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Dead Center: The Invention of Character in the Language of Modernism

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Dead Center: The Invention of Character in the Language of Modernism

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B.A., University of Minnesota, 2004

Advisor: Jill Robbins, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

Dead Center: The Invention of Character in the Language of Modernism
By Jacob Hovind

In "Dead Center," I examine the way in which the modernist novel interrogates and rethinks literary character as an effect of language. The project shows how the heightened concern with the primacy of consciousness and subjective experience converges with an emergent set of writing practices that emphasize literary experimentation and that interrogate the autonomy and impersonality of literary form. The modernist character is intimately linked with an understanding of the textuality of character that cannot however be reduced to a simple linguistic analysis. Neither simply an implied person nor a linguistic structure, character is always a figural play between both; a figure of language in which figure is always pointing beyond language. And we cannot think this tension inherent in character without looking at the modernist novel's intervention into the representation of personhood. Paradoxically, both aspects of the literary character, its textuality and its life, are exacerbated in modernism.

I first identify this conception of character in the criticism of Erich Auerbach, particularly in his readings of Dante and Flaubert, before turning to individual readings of major modernist novelists, each of whom poses the question of character in vital ways that unfold the implications uncovered in Auerbach's ontology. I trace the way in which literary life unfolds in Henry James as a rhetoric according to which the consciousness for which his characters are so celebrated emerges out of a ghostly structure of haunting, while I read Virginia Woolf's construction of character as the product of a complex web of personhood involving the death of the author and the transposition of textual authority to the impersonality of narrative voice, as it is structured according to the sentence of free indirect discourse. Lastly, I find in Samuel Beckett's novels the gradual reemergence of character out of its initial absence, reading his work as an allegory of the construction of character in any novel, as it becomes figured as the invention of something out of nothing, or life out of death.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: CHARACTER AND MODERNISM

At the heart of this study lie two fundamental questions, the first and most essential of which is: just what is it that we talk about when we talk about literary characters? To whom or what do we refer when we speak of fictive subjectivities, those little egos that populate the pages of literary history? As readers, as writers, and as critics of every methodological stripe, we are so easily led to talk about characters as if they were real people, while of course knowing all the while that they are not. And if characters are not real people, while remaining always so close, then what I hope to uncover is just what it is that they are. Can these people of language be granted something like an ontological status? If so, how might we begin to characterize it?

The study's second question is: why modernism? What is it about this literary historical epoch that is so essential to our understanding of character? I propose that the major thinkers and novelists of modernism rewrite the rules of character's game, as they bring fictive subjectivity to the center of the literary endeavor, such that character comes to take on a kind of centrality in the language of fiction more than it ever has before in literary history. But at the same time as the modernists emphasize character, they also fundamentally rework our idea of just what kind of beings these figures are. The modernist novel interrogates and rethinks literary character, as the heightened concern with the primacy of consciousness and subjective experience converges with an emergent set of writing practices that emphasize literary experimentation and that interrogate the autonomy and impersonality of literary form. How, I ask, does the language of modernism invent character?

I address first this second constellation of questions, as it essentially offers the most straightforward answer. The modernist novel is *about* character, as the novel never has been before. If the modernist era was one of drastic upheaval in terms of the subject's definition and self-understanding in the realms of science, politics, and psychology, then something locally specific was also happening to personhood in the realm of literary understanding and practice.[1] Literature, of course, has always deployed character; from the very first fictions told, stories always had to happen to *someone* who does not necessarily exist in the real world. But in the language of modernism, this fictive *someone* is brought into the center of narrative's organization. Throughout all of the novels whose very new sets of conventions and experimentations have come to definite modernism – in the works of James and Proust, Lawrence and Woolf, Joyce and Musil, up through Beckett – narrative is no longer concerned with the events omnisciently and assertively narrated by realism, but with the interpretation, or impression, of those events as mediated through a literary subjectivity.[2]

As Irving Howe has noted, modernism may broadly be characterized as a "shift of world-outlook…from narrative to character, cosmos to psyche" (58), such that in the modernist novel, the subjectivity of character seems simply to replace the objectivity of event. Similarly, in his study *Character and the Novel*, W. J. Harvey compares (rather unfavorably) Virginia Woolf's method of composition in *To the Lighthouse* to that of Dickens:

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[1] For a classic, as well as succinct, account of the way in which subjectivity was largely redefined by science and philosophy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see James McFarlane's "The Mind of Modernism," an essay that also considers how the artists and writers of modernism sought to bring this redefinition into the realm of aesthetics. On the challenges facing the individual from the pressures of upheavals both social and literary, "as [subjectivity] endures the heavy pressures of modern history and modernist literary experiment" (xi), see Michael Levenson's *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*.

[2] Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*, originally published in 1931, makes the still influential argument that modernism marks a return to the Romantic poets' elevation of the "intrinsic value of the individual" (4).

To dine with the Podsnaps [from Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*] is to surrender to a world of things sensed as living a life of its own; *to dine with the Ramsays is to celebrate a triumph of mind over matter*….We are left with facts of mind where sometimes we hunger for simple, brute facts (39-40, my emphasis).

The modernist novel emphasizes character by organizing itself around the subjective impression of literary reality, as opposed to the mere relaying of that reality from some vantage point above or outside of any given narrative's events. Those omniscient narrators found in Eliot and Trollope, or in Dickens and Thackeray, the God-like figures in whose hands much of the novel's history was delivered, become increasingly sparse, and the novel is largely turned inward, told through the mind's eye of whatever character stands at a novel's center at any given moment.

The traditional anchoring point of novelistic point of view in the realist tradition is eroded, as character comes to take on a greater import and centrality to the language of the novel and the figure of the personalized narrator is increasingly eliminated. While it seems that character would inherit the implied personality of the now absent narrator, the real story of the modernist novel, I propose, for all this emphasis on subjectivism and the individual point of view, is a kind of depersonalization of the literary character. If character, as it is largely found throughout the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, could once stand mimetically for the plenitude of a person, then now it is no longer subtended by the personality of the narrator, but only by the void left by this narrating figure's absence. It is as if the presence of the narrating figure in earlier modes of novelistic discourse concomitantly guaranteed the very realistic *presence* of that figure's created characters; for instance, Dickens's Podsnaps seem so mimetically embodied in

their world of "simple, brute facts," because Dickens's comfortably personalized narrating presence is there imprinting the illusion of personhood on his entire world.[3]

The characters of modernism, on the other hand, for all their "life" and for all their approximation of empirical experience, inhabit an increasingly impersonal space. The voice in which the modernist novel is told no longer belongs, as I have suggested, to the narrator as the personalized delegate of the author, but rather, it is a neutralized and impersonal narrative voice of a literary language that originates in no such "person." The world of the modernist character is one that is increasingly *written*. The heightened effect of character that we find in modernism happens in its language precisely *as* an effect of language. The modernist character is intimately linked with an understanding of the textuality of character, but this, unexpectedly, cannot be reduced to a simple linguistic analysis. The novelists of modernism show that literary life can only be born out of writing, yet the characters of modernism appear very much to live, and they do so with a kind of intensity; but at the same time, the novelists of modernism show, literary life can only be born out of writing. In the pages that follow, I show that to "live" as a character, is to inhabit a world from which subjectivity is absent, and thus is to exist at the same time according to the law of life's uncanny opposite, which is to say, death. If character can be said to have any kind of ontology, then it is one that involves undergoing the figurative death of becoming literary.

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[3] One of the finest accounts of the many differences between characters in nineteenth-century fiction and those in that of the twentieth-century is Baruch Hochman's *The Test of Character*. The writers of the latter century, Hochman argues, "recoil from the [previous century's] effort to capture the seemingly solid social and moral surfaces of the self" (11), and they seek instead to "penetrate those surfaces and capture essences that underlie them" (12). On this sea change in methods and types of characterization, see also Leo Bersani's *A Future for Astyanax*, in which he expertly analyzes the transition from realism to modernism as "the confrontation in nineteenth-century works between a structured, socially viable and verbally analyzable self and the wish to shatter psychic and social structures" (x).

Here lies the central paradox of character's unique version of living: it is a being that is very much like a person, and yet it always remains forever something that has nothing to do with personhood. No matter how intensely a character may appear to live off the page, no matter how finely wrought the illusion of its embodiment, whatever resemblances may exist between the two types of entities, characters and people, these are the result of a trick of language that seems to operate at the limit of language. In one of modernism's most passionate manifestos on the centrality of character, D. H. Lawrence's "Why the Novel Matters," he writes that "the novel is the book of life" (195). And in this book of life, "the characters can do nothing but *live*….A character in a novel has got to live, or it is nothing" (197, Lawrence's emphasis). Lawrence, polemically arguing for the kind of vitality for which his own characters are so well known, living as intensely as they do, also hints at the other truth of character's mode of existence: it is a being that does, in a sense live, but it is also, quite literally, *nothing*. Characters must live or they are nothing, Lawrence claims, but what we will see is that, despite his apparent intentions, both halves of Lawrence's equation can be understood as equally correct.

The relatively small history of the theoretical engagement with character consists of two seemingly opposed critical camps: a traditional mimetic approach or a linguistic, semiotic analysis. According to the former, character is read as something like a real person, with depths and motives, and fiction would not finally mean anything unless it possessed this human factor; for the latter, on the other hand, character is nothing but a an impersonal structural position, or the subject of a verb. Character, in other words, either lives, or it is nothing; it simply depends on which critic you ask.

The extreme version of a mimetic conception of character might be identified as the notorious "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" argument, according to which critics give themselves over to the fiction of their object of analysis, taking up the invitation to imagine that novels tell stories of real people in some possible extratextual world, where there might be motives and psychologies, not to mention entire biographies, that are not given in the pages of the work itself.[4] This referential dimension of character is supported, whether tacitly or explicitly, in the work of such critics as W. J. Harvey, Baruch Hochman, James Phelan, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Blakey Vermeule, and Martin Price.[5] It finds perhaps one of its most polemical supports in a late essay by Irving Howe, in which he expresses his utter exasperation with those critics who would seek to drain literary characters of all signs of life:

> The great fictional characters, from Robinson Crusoe to Flem Snopes, from Tess to Molly Bloom, cannot quite be "fitted" into or regarded solely as functions of narrative. *Why should we want to?* What but the delusions of system and total grasp do we gain thereby? Such characters are too interesting, too splendidly

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[4] The origin of the "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" critique of the mimetic fallacy may be found in L. C. Knight's essay of that name, originally published in 1933. There, Knight famously attacks what he sees as a certain naïveté, most particularly in A. C. Bradley's influential study of Shakespeare from 1904, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, but more generally in Shakespearean criticism as a whole. He caustically notes that "in the mass of Shakespeare criticism there is not a hint that 'character' – is like 'plot', 'rhythm', 'construction' and all our other critical counters – is merely an abstraction from the total response in the mind of the reader or spectator, brought into being by written or spoken words; that the critic therefore – however far he may ultimately range – begins with the words of which a play is composed" (4). It should be noted, however, that nowhere in his study does Bradley actually ever pose the question of how many children Lady Macbeth had. Knight's sardonic attack can be read, then, as an instance of the more general New Critical trend of keeping literary criticism focused on the particularities of the text at hand.

[5] See Harvey, *Character and the Novel*; Hochman, *Character in Literature*; Price, *Forms of Life: Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel*; and, for studies that seek to construct a kind of ethical system to encompass the reader's construction of character, see Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots*; Rimmon-Kenan, *A Glance beyond Doubt: Narration, Representation, Subjectivity*; and Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?*

mysterious for mere functional placement. (Who'd even look at Emma Woodhouse if she were just an "it"?) (42, Howe's emphasis).

In his plea for a humanist understanding of character, according to which we gain, in reading the great characters of literary history, "enduring companion[s] of consciousness" (45), Howe rejects precisely the structuralist (or functionalist) school of thought on character, whereby literary subjectivities may be defined "solely as functions of narrative."

This latter understanding of character finds most of its proponents in formalist and structuralist accounts of narrative. An early, and very severe, version of this theory of character may be found in the work of the Russian Formalist critic Boris Tomashevsky:

The protagonist is by no means an essential part of the story. The story, as a system of motifs, may dispense entirely with him and his characteristics. The protagonist, rather, is the result of the formation of the story material into a plot. On the one hand, he is a means of stringing motifs together; and on the other, he embodies the motivation which connects the motifs (90).

Similarly, Vladimir Propp subordinates the character to its function within narrative, continuing the classical Aristotelian model of a poetics wherein the action is dominant over its actor.[6] This understanding of character continues through much of the writing of Roland Barthes, for instance in *S/Z*, where he writes of character as nothing but a bundle of adjectives and attributes, of "semes" that coalesce around a noun that hardly signifies whether it is proper or common.[7]

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[6] For Propp's almost comically elaborate classification of "the functions of dramatis personae," see *The Morphology of the Folktale*, pp. 25-65.

[7] Barthes writes: "When identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created" (67). Further "structuralist" or linguistic analyses of character may be found

I argue in this study that character must be understood as a construction of both of these theoretical aspects; it is to be situated on the cusp *between* personhood and the textuality of a written mark. In his recent study *The One vs. the Many*, Alex Woloch has also sought to unite the two opposing conceptions of character into a functional model, arguing, I think quite correctly, that character "relies *on* reference and takes place *through* structure" (17, Woloch's emphases).[8] Character is *neither* an implied person *nor* a linguistic structural position, but is always a figural play between *both*, a reference to a fictive person that occurs only in and as language. Woloch's work, like nearly every study of character, finds its critical objects in the nineteenth-century novel, but I argue that we cannot think this tension inherent in character without looking at the modernist novel's intervention. Paradoxically, both poles – mimetic and structuralist – of the literary character are exacerbated in modernism. That is, if the modernist novel is a new and more authentic mimesis of character, this is only because of an awareness of its textuality, its authority no longer grounded in any personality beyond its own pages. Within the works of modernism, character is both more real and less real than it has ever before been articulated in literary history. Reading a selection of modernist novelists and critics, this dissertation situates character's mode of being in between ontology and rhetoric, between mimetic illusion and linguistic figuration. The life of character occurs

in such works as Philippe Hamon, "Pour un statut sémiologique du personnage"; Hélène Cixous, "The Character of 'Character'"; Thomas Docherty, *Reading (Absent) Character: Toward a Theory of Characterization in Fiction*; Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse*; Nathalie Sarraute, *The Age of Suspicion*; John Frow, "Spectacle Binding: On Character"; as well as Rawdon Wilson's critique of Martin Price, "On Character," in which he forcefully argues that "the distinction between characters and actual persons is an absolute one" (194).

[8] For another convincing attempt at fusion between character's two dimensions, see Joel Weinsheimer, "Theory of Character: *Emma*." In this quite brilliant essay, Weinsheimer aligns the doubled aspect of character with the doubled position of hermeneutic criticism. Just as "characters are both people and words," so too does the critic find himself in the same position: "He recognizes that as a person in the world he interprets the text as it interprets him. But the critic is not only a person, and he belongs to more than the world. He balances world and text, and refuses to reduce either one to the other, for he himself, the critic as such, is the locus of their inter-interpretation" (210).

in and as writing; and this, we will see, is ultimately the space of nothing, or the figure of life's opposite, death.

It is in the criticism of Erich Auerbach that I identify the most powerful expression of this conception of character, turning Auerbach, despite himself, into a "theorist" of character. If modernism brings to the fore what has always been the existence of the literary character, the doubled structure of its unique life, then it is in Auerbach's work, and particularly in his numerous readings of Dante's *Inferno*, as well as in his philological history of figural interpretation, where we may find the most profound articulation of the "birth" of that existence. What Woloch has recently identified as simply a structural problem is in Auerbach an uncannily ontological one, what I call his "figural ontology" of character.

Thus this dissertation's first chapter pursues the way in which, for Auerbach, character is born in Dante as a figurative process, an implied person that is born only out of, and in an inextricable relationship with, an impersonal structure. In Dante, as opposed to the epic and medieval traditions which precede him, characters are made to appear as a coherent fusion of both the whole and the particular, the eternal and the finite; this is achieved by representing living and acting figures in the atemporal realm of the *Inferno*. The richness of his characters' existence is in an essential mutually interdependent relationship with the timeless world in which they act out their destinies. As opposed to the empty dummy subjects of allegory, or the static heroes of epic, there is suddenly the emergence of the "real" literary person, with the implications of depths, complexities, and inner life. However, the character in Dante is a "real" person who can only appear as

such *because he has died*, because he gains the impression of life from his place in the atemporal realm of the afterworld. *The life of character only happens after death*.

Auerbach shows us that the "birth" of the modern character, a birth that occurs in the moment of death, can be found in Dante's representation of the human in literature. We cannot identify this living death, however, without Auerbach's reading of Dante. Thus I will offer a sustained reflection on Auerbach's methodology, which I pose as a distinctly modernist critical position. In order to situate Auerbach as a major thinker of European modernism, I argue that, not only in his accepted masterwork *Mimesis* but throughout his entire corpus, he constructs a specific method for literary understanding, a hermeneutics. This hermeneutics develops out of his decades-long preoccupation with the method of figural interpretation, the essentially Christian mode of reading that he traces from late Roman antiquity through the Middle Ages. This is to say that Auerbach himself employs a version of figural interpretation, the method of which he only seems to offer a philological account. Out of what I will call his "figural hermeneutics" there emerges a thoroughly modernist critical point of view, one whose understanding of mimesis is dependent upon the figurative structure of figural understanding, rather than a doctrine of literary realism. Mimesis, as it gradually emerges out of Auerbach's hermeneutics, is a figure of language. If mimesis is a figure of language, then character is equally, for Auerbach, created by the same figural operations that underlie the effect of mimesis. Out of what I call Auerbach's "figural hermeneutics," I trace the emergence of a figurative structure of the modern character as it is born among Dante's dead souls and will eventually come to inhabit Flaubert's realism, out of which in turn are born many of the tendencies that I will take as most characteristic of the modernist novel.

Once the contours of this dissertation's ontology of character are established through the first chapter's close reading of Auerbach, I then turn to individual readings of major modernist novelists, each of whom poses the question of character in vital ways that unfold the implications uncovered in Auerbach's ontology. The second chapter considers the "The Ghosts of Henry James," as I trace the way in which literary life unfolds in James as a rhetoric according to which the consciousness for which his characters are so celebrated emerges out of a ghostly structure of haunting. Henry James reads his own work, looking for the truth of reality rendered as representation, but all he finds is language, and a collection of dead letters. James's oeuvre, his own literary history, tells the story of the increasingly written life of character, which becomes the very same movement of the effacement of the personalized narrator. And as in Auerbach, I ask, once character is no longer understood as the semblance of an unmediated subjectivity, why does the ontological problem remain? What is this way of living that consists in being written? I read the way in which this tension inherent in character arises throughout James's literary criticism, as he constructs, particularly in the prefaces to the New York Edition of his works, the fabulous architecture of what becomes "the haunted house of fiction." Two Jamesian heroines are read as particularly illustrative of his ghostly ontology of character, as I trace the education of Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), before examining James's use of the scenic method in constructing *The Awkward Age*'s (1899) Nanda Brookenham.

Already underway in the work of James, the apparent impersonality of the modernist novel reaches its culmination in the novels of Virgina Woolf. If Flaubert served, for Auerbach, as the fulfillment of Dante, then Woolf, in turn, might be said to

function as the fulfillment of the perverse kind of realism Auerbach finds in Flaubert. Woolf's modernism, as it is famously analyzed in the last chapter of *Mimesis*, "The Brown Stocking," is after all the end of Auerbach's own trajectory of "realism," the highpoint of modernism, and even perhaps, for Auerbach, the endpoint of European literature itself. And so, in this dissertation's third chapter, "Untangling Virginia Woolf's Web," I read a wide selection of Woolf's works, including novels, literary criticism, and diary entries, as emblematic of the trend toward depersonalization in the modernist novel. However, it is found to be a paradoxical kind of depersonalization, as out its textual fabric there emerges some of the most richly articulated characters in all of literary history. Character, in Woolf, is ultimately the product of a complex web of personhood involving the death of the author and the transposition of textual authority to the impersonality of narrative voice, particularly as this textual figure is structured according to Woolf's most characteristic type of sentence, that of free indirect discourse.

The major problematic of Woolf's work, and that of modernism as a whole as Auerbach characterizes it, is the question of how to communicate, how to connect isolated and fragmentary subjectivities into anything like a whole. This could be said to be one of the traditional functions of the personalized omniscient narrator, being able to see into all of his characters' consciousnesses and to deliver what he finds there, assuring that they all belong to a common community of persons. In Woolf, however, this communion is instead an effect of language that is neither purely linguistic nor mimetic. The mimetic union between characters happens only in the linguistic collectivity engendered by the sentence of free indirect discourse. Like James's conception of the creation of characters as the raising of ghosts, and his sense of reading his works as

treading over a corpse that still somehow sustains life, there is a sense here of the uncanny "deaths" of this moment of community, and of the strange ontological state of "living" that goes on after them. I ultimately look most closely at this relationship in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts* (1941); in both works, the community of singularities, the urgently sought connecting of consciousnesses, occurs only in emphatically aesthetic moments during which her personages explicitly exist *as characters*. Similarly, the modernist language figured by Woolf's author, free indirect discourse, connects its characters around the empty center of this kind of subject-less sentence. Woolf's author-figure functions as a metonymy for the very language of the modernist novel, "dying" into an impersonality that mirrors the dead center of the sentence of free indirect discourse.

If Auerbach positions Woolf's high modernism as the endpoint of a certain conception of literary history – that project of Europe's textual creation of "reality" – then I end this dissertation by looking to the novels of Samuel Beckett as the fall-out of this story. In Beckett's novels, I argue, we find what I call the "afterlife of modernism;" but, to reverse this phrase's expected genitive emphasis, what these novels show us is that fiction as such takes place in that uncanny "life of afterlife" (*MC* 123) of which Beckett speaks in *Mercier and Camier*. As I argue in the fourth chapter, "Samuel Beckett and Company," Beckett's novels progressively pare their form down to essentials, shedding one by one the traditional figures and strategies of representation that define the art of the novel. And yet Beckett continues to write novels, a fact that the critical literature for the most part seems to take for granted. What I claim is much needed in the critical understanding of Beckett, is to look at the "novelness" of his works, to ask how they

employ the traditional elements that constitute the form, such as voice, point of view, and tense. They may be novels that tell no story, and have no recognizably human characters to speak of, and yet they are still novels, fictive utterances, and so, I claim, we must read them explicitly as such. And in turn, Beckett's novels might then in fact provide an interrogation into the novel's unique ontology, illuminating this narrative voice that has come to assert itself in the language of modernism.

What occurs in Beckett's trilogy, I claim, is a reduction to the "unnamable" and unutterable discursive "I" of novelistic discourse; namely, to the narrative voice, that presence which is never the same thing as a narrator, a character, or an author, but perhaps the very voice of the absence of these figures, the dead center lying at the heart of the respective ontological structures of character found in Auerbach, James, and Woolf. While mimesis, throughout this project, is understood as a figure of language, in Beckett that principle is still operative, in the sense that mimesis is understood as always being a discursive act of diegesis. Fiction is always a kind of utterance that must be told *by* some narrating thing, and *through* the lens of some mediating presence. The classic account of this fundamental dynamic of fiction may be found in Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, in which he forcefully argues against the supposedly Jamesian myth of "showing" over "telling." Ultimately, for Booth, "we must never forget that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear" (20), and fiction then is always a realm in which the presence of the author is more or less felt.[9]

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[9] As Booth famously defines the "implied author:" "As [the author] writes, he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general,' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works….Whether we call this author an 'official scribe,' or adopt the term recently revived by Kathleen Tillotson—the author's 'second self'—it is clear that the picture the reader gets is one of the author's most important effects. However impersonal he may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe" (70-1). And of course, as we find in writers from Flaubert to James and Beckett, this "official scribe" is precisely the effect of no one and nothing. In *Story and*

But, if, as I propose, the modernist novel has eliminated all traces of both its author and the personal narrator from its language, then we must ask who is "creating" this reality if we can have no textual recourse to any person like the "author." How is the discursive "I" of novelistic discourse to be characterized? How might we define the narrative voice outside of any category of personhood?

All narrative may be discourse, but this discursive "subject" is an immanent textual figure. While thinkers as varied as Booth, Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, and Seymour Chatman have demonstrated the discursivity of all narrative, Beckett will help us to identify that "I" who lies at the root of any narrative act.[10] This "I" is of course

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Discourse, Seymour Chatman has suggestively added to Booth's definition of the "implied author," and differentiated this figure from the fictive position of the personalized "narrator," such that: "Unlike the narrator, the implied author can *tell* us nothing. He, or better, *it* has no voice, no direct means of communicating. It instructs us silently, through the design of the whole, with all the voices" (148, Chatman's emphases). While I cannot hope in this space to analyze Chatman's formulations in depth, what I might suggest is that, in so sharply differentiating the "implied author" from the "narrator," he arrives at our essential figure of the non-person narrative voice, as the simple and silent fact that stories are happening.

[10] While Booth's classical characterization of the "rhetoric of fiction" and its "implied author" still seeks to recuperate the biographical entity of the author as a presence in any literary work, it is in the work of his French contemporaries, most particularly Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, that we may find an approach that comes nearer to my own notion of the impersonal narrative voice, or fiction's dead center. For both thinkers, every narrative is, as it were, "told" by someone; subjective discourse haunts every narration, and no *énoncé* can quite escape the event of its own *énonciation*. However, this does not betray the presence of the author as some kind of authoritative figure who would precede his work, but rather the presence that is betrayed is the formal or linguistic person. Characterizing this textual figure, Barthes writes in "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives: "*who speaks* (in the narrative) is not *who writes* (in real life) and *who writes* is not *who is*" (111-2, Barthes's emphases). Modern narratives, for Barthes, refer increasingly to their own act of being told, but the *hic et nunc* of this telling occurs as an effect of language: "the psychological person (of referential order) bears no relation to the linguistic person, the latter never defined by states of mind, intentions or traits of character but only by its (coded) place in discourse. It is this formal person that writers today are attempting to speak" (114). Narratives may increasingly be referring to their own performative gesture and to their own discursive nature, but this is only to show, beyond any presence of a person, that "what takes place in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally *nothing*; 'what happens' is language alone" (124, Barthes's emphasis).

While Barthes reads this increasingly textual discursivity in contemporary narratives, such as those "depersonalized" (105) texts of Philippe Sollers, Genette implies that this is a transhistorical phenomenon, since as far back as Plato's poetics, mimesis (pure presentation) has always really revealed itself to be diegesis (mediated telling, marked by the presence of some narrating thing). In "Frontiers of Narrative," he writes that narrative, as wholly impersonal mimesis, "exists nowhere, so to speak, in its strict form" (141). And in *Narrative Discourse*, he shows that, while in such famously impersonal modern novelists as Flaubert and James, irony is supposed to distance the author from the text, what is really engendered by the absence of the author is the presence everywhere of the discursive gestures of the textual

nothing like a biographical person, but rather what Barthes has termed the "grammatical person" (109) – what I claim must be read as the textuality of the neutral narrative voice. And as the very ground of any and all fiction, the narrative voice, I propose, requires not simply a structuralist or formalist grammar, but its own unique kind of ontology. That is to say that, while the narrative voice may linguistically stand for no one at all and nothing, it still manages to produce the illusion of life in fiction's house. It invents the characters that provide the history of the novel with its "company," however grammatically null they may be. To understand the voice that speaks ceaselessly throughout Beckett's late novels – from *Molloy* (1951) and *The Unnamable* (1953) to the last "trilogy," *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, and *Worstward Ho* (1980-83) – I will read Beckett's work in conjunction with the thought of his French contemporary Maurice Blanchot, the major thinker of *l'espace littéraire* and *la voix narrative*. If the question of character is ultimately one of the narrative voice, then that is found, in Beckett and in Blanchot, to be the very question of the literary act itself.

This narrative voice that Beckett identifies throughout his novels, and that Blanchot interrogates, can neither cease speaking nor speak its own act of speaking, and all it can do is attempt to register this failure. I ultimately read this tension in Beckett's short novel *Company*, as this work operates according to that tension with which this dissertation began, namely, the tension between the life of character and its opposite, death or *nothing*. Tiring of its own solitude and its failure to tell its own story, Beckett's

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narrative voice. But for all this infiltration of discourse into narrative, the assertion of "I" *qua* linguistic or formal person is exactly the opposite of an affirmation of subjectivity. It engenders instead "a pronominal vertigo," (246). Proust's narrating Marcel, for instance, becomes not a psychological entity standing in for his creator, but a figural nexus of author, narrator, and hero all at once. All of the narrative levels converge into the same person, or into the same category of personhood. Linguistically, no one is above or below anyone else.

narrative voice once again desires company, and so works to invent a "character" out of its own interminable impersonality. And what Beckett shows us is the model for the creation of any character, of all of these people who have inhabited fiction's spaces since their first deaths in Dante's *Inferno* – the creation of life out of death, the invention of an implied person out of narrative's figurative operations. "Company," then, becomes the ultimate rhetorical figure for the invention of character in the language of modernism. In his invaluable study of Samuel Beckett, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*, Richard Begam characterizes Beckett's impossible figure of the Unnamable as "a dead center, a point of convergence where nothing converges" (172). And in this phrase, we can begin to see, Begam characterizes not only the fundamental logic of Beckett's novels, but perhaps the logic of any work of fiction and this figure of the literary character upon which fictions are built. It is out of this dead center that the life of character emerges. In Dante's infernal afterlife and in Flaubert's dead letter office, in James's haunted house of fiction and in Woolf's speakerless sentences, character comes to live its uncanny ontology.

CHAPTER ONE: ERICH AUERBACH'S FIGURAL ONTOLOGY OF CHARACTER

Since its initial publication in 1946, Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* has stood as the major account of realism in Western literature. It is a magisterial piece of literary history tracing the way in which writers from Homer to Virginia Woolf have used narratives to make sense of reality. This description, however, accounts for only a fraction of the work's scope. More than just a book about stories, *Mimesis* shows that Auerbach himself tells a story, through his readings of the vast library of European literary history. What then is the real story of *Mimesis*? How might we read Auerbach's own work as something like a piece of literature, a kind of fiction cast as a seeming history of the fictions of Western literature? Not simply a literary history of mimesis or a theoretical statement about realism, *Mimesis* opens itself up to the same figurative operations that it supposedly only describes.

Drawing out the rhetorical operations at work in Auerbach's critical project will show that *Mimesis* can actually be read as a vast narrative, one whose plot, as it were, is the triumph of realism in Western literature. And Auerbach tells not only this story, the one for which the work is justly famous, but the story of his own writing, that of the interpreter or literary historian as author. Like the greatest achievements of European modernism, Auerbach's *Mimesis* is essentially determined by its own written, or created, status. In its processes of figuration, *Mimesis*, I will show, becomes a kind of epic modernist novel, with its own artificial reality and cast of characters who populate it.

Ultimately, Auerbach tells the story of the figural construction of literary reality, or of the effect of mimesis. We will see that the usual categories used to define Auerbach's work, such as "mimesis," "realism," and even "literary history," are actually

figuratively created by Auerbach's critical practice. Mimesis, as Paul de Man has so often remarked, is but one figure of language among many.[11] Essential to this effect is the cast of characters inhabiting that literary reality, those fictive subjectivities upon which the representational act hinges. If mimesis is a figurative operation rather than a natural structure, then it is an operation performed *by someone*, the creation of reality by a figure inscribed within the fictive world. And just as Auerbach creates such concepts as "realism" and "literary history" while he supposedly only acts as their critic, so too, in writing the history of the literary character, does he in fact construct an implicit ontology of character, the mode of being of the fictive, or linguistic, person. That is to say, the life of character, like mimesis, is the product of rhetorical operations. The literary self is a figure of language.

A brief history of fictive epistemology

In one of *Mimesis*'s most formidable early reviews, "Auerbach's Special Realism" (1954), René Wellek, like nearly every other early critic, takes Auerbach to task for his failure to define just what realism means for him. Wellek ascribes this failure to

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[11] For example, in "The Resistance to Theory," where de Man writes that, if literariness is a quality whose referential success is never certain, then "mimesis becomes one trope among others, language choosing to imitate a non-verbal entity just as paronomasis 'imitates' a sound without any claim to identity (or reflection on difference) between the verbal and non-verbal elements" (*RT* 10). See also "Literature and Language: A Commentary": "Mimesis can be said to imply a referential verification as well as to dodge it; the only thing that can be stated with certainty is that it allows for the confusion between the two choices" (*BI*, 285). What is to be stressed in the de Manian positioning of mimesis as a figure of language is not a flat-out denial of any referential efficacy of literary language, but rather the idea that if there is referential success, then it is only because of a relationship that is in no way natural, but only rhetorical. "Literature is fiction," de Man writes, "not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge 'reality,' but because it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world. It is therefore not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language" (*RT* 11). I want to position this way of thinking about mimesis's figural qualities as a means of going beyond the structural moment where everything is revealed to be mediated language, where mimesis is betrayed as diegesis. There is the linguistic moment when "mimesis" and "character" are revealed to be figures of language, the results of rhetorical operations. This, however, does not deny the fact that some kind of referential, or ontological moment remains as an effect of this figure, or as a kind of haunting; the point, then, is that this latter moment is no longer given any certain authoritative status.

Auerbach's radical relativism, a result of his extreme reluctance to use any generalizations or conceptual terms. "Every author has the right to limit his theme" (304), Wellek writes, but Auerbach seems to have limited himself too far, to the point of obfuscation. Wellek draws attention to the fact that Auerbach does in fact use the traditional nineteenth-century sense of realism, understood as "truthful observation, minute analysis, in a scientific spirit, or realism as a diagnosis of social ills" (301). But he uses it only briefly; this becomes notable especially when one considers that Auerbach finds the modern triumph of realism in that very nineteenth-century spirit, in the French realist novelists from Stendhal to Zola. Ultimately, determined to conceptualize Auerbach's project, Wellek writes that the most accurate term for Auerbach's sense of realism might be termed "existential," as it combines "tragic depth and historical occurrence" (303).

Wellek lands on "existential" as Auerbach's determining conception of realism precisely because of the intimate link, in Auerbach's work, between realism and individual experience. In fact, Wellek finds, *Mimesis* "concerns not realism but man's attitude toward the world in general, man's conscious and unconscious epistemology, his art of expressing his attitude, without too much regard for such a specific movement as modern literary realism" (301). On the one hand, Wellek's definition of *Mimesis*'s program gets at once to its heart. The chapters unfold as a gradual accumulation of instances of mankind's engagement with reality, the ways in which it is comprehended and organized. On the other hand, however, the "reality" in question is always in *Mimesis* one that is made sense of and organized by being written. For example, what Auerbach reads is not Flaubert's reality as it is presented in *Madame Bovary*, but Emma Bovary's

own reality which she inhabits. The experience of the character, or in the case of a writer like Augustine, the written self, becomes a kind of metonymic stand-in for the experience of the author in the empirical world.[12] The question of the individual, while entirely preeminent for Auerbach, is a question that remains always immanent to his readings of literature's presentation of the human encounter with the world. Auerbach may in fact be writing a history of epistemology, rather than one of realism, but it is a fictive epistemology that Auerbach traces, the figural representation and organization of literary reality by the fictive self who inhabits that world.

Auerbach does retain a deeply passionate fidelity to the idea of mankind, a reverence for the dignity of man and of his creations which we can call humanist.[13] However, implicit in Auerbach's actual critical practice is the understanding that man is not the same thing as his representation; while the individual is always deeply rooted in history and in reality, the character is always and only firmly rooted in language, in the linguistic organization of that history figuratively rendered literary. Like the passage from reality to literary language, the idea of man undergoes a similarly figurative

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[12] The way in which I am trying to identify the experience of the author as only a fictive position for what can only be the experience of the character is, I hope, reminiscent of de Man's claim in "Autobiography as De-Facement" that the autobiographical project in fact creates the life that it supposedly serves to represent: "And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity" (*RR* 69)? The "author" is then just a displaced figure constituted by the fictive subjectivity encountered by the reader, that is, the character.

[13] For a typical, though highly appreciative reading of Auerbach's humanism, see William Calin's *The Twentieth-Century Humanist Critics: From Spitzer to Frye*, pp. 43-56. In *Intellectuals in Power*, Paul Bové offers a powerful overturning of Auerbach's humanism, demonstrating how it becomes a thoroughly "modernist" methodological tool Auerbach is forced to use against humanism's own dehumanizing tendencies in late modernity. As Bové writes of the dream of the humanistic historist: "It involves recalling tradition and defending it (and so its defenders) as the only way an elite can educate, form, and lead a larger public. Yet, unlike other humanists, Auerbach senses that this tradition is, in modernity, a function of the historian, that it is a ward of and has its sole reality in his self-consciousness….Humanism turns against itself" (170).

transformation. If mimesis is a figure of language, then character is equally, for Auerbach, created by the same figural operations.

The integral relationship between representation and character is already discernable in the opening pages of Auerbach's first published book, his 1929 study *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*. The book takes as its epigraph a fragment of Heraclitus that claims: "A man's character is his fate," and the entire study can be read as an unfolding of this foundational insight. In the first chapter of the work, Auerbach notably sets out to trace the history of the representation of man in Western literature, until the privileged position of Dante's *Commedia* as a kind of breaking point in this trajectory. From the beginning of Auerbach's work, the question of a literary representation of reality and that of the literary figure of a human person are one and the same. A story or a narrative – a fate, as it were – is nothing but the character around which it unfolds.[14] In a description of the Homeric conception of this relationship, which bears quoting at length, Auerbach writes:

> That realism, or to cast aside a word that is ambiguous and has undergone so
> many changes of meaning, that art of imitation is to be met with everywhere in
> Homer, even when he is telling fairy tales, for the unity, the *sibi constare*, or
> constancy, of his figures justifies or produces the things that happen to them. In a
> single act the poet's fantasy creates the character and his fate….Thus Homeric

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[14] J. Hillis Miller, in *Ariadne's Thread*, addresses this integral relationship between fate and character in a gloss on Walter Benjamin's 1919 essay "Fate and Character." Benjamin is concerned with how fate and character belong to irreparably different spheres, one external and the other internal, though both remain inaccessible to the signs through which they manifest themselves. However, Miller notes that, although fate and character belong to different epistemological spheres, they are never wholly detached from one another: "The confluence of fate and character as vector forces draws out the storyline of a person's life and makes it narratable, something that may be accounted for, recounted, brought out in the open for all to read. Hidden inner character may be the way someone's mysteriously occult outer 'fate' inscribes itself most effectively within the world, immanently, by writing itself within and on a person's body, personality, and behavior" (62).

imitation, which the ancient critics called mimesis, is not an attempt to copy from

appearance; it does not spring from observation, but like myth from the

conception of figures who are all of a piece, whose unity is present even before

observation begins. Their living presence and diversity stem, as we can

everywhere perceive, from the situation they inevitably get involved in, and it is

the situation that prescribes their actions and their sufferings. Only then, when the

conception is established, does naturalistic description set in, though there is no

need for the poet to summon it; it comes to him quite spontaneously (*DPSW* 2-3).

In Auerbach's schema, what the poet creates is nothing but his character, and whatever

story the narrative will come to tell is already inscribed in the nature of that character.[15]

Literature is here conceived not as a copy of life, and this is not only because literature

can tell events that could never happen in the empirical world, but rather, because it is the

very idea of the human in which Auerbach finds the core idea of the literary. There is a

character, and whatever may happen to that character bears what might be called the

"truth-value" of literature, its probability and its fidelity to reality, whether or not that fate

is possible in the real world of men. Even the most fantastic of stories, it seems, can claim

a kind of faithful "imitation" of reality, precisely because of the implied humanness of

the literary character. And what is central to this passage as well is the idea that mimesis

is not, in fact, tied to empirical events which it is faithfully to record, but rather, is

involved in intrinsic matters of narratological construction and syntactical operations.

Auerbach articulates mimesis as an internal method of style, rather than as an operation

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[15] It must be stressed here that in the language of this early study, tracing "the idea of man in Western literature," the Homeric conception of character functions not as a contrast to modernity, but as a point of departure.

dealing explicitly with reality, a basic tenet which will remain crucial to the further developments of the fate of character in his work.

If anything, what is implicit in these opening pages of the early study on Dante, whose first chapter is notably a history of "The Idea of Man in Literature," is a kind of denial of mimesis having any access to a world beyond itself. Literature here takes no part in "copying" reality, and Auerbach never seems to imply that he has this idea of mimesis in mind in the first place. Rather, in taking the idea of the human from the real world of writers and readers, and inscribing it into the literary, he already marks a slippage between the nature of a fictive character's fate and that of a real person's. If the fate, or the story, is inscribed in the person, then when that person becomes a character, a person of words, a figure of letters on a page or of the breath of the ancient orator, then something distinctly literary about that person's very "being" will be revealed. The fate is inscribed in the kernel of the person, but *qua* character, the literary person's fate is a story, and its course follows a wholly different epistemological order, that of fictive living rather than what we call "living" as such. Homer, posited as a kind of mythic originary point of Western literature, "has a conception of man that experience alone could not have given him" (*DPSW* 3). Experience gives the conception of man in part, because the idea of man is pulled from the world in which the poet lives. However, once having entered the literary, the transformation from man to character occurs; something happens to "man" for which experience and observation alone cannot account. The literary "conception of man," which is to say the character, turns out to be born in ways that veer far from the life of mankind on earth.

Exactly what kind of operations are at work in that transformation will not be seen, in Auerbach's history of literature, until the work of Dante at the end of the Middle Ages. It is in Dante, Auerbach argues, that Western literature first displays "man's inner life and unfolding" (*M* 202), which we will read as the modern conception of character, that upon which a form like the realist novel is born. As never before, literary language will present the illusion of the human, providing a stage for the realistic depiction of mankind. Before reaching this point, in both literary history and in Auerbach's own account of it, we might briefly trace how the idea of man in literature reaches the breaking point of the *Commedia*. Turning to *Mimesis*, and to the history of fictive subjectivity that it tells, we can see how the idea of the individual is central to its structure, the red thread that runs through its seeming account of literary realism, or the figure that haunts its landscape.[16] If *Mimesis* is most well known for telling the story of the triumph of realism, the way in which literature's serious engagement with reality emerges in the modern era, then the realist character, the seriously treated fictive individual, also gradually emerges as the product of the very same forces behind that realism.

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[16] Critics such as David Carroll and Luiz Costa-Lima have been absolutely correct, then, in emphasizing the centrality of the individual to Auerbach's project. However, for instance in "*Mimesis* Reconsidered," Carroll seems to miss the point when he criticizes, or "deconstructs" Auerbach's reliance on an empirically-based model of sense-perception in his reading of literature. Carroll takes Auerbach to task for defining "the imitation of reality" as the "imitation of the sensory experience of life on earth" (*M* 166): "An argument on behalf of the senses implies that the living, feeling subject is the origin of its relationship with the real, that nothing precedes or determines this relationship" (9). What Carroll writes is certainly true, but only insofar as it describes the construction of reality by a literary subjectivity, that is, a character who does not stand outside or apart from that reality of a world inscribed in fiction. In "Erich Auerbach: History and Metahistory," Costa-Lima similarly argues, though in a favorable way, that "realism" only signifies according to a model whereby the world is organized by an individual as the "tranquilizing center" (489). I would essentially agree with such a claim, although not with the spirit in which it is made. That is to say, this is not so much a criticism of Auerbach's work, I argue, as one of its central presuppositions.

The prehistory of the literary self, or Abraham over Odysseus

In *Mimesis*'s famous opening chapter, "Odysseus's Scar," Auerbach contrasts a scene from Homer's *Odyssey* to the story of Abraham's sacrifice in the book of Genesis, ultimately setting up a tension between the ancient Greek conception of character and that of the Hebraic tradition.[17] The world of the Homeric epic is one of a pure present, that knows only foreground and that represents everything in an immediate visibility, with nothing hidden and nothing undeclared. With no "psychological processes" to be developed, "Homer's personages vent their inmost hearts in speech" (*M* 6), such that the reader is able to discern not only the entire world on display, but the entirety of the people who inhabit it. Auerbach characterizes the Abraham story, on the other hand, as a world entirely antithetical to the Homeric, shrouded in unknown quantities and demanding interpretation at every turn:

> The externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thought and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal…remains mysterious and "fraught with background" (*M* 11-2).[18]

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[17] I resist contrasting the Hellenic tradition with a "Judeo-Christian" one, for reasons which will soon emerge.

[18] In an essay entitled "Sacrifice," Jill Robbins is careful to point out that the story of Abraham is just as empty of psychology as the Homeric epics. But while Odysseus' absence of psychology is replaced by outwardness and "foreground," Abraham's is simply presented as a series of obscurities, gaps, and *lacunae*. As Robbins notes, by any standard, Abraham's actions are enormously inexplicable. She points out that Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* can almost be read as a desperate attempt to make sense of this absence of psychological explanation: "What was Abraham's state of mind? Did Abraham communicate the purpose of his journey to Isaac? Where was Sarah and what did she know about it? And, ultimately,"

The world of Genesis contains "problematic" interior situations simply unimaginable in the Homeric epics, by virtue of the fact that in the latter, there is nothing left to know, nothing to discover or nothing to hide. The destiny of the Homeric characters is always clearly defined, and their fates are never in doubt. They "wake up every morning as if it were the first day of their lives: their emotions, though strong, are simple and find expression instantly" (*M* 12).

Compared to this, Auerbach sees it as something like a revelation that Abraham, the character as he is presented in Genesis, is even able to remember his own actions. As commonplace as the simple act of memory has become in the modern sense of the human, the act would have been, for Auerbach, entirely impossible for Hellenistic characters. Anything they would have to remember is given as a pure present, always in the foreground, retrieved by the very clarity of the world through which they move.[19] And just as much as the Homeric character cannot remember, neither can he develop, since his entire destiny is present at every moment of his existence, like a train that follows tracks already determined for it.

Kierkegaard asks, What is God doing" (293)? In his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, Robbins writes, "Abraham also sacrifices all possibility of making himself intelligible to Isaac and Sarah, his family, or to the community" (ibid.).

[19] Here is a place where it seems essential to point out that Auerbach is tracing not the history of man, but that of character; he is not naively falling into some nostalgically hypostasized idealization of the ancients in comparison to the fallenness of late moderns. This claim is one often lodged against Lukács' account of Hellenist epic in *The Theory of the Novel*, a work which otherwise is not without its similarities to Auerbach's *Mimesis*. For instance, in *Marxism and Totality*, Martin Jay sums up that in *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács' version of epic is "based far more on the image of the Greeks in German culture, for example in the writings of Hegel and Friedrich Theodor Fischer, than on any legitimate historical analysis of the Homeric period….The Greeks were thus as romantically depicted as in any of the earlier fantasies of Winckelmann and his followers" (93). Jay in fact goes on to cite Auerbach's own philological analysis of the Hebrew Bible as a counter-example to Lukács' idealized characterization of the epic age.

The "realism" that emerges from the Hebrew Bible,[20] on the other hand, is nothing but the development of character, the fact that Abraham, for instance, gradually emerges as an individual by virtue of the passage from his first to second "call" from God, and the accumulation of experience that happens during that passage (Genesis 12 and 22). The Hebrew Bible, Auerbach writes, presents us in fact with nothing but that "history of a personality" understood as "the formation undergone by those whom God has chosen as examples" (*M* 18). There is a "multilayeredness" of existence in the Hebrew presentation of character entirely unknown to the world of Homer, discontinuity and difference in the former, as compared to an almost stifling unity in the latter.

This difference is possible, Auerbach writes, because in the world of the Hebrew Bible, more of life is able to be taken seriously than in the Homeric world. While in Homer, the sublime events happen almost exclusively among the ruling class and the great warriors, in the Bible, "the sublime influence of God…reaches so deeply into the everyday that the two realms of the sublime and the everyday are not only actually unseparated but basically inseparable" (*M* 22-3). Odysseus may return to Ithaca by masquerading as a poor beggar, but there is never any doubt that he is only playing,

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[20] I use the term "Hebrew Bible," as opposed to "Old Testament," following both Auerbach's own usage, as well as the logic implied in his argument. Notably, he uses "Alte Testament" only infrequently, more often classifying the Hebraic narratives as belonging to "den biblischen Geschichten" or "das elohistischen Text;" put simply, in contrast to the Homeric epics, the Hebrew Bible is "an equally ancient and equally epic style from a different world of forms [ein ebenfalls antikes, ein ebenfalls episches Text aus einer anderen Formenwelt 12]" (*M* 7). As Jill Robbins notes in "Sacrifice," if Auerbach does make recourse to the term "Old Testament," and the relationship with the Hebrew Bible that it implies, it is because his "literary critical and philological interest is largely in the Christian allegorical interpretations that this text from the Hebrew Bible has received. The sacrifice of Isaac prefigures the Golgotha event, to take just a few examples, in the symbolism of the three days, in Isaac's carrying the wood of his sacrifice (as Christ carried his own cross), and more prominently, in the free consent of the sacrificial victim" (293). What Robbins finds, however, is that even in Auerbach's own characterization of the Abraham story as presenting itself both as absolute truth and as an obscure text demanding "transgressive interpretation," it becomes foundational for the very difference between the two terms "Hebrew Bible" and "Old Testament," between "the Hebrew Bible's self-understanding and the Christian figural understanding of it" (ibid.). Curiously, in his 1953 "Epilegomena to *Mimesis*," Auerbach lists among the criticisms that have been directed toward his book the claim that it is "anti-Christian" (*M* 570).

waiting heroically to reclaim Penelope and to have his vengeance. The great characters of the Hebrew Bible, on the other hand, are actually capable of falling lower in dignity – one need think only of Adam here – and of rising to unexpected heights. These often miserable transformations are not simply acted out, as in the case of the Homeric heroes, but rather always involve the entire fate of the Biblical characters, whose being is always in flux and whose identities remain unstable.

The sublime come down to earth

Prefigured by Homer's epic, the strict separation of styles would go on to gain a universal dominance in the literature of Greek and Latin antiquity, which Auerbach reads, for example, in Petronius's *Satyricon*. This is to say that antique literature is governed by an essentially insurmountable separation between the levels of literary representation, according to which the tragic and sublime style is used for noble and elevated figures, the idyll or pastoral represent the home and the noble simplicity of the countryside, and the low style of comedy is strictly reserved for "everything commonly realistic, everything pertaining to everyday life" (*M* 31). During the waning years of Roman classicism, however, there also begins to emerge an alternative strand of realism in the Christian tradition, whereby that classical separation of styles gradually breaks down. Instead of being relegated strictly to the comedic style, as in Petronius's bawdy satire of earthly delights and transgressions, everyday life and sensuous experience are increasingly taken seriously, even tragically, in the writings of the early Christian fathers.

Auerbach first reads this mixture of styles in the Gospel of Mark's account of Peter's denial of Christ, in which a scene "entirely realistic both in regard to locale and *dramatis personae*…is replete with problem and tragedy" (*M* 41). While Petronius was

able to treat lowly reality because he did so in the comedic style considered proper to it, "a scene like Peter's denial fits into no antique genre," Auerbach writes: "It is too serious for comedy, too contemporary and everyday for tragedy, politically too insignificant for history—and the form which was given it is one of such immediacy that its like does not exist in the literature of antiquity" (*M* 45). And like the reality of the representation, the conception of character is entirely new as well. Peter, the great sinner, is not treated as a merely ancillary character, an illustration of sin, or a ridiculous scoundrel, but he is rather "the image of man in the highest and deepest and most tragic sense" (*M* 41). The most serious is increasingly seen in the low, the common, and the random.

This tradition of the realistic rendering of the life of man finds its most explicit early example in Augustine's *Confessions*, in which the individual is put on display in a previously unheard of immediacy. Augustine, Auerbach writes, "feels and directly presents human life, and it lives before our eyes" (*M* 70).[21] The analysis of Augustine in *Mimesis* is brief, confined to only a few pages at the end of the third chapter, "The Arrest of Peter Valvomeres," which is otherwise devoted to a study of Augustine's contemporary, the Roman historian Ammianus. The importance of Augustine, though, for

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[21] We can even think of Augustine's writing in a confessional mode as a kind of birth of literary subjectivity, of the use of written language as a medium for the presentation of an intensely inward life. The conversion experience that makes the genre of the confession possible (the conversion from one who sins to one who is saved and is thus able to tell about his prior "self" as a sinner) is in fact the basic narratological structure of any autobiographical project, or any first-person narrative. In order to write the story of one's life, one must undergo the linguistic conversion from an "I" whose story is narrated to an "I" who is able to narrate from a vantage point on the hither side of that life. This problematic of conversion is excellently analyzed by Jill Robbins in *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother*. She writes: "At the moment of conversion the sinner becomes the converted narrator, an 'I' who is able to tell the story of its self-loss and self-recovery….In this way, the conversion experience makes possible the first-person narrative; conversely, a formal requirement of a first-person narrative is a conversion experience" (24). Or as she writes elsewhere, in "Circumcising Confession:" "The specular self-constitution of the subject is inherent to the (theological) project of autobiography" (26). See also Eugene Vance, *Mervelous Signals*, particularly the opening chapter, "Augustine's *Confessions* and the Poetics of the Law;" as well as John Freccero's opening chapter in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, "The Prologue Scene." See also Kenneth Burke's analysis of Augustine's religious conversion as the working through of a linguistic predicament, in *The Rhetoric of Religion*.

the scope of *Mimesis* cannot be underestimated. Auerbach finds in Augustine's "biography" of his friend Alypius the advent of what he calls a *sermo humilis,* a "low style" that is at the same time "a new elevated style."[22] Like the coexistence of the sublime and the everyday in the Bible, Augustine's *sermo humilis* is a literary language that directly confronts the sensory and realistic, in even its basest forms, but which also touches upon the sublime, announcing the Christian mixture of styles whereby the most tragic and problematic is not kept apart from the everyday and the common. It is a low style "such as would properly only be applicable to comedy, but which now reaches out far beyond its original domain, and encroaches upon the deepest and the highest, the sublime and the eternal" (*M* 72). In Augustine, however, this style is not commanding so much a "representation" of reality, as it is an interpretation of it, according to the conception of reality and of history Auerbach reads in this early Christian tradition, a conception that will come to be called "figural."

Reality, in all its dynamism and sensorial quality, is interpreted as containing within it the divine nature of God's plan; the great trajectory of man's downfall and salvation in the kingdom of God inhabits the most everyday of common occurrences in the empirical world of men, both high and low. The term "figural" emerges out of the way in which the people and events of life on earth are increasingly read as a series of "figures," signs pointing to nothing less than the entire history of salvation. This figural conception of reality and history is "rooted from the beginning in the character of Jewish-

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[22] The importance of *sermo humilis* as a stylistic sea change in Western literature is explored at great length in a late essay from 1952, "*Sermo humilis,*" collected in Auerbach's last volume, *Literary Language and Its Public.* In that essay, Auerbach traces the etymology of the term as it was received by Augustine, as well as the influence it would come to have on Latin literature in Augustine's wake. As he notes: "The domain of *sermo humilis* in late antiquity includes all the forms of Christian literature. It pervades philosophical disquisitions as well as realistic records of events" (*LL* 53).

Christian literature" (*M* 41) in that it finds its embodiment in the core of Christian doctrine, namely, in Christ's Incarnation and Passion. The idea that the son of God not only took the form of a common man, but "was treated as a low criminal, that he was mocked, spat upon, whipped, and nailed to the cross" (*M* 72) would be unimaginable according to the classical separation of styles. The most tragic, in the Christian tradition, comes down to earth, in its lowliest places and in its most pitiful tendencies. The basest of bodies, that of the crucified Christ, is also a sign of the sublime God, while still maintaining a painfully immediate corporeality.

This "figural" worldview, whereby the entire trajectory of God's plan is found in even the lowest forms of everyday existence, forms the epistemological basis for all three of these early instances of realism that have been discussed – the Old Testament story of Abraham's sacrifice, the New Testament account of Peter's denial of Christ, and Augustine's presentation of his own self in *The Confessions*. The basis of this worldview is already present in the spirit of the Hebrew Bible, where the stories may lack the poetic unity of the Homeric epics, but which become united along a "general vertical connection" (*M* 17) by virtue of the fact that they present, in all of their accumulated details, "universal history" (*M* 16). Instead of coalescing horizontally into a narrative, the events described in the Hebrew Bible point vertically to the one true narrative, the entire history of mankind, from the creation of the world to its end in the fulfillment of the Covenant. This understanding of history then becomes "a general method of comprehending reality" (ibid.). While in the antique realism of Homer's *Odyssey* literary reality amounts to the presentation of a pure present, where nothing is hidden or left in secret, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, "the sensory occurrence pales before the power of

its figural meaning" (*M* 49). Classical antiquity knows only foreground, and every event is clarified by the light of day,[23] while on the other hand "the antagonism between sensory appearance and meaning…permeates the early, and indeed the whole, Christian view of reality" (ibid.). Realism grows all the more intense and immediate, but at the same time, the meaning of that reality increasingly lies elsewhere.

Ultimately, Auerbach finds, this early epistemology of the Biblical narratives, according to which the meaning of a thing is distinctly other than its physical presentation, becomes the very undoing of its own Hebraic context. As history rapidly marches forward and the world grows increasingly wide, events and persons entirely outside of the Jewish framework must be interpreted so as to find a place within that framework. The problem becomes how to find the overarching narrative of the history of the Jewish people in a history that is quickly passing beyond the Jewish realm, most particularly into the Roman world. With that widening of the world, the entire Jewish tradition is, according to a Christian appropriation and subversion of its own logic, reinterpreted as a prognostication of the appearance of Christ and the emergent unfolding of Christian history. The epistemological basis of the Hebraic worldview then transforms that same Hebraic tradition into a figure for a meaning that lies beyond it, the Christian history of the New Testament. In the writings of the early Church fathers, notably in the Apostle Paul,

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[23] This is an element of "Odysseus' Scar" with which many classicist scholars have disagreed. See, for instance, the 1950 review essay of *Mimesis* by Ludwig Edelstein. While praising the work as a whole, Edelstein spends most of his essay questioning Auerbach's banishment of realism from antiquity. He cites numerous classical figures, including Euripides, Menander, and Callimachus, as examples of "a more serious representation of average life in Greek literature than a hard and fast distinction between the comic and the tragic will admit" (428).

> The Old Testament [*alte Testament*] was played down as popular history and as the code of the Jewish people and assumed the appearance of a series of "figures," that is of prophetic announcements and anticipations of the coming of Jesus and the concomitant events…The total content of the sacred writings was placed in an exegetic context which often removed the thing told very far from its sensory base, in that the reader or listener was forced to turn his attention away from the sensory occurrence and toward its meaning (*M* 48).

What we might stress here is the seeming paradox of realism as an emerging discourse: that its fidelity to the seriousness and tragedy of everyday life becomes all the greater as the very nature of reality is increasingly devalued for the sake of its figural meaning.

The realism of the Hebrew narratives are so strong because "a single and hidden God" (*M* 17) is pointed to by everything, and no individual is free from the seriousness engendered by that signification. But we will remember, as Auerbach had described it with regard to Homer in his early study of Dante, that a man's character is his fate, that there is a fundamental unity between the literary presentation of a person and the story that person inhabits. How is a character to be, then, not only its own story, the things it does and says, but another, that universal story of which its existence is only a figure, or a sign? If the story is doubled, at once both singular and universal, then the character with which it is so essentially linked must be as well. Moreover, when the world of Hebrew Bible becomes a figure not of God's truth, but of the New Testament, then it is no longer to universal history that it points, imbuing everyone on display with a sublime tragedy. The early realism of the Hebraic world now points instead to yet another "reality," the Christian one lying between that initial world become shadow, and the truth which now

lies even farther away. A sign which had been simply composed of two parts is turned into one built upon at least three.

Literary history without history

Like Augustine, Auerbach essentially interprets history. And he shares with Augustine the "figural" method of interpretation. Auerbach reads history, however, not to fit its mass of people and events into the Christian narrative of God's plan, but into the very narrative of literary history. Auerbach reads a series of particulars, and yet makes them point to a larger narrative, to a "truth" outside of themselves, without ever letting the particular texts become mere shadows subservient to that truth. If the texts he reads, and more importantly, the characters that inhabit them, are doubled, then the question becomes, how are they made to figure? The texts he reads become figures for the development of literary "realism," for "the representation of reality in Western literature," as the work's English subtitle proclaims. However, as in Augustine's revisionist method of figural interpretation, "realism" proves to be not a pure and immediate present, a literature which straightforwardly represents a reality outside of itself, but rather a series of figural relationships whose ultimate endpoint is found to lie quite far afield from any simply existent reality. We must here briefly trace Auerbach's conception of history, which we can at least provisionally label as "figural," and find what story of "mimesis" his historical method is able to tell.

Mimesis's initial critics, following both the German publication in 1946 as well as the English translation in 1953, were unanimous in expressing their immense admiration for Auerbach's formidable achievement, eager to recognize in equal parts the breadth of his philological knowledge and the depth of his critical insight. However, they were

almost equally unanimous in criticizing Auerbach's hesitancy to name his critical

presuppositions, to announce his methodology, or to even define his set of major terms,

such as "mimesis" or "realism." Many modern readers even take *Mimesis* to task for

failing to offer any kind of theory of literary mimesis, to say just what, for Auerbach,

mimesis is.[24] The absence of any programmatic definition of mimesis, however, is not

accidental, but is in fact essential to Auerbach's critical project. In the "Epilegomena to

Mimesis," an essay he wrote in 1953 as a response to his critics, most notably Ernst

Robert Curtius, Auerbach acknowledges and in fact fully admits to this critique, while he

carefully defends his position.[25] Maintaining a critical fidelity to the particular, Auerbach

describes his reluctance to use generalizations and abstract concepts as his resistance to

any kind of literary criticism that would seek its models in the rigidities and exact laws of

the sciences, which he views only as a dangerous turn in the twentieth-century

humanities. As he writes, "there is not in intellectual history identity and strict conformity

to laws, and abstract, reductive concepts falsify or destroy the phenomena" (*M* 572).

Never intending to write a work of literary theory, Auerbach instead practices the method

inherited from his German training in classical philology, a careful and scrutinizing

explication de texte that never veers far from the terms offered by the individual work at

hand.

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[24] The criticism runs from the work's initial reviewers to more contemporary deconstructionist critics. See, for instance, the early review by René Wellek, as discussed above. Similarly among the early critics, Francis Fergusson, in his joint review of *Mimesis* and Curtius' *Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, writes that the complaint about Auerbach's lack of definition of terms like "reality" and "representation" is invalid, since the terms are eventually understood from the material itself; and Ludwig Edelstein sympathizes with the impossibility of "a systematic history of [Auerbach's] subject" (426). Charles Muscatine remains persistent in offering concrete definitions of Auerbach's major concepts, but he admits that he can only do so by "collecting here definitions from scattered parts of the book" (205). The same criticism continues in a more recent and "deconstructive" critic such as David Carroll, in his 1975 essay, "*Mimesis* Reconsidered: Literature, History, Ideology."

[25] For Curtius' review, see "*Die Lehre von den drei Stilen in Altertum und Mittelalter*" (1952).

Strangely, considering that the name of the work in question is simply *Mimesis*, Auerbach goes on to write:

> Were it possible, I would not have used any generalizing expressions at all, but instead I would have suggested the thought to the reader purely by presenting a sequence of particulars. This is not possible; accordingly I used some much-used terms, like realism and moralism…That they all signify all and nothing was perfectly clear to me; they should acquire their meaning only from the context, and in fact from the particular context (ibid.).

Resistant to using abstract terms at all, and in fact wishing to avoid them entirely, Auerbach instead reveals his conceptions of "mimesis" and "realism" only through his own critical act of reading his textual examples.[26] Naturally, then, Auerbach's work remains difficult to classify according to any kind of theoretical movement or methodology, but this is precisely because of the fact that it would be entirely anathema to his critical project to do so. Never intending to construct an abstract theory, or an empirically determined literary history, what Auerbach does perform is a consistent and rigorous form of what we today call close reading. Auerbach writes neither a poetics, nor a literary history, but a hermeneutics.[27]

As a hermeneutics, or a series of individually determined interpretive readings, Auerbach's criticism maintains an absolute closeness to whatever text is at hand, but at

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[26] And not only does Auerbach do this with his critical terms – performatively enact that which he would traditionally be supposed only to describe, but with his entire literary historical project as well. Fredric Jameson echoes this task, when he writes in the preface to *The Political Unconscious*: "Of literary history today we may observe that its task is at one with that proposed by Louis Althusser for historiography in general: not to elaborate some achieved and lifelike simulacrum of its supposed object, but rather to 'produce' the latter's 'concept.' This is indeed what the greatest modern or modernizing literary histories— such as Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*—have sought to do in their critical practice, if not in their theory" (12).

[27] The critical literature placing Auerbach within the traditions of (German) hermeneutics is practically nonexistent, but an interesting beginning may be found in W. Wolfgang Holdheim, "The Hermeneutic Significance of Auerbach's *Ansatz*."

the same time, he builds all of these particularities into a larger structure, the epic literary history of realism for which *Mimesis* is canonically known as being. The latter, however, can only be constructed out of the gradual accumulation of the former.[28] At the same time, while Auerbach is so hesitant ever to name his method or to define his critical project, in one of the few places where he does make something like a programmatic statement of purpose, he makes it clear that his fidelity *is* in fact to history. In the introduction to his last volume of essays, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, collected shortly before his death in 1957, Auerbach writes plainly that his "purpose is always to write history" [*immer wieder habe ich die Absicht, Geschichte zu schreiben* 20] (*LL* 20). Already implicit in the basic structural principle of *Mimesis*, in which a hermeneutics devoted to the particular creates a whole entity spanning all of European history, one might define this conception of history that spans Auerbach's entire work as loosely Hegelian, according to which the particular always reflects the whole.[29] Hermeneutically, this means that Auerbach will begin by identifying one problem or motif – in the case of *Mimesis* it is the classical doctrine of the separation of styles – and use it as a means of analyzing, firstly, a given work as a whole unity; secondly, the specific epoch to which that work belongs; and lastly, the larger

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[28] Here we might think of de Man's claim in "Literary History and Literary Modernity," that "to become good literary historians, we must remember that what we usually call literary history has little or nothing to do with literature and that what we call literary interpretation—provided only it is good interpretation—is in fact literary history" (*BI* 165). That is to say, Auerbach writes literary history in and as literary interpretation, or hermeneutics.

[29] Auerbach fully confesses to the deep-rooted Hegelian influence on his worldview in the "Epilegomena to *Mimesis*." He writes there: "[*Mimesis*] is a German book not only on account of its language…It arose from the themes and methods of German intellectual history and philology; it would be conceivable in no other tradition than in that of German romanticism and Hegel" (*M* 571).

pattern of history, which for Auerbach becomes essentially synonymous with a unified European civilization.[30]

In the introduction to *Literary Language*, Auerbach discusses at length the indebtedness of his conception of history not only to Hegel's historicism, but to that of Giambattista Vico, whose *Scienza nuova* (which first appeared in 1725) Auerbach translated into German in 1924.[31] He takes from Vico's theory of historical knowledge the principle that we can only know what we, humans, have made, but that we are capable of understanding anything made by those human hands. This is possible, according to Vico, because of the fact that every human event and action is part of one larger unity, the unfolding of human history according to the always already present universal law of some kind of divine providence. The interpreter shares the same continuum as any created object he might interpret, and there instantly exists between the two a kind of mutually interdependent relationship of understanding.

It must also be stressed that another of Auerbach's central inheritances from Vico is the earthliness of his historicism, which is to say that reality is always identified with

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[30] Concerning this relationship between "history" and "Europe," the last essay of Auerbach's final volume, "The Western Public and Its Language," closes with the rather mournful note: "Nevertheless we may venture to speak of *a* European society and even of a European *Hochsprache*. What unites them is their common root in antiquity and Christianity. For this combination contains the dialectical force which—even if Europe, like Rome before it, should now lose its power and even cease to exist as such—has prefigured the forms of a common social and cultural life on our planet" (*LL* 338). The kind of unity which, via its *Hochsprache* and literate public, Europe achieved would simply have been unimaginable anywhere else in the world, from the perspective of Auerbach's Germanic classicism. Notably, that unity of European history is not a result of a politics or a social order, but of a language, the literary Latin of the early Middle Ages. This is a place where one might begin to study the similarities between Auerbach's project and that of his contemporary, Ernst Robert Curtius, despite their many methodological differences. Curtius writes in the forward to the English translation of his major 1948 work, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, that his work, like Auerbach's, grew out of a concern for European unity, and its seeming destruction in the wars he had witnessed. Curtius curiously notes that "the demonstration [of the unity of Western culture] can only be made from a universal standpoint. Such a standpoint is afforded by Latinity. Latin was the language of the educated during the thirteen centuries which lie between Virgil and Dante" (viii). The history of Europe is to be found not only in a language, but in an explicitly *literary* language, one that lived in writing but which essentially had no public which might speak it.

[31] *Die neue Wissenschaft über die gemeinschaftliche Natur de Völker: Nach der Ausgabevon 1744 übersetzt und eingeleitet*. Munich: Allgemeine Verlaganstalt, 1924.

history, rather than with some theological or metaphysical, noumenal reality.[32] Thus Auerbach can write that "although the means with which Providence operates are purely historical, its work is a complete and perfect whole" (*LL* 10). On this point, Auerbach is careful to draw attention to Vico's differentiation between philosophy and philology, according to which the former is concerned with immutable and absolute truth (*verum*), while the latter is devoted to the interpretation of particular and contingent truth (*certum*). The particular truth is always subject to change, as it is presented differently for each epoch, while the universal truth is never manifested in history. As Auerbach writes, "one aspect or another of the Platonic *verum* is actualized in every stage of history; no historical period embodies the whole of it. It is fully contained only in the plan of Providence or in the total course of history; and it can be known only through a knowledge of history as a whole" (*LL* 16). And because one can only arrive at the *verum* from the historically particular *certum*, philosophy and philology are inseparable from one another, inextricably linked in the study of man's cultural productions.[33]

Due to the earthliness of his Vichian historicism, Auerbach holds that the historical position of the interpreter is just as essential as that of the object. His own position, particularly in regards to *Mimesis*, is thus repeatedly stressed. He makes passing references to his own historicity in that work, from our late modern epoch's "incomparable historical vantage point" (*M* 553), offering a final *apologia* that "*Mimesis* is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the

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[32] See "Vico and Aesthetic Historicism," first published in 1949, collected in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*. Here, Auerbach writes: "Vico created and passionately maintained the concept of the historical nature of men. He identified human history and human nature, he conceived human nature as a function of history….As Vico puts it, human history is a permanent Platonic state" (*SDEL* 198). On this point, one can also identify the influence on Auerbach of Herder and Hegel. Timothy Bahti, in "Vico, Auerbach and Literary History," terms Auerbach's historicism a "Hegelianization of Vico" (103).
[33] The method, we might suggest, becomes a kind of alignment of a synchronic and a diachronic perspective, whereby each individual part dynamically employs the atemporal system of the whole.

beginning of the 1940s" (*M* 574). Subsequently, the air of melancholy that hangs over his

contingently modern perspective is at times extremely palpable.[34] In the later introductory

essay, he quite clearly states that he is writing during a time of distress, during which

"European civilization is approaching the term of its existence" (*LL* 6). Standing at the

end of an era having lasted three millennia, Auerbach notes that this is really the last

moment from which this unity of "Europe" will be able to be seen as a whole, as "already

it is beginning to be engulfed in another, more comprehensive unity," and then goes on to

remark: "Today, however, European civilization is still a living reality within the range of

our perception" (ibid.).[35] While he never states explicitly just what this post-European

totality would be, one can certainly acknowledge that, if history for him is essentially

aligned with the unity of European culture, history is certainly heaving its last sigh during

the years of Auerbach's writing.

While European history can still be grasped – even if, like Benjamin's image of

the Angelus Novus, it is only seen from a backward glance that captures nothing but a

growing pile of destruction in its gaze – it seems that, for Auerbach's position in late

modernity, it is too far along in the day for this history to be seen clearly. The sense of

unity has been lost, and while one is still within that history, it no longer appears to be a

natural whole, but simply a massive collection of parts, growing larger and more

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[34] See, for instance, the innuendo-laden discussion of legend in the first chapter on Homer (*M* 19-20).

[35] If this post-European, "more comprehensive" epoch towards which Auerbach hints is something like what we today call our "globalized" world, in which all people are technologically and linguistically closer than ever before (however ontologically far they may remain) then it seems fair enough that one would find problematic Auerbach's unease at this multicultural unity; though an attentive reader both of the works which Auerbach is reading, as well as of that "unity" which we have seen post-date him, might be a little more sympathetic towards his anxiety. On the ambivalence of Auerbach's feelings of a post-European world, see in particular the last chapter of *Mimesis*, but also the late essay from 1952, "Philology and *Weltliteratur*," in which he privileges the idea of the post-national "global citizen," while at the same time lamenting the leveling process of homogenization that comes with that transition. As he perhaps snidely remarks, in a discussion of the kind of world we live in being precisely the kind in which the humanist ideal of a *Weltliteratur* might triumph, "this contemporary situation is not what Goethe had in mind" (3).

confused by the minute, until the whole mess spills over into what will come after

"Europe." Thus, because it is entirely impossible to accumulate every last particular of

history, the infinite proliferation of *certa* embodying the higher *verum*, Auerbach finds

that there is an essential random or accidental quality to whatever particular point of

departure [*Ansatz*] is chosen by the interpreter.[36] The only governing criterion is that

whatever method or motif is used to uncover history, it cannot be arbitrarily imposed

upon the materials, but must develop out of the materials themselves, "a characteristic

found in the subject itself, essential to its history, which, when stressed and developed,

clarifies the subject matter in its particularity and other topics in relation to it" (*LL* 19).

Auerbach does not construct a critical-theoretical model, or a predetermined literary

historical narrative, and then proceed to slot a collection of texts into that mold, but rather

remains close to the texts themselves, only finding the theory or history in the reading

itself. As he confesses in *Mimesis*: "the great majority of the texts were chosen at

random, on the basis of accidental acquaintance and personal preference rather than in

view of a definite purpose" (*M* 556). The interpreter must always remain in obedience to

the rules of the texts that fall, even if accidentally, before his gaze.

Auerbach's method of reading history, then, is structurally analogous to

Augustine's figural interpretation, whereby particular individuals and events are rendered

as figures which point beyond themselves, but the intent is very far from that of the early

Christian fathers. In no way does Auerbach use "the method of revisional interpretation"

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[36] On the actual interpretive necessity of the supposed historical contingency of the famous circumstances of Auerbach's writing of *Mimesis*, his banishment by the National Socialists from his chair at Marburg to the alien environment of Istanbul, as well as a masterful reinterpretation of the great humanist myth of the impassioned scholar writing his masterful work without the benefit of a well-equipped library, see Paul Bové, *Intellectuals in Power: A Genealogy of Critical Humanism*. See also David Damrosch, "Auerbach in Exile," for a discussion of the inherent impossibility of *Mimesis*'s critical project, the certain failure of constructing a literary history of the West from a late modern vantage point.

(*M* 48), whereby the events of history are turned into figures made to prefigure a preexisting higher-order narrative, a divine and atemporal universal history. Nor, as we have seen, *could* this method have even been available to Auerbach. From his position in late modernity, there is simply no higher-order narrative left to guide him. Auerbach's critical objects become a series of figures, whose meaning resides both in themselves and in a larger narrative beyond themselves. This is an entirely immanent operation, since the larger narrative does not exist outside of, or before the individual figures, but only comes into existence out of those very figures.

Auerbach renders as figures the texts he interprets. They are read such that they point to a larger truth, the narrative of Western literary history, though this truth only exists because of the texts that point to it. Moreover, this same figural movement determines the characters that inhabit these texts. As we have seen, any narrative, or literary text, is in a metonymic relationship with its characters, such that "a man's character is his fate." Realism is ultimately a question of character, the serious treatment of the individual, and history always belongs, especially in those early texts Auerbach reads in *Mimesis*, to the actors who enact it, figures like Abraham, Peter, and Augustine himself. These figures do not, however, figure any larger narrative; no divine plan exists into which they might fit. Instead, the characters of *Mimesis* point only to a literary history which they themselves already comprise. We must examine how exactly Auerbach employs a version of figural interpretation in his writing of literary history, and ask how figures signify in the narrative he writes. Auerbach traces the history of figural interpretation, from Augustine to the Middle Ages, but he employs the figural method in a form that remains wholly distinct from that history. Both the texts comprising

Mimesis's literary history and the characters of those texts are rendered by Auerbach as figures. To what truth, then, do they point?

A scene from the great drama of mankind

The "figural" method of interpreting reality is largely absent in the early medieval literature Auerbach reads in *Mimesis*. While the French courtly romances are highly Christian, they lack the immediacy and sublime everydayness of the early centuries of Church realism. The historicity of characters like Abraham and Peter is lost entirely to a class-based rigidity inherited as a last vestige of late antiquity. The romances retain the basic structure of the "figural" worldview, but it is so severed from concrete historicity, and from the baseness of the Passion of Christ, that the characters, as Auerbach writes in regards to the *Chanson de Roland*, "no longer have any reality, they have only signification" (*M* 116). More akin to the hollow figures of allegory, who lose their earthly dynamism entirely in the face of their abstract reference, the characters of medieval romance are even more drained of life and background than the static heroes of the Homeric world. Yet Auerbach finds the return of a truly figural realism when he turns toward an anonymous French Passion play from the twelfth century, *Mystère d'Adam*. The figural realism that begins to emerge in medieval Christianity is found to be more realistic than would have been possible even in Augustine's outpouring of his own self.

The mystery play is set in a humble home in the French countryside, and Auerbach reads a domestic scene taking place between a farmer and his wife who could stand for the humble peasantry as a whole, everyman, everywhere. The characters are notably referred to as Adam and Eve. The drama is certainly a *sermo humilis*, even written in the vernacular. As in Augustine, the everyday is infused with the sublime,

which entirely inhabits this scene representative of nothing less than the common life of man on earth. The small dramas of everyday life are all part of the one great drama of the larger historical schema of man's fall from the garden and eventual salvation by the divine judgment. In *Mystère d'Adam*, Auerbach writes, "the scenes which render everyday contemporary life…are, then, fitted into a Biblical and world-historical frame by whose spirit they are pervaded. And the spirit of the frame which encompasses them is the spirit of the figural interpretation of history" (*M* 156). Every occurrence in the everyday world, while dynamic and distinct as a particular event, is at the same time an occurrence in the great historical trajectory of God's eternal plan. The greatest of truths is not only hidden in the smallest everyday scenes, but it *is* those everyday scenes at the same time. Every event in the play is "part of one—and always of the same—context: of *one great drama* whose beginning is God's creation of the world, whose climax is Christ's Incarnation and Passion, and whose expected conclusion will be Christ's second coming and the Last Judgment" (*M* 158, my emphasis). The everyday is also the essential, and both are dynamic and alive.

Curiously, it is in the plainest instance of Auerbach's conception of this medieval figural literature when he becomes the most indirect, and we might even say *literary*. The play is dependent upon a classically Christian figural worldview, and thus every scene is both itself, in its particularity, and part of the soteriological scheme as well, the grand history of salvation. But it is in Auerbach's secularized, and what I position as his *modernist* conception of figural interpretation, that this world-historical narrative is rendered as "one great drama [*eines einzigen großen Dramas* 154]," moreover with a classically theatrical structure of a beginning, climax, and conclusion [*Beginn*,

Höhepunkt, *noch ausstehendes und erwartetes Ende* 154]. This great drama, as Auerbach conceives it, has only one place—the world – and "but one action—man's fall and redemption" (*M* 158). The universal truth of history is articulated precisely as a grand and overarching work of literature, the one great drama of mankind. Medieval figurality, in Auerbach's own modernist hands, is secularized and rendered figurative – the ultimate truth (*veritas*) to which all individual instants point is no longer the plan of divine providence, but the unfolding of the entity called literature.

Here we may finally summarize Auerbach's own "theory" of figurality, as it emerges from his merely philological accounts of the history of figural interpretation. Ostensibly only describing the "figural" worldview, we will see how it in fact determines Auerbach's own critical project, not only his conception of literary mimesis, but also his construction of the literary character. Auerbach first introduces the figural worldview only loosely in the 1929 study of Dante,[37] but it only reaches a full articulation in writings from his time spent in Istanbul. Not only does he articulate it at numerous points throughout *Mimesis*, but he explores the concept at great length in his seminal essay "*Figura*," first published in an Italian journal in 1938.[38]

Auerbach traces the history of the term, coming to Latin from the Greek *schema*, in the sense of outward shape or plastic form, but it is distinctly a formalism that

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[37] As Auerbach writes in this early study, on the "mimetic revival" of Dante's Middle Ages: "It culminated in a spirituality which encompassed the whole of earthly life at every level, the great political developments no less than men's occupations and domestic activities, the seasons and the hours of the day…It became a universal and universally present spiritualization of the earthly world which however retained its patent sensuous reality" (*DPSW* 19-20). Seventeen years later, in *Mimesis*, he writes that, while he had in fact articulated the basic structure of Dante's realism in the earlier book, since then he has "been concerned with the question what conception of history is the foundation for Dante's realism, this realism projected into changeless eternity" (*M* 194).

[38] "*Figura*," in *Archivum Romanicum* 22 (1938). The essay was reprinted in a volume published in Istanbul in 1944, *Neue Dantestudien*, along with the esays "*Sermo Humilis*" and "Franz von Assisi in der Komödie;" and it appeared in English translation in 1957, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*.

expresses something living and dynamic. As he writes of the word's initial transposition from Greek to Latin, "to be sure, *schema* itself in Greek is more dynamic than the word as we use it; in Aristotle, for example, mimic gestures, especially of actors, are called *schemata*; the meaning of dynamic form is by no means foreign to *schema*; but *figura* developed this element of movement and transformation much further" (*SDEL* 16). In Lucretius, the word first comes to take on the meaning not of the initial form but of its imitation, transitioning from model to copy, but also capable of signifying the play between the two, such that "*figura*" is employed "in the sense of 'dream image,' 'figment of fancy,' 'ghost' [*in der Bedeutung von 'Traumbild,' 'Phantasiegestalt,' 'Schatten des Toten'* [17]" (*SDEL* 17). Ultimately, then, "*figura*" comes to signify the enlivening of a form once dead, or, the shadow of a thing that remains dead.

The term enters the Christian world through Tertullian, who conceives of *figura* as a thing treated as a prophetic event foreshadowing things to come. And to find this *figura*, one must interpret in a particularly figurative manner, the model of which in the Christian exegetical tradition is that established by Augustine, whereby the events and figures of the Hebrew Bible are seen to prefigure those of the New Testament.[39] Tertullian reads the Old Testament figure of Joshua as prophetic of Christ in the New Testament. In short, Joshua becomes a sign, but that does not mean that he is brought to stasis: "Thus the naming of Joshua-Jesus is a phenomenal prophecy or prefiguration of the future Saviour; *figura* is something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical" (*SDEL* 29). Both poles of the figural relationship

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[39] This is of course the movement whereby the Hebrew Bible is subsumed under the logic of revisionist interpretation and named the "Old Testament." On Augustine's establishment of figural interpretation in the early movements of the Church to convert new followers, see Auerbach, "*Sermo Humilis*," (*LL* pp. 37-9), as well as Jill Robbins, *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother*, pp. 1-4.

retain their own concrete dynamism and singularity. Each event signifies itself, while in the spiritual act of figurative interpretation, it is also made to signify the other, both thereby becoming events in a grander scheme. Auerbach writes in "*Figura*":

> Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills [*einschliesst oder erfüllt* 47] the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life. Only the understanding of the two persons or events is a spiritual act, but this spiritual act deals with concrete events whether past, present, or future, and not with concepts or abstractions (*SDEL* 53).

This is the same understanding of history whereby Augustine interprets the reality before his eyes in the newly articulated *sermo humilis*, allowing the sublime and eternal to reside in the everyday and the low. While it wanes during the early years of the Middle Ages, by the time of the French mystery play discussed above, figural interpretation is once again firmly reestablished as the dominant mode for comprehending reality in the Christian world.

The peasant and his wife on the stage are real people, so to speak, alive in their contemporary dynamism and changeability, singularly inhabiting the course of history, but at the same time, as "Adam and Eve," they are the tentative forms for something eternal and timeless, and this eternal nature, their role in the "one great drama," never diminishes their historical quality. As Auerbach notes, in one of his many stresses on this point, "both shadow [*umbra*, *imago*] and truth [*veritas*] are abstract only in reference to the meaning first concealed, then revealed…Moses is no less historical and real because

he is an *umbra* or *figura* of Christ, and Christ, the fulfillment, is no abstract idea, but also a historical reality" (*SDEL* 34). And yet the fulfillment is always of an incomparably higher order, as the *veritas*, belonging to a higher truth or reality. The first event is only found to be *figura* when the fulfillment occurs and reveals it to have been such, but at the same time, as eternal *veritas*, the fulfillment has already been present, in past, present, and future, even long before the first event's own initial occurrence. The eternal is already figured in the events of history, even before the spiritual act of interpretation reveals them as *figurae*.

But what must be stressed is the literariness, or figurality, of Auerbach's own *modernist* figural worldview. In his interpretative hands, the greatest "truth" is in fact found in the most minor particular, in any accidental encounter with any piece of literature. That truth belongs, however, not to the Christian framework, but to the realm of literature, the "great drama" that Auerbach gradually constructs out of his mass of individual readings and hermeneutic practices. The *figurae* of the medieval Christian worldview are rendered as *figurae* of a rhetorical sign-system. The medieval farmer and his wife do not inhabit the eternal realm of the divine plan at the same time as the world of mankind in a mimetically represented French countryside. Auerbach finds their "life" to be still comprised of an interplay between a universal and a particular, but those have become neither divine nor earthly, but instead literary. Adam and Eve inhabit, as mimetically "realistic" people, their own individual work, *Mystère d'Adam*, an instantiation of "literariness" available to be read by an interpretive hermeneutics. But *as characters*, implied people rendered as distinctively literary figures, they also perform

within that great "drama," the atemporal narrative of literature as such, the unique ontology conferred by representational language.

In tracing the history of the term "*figura*," Auerbach has polemically stressed the dynamism and historicity that became attached to the term in its use by the Christian church fathers, at the cost of its antique origination as deadened form.[40] Auerbach's modernist construction of "European literature," I suggest, realigns "*figura*" with its root in and as figural language. Timothy Bahti has offered an excellent analysis of the rhetorical structure of *figura* in his 1992 study *Allegories of History*. As he stresses:

> From [the Latinization of the Greek *schema* to *figura*], *figura* becomes a rhetorical term for the verbal distinctions between the real and the apparent or seeming, the straightforward and the stylized, the model and the copy, the true and the concealing—most basically, the distinction between the literal and the figurative. Consequently, one cannot raise the objection that Auerbach's historical understanding of *figural* interpretation might have little to do with the theory of *figurative* language; on the contrary, *figural* in Auerbach's historical sense is grounded upon *figurative* in our conventional sense (142, Bahti's emphases).

What seems to be only a method of interpretation, a way of constructing history, is in fact inseparable from its tropological structure.

From Auerbach's modernist point of view, figural interpretation is redeployed in his writing of literary history. Auerbach reads his individual literary works figuratively, or rhetorically, in order to construct the idea of *Mimesis*'s history of literature. The work

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[40] On the sense of "*figura*" as a term closely related to "trope" in the classical rhetoric of Quintilian, see "Figura," pp. 25-7. Auerbach writes: "The aim of a figure [in Quintilian] is not, as in all tropes, to substitute words for other words; figures can be formed from words used in their proper meaning and order. Basically all discourse is a forming, a figure, but the word is employed only for formations that are particularly developed in a poetic or rhetorical sense" (*SDEL* 26).

is severed from its own representational claims, *and read otherwise*, as a scene in that one great drama that Auerbach constructs in *Mimesis*. The farmer and his wife stand as mimetically real "people," that, when read otherwise, point not to their figural existence as God's subjects in a salvation history, but to their figurative existence as characters, those rhetorically constructed "ghosts" or "dream images" of real people. As Auerbach reminds us, with regard to Ovid, "*figura* is mobile, changeable, multiform, and deceptive [*bewegt, wandelbar, vielfältig und zu Täuschung geneigt* 21]" (*SDEL* 23). The literary character is something, in Auerbach's hands, far more than simply the semblance of a person.

Auerbach writes what seems to be a history of realism that is also a history of the literary character, while that history itself is only the effect of a mode of interpretation, or a hermeneutics, which I have called figural. As a figural hermeneutics, a given text is read both literally for its own meaning, and figuratively as an instance of a larger "truth." This larger truth becomes in Auerbach's hands the mode of being literary as such, what we could call a poetics masquerading as a literary history. In the figural relationship that emerges from these two poles of reading, we may discern what is ultimately an ontology of representational literature. The literary work of art, for Auerbach, becomes the textual space opened up by the relationship between its own status as an individual work that means something according to a referential structure discernible by a reader, and its status as an exemplary instance of a larger structure of literary conventions and rhetorical operations. [41] And as we have seen, for Auerbach the text is essentially in a metonymic

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[41] What I am attempting to identify in Auerbach as an implicit statement about the ontology of literature purposefully echoes the thought of René Wellek and Austin Warren in *Theory of Literature*, as they raise the "extremely difficult epistemological question…of the 'mode of existence' or the 'ontological status' of a literary work of art," as they, in short, ask "what and where is a poem." (142). Their ultimate conclusion

relationship with its characters, such that they themselves are read according to the same figural logic. The ontology of representational literature is in a structurally analogous relationship to that of the literary character. We are close to uncovering just what kind of ontology it is that Auerbach constructs for these "multiform" figures. Before we can get to this point, however, we must first examine the structure of history for Auerbach, which we have previously called "figural." How, in its figural construction, does history ultimately tell the story of a literary ontology?

Europe's last modernist novel

We will remember that history is what ostensibly stands as Auerbach's major critical preoccupation, the figure in whose service he performs his textual interpretations. He is clear to state that, in contrast to his mentor Leo Spitzer, who practices as a stylist concerned with individual linguistic forms, Auerbach is always writing history.[42] And as a historian, he writes, "I never approach a text as an isolated phenomenon; I address a question to it, and my question, not the text, is my primary point of departure" (*LL* 20). As we can see in *Mimesis*, he is not concerned with how, for instance, a text such as Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* only means something in and of itself, but rather how it is related to the starting question, *Mimesis*'s particular *Ansatz*, or hermeneutic point of departure, of the classical levels of style. *Mimesis*, then, instead of being a theoretical statement about realism or representation, becomes a history of the unfolding and triumph of *sermo humilis*, the mixture of styles whereby lived and concrete reality is able

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is that a literary work "must be conceived as a structure of norms, realized only partially in the actual experience of its many readers" (150), or, to put in our own terms, a hermeneutics governed by a poetics.
[42] See, for instance, Spitzer's "Linguistics and Literary History," where he discusses his own very similar conception of the *Ansatz*, while at the same time introducing his very dissimilar use of it. Accounts of the differences between Spitzer and Auerbach may also be found in Geoffrey Green, *Literary Criticism and the Structures of History* and Harry Levin, "Two *Romanisten* in America."

to be taken seriously. As we have seen from his considerations of his own contingent vantage point, Auerbach himself certainly takes reality quite seriously. At the same time, however, reality is not only taken seriously, but *figuratively*. Hayden White has masterfully traced Auerbach's construction of *Mimesis* as a process of figuration. He writes that *Mimesis* "not only is a specific kind of literary representation, that is, figuralism, but is also a history conceived as a sequence of figure-fulfillment relationships" (91).[43] And not only does *figura* determine the structure of the internal relationships between the texts comprising *Mimesis*, whereby one reading becomes the figure for the next reading which fulfills it, *ad infinitum*; but *figura* also determines the relationship between each individual text and to the larger "truth" whose story *Mimesis* tells.

If Auerbach is writing "history," then we must see exactly how this history is characterized. Does not Auerbach's own language, and his implicit employment of "*figura*," upend his own purported historical claims? As he writes in the introductory essay to his final volume, "the general conception that can be set forth is, I believe, that of an historical process, *a kind of drama* [*etwas wie ein Drama* 22], which advances no theory but only sketches a certain pattern of human destiny. *The subject of this drama is Europe*" (*LL* 21, my emphases). And earlier, writing of the method of getting to the whole by examining the parts, he writes, "thus disclosed, the whole takes on a character of dialectical unity, *of a drama or, as Vico once said, of a serious poem* [*wie ein Drama, oder, wie Vico einmal sagt, wie ein ernstes Gedicht* 10]" (*LL* 7). What these allusions point to, like the dramatic metaphors in the reading of *Mystère d'Adam*, is not of course a denial of Auerbach's claim that he is writing history, but an affirmation of the fact that, in

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[43] See "Auerbach's Literary History: Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism," in *Figural Realism*.

Mimesis as well as in all the projects comprising his studies of "Europe," he is writing a distinctively *literary* history. "Europe," this quickly vanishing historical epoch whose last pieces he is trying to salvage before it fades away, is always in fact "European literature," a claim which would not all be foreign to Auerbach himself, naming as he did one of his collections *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, as if the history of Europe has only been able to unfold before his interpretive gaze as something like a work of art.[44]

Not only, though, does this mean that the history of "Europe" can merely be written as one of "European literature," but also, and more importantly, to write history is itself akin to a literary process. If his task is to salvage a European history that he feels is quickly running its course, then what Auerbach actually writes, as he does not only in *Mimesis* but in all of his essays, a *literary* history, both in the sense of a history of literary art and history *as* literary art. He sets out to save history by writing it, but what he writes is "a kind of drama," one of the many aesthetic metaphors that run throughout his work, including many of the essays in *Mimesis*. Like the "problematic individual" which Lukács identifies in *The Theory of the Novel* as the prototypical hero of the modern novel, Auerbach seeks an organic totality in a late modernity in which such a thing is no longer tenable, and so can produce nothing but a subjectively created and inorganic totality, an intentional object.[45] To write history is always a rhetorical operation, in the

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[44] As Harry Levin notes in "Two *Romanisten* in America:" "Now and then an elegiac tone hints to us that the drama is a tragedy which has entered its last act" (116). Although Levin in no way presses the point of Auerbach's recourse to aesthetic metaphors, his beautiful summation is remarkably astute.

[45] On the inorganicity of the novel, Lukács writes, in terms that perfectly echo the task of writing a modernist history: "The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (56). And the novelist, for Lukács, is mirrored by the novelistic hero, burdened with interiority, and driven on his mundane quests by the cruel knowledge that "meaning can never quite

sense that it creates its very concept by writing it. That is, like the novelist, the historian takes the raw elements of empirical reality untouched by any interpreter's hands and only turns them into "history" by writing them *as* history. The past must first be turned into a language that can be read meaningfully, that is, into a narrative, so that the historian is able to interpret that past, to read it figuratively. As Hayden White has written, historical discourse does not produce knowledge about the past, but only "*interpretations* of whatever information about and knowledge of the past the historian commands" (2).[46]

There is a rhetorical structure to Auerbach's writing of history, which is in fact the figurative process underlying his own method of figural interpretation. That is to say, Auerbach's own historical relativism, as inherited from Vico, is actually structured according to the Christian doctrine of figural interpretation that he reads in his own critical encounters with Biblical and medieval literature.[47] The figural method of interpretation implicitly guides Auerbach's method, though in a form that has been secularized from the Christian-scriptural view of reality in which he defines it. As in the method's classical model, whereby one event is seen to prefigure a second event, which is the fulfillment of the first, the *veritas* (truth) of the former event's *umbra* (shadow), both figure and fulfillment exist within the historical current, while the only thing outside of time, the only "spiritual" element of the process, is the act of interpretation itself.

penetrate reality, but that, without meaning, reality would disintegrate into the nothingness of inessentiality" (88).

[46] On historiography as such as a tropological discourse, see Hayden White, *Figural Realism*. Of particular interest is the essay "Auerbach's Literary History: Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism." See also Bahti, "Vico, Auerbach and Literary History," in which he traces the rhetorical operations of Vico's own philosophy of history, arguing that Vico "is articulating *not* a principle of human history, but rather a principle of the *interpretation of history*" (106, Bahti's emphases).

[47] In "Auerbach's 'Hidden'(?) Theory of History," Claus Uhlig demonstrates how it was actually the demands of the hermeneutic circle that betrayed the limits of Auerbach's Vichian conception of history. That is, the fidelity to the singular text demanded by Auerbach's hermeneutic practice (the element that he shared with Spitzer), stands at odds with the synthesizing activity demanded by Vico's totalizing vision of history. Vichian cyclicity, Uhlig shows, is gradually eclipsed by Dantean figurality as an interpretive model.

What must be stressed is that this structure is analogous to that of historical interpretation which Auerbach was so careful to outline in the later introduction to his final volume. Or perhaps it should be said, reversing the claim, that Auerbach's conception of historical interpretation, his method for "writing history," has a figural structure. The figure, the text, is part of a living and historical reality, as Auerbach will insist that he takes the text as part of a contextual worldview, and the fulfillment, the reading of the text by the interpreter, is also part of that history, dependent as the interpretation is upon the real and concrete situatedness of the interpreter. Both figure and fulfillment are *certa*, while the *verum*, the immutable truth to which every instantiation of history points, is something like that atemporal "spirituality" of the figural gesture of interpretation, though it becomes here "European literature," or literary history, that great unfolding of historical events taken as a totality. But since the interpreter must still exist within history, he is forever unable to see it in its totalized unfolding, to observe which one would have to be in some kind of position outside of, or after, history.

Thus we can see that if the one thing Auerbach was sure to articulate about his method – his conception of history – has a figural model, then the structure of *figura*, as interpretation, continues to determine *Mimesis*. And once secularized, this structure begins to reveal the essential presupposition of the entire project as well, namely what conception of mimesis Auerbach is employing. As Auerbach writes in "*Figura*," the figural structure is actually of a tripartite nature, the *figura* of the fulfillment is first *historia et littera*, the real event simply in and of itself. But that very same *historia* becomes *figura* by virtue of the interpretive gesture: "*figura* is the same literal meaning or event in reference to the fulfillment cloaked in it, and this fulfillment itself is *veritas*,

so that *figura* becomes a middle term between *littera-historia* and *veritas*" (*SDEL* 47). So in *Mimesis*, when Auerbach looks at the representation of historical reality in his selected texts, by virtue of his figural method of interpretation, that history is already rendered figurative. The "reality" read by Auerbach becomes the figure of a figure, or we might say, following Jill Robbins' reading of Augustine, that there is *one figure too many*.[48]

This is to say, there is never any semblance of "reality" in these texts to begin with anyway, since *historia* has been turned into *figura* already in the texts interpreted. This point can be gleaned from the original German sub-title, *Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der Abendländischen Literatur* – reality does not precede its representation, as in the English "Representation of Reality," but rather it exists *only* as representation. Auerbach tells the story of "represented reality," *historia* as *figura* of something else, namely the fulfillment of the act of literary interpretation. *Mimesis*, in fact, is something like a misnomer, since Auerbach's critical project always reveals the ways in which mimesis betrays itself as diegesis – "represented reality" is not an unmediated transposition of some extra-textual reality, but rather the subjective creation of a new reality.

This method of figural interpretation, in Auerbach's hands, can be described as a thoroughly modernist strategy – namely, that of taking a particular embedded in history and making it signify something else, finding the whole in the most insignificant part, a relationship that we might call "synecdochal." A figural structure that has access to no transcendence, this modernist method does not take the particular as a manifestation of a whole that exists elsewhere, but rather reads its particular *as* the whole, the two

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[48] See *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother*, p. 8, where Robbins reads Augustine's positing of the Genesis figure of Hagar as an "other mode of signification," which must be cast out of the figural chain, lest it disrupt the phenomenological model of language upon which it depends. The threat posed by Hagar is precisely the figurative nature of figural interpretation, the fact that it may open itself up to a rhetorical dimension of language that cannot be contained.

inextricably interdependent. Thus we can see in *Mimesis'* closing chapter, just why Auerbach aligns his critical position with the perspective of literary modernists such as Woolf and Joyce, for whom the "essential" can only be gleaned from randomly encountering the things of everyday life, in an increasingly multiplied world so difficult to order, where one is left only with the uncharacterizable and chaotic rush of experience. As Auerbach writes of Woolf's method: "There is a confidence that in any random fragment plucked from the course of a life at any time the totality of its fate is contained and can be portrayed" (*M* 547). In Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, which Auerbach reads in that final chapter, the most profound experiences, the "moments of being" in which the "essentials" of living shine forth, occur to characters being bored at a dinner party, sewing a stocking, looking for a lost brooch; while what were traditionally thought of as the defining experiences of life, for example the death even of the novel's major character, are reduced to parenthetical asides. Just as monumental is Auerbach's own fidelity to the most minor of particulars, the most seemingly innocuous details of the most neglected texts from literary history.

As a method of reading history, his figural method of interpretation, secularized and modernist, undermines that very access to history by virtue of its own figurative structure. It does not read a history which preexists itself, but it creates that history which it purportedly only relates. That is to say that once secularized and freed from its Christian framework, *figural* interpretation becomes a *figurative* structure, opening up to a rhetorical dimension of language that cannot be subsumed into any strictly mimetic model of representational homology.[49] And so, the particularities of Auerbach's critical

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[49] And here is where we may think of Auerbach's modernism as also being his movement from a Christian model of figural interpretation to one that may be called "Hebraic." That is to say, following Jill Robbins'

engagements, the texts which he reads, come not to be accumulated into an entity that can

be empirically identified as "history," but one called "literature" – "a kind of drama," or

an "epic poem." Thus, rather than the totalizing gesture of Christian figural interpretation,

whereby the Old Testament is subsumed as *umbra* to the *veritas* of the New Testament,

or texts would be the figurative version of their history's own literal "truth," Auerbach's

figural interpretation stresses instead discontinuity and inorganicity. There is not an

outside to which these texts and these characters can be mimetically aligned.

In Auerbach's masterwork, *Mimesis*, the very subject of that figurative history,

mimesis, is itself a figurative structure, that by which reality is subjectively rendered

literary. Auerbach reads his texts' very mimesis as a figural operation rather than simply

as some unmediated access to an extra-textual reality. Mimesis is a figure of language –

and the "history" of mimesis becomes a figural story of a structure that already figures.

Literary "reality" is always represented, that is, the intentional and inorganic creation of a

rhetorical operation. Moreover, it is a rhetorical operation performed not by the author of

the given text, but by the fictive subjectivity that inhabits it. That is, the effect of mimesis

is an immanent operation; each text's reality is its own, each time always new. A text's

reality is not the fulfillment of the author's experience of his specific historical milieu,

since that historical experience, in the figural process of representation, is *historia*

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excellent analysis of the figurality of *figura* in *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother*, that Auerbach undoes the suppression of the Judaic that had been instantiated in Augustine's discourse of figural interpretation, whereby the Old Testament was cast out as merely the shadow of the higher truth of the New Testament. Just as Auerbach, in what I am posing as a distinctively modernist strategy, employs the figurative dimensions of figural interpretation, Robbins writes: "The necessity of reading the very figurality of the figural relationship between the two testaments…disrupts the asserted homology between literal and figurative, and carnal and spiritual. It disrupts the phenomenological oppositions that organize the figural discourse. It disarticulates the figural claim" (9).

Similarly, Jesse M. Gellrich, in "*Figura*, Allegory, and the Question of History," writes that Auerbach's version of figuration is actually closer to Walter Benjamin's modernist version of allegory than it is to the medieval conception of *figura*. And for reasons not entirely dissimilar, Geoffrey Green has identified what is particularly Hebraic in Auerbach's critical project, in *Literary Criticism and the Structures of History*.

rendered as *figura*; rather, the empirical experience of the author is figuratively displaced onto the fictive, or written, person, who "lives" in that text. The text, as fulfillment, can only be the figural counterpart to a figurative reality, or to reality read figuratively; that is, the fictive reality of the figure of a person, of the literary character.

Dante's impossible bodies

The farmer and his wife of the passion play become, in *Mimesis*, the figures for an emergent Christian realism, while at the same time explicitly revealing the figurative structure of that realism. Thus the stage becomes set, so to speak, for Dante's own climactic role in Auerbach's literary history, as the great Christian drama of figurality at once reaches its climax and falls apart, and where the modern literary character finds its own specificity and independence. Auerbach finds in Dante, seemingly paradoxically, the emergence of a truly modern realism in literature, secularized and freed from the overarching schema of the Christian framework of fall and redemption. And again, the questions of realism and of character are entirely interdependent. As Auerbach notes in his late essay, "The Western Public and Its Language," Dante "inaugurated modern European literature (or perhaps it would be more accurate to say the modern self-portrayal of man)" (*LL* 314). As we shall see, however, the "modern" (both literature and character) inaugurated by Dante's intervention in the figural worldview of medieval Europe is going to be made *modernist* by Auerbach's own intervention into the story of that figurality.

Having articulated the "realism" of Dante's *Commedia* in the 1929 study, Auerbach examines the poet yet again in both "Figura" and *Mimesis*, having in the interim found "what conception of the structure of events, in other words what

conception of history, is the foundation for Dante's realism, this realism projected into changeless eternity" (*M* 194), which is of course the figural conception of history. In *Mimesis*'s eighth chapter, Auerbach begins with a stylistic analysis of a passage from the tenth canto of the *Inferno*, looking at the figures of Cavalcante and Farinata, belonging with the heretics and infidels of hell's sixth circle. Hearing Dante's voice, and his distinctly Florentine dialect, they recognize him as belonging to their homeland, and proceed to ask him about the fate of the world they have left behind them, in language of a heightened emotion, wrenching and mournful.

Like previous characters in Auerbach's history of Christian realism, such as the farmer and his wife in *Mystère d'Adam*, Cavalcante and Farinata exist according to a figurative model. They are depicted as real and historical men, dynamic and changeable as they were during their lives in the world of mankind, but at the same time, in hell, they are living the fulfillment of their lives on earth, living forever in the eternal realm of the afterworld, inhabiting their designated place according to the divine judgment. But instead of existing *as* figures, as previous characters had done, they exist *as fulfillment*. They do not, like the farmer and his wife, point to the larger truth, but they actually inhabit that truth. That is to say, their lives as characters in the pages of Dante's narrative are solely comprised of their life after death; they are living and breathing men, with depths of emotion and history, but the setting for their story is the atemporal realm of the *Inferno*. As Auerbach pursues his description:

> In their phantom bodies the souls of the damned, in their eternal abodes, have
> phenomenal appearance, freedom to speak and gesture and even to move about
> within limits, and thus, within their changelessness, a limited freedom of change.

We have left the earthly sphere behind; we are in an eternal place, and yet we encounter concrete appearance and concrete occurrence there. This differs from what appears and occurs on earth, yet is evidently connected with it in a necessary and strictly determined relation (*M* 191).

This strictly determined relation between changeable life and eternal fate is so strong, and so strict, precisely because of the existence of the characters as fulfillment, that is, as being placed in the afterlife according to their actions as men on earth. Their earthly and historical character is what determines their ultimate fate.

Rightfully placed among the souls of the dead, the situation of Dante's characters in the afterlife is "merely a continuation, intensification, and definitive fixation of their situation on earth, and…what is most particular and personal in their character and fate is fully preserved" (*DPSW* 88). The characters thus stand as a coherent fusion of the whole and the particular, the eternal and the finite, character and fate. But because, as "real" people, the characters are still stricken with memory, all they can do is endlessly relive their lives on earth, and in the case of those damned to hell, bemoan their fate and perhaps wonder how they even have come to be land where they are. Their nature as literary characters is prescribed according to their existence as fulfillment, but as fulfillment, there is, it seems, a constantly increasing intensification of their existence as figure, namely, of their life on earth. "And still more," Auerbach notes:

From the fact that earthly life has ceased so that it cannot change or grow, whereas the passions and inclinations which animated it still persist, without ever being released in action, there results as it were a tremendous concentration. We behold an intensified image of the essence of their being, fixed for all eternity in

gigantic dimensions, behold it in a purity and distinctness which could never for one moment have been possible during their lives on earth" (*M* 192).

The characters of the *Commedia* live according to Dante's medieval Christian figural view, whereby both their figural and fulfilled existence retain the characteristics of concrete historical reality. The narrative shows them in the world beyond, in God's design in *active* fulfillment. And as was noted in regards to Auerbach's basic conception of figurality, the pole of fulfillment is always going to carry a greater weight and intensity than that of the figural pole, because it is the life that really matters, the *veritas* of the provisional and temporary life of changeable men on earth.

Thus Auerbach can claim that Dante's beyond is dynamic and filled with history: it is the intensified and perfected form of the figural pole. The characters not only remember their earthly lives, in every minute detail, and not only do they wonder about the future – as Farinata and Cavalcante ask Dante the wanderer about the current state of things in Florence; but temporality is most dynamically, and paradoxically, preserved in the timeless realm in the present tense, in the fact that these men still – during the time of the narrative, so to speak – love and breathe and have sadnesses and feel pains and pleasures. It is as if all the realism that had been allowed by the development of the *sermo humilis* within the Christian mixture of styles were transposed to the *most* sublime and eternal space. Rather than Christ brought down to earth, we have the baseness of earth, its sins and its pettiness and its ugliness, brought up to the Kingdom of God and made more teeming and alive than it has ever been before, more multiple than Paul could have imagined, and more passionate than Augustine ever could have expressed.

As Auerbach explains in the 1929 study, the integral relationship between earthly existence and eternal fate is used according to Thomist doctrine, according to which "the souls (with the exception of those requiring purification in Purgatory) arrived immediately after death at their final destination, assigned them according to their deserts" (*DPSW* 87). Moreover, Thomas also held to the Aristotelian unity between body and soul, which is the element of his doctrine that Auerbach ascribes as the major source of Dante's great realism. That is, this unity provides the essential philosophical background to Dante's efforts to "portray the individual character or soul as forcefully as possible through the gestures of the body attaching to it" (*DPSW* 86). The poet can portray the earthly actions of a person, in fact the most base and corporeal, and still illuminate the most essential aspects of his character, or his soul, a representational strategy unheard of in earlier medieval literature.

However, having posited a unity between soul and body, Thomas encountered the ontological problem of the disembodied state of the dead. That is, how can a soul find its fulfillment in the afterlife if it is no longer attached to the body which is of a union with it? He ultimately found a solution to this problem, Auerbach writes, by virtue of the fact that the soul is not a part of the body, but rather its form, and so, as "a subsistent principle," "it retained its being after separation from the destroyed body" (*DPSW* 87). Hence in Dante, "the soul separated in death from the body preserves its vital and sensitive faculties 'virtually'" (ibid.).[50] Perhaps the only circumstance in which Dante veers from Thomas, and follows the classical model of Virgil's descent into the

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[50] On the way in which the soul "virtually" maintains the body's sensorial faculties, see for instance, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXV, lines 79-84: "And when Lachesis has no more thread, the soul is loosed from the flesh and carries with it, in potency, both the human and the divine; the other faculties all of them mute, but memory, intellect, and will far more acute in action than before" (273-5), trans. Charles Singleton.

underworld populated by shades, is that he gives the souls of his damned shadow bodies, which only further accentuates their heightened intensity as living and human characters: "And in giving them shadow bodies, Dante has not only given them the possibilities of pleasure and pain; above all he has enabled them to stand in sensuous concreteness before him and before us, and to manifest their state by their physical presence" (*DPSW* 88). Thus the earthly effect of Dante's "mimesis" is all the more emphatic – the essence of the characters is contained in their very corporeal presentation.

As John Freccero has demonstrated in his masterful essays on Dante, the Augustinian and Pauline tradition was also essential to structuring Dante's world.[51] Central to this tradition is the idea that the soul functions as something like the significance of the body's mere material signifier. The relationship between the body and the soul becomes aligned with what amounts to a theory of signs, by which the movement of the soul toward perfection mirrors the referential movement from sign to signification, as Augustine explains in *De Doctrina Christiana*.[52] However, as Freccero notes, for the damned there is no longer any such movement of the soul towards its own fulfillment. "Despair," he writes, "like death, is like a sign emptied of its significance and is therefore mute" (100). Thus, the problem becomes, for Dante's "realism," how to represent, in a supposedly mimetic language, what essentially amounts to the absence of reference, that is, "the representation of non-representation" (ibid.). The Inferno is the place determined by the abandonment of all hope, hope being that movement of the soul which

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[51] John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*. In particular, the essays "Infernal Irony: The Gates of Hell" and "Manfred's Wounds and the Poetics of the *Purgatorio*."

[52] As Augustine writes: "For when something meant figuratively is interpreted as if it were meant literally, it is understood in a carnal way. No 'death of the soul' is more aptly given that name than the situation in which the intelligence, which is what raises the soul above the level of animals, is subjected to the flesh by following the letter….It is, then, a miserable kind of spiritual slavery to interpret signs as things, and to be incapable of raising the mind's eye above the physical creation so as to absorb the eternal light" (72).

Augustinian doctrine aligned with signification, the path from dead sign to living meaning. It would seem impossible then to mimetically represent that abandonment of all hope, since a space without hope is a space defined precisely by its lack of movement toward any reference, rooted only in the dead and plastic sign. But hell is populated only by souls, which are precisely the figures of hope, or of the signifying movement of a sign; mimetic language as such is the very medium of that movement of the soul. So how is a damned soul to be represented at all, when it is without the referential mimesis that comes with hope?

This representational impasse is overcome by the fact that the souls of the damned "are represented as if they were the bodies from which they originated" (101), Dante's one deviation from Thomist doctrine. The significance, the soul, becomes identical to the immobile and plastic sign, the body, and "life" is only represented by virtue of the replication of the empty signifier, a dead letter.[53] In what amounts to a "poetics of death" (101), or "mimesis with a vengeance" (102), the representation of life only occurs with the replication of the damned, of death, coded as writing, or the materiality of the body. Freccero ultimately adduces that Dante's poetic practice is an "ironic imitation" (103), opposed to the passionate immediacy Auerbach identifies in Dante's realism of the "secular world." The humanity of the damned can only be stressed by Auerbach, Freccero claims, at the cost of ignoring the signifying system at play in the Pauline relationship between body and soul. As Freccero writes, Auerbach's "insistence on the human autonomy of the characters at the expense of the divine order is a function of his own mystification" (104), and so Auerbach's assertions of Dante's mimesis must in turn

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[53] The idea of the dead letter, the letter that kills, standing against the life-giving spirit, originates in the Pauline tradition. Freccero cites from II Corinthians 3:3-6 St. Paul's "Letter that kills…engraven in stone" as opposed to the "Spirit that gives life…written in the fleshy tablets of the heart" (100).

be ironized by having signification reintroduced into the representational practice of the *Inferno*.

But, as we have already seen, Auerbach's entire critical project is already as it were ironized in *Mimesis*, in the sense that he self-consciously asserts the distance between writing and the reality that he might hope writing could represent, all the while knowing it to be a subjective fantasy. What I have been calling his modernist method of figural interpretation is already an ironic exercise in rhetorical analysis, figuratively constructing the effect of mimesis out of his texts' rhetorical operations. So when Auerbach does in fact insist on the "human autonomy" of Dante's characters, that the power of their presentation allows them to eclipse the divine order of Dante's medieval Catholic worldview, we must ask just how this "realism" comes to happen. When Dante creates literary history's first great modern realism, the presentation of "true reality" (*M* 554), it is still, in Auerbach's modernist-critical version of it, a figural realism, and, as Freccero calls Dante's poetics, "a world seen from the perspective of death" (109).

The afterlife of *figura*, or the birth of the modern character

The divine order, according to a Thomist anthropology and a figural understanding of history, structures Dante's world, but the figures inhabiting that structure become exaggerated to a point where they can no longer be held. "In the very heart of the other world," Auerbach writes, Dante "created a world of earthly beings and passions so powerful that it breaks bounds and proclaims its independence. *Figure surpasses fulfillment*, or more properly: the fulfillment serves to bring out the figure in still more impressive relief" (*M* 200, my emphasis). The effect of the earthly figure, of Dante's human characters, is so strong, that its very force of living breaks the framework

of the Christian order in which they have been placed for eternity. The figure becomes independent, and man himself steps forward in the world of literature, free from any Christian systematization or eschatological organization:

> The image of man eclipses the image of God. Dante's work made man's Christian-figural being a reality and destroyed it in the very process of realizing it. The tremendous pattern was broken by the overwhelming power of the images it had to contain….More accurately than antique literature was ever able to present it, we are given to see, *in the realm of timeless being*, the history of man's inner life and unfolding (*M* 202, my emphasis).

While the characters in the medieval passion play lived the history of life on earth, they also stood for the very fulfillment of that life, figuring the broader story of man's fall and redemption – they were both the particular farmer and his wife, and the universal Adam and Eve. This is the case in Dante as well, where particular individuals are enmeshed within a universal framework, though the human factor has a level of intensity that sets it free from that broader framework. This occurs, however, in the space of that universal history, rather than in a country cottage on the earth of historical time and change. Individuals more realistic than the characters of the passion play paradoxically exist in a setting far more abstract.

Just as the farmer and his wife were also part of that "one great drama," so here too does Auerbach resort to a distinctively literary language to discuss this breaking of the Christian-figural framework. The effect of Dante's intense realism is that it delivers the richness and depths of life on this earth of mankind, but the breaking of the frame does not change the fact that the setting is still the beyond. And this beyond comes to

seem merely "a stage for human beings and human passions [*das Jenseits wird zum Theater des Menschen und seiner Leidenschaften* 195]" (*M* 201). And when he writes that the characters' "eternal position in the divine order is something of which we are only conscious as a setting whose irrevocability can but serve to heighten the effect of their humanity, preserved for us in all its force" (ibid.), the effect of theatricality and literariness is heightened in the original German: "*ihre ewige Lage in der göttlichen Ordnung wird nur bewußt als ein Schauplatz*" (196). The afterlife, the Kingdom of God, becomes a stage, the setting of a scene, distinctly separated from life and instead belonging to a kind of 'art,' and yet containing the richness and complexity of that life.

So while medieval literature had been, for Auerbach, integrally tied up with the framework of the Christian-figural view of history, whereby men on earth figure their role in the eternal story of mankind, there has also, as we can see in these two privileged instances, been something uniquely literary about this figural schema. When the Inferno is called "a realm of timeless being" that still remains as the stage upon which the emancipated characters of literature will live their lives after the breaking of the Christian-eschatological order, perhaps what can be understood here is that this conception might also describe the status of any work of literature presenting life on earth in its own differentiated space.

The characters, as figures, have broken free from the strictly Christian model of the atemporal realm which they figure, but perhaps this independence from God's design has still not shattered their figurality entirely. That is to say, as has been noted in Auerbach's very means of discussing the figurality of medieval characters, they also function in a model whereby they stand as real human characters presented in the

individual work which they inhabit, while at the same time pointing to something larger, "a realm of timeless being," in the sense of the very idea of literature itself, or literary history, the "one great drama" that Auerbach's project sets out to follow. Free from eschatology, the beyond is still the setting, and Dante's characters are still dead, but outside of the Christian design. Thus secularized, is not this beyond now free to be called perhaps what it was all along, something like the space of literature?

Even before their intensity broke the frame, then, Dante's characters already represented a sea change in the history of characterization in Western literature. No longer mere types, as characters would have to have been according to a classical separation of genres, and no longer richly expressive humans, in the manner of Augustine's narrative voice, who were as such only able to inhabit writing as "real people" interpreting reality, rather than literary representations. In Dante, for the first time, what is perhaps the modern ontological nature of any literary character is presented in Western literature: characters who are at once "real people," in the sense of an implied humanness, with depths and memories and emotions and loves, while at the same time they exist as structural positions, as people of paper, inhabiting words on a page, entirely non-referential functions of impersonal writing. The human, or mimetically human, and the atemporal or inhuman: each cannot exist without the other in order to create the overall phenomenon of character. "Down to the most extreme particularity of his former sensuous being, the individual man is preserved in the place of his ultimate fate…what has been preserved is not two different things, but the unity of a single personality (*DPSW* 152)," Auerbach writes in the 1929 study. In this earlier volume as well, when Auerbach sums up the richness of the *Commedia* and its realism, he offers, perhaps

inadvertently, a description of the very strangeness of what Maurice Blanchot will call "literary space." Auerbach writes:

> What I have in mind is that *he leads all men into a realm apart, where the air is not that of our everyday earth*. Not that the reality of life has vanished; is has grown doubly plain and tangible. But the light is different and the eyes must grow accustomed to it; they must acquire a new and sharper vision which passes over no detail as unimportant, commonplace, or fragmentary; whatever appears in that place is definitive and immutable, demanding the fullest and most careful attention. Dante transports his listeners into *a strange world so permeated by the memory of reality that it seems real while life itself becomes a fragmentary dream*; and that unity of reality and remoteness is the source of his psychological power (*DPSW* 173, my emphases).

A strange world, a realm apart, where our earthly reality colors everything, and yet it at the same time has undergone a strangeness so as to seem almost unrecognizable as we know it; a world in which the mutability and changeability of earthly beings and affairs are fixed forever in a material that lasts, though this material in its own turn gains a kind of reality; a world that makes our perception estranged upon entering it, because it requires the most careful and demanding of attention: in short, literature.

Auerbach stresses the point that this fusion of the finite and infinite natures of the idea of the person in Dante's characters happens with the most force in the *Inferno*, where the characters, like all of those in the *Commedia*, are of course dead, yet because they are in the realm of damnation, they are still acutely concerned with their earthly existence, forever looking backward in being forced to reflect upon their current fate. Stricken with

memory, they must forever relive their life and the path that has led them to their current place. This backward glance is less pronounced in Purgatory and in Heaven – in fact, entirely absent, as Auerbach points out, since in those two realms, and particularly in the latter, there is a feeling of pure ascendancy into the eternal, without the need to constantly relive one's life on earth. It has a bearing on man's fate in the afterlife, but it can be shed, in a sense, and the heavenly creature is truly reborn. "The higher Dante rises," he writes, "the more universal and impersonal become the souls that appear" (*DPSW* 120). So if Dante, as we propose, does in fact offer a model for the idea of character in modern literature, there is an essential element of damnation to the fate of these hellish literary people. Only for the people in hell is temporality and dynamism still so foregrounded in the realm of the atemporal. About the souls of the damned, Auerbach notes, "nothing happens to them any longer, or rather, *what happens to them will keep happening forever*" (*DPSW* 142, my emphasis).[54]

Auerbach's reflections on Dante offer a model for the nature of the modern literary character as such, a real person figured in an atemporal realm, which is nothing other than 'literariness' itself. If Dante's characters have broken free of the frame of Christian-figural doctrine, what remains to be seen, however, is into what exactly they

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[54] Compare this to Alex Woloch's recent *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, in which his fundamental argument is that the phenomena of literary characters relies on reference and takes place through structure. Woloch makes this connection with Auerbach, though in passing in a footnote, where he writes: "What's thematized in the *Inferno*—the static emplacement, or imprisonment, of a changeable human—holds true, in an important sense, for *any* literary character, as he or she is circumscribed into a delimited, and permanent, configuration within a larger narrative structure" (338, Woloch's emphasis). The point in Auerbach lies, as Woloch notes, in the fact of changeable humans within an atemporal and permanent structure much larger than themselves, but what Woloch does not point out, which this chapter seeks to stress, is that these characters in Dante's *Inferno* are, of course, earthly beings who have died, and the atemporal structure is in fact the beyond, the eternal world after death. What remains for Woloch simply a structural problem, is here also an ontological one. There is the structural moment of language, wherein characters are nothing but dead letters, while at the same time the problem of "life" remains, or the increasingly strong illusion of life. What kind of uncanny ontology can be ascribed to these dead letters and to these damned souls?

have been emancipated. Characters have proclaimed their independence from the eschatological and the divine, but the setting of the afterlife has not changed, where what happens to them will happen forever. Within the trajectory of Auerbach's literary history, this setting becomes that of modern realism; if the "one great drama" of European literature proceeds to march on from the destruction of the larger framework by Dante's passions, it does so into what will develop as the modern European novel. Thus we can see that, while the Christian framework has been left behind, the figural structure remains in Auerbach's interpretation of literary history: characters, in a sense, are still embodied fulfillments of their *figura qua* their life on earth as real men, but this fulfillment is no longer their place according to the plan of God, but rather their becoming-literary. These characters, long after Dante, are going to be separated from their *imago* or *figura* by a death, though it is no longer a spiritual death but a death of a distinctly linguistic kind. That is to say, the modern character is a person turned into language, rather than a person turned into a shade in the afterlife. And the process of becoming-literary is nothing other than the uncanny signification of life out of the dead letter of the literary body.

The new world in search of itself

Auerbach finds that a truly modern realism, in the sense in which the term is used to this day to describe the novelistic tradition of nineteenth-century France from Stendhal to Zola, is engendered in Dante's afterlife. It is an understanding of realism wholly defined by the characters which it represents, or, to put it otherwise, literary realism is primarily to be defined as the realistic presentation of character. However, as we have seen, it is a realism whose setting is hell. And while the realist presentation of literary personhood is born in Dante, this very birth is what has caused the universal framework

in which that person was given meaning to be lost. What kind of space, then, does modern realism prove to be for Auerbach? Before he finds its triumph in Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert, Auerbach first analyzes realism as an emergent literary mode in writers ranging from Montaigne and Moliere to Shakespeare and Schiller. Remembering that an essential element of Auerbach's realism is that it treats the individual not only with verisimilitude, but with a seriousness and even tragedy, the realist individual of Dante does not in fact reappear until the nineteenth-century French novelists. Until that reappearance, the realist character is seemingly cast adrift in literary history, searching for any kind of organizational principle that might give it a meaning that could be considered serious.[55] Before arriving at Flaubert's place in Auerbach's figural literary history, I will briefly look at Auerbach's reflections on Boccaccio and Cervantes, to see what kind of path it is that leads between Dante's realist revelation and Flaubert's supposedly triumphant role in its unfolding.

In the chapter of *Mimesis* that follows "Farinata and Cavalcante," Auerbach reads Boccaccio's *Decameron* as both a natural inheritor of Dante, as well as a literary historical sea change of its own. In Boccaccio, the characters have a richness inherited from Dante's realism, but they inhabit not the afterlife that was Dante's source of that richness, but the earthly world of mankind, with an almost palpable physicality. "Boccaccio's characters," Auerbach writes, "live on earth and only on earth. He sees the

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[55] In 1937, Auerbach published "On the Serious Treatment of the Everyday," in the publications of the Faculté des Lettres at Istanbul University. The essay serves as a kind of germ out of which *Mimesis* grew, and it is here that he first discusses the representation of reality in modern literature. He writes that the representation of reality can only become *serious* "when one is conscious of what is internal to the workings of history and of the necessary entanglement of everyday life. The insight into the historicity of the human and society is the principal presupposition for the serious imitation of the everyday" (440). As we have seen in our examination of Auerbach's actual critical method, the sense of "history" in this definition is always of a distinctively literary cast. We might say that what is emerging in these centuries spanning from Boccaccio to Cervantes is the way in which the character is entangled within his "literary-historicity," his engagement with the order in which he lives, his being a cast member of literary history.

abundance of phenomena directly as a rich world of earthly forms" (*M* 224). In Boccaccio, Auerbach writes, coming immediately after Dante, "sovereignty over reality in its sensory multiplicity remained as a permanent conquest, but the order in which it was comprehended was now lost" (*M* 228). Literature is now capable of taking on the plenitude of earthly existence, and if it lacks the order that had been provided by Christian teleology, then this is because that very order has been effectively destroyed by the realism it created.

Recall that in Dante, Auerbach characterized this destruction as the eclipse of God by the image of man, as if God served as the atemporal originary point of the universal order in which the realist character was cast. And in the writers coming after Dante, that originary point is structurally replaced by the author. As Auerbach writes of Boccaccio, "it is in him that the world of sensory phenomena is first mastered, is organized in accordance with a conscious artistic plan, caught and held in words" (*M* 216).[56] As realism struggles to define for itself an ordering principle in which its subject matter would be able to be properly taken seriously, what Auerbach in fact hints at here is that it has already found such an order precisely in itself.[57] The Christian framework of Dante

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[56] See also the twelfth chapter of *Mimesis*, "*L'Humaine Condition*," in which Auerbach analyzes Montaigne's attempt to organize and interpret reality according to no other standard aside from his own subjectivity. Charles Muscatine suggestively aligns Auerbach's characterization of Montaigne's ironic position with that of the critic himself: "Indeed, the explication of Montaigne's style and method, of his elasticity, his experimentalism, his suspicion of *a priori* formulations, is strikingly applicable to Auerbach's own work" (206).

[57] And here is where we can see that realism from the very beginning finds its basic structural principle in irony, in the sense articulated by both Lukács and de Man, as a normative stance for novelistic discourse whereby it acknowledges its own status as a created form. And as such, it is entirely incompatible with mimesis. As de Man writes in his essay on Lukács, "Irony steadily undermines this claim at imitation and substitutes for it a conscious, interpreted awareness of the distance that separates an actual experience from the understanding of this experience. The ironic language of the novel mediates between experience and desire, and unites ideal and real within the complex paradox of form. This form can have nothing in common with the homogeneous, organic form of nature: it is founded on an act of consciousness, not of the imitation of a natural object" (*BI* 56). And in a language certainly resonating with an almost Christian idealism, Lukács himself writes in *The Theory of the Novel*: novelistic irony is the very "*self-correction of*

may have been shattered, and medievalism is entirely left behind, but what emerges in these late medieval and Renaissance writers is that realism is now maintained by the wholly secularized order of literariness itself.

The representation of the world may be just as rich and lively as the world outside of representation, but there is no real point of access between the two. Literary history itself replaces the divine fulfillment of the afterlife, as an 'ideal' order according to which realism's earthly events, in all their chaotic multiplicity, are to be organized and judged, in the sense of being represented in literature. Mimesis once again reveals itself, for Auerbach, as a figural operation, an ironic stance that is always ultimately diegesis. The artistic representation of reality, as in the Thomist placement of souls in the beyond, is always to fix 'real' people and events into a consciously designated place in a distinctively unreal and atemporal realm.[58] And as Dante's shades were only related to their earthly existence by tortured memories, so to do the inhabitants of realism bear a

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*the world's fragility…*within which everything is seen as many-sided, within which things appear as isolated and yet connected, as full of value and yet totally devoid of it, as abstract fragments and as concrete autonomous life, as flowering and as decaying, as the infliction of suffering and as suffering itself' (75, my emphasis).

[58] Auerbach's reflections on *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Rabelais's sixteenth-century comic epic, provide what almost amounts to a synecdoche of this whole structure of figural realism. He reads a seemingly ridiculous and wildly unrealistic passage wherein the giant Pantagruel protects his army from a rainstorm by giving them shelter in his mouth. There they find, much to their surprise, not only mountains and landscapes, seas and deserts, but twenty-five kingdoms, each with its own large cities. Given even this small example, it seems strange indeed that Auerbach would include Rabelais in his literary historical canon of the representation of reality. However, despite the fantastic nature of its set-up, what Auerbach finds to be so realistic about this Rabelaisian set-piece, what he in fact calls a "super-realistic mimesis" (*M* 276), is precisely the existence of such a realistic world within a space so strange as Pantagruel's mouth. "The most astonishing thing and most absurd thing," Auerbach writes, "about this Gorgiasian world is precisely that it is not entirely different from ours but on the contrary *resembles it in the minutest detail*; it is superior to ours in that it knows of our world whereas we know nothing of it, but otherwise it is exactly like it" (*M* 270). A passage out of this world has been made, but the world discovered there is so similar to the one left behind as to be almost even more real, though it is only approached through a fantastic leap into the imaginary. And is this not the experience of encountering any realist literary world, from Jane Austen to Zola? All of its details, even the most small, are so close to corresponding to the things we know of the empirical world, and yet they are not of course those things; the literary world must know of the world outside itself – otherwise it would not be imaginable that it could be realistic – and yet this outside world knows nothing of that other one until the text is read.

relation with empirical or historical personhood that we might call uncanny, or spectral – strange shadows of a bodily mankind only vaguely suggested.

Cervantes' Don Quixote, in Auerbach's analysis, becomes what we might call the emblematic hero of this newly emancipated literature. While in the Christian-figural model, the ideal is tied inextricably to the reality that figured it, Don Quixote's own idealism, erroneously called madness, has severed such ties:

> It is not based on an actual understanding of actual conditions in this world. Don Quixote does have such an understanding but it deserts him as soon as the idealism of his idée fixe takes hold of him. Everything he does in that state is completely senseless and so incompatible with the existing world that it produces only comic confusion there. It not only has no chance of success, *it actually has no point of contact with reality; it expends itself in a vacuum* (*M* 344, my emphasis).

The Knight of the Sad Countenance sees giants where others see windmills, enchanted princesses where others see vulgar peasant girls – no matter what kind of reality it is that presents itself before his eyes, he takes it as an embodiment of his ideal. And what is particularly unique to Don Quixote is that his ideal is one that has been entirely developed from the realm of the literary. He takes on the world before him as if it were the space of literature in which he has spent his adult life entirely lost as a reader. And, as Auerbach stresses, there is no point of contact between this ideal and the reality that supposedly figures it.

The ideal, rather than what is oftentimes taken at face value as Quixote's unfortunate madness, functions simply as his means of organizing the world before him.

It is an organizing principle, however, that severs that world from its own 'reality,' and in being transformed by Quixote's interpretative gesture, "reality willingly cooperates with a play which dresses it up differently every moment [*Die Wirklichkeit bietet sich willig einem Spiel, das sie jeden Augenblick anders kostümiert* 335]" (*M* 351).[59] Quixote "*found the order of reality in play* [*Er fand die Ordnung der Wirklichkeit im Spiel* 342]" (*M* 358, my emphasis). Auerbach has characterized the few centuries of literary history following Dante as being a literature without any organizing framework, a realism with no means of imbuing its own reality with any significance. But what we find in his interpretations of those texts is n organizational principle based upon the very figural operations at work in Dante's invention of modern realism. These texts, from *The Decameron* to *Don Quixote*, find their meaning, their realism, in the very distance that separates them from the empirical world outside their pages, in the figural difference between the characters inhabiting their pages and the readers and writers who exist on the hither side.

Reality, emancipated from Christian fulfillment, has entered into literary history, with all the liveliness, complexity, and depth of a rapidly modernizing European world. But for all this immediacy of reality, and the accentuated humanness of the characters that have survived Dante's breaking of the divine framework, that reality and those characters exist in literature explicitly *as* literature, all imitation notwithstanding. It is as if this newfound literary humanness, marching onwards in the drama of literary history, has lost the divine figural gesture that ties it to earthly reality, and so while its new fulfillment as literature has infinitely more access to "reality," it also remains even more

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[59] Having been composed especially for *Mimesis*' 1950 translation into Spanish, the fourteenth chapter on *Don Quixote*, "The Enchanted Dulcinea," does not appear in the German first edition, from which my other citations are taken. Thus, my German citations from this chapter are taken from the second edition, published in 1959. Notably, I might point out, the aesthetic metaphors have become in this chapter even more explicit.

separate from that reality than even Dante's beyond. Accordingly, what is to be stressed for the modern idea of the literary, if not the specifically novelistic, character, is that they are pure fictions. Because of Dante, literary history has been able to incorporate 'people' more life-like and true to reality than ever before, but by virtue of the very same gesture, they are solely people of paper. Their humanness is only implied, in all its depth and complexity; unlike Farinata and Cavalcante, they were never actually men who lived and breathed in the real world, recorded in the annals of history. They have died, so to speak, but their sole existence is to be found in that death, and paradoxically, this living death is also what allows for the very richness of their representational life.

The novelistic character is structurally a fulfillment, but with no *figura* or antecedent that it fulfills. Its figurative operations are in fact those of the trope of catachresis. As de Man has succinctly defined the trope, it is that "which coins a name for a still unnamed entity, which gives face to the faceless" (*RT* 44). This is to say that character confers linguistic existence upon an entity which has no ontological presence of any other kind. There is an act of reference, and the unfolding of a figurative chain, but it leads to no object which preexists that chain; character has a figural existence, without any literal referent. Secularized by Dante, the *veritas*, or representation, has taken on the richness of the *littera*, the historical existence of a person. In that very movement, however, the representation has become nothing but a dead letter, a word on a page, from which the necessarily implied humanness essential to character can be connoted, but by which no *historia* is referred. The multitude of real, everyday existence is precisely what the modern character inhabits, but it is of an order far from the actual world of men, localized instead in the endlessly proliferating pages of literary history.

The figural nineteenth century

The eighteenth chapter of *Mimesis*, "In the Hôtel de la Mole," discusses the works of Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert as the triumph of modern realism, or of the serious representation of everyday life in all its historicity. As Auerbach briefly summarizes in the epilogue to *Mimesis*, his own work began with the reflection that modern realism resulted from the gradual breakdown of the classical separation of styles. "I came to understand," he writes, "that modern realism in the form it reached in France in the early nineteenth century is, as an aesthetic phenomenon, characterized by complete emancipation from that doctrine" (*M* 554). This is immediately followed, however, by the consideration that these novels are not the first instance in literary history of this breakdown, but rather "that the revolution early in the nineteenth century against the classical doctrine of levels of style could not possibly have been the first of its kind" (ibid.). Those earlier instances of "modern realism" were in fact the story of Christ, as well as the great sea change of Dante's *Inferno*, both of which we have already analyzed.

Curiously, Auerbach then goes on to mention that there is a third and final basic idea at the root of *Mimesis*, namely "the semantic history of the word *figura*" (*M* 555). Auerbach places such importance on *figura* for *Mimesis* as a whole because it is the determining structure of the Christian worldview which had created the first two instances of modern realism, the late antique and the medieval. Auerbach only discusses this central role of *figura*, however, in relation to those earlier two instances, and remains silent when it comes to connecting *Mimesis*'s third central tenet, *figura*, to its first, the triumph of modern realism in the nineteenth-century French novel. Presumably, this is due to the breakdown of the Christian-figural worldview that Auerbach had read in

Dante's realism. As I hope to have demonstrated, however, the structure of *figura* remains in the history of *Mimesis*, and after Dante's realism, it remains in a secularized model that only highlights its figurative operations.

If *figura* is, as Auerbach summarizes one last time, the conception whereby "an occurrence on earth signifies not only itself but at the same time another, which it predicts or confirms, without prejudice to the power of its concrete reality here and now" (ibid.), then what remains to be seen is how *figura* still determines realism's third and final occurrence, in the French realist novel culminating in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. The task that remains is to tie up, as it were, the loose threads of Auerbach's own story. How does *figura* structure Flaubertian realism, and its modern presentation of literary character? What does an explicitly modern instance of *figura* look like? If the *modern* character was born in Dante, then how does it become the figure of a *modernist* fulfillment to be found in Flaubert's heroine?

As we have seen, there is always a latent figurative structure to Auerbach's ostensible figural chain. The figural worldview hides within itself a figurative, or literary, conception of language, and it unfolds as a tropological structure according to which sign and meaning do not naturally coalesce, but rather relate to one another in a series of figure-fulfillment relationships. Each text within the literary history of *Mimesis* is read both hermeneutically, for its own significance, and as an element of a larger entity, that great drama of European literature whose unfolding I have been tracing. This larger hermeneutical unfolding happens precisely according to the figural structure that determines Auerbach's literary-historical method, whereby one text's realism offers a promise which is then fulfilled by the next text, which in turn is itself turned into yet

another figure awaiting its own even more realistic fulfillment. And so the instance of a truly modern realism, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, is read as the fulfillment of Dante's earlier realism; which in turn was a fulfillment of the figure of the New Testament's realism of the Passion, itself the fulfillment of the Genesis account of the sacrifice of Isaac.

If in the Biblical stories a multilayered reality was able to be taken seriously, then in Dante this is performed by characters as lifelike and as immediate as their realistic reality. By the time of the nineteenth-century French novelists, it is no longer simply a question of being realistic, but of actively engaging with the reality represented. As Auerbach writes of Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*:

> The characters, attitudes, and relationships of the dramatis personae, then, are very closely connected with contemporary historical circumstances; contemporary political and social conditions are woven into the action in a manner more detailed and more real than had been exhibited in any earlier novel, and indeed in any works of literary art except those expressly purporting to be politico-satirical tracts (*M* 457).

Remembering that the *serious* representation of reality, for Auerbach, engages with the individual's necessarily entangled relationship with history, then it would seem that Stendhal's 1837 novel is in fact the most realistic kind of literary art.[60] Not only are its characters in a dynamic relationship with French history, but its own status as a literary object is meaningless unless its historical context is understood.

However, the question that arises is just how seriously reality is treated in Stendhal, and in Balzac and Flaubert after him. We might question just what kind of

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[60] See "On the Serious Treatment of the Everyday," p. 440.

fulfillment of Dante's great promise, that emancipatory project of the Christian framework's destruction, the nineteenth -century realist novelists actually represent. While Auerbach's literary history becomes cast as something like a literary work of art, determined by a figurative tropics rather than any kind of empirically based factuality or organically developing process, he finds something similar in the work of Balzac, the ostensible historian of nineteenth-century French life. Auerbach stresses three central tenets that underlie Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, the first two of which we have seen are also fundamental to Auerbach's own project: "the universality of his plan" and "the element of random reality" (*M* 480). Like Auerbach, Balzac attempts to construct a total vision of a historical entity – his Paris as Auerbach's "Europe" – out of the random flotsam of that entity which is nothing like an organic wholeness until the critic, or novelist, fixes it in his interpretive grasp. The third element of Balzac's *Comédie*, however, is equally essential to Auerbach, and this element lies in Balzac's use of the word *histoire*.[61] Auerbach stresses that Balzac's *histoire* "is not a matter of 'history' in the usual sense—not of scientific investigation of transactions which have already occurred, but of comparatively free invention; not, in short, of *history* but of *fiction*" (ibid., Auerbach's emphasis).[62] Because one tries to tell the story of a reality that resists any organization that comes from outside of itself, one writes, as one can only do, not a history that faithfully displays that reality, but a fiction that resembles it, or stands as a figure for it.

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[61] Auerbach is reading "*histoire*" in a letter of Balzac's to the Countess Hanska, in which he outlines his plan for entire work. As he writes, "the history of the human heart [*l'histoire de coeur humain*] traced thread by thread, social history [*histoire sociale*] set down in all its parts—there is the foundation. It will not be imaginary facts; it will be what happens everywhere [*Ce ne seront pas des faits imaginaires; ce sera ce qui se passe partout*]" (quoted in *M* 479-80).

[62] As Auerbach curiously writes in the German original, "*nicht um history, sondern um fiction (die englichen Ausdrücke sind besonders deutlich)*" (426).

As a fiction, then, the history becomes cast not with people, but with the figures of people who haunt fiction's pages – characters. "In the Hôtel de la Mole" quite notably begins, not with a stylistic analysis that takes for granted that it reads a written piece of literature (as in essentially every other chapter of *Mimesis*), but with a discussion of Stendhal's own reality beyond his writing of *Le Rouge et le Noir*. While it seems as if the goal of this method is to place the novel more firmly in its historical context than any other work had been before, what Auerbach consistently affirms in his analysis is nothing but the novel's almost polemical turning away from reality. "Stendhal's realistic writing," Auerbach notes, "grew out of his discomfort in the post-Napoleonic world and his consciousness that he did not belong to it and had no place in it" (*M* 461). Reality becomes a problem for him precisely because of the utter disillusionment felt in the face of the difference between historical actuality and its ideal as imagined by the whole generation of French writers following in Rousseau's wake. And like his author, the hero Julien Sorel is a man apart, hopelessly at odds with the stifling world around him, looking for his models instead in the few books he has read, in literary history. The first great hero of Auerbach's modern realism is in fact a man created by literature.[63] The novelistic subject longs for a referent, or at the very least antecedents, and finds them only in other works of literature: a reality in which there is nothing but "figural" meaning, or secularized fulfillment. Julien's world is a fictive one, through and through, and he hardly

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[63] Laszlo K. Géfin offers an excellent reading of Auerbach's analysis of the figure of Julien Sorel in his essay "Auerbach's Stendhal: Realism, Figurality, and Refiguration." Beginning with the claim, shared by my own essay, that "the modern novel itself had clung to figurality [i.e., that ostensibly lost in Dante] (29)," Géfin writes that even in what Auerbach identifies confidently as the first true realist modern novel, there is a sense that its realism is nothing but an exaggeratedly literary world, a figural 'reality' trying uselessly to base itself on textual or historical 'fulfillments' that have already happened. Life, in short, is for Stendhal's characters forever elsewhere.

even bears enough resemblance to a person of flesh and blood to warrant the mimetic guarantor of a name.[64]

Flaubert's dead realism

Life had seemingly entered literature after Dante's destruction of the Christian framework, the stories it tells are those of real people from any level of existence. Yet, as we have repeatedly seen, in Boccaccio's ironic grasp of the world and in Cervantes' playful stage, in Stendhal's paper hero and in Balzac's fictive history, the triumphal march of realist literature has never been freed from the figurative structure of the figural worldview. Auerbach reads each of these texts for their gradually increasing realism, while his own figural method constantly betrays the great gap that separates the order of literary experience from experience in the empirical world. However, in what supposedly stands as the highest achievement of the realist tradition, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), the novel's very figurative structure, the ways in which its own realism is betrayed as a complex rhetoric, prefigures Auerbach's own figurative interpretation. Put simply, after his method's subversion of the realism he seeks to find in Stendhal and in Balzac, in Flaubert's novel, there is nothing of "real" life even to be found.

Realism's great triumph is paradoxically what reveals for Auerbach, I claim, the figural structure of mimesis as a literary mode. The fulfillment of Dante's promise of realism takes on the richness of reality, and yet, by virtue of the very same gesture, there

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[64] As Géfin writes: "The desperate longing of the novelistic subject for the assumed substantiality of antecedent textual figures is a sign that subject is basically empty, devoid of a transcendentally authorized selfhood" (36). Julian Sorel is quite simply no subject at all, but rather "a montage of borrowed bits and pieces" (77), as Michael Wood has described him. While Wood is referring to what in Julian is constructed from events in Stendhal's own life, the phrase is perhaps even more pertinent in describing the way in which Julian is an assemblage of books read and other characters idealized. We can think again here of de Man's "Autobiography as De-Facement." Julian Sorel is readable as a figure because of the details of the life (that belong to Stendhal) that stands outside his creation, but perhaps "Stendhal" is in fact nothing but an overdetermined figure created by the reading of Julien Sorel?

is only reality rendered as written style. *Madame Bovary* functions as the culmination of realism to the extent that the only "truth" to be identified in Flaubert's novel is that of language itself. The richness of character, the presentation of life as it is lived, finds its fulfillment in the character become a dead letter, a figure with no *prior* literal counterpart.

As in nearly every other of Auerbach's stylistic analyses in *Mimesis*, this pivotal position of *Madame Bovary* ultimately rests on the question of character, and the mode of existence of Emma Bovary. He introduces his reading of a brief passage describing one of Emma and Charles' dinners with the caveat that "the paragraph presents a picture—man and wife together at mealtime. But the picture is not presented in and for itself; it is subordinated to the dominant subject, Emma's despair" (*M* 483). Not the objective representation of some extra-textual outside, but rather one more instance of the fictive epistemology whose history *Mimesis* has traced, the scene before Auerbach's interpretive gaze is one in a wholly subjective mode. However, as in the case of Stendhal, what Auerbach emphasizes about the realism of this psychological immediacy is not at all its triumphal role as a literary device, but rather the complete mediocrity of the world around it, "its cheerlessness, unvaryingness, grayness, staleness, airlessness, and inescapability" (ibid.). Realism's greatest moment in literary history, when "random persons and events [are embedded] in the general course of contemporary history, the fluid historical background" (M 491), is born out of an extreme dissatisfaction with the reality that it ostensibly serves to imitate.

Like Julien Sorel, and his search for models in literary antecedents such as Rousseau, Emma Bovary is a heroine incompatible with reality. As she grows ever more entrenched in the mediocre life of a country doctor's wife, Flaubert remarks:

As for the rest of the world, it was lost, with no particular place, and as if non-existent. Anyway, the nearer things were the more her thoughts turned away from them. All her immediate surroundings, the wearisome countryside, the petit-bourgeois stupidity, the mediocrity of existence seemed to her the exception, an exception in which she had been caught by a stroke of fate, while beyond stretched as far as the eye could see an immense land of joys and passions (51).

And while Emma's despair over the vast distance she feels between the immensity of herself and the banal realm of experience in which she has been "caught by a stroke of fate" grows increasingly as the novel reaches its inevitable conclusion, reading the novel elicits strangely similar despondency in Auerbach. "In the Hôtel de la Mole" had opened with an account of the stultifying boredom and decay of the everyday from which Julian Sorel had turned, and it mounts by chapter's end to a kind of tirade that certainly strikes a strange note coming from a critic normally noted for his subtlety. Reflecting still on the dinner scene between Charles and Emma Bovary, Auerbach comes to the final and passionately delivered conclusion that:

What is true of these two applies to almost all the other characters in the novel; each of the many mediocre people who act in it has his own world of mediocre and silly stupidity, a world of illusions, habits, instincts, and slogans; each is alone, none can understand another, or help another to insight; there is no common world of men, because it could only come into existence if many should find their way to their own proper reality, the reality which is given to the individual—which then would also be the true common reality…[But instead] it

becomes one-sided, ridiculous, painful, and it is charged with misunderstanding, vanity, futility, falsehood, and stupid hatred (*M* 489).

If Auerbach does valorize *Madame Bovary* as the preeminent realist novel of the nineteenth century, then he paradoxically does so by damning the reality that it so faithfully seems to represent. While Auerbach was certainly acutely aware of his own era as a time of great distress, particularly from his melancholy outpost in Istanbul (not unlike Emma's banishment from her Parisian dream world to the prison houses of Tostes and Yonville), then he finds things to have not far progressed beyond Flaubert's own historical situation.[65] And like Emma Bovary, he turns to a world outside of the one in whose face he feels such despair – the "great drama" of literary history whose pages the critic increasingly comes to inhabit.

However, the tirade of negativity cited above does in fact end on something like a positive note. After remarking that nothing but a rotten and stultified world is on display amongst Flaubert's characters, Auerbach continues:

> In his book the world consists of pure stupidity, which completely misses *true reality*, so that the latter should properly not be discoverable in it at all; *yet it is there; it is in the writer's language*, which unmasks the stupidity by pure statement; language, then, has criteria for stupidity and thus also has a part in that

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[65] Compare the above citations discussion of stupidity, illusions, and slogans with the discussion of legend in *Mimesis*'s opening chapter, in which he writes of the way in which legend must detach its subject from its historical context, and essentially have recourse to the abstracting tools of ideology. He notes, in one of the few instances of *Mimesis* where he does step back from the text and speak of his own world: "Let the reader think of the history which we are ourselves witnessing; anyone who, for example, evaluates the behavior of individual men and groups of men at the time of the rise of National Socialism in Germany, or the behavior of individual peoples and states before and during the last war, will feel how difficult it is to represent historical themes in general, and how unfit they are for legend; the historical comprises great number of contradictory motives in each individual, a hesitation and ambiguous groping on the part of groups;…and the motives of all the interested parties are so complex that the slogans of propaganda can be composed only through the crudest simplification—with the result that friend and foe alike can often employ the same ones" (*M* 19-20).

reality of the "intelligent" which otherwise never appears in the book (ibid., my emphases).[66]

And here is perhaps where we can find *Mimesis*'s most curious reversal, and the clue to the ontological nature of Emma Bovary's ostensibly realist existence as a literary character, the way in which she fulfills the figural promise born out of Dante's infernal structure. The semblance of the real person, the imitation of the passions and depths and complexities that are combined to create the experience of living, was created by the intense air of reality engendered by Dante, but in Flaubert that "reality" has become nothing but the very writtenness of that literary act of imitation. The "true reality" of mimesis, and of the literary character who essentially determines it, is not the person imitated, but the fact that a person is imitated, or the fact that the literary subjectivity is in fact a written character who is an imitation of nothing.[67] Truth as some extra-textual thing that could have been imitated is finally, and explicitly, made clear in *Mimesis* as a wholly literary truth – the "reality" of Auerbach's own story is writing, and its subjectivities, the

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[66] Here we can see how Auerbach's analysis anticipates Jonathan Culler's masterful account of the operations of Flaubertian stupidity as a novelistic principle in *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*. As he writes, "Flaubert's stupidity…is both a mode of perception and a quality of objects, an attempt to free oneself from the world coupled with an oppressive consciousness of the reality of that world" (178). Essentially salvaging the world by turning its stupid objects into a series of signs without meaning, stupidity allows the subject the most freedom before that world, to read it in a state of reverie, as if it were written. See Culler, pp. 157-8, for his full discussion. Auerbach himself discusses Flaubertian *bêtise* in the 1937 essay; see pp. 430-1.

[67] Timothy Bahti has excellently glossed this passage by slightly, and I think correctly, altering the emphasis of Auerbach's language. Bahti writes: "Auerbach's phrasing here is precisely right even as his meaning is profoundly wrong. The 'true reality' that cannot be fulfilled or revealed in realistic representation—for what is revealed is falsehood and nothingness—is nonetheless to be revealed and fulfilled somewhere; but if it is not in the realistic representation, it is not '*in* the writer's language' or '*in* the book either, as if it were some thematic or semantic representation of meaning to be revealed, fulfilled, and made real in an act of understanding. Rather, it *is* the language and *is* the book: the 'true reality' of the letters that unmask—literally, 're-veal'—their representational stupidity and nothingness by their pure statement" (154, Bahti's emphasis). I would argue, however, that this is in fact the implicit "meaning" at which Auerbach's interpretation is aiming.

"people" whose "truth" is told in their stories, are the people of paper who seem to breathe writing's strange air.

Auerbach looks in *Madame Bovary* for the truth of realism, but what he finds is only a literary reality born out of the "truth" of language. The heroine of Auerbach's "realism," the woman who stands as the apotheosis of the fictive epistemology whose history he has been tracing, is nothing but a pastiche of language, the semblance of a living person whose life consists in remaining a bundle of words, a dead letter. For all their abuse of her, perhaps it is her lovers who, within Flaubert's universe, most acutely hit upon Emma's paper existence. As Emma professes her love in increasingly desperate and trite ways, Flaubert notes that Rodolphe "had so often heard these things said that they did not strike him as original. Emma was like all his mistresses; and the charm of novelty, gradually falling away like a garment, laid bare the eternal monotony of passion, that has always the same shape and the same passion" (154). While Rodolphe's thoughts align Emma's existence as an interchangeable lover with her existence as a being of language, Léon perhaps gets it more accurately in his reflections on his own affair:

> She was the mistress of all the novels, the heroine of all the dramas, the vague "she" of all the volumes of verse. On her shoulders, he rediscovered the amber color of the *Odalisque au Bain*; her waist was long like the feudal chatelaines; she resembled Musset's *Femme Pâle de Barcelone* (209).

Like the novel around her, as it is read according to Auerbach's figurative hermeneutics, Emma Bovary is something resembling a woman, a mimetic entity to which we can ascribe a name, personality, and psychology; while at the same time she is "the mistress

of all the novels," a heroine who is only recognizable as such because of the codes and conventions of the literary work she inhabits.[68]

   She is the heroine of *Madame Bovary* because she is identifiable as the semblance of a person. But she is always and only the semblance of a person because she is the *heroine* of *Madame Bovary*. Her "truth" lies only in the letters of her name, pointing nowhere and referring to no woman. As in Rodolphe's pitiful remembrance of Emma, as he stares at the miniature of her that he keeps in a Rheims cookie-box, Emma's being is indistinguishable from her existence as an image: "Then, from looking at this image and recalling the memory of the original, Emma's features little by little grew confused in his remembrance, as if the living and the painted face, rubbing one against the other, had erased each other" (161-2). Emma, caught between being a living woman and a dead image, a "painted face," is ultimately neither one nor the other, but only the figurative interplay between the two.

   A figure for an unreal person, a catachretic signifier of nothing, Emma lives in a world organized by nothing other than Flaubert's style. She isn't even able to articulate her own longings, which are consistently filtered through the impersonal style of Flaubert's narrative voice. Writing is all there is, the Flaubertian style having corrected

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[68] Culler, while demonstrating the constant denial of meaning and reference in Flaubert's novels, still reminds us that "Flaubert creates characters," and he goes on to explain: "We can discuss the personalities of Emma and Charles, of Frédéric and Deslauriers; and though the psychological material in the later works does become remarkably thin, we are still very far from the empty voice of Beckett's *Comment c'est* or the shifting and confused figures of Sollers' *Le Parc*, *Drame*, and *Nombres*. Flaubert does not confuse or conflate characters; we know who was involved in any given incident; and even when we are not offered rich psychological portraits, the individuals who figure in the story are named and distinguished" (135). However, while Flaubert does keep the representational function of language and the mimesis of character intact, he still stops short of making characters "repositories of meaning." As Culler writes, "the functions they serve in other novels, both as subjects of experience and as objects of the reader's experience, are cited and parodied" (134). This is to say, perhaps, that there is an intense mimesis of character, but one whose meaning lies not in the person represented but in the very literary dimension opened up by that act of mimesis. For an analysis of Flaubert's method of characterization that seeks to recuperate an essentially human quality, and which explicitly opposes itself to Culler's analysis, see Diana Knight, *Flaubert's Characters*.

the rottenness and formlessness of the "real" world that now stands irreparably on the outside of the literary text. Auerbach began his analysis by emphasizing the novel's intense subjectivity, the way in which its depictions are constantly filtered through Emma's own point of view. He writes that what is at issue in the novel is not the matter "of a simple representation of the content of Emma's consciousness, of *what* she feels *as* she feels it. Though the light which illuminates the picture proceeds from her, she is yet herself part of the picture, she is situated within it" (*M* 484, Auerbach's emphasis). Emma's own subjectivity determines whatever scene is on display, almost throughout the entirety of the novel, and yet at the same time she is constantly denied the organizing power that such a position would seem to guarantee.

In the dinner scene Auerbach analyzes, the reader is only able to know Charles through the lens of Emma's boredom and despair, while at the same time the narrative unfolds in a language that does not belong to that lens. Auerbach continues:

> Here it is not Emma who speaks, but the writer…*Toute l'amertume de l'existence lui semblait servie sur son assiette*—she doubtless has such a feeling; but if she wanted to express it, it would not come out like that; she has neither the intelligence nor the cold candor of self-accounting necessary for such a formulation. *To be sure, there is nothing of Flaubert's life in these words, but only Emma's*; Flaubert does nothing but bestow the power of mature expression upon the material which she affords, in its complete subjectivity. *If Emma could do this herself, she would no longer be what she is*, she would have outgrown herself and *thereby saved herself* (ibid., my emphases).

In a highly curious formulation, Auerbach claims that the "life" of these words is Emma's, but that their expression belongs to Flaubert. What, though, may we call this life of Emma's? As we have seen, it is a "life" that consists solely of not having anything to do with what can be called living at all. If Emma Bovary is the fulfillment of the realist *figurae* of Farinata and Cavalcante, then her life consists simply in being dead. But she isn't even granted the dignity of being a dead soul, a person who once lived and finds her literary representation as a shade inhabiting her place in the afterlife; all she is, is a dead letter, a word on a page.[69]

Emma's way of being dead, so to speak, is outside of any kind of Christian-eschatological framework, and instead is simply the result of a linguistic predicament. But Auerbach, in his description of her "life" as living death, still makes recourse to the language of salvation—if Emma were given the power of expression, she would be more than she is and would *save herself*. Presumably, for Emma to be saved would consist of her being a deeper and more intelligent character, the semblance of a better woman. But also, and more importantly, if Emma were "no longer what she is," then Emma would simply *be*, since "what she is" is exactly something that *is not*. She is not someone living who has died, but someone who only lives because she is dead, living her life in the realist afterglow of Dante's infernal setting.

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[69] I must echo Timothy Bahti's gloss on this same passage. Claiming that it contains "a sentence [he finds] the most bizarre in all of *Mimesis*," Bahti interrogates Auerbach's formulation that Emma "would no longer be what she is" if she could express her vague longings herself. He writes: "She would no longer be Emma, the unhappy and doomed heroine of Flaubert's novel. Perhaps—surely in part—Auerbach means she would be a different character, less unhappy, less doomed. But who is 'she'? 'She' is not, as Farinata or Cavalcante was, a once real and historical person. 'She' is the 'real' Emma Bovary who is not. A realistic representation of a fictional character taken by Auerbach as a person—a 'complete subjectivity'—who might have been otherwise than she is, that unhappy fiction….Her *figura*, as the letters on the pages of *Madame Bovary* producing (signifying, representing) the figure of a real person, would be fulfilled (surpassed, overcome, canceled) in her becoming more (but also less) then she is—in her becoming *disfigured* as a figure (a representation of a reality) and being made literal, historical, real" (151-2, Bahti's emphasis).

It is in the Inferno where Auerbach's ontological structure of the modern literary character was created, and that character, as a highly mimetic representation of nothing, lives what amounts to a life of damnation from the start. It is not without importance that Emma Bovary, whom we might call the emblematic heroine of modern realism, famously lives, thematically on the level of content, a life of imprisonment and entrapment. Caught in a world that cannot possibly exist according to her demands of it, she is damned to a life of mediocrity and boredom. More centrally, however, this thematic imprisonment and inescapability is in equal measures present in her damnation at the linguistic level. She is unable to save herself, because, like the shades of Dante's beyond who have figured her existence as a realist character, she lives without hope, and with no access to any path beyond that laid out for her by the "truth" of Flaubert's style.[70] Or, as Jonathan Culler has noted, "Emma is fated to be destroyed by the irony of Flaubert's prose" (144).[71] Her fate is sealed not by all the qualities that her implied person has, but by the language of the novel that has implied that person.

When Emma does meet her inevitable death, then, it comes as a kind of non-event, since she has been only a dead thing throughout the entire novel. *Madame Bovary*, at the very least, could be called its own heroine's death sentence. She finally expires, after an extended series of death throes in which she increasingly comes to resemble the object she essentially is, and the only claim the novel can make is the rather banal, "she had ceased to exist" (258). The bundle of letters comprising her name may just as well

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[70] In his 1902 essay on Flaubert, Henry James writes that the success of *Madame Bovary* lies not in Emma Bovary herself, for she is far too "weak" a vessel to maintain any serious interest, but in the form in which Flaubert narrates her plight. But if she is such a weak vessel, then it can only be because that form privileged by James has damned her to such a fate: "Then her setting, the medium in which she struggles, becomes in its way as important, becomes eminent with the eminence of art; the tiny world in which she revolves, *the contracted cage in which she flutters*, is hung out in space for her, and her companions in captivity there are as true as herself" (326, my emphasis).

[71] See *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*.

have signified a barometer whose meter stops ticking or a cap torn to threads, or any other Flaubertian object. Immediately following the objective report of her death comes another statement made by Flaubert's narrative voice, which affirms not only the banality of death, but the banality of the novelistic life that it extinguishes: "Someone's death always causes a kind of stupefaction; so difficult it is to grasp *this advent of nothingness* [*cette survenue du néant* 450] and to resign ourselves to the fact that it has actually taken place" (ibid., my emphasis). If Emma's actual death is the advent of "nothingness," then perhaps we can compare this to Flaubert's famous letter to Louise Colet, in which he articulates the kind of book he would like to write, the kind of book that *Madame Bovary* essentially becomes. As he writes in the letter from January 16, 1852:

> What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is *a book about nothing* [*un livre sur rien*], a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support; a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible (300, my emphasis).

Emma's death is so seemingly incidental, like the muted winding down of a child's plaything, precisely because it is only a condensation of what her entire existence has been: the nothingness that is death. She lives in a book about nothing, and so her death is just one more impossible entry adding up to that nothing, like an endless string of zeroes which can still only add up to zero.[72]

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[72] An excellent reading of the way in which death inhabits the entirety of *Madame Bovary*'s very formal structure is offered in Elissa Marder's *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity*. See in particular pages 150-88, in which she claims that "insomuch as [*Madame Bovary*] is 'about' anything, this novel is 'about' death" (152). My own reading, however, differs from hers insofar as I claim that the novel

The modernist fulfillment of the modern

To return to Auerbach's analysis of Flaubert's style, then, any life in the novel's language belongs to Emma and the other characters, which is to say that it is the uncanny life of the dead, while the power of expression belongs wholly to the novelist. Flaubert simply forms the material laid before his novelistic gaze by the characters' subjectivities. However, Auerbach is then careful to distinguish between the style of Balzac and Stendhal, whose voices are constantly heard in their novelistic universes and whose opinions about their characters are always known, and what he calls the "objective seriousness" of Flaubert. Of Flaubert's style, Auerbach writes:

> We hear the writer speak; but he expresses no opinion and makes no comment. His role is limited to selecting the events and translating them into language; and this is done in the conviction that every event, if one is able to express it purely and completely, interprets itself and the persons involved in it far better and more completely than any opinion or judgment appended to it could do. Upon this conviction—that is, upon a profound faith in the truth of language responsibly, candidly, and carefully employed—Flaubert's artistic practice rests (*M* 486).

Auerbach goes on to allude to Flaubert's famous letter in which he writes that the novelist ought to act like God, present everywhere in his creation but visible nowhere.[73] Auerbach summarizes the role of the Flaubertian creator: "The universe is a work of art produced without any taking of sides, the realistic artist must imitate the procedures of

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is not so much *about* death, as it is inextricably inhabited by it, the space in which death "lives," or asserts itself as a kind of Flaubertian negative "truth."

[73] See the letter to Louise Colet from December 9, 1852: "An author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere. Art being a second Nature, the creator of that Nature must behave similarly. In all its atoms, in all its aspects, let there be sensed a hidden, infinite impassivity" (173).

Creation, and every subject in its essence contains, before God's eyes, both the serious and the comic, both dignity and vulgarity" (*M* 487). And just as God must remain unmoved before his creation, refusing to take sides, Flaubert "wishes, by his attitude—*pas de cris, pas de convulsion, rien que la fixité d'un regard pensif*—to force language to render the truth concerning the subjects of his observation" (*M* 490). Strangely, according to Auerbach's formulation, we hear the writer speak, though what we hear him say is precisely nothing – he speaks while he "makes no comment." And everything the writer "says" is actually only the "truth" of language itself. The writer speaks, but all that is heard is writing.[74]

Without ever naming the term, Auerbach essentially touches upon Flaubert's famous "invention" of free indirect discourse, *style indirect libre*, as a major structural principle of novelistic language. Blurring as it does the line between the perspective of the author and that of the character, the sentence of free indirect discourse engenders a kind of constant uncertainty principle as to where the source of writing's truth lies. For example, during one of Emma's fit of despondency over her marriage with Charles, we read:

> How was it that she—she, who was so intelligent—could have allowed herself to be deceived again? Moreover, what madness had driven her to ruin her life by continual sacrifices? She recalled all her instincts of luxury,…all that she had longed for, all that she had denied herself, all that she might have had (149)!

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[74] Gérard Genette, in his 1965 essay "Flaubert's Silences," characterizes Flaubert's modernism as precisely this break into silence, a writing that still exists while seemingly paradoxically expressing nothing. He writes: "Flaubert was choking with things to say, enthusiasms, rancors, loves, hates, contempts, dreams, memories….But, one day, as if that were not enough, he conceived the project of *saying nothing*; that refusal of expression inaugurates the modern literary experience" (199, Genette's emphasis).

Where is the judgment in such a passage to fall? Where does its truth lie? We are clearly in Emma's point of view, while at the same time we are in an ironic point of view outside of her as well, the language at once proclaiming her intelligence and maliciously condemning it as just another stupid fantasy.[75] The tense alone betrays the voice of this utterance as one that can only belong to writing, and to no semblance of a subjective consciousness.[76] Later, during her dissatisfaction with Léon, Emma decides – or perhaps it is fairer to say the text decides: "Everything was a lie. Every smile concealed a yawn of boredom, every joy a curse, every pleasure its own disgust, and the sweetest kisses left upon your lips only the unattainable desire for a greater delight" (223). In this world organized according to Flaubert's God-like "truth," then here is perhaps its greatest affirmation, in a language that verifiably belongs to no one and that bears no traces of subjectivity: "Everything was a lie."

Auerbach's tirade against the stupidity and emptiness of Flaubert's world, analyzed above, becomes increasingly justified it seems, particularly when *Madame*

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[75] For the fullest account of Flaubert's use of *style indirect libre*, and of the ironic mode the style engenders, see Vaheed K. Ramazani, *The Free Indirect Mode*. Tracing the style's "grammatical independence and mimetic ambivalence" (129), Ramazani argues that "against the horizon of narratorial impassivity, the ironic free indirect mode provokes the reader's alienation from the 'natural' filiation between novelistic discourse and the fictional world. And of course the perceptual extreme of this conceptual alienation is the disappearance of the signified. Thus, free indirect ambiguities of voice trigger a polemical irony that in turn promotes designification, language disarticulated so as to mirror only itself" (115). Culler also stresses the importance of free indirect discourse, as opposed to many critics' erroneous emphasis on a supposed technique of shifting between limited points of view in Flaubert's style, moving constantly from one verifiable character to another. He writes: "There are shifts within 'limited point of view' which are part of a general strategy of narrative discontinuity and which must not be ignored...Emphasis on limited point of view can have a pernicious effect on the reading of novels because of the kind of recuperation it encourages. It suggests that the details of every description are justified and given a function by virtue of the fact that someone noticed them. It denatures strangeness by personalizing it, making it a function of a particular optic" (113). *Style indirect libre*, of course, is precisely that style that maintains strangeness by rendering uncertain any stable point of view from which its sentences might originate.

[76] For an excellent study of the linguistic and epistemological ramifications of free indirect discourse, as a kind of sentence which designates a speaker but which may not represent subjectivity, see Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences*. The most comprehensive general studies are Brian McHale, "Free Indirect Discourse: A Survey of Recent Accounts," a survey of critical and theoretical accounts, and Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice*, a survey of the style's development in the nineteenth-century novel.

Bovary ostensibly functions in *Mimesis* as the height of literary realism in the nineteenth century. Any life which inhabits it is irreversibly dead, its truth is nothing but a tissue of lies, and the heroine at its heart is but a dead letter. If Dante's creation of a true realism and of the modern character was a literature that was more real than the reality it represented, then the fulfillment of this realism is a highly mimetic literature damned to betray itself as nothing but a fiction. As Timothy Bahti writes, Dante's fulfillment is found in "a realistic fictional life transformed into a reality that would be more, should be more, but is not: *plus de réalité*—more, and no more, reality" (152). And just as Dante's invention of a modern literary subjectivity was dependent upon an erasure of God—"the image of man eclipses the image of God" (*M* 202)—as the organizing locus of this newly liberated world of mankind, Auerbach finds in Flaubert's free indirect style what amounts to a second eclipse of God. The Christian-eschatological framework was replaced by literariness itself as the new world's structural principle, and with that passing the empty place of God was filled by the figure of the author.[77] This structurally analogous position between the two figures reaches a kind of climax in the nineteenth century, with Auerbach's analysis of the "universality" (*M* 480) of Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, while at the same time it falls apart entirely with Flaubert's stylistic erasure of the God-like narrator as any kind of constant organizing principle.

If the birth of the character came at the cost of the death of God, then now even God's stand-in figure, the author – or more accurately, the personalized narrator as that author's own stand-in figure—has passed away. No one is left to accurately and verifiably proclaim any kind of truth in writing aside from writing's own "truth" that

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[77] Recall Auerbach's discussion of Rabelais' essentially ironic position, as sovereign over the world he freely holds before his organizing point of view, or that of Montaigne.

"everything is a lie" and that its reality in fact *is not*. Ultimately, *Madame Bovary* becomes, instead of realism's triumph, the site of a kind of birth of the modernist consciousness. As Flaubert's style blurs the voice of the character with that of the increasingly evasive and depersonalized "narrator," there is no longer a certain and invariable presence that stabilizes the world of the novel. Auerbach looks for Flaubert's voice as the bearer of the "truth" of his world, but literary subjectivities are the only beings to be found, their existence nothing but letters on a page. Flaubert's "God-like" presence has vanished from the world it has created. If Auerbach had found in Dante's *Inferno* the birth of the modern character, which is concomitant with his "death," then in Flaubert, Auerbach finds the first signs of the death of the narrator, replaced by the impersonality of the narrative voice as a pervasive and unlocalizable writtenness, or textuality. And the inhabitant of the *Inferno*, the *figura* of the modern realist character, finds its fulfillment in the *modernist* character, the dead letter of *Madame Bovary*'s textual world.

Essential to this essay has been tracing what exactly is so modernist about Auerbach himself, asking how, as a historian, he recasts his method of figural interpretation in a figurative mode akin to the preoccupations of literary modernism. Among these preoccupations, we can list: a privileging of the random and the everyday as the site of the most serious and sublime; a concern with the distance that separates writing from the empirical world to which it may or may not maintain any kind of mimetic fidelity; a replacement of the personalized narrating figure, as a substitute for the author, with the impersonality and textuality of the narrative voice; and a privileging of character as the central figure in literary art, according to which mimesis is nothing but a

highly subjective mode. *Mimesis* does in fact famously end, in "The Brown Stocking," with Auerbach's affirmation of his own inextricable position as a European modernist, aligning his own methodology with novelists such as Woolf, Proust, and Joyce.[78] However, I will stop short of engaging explicitly with Auerbach's analyses of these novelists, for as I hope to have shown, his modernism inhabits his entire critical project, from his early study of Dante to his late concerns about the possibility of any unity of "Europe" as the object of the humanist dream. *Mimesis* itself is not only what I call a major modernist work, but in the history of the literary character that it tells, it actually constructs the ontology of the literary character, born as a modern entity in Dante and fulfilled as a modernist construction in Flaubert, coming to consciousness, as it were, from a realism more real than life, to a modernism whose fictiveness is more dead than alive.

Auerbach notes, within his discussion of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, that "the people whose story the author is telling experience much more than he can ever hope to

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[78] He writes of the methods of these novelists: "This shift of emphasis expresses something that we might call a transfer of confidence: the great exterior turning points and blows of fate are granted less importance; they are credited with less power of yielding decisive information concerning the subject; on the other hand there is confidence that in any random fragment plucked from the course of a life at any time the totality of its fate is contained and can be portrayed" (*M* 547). And he continues, uncharacteristically drawing attention to his own critical position, and remarkably referring to his own work whose end he is quickly nearing as something like a modernist novel comparable to *Ulysses* or *À la recherché du temps perdu*: "It is possible to compare this technique of modern writers to that of certain modern philologists who hold that the interpretation of a few passages from *Hamlet*, *Phèdre*, or *Faust* can be made to yield more, and more decisive, information about Shakespeare, Racine, or Goethe and their times than would a systematic and chronological treatment of their lives and works. *Indeed, the present book may be cited as an illustration*. I could never have written anything in the nature of a history of European realism; the material would have swamped me….As opposed to this I see the possibility of success and profit in a method which consists in letting myself be guided by a few motifs which I have worked out gradually and *without a specific purpose*, and in trying them out on a series of texts which have become familiar and vital to me in the course of my philological activity…But to return to these modern writers who prefer the exploitation of random everyday events, contained within a few hours and days, to the complete and chronological representation of a total exterior continuum—they too (more or less consciously) are guided by the consideration that it is a hopeless venture to try to be really complete within the total exterior continuum and yet to make what is essential stand out. *Then too they hesitate to impose upon life, which is their subject, an order which it does not possess in itself* (*M* 548, my emphases).

tell" (*M* 549), and we have seen that the life of character, as it emerges in *Mimesis*'s figural operations, leads such a dynamic and multiform existence. In telling the history of literary subjectivity, he has uncovered the unexpectedly rich existence of this unique kind of being. And as *Mimesis* draws to a close, he finds that there is still more to be told, more chapters to its history that remain to be written and further investigations to be made into its complex ontology. Struggling to make sense of who it is that speaks in Woolf's novel, an opus of modernist free indirect discourse, Auerbach seems almost scandalized that an unidentifiable voice can proclaim that Mrs. Ramsay, the heroine of the novel, looks so sad, while at the same time the voice can only but wonder why she is so sad. Such a statement, Auerbach finds, "verges upon a realm beyond reality," and he continues:

> And in the ensuing passage the speakers no longer seem to be human beings at all but spirits between heaven and earth, nameless spirits capable of penetrating the depths of the human soul, capable too of knowing something about it, but not of attaining clarity as to what is in process there….No one is certain of anything here: it is all mere supposition, glances cast by one person upon another whoses enigma he cannot solve….Is it still 'people' who are speaking here (*M* 532)?

These spirits that Auerbach finds in Virginia Woolf, these strange 'people' whose personhood is precisely in question, hovering as they do somewhere beyond this world, are nothing but the cast of characters who populate his own work, "the great drama" of literary subjectivity whose story he tells. They are the shadowy figures of the Old Testament, Dante's infernal shades, Flaubert's dead letters, the 'dream images,' 'figments of fancy,' and 'ghosts' of the figurative unfolding of *figura*'s literary ontology. From the

position of late modernism Auerbach has, like Shakespeare's Miranda, found himself awoken into a new world, one whose boundaries and whose entities remain yet to be further discovered:

O wonder!

How many goodly creatures are there here!

How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world

That has such people in it!

CHAPTER TWO: THE GHOSTS OF HENRY JAMES

In 1910, Henry James was asked to contribute to a symposium on immortality. The talk he delivered, which was printed in *Harper's Bazaar*, poses the question, "Is There a Life after Death?" James answers this question not by actually speculating on immortality in any religious sense, or even in any direct way at all, but rather by addressing consciousness, and in particular that highly refined consciousness for which his characters are both so celebrated and so notorious. The type of consciousness wherein James looks for immortality is the kind that is found again and again throughout his work: a consciousness upon which nothing is lost.[1] There can only be anything like a life after death for those who have really known what it is to live in the first place, and living meaningfully, for James, is ultimately dependent upon the fine perceptiveness of consciousness. Life after death "all depends…on what life has predominantly said to us. And there are those—I take them for the constant and vast majority—to whom it in the way of intelligible suggestion says nothing" (*LD* 603). And yet, James is forced to admit, no matter how fine one's consciousness, no matter how acute one's feeling for life, one is still seemingly trapped in a world where everything reaches its end. The finest life has the finest hopes of living on, but those hopes "may well break down before the avidity and consistency with which everything insufferably *continues* to die" (*LD* 608, James's emphasis). How, James wonders, can we possibly believe in immortality when

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[1] As James writes in "The Art of Fiction" (1884), "If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions *are* experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe. Therefore, if I should certainly say to a novice, 'Write from experience and experience only,' I should feel that this was rather a tantalizing monition if I were not careful immediately to add, '*Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost*'" (53, my emphasis). While this is the kind of consciousness clearly celebrated by James, it is also the kind of finely tuned instrument that has frustrated so many of his critics, and provided material for his satirists. As T.S. Eliot famously puts it in his 1918 essay on James: "He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it" (110).

everything around us is dying all the time, when nothing can be held onto and nothing's inevitable end can be prevented?

In the face of such a state of inevitable decline, in the dimly growing awareness of the way in which everything continues to die, James describes his feeling that "the universe, or all of it that I could make out, kept proclaiming in a myriad voices that I and my poor form of consciousness were a quantity it could at any moment perfectly do without" (*LD* 609). If the universe goes on without everyone else, then it can certainly continue without that thing persistently called "I," despite the fact that "in presence of the great question [of one's own mortality] I cling to these signs [the ones by which I know myself to be 'I'] more than ever" (*LD* 607). James finds, then, that all the while he had been worrying about the finiteness of his consciousness he had at the same time been developing a relationship with it of a distinct kind. Namely, he had learned "to live in it more, and with the consequence of thereby not a little undermining the conclusion most unfavorable to it" (ibid.), namely its extinction. Reacting against "so grossly finite a world," James increasingly "lives in" consciousness because it "at least *contained* the world, and could handle and criticize it, could play with it and deride it; it had *that* superiority" (ibid., James's emphases). By way of this inward turn, by knowing and refining one's consciousness and one's "personality," one gains relations with the world previously unavailable, relations "still vague, no doubt, as undefined as they are uplifting…yet filling us…with the unlimited vision of being" (*LD* 610). It is only in consciousness that one is able to have this access to "being," to feel that one's determinations of the relations between things has any bearing, in short, to recreate the world anew, to imagine it in another way such that it could mean anything at all.

James still goes one step beyond consciousness as such, however, and discovers that his greatest achievements of consciousness, understood as a kind of generative power of the world, lie in fact in his art:

> And, once more—speaking for myself only and keeping to the facts of my experience—it is above all as an artist that I appreciate this beautiful and enjoyable independence of thought and more especially *this assault of the boundlessly multiplied personal relation* (my own), which *carries me beyond even any "profoundest" observation of this world whatever, and any mortal adventure*, and refers me to realizations I am condemned as yet but to dream of….As more or less of one [an artist] myself, for instance, *I deal with being, I invoke and evoke, I figure and represent*, I seize and fix, as many phases and aspects and conceptions of it as my infirm hand allows me strength for; and in so doing *I find myself—I can't express it otherwise—in communication with sources*; sources to which I owe the apprehension of far more and far other combinations than observation and experience, in their ordinary sense, have given me the pattern of (*LD* 611, my emphases).

As an artist, James makes use of the most acute kind of consciousness, and has the most profound access to "being," finding his function to be to establish "sublime relations" (*LD* 612). Putting his consciousness to work in his art, James deals with being in the most acute and multi-faceted way he finds possible, and he deals with it in a way that mere "observation and experience" cannot account for. Using an almost mystical terminology, James finds himself in his consciousness "in communication with sources." The relationship to being to which his consciousness opens him up goes out of the world of

mortal and dying men, beyond any pattern that may be discerned in any empirical way and by any earthly light. In communication with some unnamable "source," James finds, in his power to create the world of art, that "this world," the one on the earth of mankind, the one of these mortal adventures, is not at all the real one, but rather only "a chance for experiment" (*LD* 613). The earth in which he lives and must die is figured only as a kind of testing ground for the world whose possibilities lie in our minds, and whose infinite potentialities ultimately lie in art. It hardly matters, it seems, that everything dies all the time in this world, for it is not the real one, and there is, above and beyond it, that world in which "the fountain of being" (ibid.) is found and in which everything lives forever.

Life after death occurs in the realm of art, in the imaginary space of literature and in the relations of being which literature has the distinctive power to "figure and represent," to "seize and fix." Able to create the world anew, the consciousness of the artist becomes for James the source of immortality, and, he writes, if this conception seems strikingly similar to the structure of the traditional sense of the afterlife for "orthodox theology" (ibid.), then so be it. The similarity being only superficial, James is not very bothered by it. He even welcomes the religious connotations of his position, it they help to make his claims seem more valid, or at least comprehensible. Belief in immortality, religious or otherwise, becomes irrelevant when one desires it badly enough, in whatever secularized form it may take.[2] If one looks for it in either art or in religion, the distinction does not matter so long as one performs the search in good faith.

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[2] Andrew Cutting, in his study *Death in Henry James*, claims that this essay was written as a kind of response to James's growing awareness of the commercial failure of the New York Edition of his works, which had been his attempt at immortality via self-monumentalization. His hopes for permanence, for an assured afterlife in the annals of literary history, seems to have failed for James, never finding the fame and sales he so desperately wanted, and "it is therefore understandable that he should try to imagine how his consciousness might survive independently of his productions" (121). Sharon Cameron, in *Thinking in Henry James*, is the only other critic, to my knowledge, who has addressed "Is There a Life after Death?"

In what follows, we will find that this immortal realm that preoccupies James late in his career becomes the figure for nothing but his own work of literature. It is a space populated by characters who are figured as so many ghosts, corpses, and dead things, but dead things that are still imbued with an uncanny quality of living. This way in which the Jamesian character exists as a kind of survivor of its own figurative death, an event that occurs at the very moment in which it is brought into its uniquely literary existence, is initially articulated in the theory of fiction found in James's New York prefaces to his novels. This construction of figurative life is the story whose unfolding *The Portrait of a Lady* tells, and it is the ontological stage upon which *The Awkward Age* is erected, as we read these two pivotal novels of Henry James's "uncanny" theory of character.

A realism from the other side of life

The veritable heaven on earth erected by the artist is the subject of the major work which had occupied James during the years preceding this late essay, namely, his monumental act of rereading and revising of his own works in preparation for the New York Edition. In 1905 he began the revisions, and from 1906 to 1908 he wrote the eighteen prefaces which would introduce the Edition's twenty-four volumes, comprised of approximately two-thirds of his works and published from 1907 to 1909.[3] The prefaces are largely considered to be the site of James' most elaborate and concise statements of literary theory and criticism, together comprising a statement on what, for him, the work

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She reads the essay in conjunction with *The Wings of the Dove*, and the way in which Milly Theale "survives" her own death by manipulating Densher and Kate Croy into being entirely unable to live the rest of their lives without thinking about her and her ineffable influence upon their relationship. Cameron writes: "The essay is an allegory explicated by the novel. If you think enough, the essay would imply, you deny death. The novel shows how" (157).

[3] For reasons which James never reveals in his letters or notebooks, some of the Edition's notable exceptions include the novels *The Europeans*, *Washington Square*, *The Bostonians*, and *The Sacred Fount*.

of literature is.[4] Literature, in these prefaces, is most often formulated as the representation of life, and of the articulation of individual experience, though an articulation that must always be ordered in a way that experience itself is forever unable to achieve. Life and experience consistently lie at the root of the literary work of art, and thus when James reads over his own works, character inevitably becomes the dominant focus of his self-interpretations. He persistently hits on the literary character as the novel's major problem, as well as its essential solution; while the prefaces do comprise an elaborate theory of literature, that theory of literature in turn entails what ultimately amounts to a theory of character. And reading over all the life contained within his own novels begins to become in the prefaces an increasingly uncanny encounter for James. If literature is consistently affirmed as an articulation of life, then it is a life inextricably ridden with death, an experience of a wholly other kind. Literary life, the prefaces find, is in fact the life after death James will come to investigate in the essay of 1910.

James's most programmatic statement on the representational nature of novelistic art occurs not in the prefaces, but over twenty years earlier, in "The Art of Fiction" (1884). In that essay, he writes plainly that "the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life" (46). Thus he is highly critical of Anthony Trollope for his constant intrusions and digressions into his narratives, the ways in which he betrays himself in his works, revealing them to be but "making believe." Trollope, James writes, "admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give

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[4] See in particular R.P. Blackmur, "The Critical Prefaces of Henry James," where he claims that in the prefaces "criticism has never been more ambitious, nor more useful," and that they comprise "the most eloquent and original piece of literary criticism in existence" (15-17). See also Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, where he writes that James is "the only real *scholar* in the art [of the novel] (187), and Morris Roberts, who claims that "no critic has ever gone more deeply into the philosophy of art" (120) than James had in his prefaces.

his narrative any turn the reader may like best. Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime" (ibid.).[5] The air of reality hanging over fiction must be so strong, and so untroubled, that the distinction between whether an event could happen or actually has happened no longer even matters. Nothing in a novel will be of any interest, for James, unless the novelist has first "produced the illusion of life" (53), including all its infinite impressions and experiences, its textures and feelings. James exhorts to the young novelist:

> All life belongs to you, and do not listen either to those who would shut you up
>
> into corners of it and tell you that it is only here and there that art inhabits, or to
>
> those who would persuade you that this heavenly messenger wings her way
>
> outside of life altogether, breathing a superfine air, and turning away her head

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[5] See also James's lengthy obituary essay from 1883, "Anthony Trollope," where he writes: "It is impossible to imagine what a novelist takes himself to be unless he regards himself as an historian and his narrative as a history. It is only as an historian that he has the smallest *locus standi*. As a narrator of fictitious events he is nowhere; to insert into his attempt a backbone of logic, he must relate events that are assumed to be real….Therefore, when Trollope suddenly winks at us and reminds us that he is telling us an arbitrary thing, we are startled and shocked in quite the same way as if Macaulay or Motley were to drop the historic mask and intimate that William of Orange was a myth and the Duke of Alva an invention" (1343). While it is commonly assumed that James's criticism of writers like Trollope and Thackeray is that they simply intrude unnecessarily into their narratives, James E. Miller, Jr., in his essay "Henry James in Reality," clarifies that "his objection is not to Trollope as an *intrusive* narrator but, rather, as a *disclaiming* narrator who frequently reminds the reader that what is happening is not 'real' and can be changed at any time by arbitrary action of the storyteller" (598, Miller, Jr.'s emphasis). John Carlos Rowe points out that James himself is just as guilty as Trollope, if not more guilty, of frequent narratorial intrusions into his works; the difference between the two is only one in degree rather than in kind. As Rowe write that there is a sense "in which James always exposes his fiction, and that is in the fundamental assumption of the *textuality* of experience…James's social dramas are built on the basic philosophical assumption of a world in which the only objects for understanding are the always already interpreted texts of social convention….In this regard, James is, even more than Trollope, perpetually tipping his hand to the reader, exposing the fictive foundations for his 'illusion' of the real. James's objections to Trollope's narratorial intrusions, then, are not just fussy, technical objections. Rather, James implies that the novelist who plays such a role – that of deux ex machine – presumes to have full control of *his art*. That art, I would contend along with James, is nothing more than an extension of the social arts; its means of sustaining the illusion of its "felt life" are drawn from those same social forms that it represents….In short, the arbitrariness or fictionality represented by the novelist is principally that of society and its history; the novelist himself may participate in such invention, but when he attempts to control fully the fictionality of his own literary form, then he has succumbed to a certain 'suicidal satisfaction' in his own independence and artistic self-sufficiency" (71-2, Rowe's emphases).

from the truth of things. There is no impression of life, no manner of seeing it and

feeling it, to which the plan of the novelist may not offer a place (64).

All of life is available to the writer of fiction, every corner of experience can find its way

into his "illusion of life," and it is in this very truth, James finds, that the novelist

"competes with life" (53). However, because "humanity is immense, and reality has a

myriad forms" (52), the sense of life is very difficult to fix; there is quite simply too

much of it, and too many perspectives from which it might be defined.

The novelist, then, cannot possibly hope to offer a picture of life in and of itself,

as it might exist objectively outside of any interpretation or understanding of it; rather,

what the novelist creates is another version of life, its competition. The novelist's

creation is not a mirror of life, but an alternative to it.[6] Or, as James famously writes in a

1915 letter to H.G. Wells: "It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance, for

our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever

for the force and beauty of its process" (490, James's emphasis). What kind of life, then,

is a life which is an alternative of reality, no longer Stendhal's mirror in the roadway, but

rather an inorganic and non-corresponding picture, the formed product of the novelist's

intentional consciousness? What, we have to ask, is this life that is not life? In the later

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[6] Thus, characterizing James's literary theory, René Wellek writes that James is neither a "'realist,' the label pinned on him in most histories of literature, nor a 'formalist,' a devotee of art for art's sake for which he is often dismissed" (299). Similarly, John Carlos Rowe identifies two versions of James, "the James of Experience and the James of Form," and he writes: "Subjective experience may appear to undo the unity of form at one moment in James, only to be transformed by James's formalism in the next moment….The difference of work and world is made understandable as the phenomenological activity of translation by which the mind overtakes the world. Art is thus the genesis and structure of a subject that makes us 'see' itself as 'consciousness.' In such a manner, 'art *makes* life' by the incarnation of meaning, the importance and interest which are embodied in the form of subjectivity itself" (229-30). As Hazard Adams remarks: "James is a 'realist' and believes that the novel is a 'personal, a direct impression of life,' that must have an air of reality, and that the novelist has much in common with the historian…[But] it is interesting…that even in these remarks the role of the artist as a central presence is not diminished" (660). In short, the novelist competes with life by recording its history, not simply because he "imitates" it, but because the basis for that competition lies in the very formalism of a novelistic practice rooted in the form-giving subjectivity of the novelist.

essays of the New York Edition, James writes again about his theory of representation in the preface to *Roderick Hudson* (1875), in terms not entirely distant from "The Art of Fiction" essay. It is the earliest of his novels to be included in the Edition, and it represents a highpoint of his early brand of realism.[7] Thus the novel gives him occasion to dwell on the origins of his own representational strategies, and on the nature of realism.

In his reflections on *Roderick Hudson*, James writes of representation as the organization of experience, in a way that echoes his formulations from 1884. Being of an "admirable immensity" (*PNY* 1039), experience can easily cause one to lose one's way, and so some "system of observation" is needed. From this claim, James begins to justify the entire project of the prefaces, the project of going over each work and articulating its origin in the author's own empirical experience, what he calls the "germ" of each story. How, James asks, has the raw stuff gleaned from life become the highly formed novels filling the volumes of his massive New York Edition? As he puts it:

> We see it [experience] as pausing from time to time to consult its notes, to measure, for guidance, as many aspects and distances as possible, as many steps taken and obstacles mastered and fruits gathered and beauties enjoyed. Everything counts, nothing is superfluous in such a survey; *the explorer's note-book strikes me here as endlessly receptive* (ibid., my emphasis).

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[7] By James's "early brand of realism," I refer to those novels composed before his full articulation of the reflective and mediating center of consciousness method, a turn, we shall see, that I will largely identify with James's composition of *The Portrait of a Lady* in 1881. The way in which consciousness comes to serve as an organizing and focalizing principle of this novel and those that follow stands in sharp contrast to such early works as *Roderick Hudson*, *The American*, *The Europeans*, and *Confidence*. These works, whose use of third-person omniscient narration and relative lack of subjective mediation, can be seen as more traditionally "realist" in the sense in which George Eliot, Trollope, or Thackeray are labeled "realist."

What James is ostensibly describing here is the work of the author, figured as an explorer, as if he were wandering through the world like a visitor from a foreign land, noting everything with the acuteness that only a stranger can know. Experience, which is nothing but the author himself, becomes something like a Benjaminian *flâneur*, Baudelaire's painter of modern life, wandering through the modern world and besieged on all sides by the chaotic scenes unfolding all around him, though never including him within their carnival.[8] The author is a man apart, an "explorer" charting new territory. Later in the preface the novelist becomes the one who "embarks, rash adventurer, under the star of 'representation'" (*PNY* 1044). But if it is the empirical world of experience that he explores, then what of the notebook in which he makes his notations and records his observations, this "endlessly receptive" transcription of the world of mankind? The novel, this notebook, is a form that can simply take in everything, that can not only record all the annals and events of the world, but can make them mean something. And meaningfulness can only come at the cost of not keeping everything in the notebook. As James writes, "really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so" (*PNY* 1041, James's emphasis). The explorer's notebook is "endlessly receptive" and the whole work of art lies in the attempt to cut off its ability to be imprinted, to stop it short at some finely crafted point. The artist's work is to create a

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[8] This is in fact precisely the image that James gives in the preface to *The Princess Casamassima* (1886): "It is a fact that, as I look back, the attentive exploration of London, the assault directly made by the great city upon an imagination quick to react, fully explains a large part of [the novel's origin]…One walked of course with one's eyes greatly open, and I hasten to declare that such a practice, carried on for a long time and over a considerable space, positively provokes, all round, a mystic solicitation, the urgent appeal, on the part of everything, to be interpreted and, so far as may be, reproduced…Possible stories, presentable figures, rise from the thick jungle as the observer moves, fluttering up like startled game, and before he knows it indeed he has fairly to guard himself against the brush of importunate wings" (*PNY* 1086).

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form that can encompass the things of the world which, in their sheer accumulation, have no form of their own.[9]

When James describes himself at the time of the preface's writing, however, he is not that vessel of experience wandering through the world, but rather a reader in 1906, poring over a number of works written by that author figured as impersonal experience. Reading over his own works, James finds himself, "all attentively, in presence of some such recording scroll or engraved commemorative table—from which the 'private' character, moreover, quite insists on dropping out" (*PNY* 1039). The role of the explorer has been eliminated, replaced with a figure like an archaeologist, and yet the metaphor of the notebook remains. The novel before him, *Roderick Hudson*, is still that explorer's notebook, the endlessly receptive record of experience for which nothing is superfluous. Moreover, it is a notebook whose observations appear to have been made by no one, the "private character" having dropped out, but rather by the impersonality of experience

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[9] In his study of James in *The Metamorphoses of the Circle*, Georges Poulet describes James's art as one born out of the consciousness's fight not to lose itself entirely in the enormity of reality. As Poulet writes: "One needs at all costs an act of mind to stop short this proliferation which is both marvelous and fatal….The important business for the writer is to place boundaries where, naturally, there are none. For James…literature is a limited representation, therefore formal, therefore artificial, of what for him, is illimitiable….The terror inspired in Henry James by the admirable immensity has, for him, as effect, the immediate desire to elevate barriers. So this thought, spontaneously and initially one of the most formless possible, almost from the very first adopts the most rigorous formalism" (309). Here we can see that James's realism is actually not that far from the claims of Georg Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* (1920), in which he goes so far as to claim that the novel's essentially ironic structure makes it a genre in fact antithetical to any kind of mimesis. Lukács calls the novel "the adventure of interiority," writing that "it is a desperate, purely artistic attempt to create, with the means of composition, structuring, and organization, a unity that is no longer organically given: a desperate attempt and a heroic failure (55). Hopelessly grounded in the subjectivity of the novelist, while at the same time trying to present itself as an organic and unified whole, the novel is in a constant situation of irony, which Lukács characterizes as that position which sees the novelistic world as a unified world, but then recognizes it as one that is merely formal, which is to say, nothing but a created totality, made of discrete parts that can never quite add up to a rounded whole, as they would in epic structures and the totality of an empirical world from which they spring. As J.M. Bernstein writes in *The Philosophy of the Novel*: "Novelistic irony begins with the fictiveness of its world, with the distance separating fiction (form-giving) and social reality, and ironically reflects on that fact….For a novel to come to self-consciousness is for it to call into question its own removal from or transcendence of experience. *Novelistic irony begins with the madness of fiction, with the unreality of all that lies within its domain*, with, finally, the reduction of the world to writing, and 'figures' through the instrumentality of form a return to the world" (215, my emphasis).

itself as the figure for an author who has become inaccessible through his product. James, as a reader, finds himself as if reading the foreign and unsigned record of a civilization irretrievably lost. And the notebook, it seems, has not in fact been an exact transcription of the observations it ought to contain. When the notebook was the figure for the novelist at work, life was simply everything and the notebook overflowed in taking it all in. But when the notebook lies open before the reader, the novel itself becomes, as James writes in his 1899 essay "The Future of the Novel," the thing that "can do simply everything, and that is its strength and its life" (105).[10] The novel can do everything, with the caveat that what it cannot still do is take in everything offered by life, the entirety of the world noted by observation, experience, and exploration. The novel's everything, its limitless capabilities, is not the immensity of the world's everything. The novel can create only *a* world; if it recreated *the* world, it would have to be some infinitely proliferating art form as yet unimaginable by James, something like the hellishly spreading map of Borges's cartographers.[11]

This necessary distillation of life which the form of the novel must perform is again discussed at length in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897). As in all the other prefaces, James writes here of the process of picking a "germ" from life, and turning it into a narrative form. However, instead of simply tracking the growth of the germ, James pauses to reflect on its structure, finding that it becomes something almost like an alchemical process. "One's subject," he writes, "is in the merest grain, the speck of truth, of beauty, of reality, scarce visible to the common eye" (*PNY* 1138), and the

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[10] Similarly, James closes his preface to *The Ambassadors* (1901), one of the last volumes of the New York Edition, with the claim that "the Novel remains still, under the right persuasion, the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms" (*PNY* 1321).

[11] See Borges's one-paragraph parable, "On Exactitude in Science:" "And the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it" (325).

artist becomes like "a dog suspicious of some buried bone" (ibid.). If in the early stage of his career, while writing *Roderick Hudson*, James's task as a novelist was to note everything in his explorer's notebook, then over twenty years later, the author seems to actually take note of very little. More of a watcher than a recorder, James finds himself waiting for life to give its hidden secrets up to him, in the most unexpected places and in the most unpredictable moments. The issue is no longer to find a way to control life, to find the form that will cut it off and to make it meaningful, but rather to rescue something from life's "splendid waste" (*PNY* 1139).

James recalls that the inspiration for *The Spoils of Poynton* came to him while at a dinner party. Overhearing a conversation taking place between two diners near him, James finds the slightest trace of a germ floating through the air: "There had been but ten words, yet I had recognized in them, as in a flash, all the possibilities of the little drama of my 'Spoils,' which glimmered then and there into life" (*PNY* 1140). The inspiration is so sudden, and the story unfolds so quickly, that James describes having to stop himself from hearing any more of the conversation after those ten golden words, for as the talk goes on he only sees "clumsy Life again at her stupid work" (ibid.). Leaving behind the incidental occasion of the novel's origin, James goes on to speak in general of the work of the artist, and his relationship to life. "The artist," he writes,

> has to borrow his motive, which is certainly half the battle; and this motive is his ground, his site and his foundation. *But after that he only lends and gives, only builds and piles high, lays together the blocks quarried in the deeps of his imagination and on his personal premises*. He thus remains all the while in intimate commerce with his motive, and can say to himself—what really more

than anything else inflames and sustains him—that *he alone has the secret of the particular case*, he alone can measure the truth of the direction to be taken by the developed data. There can be for him, evidently, only one logic for these things; *there can be for him only one truth and one direction*—the quarter in which his subject most completely expresses itself. The careful ascertainment of how it shall do so, and the art of guiding it with consequent authority—*since this sense of "authority" is for the master-builder the treasure of treasures*, or at least the joy of joys—renews in the modern alchemist *something like the old dream of the secret of life* (*PNY* 1141, my emphases).

If life is all "splendid waste" and "stupid work," conversations that meander around an over-laden dinner table, then art becomes that which can discern life's "truth" and "direction," the process whereby "the old dream of the secret of life" can begin to be articulated. And the artist is the modern alchemist who can discern this secret, who can save life from its own incessant wreckage. The secret of life, as James will articulate it in his 1910 essay on immortality, is precisely to save it. And to save life is nothing but to render it as art, to create the world anew and to articulate a new kind of life in the language of literature.

Character building

A kind of angel of salvation, the artist becomes figured as "the master-builder" whose process of writing is akin to the building of a house, although the house can only be an impossible and imaginary edifice built upon the slightest corner stone. With what, then, is the house of the work of literature built? What are these building blocks which lie nowhere in the world from which the hint has come, but which are to be found only in the

depths of the artistic and form-giving imagination? The trope of the builder sends us to one of James's most well known formulations in all his critical writings, the figure of the "house of fiction" which he unfolds in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). In reading this preface we find that the image of building, of the construction of the house of fiction, is inextricably linked to James's thought on the literary character. If James's theory of realism can be read as a version of what is ultimately a strangely alchemical theory of immortality, then this latter theory, via the figure of the master-builder, is in fact a theory of the literary character. As James asks in "The Art of Fiction:" "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is *not* of character? What else do we seek in it and find in it" (55, James's emphasis)? To think about fiction, and to question what exactly it is, is essentially to think about the characters inhabiting it. Fiction is character, and character is fiction; both would be unimaginable without the other, and James could hardly even describe a distinction between the two.[12]

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[12] James's formulations can perhaps be considered as a formalist reworking of the formulation that "character is fate," attributed to Heraclitus but perhaps most widely known to the nineteenth century from Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. Character, for James, is not so much "fate," as it is "story;" that is, the unfolding of a narrative is nothing but the illumination of the character to whom it happens. Interestingly, this classical formulation is heavily critiqued by George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), in one of her characteristic philosophical asides. As she writes about her heroine, Maggie Tulliver: "But you have known Maggie a long while, and need to be told, not her characteristics, but her history, which is a thing hardly to be predicted even from the completest knowledge of characteristics. For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. 'Character,' says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms—"character is destiny." But not the whole of our destiny. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, was speculative and irresolute, and we have a great tragedy in consequence. But if his father had lived to a good old age, and his uncle had died an early death, we can conceive Hamlet's having married Ophelia, and got through life with a reputation of sanity, notwithstanding many soliloquies, and some moody sarcasms towards the fair daughter of Polonius, to say nothing of the frankest incivility to his father-in-law" (428-9). James would certainly find Eliot's alternative history for Hamlet highly questionable, to say the least, particularly considering the main criticism in his 1866 review essay of *Felix Holt, the Radical*: "Her plots have always been artificial—clumsily artificial—the conduct of her story slow, and her style diffuse" (907). At the very least, these fundamentally opposed conceptions of character signify not only James's distance from Eliot, but also his distance from the fundamental tenets of the nineteenth century realist novel, including its assumption of a stabilized self-identity that can be defined independently of its wider narrative context. On the similarities and differences between James's conception of character and Eliot's, see Richard

James begins the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* by reflecting on the novel's origin, but he ends up finding that there really is none to be found in any expected sense. There is no conversation overheard at a dinner table, or discourse overheard one summer's night in a Parisian garden.[13] Instead, all James can find in his recollections of the novel's beginning is "the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman, to which all the usual elements of a 'subject,' certainly of a setting, were to need to be superadded" (*PNY* 1071). The character is all there is, and the story attaches itself to the figure, is built around it in proportion to the character, rather than vice versa. "I could think," James writes, "so little of any fable that didn't need its agents to launch it; I could think so little of any situation that didn't depend for its interest on the nature of the persons situated, and thereby on their way of taking it" (*PNY* 1073).[14] Once the character is in place, once Isabel Archer stands firmly

Freadman's invaluable study *Eliot, James and the Fictional Self*, pp. 31-8. See also Mary Doyle Springer's *A Rhetoric of Literary Character*, the only full study of James's methods of characterization, in which she describes the essential dynamism of James's portraiture of character. She argues that the "literary character described in isolation from any sense of his acts, or the potential whole action, produces but little sense of character, and little of form, of what we are to feel for the character" (24-5). However, I cannot ultimately align my own critical position with her own, largely due to her highly classical Aristotelianism, in which character is essentially understood as an agent, "a literary construct rhetorically designed for a task," (17) in which any fictive subjectivity is simply determined by its formal function, the effect it is designed to have upon its readers.

[13] The latter example is of course the famous germ of *The Ambassadors*, William Dean Howells's reported outburst to the younger Jonathan Sturges, urging him to "live all one can," while there is still time before inevitable regret begins to set in. See Leon Edel's account in *The Master: 1901-1916*, p. 73. As James notes in that novel's preface: "Never can a composition of this sort have sprung straighter from a dropped grain of suggestion, and never can that grain, developed, overgrown and smothered, have yet lurked more in the mass as an independent particle" (*PNY* 1304). Characteristically, while James notes the ease with which the novel's center of energy can be found in its germ, he does not actually provide the germ itself in the preface.

[14] Compare this to Virginia Woolf's highly similar formulation in "Character in Fiction," in which she describes the practice of novel writing as the attempt to fix a character that has burst into the novelist's view: "Some Brown, Smith, or Jones comes before them [most novelists] and says in the most seductive and charming way in the world, 'Come and catch me if you can.' And so, led on by this will-o'-the-wisp, they flounder through volume after volume…Few catch the phantom; most have to be content with a scrap of her dress or a wisp of her hair" (*EVW III* 420-1). After telling her allegory of the old woman seen in the corner of a train carriage, Woolf continues: "Here is a character imposing itself upon another person. Here is Mrs Brown making someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about her. I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite. I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with

and vividly in James's vision, the issue of her actual novel then becomes but to build the house of fiction around her:

> The point is, however, that this single small cornerstone, the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny, had begun with being all my outfit for the large building of "The Portrait of a Lady." It came to be a square and spacious house—or has at least seemed so to me in this going over it again; but, such as it is, it had to be put up round my young woman while she stood there in perfect isolation (*PNY* 1076-7).

And it is in this probing and roving around the isolated figure of Isabel that James constructs both the house that will keep her (what will become *The Portrait of a Lady*), but also the metaphor of the house of fiction itself.

Having established the importance of the stray and unattached figure as the origin of the story, James goes on to wonder how value is to be given to that figure, how it is to be responsibly made into a story that matters. How, in short, can the character blossom rightfully into her own story, when one author or another would make of her what he will? Isabel Archer may as well, James seems to suspect, be given to a series of different artists, each of whom would make something else of her, pull another moral from the basic kernel upon which she stands. And it is out of this problem that James builds his fabulous architecture. To quote his metaphor at length:

> The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision

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character, and that it is to express character…that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved" (*EVW III* 425).

and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. *They are but windows at best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life*. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pair of eyes, the window may *not* open; "fortunately" by reason, precisely, of this incalculability of range. *The spreading field, the human scene, is the "choice of subject"; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the "literary form"*; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious (*PNY* 1075, my emphases).

The details of this particular architectural plan are a bit muddled, to say the least. If James began with the conception of Isabel as an isolated figure, rooted in a void and waiting for the house of fiction to be built up around her, then when he elaborates the metaphor, her place at the house's center is taken up by the more general, and certainly the more lively,

"human scene." Surely, this human scene, which seems to be the kind of abstract parade of humanity associated with Balzacian comedy, is much larger than Isabel herself; it is the scene into which she must plunge if she is to live a story, the only place in which her destiny could unfold if anything were going to happen to her. But where does Isabel herself lie in this blueprint? Where does the human figure lie in this architectonics which multiplies perspectives into so many dead ends and windows that look onto other windows, like some kind of impossible house that might have been imagined by Piranesi or M. C. Escher?

Given that the dominant formal problem for James in all the prefaces is that of point of view, of finding the appropriate consciousness through which to tell any given story,[15] what we can see here is that the character, the isolated figure standing at the origin of the story, has in fact become one of the windows of fiction's house, one of those uncountable "pierceable" apertures through which the human scene may be glimpsed. In the prefaces to both *Roderick Hudson* and *The Spoils of Poynton* James describes the difficulties of finding the right way to transform the raw material of life into the formed and meaningful interest of art, and in each preface James ultimately finds the answer in

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[15] On the way in which James's theory of fiction is essentially a theory of point of view, or is at least centrally dependent on point of view, see Percy Lubbock's classic, an overtly Jamesian, study, *The Craft of Fiction*, where he claims: "The whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the question of point of view—the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story" (251). See also Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, in particular pp. 42-50 and pp. 340-67, for a discussion of the various ways in which Jamesian realism is entirely dependent upon the point of view of the fictive consciousness anchoring any given narrative. Similarly, René Wellek writes that point of view for James is not "just a technical device," but rather "is another device to achieve the general effect of illusion" (313). And as the more contemporary, and "deconstructive" critic, David Carroll writes in *The Subject in Question*: "Point of view is for James *the principle* of the novel – its center – that principle around which the novel structures itself as form. In fact, James's theory provides the novel with a consciousness of itself by analyzing the problem of consciousness in the novel; it supplies the novel with a point of view on itself by discussing the problem of point of view" (53). See also Poulet, who writes: "The choice of a consciousness, for James, is the choice of a *form*. Thanks to the point of view which it assumes, the consciousness, at the heart of the work, becomes an authentic '*principle of composition*'" (312, Poulet's emphases).

the literary character, and more specifically, in the literary character as a formal principle, as a means of shaping the story. In the case of *Roderick Hudson*, James finds that the key to constructing the novel – or any novel – is to find a way to make it appear as if life could be formed, to find a way of making it seem as if the relations of human existence could be stopped at a certain point so as to be made into something that could even begin to be apprehended. He finds this form, or this boundary, not in any narrative dynamic or in any particular plot, but in a character – and not even in his hero at that, but in a secondary character through whose eyes Roderick's story would be more meaningful than if it had been told through its own hero's. James discovers:

> The centre of interest throughout 'Roderick' is in Rowland Mallet's consciousness, and the drama is the very drama of that consciousness—which I had of course to make sufficiently acute in order to enable it, like a set and lighted scene, to hold the play….What happened to him was above all to feel certain things happening to others…so the beauty of the constructional game was to preserve in everything its especial value for *him* (*PNY* 1050, James's emphasis).

Rowland Mallet becomes the point of view whose light shines upon the novel's entire unfolding. Everything happens only because it happens as reflected through his consciousness – he is thus both the central actor, in fact the only one, but also a man on the side lines, the one to whom what happens is nothing but the fact that the things that physically and dynamically happen do so to those around him and whom he forever watches.

Similarly, in *The Spoils of Poynton*, James discovers that once he has discovered the key to his story, the secret of life gleaned from those mere ten words, and has begun

to build the house of fiction, the object at its center, the main "hero" of his adventure, is precisely that, an object, or rather a collection of them. The "spoils of Poynton," the objects about which the novel's characters argue and whose fate drives along the plot, are in fact the center of interest of the novel. But regrettably James realizes:

> The spoils of Poynton were not directly articulate, and though they might have, and constantly did have, wondrous things to say, their message fostered about them a certain hush of cheaper sound—as a consequence of which, in fine, they would have been costly to keep up. In this manner Fleda Vetch, maintainable at less expense…marked her place in my foreground at one ingratiating stroke. She planted herself centrally, and the stroke, as I call it, the demonstration after which she couldn't be gainsaid, was the simple act of letting it be seen she had character (*PNY* 1144-5).

James constructs Fleda as the consciousness through whom the fate of the novel's precious things would be seen, and in so doing he discovers that his novel's subject is in fact not those chairs and cabinets and paintings at all, but rather "the passions, the faculties, the forces their beauty would, like that of antique Helen of Troy, set in motion" (*PNY* 1145). The spoils are the spirit around which the novel orbits, but the novel's story as it unfolds becomes precisely that these objects *happen* to a series of characters, and they happen most forcefully to the consciousness considered most apt to display them, that of Fleda Vetch. Thus R. P. Blackmur calls James's most famously characteristic method the "Indirect Approach," and he describes it as:

> The existence of a definite created sensibility interposed between the reader and the felt experience which is the subject of the fiction. James never puts his reader

in direct contact with his subjects; he believed it was impossible to do so, *because his subject really was not what happened but what someone felt about what happened*, and this could be directly known only through an intermediate intelligence (25, my emphasis).

All that happens, then, in the most typical Jamesian scenario, is that *something happens to some fictive person*.

In both novels, *Roderick Hudson* and *The Spoils of Poynton*, James looks for a formal principle, and he finds instead a character. Moreover, figures such as Fleda Vetch and Rowland Mallet become the essential lynchpins of Jamesian mimesis, although they are initially employed in his representational strategy as the very discrepancy between life and fiction, the line which cuts the world of the literary work of art off from the world outside its pages. One may find that Rowland Mallet stands as more of a formal principal than anything else, that is, the events of *Roderick Hudson* could imaginably unfold without the sage older man viewing everything from the sidelines. But by the time of the composition of *The Spoils of Poynton*, James's conception of mimesis has evolved such that the character through whose eyes the story unfolds and whose mind reflects the novel's events, cannot simply function as a transparent and inconsequential reflector, but must also be of "interest" in and of herself.[16] Of Fleda's construction, he writes that "a

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[16] This demand for interest is the central reason behind James's criticisms of Flaubert, despite the great admiration James felt for the formal advancements of his predecessor, and for his devotion to style. See the 1902 essay "Gustave Flaubert," in which James describes *Madame Bovary* and *L'Education Sentimantale* as great works, but only despite their highly flawed central, because essentially uninteresting, central consciousnesses. About both novels, James writes: "He [Flaubert] wished in each case to make a picture of experience—middling experience, it is true—and of the world close to him; but if he imagined nothing better for his purpose than such a heroine and such a hero, both such limited reflectors and registers, we are forced to believe it to have been a defect of his mind" (326). And with regard to the latter novel's hero in particular, James continues: "Frédéric is positively too poor for his part, too scant for his charge; and we feel with a kind of embarrassment, certainly with a kind of compassion, that it is somehow the business of a protagonist to prevent in his designer an excessive waste of faith" (327). Wayne Booth summarizes James's

character is interesting as it comes out, and by the process of duration and emergence; just as a procession is effective by the way it unrolls, turning to a mere mob if all of it passes at once" (ibid.). If the reflector is of interest, if the reflector is an actual character in the mimetic sense of the word, containing depths and feelings and all the implications of living, then the story will naturally be of interest as they witness it. "Fleda," James writes, "almost demonically both sees and feels, while the others [the novel's minor characters] but feel without seeing" (*PNY* 1147).[17] That the Jamesian character *both sees and feels* becomes the key to its existence; its seeing confers form on a realism that requires artistic shaping so as to separate it from life, while its feelings confers the very mimetic element without which any resemblance to realism would be severed.[18]

The apotheosis of the Jamesian character, caught as it is in a dialectic between form and content, between seeing and feeling, can be found in Maggie Verver, the ostensible heroine of *The Golden Bowl* (1903), which is not only James's last major

criticism: "Much as he admired Flaubert, he felt that Flaubert's realism was too superficial….Feeling as he did that the most interesting subject was a fine but 'bewildered' mind dealing with life, he was disturbed by Flaubert's choice of stupid minds as centers of consciousness, 'reflecting' events" (42-3).

[17] See Dorothea Krook's landmark 1962 study, *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James*, in which all of her readings are "connected by the theme of 'being' and 'seeing'—the exploration and definition of consciousness in James's particular meaning of the term" (ix). Krook is not only the first critic to devote a book-length study to Jamesian consciousness, but she admirably reads that consciousness from both of its equally necessary aspects, as content ('being') and as form ('seeing'). She describes James's method of building his characters as a kind of exercise in excess, which consists of immersing them entirely in the material world, while endowing them with an almost obsessively acute self-consciousness. "Steep them and saturate them," she writes, "until they are all, like Kate Croy in *The Wings of the Dove*…made with the power to be actively and deeply involved in the objective world, which is to be made for 'being;' and at the same time made with the power to be intensely and minutely conscious of all that this involvement in the objective world implies, which is to be made for 'seeing'" (22).

[18] Thus James is highly critical of Joseph Conrad in his 1914 essay, "The New Novel." James begins by praising the ingenuity of Conrad's formalism in his recently published novel *Chance*, calling the novel's highly intricate method of nesting multiple narrating characters within one another a "miracle," though he immediately follows this with the comment that "that the miracle has been one thing and the success another" (147). The effect, however, of such an ingenious method is that the novel is all too formed, and the characters, in their proliferating acts of telling, become simply artificial things designed to see and tell, revealing ultimately nothing but the heavy-handed presence of Conrad himself. Conrad has created a marvel of point of view, for James, but he has done it at the cost of any truly feeling consciousness, the air of reality, behind the proliferating collection of forms.

novel, but whose preface is also the last of the New York Edition. Reflecting on the

novel's construction, James begins the preface by describing his now typical method of

using "some more or less detached, some not strictly involved, though thoroughly

interested and intelligent, witness or reporter, some person who contributes to the case

mainly a certain amount of criticism and interpretation of it" (*PNY* 1322). This method,

however, is mostly used in the shorter stories of James's late period, where the point of

view is frequently that of some unnamed painter or writer, one who often speaks in the

first person, but who views the story that unfolds always with a certain detachment.

These stories often read as if they are small formal experiments for James, in which their

reporters learn something that can ultimately be described as a lesson in what art is and

how it works. As Tzvetan Todorov describes their function in his study of James's stories

from *The Poetics of Prose* (1971): "The tales play a special role; they stand as so many

theoretical studies in which James poses the great esthetic problems of his work, and in

which he solves them" (143).[19] For a work such as *The Golden Bowl*, however, James

finds that the detached observer will not be able to penetrate sufficiently into the heart of

the matter, in a particular novelistic world populated by such secretive and reticent

figures. Instead of using a figure such as Rowland Mallet, James needs to "get down into

the arena and do my best to live and breathe and rub shoulders and converse with the

persons engaged in the struggle that provides for the others in the circling tiers the

entertainment of the great game" (*PNY* 1323). However in this novel's particular game,

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[19] This type of story is very common throughout James's corpus, but for some of the more notable
instances in which an author or artist figure narrates a specific aesthetic learned over the course of his
narrative, see "The Author of Beltraffio" (1884), "The Real Thing" (1892), or "The Figure in the Carpet"
(1896). Perhaps the most representative of James's "detached" witnesses or reporters is the unnamed young
telegraph operator at the center of "In the Cage" (1898), as she constructs an entire novella out of the
fragments and messages that pass through her hands.

"there is no other participant, of course, than each of the real, the deeply involved and immersed and more or less bleeding participants" (ibid.). The novel in fact only has essentially six characters, six characters who do nothing but watch one another, and speak with one another about watching, over the course of hundreds of pages whose claustrophobia begins to take on an unusual kind of intensity as the novel continues without much of any traditional plot to speak of.

The Golden Bowl's two more minor characters, Fanny and Bob Assingham, are too distanced from the action's main heart to be able to provide any properly felt insight into the proceedings, while the next pair of Adam Verver and Charlotte Stant cannot function as points of view, since the novel's proceedings are essentially dependent upon the mysteries of their respective consciousnesses. That is, the novel essentially is *about* the question of what exactly Adam and Charlotte know. Thus James constructs the novel's neatly divided formal structure, according to which most of the first half is seen through the perspective of the Prince, while the second half is entirely seen through the eyes of Maggie, the Princess. And both figures become two of James's most characteristic creations precisely because of this delicate balance they must maintain between seeing and feeling, between functioning as pure form and functioning as mimetic intensity:

> Having a consciousness highly susceptible of registration, he [the Prince] thus makes us see the things that may most interest us reflected in it as in the clean glass held up to so many of the "short stories" of our long list; and yet after all never a whit to the prejudice of his being just as consistently foredoomed, entangled, embarrassed agent in the general imbroglio, actor in the offered play.

The function of the Princess, in the remainder, matches exactly with his; the register of *her* consciousness is as closely kept—as closely, say, not only as his own but as that of…the all-noting heroine of "The Spoils of Poynton," highly individualized *though* highly intelligent; the Princess, in fine, in addition to feeling everything she has to, and to playing her part just in that proportion, duplicates, as it were, her value and becomes a compositional resource, and of the finest order, as well as a value intrinsic (*PNY* 1223-4, James's emphases).

The Jamesian character at its most developed stage of existence, "highly individualized though highly intelligent," becomes a figure with two values. Both a "compositional resource," such as Rowland Mallet in 1876 or the unnamed narrators of so many of the short stories, and a "value intrinsic," like the highly sensitive Fleda Vetch, or the dynamic and intensely feeling Isabel Archer, the Jamesian character is neither pure form nor pure mimesis. The character becomes, for James, both a structural role as well as an intensely felt and implied psychological entity. Moreover, it is not simply at one moment one kind of being, and at the other another, but like Maggie struggling to grope her way through the dark situation in which she finds herself immersed, the character only emerges out of the dialectic interplay of both values, of both the formal pole and the mimetic.

Maggie ultimately becomes perhaps James's most exemplary consciousness, since she must live through her own narrative as one of its "more or less bleeding participants," but that narrative becomes nothing but her effort to understand the novel's other characters. Her story essentially becomes her development not only in hermeneutics, but in what amounts to a kind of authorship, since all she knows of her own novelistic world is her particular interpretation of it; what Maggie thinks is

essentially all there is by the end of *The Golden Bowl*.[20] As Maggie reflects during the

famous scene of her watching the novel's other five characters play bridge from the other

side of a window:

> They might have been – really charming as they showed in the beautiful room,
>
> and Charlotte certainly, as always, magnificently handsome and supremely
>
> distinguished – *they might have been figures rehearsing some play of which she*
>
> *herself was the author*; they might even, for the happy appearance they continued
>
> to present, have been such figures as would by the strong note of character in each
>
> fill any author with the certitude of success, especially of their own

[20] As Ruth Bernard Yeazell writes in her valuable study, *Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James*, "the more that acting and imagining thus merge, the more do characters in late James seem to possess something of the artist's own power" (6). In *"A Thing Divided:" Representation in the Late Novels of Henry James*, John Landau describes the pivotal moment of *The Golden Bowl* as Maggie's telling an "enabling lie," namely, the lie that she does not suspect Charlotte of having an affair with her husband, the Prince. Maggie's lie, he writes, "is seen as her self-conscious generation of a fiction that will enable her to manipulate appearances, and thereby manipulate Charlotte, her husband, and her father. The word 'fiction' in fact shares its Latin origin with the infinitive '*fingere*,' to form or to figure, and with the word counterfeiting. Maggie's lie is a species of fiction generated from her experience as an outside observer. This specular experience is what enables her to move inside the area of conflict and struggle" (143). The novel ends with Maggie once again affirming her lie, despite everything that she has come to suspect to the point of near certainty, and in that ending "*The Golden Bowl* finally celebrates the capacity to tell or accept an untruth, a fiction…[In the novel] the terms and forms of social life have to be generated and regenerated through the creative activity of representation, the activity of fiction making" (144). Describing the Jamesian consciousness in general, of which Maggie is perhaps the most exemplary, Sheila Teahan, in her study *The Rhetorical Logic of Henry James*, convincingly discusses the productive status of the center of consciousness, arguing that "the central intelligence cannot be extricated from the narrative it claims to organize" (2). She writes: "The Jamesian reflector is not simply reflective or constative, as it were, but radically performative: it produces the material it claims only to represent…[The reflector] both 'projects' and 'reflects': the rhetorical medium of the central consciousness is inextricable from the projection or production of plot itself" (4). Ultimately, "the reflector's production of the narrative events it claims only to represent thus puts in question the traditional priority of *fabula* and *sjuzet*, or story and discourse….The distinction between story and discourse is elided insofar as story is produced by the very discourse of the reflective center" (6). In *Henry James and the Experimental Novel*, Sergio Perosa writes: "The central intelligence of his [James's] novels controls, and indeed creates, the very substance and form of the narrative…The novel itself is the creation of the narrator, rather than a reflection of life. The self-contained world and the form of the novel challenge and defy outward reality: it is not a duplicate or an imitation of life, but an alternative to it" (99). Similarly, in *The Insecure World of Henry James's Fiction*, Ralf Norrman poses, with regard to *The Turn of the Screw*, the question of whether "the governess does not in fact *invent* the things she claims to *discover*" (133, Norrman's emphasis). The governess of that novel, along with Maggie Verver and the unnamed weekend guest in *The Sacred Fount*, are often read together as James's most complex author-figures. I will have more to say about the relationship between the center of consciousness and the figure of the author shortly with regard to James's elaboration of the method in *The Portrait of the Lady*.

histrionic…Spacious and splendid, *like a stage again awaiting a drama, it was a scene that she might people*, by the press of her spring, either with serenities and dignities and decencies, or with terrors and shames and ruins, things as ugly as those formless fragments of her golden bowl she was trying so hard to pick up (488, my emphases).

Maggie is certainly still in the thick of the novel's drama, as the whole plot to the very end revolves around her increasing certainty of her husband's infidelity. But she has also become truly doubled, a character of two wholly different orders, a central actor, but in a drama that she herself is authoring. Ultimately, the distinction between James and Maggie breaks down entirely, as she stands in a position of control over her own novelistic reality just as much as James ostensibly stands in control of her.[21] Maggie's figurative powers of authorship have become so exacerbated, that not only is she the window of *The Golden Bowl*'s house, in the sense of its form-giving point of view, but she is also the watcher on the window's other side, the creative and generative force behind the events upon which she seems only to be spying.

To return finally to the house of fiction metaphor, then, we can begin to see just where it is that Isabel Archer finds herself precariously standing in this awkward architecture. If Isabel begins the novel as the naïve young American, standing alone in the middle of the vast "human scene" that fills the house of her own fiction, then the course essentially charted by the novel becomes how she also manages to find a position in one of the innumerable windows in the house's walls.. For what are James's windows

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[21] For a wonderful reading of Maggie's figurative authorship, as well the ethical implications of her performative power, see J. Hillis Miller's essential study of speech acts in James, *Literature as Conduct*, pp. 284-90.

other than the possible points of view through which he can choose to tell his story?[22] If the house is filled with the "human scene," then it is equally constructed out of the same mortal material as well. The rooms are populated by the feeling of humanness, we might say, while the walls are built from the seeing of intelligence. As James writes, "the spreading field, the human scene, is the 'choice of subject'; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the 'literary form'" (*PNY* 1075). However, we have seen that James's answers to the problem of "literary form" are consistently found in the literary subjectivities comprising the human scene of the "choice of subject." The entire spatialization of the metaphor of fiction's house crumbles, and there is no longer any stability upon which the building might safely stand. Form inhabits content, and content constructs form, such that the two, as they converge in the Jamesian character, become increasingly indistinguishable as his novelistic practice develops.

The education of Isabel Archer

How then, we may ask, is the "particular engaging young woman" at the center of James's house constructed? If the entire house of fiction is launched by "the stray figure, the unattached character" (*PNY* 1073) of Isabel Archer, then we might chart her course as James's architecture is constructed not only up and around her, but out of her as well. How, in short, as both its content but also its form, does she inhabit fiction's house, if, as we have seen, she is also impossibly its very material? *The Portrait of a Lady* is canonically known for telling the story of Isabel's confrontation with her own destiny,

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[22] Curiously, in his succinct summation of the house of fiction metaphor and its relation to James's structural practice in general, R.P. Blackmur simply states: "The eye is the artist, the scene the subject, and the window the limiting form" (32). This definition, I suggest, must be drastically reconfigured if it is taken into account that the window is also, and essentially, a character, just as much as the subject is.

once she unexpectedly inherits a large sum of money and enters the complex world of Europe's drawing rooms. The novel hinges, as James puts it in the preface, entirely upon the question, "Well, what will she *do*" (*PNY* 1081, James's emphasis)? And this is certainly the question which all the innumerable watchers at the house of fiction's windows are waiting to see answered, as they look down upon the vast human scene. However, we must not only ask what Isabel will do, but perhaps more centrally, we must ask what she is. The narratological question must be answered, while at the same time it must be turned into an ontological one. Isabel's narrative trajectory is also her construction as a character. At once content and form, actor *and* window, Isabel's path is constituted not only by confronting her own destiny in the spreading field of her particular human scene, but also by learning how to live in the unstable house of fiction as such.

Isabel's education turns out primarily to be an education in the Jamesian theory of fiction. This theoretical education, we might say, consists in Isabel's learning to understand that mimesis is a figure of language, learning that "reality" is always a thing created by an interpretive process.[23] As we have seen, for James, the novelist does not

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[23] On the figurality of mimesis, we can think of Paul de Man's numerous remarks concerning the tropological dimension of reference. For instance, in "The Resistance to Theory," he writes that, if literariness is a quality whose referential success is never certain, then "mimesis becomes one trope among others, language choosing to imitate a non-verbal entity just as paronomasis 'imitates' a sound without any claim to identity (or reflection on difference) between the verbal and non-verbal elements" (*RT* 10). What is to be stressed in the de Manian positioning of mimesis as a figure of language is not a flat-out denial of any referential efficacy of literary language, but rather the idea that if there is referential success, then it is only because of a relationship that is in no way natural, but only rhetorical. "Literature is fiction," de Man writes, "not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge 'reality,' but because it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world. It is therefore not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language" (*RT* 11, de Man's emphasis). I want to position this way of thinking about mimesis's figural structure as a means of going beyond the structural moment where everything is revealed to be mediated language, where mimesis is betrayed as diegesis. There is the linguistic moment when "mimesis" and "character" are revealed to be figures of language, the results of rhetorical operations. This, however, does not deny the fact that some kind of referential, or ontological moment remains as an effect of this

represent life so much as offer a different version of it. He does not represent reality in the pages of fiction, but competes with it. To understand mimesis as such, to learn that reality is not organically given but is created as the product of one particular point of view among many, might be said to be the initiation ritual that James's American heroes, not only Isabel but also such figures as *The American*'s Christopher Newman, *The Ambassadors*' Lambert Strether, or *The Golden Bowl*'s Maggie Verver, are forced to go through in Europe, learning how to turn mere seeing into reading.[24] In James's world, to simply see is to miss everything, and both objects and people are always texts to be interpreted. Or as James alternatively puts it in his 1888 essay on Maupassant: "Every good story is of course both a picture and an idea, and the more they are interfused the better the problem is solved" (537). The paucity of simply seeing, in James, is essentially not to recognize the idea in any picture.

When Isabel's adventure begins, seeing and reading for her belong to two wholly separate realms whose boundaries are carefully demarcated. She is characterized by the fact that "her imagination was by habit ridiculously active," while at the same time "at important moments, when she would have been thankful to make use of her judgment

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figure, or as a kind of haunting; the point, then, is that this latter moment is no longer given any certain authoritative status. See also de Man's essay on Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*, where he discusses the importance of Lukács's replacing mimesis with irony as "the determining and organizing principle of the novel's form." Irony as the constitutive mode of the novel "steadily undermines this claim at imitation and substitutes for it a conscious, interpreted awareness of the distance that separates an actual experience from the understanding of this experience…This form can have nothing in common with the homogenous, organic form of nature: it is founded on an act of consciousness, not on the imitation of a natural object" (*BI* 56).

[24] In *Henry James and the Visual Arts*, Viola Hopkins Winner traces this dominant Jamesian motif to his criticism of the early Impressionist painters. For James, she writes, "the painter who records a quick visual impression of a scene runs the risk of being shallow if his perceptions are limited" (50). Similarly, John Carlos Rowe writes: "In the novels and tales, interpretations may masquerade as visual impressions, but there are no impressions that are not always already involved in complex semantic, social, and historical determinations. These interpretations are mistaken for impressions only by such impressionable naifs as Daisy, Newman, Strether, Isabel; their impressions are often indications of a certain blindness, an inability to see beneath the surface of events, reminders that these characters have not yet learned to read the codes with 'imagination'" (194).

alone, she paid the penalty of having given undue encouragement to the faculty of seeing without judging" (*PL* 86). "She had an immense curiosity about life and was constantly staring and wondering" (*PL* 89), while at the same time "it appeared to Isabel that the unpleasant had been even too absent from her knowledge, for she had gathered from her acquaintance with literature that it was often a source of interest and even of instruction" (*PL* 87). A wealthy young woman in Albany, with a taste for the novels of George Eliot and the poetry of Browning, Isabel is caught between her intense feeling for life and her finely attuned ability to observe. Living life belongs to the imagination and to the lessons learned from literature's pages, while simply watching life is all that Isabel can do in her actual order of empirical experience. Her naïve and intensely inward desire is above all that "she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was," and, the narrative voice ironically though gently adds, "sometimes she went so far as to wish that she might find herself some day in a difficult position, so that she should have the pleasure of being as heroic as the occasion demanded" (*PL* 105). Isabel desires to live beautifully, it seems, for no greater reason than that the only life she knows is that of a George Eliot heroine, one that is not only English as opposed to American, but that is fictive as opposed to real.[25]

So when Isabel is brought to England by her Aunt Touchett after the death of her parents, there is no greater indication of the fact that her carefully separated realms of life merely observed and literature intensely lived are going to converge, and break down painfully, than the fact that one of her initial observations is that it all seems "just like a novel" (*PL* 70). The question then becomes, will she turn out to have entered the kind of

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[25] For an insightful reading of Isabel's presumed misreading of George Eliot, see Freadman, pp. 90-1 in particular, although pp. 48-122 offer an astute comparison between Isabel's narrative and Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*.

novel whose heroine her independent and thoroughly American ego will allow her to be? As Isabel claims when she first meets her aunt, her "point of view" is "thoroughly American" (*PL* 113). Suddenly cut adrift amid European society, Isabel wonders whether its members will be nice to such a young and thoroughly American creature: "They won't rob me or beat me; but will they make themselves agreeable to me?" she ponders, before adding, "I don't believe they're very nice to girls; they're not nice to them in novels" (*PL* 110). And of course, as *The Portrait of a Lady* unfolds, Isabel will learn that in this respect, the novels she has read are perfectly correct. Europeans, she discovers, are not particularly nice to young girls, especially ones with fabulous amounts of money and such a misplaced desire to always think the best of themselves.

Essential to Isbael's trajectory in the novel is her education in what kind of character she must be in order to properly inhabit this world "just like a novel" in which she finds herself having landed. Having only ever experienced a life in which to watch is one thing, while to live is another, where literature is one world and experience belongs to another order entirely, Isabel begins to see that in her new novelistic space, the lines of separation between the two are not as clearly defined as she had been led to believe in the comfort of Albany. In one exchange with her cousin Ralph, he points out to her that this must be her inevitable lesson if she is at all to figure out how to live in Europe:

"You want to see life—you'll be hanged if you don't as the young men say."

"I don't think I want to see it as the young men want to see it. But I do want to look about me."

"You want to drain the cup of experience."

"No, I don't wish to touch the cup of experience. It's a poisoned drink! I only want to see for myself."

"You want to see, but not to feel," Ralph remarked.

"I don't think that if one's a sentient being one can make the distinction" (*PL* 203).

If to have a point of view "thoroughly American" becomes coded for Isabel as being able to see life without having to drink from the poisoned cup of experience, then what she will learn, and what Ralph intimates here, is that Europe requires a character of a wholly different kind. One can only see while still feeling in Isabel's conception of the order of things, precisely because it is a mode of being that, as one of James's typically naïve Americans, she has learned on the hither side of literature's pages. One can, she imagines, see the exploits of George Eliot's world-wearied heroines perfectly fine without having to drink from their particularly potent cup of experience, while feeling immensely for them in the process.

Isabel begins to recognize the shift in her position and the instability of her new ground during her rejection of Lord Warburton's proposal of marriage, which is a particularly significant thing for her to do, considering that he was the figure who first made her feel that England was all "just like a novel" in the first place. Alone with the Lord in the garden of the Touchetts' estate, Isabel begins to sense that the proposal is arriving, all the while knowing that she is not in love, no matter how traditionally novelistic and fascinating the prospect of marrying a lord may seem:

It suddenly came upon her that her situation was one which a few weeks ago she would have deemed deeply romantic: the park of an English country-house, with

the foreground embellished by a "great" (as she supposed) nobleman in the act of making love to a young lady who, on careful inspection, should be found to present remarkable analogies to herself. But if she was now the heroine of the situation she succeeded scarcely the less in looking at it from the outside (*PL* 158).

Isabel begins to recognize that she has become the heroine of a plot for which she was woefully unprepared, while she still remains resistant to giving up her position as a reader. If she sees that she is becoming a character in this new novelistic space of Europe, she still at least clings to the memory that literature at one point did not have to be the same thing for her as living. She may be a character, the unsuspecting heroine of a subtly unfolding plot, but she can at least still watch herself as one. However, even Isabel's strong-mindedness cannot escape the fact that she is no longer reading a George Eliot novel, but one to whose heroine she herself suddenly bears such "remarkable analogies." Isabel, in fact, has given up on reading literature entirely in Europe:

Of late, it was not to be denied, *literature had seemed a fading light*, and even after she had reminded herself that her uncle's library was provided with a complete set of those authors which no gentleman's collection should be without, she sat motionless and empty-handed, her eyes bent on the cool green turf of the lawn (*PL* 153, my emphasis).

There is no longer any need to read a work of literature when one is suddenly living in one. Books, in Europe, are not for reading but rather for lining the walls of the fabulously complex and picturesque country houses in which its characters play out their plots.

When Isabel's headstrong American friend Henrietta Stackpole joins her in England, she cannot help but find her changed. Though changed into what, she seems as yet unable to say. After Ralph makes a characteristic literary analogy of Isabel's situation, describing the plot in which they find themselves as that from *The Tempest*, with Isabel cast as Miranda, Henrietta remarks:

> "*But I'm not talking about imaginary characters; I'm talking about Isabel. Isabel's intensely real*. What I wish to tell you is that I find her fearfully changed….Isabel's changing every day; she's drifting away – right out to sea. I've watched her and I can see it. She's not the bright American girl she was. *She's taking different views, a different color, and turning away from her own ideals*. I want to save those ideals, Mr Touchett, and that's where you come in" (*PL* 174-5, my emphases).

Of course Henrietta is talking about imaginary characters, since she exists only in a novel and is herself nothing but imaginary. Bracketing this irony, however, we can see that Henrietta has not yet noticed, although Isabel is beginning to learn, one of the essential tensions in James's construction of character, from his earliest novels onwards. This tension, the one most operative in Isabel's education, is that between Americans and Europeans, and James consistently codes it as something like the tension between "people" and "characters," or a more mimetic representation of the person, appropriate to the realist novel and its faith in the stability of personhood, and a new modernist one that is dependent upon artfulness and rhetorical strategies.[26] If Isabel finds at the beginning of

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[26] Exceptions to this Jamesian law of transatlanticism include *The Europeans* (1878), "An International Episode" (1878), and "Lady Barbarina" (1884). These are the rare works by James in which it is the Americans whose more sophisticated and complex, or at least unreadable, behavior confounds the Europeans, who must then learn how to see with imagination, or how to turn mere impressionism into

The Portrait of a Lady that everything in England is "just like a novel," then her trajectory as she learns to live among these shadowy Europeans is precisely to learn how to live in a novel, how to live as a character. And to be such a character, she learns, is to live as a literary "person" for whom "being" is increasingly an issue of language, of signification of an unexpectedly complex kind. And as Isabel will quickly and devastatingly learn, the "views" and the "color" of these people are indeed of a wholly different kind than those of their American counterparts.[27]

Isabel's altering sense of what constitutes a character begins to become apparent to her during her exchange with Lord Warburton on the Touchetts' estate, which ends in her rejection of his marriage proposal:

When she had thought of individual eminence she had thought of it on the basis of character and wit − of what one might like in a gentleman's mind and in his talk. She herself was a character − she couldn't help being aware of that; and hitherto her visions of a completed consciousness had concerned themselves largely with moral images − things as to which the question would be whether they pleased her sublime soul. *Lord Warburton loomed up before her, largely and brightly, as a collection of attributes and powers which were not to be measured by this simple rule, but which demanded a different sort of appreciation* − an appreciation that the girl, with her habit of judging quickly and freely, felt she lacked patience to

interpretation. The fact that the cultural roles are reversed, however, does not alter James's fundamental structural principle of difference, but in fact perhaps even exacerbates it, calling into question as it does the stability of any cultural ground upon which the self may construct its identity. For an overview on the history of the criticism of James's "international theme," see Tony Tanner's "Introduction" to *Henry James: Modern Judgments*, pp. 11-41.

[27] As Georges Poulet notes in *The Metamorphoses of the Circle*, relations for Jamesian characters are "a matter of the surface and not of depth, of displacement in space and not in time….To go from Europe to America, or from America to Europe implies, in this regard, a more significant mutation than to pass from adolescence to manhood" (313).
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bestow. He appeared to demand of her something that no one else, as it were, had presumed to do. *What she felt was that a territorial, a political, a social magnate had conceived the design of drawing her into the system in which he rather invidiously lived and moved* (*PL* 156, my emphases).

Isabel thinks of herself as a character first and foremost, because her understanding of character operates according to a kind of Emersonian self-reliance. For her "thoroughly American" point of view, a character is simply what one is in a moral sense, and she has never yet been forced to question this belief in a stabilized self-identity. One is what one thinks and feels, determined by a kind of unalterable core that one keeps forever through one's life. Isabel senses in Lord Warburton, on the other hand, something larger and more complex than a simple constitutive ego. He is constructed out of the very fabric of a system that extends far beyond his mere self; his identity, his "character" is built out of the very weight of the tradition that has produced him and the rules and codes of the world in which he exists. Everything that there is to know about him is not there on the surface, to be seen in a single glance or known by a single utterance. Rather, there are things so hidden as to be initially undetectable, essential facets so impersonal and widespread as to be troublingly unknowable.

This constitutional difference comes explicitly to the fore in Isabel's initial exchanges with Madame Merle, who herself is an American, but who has been living in Europe for so long as to be almost entirely adapted to its tradition and its systems. The two women reveal themselves to have in fact two entirely irreconcilable theories of character. When Isabel comments that she does not care about whatever house her

potential husband may have, Madame Merle counters by pointing out the crude naïveté of Isabel's carelessness:

> "When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our "self"? Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things*! One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive" (*PL* 253, James's emphasis).

Isabel can only respond to such a seemingly alien concept of character by offering her own:

> "I don't agree with you. I think just the other way. I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure to me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me, and heaven forbid they should" (ibid.)!

One cannot help but think that Madame Merle has the last word in this exchange by immediately following Isabel's outburst with the observation that she dresses so well. For what Madame Merle knows is that Isabel's clothes, functioning as they do as a sort of readable sign-system, are in fact constitutive of Isabel's character, just as much as any of her other "appurtenances" or her "envelope of circumstances." If to be a character, in

James's European sense, is to be part of a rhetorical system much larger than one's mere self, then essential to this structure is that character itself is a thing to be read, a unit of a signifying code that one must begin to decipher in order to understand. The difference between person and character, between constitutive ego and the inscrutability of a sign system, is tantamount to Isabel's larger initiation ritual of learning how to turn mere seeing into reading, how to turn the simple surfaces of impressions into the depths and secrets of interpretations.[28]

Isabel wants to think that nothing except for her very self could possibly express her personhood, that she has an ego that signifies according to a code of pure transparency that belongs only to itself, all the while not realizing that the literary space that she has come to inhabit in Europe does not function according to such a strictly homological model. While she has to learn how to read in Europe, her lesson also comprises the understanding that she herself is a thing to be read. As Isabel stumbles increasingly disastrously through her fate, Ralph wonders at a certain point what has

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[28] Numerous critics have from a variety of perspectives addressed this system into which Isabel gradually becomes initiated, and to whose rules she must shift her understanding of self. Ruth Bernard Yeazell comments on the "worldliness" of Madame Merle as her "art of surfaces, of manipulating and controlling appearances," in contrast to "the stubbornly romantic Isabel" (5). Richard Freadman describes Merle's theory of character as "an image of the self as absent, decentered; indeed, the self so conceived is a sort of vacant potentiality capable only of transcendental or discursive actualization" (107). Against Merle's "semiotic view," Isabel tries to pose her own theory of "existential self-creation," a view which is not entirely dependent upon convention. However, in such a wholesale rejection of convention, Isabel becomes something like a tragic Emersonian. As Freadman writes: "She is here what Lionel Trilling terms 'the opposing self': she has made a prior choice – or so she thinks – to reject the codes that to a large extent structure her character, and so her power of choosing. The paradox all but breaks her" (108). The essential question of *The Portrait of a Lady* for Freadman is posed as: "Is one's self one's own 'composition' or someone else's? If the latter, whose? In either case, by what forms and properties does it proceed" (92)? However, he ultimately wants to salvage something from Isabel's theory of character, as he concludes that "Isabel learns not simply that she possesses a personal essence, but that it must somehow find articulation and protection within the codes;" but perhaps Merle's version of the self still triumphs in his self-described "humanist" reading, since he immediately follows this by claiming that the novel's "lessons of self-expression, self-preservation, and indeed the state of the codes themselves, are all in the end left unresolved. The frames of the portrait close somewhat claustrally around its anguished subject" (118). John Landau, on the other hand, describes the Jamesian character's situation in terms perfectly resonant with Merle's semiotics, as one in which "the whole tissue of selfhood (and the self's relation with the other) is seen as an interlocking set of relations characterized by the lack of an organizing essence" (143).

become of her: "The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something" (*PL* 444). What Ralph understands, what Madame Merle perfectly knows and what Henrietta begins to notice in her transformed American friend, is that one is not at all simply what one is, but that one is always a representation of something else. Though what it is that a person is "supposed to represent" is in no way clear, particularly when it becomes increasingly apparent that Isabel cannot simply "represent" American ideals of self-reliance, since such a signification would be destroyed by the very fact of representation.[29] Surfaces are not the same things as depths, and the rhetorical logic tying one to the other is far too complex and widespread to allow for any easily detected pathway between the two.

After recognizing the magnitude of her error in marrying the cruel and secretive Gilbert Osmond, Isabel can do nothing but accept what she has made of her fate. Clinging still to at least the memory of her American ideals of self-reliance and self-constitution, Isabel will stand by her decision, even after learning that it was far from freely chosen by herself, that she only had her money because of a decision made by Ralph, and that she only had her husband because of a plot constructed by Madame Merle. Nevertheless Isabel still clings to her American ideals toward the novel's end, although with one essential difference. She now recognizes them to be only ideals, having fully realized that to be a character in her particular novel is to live according to a

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[29] As John Landau writes, of James's late works in particular, although I would claim that the description describes precisely Isabel's predicament: "The late works represent the struggle to define a self whose 'ordeal of consciousness' [the phrase alludes to the title of Dorothea Krook's landmark study, which itself borrows the phrase from the preface to *The Wings of the Dove*] takes place in an unstable network of linguistic and social relations characterized by the absence of 'truth.' The importance of the network of language, art, manners, social forms, and norms is emphasized precisely because it lacks the authority of transcendence and compensates for this lack. All we have is the network of representation" (17).

code of another kind. They were simply representational strategies by which "reality" and "identity" were constructed, an artful rhetoric that can easily be replaced by another.

When Caspar Goodwood, her ardent and thoroughly Romantic American suitor, meets her toward the novel's end, the full scope of Isabel's completed education begins to become apparent. As he passionately and mournfully comments to her, "I'm told you're unhappy, and if you are I should like to know it. That would be something for me. But you yourself say you're happy, and you're somehow so still, so smooth, so hard. You're completely changed. You conceal everything; I haven't really come near you" (*PL* 558). Isabel by this point has fully incorporated the art of concealment to the point where what she says is entirely antithetical to what she feels, a state of incompatibility between surface and depth which she goes on to fully display to Caspar in one of the novel's most indirect, and for all that still most touching, exchanges:

"I ask nothing – nothing, that is, I shouldn't. But I do ask one sole satisfaction: – that you tell me – that you tell me –!"

"That I tell you what?"

"Whether I may pity you."

"Should you like that?" Isabel asked, trying to smile again.

"To pity you? Most assuredly! That at least would be doing something. I'd give my life to it."

She raised her fan to her face, which it covered all except her eyes. They rested a moment on his. "Don't give your life to it; but give a thought to it every now and then." And with that she went back to the Countess Gemini (*PL* 559).

Having come to understand how to live in Europe and its tangled contextual relations, Isabel knows that one does not signify oneself according to a kind of direct presentation of inwardness, wherein what one is would be equal to what one says and does. Everyone remarks that she has changed so drastically, and within the Jamesian logic of the passage from America to Europe, that change is tantamount to the passage from person to character. Isabel's sense of self has shifted from a realist model whereby the literary character is the purely mimetic representation of personhood to a modernist paradigm in which the character bears within itself a more complex rhetorical process inextricably tied to its status as a written mark, as an element in a sign system that only means by virtue of an elaborate complex of substitution and difference.

Figurative consciousnesses

As we have seen, this passage from person to character is also a passage from feeling to seeing, and from seeing to reading. Remembering James's house of fiction metaphor that launched Isabel in the first place, this move can be architecturally framed as the move from the center of its house to its windows, or from content to form, a move that ultimately results in a kind of deconstructive undecidability between the two. As James describes Isabel's fate in the preface, when he first finds her she is still the mere stray figure, a "vivid individual—vivid, so strangely, in spite of being still at large, not confined by the conditions, not engaged in the tangle, to which we look for much of the impress that constitutes an identity" (*PNY* 1076). Isabel may be a fascinating figure from the start, but she is still wandering alone through fiction's house, without yet being tangled in the conditions necessary to make her truly of interest. Curiously, James creates this interest not by simply imagining the conditions in which Isabel will find herself

tangled, but by turning Isabel from a mere solitary young woman into a formal principle, by transposing her from a mere inhabitant of her house to one of its compositional elements, to the windows lining its walls. As he writes of his discovery during *The Portrait of a Lady*'s writing:

> "Place the centre of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness," I said to myself, "and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you wish. Stick to *that*—for the centre; put the heaviest weight into *that* scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself. Make her only interested enough, at the same time, in the things that are not herself, and this relation needn't fear to be too limited. Place meanwhile in the other scale the lighter weight (which is usually the one that tips the balance of interest): press least hard, in short, on the consciousness of your heroine's satellites, especially the male; make it an interest contributive only to the greater one…The girl hovers, inextinguishable, as a charming creature, and the job will be to translate her into the highest terms of that formula, and as nearly as possible moreover into *all* of them. To depend upon her and her little concerns wholly to see you through will necessitate, remember, your really 'doing' her" (*PNY* 1079-80, James's emphases).

Before even really seeming to know just what it is that Isabel's story will be, James finds the entire answer to her fate simply in turning her from the simple mimetic "portrait" of a person into a compositional principle. She is not only to be the one who feels, but also the one who sees, and who must learn how to understand that seeing is always reading.[30]

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[30] In her masterful rhetorical reading of *The Portrait of a Lady*, "Understanding Allegories," Deborah Esch points out that the novel's title, its proclamation to be a "portrait" of Isabel, is in fact a misnomer undone by its heroine's relationship to language. She discusses the way in which portraiture is figured in James's critical writing as a mode dependent upon "translation," which is also the term he uses for a successful act

Neither simply content, feeling, nor form, seeing, Isabel emerges only out of the complex interplay of these two halves of fiction's equation as her European education unfolds.

Reading, as interpretation, is moreover a kind of authorship, as we have already seen with *The Golden Bowl*'s Maggie Verver. The elaboration of point of view increasingly transposes any potential ground for novelistic "truth" from the author, or his omnisciently narrating delegate, to the central character. The author is gradually lost as any guarantor of his work, but by that very same gesture, James figuratively recreates the author-figure within the immanent world of the novel.[31] The Jamesian principle of the center of consciousness, his "invention" of point of view as a rigorous structural principle, is turned into a way of displacing the authority of his novelistic world, transposing the ostensible center of any work from the author, or narrator, to whichever character provides a given work its illuminating lens. Isabel, as James describes her in the preface, is meant to be the novel's everything, translated into "*all*" the terms of the novel's "formula." The center of consciousness method turns the focus of any work's action from the actual unfolding of the events, to the interpretation of those events by an

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of literary criticism. Tying together these figurative strands, Esch argues that "Isabel Archer, the lady imaged in the titular portrait, proves to be 'connected doubly' with criticism, in a doubleness signaled in the pivotal genitive of the novel's title; she is arguably its object—its text—as well as its subject—its reader…Isabel figures the text" (132). Moreover, if translation for James is always figuratively an act of criticism, then "in the terms of James's figure for criticism—the 'happy portrait' that is 'really…a text preserved by translation'—what is at issue is a temporally complex relation between languages, and not the mimetic relation of a visual representation to an external referent" (139).

[31] In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson accounts for this gesture as James's attempt to maintain a subjective origin for the novel once it has become reified by Flaubert's aesthetic practice, his "depersonalization of the text [and] laundering of authorial intervention." Succeeding Flaubert in the history of the novel, James intervenes by keeping Flaubert's formalist distance from his product, while at the same time recuperating the figures of author and reader: "In such a situation, it is abundantly clear that the Jamesian invention of point of view (or better still, Henry James's codification of this already existing technique, his transformation of it into the most fundamental of narrative categories, and the development around it of a whole aesthetic) is a genuinely historical act. The subject having been by the logic of social development stripped from its textual object, the latter must now be constructed in such a way as to bear the place of the former within itself: the narrative becomes a tree-crashing sound that will remain *heard* even when the forest is empty, since its subject-pole, its organization by reception, is built into it" (221, Jameson's emphasis).

illuminating consciousness. That consciousness, the Jamesian hero or heroine, then becomes something like a figure for both author and reader, interpreting the events around her, just as much as he or she "creates" them – that is, represents them by that very act of interpretation.

This method establishes the Jamesian character as a figure for the author who has absconded from the scene of his writing.[32] The character's illuminating consciousness becomes the means by which the reader constructs the complex of meaning that would once have resided in the governing figure of the author or the omniscient narrator, but which has now vanished into the text's fabric. The literary character, rather than a purely mimetic psychology, is turned into a figural structure, an effect of the displacement of the novel's vanished authority. The character is still a rigorous approximation of the workings of consciousness, which is to say that Isabel still of course *feels*, and yet, as a

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[32] John Carlos Rowe argues that this method moreover transposes the center of the novelistic world from the character to the reader, as the figure who gains insight only by reading alongside the centrally illuminating character. He writes: "Disappearing utterly into the fabric of the work, the authorial subject is 'revived' only by a reader, whose recompositions merely confirm the active 'presence' of some principle of imaginative mobility or creative embodiment that points us to the evasive authority of the text….The ultimate defense in this psychology of the author, of literary mastery, is to objectify the literary as the *essence* of human freedom. James's ultimate decentering, then, is finally a *formalist* strategy, whereby the 'specious and spurious center' of the 'symbol' [that is, the character become a figure] compels the reader to perform the author's work" (249, Rowe's emphases). Similarly, Richard Freadman writes that the Jamesian novel "tends to 'decenter' character: essence is as it were displaced from actor to reader…If the reader is creatively completing what he reads through his own subjectivity, he is necessarily infusing it with his unique ethical sensibility. A definitive authorial or narrating perspective thereby dwindles. Character is no longer offered, as it is in Eliot, as already-ethical; ethics no longer emanate self-evidently from a stable source. The burden of judgment is upon the reader" (44-5). See also Percy Lubbock, one of whose central tenets is: "The reader of a novel…is himself a novelist; he is the maker of a book…for which he must take his own share of the responsibility" (17). This ultimately leads him to claim, with regard to *The Ambassadors*, that Lambert Strether is "no longer a figure that leans and looks out of a window, scanning a stretch of memory…It is rather as though the reader himself were at the window, and as though the window opened straight into the depths of Strether's consciousness" (146). However, I must argue that these critical positions underestimate the growing autonomy and form-giving powers of James's central reflectors. As we have seen in a figure such as Maggie Verver, the authorial position of creative authority remains firmly anchored in the central character, and all the reader can do is attempt to perform a sort of hermeneutic game of catching up.

formalist strategy, this method of representing consciousness becomes a way of constructing that fictive consciousness as a textual operation, or as a figure of language.

Though these figures feature more or less forcefully in nearly all of James's novels, Isabel Archer is particularly striking, in that she embodies the process by which the diminishment of the omniscient narrator becomes a rhetorical effect of the increasing textuality of characters, as they come less and less to resemble biographical beings that can be seen from outside and known from inside. It is notable that as Isabel Archer comes to "consciousness," which would be the traditional representational reading of her moral trajectory, the moments increase when James's narrative voice is unable to get inside of her head, to know what she thinks or why she does what she does. There are numerous instances in the novel when James's narrative voice is forced to explicitly assert itself only in order to proclaim its very lack of omniscience with regard to knowing what is happening within Isabel's consciousness.[33] For instance, when Isabel is about to leap into her marriage with Gilbert, the narrative voice intimates that this is the very same moment when she begins to suspect that something terribly wrong is happening, without being able to name that suspicion, or even its definite existence. "The working of this young lady's spirit was strange," James writes, "and I can only give it to you as I see it, not

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[33] As Richard Freadman notes: "The narrating persona edges embarrassedly out of the picture, his formal displacement an eerie analogue of the circumstantial and spiritual displacement he narrates" (99). That is to say, if the narrator ostensibly narrates a world filled with people who can only exist in a state of speculation about one another, character becoming a thing increasingly difficult to read, then he must ultimately adopt the same position of speculative unknowing. See also J. Hillis Miller's *Literature as Conduct*, pp. 74-83, for a reading of how Isabel's essential unknowability to James's narrator by the novel's end is the textual effect of the performative dimension of each of her momentous decisions. Miller writes: "It is not an accident or an oversight that the narrator (or James himself) does not tell the reader, elides essential information, or keeps the secret [of why Isabel returns to Gilbert at the end of the novel]. He would tell if he could, the reader may suppose, since he affirms in the preface that he has told everything he can. He cannot in principle, however much he might want to do so, given that the presuppositions that the novel exemplifies about decision, knowledge of the other and of oneself, tell how a performative…leads to knowledge. The movement from the one to other is in principle unknowable. The two are incommensurable….[The moment of decision] is a blank space in the language" (80).

hoping to make it seem altogether natural (*PL* 363). What I propose is happening in these moments is that Isabel's formalism, determined by her structural position as a point of view and as a center of consciousness, is the very same element that also lends to her mimetic dimension. That is, because she is mere form, a textual mark and a structural operation, she is also an implied person. She is not an implied person who is then put into a text; she is a text out of whose rhetorical status emerges the mimetic illusion of consciousness. There is found to be a depth hidden beneath the form, and since that form is figured as a point of view, it is a depth that is in principle unknowable.[34]

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[34] In recent decades, critics have begun to address this figural interplay between form and being in the Jamesian construction of consciousness, to varying degrees of hoping to recuperate the mimetic, moral, or psychological dimension. For instance, Freadman notes that "James's techniques for rendering consciousness produce a sense of difference as existing both within and beyond language, as if subjectivity were at once the source and the consequence of language" (179). Landau describes Jamesian consciousness as a method that affirms mimesis, only to undo it by drawing attention to the creative capacity of consciousness: "By highlighting the process of consciousness James succeeds at once in creating a mimetic world where characters act and interact with each other, while also suggesting the factitious nature of such a world" (25). He argues that we cannot reject entirely the moral dimension of "the ordeal of consciousness," but that we must also recognize how "James's fiction dramatizes the project of representation itself as the 'ordeal of consciousness'" (13). More recent and explicitly deconstructive critics have sought to eliminate the mimetic dimension of consciousness entirely. Sheila Teahan argues that James's consciousness is a "figure or speech that condenses two master tropes of literary representation: the mimetic trope of mirroring or reflection, and the structural metaphor of the center" (2); and in that condensation, the figure dismantles both of its poles, undoing not only its putative task of mirroring, but also the organicism implied by its status as center. Jamesian consciousness "is a theoretical fiction or conceptual metaphor for the structures of figuration and causality it both generates and dismantles" (4). Similarly, in her study *False Positions*, Julie Rivkin analyzes the center of consciousness as a figure of displacement, delegation, and deferral, always promising presence but ultimately only telling the story of an increasing chain of absence. She writes: "What the 'center' promises—that consciousness can be fully incarnated in a given character who will then constitute a foundation for meaning and truth in the novel—is exactly what the recourse to a 'delegate' acknowledges as an impossibility.…'Deputies,' 'delegates,' 'substitutes,' and 'apologists'…are neither central nor conscious; that is, they are never the perfect realizations of meaning and intelligence and truth that they are acclaimed to be" (3). While making sure to distance herself from deconstruction, Sharon Cameron has similarly argued, in her highly influential study, that "James dissociates consciousness from psychology" (1). Consciousness is present in James's novels, but it is not localizable in discrete selves or rooted in central characters; rather "it is disseminated.…For in the novels consciousness is disengaged from the self. It is reconceived as extrinsic, made to take shape— indeed, to become social—as an *inter*subjective phenomenon. What is radical about this reconception is that it dispenses with the idea of a psychology while preserving the idea of a consciousness. In fact, it valorizes consciousness just to the extent that consciousness can be separated from the confines of a self" (77, Cameron's emphasis). What I hope is becoming clear, however, is my belief that both of these critical positions, the moral and the textual, are correct, but only insofar as one cannot exist without the other. The figurative status of Jamesian consciousness produces the moral dimension, without which it would only remain a kind of syntactic drift.

The figure for her own author to whom she has now become entirely unknowable, Isabel has, by the end of her narrative, fully incorporated the art of interpretation and the lesson that surfaces do not correspond to depths, and that content is always a thing also formed. Isabel now goes back over her own novel and rereads, though with her education complete, the gaps are properly filled, and she reads finally correctly. It is as if she reads the fictiveness finally of this society in which she has been living – if at first she thought it was all *like* a novel, now she realizes that it really has been a novel:

> It was extraordinary the things she remembered. Now that she was in the secret, *now that she knew something that so much concerned her and the eclipse of which had made life resemble an attempt to play whilst with an imperfect pack of cards*, the truth of things, their mutual relations, their meaning, and for the most part their horror, rose before her with a kind of architectural vastness. She remembered a thousand trifles; they started to life with the spontaneity of a shiver. She had thought them trifles at the time; now she saw that they had been weighted with lead. Yet even now they were trifles after all, for of what use was it to her to understand them (*PL* 606, my emphasis)?

Everything is suddenly seen again, in the full light of understanding, and it is seen precisely as a game, though one that without any knowledge of its very status as a game can only be played "with an imperfect pack of cards." And the fullness with which Isabel now understands the difference between knowing and living, between seeing and feeling, is such that the latter is now largely eclipsed in the glaring light of the former. Living, for Isabel, is now a matter essentially comprised of seeing and reading, a displacement that leads to the novel's most perplexing act, Isabel's final renunciation of her former way of

living, of the expansion she had once so sincerely desired, in order to return to Gilbert at the novel's end. As Isabel realizes with a force during her famous nighttime vigil in chapter 42, "she had not read him right" (*PL* 476), and her final act of living is to force herself to remain with the consequences of that disastrous misreading.[35] She learns, ultimately, that she is not only herself, according to the mimetic model of personhood which she had initially maintained in her "thoroughly American" point of view. Rather, any intrinsic personhood to which she may lay claim is only the result of a system far more widespread than her mere self, the product of "mutual relations" and their more or less horrific meanings. Her personhood is not the origin, but the effect of the contexts and systems in which she is inextricably enmeshed. It is the cost of living in fiction's house, of leaving behind the "the spreading field, the human scene" in order to carry the burden of properly seeing, "living" only insofar as a "mere hole in a dead wall" is able.

Ultimately, this is the path of James's narratives from realism to modernism, from America to Europe.[36] Isabel learns to shed her thoroughly American, almost Emersonian,

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[35] For an insightful reading of the rhetorical operations of Isabel's misreading of her husband, see Deborah Esch's "Understanding Allegories." In this essay, she identifies the operative figure of Isabel's vigil as synecdoche, a mistaking of the part for the whole. She writes that Isabel's misreading "entails precisely looking for 'substance' where there is only image. More specifically, she identifies the part with the (partly masked) whole—that is, forgets the substitution on which the 'striking figure' is founded, and the difference such a substitution necessarily introduces. If 'she had not read him right,' it is because she (mis)takes the figure literally, 'translates' it faithfully….She takes the partial figure for the totality of a meaning that proves mistaken, unreliable. Her choice of Osmond, 'translated' into the terminology of reading, figures a choice of meaning at the expense of rhetoric, a falsely referential translation of the figure—a 'forgetting' of the figurality of language for the sake of the illusion that it can properly and unproblematically mean" (142-3). See also John Carlos Rowe's comparison between Isabel's vigil with her earlier tour of Europe, which he describes as a kind of parody of the proper way to see in James's world. He writes: "What the tour ought to have offered is written by the narrative itself: a conscious investigation of one's social, familial, and historical relations. It is such 'narration' that Isabel cannot begin to approximate until chapter 42, that 'vigil of searching criticism,' in which the combination of recollection and imagination will first enable her to 'represent' her life" (197). That is, not until the novel's end does Isabel begin to supply her impressions with interpretations, does she understand that every picture is also an idea. However, characteristic of my own critical separation from Rowe's analysis of James in general, I would argue that 'linguistic' must be added to the list of relations Isabel investigates.

[36] Freadman writes that James's "drift towards phenomenology is surely typical of the English novel's evolution from Victorian modes to modernism" (253), and his entire study, tracing the transition from

romantic ego, so that she can become a proper Jamesian center of consciousness, a character whose "life" is built from being a structural principle, whose meaning and whose "essence" is created by the artfulness and rhetoric of the context around her. James's favored theme of lost innocents, the young lambs being led to the slaughter, can be thought of as something like this process of "real people" becoming trapped into the surfaces and arts of a world that is thoroughly fictive. As a Jamesian consciousness, one who both sees and feels, Isabel Archer succumbs to the rules of literature's game, learning how to read properly and how to hide her secrets, how to play the game with the correct deck of cards.

The haunted house of fiction

Isabel's narrative ultimately tells the story of the Jamesian construction of character, caught as it is in a figurative interplay between form and content, and between mimetic humanness and structural material. This precarious existence, the way in which James's characters paradoxically inhabit *and* construct his house of fiction, becomes a constant theme throughout the prefaces of the New York edition and their examinations of character. It is perhaps most beautifully captured in James's description of Kate Croy

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George Eliot to James can be seen as an attempt to follow this evolution, an evolution notably literalized in *The Portrait of a Lady* on the level of content. In his study *Experiments in Form*, Walter Isle also points out the increasing inwardness and subjectivization of reality as his entrance into modernism. He writes, in reference to *The Sacred Fount*: "The form of the novel, with its restriction to the subjective, individual consciousness, is one best understood in comparison to novels of a later period. At the same time James is also close to offering one of the major twentieth-century solutions to the chaos of life—salvation through art" (232). Isle even compares *The Sacred Fount*'s narrator to Proust's, in so far as the former figure "decides that only by recreating his experience in a work of art can he make it meaningful (ibid.). Blackmur goes so far as to claim that such high modernists as "Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson would have been impossible without" James's influence. For an essential study of James's role in the English novel's path from Victorian to modernism, see Baruch Hochman, *The Test of Character*, in particular pp. 111-56. With regard to James's role as an essential early figure in modernism, and a major influence on Woolf and James Joyce, see Daniel Mark Fogel, *Covert Relations*. And for an account of James's conception of character as a fundamental break from that of the nineteenth century realist novel, see Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*, pp. 128-55.

in the preface to *The Wings of the Dove* (1902). Unlike *The Portrait of a Lady*'s method of keeping the center entirely within Isabel's consciousness, or *The Golden Bowl* and its carefully constructed binary system of two points of view that build off of one another to form the novel's whole, James's penultimate major novel is instead structurally established according to a series of successive centers. The points of view are many, although each is firmly anchored and carefully constructed so as to never overstep its limits. The secrets at the novel's heart – Milly Theale's illness, Kate Croy's betrayal, Merton Densher's wavering allegiances – are approached from a small selection of subjective angles, although as the novel progresses towards its end, the point of view dominantly belongs to Merton Densher. James begins his discussion of the novel's construction in formal terms, describing the process of "fixing" his successive centers, "of fixing them so exactly that the portions of the subject commanded by them as by happy points of view, and accordingly treated from them, would constitute, so to speak, *sufficiently solid blocks of wrought material, squared to the sharp edge*, as to have weight and mass and carrying power" (*PNY* 1294, my emphasis). Here we seem to be firmly within the realm of the house of fiction metaphor, with the work's architecture fashioned out of the building blocks pulled from the quarry of the writer's imaginative depths. The successive centers, however, the points of view and the consciousnesses to which they belong, are not only windows onto the story, hinged views from which it may be seen; rather, consciousness becomes figured as the house's very building blocks, its "wrought material." The "dead wall" in which the windows are laid is itself comprised only of consciousnesses and points of view, in short, of characters. The house of fiction is nothing but the characters inhabiting it, and perhaps the house is revealed to all along

have been a house of glass, a transparent edifice of window upon window that might shatter at the slightest touch, its solidity beginning to tremble under the weight of so many finely wrought consciousnesses.

Immediately after establishing the trope of the "wrought material" of his characters' fictive consciousnesses, James goes on to recognize the precariousness of such an architectural plan, no matter how solid its material may be. As James continues his account of the building of *The Wings of the Dove*:

> I have just said that the process of the general attempt is described from the moment the "blocks" are numbered, and that would be a true enough picture of my plan. Yet one's plan, alas, is one thing and one's result another; so that I am perhaps nearer the point in saying that this last strikes me at present as most characterized by the happy features that *were*, under my first and most blest illusion, to have contributed to it. *I meet then all, as I renew acquaintance, I mourn for them all as I remount the stream, the absent values, the palpable voids, the missing links, the mocking shadows*, that reflect, taken together, the early bloom of one's good faith (ibid., my emphasis).

The architect's plan cannot take into account that his building material is as if alive, and like alive things, it possesses an unpredictability and a vitality which no blueprint could chart. What James addresses here, what he almost seems to mourn, is that there is a kind of ontology beyond his carefully drawn formalist plans. Characters are the building blocks of fiction's house, they are the forms whose consciousnesses control the shape of the narrative work; but at the same time, they are the seemingly very real figures who haunt the house's rooms, and who will refuse to stay put. A ghost reflected by a series of

proliferating windows, the character may be wrought material, but not so solid that it could always fall down, or unexpectedly dim. Some characters, such as Rowland Mallet, blossom into more than their role in the master-builder's plans, and some, like Kate Croy, become so much less than they could have been. Strangely, Kate Croy is figured as being less – in terms of the ultimate form of *The Wings of the Dove* – than she actually *is*. There is some remnant of being facing James the reader of 1908, and he can only read her formal existence, as she exists in the text before him, as an absent value, a palpable void, or a mocking shadow.[37] She is left as a thing that haunts, with an ontological status that was seemingly not fulfilled entirely by its formal deployment. And so not only Kate, but "every one, in short, was to have enjoyed so much better a chance that, like stars of the theatre condescending to oblige, they have had to take small parts, to content themselves with minor identities, in order to come on at all" (*PNY* 1295-6). The Jamesian character, in this strange kind of dirge, is a thing that cannot exist otherwise, for how can it be any different than what it is in the lines of the text, in the contours of the formal architecture of its novel? At the same time, it is a kind of constant remainder – or reminder – of something that the house of fiction contains which was not predicted in its construction; a life that could have existed otherwise, a life that could have been more, a life that is more than what it is.[38]

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[37] In *The One vs. the Many*, Alex Woloch has commented on these passages, with regard to James's understanding that every fictive character, no matter how minor, could potentially usurp their work's space of centrality. That is, if the minor character of a novel plays an essentially functional role, we can never forget that "behind every hand is a heart and a head" whose implicit desire for self-expression could potentially disrupt the organization of any narrative. See pp. 21-4.

[38] This odd way in which Kate Croy seems to exist outside of her own narrative presentation is structurally analogous to a highly curious figure James uses near the end of the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, the figure of the "clear matter" of any story as some vast expanse of snow, upon which both reader and writer tread, creating in their footprints their own particular vision, or version, of the story. That is, the actual novel that is written is only one set of tracks crossing a previously untrammeled field, as if the novel is only a figure for this ideal or true novel, which seems to exist independently of the writer who actually writes it. See

The "life" of character, then, its only properly namable existence is that of form, the ultimate shape it takes in the lines of its own particular text. This, we will remember, is the pole of character that is aligned with "seeing," with the perspective that shapes fiction's architecture. This would seem to be the least mimetic aspect of character, since "seeing" happens only in the "dead wall" of fiction's house. But by a strange kind of reversal, James seems to find that poor Kate Croy's life lies *only* in her capacity for seeing, and he mourns the absence of all the feeling that she should have possessed, the feeling that she *does* in fact possess, but which did not find its way into her final textual existence. Recalling once again the house of fiction metaphor, it is in the center of the house, in its rooms and hallways, where the "life" of fiction resides – the "human scene" that all the various watchers are watching. And while the "watcher" at the window is figured explicitly by James as the author himself, we cannot forget that the windows through which the watcher watches are the characters, the consciousnesses of the house's populace.[39] These consciousnesses, James writes, those like Kate Croy's, "are but

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PNY 1328-32. J. Hillis Miller has commented beautifully on this passage, not only in *Literature as Conduct*, pp. 157-66, but also in *The Ethics of Reading*, 110-22. As Miller elucidates James's figure, in the former volume: "What is extraordinary about this testimony, and radically contrary to commonsense assumptions, is the way it presupposes that the 'matters' of James's various works exist not only outside the words of the novels but also outside James's creating or concocting consciousness. James measures the actual words on the page by their degree of fit to his present apprehension of the matter of the novel….It is to this separately existing matter that the words of the novel refer. The novel makes transferred use of all the words that apparently refer to historically real places and things in order to refer by catachresis to features of the clear matter of the story. I say 'catachresis' because that word names a 'forced and abusive transfer' of words naming real entities to make them more occult entities that have no proper names of their own and therefore can be named only in this indirect way. This is expressed allegorically by James as the relation between the tracks in snow and the shining expanse of trackless snow that was there before anyone walked across it. What actually gets written is always a figurative substitute for what can never be expressed or referred to directly" (158-9). And like the "ideal matter" of *The Golden Bowl*'s story, Kate Croy as she appears as a word on a page becomes figured as a figure for her "real" existence in some realm without a proper term, where her story happens all the time and where her inner life unfolds, before and after James has peered through her window.
[39] And as we have seen in *The Portrait of a Lady*, the watcher can watch through the window Isabel figures, but he cannot always know. If anything, James's figure of the watcher, and the passivity it implies, in itself discards any kind of authority that the character's creator or putative historian may have. Thus, David Carroll, in his "deconstruction" of James's theory of fiction, is correct insofar as he attempt to read James's

windows at best, *mere holes in a dead wall*, disconnected, perched aloft" (*PNY* 1075, my emphasis). If Kate Croy, to take the prime example from the prefaces, then, is mourned for the fact that her only too brief life is relegated to her formal function of seeing, at the cost of her own inner and untold feeling, then what James seems to be mourning is the fact that Kate Croy's life consists entirely in being dead, despite the fact that she stands as one of his most memorable and complex heroines. A mute block of wrought material, a mere hole in a dead wall, Kate Croy sees and she sees fiercely, and when her seeing is over, she must leave the stage, having filled her role, and presumably do her feeling elsewhere.

Imbued with life, and yet nowhere but perched aloft in a dead wall, what is this shade that haunts the house of fiction? Not only Kate Croy, but Isabel Archer, Maggie Verver, Fleda Vetch, Rowland Mallet – all have been read over by James as figures caught between seeing and feeling, between form and content, between death and life. James is the modern novelist of realist psychology *par excellence*, nothing short of the

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method of the central consciousness "without the assumption of the identify of an 'I' itself at the origin of point of view" (52). That is, we cannot assume that the "center" of any James text is inhabited by a stable and mimetic subjectivity. However, Carroll jumps perhaps far too quickly when he goes on to claim that "the Jamesian subject is posited in a classical philosophical manner as presence" (56), a naïve mimeticism Carroll claims is undone by the intricacies of the house of fiction metaphor. Carroll finds that "what ultimately guarantees the integrity of the house of fiction…is that behind the window is another figure, this one supposedly 'real' and present in the 'real world' – the author himself.…The fictional universe has its center in the consciousness of a fictional subject behind which stands the 'true origin' and subject of the novel: the author and his consciousness" (56). Ultimately, Carroll goes on to argue that James's entire theory of point of view is undone by the irreconcilability between these two consciousnesses, which undoes any faith in a unified subject and "displaces the subject from the center of form" (66) entirely, a conclusion which I cannot help but feel misses the elaborate methods of James's construction of character. Similarly, Poulet – unsurprisingly – writes: "Every central character is for James a means of perceiving things according to the angle of incidence which a creature of his choice gives him. At the back of the consciousness of the character, there is therefore the consciousness of the novelist. It is like the consciousness of a consciousness. Occult, dissimulated into the background, it reigns no less everywhere. It is the center of the center. From the commanding point of view which it occupies, it silently imposes on its universe the interpretations of its thought and the choices of its will" (311). See also Wayne Booth, who argues essentially for the impurity of all fiction, warning that "we must never forget that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear" (20), and that James can in no way, despite his intentions, be cast outside fiction's house. In short, while the metaphor may ultimately affirm the author's anchoring presence, the novels themselves undo any such hope.

great modern portrayer of character, the chronicler of consciousness.[40] And yet when he reads his own corpus for the New York Edition, all he finds in it are a seeming series of corpses. The body of his work is made almost exclusively of the bodies – or at least the minds – of his characters; that is, his novels are about nothing but people. But the existence of this vast populace is not so easy for James to define, and there is an anxiety running throughout the prefaces with regard to trying to articulate just who or what these people are, and what they mean to him, both as a writer and as a reader.

Recalling his late essay on immortality, and the powerful, almost religious, function that it ascribed to the particular kind of consciousness of the work of art, what I propose is that we can posit the life of the Jamesian character as precisely the afterlife of the dead. As James describes his work as a novelist in that essay, "I deal with being, I invoke and evoke, I figure and represent, I seize and fix, as many phases and aspects and conceptions of it as my infirm hand allows me strength for; and in so doing I find myself—I can't express it otherwise—in communication with sources" (*LD* 611). He deals with being, in all its aspects, but he does so by means of communication with sources, sources "to which I owe the apprehension of far more and far other combinations than observation and experience, in their ordinary sense, have given me the pattern of" (ibid.). These sources can be read as the immortality-lending powers of the artistic consciousness, the work of any novelist concerned with telling the story of living and with the creation of character, and what James discovers here is precisely the uncanny alchemy of such power, no matter how ostensibly realist. What does it mean to create life

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[40] This reputation is essentially the result of the enduring influence of two of James's earliest major critics, R.P. Blackmur and his moralist perspective, essentially equating Jamsian consciousness with conscience; and Georges Poulet's phenomenological study. See also the early essays by T.S. Eliot and Philip Rahv, who both emphasize James's moralist dimension, as well as Lubbock's New Critical emphases on the centrality of point of view.

desired nothing else, when finishing the novel in 1876, than to keep hold of his vision. The novel may have been more or less satisfactorily completed, but in Christina Light

> The multiplication of touches had produced even more life than the subject required, and *that life, in other conditions, in some other prime relation, would still have somehow to be spent*. Thus one would watch for her and waylay her at some turn of the road to come—all that was to be needed was to give her time (ibid., my emphasis).

The image is a somewhat fanciful one, but what I want to suggest is that the implicit ontology upon which it relies is that of any literary character with the semblance of "life." Christina Light will leave *Roderick Hudson*'s story and continue along her road; she will amass her own implicit biography, the one necessary for anyone of whom some reader or writer might be able say, this is a person that can be known and that I have known. And James the writer can only wait until she comes back into view, until her path takes her once again into his line of vision. She does so ten years later during the composition of *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), in which she figures as such a prominent character and thematic locus that she lends the novel's title her own name, having become the Princess during the time of the events in *Roderick Hudson*'s narrative.

In the preface to the later novel, James describes at great length the perceptive qualities of the novel's hero, the bookbinder turned revolutionary Hyacinth Robinson. His consideration of Hyacinth, as a man who sees just as much and just as well as his narrative situation demands, is to the same purpose as that of any of his other central consciousnesses, namely, that of finding the figure who "may feel enough and 'know' enough—or be in the way of learning enough—for his maximum dramatic value without

feeling and knowing too much for his minimum verisimilitude, his proper fusion with the fable" (*PNY* 1094-5). Hyacinth joins a long list of Jamesian heroes and heroines; in fact, James goes on to list nearly every one of them in yet another instance of his articulation of character as a proper union between form and content, between perception and life. Having established Hyacinth as the right kind of perceiver, James then goes on to wonder how he can feel in the most appropriate way, how he can have a story to live that matches up with his vision.

And James finds that the most interesting narrative complication would be for Hyacinth to fall in love with "the beauty of the world," at the very same moment as he despairs most of the "iniquity of its social arrangements" (*PNY* 1097). Hyacinth must find some sort of connection that would allow him access into a world that could be seen as beautiful, to gain a glimpse of the higher spheres, and to be pulled out from the streets in which his disgust with the world's injustices only mounts. This connection is found, for James, precisely when Christina Light wanders back into his line of sight, when she comes around the right bend in her road. James's rediscovery of Christina, his seemingly accidental reencounter with her at just the moment when he realizes *post facto* that he had needed her most, becomes figured for James as precisely an encounter with the uncanny: "She had for so long, *in the vague limbo of those ghosts we have conjured but not exorcised*, been looking for a situation, awaiting a niche and a function" (*PNY* 1098, my emphasis). Strangely, Christina is not a ghost because she is returning, but she is a ghost because that is all she has ever been; her "birth" itself was all along a "conjuring." This formulation is so ontologically startling, not for what it has to say about the phenomenon

of recurring characters, which is ultimately not that much at all, but for what it suggests about character as such.

Characters come back, not because of some breaking of the rules of fiction's game, but because they always can, each and every one. And the kind of being whose nature it is to always potentially come back is precisely the ghost, the figure who haunts, whose being consists in not wholly being at all. This thought leads James into one of the most curious passages in all the prefaces, which must be quoted at length:

> I shall not pretend to trace the steps and stages by which the imputability of a future to that young woman—which was like the act of clothing her chilled and patient nakedness—had for its prime effect to plant her in my little bookbinder's path. Nothing would doubtless beckon us on further, with a large leisure, than such a chance to study *the obscure law under which certain of a novelist's characters, more or less honourably buried, revive for him by a force or a whim of their own and "walk" round his house of art like haunting ghosts, feeling for the old doors they knew, fumbling at stiff latches and pressing their pale faces, in the outer dark, to lighted windows*. I mistrust them, I confess, in general; my sense of a really expressed character is that it shall have originally so tasted of the ordeal of service as to feel no disposition to yield again to the strain. Why should the Princess of the climax of "Roderick Hudson" still have made her desire felt, unless in fact to testify that she had not been—for what she was—completely recorded? *To continue in evidence, that had struck me from far back as her natural passion; in evidence at any price, not consenting to be laid away with folded hands in the pasteboard tomb, the doll's box, to which we usually relegate*

the spent puppet after the fashion of a recumbent worthy on the slab of a sepulchral monument. I was to see this, after all, in the event, as the fruit of a restless vanity: Christina had felt herself, known herself, striking, in the earlier connexion, and couldn't resign herself not to strike again. Her pressure then was not to be resisted—sharply as the question might come up of why she should pretend to strike, just *there*. I shall not attempt to answer it with reasons (one can never tell everything); it was enough that I could recognize her claim to have travelled far—far from where I had left her: that, one felt, was in character—that was what she naturally *would* have done. Her prime note had been an aversion to the *banal*, and nothing could be of an effect less *banal*, I judged, than her intervention in the life of a dingy little London bookbinder whose sensibility, whose flow of opinions on "public questions" in especial, should have been poisoned at the source (*PNY* 1098-9, my emphases).

James suggests that the ideal relationship between a work and its characters would be that they find enough being in the particular story in which they are cast, that they spend themselves entirely. Characters, once having played their part, ought to be like dolls that can be returned to their box, or more curiously, like puppets that are as if laid out in some grand sepulcher, a monument to all these – plastic – dead. However, as we have seen, the doll and the puppet are dead from the very start, ghosts that have been conjured but not yet exorcised, and perhaps never entirely able to be exorcised at all. After all, for example, if Kate Croy had so much life left to give in the novel in which she could unfortunately figure only too meagerly, might she also come back in some novel always waiting to be written? Christina Light returns because, as James begins to understand, it

is in her very nature to do so; that is, she is mimetically the kind of person who would not remain hidden for long out on the long road of limbo, who would not lie down on her burial mount. Given James's ghostly formulations, Kate Croy must still be out there in a forgotten corner of fiction's house, waiting to wander back into a more central room.

Christina Light, James writes, operates according to that "obscure law" whereby a character returns and "walks around his house of art" like a haunting ghost. However, she is not necessarily an exception to some less obscure law, and presumably a more natural one, whereby a character would remain buried once spent. In fact, James gives no counterexample to this "obscure law;" it is the only one there is. If this seems like it ought to be outweighed by a more normal law, the one by which most characters live and die, this is only because James the novelist desires for fiction to operate according to some natural rule. James writes that his "sense of a really expressed character is that it shall have originally so tasted of the ordeal of service as to feel no disposition to yield again to the strain." But, as we have seen, James the reader consistently finds fiction to conform to no kind of such natural law. Stories consistently grow far from their original germs, and the novel can persistently do "everything." If his descriptions of his own characters in the prefaces have shown us anything, then it is that he is not quite in control of them ever in the way he initially thought.

Most characters do in fact "feel no disposition" to suffer the strain of service in the game of representation, but this does not preclude the fact that they could, especially given the strange independence James consistently lends each character in his rereading of them. Remembering Isabel's essential unknowability, and autonomy from her narrative voice, one may well judge that, by novel's end, she could hypothetically choose

to return as well, and James would never even know why. Ultimately, any literary character for James lives an existence like the figures in *The Golden Bowl*:

> They learned fairly to live in the perfunctory; they remained in it as many hours of the day as might be; *it took on finally the likeness of some spacious central chamber in a haunted house*, a great overarched and overglazed rotunda where gaiety might reign, but the doors of which opened into sinister circular passages (524, my emphasis).[44]

The haunted house becomes a model for fiction in general, and its characters roam around its chambers uncannily, hovering between life and death without ever wholly belonging to either. And if they are all ghosts anyway, once conjured potentially never yet exorcised, then it is in their very ontological, or perhaps we might say "hauntological," nature always to return. James famously wrote many proper ghost stories, particularly in the last two decades of his career, the most famous of which is perhaps *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). However, what I hope to have demonstrated is that all of his novels and stories are in fact ghost stories, and that any work of fiction can only be the conjuring of ghosts in a spectral house. [45] Conjured in their very act of being

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[44] Similarly, in *The Golden Bowl*'s preface, James freely reflects upon the artist's creation of characters as a kind of occult conjuring trick: "That one should, as an author, reduce one's reader, 'artistically' inclined, to such a state of hallucination by the images one has evoked as doesn't permit him to rest till he has noted or recorded them, set up some semblance of them in his own other medium, by his own other art—nothing could better consort than *that*, I naturally allow, with the desire or the pretension to cast a literary spell. Charming, that is, for the projector and the creator of *figures and scenes that are as nought from the moment they fail to become more or less visible appearances*" (*PNY* 1326, my emphasis).

[45] What I am proposing here is related to what J. Hillis Miller has also put forth in some remarkable formulations in *Literature as Conduct*, where he writes: "All James's stories and novels are ghost stories…The ghost stories 'proper' are really, obliquely, about the act of literature. The bring into the open the way all works of fiction that are 'believed in' by the reader work their magic by using language to 'raise the ghosts' of the characters. These characters then have a spectral existence in the mind, feelings, and imagination of the reader. They go on permanently dwelling there, obscurely haunting the reader's mind. They abide there permanently, ready to be brought forward again if the reader thinks of the story, or, especially, re-reads it" (299). Somewhat similarly, Julie Rivkin argues that James's ghosts belong not to the tradition of Gothic fiction, but that "we might see them as produced by the representational logic at work in

created, characters are not simply dead, plastic things, but dead things and appearances always animated with the intensity of life. The dead can never remain simply dead, for James, precisely because the space in which they live is that space of immortality, James's eternal realm of the literary, the artist's house of the dead.[46] And as James remarks in the preface to "The Altar of the Dead" (1895), "the sense of the state of the dead is but part of the sense of the state of the living" (*PNY* 1249).[47] In the afterlife, as in the space of literature, there is no telling the difference between the two.

Remains of life in *The Awkward Age*

In figures such as Christina Light and Kate Croy, James may have felt that he had created "too much life," but if it is a life that consists entirely in being dead, in fact, in never being able to die at all, then it is indeed a strange kind of life to have too much of. Is not immortality in fact nothing but having too much life all along forever? This life of

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his texts" (15-6). See also Harry Levin's curious suggestion in *The Power of Blackness* that "The Jolly Corner" (1908), one of James's most famous ghost stories, in fact offers an allegory for the relationship between an author and his characters (5).

[46] We may here think of Jacques Derrida's formulations on spectrality and its disruption of any possible ontology in *Specters of Marx*: "a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back" (123). And any reader of fiction, in a sense, performs nothing but the work of mourning: "It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead" (9, Derrida's emphases). When we psychologize a character, or imbue it with an imagined biography, when we seek to construct a character as an imagined representation, are we not doing anything but "*attempting to ontologize remains*"?

[47] The artist, for James, becomes figured in Stransom, the hero of "The Altar of the Dead", who lives according to the rules of "the religion of the dead" (452). He mourns not simply one or two lost loved ones, but everyone, "those whom indeed he always called in his thoughts the Others" (451). Stransom's ultimate triumph is a constant vigil over an altar constructed, "with its multiplied meanings" (472), to serve as a remembrance not simply for each and every dead, but, in their accumulation and in their shared fate, for what might be considered death as such. Like James's reach toward immortality, those sources of a wholly other kind in which he finds his novelistic art, Stransom "had given himself to his Dead, and it was good: this time his Dead would keep him" (483). In his study of James in *The Poetics of Prose*, Todorov argues that the essential Jamesian theme is the unknowable or absent origin of any narrative, the secret that can never exist as such, but which can only make itself manifest in the search for it, which becomes the narrative itself. Death becomes one of the ways in which this constant Jamesian secret is figured, and so, if in "The Altar of the Dead" "death is glorified in its pure state, without regard for those it has touched" (167), then perhaps this story might function as the Jamesian story *par excellence*, an allegory for his entire ontology of literature. On the dead as a major theme throughout James, see also Blackmur, p. 27.

character, then, would be nothing but eternal death without ever being able to finally die. Who are these ghosts haunting James's fiction? Whom does one encounter when one dives, as Dencombe, the hero of the story "The Middle Years" (1893) puts it, "to where, in the dim underworld of fiction, the great glazed tank of art, strange silent subjects float" (238)? And if the Jamesian character exists according to the "obscure law" whereby ghosts are things that can always haunt, then to what truth does this law adhere, out of what kind of code is it constructed?

It is in the *Awkward Age* (1899), not only in the novel itself but in its preface as well, where I will look for James's fullest expression of the uncanny ontology of the literary character. *The Awkward Age* is famously James's most structurally unusual book, written almost entirely in dialogue form, and its form has for decades confounded critics nearly as much as the strange events of its story.[48] An unusual hybrid between the forms of the drama and the novel, the work allows James an unprecedented means of constructing character, one that I argue gets straight to the heart of the Jamesian ontology of the fictive person. Moreover, situated as it is in the "awkward age" of literary history's *fin de siècle*, the novel becomes a kind of degree zero of the modernist character as such, caught between the depths of the realist nineteenth century's approximations of living

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[48] Of James's early critics, F.R. Leavis is nearly alone in recognizing the novel's important and formal success. See *The Great Tradition*, pp. 205-8. Far more typical are reactions such as Percy Lubbock's, who, while nearly praising *The Awkward Age* as a formal *tour de force*, cannot help but ask: "Where are the other Awkward Ages, the many that we might expect if the value of drama is so great" (196-7)? See *The Craft of Fiction*, pp. 189-202. Similarly, in his study *The Method of Henry James* (1918), Joseph Warren Beach writes with growing exasperation about what he sees as the novel's preoccupation with technique so as to dismiss the novel entirely by placing his reflections on it under a chapter titled "Technical Exercises;" see pp. 243-249. Perhaps the most notable attack on *The Awkward Age* comes from Edmund Wilson, in his famous essay from 1934, "The Ambiguity of Henry James," in which he seems to be entirely offended by the novel, for reasons both moral and aesthetic. Calling it "unpleasant and irritating" (181), he expresses a kind of outrage that James seems so proud of his achievement in his comments in the preface. He pities the fact that "the innocent Nanda Brookenham…has a whole host of creepy creatures around her" (180). Ultimately, he is offended most by what he sees as the novel's wholesale lack of values: "James could never have known how we should feel about the gibbering, disemboweled crew who hover about one another with sordid, shadowy designs in *The Awkward Age*" (181).

and faith in the stability of identity, and the ecstatic surface plays of the early twentieth century's adventures in formalism, though ones that will ultimately not be without their own unique depths.[49]

In the preface to *The Awkward Age*, James writes of a phenomenon he repeatedly experiences while rereading his own works, that of the work veering so far from, and growing so unusually large in proportion to, its original idea, or "germ." *The Awkward Age*, he writes, belongs to a group of his works which all "asserted in each case an unforeseen principle of growth. They were projected as small things, yet had finally to be provided for as comparative monsters" (*PNY* 1120).[50] Monster or not, however, *The Awkward Age* is noted by James as having a certain privilege for him; more than any of his other works its "history," by which he means that of its construction, "embodies a greater number of curious truths" (ibid.). As James continues:

> The thing done and dismissed has ever, at the best, for the ambitious workman, *a trick of looking dead, if not buried, so that he almost throbs with ecstasy when, on an anxious review, the flush of life reappears*. It is verily on recognizing that flush on a whole side of "The Awkward Age" that I brand it all, but ever so tenderly, as

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[49] Walter Isle isolates the formal experimentation of *The Awkward Age* as an essential advancement of James's technique into the era of British modernism, describing James's development through the novels of the 1890s and into the late novels of the "major phase" as a reflection "of the general changes from nineteenth-century to twentieth-century, or rather vaguely, from 'Victorian' to 'Modern'" (vii). His 1968 work is in fact the first full-length study devoted to James's "dramatic" novels of the second half of the 1890s. On *The Awkward Age* in particular, see pp. 165-204. In his recent essay, "Henry James, (Post)Modernist?," David McWhirter isolates *The Awkward Age* as "the most postmodern of James's fictions" (182), not only for its formal technique, but for its cultural concerns as well.

[50] On this process, and the important role it plays in James's general act of self-reading in the prefaces, see Rowe, who writes that the "germ" of each story undergoes "destabilization, even deconstruction, in the course of James's revisionary tour – in the course, that is, of his 'reading' of his own writing….James never describes the 'germ' in terms that would identify it as an 'object' or a 'thing' in itself; it is nothing but its effects" (236). See also David Carroll, pp. 60-6, for a reading of the way in which the constant displacement of James's germs is structurally analogous to the formal displacement of the self undergone in each of the novels.

monstrous—which is but my way of noting the *quantity* of finish it stows away

(*PNY* 1120-1, my emphasis).

The work before him, once constructed and now nearly ten years later being read, has the appearance of being dead and buried, and yet life is found miraculously to still remain. James the reader pores over each work of his corpus as if glancing over a collection of corpses, and yet, unexpectedly, each time life reappears and makes itself felt. Curiously, it is this unexpected appearance of life in what should have been a buried corpse that causes James to "tenderly" call *The Awkward Age* "monstrous," as if the novel is for him a kind of Frankenstein's monster, the semblance of a life built out of a collection of dead things. James then goes on to note that the monstrous quality of the novel is in fact simply another way of naming all of the "finish" that has gone into it, the perhaps disproportionate amount of formal polish in its construction. If *The Awkward Age* is a monster, then this is due not only to the life that appears in its death, but also to its amount of form, the way in which its form seems to dominate its originally simple content. As in the dialectical structure of character established in the other prefaces, *The Awkward Age*'s monstrosity is due neither to its form, one might say its deadened aspect, nor to its content, its semblance of life. Rather, it is the product of both, such that the distinction between the two begins to break down. Monsters are monsters, as ghosts are ghosts, it seems, because any attempt to separate life from death is ultimately going to be frustrated.

James goes on in the preface to drastically undermine any such form-content distinction when he simply recounts his efforts to find a form for the novel that would match up responsibly with its intended subject. Acknowledging its "monstrous" growth

out of its seemingly small germ, he informs us that the germ in question was simply "the difference made in certain friendly houses and for certain flourishing mothers by the sometimes dreaded, often delayed, but never fully arrested coming to the forefront of some vague slip of a daughter" (*PNY* 1121). And this particular germ "sprouted in that vast nursery of sharp appeals and concrete images which calls itself, for blest convenience, London" (ibid). In short, the novel is about what the modern English do with their young girls once they reach "the awkward age" when they come down from the nursery to join the adults in the drawing room. How, in short, are English girls to traverse the unnamed and unknown zone in between innocence and experience, in between girlhood and marriage, ignorance and knowing?

James imagines the social scene in which this event must be happening all over London, and distills a particular case in which his germ, simply an "arrangement of objects," can "become a picture" (*PNY* 1123). As he describes the set in which his novel must reside:

> One could count them on one's fingers (an abundant allowance), the liberal firesides beyond the wide glow of which, in a comparative dimness, female adolescence hovered and waited. *The wide glow was bright, was favourable to "real" talk, to play of mind, to an explicit interest in life*, a due demonstration of the interest by persons qualified to feel it: *all of which meant frankness and ease, the perfection, almost, as it were, of intercourse*, and a tone as far as possible removed from that of the nursery and schoolroom—as far as possible removed even, no doubt, in its appealing "modernity," from that of supposedly privileged scenes of conversation twenty years ago. *The charm was, with a hundred other*

things, in the freedom—the freedom menaced by the inevitable irruption of the ingenuous mind; whereby, if the freedom should be sacrificed, what would truly *become* of the charm? The charm might be figured as dear to the members of the circle consciously contributing to it, but it was none the less true that some sacrifice in some quarter would have to be made, and what mediator worth his salt could fail to hold his breath while waiting on the event (*PNY* 1123-4, my emphases)?

The tension of the "awkward age" of adolescence occurs in the very liberality of a seemingly as yet unlimited modernity, too new to have formed its own rules and boundaries. Everything is seemingly possible because one can *talk about* everything, and the play of mind is untrammeled in a way that no previous social code has allowed. And if this freedom is this social world's very charm, it is also its major difficulty. How can a social group continue to *talk* about everything in the face of an innocence which is not supposed to *know* everything until it is married, and thus able to join in the rounds of talk? That is, once the girl comes downstairs to be put on the marriage market, how is she to avoid instantly becoming unmarriageable in the very same moment, once exposed to, and tainted by, all the knowledge gained by this proliferating talk? The answer, ultimately, is that she cannot avoid this double bind, precisely because of the "inveterate English trick of the so morally well-meant and so intellectually helpless compromise" (*PNY* 1124). The English, in contrast to their Continental and American counterparts, simply refuse to either curtail their talk or keep their unmarried girls hidden away, resulting in the untenable position of the novel's young heroine, Nanda Brookenham.

His subject quickly established, James spends the majority of the preface discussing all the "finish" that *The Awkward Age* then required so as to be of a form appropriate to its content. Its content essentially being "talk," James finds that the most appropriate form must also lie in such verbal play, in the form of dialogue.[51] And keeping himself strictly to dialogue, and to the objective kind of presentation it engenders, James forbids himself the typical strategies for representing consciousness and subjectivity which are so inherently characteristic of his work. If James is canonically understood as the major novelist of psychological realism, then this is largely due to his celebrated center of consciousness method, the one on display so forcefully in nearly all of his major novels from *Roderick Hudson* to *The Portrait of a Lady* to *The Golden Bowl* – though, as we have seen, James's employment of this method carries him far from the realist assumptions of consciousness upon which the novel has traditionally relied.

The method, we will remember, ostensibly involves the selection of the appropriate point of view through which to tell the events of any given novel. It is a consciousness not only through which the reader and writer see, but into which they plunge and with whom they can so intensely feel. Not only does the consciousness provide the focalizing lens for its given narrative, but James's narrative voice is, to varying degrees, free to glance in and out of its depths as he sees fit. In his masterful study of the performative dimension of James's work, *Literature as Conduct*, J. Hillis Miller characterizes this psychological method as being dependent upon two major conventions:

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[51] Sergio Perosa notes that James's "experiment with the *roman dialogue* seems to be well suited to the story precisely because it is through the dialogues of the grown-ups that Nanda Brookenham is exposed to the danger of corruption (69-70).

> The positing of an omniscient or telepathic narrator, able to enter the minds and feelings of all the characters at will, and the use of free indirect discourse, whereby the narrator speaks in the third person past tense what the characters might have said to themselves in the first person present tense. The narrator or impersonal "narrative voice" can know only what the characters know, think, and feel, but "he" or "it" can represent these as completely as he or it wishes (105).

The conventions, then, of the Jamesian narrative voice are essentially those of the nineteenth-century realist novel, the method on display in Eliot, Thackeray, or Hardy, with an essential difference that they are limited strictly to the knowledge and feelings of the characters. The highly personal point of view belong to the narrator himself is almost entirely absent, but the method of reporting the knowledge and feelings of the characters remains the same.[52] Moreover, as we have seen in such figures as Isabel Archer and Maggie Verver, consciousness, in James's hands, becomes something far more wily than the mere literary representation of personhood, as it covers over nothing but voids, ghosts, and abyssal acts of figuration.

In *The Awkward Age*, then, James renounces not only the focalizing, and form-giving, powers of the center of consciousness method, but also the "going behind" of any such consciousness upon which any typically psychological Jamesian novel would only *seem* to depend. He himself characterizes the method as doing without what it is that makes any novel by James so distinctly Jamesian:

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[52] As Miller notes elsewhere in his work, with regard to *The Wings of the Dove*: "The narrator is nothing but a neutral, equable, cool, slightly ironic power of narration….The neutrality and lack of personality would justify calling the narrative voice an 'it' rather than a 'he' or 'she.' It, the narrative voice, is without gender, class, race, or historical placement…[and it is] quite different from the more or less personalized narrators of *Tom Jones*, *Vanity Fair*, *Middlemarch*, or *He Knew He Was Right*" (175).

I myself have scarcely to plead the cause of "going behind," which is right and

beautiful and fruitful in its place and order; but as the confusion of kinds is the

inelegance of letters and the stultification of values, so to renounce that line

utterly and do something quite different instead may become in another

connexion the true course and the vehicle of effect. Something in the very nature,

in the fine rigour, of this special sacrifice…lends it moreover a coercive charm; a

charm that grows in proportion as the appeal to it tests and stretches and strains it,

puts it powerfully to the touch (*PNY* 1131-2).

Preventing himself from "going behind" his characters (though this "going behind," as I

hope to have shown, is itself a complex maneuver whose ultimate goal is never certain),

James abandons his work to the play of pure surface, and to the objective presentation of

sheer exteriority. In short, he finds that in renouncing "going behind," he is renouncing

the primary methods of novelistic discourse as he has come to inherit them at the

nineteenth century's end, and he no longer finds himself equipped with what ought to be

the fundamental tools of any realist presentation of the life of character. He instead finds

himself "getting launched in 'The Awkward Age,' as if I were in fact constructing a play"

(*PNY* 1133).[53] This way in which James crafts his novel as if constructing a play is what

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[53] Of course it should be noted that James does in fact "go behind" in the novel, with an entirely
unambiguous instance of free indirect discourse happening on the very first page: "Vanderbank became
conscious of having proposed his own rooms as a wind-up to their drive. Wouldn't that be a better finish of
the evening than just separating in the wet" (*AA* 19)? There are in fact over a dozen such instances
throughout the novel, although they do happen with more frequency in the novel's first third or so. One
might forgive such instances by remembering that James originally wrote the novel for serialization, and
perhaps it took him some time to fully develop the method. However, in the preface to *The Princess
Casamassima*, when James offers a lengthy list of some of his most finely achieved central reflectors, he
curiously adds: "I should go on from them [these intense perceivers] to fifty other examples; even to the
divided Vanderbank of 'The Awkward Age,' the extreme pinch of whose romance is the vivacity in him, to
his positive sorrow and loss, of the state of being aware" (*PNY* 1096). And while Vanderbank is an
intensely "aware" person, as are all the highly intelligent characters of *The Awkward Age*, he can hardly be
called a perceiver in any formal sense. The highly ironic way in which James treats Vanderbank as such a
perceiver can be seen in perhaps the novel's most characteristic instance of "going behind," when

will become known as "the scenic method," an objective mode of presentation seemingly opposed to the more common center of consciousness. James carefully developed this method, whereby the novel approximates the exteriority of dramatic performance, after the 1895 disaster of his foray into the theater with *Guy Donville*.[54] Experimented with in *Spoils of Poynton* and *What Maisie Knew*, and used for the first time as a totalizing structural principle of a work in the little known novel *The Other House* (1896), the scenic method reaches its most rigorous and exact use in *The Awkward Age*, in which the relationship between the characters and the nearly complete absence of any narrating presence, the figure who might be able to go behind, is most strikingly on display.[55]

Ultimately, this scenic method, rather than an anomalous antipode to the center of consciousness method, which is how it is typically considered in James criticism, is instead an extreme version of the figurative operations at play in the creation of the Jamesian consciousness. The scenic method seems to be the most mimetic presentation of

Vanderback struggles to respond to something Nanda has said to him: "As Mr. Van himself could not have expressed at any subsequent time, to any interested friend the particular effect upon him of the tone of these words his chronicler takes advantage of the fact not to pretend to a greater intelligence – to limit himself on the contrary to the simple statement that they produced in Mr. Van's cheek a flush just discernible" (*AA* 131). If some narrating presence – "his chronicler" – goes behind in this strangely ironic moment, it is only to show that there is nothing to show. Vanderbank himself does not know what he is thinking, and so the narrative voice takes the opportunity to remind the reader that he has no power to know what he may or may not have been thinking in the first place. James breaks the law of the scenic method only to once again reinforce it, claiming that even he can know nothing more than what could be objectively witnessed. J. Hillis Miller's striking commentary on James's odd relationship to "going behind" in *The Awkward Age* can be found in *Literature as Conduct*, pp. 117-22.

[54] For an account of James's years in the theater, see Leon Edel, *The Middle Years*. For his particularly masterful recounting of the disaster of *Guy Donville*, see *The Treacherous Years*, pp. 73-96.

[55] *What Maisie Knew* (1897) plays a pivotal role in the development of this method, as the novel gradually evolves from one in which Maisie stands as the central reflector, the actions of the cruel adults around here illuminated only by her childlike and innocent consciousness, to one in which Maisie is portrayed only scenically from the outside. Her formal trajectory becomes a miniature synecdoche for the moral path of Isabel Archer. Throughout most of the work we are able to see what Maisie sees and how she sees it, but by the novel's end, we can only see her from the outside, a character trapped in the surface of her own language, and who has learned to keep her thoughts hidden. For a suggestive reading of the ways in which Maisie's formal transformation is the result of the shifting grounds of her position within her story, see Julie Rivkin, pp. 122-62. See also Teahan, pp. 38-67, for a similar argument about the metaphoric relationship between the figurative death of Maisie's childhood and the structural "death" of her point of view.

character, the unmediated presentation of the literary person as if it is a body that can be seen crossing a stage, and yet what it reveals is the rhetorical construction of a properly literary consciousness, the creation of the person that is innocently thought to be only represented. As we have seen, Jamesian criticism has long established him as *the* novelist of psychological realism, including the moral criticism of R.P. Blackmur, the New Critical concerns of Percy Lubbock, and also the phenomenological analysis of Georges Poulet. On the other hand, more recent "deconstructions" of Jamesian consciousness, such as those found in David Carroll, John Carlos Rowe, Leo Bersani, Julie Rivkin, and Sheila Teahan, have, to some degree, identified the linguistic operations at work in constructing Jamesian consciousness. However, most critics still bracket the scenic method as anomalous, stressing its replacement of diegesis, narratorial telling, with mimesis, objective showing.[56] What I propose, however, is that the Jamesian scenic method functions as a kind of zero degree of any narrative act, both the ground on which any fiction is built, and the limit it can reach.

Most importantly, for our concerns, the function of character in the scenic method reaches to the heart of James's ontology of literary personhood. What is on display in the scenes that unfold in *The Awkward Age* is the creation of any literary character, the

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[56] For an essential study of the scenic method, and an overview of its development out of the drama, see Isle, p. 18-38. See also Lubbock, pp. 59-123, in which he contrasts it to the "pictorial" method of the realist novel, associated by him most closely with Thackeray and Tolstoy. Another basic summary of the form can be found in Joseph Wiesnfarth, *Henry James and the Dramatic Analogy*, in particular pp. 1-43, where he describes at great length the method's three major goals, intensity, economy, and objectivity. In his study of James's "experimental techniques," Sergio Perosa does begin to align the scenic method with the more common center of consciousness, calling them "complimentary." He writes: "The self-sufficiency of the dramatic scene is made dependent on the personal – and limited – view of the narrator; in turn, his mind and consciousness as well are dramatized" (51). The general aim of Perosa's argument is, I think, correct. However, what I will soon hope to show is that it is only correct for reasons entirely other than what he argues. Ultimately, in a scenic novel like *The Awkward Age*, there is nothing like a point of view at all, limited or otherwise; or, at the least, there is not yet any consciousness in which a point of view may reside.

emergence of the illusion of consciousness out of what is without any such consciousness or personality. As we have seen with Isabel Archer, the mimetic dimension of character ultimately occurs in James as the effect of the formal dimension of character. Isabel's trajectory in *The Portrait of a Lady* is the move from the stabilized and unified self which had anchored the nineteenth-century realist novel, to the undermining of that self in the face of the textuality of experience and the fictiveness of novelistic life, and ultimately to the emergence of a new kind of literary subjectivity, one that is not the mere semblance of a biographical person but is rather the construction of a complex of rhetorical and figurative operations. The literary person emerges as the haunting remains of its textual material's uncanny ontology, a process that *The Awkward Age* helps to stage. Character, in James, is ultimately a figure of language. If the method of the center of consciousness, as it is employed in *The Portrait of a Lady*, tells a narrative of this construction of character, then the scenic method, as we see it on display in *The Awkward Age*, reveals this narrative's ontological ground; it is an originary structure which tells the story of the second narrative's possibility.

Representational "truth" and the life of character

James discusses in the preface that, in constructing the novel entirely according to the rules of the scenic method, he feels in fact as if he has struck upon something fundamental about literature as such. As we have seen, James's struggle with *The Awkward Age* was to find a form that would correspond appropriately with its subject matter, or content. That subject being talk, James found his form in dialogue, appropriating the objectivity of the theater for the language of the novel, which typically relies on its ability to access inwardness, both in the form of having a subjective narrator

as a guarantor of some extra-textual truth and in the way in which that narrator employs the power of seeing into, and giving language to, the inner lives of his characters. In the preface, he describes the kind of awe he feels that, in keeping to the dramatic, he was able to do it with a "systematic loyalty" (*PNY* 1135). He goes on to note that "what has occurred meanwhile is that this high consistency has itself, so to speak, constituted an exhibition, and that *an important artistic truth has seemed to me thereby lighted*" (ibid., my emphasis). This truth, James describes, is nothing but that consistency with which he has kept his novel organized and presented according to the principle of the drama, no matter how much the work seems "to a careless eye to a wander and sprawl" (ibid.), no matter how "monstrous" it may appear.

Moreover, the collapsing of genres "helps us ever so happily to see the grave distinction between substance and form in a really wrought work of art signally break down" (ibid.). Employing the scenic method as a totalizing structural principle, but within the novel's space, James finds that the form-content distinction breaks down entirely, to the point where the two aspects of a work of art can hardly be distinguished anymore.[57] As we have seen, this is the very structure of his ontology of literary character; neither simply form nor content, seeing nor feeling, mimesis nor structure, it is instead a figural interplay between the two poles, so that any such distinctions are no longer tenable. If James has found "an important artistic truth" in *The Awkward Age*, then we can understand this truth not only as one about the ontology of any fiction, but of the

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[57] James is already speculating in his 1884 essay "The Art of Fiction" on the impossibility of distinguishing between form and content. He nearly goes so far as to deny that any term even means anything to him in isolation: "I cannot see what is meant by talking as if there were a part of a novel which is the story and part of it which for mystical reasons is not—unless indeed the distinction be made in a sense in which it is difficult to suppose that any one should attempt to convey anything….The story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread, and I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommended the use of the thread without the needle, or the needle without the thread" (59-60).

literary character as well. The two exist for James in a structurally analogous relationship with one another, and so we must press a little further into the secrets of this "truth."

Having renounced his powers of going behind his characters, James has banished himself from *The Awkward Age*'s stage, forced now to sit by idly and mutely in the back wings. Essential to the scenic method is this excision of the narrating presence from the scene; the characters are all there are, and the reader can only know them only through the constantly spreading surface play of their talk. There is no longer any guarantor of truth, a figure who can lead us behind the figures and inquire into the workings of the fierce consciousnesses seemingly on display. "Truth," understood as that final authority offered by the realist novel's presence of a stabilized and personalized narrator, the delegate of Trollope, Eliot, or whomever it is gently nudging their reader along, must then wait backstage with James's banished narrator. The characters are the only figures there to tell their own story, and no one is any position of authority above any other.

However, if the empirical truth of realism is abandoned, then James finds in *The Awkward Age* this "artistic truth," a new truth that belongs not to the real world's relationship to its fictions, or to the assurance that any such relation even exists, but only to fiction itself. He discovers what we might call a "representational truth," shedding light on the rules of any narrative act. Keeping to the drama's rules within the novel's game, James finds that his task, as a novelist whose powers amount increasingly to nothing but the impersonal raising of a curtain, is "to make the presented occasion tell all its story itself, remain shut up in its own presence and yet on that patch of staked-out ground become thoroughly interesting and remain thoroughly clear" (*PNY* 1132). Of his difficulties in adopting the role of the dramatist, James writes:

I tasted to the full…the beauty and the difficulty (to harp again on that string) of escaping poverty *even though the references in one's action can only be, with intensity, to each other, to things exactly on the same plane of exhibition with themselves*. Exhibition may mean in a "story" twenty different ways, fifty excursions, alternatives, excrescences, and the novel, as largely practiced in English, is the perfect paradise of the loose end. The play consents to the logic of but one way, mathematically right…*We are shut up wholly to cross-relations, relations all within the action itself; no part of which is related to anything but some other part*—save of course by the relation of the total to life…I saw the point of my game all in the problem of keeping these conditioned relations crystalline at the same time that I should, in emulation of life, consent to their being numerous and fine and characteristic of the London world (*PNY* 1134, my emphases).

In breaking down the form-content distinction, James curiously describes his task as if he is almost writing something like a pure work of art, having reference to nothing beyond itself, and "representing" its own story purely by means of its own fictive plane of reference; as if the work were to be some abyssal act of auto-reference, a pure act of fiction, a total book. However, James is clearly not a writer like Mallarmé, and no such book would be quite believable coming from James's pen. He discovers that fiction is nothing but such a pure act of auto-reference; any work has only operated according to this "truth." But his difficulty is that he is still writing a fiction; it must tell a story and mean, and bear within its "cross-relations" the air of at least a trace of any novel's

essential mimetic dimension.[58] There is, remember, always life after death for James, the illusion of consciousness that emerges out of literature's dead forms.

James's fidelity to the "illusion of life" may keep him from such modernist extravagances as the poetry of Mallarmé, but I want to stress that James's "artistic truth," his discovery of the law of any act of representation, is the very same discovery made by another thinker of the literary, one who finds this discovery precisely in the work of Mallarmé. In "The Double Session," from *Dissemination* (1971), Jacques Derrida offers an exhaustive reading of a short text by Mallarmé, *Mimique*, in conjunction with Plato's formulations of the relationship between mimesis and truth. Writing is for Plato, like painting, "measured against the truth [it is] capable of" (190). Writing can only be "true" to the extent that it perfectly corresponds to what it is that it is supposed to represent. This is to say, it could only be true if it were not any kind of representation at all, but only a pure repetition of something outside of itself, with no margin for difference. This is due to the classical logic according to which "what is imitated is more real, more essential, more true, etc., than what imitates. It is anterior and superior to it" (191). Ultimately, mimesis has always operated according to this law of truth, whereby the goal of mimesis,

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[58] Thus many of the novel's critics have described their impression that *The Awkward Age* is almost no kind of novel at all, or at least not very recognizable as any kind of novel to which some reader might relate, while at the same time eliciting such a large amount of emotional response. Its highly formal nature in no way detracts from, and even perhaps perversely exacerbates, its highly emotional story. For instance, in his 1903 appreciation of James's work as a whole, William Dean Howells curiously singles out *The Awkward Age* for an extended discussion. Describing the novels characters, he writes: "They strongly and vividly exist, and they construct not a drama, perhaps, but a world, floating indeed in an obscure where it seems to have its solitary orbit, but to be as solidly palpable as any of the planets of the more familiar solar systems" (14). Even in a contemporary reading highly informed by deconstruction, J. Hillis Miller cannot help but note that, while "*The Awkward Age* is hyperbolically subtle and indirect" (94), there is also an undeniably human element to James's work. He pauses toward the beginning of his lengthy analysis to comment: "I may as well admit at once that I find *The Awkward Age* immensely moving, in spite of, or perhaps because of, its artifice and its high degree of what James in the preface calls 'finish'….I do not mean that I find its formal beauty, its 'finish' moving. I mean that, in spite of my knowledge that the novel is made of words, and in spite of my more or less sophisticated knowledge of narratology and on narrative technique generally, I still think of the characters in the novel as though they were real people" (94).

as copy or imitation, would actually be to disappear entirely; not to offer a representation of "real" life, but only that life itself.

As we have seen in James's theory of realism, however, there is another possibility to this privileging of reality over its ultimately inessential representation. Remembering James's claim that "it is art that *makes* life," that art is not an imitation of reality but an alternative to it, we can see that for the novelist art is essentially "more true" than mere reality, waste and wreckage that James always felt it to be. Like James's method of realism, Mallarmé's *Mimique* posits an essential upsetting of the traditional role of mimesis within the order of truth. This disruption, Derrida finds, lies precisely in the very structure of the mime as a vehicle for representation. Mallarmé's text describes a mime playing the role of Pierrot, as he reenacts the plotting and performing of his wife's murder, but the role is written in its very act of being performed, and the reenactment consists entirely of the very miming of that supposedly prior action. "This," Mallarmé writes, "is how the Mime operates, whose act is confined to a perpetual allusion without breaking the ice or the mirror: he thus sets up a medium, a pure medium, of fiction" (69). The mime creates, or writes, the very act he represents in his very representation of it; it does not exist before or outside of its own representation. Derrida writes: "There is no imitation. The Mime imitates nothing. And to begin with, he doesn't imitate. There is nothing prior to the writing of his gestures. Nothing is prescribed for him. No present has preceded or supervised the tracing of his writing" (194). And in this act of auto-reference, the mime opens up, in this purely fictive space, a new kind of truth:

Not, of course, truth in the form of adequation between the representation and the present of the thing itself, or between the imitator and the imitated, but *truth as*

the present unveiling of the present: monstration, manifestation, production, *aletheia*. The mime produces, that is to say makes appear *in praesentia*, manifests the very meaning of what he is presently writing: of what he *performs*….We are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing; faced, so to speak, with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already double….In this speculum with no reality, in this mirror of a mirror, a difference or dyad does exist, since there are mimes and phantoms. But it is a difference without reference, or rather *a reference without referent, without any first or last unit, a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh, wandering about without a past, without any death, birth, or presence* (206, my emphases).

The text both represents and is itself what is represented. There is the strange event of a text in which precisely "nothing" happens, save for its own event as a text. There is no truth that the piece makes present, because any true image or presence becomes endlessly deferred in this cycle of reversals of presentation and mimesis. Mimesis and *aletheia* (truth *qua* making present), language which simply names something outside itself, and language which summons to presence that which it names, are both always inextricably in play in each act of literature. The bringing into presence of nothing but its own act of reference, an event in which nothing happens, nothing but itself, which is still to say, nothing:

Literature voids itself in its limitlessness. *If this handbook of literature meant to say something, which we now have some reason to doubt, it would proclaim first of all that there is no—or hardly any, ever so little—literature*; that in any event

there is no essence of literature, no truth of literature, no literary-being, or being-

literary of literature (223, my emphasis).

What we can note here, in this articulation of the absence of anything like the essence of

the literary, is that Derrida sets up Mallarmé's *Mimique* as the very model of any work of

literature, a "handbook of literature." The abyssal play of the mime, this "ghost that is the

phantom of no flesh," becomes something like a general structure for this strange kind of

writing in which nothing ever happens, since the world on its outside, the real one, is

presumably the only one in which anything might ever happen, in any kind of ontological

or empirically verifiable way.

Mallarmé's text, then, gains a certain kind of exemplarity and becomes a

handbook for this spectral structure of the literary; the story it tells is the way in which

texts refer not only to something beyond them, the world or even other texts, nor just to

themselves, in a kind of self-contained auto-reflexivity. Instead, reference always refers

to this uniquely literary "truth," which is nothing but the absence of philosophical truth

qua correspondence; namely, to the act of reference itself.[59] The mime represents nothing

but the prior absence of the very event represented, and this is in a sense the structure of

any act of literary narration. Derrida also describes this auto-reference elsewhere, in his

reading of Blanchot's *L'arrêt de mort* in "Living On: Border Lines" (1979). In

Blanchot's text, Derrida identifies a structure he terms "living on," prior to any

distinction between life or death, by which no thing that "lives" is every really fully

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[59] On this point, that something more than mere self-reflexivity is happening in this strange "truth" to which every literary act refers, Geoffrey Bennington writes in "Derrida's Mallarmé": "Just as a vague sense of intertextuality will not make Derrida's point, so it is not enough to invoke a vague sense of *self-referentiality* whereby writing refers to itself as writing by referring in general to writing in an indeterminate way: the point is that *this* singular writing here both refers to itself as this singular writing here *and in so doing* refers itself to other writing too….But the 'end' of that reference, the referent to which that reference is supposed to refer, is nothing other than the fact of reference or referring itself" (51, Bennington's emphases).

present to itself, and by virtue of which life is always already a kind of survival, like the character J. in Blanchot's *récit*, who is pulled back into the light of day from a death that has always already happened. But this death, having been survived, has not taken place in any properly ontological kind of sense. Rather, it always lies on the horizon, always around the next turn; but indubitably, it is there, and until it is reached, survived.

The point which I wish to draw out here, however, is that in the non-occurrence of the event, when J. demands of Blanchot's narrator that he recount to her this death which she has survived, the only proper happening of this event will be in the very recounting of it. As Derrida writes:

> The coming of the thing, of *la chose*, its event or advent, will be also the coming of the thing to the *récit*, subsequent to the narration, at least to its beginning, and will thus be a *récit*-effect. Thus the *récit* will be the cause—as well as *causa*, *chose* {thing, mere tool}—of what it seems to recount. *The récit as the cause and not as the relating of an event: this is the strange truth that is announced*. The *récit*'s the thing (145, my emphasis).

Thus the only presence of the event which is narrated is its very absence, the fact that, not only did it not occur before the narrating, but that, since the act is still one of narrating *something else*, not even that will bring it into any kind of presence. Its only way of being present is to be absent, always elsewhere and in some other temporality.

Moreover, I want to point out that this is the uncanny structure of any narrative act, relating events whose only "true" existence is in their being related. In the traditional language of fiction, an event is told in the preterite tense, in the sample past tense of the verb, as if it has always already happened before, but its only "happening" as an event is

in this very *ex-post* telling of it. Its only presence is in a past tense, bearing the mark of an irreducible absence. A narrative voice reports on the actions of its own characters, an act which it can only do after the story has happened; but the only place in which those actions exist is in the present "truth" of their narration, in the textual act of the utterance itself. Like the intolerable situation of J.'s "living on" in Blanchot's *L'arrêt de mort*, literary characters must die in order to become narratable things, but they never lived in the first place such that any death could have happened: their only "life," so to speak, is in this interminable kind of survival. Perhaps even more explicitly than in "The Double Session," what Derrida articulates here in this temporal predicament is the structure of *any* literary text, in the way in which the "plot" actually creates its "story," the way in which structural form creates its seemingly mimetic content.

And after this Derridean detour, we find ourselves unexpectedly back to those literary truths uncovered by James himself, not only about the ontology of fiction, but most importantly, about the ontology of the literary character who inhabits that fiction, who is in fact inextricably constitutive of it. Character always has, for James, an essential mimetic dimension; the illusion of consciousness must be intensely felt, otherwise fiction's "illusion of life" cannot be maintained. However, as we have seen in Isabel Archer's narrative, and in such figures as Maggie Verver, Kate Croy, and so many others, the mimetic dimension becomes an effect of the initial formal pole of character's existence, the way in which it is born as a functional device, a means of organizing its fictional world and of creating the very gap that irreversibly separates art from life. Form does not represent some prior content, but in fact creates it in its seemingly innocent act of representation.

Similarly, as James discovered in his consideration of Christina Light, as well as in the architecture of the house of fiction metaphor, the character is a thing that hovers in between life and death. A fictive person, the representation of a thing that has never existed, it has died from the very moment of its birth; but by virtue of this very same status, it is a thing that can never die again, filled with immortality's excess of life. The character is the inhabitant of James's occult afterlife, a ghost haunting fiction's house who can never be exorcised. And lastly, as James's restages in *The Awkward Age*'s "artistic truth," there is no such thing as the form-content distinction. Any narrative's ontology is nothing but that of the literary character; the mimetic dimension and the formal are not separate, but only emerge out of a figural interplay with one another. "Shut up wholly to cross-relations," fiction does not represent something outside of itself, but rather brings into existence the very world it is supposed to imitate. In *The Awkward Age*, it seems, James finally turns his conception of art as the thing that makes life into a work's sole structural principle, into the ontological ground of an entire novelistic world.

Talk without bodies on surfaces without depth

This investigation into the Jamesian ontology of character, then, can reach its culmination by looking at the life of character in *The Awkward Age*, this most anomalous and extravagant, yet ultimately most exemplary, of his novels. Who are these people who step onto its uncanny stage? As in Derrida's analysis of Mallarmé's text, there is an abyssal act of auto-reference that complicates the stability of representational truth. James' novel, like the mime's gestures, represents characters whose only existence is as representation. What they do and say is what they are, such that the two are made essentially indistinguishable. *The Portrait of a Lady* began with the dominant question of

what Isabel will do, and in the same way, *The Awkward Age* ultimately rests on the question of what is going to happen to Nanda Brookenham, the lost innocent around whose awkwardness everything unfolds. However, as with Isabel, the question cannot simply be that of what will happen, but rather, and more importantly, what is she in the first place? The epistemological question must be recast as an ontological one. That is, the novel is not so much about what Nanda knows and does, as it is about what Nanda is. What is this "vague slip of a daughter" that lies at the novel's heart? What kind of creature is she, and who are these people around her? What monsters, what ghosts?

In the preface's outline of the construction of the novel's dramatic structure, James describes how he was reduced to drawing the novel in geometric terms. The "germ," the subject of the awkward age of young girls in *fin de siècle* London, was grabbed quickly and painlessly from life. Then, by a kind of alchemy, it is turned into the pure surface of form before it becomes anything else:

> I drew on a sheet of paper…the neat figure of a circle consisting of a number of small rounds disposed at equal distance about a central object. The central object was my situation, my subject in itself, to which the thing would owe its title, *and the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps*, as I liked to call them, the function of each of which would be to light with all due intensity of one of its aspects (*PNY* 1130, my emphasis).

James draws out *The Awkward Age*'s structure, pared down to its pure form, as if it were reducible to a collection of abstract figures, hovering around the central object, the "awkward age" about which everyone is so concerned.[60] But the figures are not abstract

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[60] Wiesenfarth astutely notes that all of James's novels are built around centers, but that some do not happen to be centers of consciousness. *The Awkward Age*, singly among James's work, "finds its center in

entirely, as they "represent" lamps which each in turn shed a new light upon the situation. The lamps, though, do not refer to the illuminating power of a consciousness, as one might expect from James, but rather:

> Each of my "lamps" would be the light of a single "social occasion" in the history and intercourse of the characters concerned, and would bring out to the full the latent colour of the scene in question and cause it to illustrate, to the last drop, its bearing on my theme…The beauty of the conception was in the approximation of the respective divisions of my form to the successive Acts of a Play (*PNY* 1131).

James curiously uses a visual metaphor of focalization and illumination for a world in which there is none to be found. The lamp is not aligned with a character, such as the points of view of Isabel Archer or Maggie Verver, but rather with social occasions, the interactions between characters which comprise the novel's drama. The central object is not going to be seen and understood by means of what any character thinks about it, by the shedding of their illuminating intelligence upon it; rather, the central object is only going to be known by what the characters *say* about it. Without any interiority that James might access, the characters can only betray their illuminating powers of consciousness in their talk.[61]

As characters, the figures in *The Awkward Age*'s social set clearly comprise the action; the story is ultimately nothing but what they do. But as characters who talk, and

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a situation" (40). What Wiesenfarth does not pursue, however, is the way in which this fact may undo the supposedly assured psychologism of the central consciousness. That is, if the reflector can just as easily be replaced by the impersonality of a situation, then perhaps the very structure of the center does not function according to the organicism and unmediated mimeticism such a reflector would seem to promise.

[61] J. Hillis Miller suggestively describes each of these "occasions" as "a catachresis for an unnamed central object, the situation, which can be named in no other way….These Occasions are acts of language figured by the optical images James uses, not literally matters of seeing at all" (110). Similarly, Sheila Teahan notes that "the visual and pictorial values by which he conceives the scenic method…are outlined in densely metaphorical language whose rhetorical complexity undercuts the perceptual and spatial models they would uphold" (145-6).

do largely nothing but talk, they are also what illuminates the action, though in a highly indirect way that consistently casts doubt on the actual success of any illumination that might lead the reader to understanding. With no narrating figure present as guarantor of truth, as James waits powerlessly in the backstage, the only means of illumination in this world is that of the characters' own talk.[62] Something like the intensely lit lamp of Isabel's nighttime vigil, when we penetrate into the depths of her consciousness as it itself penetrates into the depth of her story, is entirely absent in this world. James does not "go behind" because there is no one there to do it.

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[62] There are critics who have seemed to make a sort of parlor game of showing how James's presence is all over the novel; how, in a sense, his actual formal achievement in no way merits his description of complete objectivity in the preface. See for instance Carl Nelson's "James's Social Criticism," in which he writes that "the narrator's role becomes the focal point of James's representational strategy and its significance" (152-3), ultimately terming James, as he is made present throughout the novel, "the too loud showman" (151). Arnold Davidson also suggests that James's claims toward objectivity in *The Awkward Age* have been grossly exaggerated, although he reads very few actual instances from the novel itself. Perhaps the most notable example of this trend is John E. Tilford's "James the Old Intruder," in which he describes James's scenic method as "a dazzling technical trick that does not quite come off" (164). With relish, he notes that the conventional narratorial phrase of nineteenth century fiction, "our friend," appears over sixty-five times in *The Ambassadors*. Booth helps to gently defend James from such critiques, while at the same time, essentially making the same critique; see pp. 58-60. I must add that I am not entirely interested in the issue of whether or not the novel contains narratorial "intrusions" that might belie its objectivity. This would not necessarily detract from what I argue is the novel's greater interest, the ontological ramifications of a novel imagined as an impossible play, a work of art in which there is no one present to bring the work into existence aside from the actors themselves. And it may as well be stated for the record that *The Awkward Age*'s instances of a narrating presence are many, although for the most part they are highly indirect, and in fact do nothing but acknowledge the absence of any such presence. The novel contains only one instance of the narrative voice using the first person singular: "I must yet haste to say" (*AA* 288); nine uses of the first person plural, for example: this "might prove to have been, should we penetrate" (*AA* 185); two impersonal references to "Longdon's historian" (*AA* 123) and "Vanderbank's chronicler" (*AA* 131); four instances of the device of referring to a character as "our friend" (*AA* 28, 148, 152) or "our young lady" (*AA* 187); and two instances where the narration refers to Longdon as "poor" (*AA* 121, 244), which is of course one of novelistic language's more subtle ways of betraying mimesis as diegesis. These rare instances, however, are overshadowed by, and their note of personal presence is entirely undone by, the far more common method of subtly "going behind" the characters by means of hypothesis, by referencing a possible spectator or observer or witness. There are twenty-nine references to such a spectator, and I will offer just a single example: "A supposititious spectator would certainly on this have imagined in the girl's face the delicate dawn of a sense that her mother had suddenly become vulgar, together with a general consciousness that the way to meet vulgarity was always to be frank and simple" (*AA* 191). This strangely dominant mood of the past conditional throughout the novel suggests always an implied subjunctive completion; that is, this *may* have been seen or noticed, *if* there had been anyone there to see it. But, of course, there is not, nor has there ever been. For a discussion of the strange temporal effects of James's method on the reader, see David Kurnick's recent essay, especially pp. 112-4. He notes: "If the normal temporal protocols of the realist novel tell the readers that this is how it was…or that this is how it is…, we might translate the temporal environment of *The Awkward Age* as delivering the much more peculiar message: 'You had to be there'" (113).

Curiously, then, the novel's action is nothing but its illumination; nothing happens but the illumination of its own unfolding. There is not a content, an objective story that may have happened somewhere, that is then formed, or turned into a meaningful and understandable narrative. Rather, the forming of the content is the novel's actual content. The characters are all there are, and all the characters are is their talk, this notorious freedom of expression for which the members of this malicious social set both celebrate and willfully destroy themselves. Without any representational depths upon which their surface play might be supported, without even any concrete bodily description – if this novel reads very much like a play, it is a kind of impossible play that could never unfold before any spectators[63] – these characters bring themselves, and each other, into existence only with their very words. James's method for introducing each character is in fact highly perverse, a kind of gesture toward mimesis that does nothing but undermine any realist concreteness the gesture might evoke. To offer only a few examples:

> [Mr. Longdon] wore neither whisker nor moustache and seemed to carry in the flicker of his quick brown eyes and the positive sun-play of his smile even more than the equivalent of what might, superficially or stupidly, elsewhere be missed in him; which was mass, substance, presence – what is vulgarly called importance. He had indeed no presence, but he had somehow an effect (*AA* 20).

> [Edward Brookenham] had a pale, cold face, marked and made regular, made even in a manner handsome, by a hardness of line in which, oddly, there was no significance, no accent….So dry and decent and even distinguished did he look,

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[63] Or as David Kurnick describes it: "*The Awkward Age* creates imaginative difficulties for its reader that are only resolvable through the often extraordinarily difficult visualization of a hypothetical scene of enactment…The novel is perhaps best understood as a blueprint for an impossible or withheld performance" (110).

as if he had positively been created to meet a propriety and match some other piece, his wife, with her notorious perceptions, would no more have appealed to him seriously on a general proposition than she would, for such a response, have rung with drawing-room bell. He was none the less held to have a great general adequacy (*AA* 53).

Mr. Mitchett had so little intrinsic appearance that an observer would have felt indebted, as an aid to memory, to the rare prominence of his colourless eyes and the positive attention drawn to the chin by the precipitation of its retreat from detection (*AA* 59).

This last description of Mr. Mitchett, or Mitchy as he is called, one of the core members of Mrs. Brookenham's social set, and the man who is revealed to be in love with her daughter Nanda, is the most outrageously void of any description at all. His features are described, but, like the novel as a whole, they are present only in their absence. The physical introduction of Nanda herself, however, is the one that is perhaps the most striking.

As per the convention of many classical dramas, the heroine does not make her appearance on stage until after the first two acts, but Nanda is from the start firmly placed as the novel's center of interest. The first of the novel's ten occasions describes the meeting between Mr. Longdon, the visiting outsider to London and the old suitor of Nanda's grandmother, Lady Julia, and Vanderbank, one of Mrs. Brookenham's closest friends, and the man with whom Nanda herself is secretly in love. While reminiscing about Lady Julia, Longdon becomes startled when he sees a photograph of Nanda in Vanderbank's apartment. He initially remarks that she "isn't so pretty," an observation

followed by Vanderbank's claim: "There's a great question whether Nanda is pretty at all" (*AA* 30). While Vanderback establishes that Nanda exists for her mother's circle as an open question, any visual foothold the reader may of thought he had gained with the mere knowledge that she is not terribly pretty is undermined by Longdon's next consideration: "Lady Julia was exquisite, and this child's exactly like her" (ibid.). When Vanderbank questions this paradox, Longdon considers: "She has just Lady Julia's expression. She absolutely *has* it – I see it here…She's much more like the dead than the living" (*AA* 31). Lady Julia may have been beautiful, and whether Nanda is or not is not the real issue. Rather, the affinity she shares with her grandmother cannot be reduced to physical appearance; she is simply a being of another kind from this thoroughly modern set. Vanderbank goes on to describe this predicament of Nanda's incommensurability with the modern, in one of the novel's most uncharacteristically straightforward speeches:

> "*She has no features. No, not one*…unless indeed you put it that she has two or three too many. What I was going to say was that *she has in her expression all that's charming in her nature*. But beauty, in London…staring, glaring, obvious, knock-down beauty, as plain as a poster on a wall, an advertisement of soap or whisky, something that speaks to the crowd and crosses the foot-lights, fetches such a price in the market that the absence of it, for a woman with a girl to marry, inspires endless terrors and constitutes for the wretched pair – to speak of mother and daughter alone – a sort of social bankruptcy. *London doesn't love the latent or the lurking*, has neither time, nor taste, nor sense for anything less discernible than the red flag in front of the steam-roller. It wants cash over the counter and

letters ten feet high. Therefore, you see, *it's all as yet rather a dark question for poor Nanda* – a question that, in a way, quite occupies the foreground of her mother's earnest little life. *How will she look, what will be thought of her and what will she be able to do for herself*? She's at the age when the whole thing – speaking of her appearance, her possible share of good looks, is still, in a manner, in a fog. But everything depends on it" (*AA* 32, my emphases).

Nanda, with "no features," is characterized as the "latent and the lurking," for whom everything is still an enormous question. And if this world is a stage, at once a macabre circus and a vulgar advertisement, then there seems to be no room for her in its troupe of actors, no means by which she could adapt herself to its love of surfaces.[64]

Like Isabel Archer before her, Nanda is an outsider in her world because she does not understand the rules of its particular game, both in the aesthetic sense and in the social. Not only does she belong to another world, the distinctively past one in which Lady Julia blossomed, but she seems to belong to another novel as well. She may remain as disembodied as the other characters of *The Awkward Age*, being without features, but she has the unique distinction that "she has in her expression all that's charming in her nature." James constructs the descriptions of the other characters out of paradoxes and wordplays and abstract details that consistently amount to no kind of description at all, but Nanda most certainly does have a face, and moreover, it is a face that corresponds to some kind of depth, to her "nature," to the "latent and the lurking." When Vanderbank and Longdon next meet, the elder figure finally lays eyes on Nanda for the first time, and he reacts with the uncanny shock of recognition. They go on to discuss Nanda's face at

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[64] In the preface to "The Aspern Papers" (1888), James explicitly codes the modern world, his sense of whose vulgarity can be found all over his work, as a kind of drama, contrasting a not even very distant past to "the very theatre of our own 'modernity'" (*PNY* 1177).

great length, not only remarking at its similarity to Lady Julia's, but adding that it is a face that "isn't a bit modern," "a face of Sir Thomas Lawrence," of Gainsborough, and of Raphael; "a face that should have the long side-ringlets of 1830…and should be a reader of Mrs. Radcliffe" (*AA* 95-6). If Isabel Archer's difference lay in her "thoroughly American point of view," cast adrift in Europe, then Nanda's is due to her thorough absence of modernity; she has an ego and a "nature" that belong, not to Emerson's America, but to the nineteenth-century novel. Not only does she have a face, but all of her being is to be seen in it, even if it that being remains during her awkward age only still a question.

Nanda is a stranger to her social world, but also, and most importantly, she also remains a stranger to her novelistic world. In his first conversation with Longdon, Vanderbank straightforwardly establishes the rules of this world, which is a curious moment since those rules themselves exclude anything like straightforwardness. After Longdon has been introduced to Mrs. Brookenham's social set, he expresses his shock at the way they talk so freely. In particular, he cannot comprehend that Mrs. Brookenham would explicitly lie about Nanda's age so as to implicitly lie about her own; and moreover, he is stunned that Vanderbank would so casually and seemingly cruelly tell him about this. Vanderbank defends their talk by informing Longdon of its basic ground rules: "It's impossible to say too much – it's impossible to say enough. There isn't anything any one can say that I won't agree to" (*AA* 29). His defense declares the law by which these people live and die, love and hate. They can say everything, and it becomes true. For these characters who live only in and as language, language will have an irresistible kind of performative power, its own particularly strong efficacious "truth."

This becomes a running joke throughout the novel, as characters repeatedly bestow attributes upon one another in short declaratives – "You're delightful" (*AA* 46); "You're too magnificent" (*AA* 111); "You're very, very wonderful" (*AA* 118); "You're stupendous" (*AA* 302) – which, once uttered, become true simply by virtue of the fact that they are said. These people would have no other way of knowing.

As in James's formulation that "it is art that *makes* life," *life is language*, for these characters; the order of reality is found in aesthetic play. Nothing exists before its verbal manifestation, not even the characters, and so there reigns in this world an ontological uncertainty, as if the characters themselves suspect their own existential instability. Figures without reference to anything namable, or perhaps that even exists, these characters themselves speak in a language that is consciously indirect, constantly questioning each other's meaning and reference, as if any utterance, and also anyone doing the uttering, is always ontologically suspect. If nothing exists outside of talk, then what is it that they could even be talking about? To what could their words even refer if not only to an ever increasing verbal realm? As the Duchess, a member of the circle but only marginally, having recently returned to England after a long exile in Italy, utters at one point, once the talk really begins to get underway: "You're very odd people, all of you, and I don't think you quite know how ridiculous you are….*You're all inconceivable* just now" (*AA* 69-70, my emphasis). And there is in fact something inconceivable about a figure like Mrs. Brookenham, the circle's guiding figure, who declares about her own mode of being: "I happen to be so constituted that my life has something to do with my mind and my mind has something to do with my talk" (*AA* 170). She states her own ontological nature in such a way that the middle term essentially drops out; her life *is* her

talk, and whatever mind that may exist only does so as a kind of by-product, an effect of a life that is only produced in and as talk.

The Awkward Age's universe of talk has been perhaps most expertly read by Tzvetan Todorov, in an essay originally published as "The Verbal Age," and reprinted in *Genres in Discourse* (1978). Categorizing at length the various modes of discourse used by the characters, Todorov ultimately concludes that

> talk constitutes the principal events of the characters' lives, and their world is truly verbal….Not only is the novel made up of conversations, but these are quite peculiar conversations: *they do not evoke events external to themselves, they are events*. It is as though language-as-narrative and language-as-action were no longer complimentary aspects of a single activity: in this story, conversations "tell" nothing at all. Conversations form the story but do not recount it (125-6, my emphasis).[65]

The ontological instability engendered by such a verbal world, in which conversations create the story rather than refer to a story outside of, or prior to, themselves, is made even more exacerbated by the fact that the characters talk *ad infinitum*, but consistently

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[65] See also Ralf Norrman, who describes five major mannerisms that construct James's world, one of which is "the 'finding a formula'-formula, which involves a tendency on the part of James's characters to half-believe in a magic power of language over reality, so that if only something can be formulated in the right way the magic inherent in words will mysteriously make reality conform to language" (2). Later, Norrman describes James himself as a believer in such a formula: "The longing is for a world in which language reigns alone without the constant threat from reality. If only there existed a world in which verbal magic worked! If only there was a world in which 'saying makes it so'! Well, the world of literature *is* such a world. Literary verbalization is self-sufficient; contact with reality is a distraction. When reality has helped to put the verbal literary imagination in motion reality is no longer needed" (130, Norrman's emphasis). Similarly, Todorov concludes his essay by grouping James with the characters of *The Awkward Age*: "Somewhere within himself he writes – as he always does – a social and realist novel, about love and money, thus about marriage. But words do not grasp things. Far from suffering from this, however…James gives himself over little by little to the pleasure he discovers in these sentences that give rise to others, ad infinitum…He who plays with words will have only words: this observation is tinged in James with two opposing feelings, regret at having lost the world, joy at the autonomous proliferation of language. And his novels are the incarnation of this ambiguity" (126-7).

deny themselves a talk that would say what it means. As Vanderbank describes the rules of the game: "We hate and we love – the latter especially – but to tell each other why is to break that little tacit rule of finding out for ourselves which is the delight of our lives and the source of our triumphs" (*AA* 237). They can do and say everything, but the one thing they cannot do is say why. And if there is nothing but talk, then what meaning or reason would there be to discover anyway? If there is nothing but talk, and talk can never speak the truth, then there is a curious absence of referential efficacy to their talk; in fact, the talk only seems to function because of its lack of reference. As Mitchy describes their talk to Longdon: "It's unimaginable. But it doesn't matter. We all call everything – anything. The meaning of it, if you and I put it so, is – well, a modern shade" (*AA* 165). Everything can be called anything, save for whatever it is to which it actually may refer, and there is no longer any ground that is not purely fictive.[66] As Todorov writes:

> Obliqueness has attained such a degree that it is no longer obliqueness: the tethers between words and things have not only been loosened or twisted, they have been cut. Language functions in a space that will remain forever linguistic…..We no longer know whether [each remark] leads to any reality, and if so, which one. Symbolization and inference might be bearers of solid information in a world where they found themselves framed by direct speech, or at least by instruments allowing interpretation to be oriented and verified. Yet…indirect information is not only predominant in this book, it is the only information available. As it

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[66] Yeazell notes, about James's entire late period in general although her claim could serve as a warning to any potential reader of *The Awkward Age*: "When the characters in James's late fiction talk, the reader suffers from a kind of epistemological vertigo, for he is granted no secure position from which to judge the moral or even the factual truth of what is being said" (71).

achieves its highest possible degree, it changes nature, and ceases to be information at all (126).

This world, then, in which language no longer even qualifies as information about anything beyond itself, in which meaning is created with each new verbal utterance, may be described as an entirely catachretic one. The characters in *The Awkward Age* most certainly exist; we can ultimately grow to know Mrs. Brookenham, Mitchy, and Vanderbank as mimetic people. They have minds that know and inner beings that feel. However, there are no words to describe them, no phrases that could correspond to these inner lives. Their character exists, but only in and as talk that does not properly correspond to any essence that could lie on its outside.

If this is the governing rule of *The Awkward Age*, both formally as a novel and mimetically as the creation of a world, then Nanda, as she steps on onto the stage, is going to fundamentally disrupt this law's workings. As we have seen, she is a figure of another kind in this world of "morbid modernity" (*AA* 60), as Mitchy terms it. Her being does not lie solely in her surface, but rather, one can see in her "expression" a "nature" that is not the same thing as that expression, as Longdon and Vanderbank had discovered while looking at her photograph. And once Nanda finally does enter the novel, in its third chapter, she begins explicitly to make it apparent that her mother's rules of talk are in no way her own. As opposed to the indirection and obliqueness of the others, Nanda explicitly declares at one point to Vanderbank: "I'm true!" (*AA* 131), a statement entirely anomalous in a world in which there is no such thing as truth outside of verbal play. Presumably, when Nanda declares herself to be true, she is not uttering the kind of performative employed by her mother and her friends, whereby if one would declare

oneself to be true, one is, but only in the sense in which "truth" has nothing but a relative meaning; rather, her "truth" would correspond to some verifiable nature, the literal counterpart to her verbal utterance. Similarly, when Longdon finally meets her, he is startled by the tone of her own talk, "the directness that made her honesty almost violent;" and as the narrative voice notes, "she might have struck him as literal" (*AA* 97). She must strike him as a curious figure indeed, if she can be "literal" in a world in which such a quality is not even allowed to exist.

As they continue their conversation, Longdon continues to be startled by Nanda's way of being, to the point of concern: "*Her mixture of free familiarity and of the vividness of evocation of something, whatever it was*, sharply opposed – the little worry of this contradiction, not altogether unpleasant, continued to fill his consciousness more discernibly than anything else" (*AA* 100, my emphasis). In contrast to the verbal acts of auto-reference that dominate in the circle into which Longdon has been thrown, Nanda operates according to a different kind of rhetoric. Freshly stepped down into the drawing room, she has already adopted her mother's "free familiarity," or at least a naïve version of it, as exemplified by her strange outburst in praise of talk, after Longdon marvels at the mysteries into which these people plunge. "Oh, we do," Nanda exclaims, "that's what every one says of us. We discuss everything and every one – we're always discussing each other. I think we must be rather celebrated for it, and it's a kind of trick – isn't it? – that's catching" (*AA* 99). Nanda, however, celebrates talk without quite understanding it. She describes the work of her mother's circle as talking about one another as if it could be true in a literal sense; there are, for Nanda, people who already exist to be talked about, rather than people who are only constituted through the play of talk. Nanda

appreciates the modern liberality of her mother's circle because, being literal, she thinks of it as mere talk; that is, what could be the harm of talking about everything as long as one is only talking? For not only does Nanda begin to possess her mother's "free familiarity," but Longdon senses that it is combined with that "vividness of evocation of something." When Nanda talks, she talks about something; she means what she says and she knows what she means. She may employ rhetoric, but it is for her integrally intertwined with reference.

The literal impossible

Nanda is, in a word, "true." However, her truth is far from that "artistic truth" that James had found in *The Awkward Age*; she is certainly not "true" in the way in which Mallarmé's mime is true And being true, her chances of survival in Mrs. Brookenham's circle, a "society in which variety of reference had brought to high perfection, for usual safety, the sense of signs" (*AA* 227), grow increasingly dim. Mitchy simply notes at one point that "she's tragic" (*AA* 94), and if a reason for her tragedy can be ascribed, then it is not only that she *is* a person of another kind, but that she *talks* like a person of another kind. Her mother wonders at one point: "What does she think or dream? Truly she's laying up treasures" (*AA* 66); and Nanda's tragic flaw is precisely this capacity to be unknowable, not to give everything away in talk. Nanda is doomed by an anachronistic inwardness, and I would follow Dorothea Krook in arguing:

> The tragic situation in *The Awkward Age* is a development and refinement of the central situation in *The Portrait of a Lady*. There, we remember, the tragic failure of Isabel Archer's marriage was likewise due to her misfortune in possessing a

'mind'—the kind of mind that (like Nanda Brookenham's) could not but be critical of the values of the world (156).

On top of this tragic flaw of simply "possessing a mind," of having a nature that exists independently of her expression, Nanda also has a different understanding of language's capacity for truth. Mitchy claims that Nanda is tragic because she lacks only one thing, "a sense of humour" (*AA* 94), and perhaps this is simply another way of saying that Nanda uses language in a highly literal way, and that she has not given up on reference between words and things. J. Hillis Miller suggests that Nanda's goodness, her simple possession of a mind that could not help but be better than the world around it, may be linked to her relationship to language, what he terms her "complete lack of irony:"

> She has no gift for figurative language, nor does she possess a sense of humor. She is absolutely literal in what she says to the others. She rarely smiles or laughs, whereas the others are constantly ironic, figurative, and indirect in what they say, like James himself…One of Vanderbank's most characteristic gestures, the mark of him as a man, is his laughter, and Mitchy often laughs too. That is a bad sign for both of them, as is their gift for irony. Irony is immoral, this would imply, a nasty vice. It does not say what is the case, straightforwardly, but says it in some other thing, as does figurative language (133).

Being literal and without irony, Nanda will be unable to find any place on her mother's cruel stage. The nature of the actor on stage is to represent nothing but his own act of representation, to bring himself into existence through his fictive gestures that figure nothing literal, or prior to their own figurative process. Putting her daughter on the marriage market, Mrs. Brookenham codes Nanda as the star attraction of their troupe:

"She too has her little place with the circus – it's the way we earn our living" (*AA* 119).
But Nanda's mind, her simple goodness that lies on the hither side of her expressivity,
assures that she will find no success in modernity's theater and in her mother's circus.
We might say that she is doomed to be a failure along the proportions of James's own
Guy Donville.

Talk is the thing that has created this world, and the people who inhabit it, and as
the novel opens, Vanderbank is curiously aware of what an outsider like Longdon would
find so appalling about it. After Longdon claims that the whole group is "too clever,"
Vanderbank responds: "What you mean, at any rate…is that we're cold and sarcastic and
cynical, without the soft human spot" (*AA* 36). There is nothing human about the
tropology of this kind of talk, spreading as it does across the surfaces whose once
corresponding depths have been entirely severed. If the social set is, as Vanderbank
claims, "past saving" (*AA* 29), then Longdon recognizes that Nanda is the one figure who
is not doomed, or at least doomed in the way the others are. She is precisely that "soft
human spot," the remnant of a depth in a world that is no longer supported by any.
Depths do not precede talk in this world, but are only a figurative effect of them, as for
instance, in those declarative descriptors the characters throw around so often to one
another. For instance, Mrs. Brookenham is not "too magnificent" because that is her
essential nature, but only because Vanderbank declares her to be, allowing her to respond
with the affirmative "I *am*" (*AA* 111), as if her character is still being constructed at each
moment with each new utterance.[67] Longdon, on the other hand, desires a "human"

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[67] In his essay "Censorship and Intimacy," Stuart Culver has, I think correctly, defined the law of identity
in *The Awkward Age* as one by which "the self is…merely what is discovered in this game of interpretation,
not an integrity outside of its representation in verbal exchange, but a product of that exchange" (380). See
also Rivkin's observation, made within the terms of her larger reading of "the myth of the virgin": "Identity

element that exists as a fundamental nature, not yet understanding that he has emerged from his decades in the English countryside into the London of the modernist novel. As he begins to understand later, "it's I…who have lost the link in my sleep. I've slept half the century – I'm Rip Van Winkle" (*AA* 136). And the link that he has lost, and which he is slowly gathering, is that massive sea change lying between Lady Julia and her daughter, between the character of the nineteenth-century's beginning and the character of its very last year.

Like Longdon, Nanda is emerging from a sleep, though hers has not been nearly as long, and it only took place in her nursery upstairs from the drawing room. Perhaps it was a sleep spent reading too many realist novels, but whatever the case, she shares Longdon's immunity from talk. As she declares to Vanderbank: "I'm not struck only with what I'm talked to about. I don't only know…what people tell me" (*AA* 197). And toward the novel's end, once Nanda has overcome her initial enthusiasm for her mother's ways and learned the cruel lesson that her mode of being has no place in this theater, it is noted, in another conversation with Vanderbank, that "the talk, Nanda's face implied, had become dim to her; but there were other things" (284). Built upon more than talk, character for Nanda is not the same thing as it is for the world around her. She declares her own theory of character at one point to Longdon:

"One's just what one *is* – isn't one? I don't mean so much," she went on, "in one's character or temper – for they have, haven't they?, to be what's called 'properly controlled' – as in one's mind and what one sees and feels and the sort

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or character in this novel is not a single stable entity, not 'virginal,' but a contextual construction, one that shifts from book to book as James moves through his various 'aspects'" (175-6).

of thing one notices." Nanda paused an instant; then "There you are!" she simply but rather desperately brought out.

Mr. Longdon considered this with visible intensity. "What you suggest is that the things you speak of depend upon other people? (*AA* 141)"

Nanda notices that Longdon finds her theory of character unexpected, precisely in that she understands his feeling that Lady Julia would never have maintained any such credo, to which Nanda responds: "If we're both partly the result of other people, *her* [Lady Julia's] other people were so different" (ibid., James's emphasis). If Nanda does in fact express a theory of character here, then it is a unique amalgamation of Longdon's and her mother's. Unlike the Emersonian Isabel Archer, Nanda at least already understands that one is not simply what one *is*, but that identity is a contextual construction, dependent upon systems and codes that spread far beyond oneself. However, she has also not entirely given up on the stability of character, as has her mother's set, or Madame Merle before them. One is constructed out of the world around one, but only insofar as one remains a unified core, with a mind that sees and feels and notices the scene outside of itself. As far as Nanda is concerned, her only downfall is that she is forced to see and feel and notice a world far more vulgar and cruel than Lady Julia's.

Nanda gets the rhetoric of character right, but her tragedy lies in the fact that she has the order of the rhetoric's figurative move reversed. There is a mutually interdependent relationship between self and representation, whether this lie in talk or in one's own representational construction of the world, but Nanda persists in believing that the self lies before representation. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, and its competing theories of character, Isabel Archer ultimately abandoned her belief in the autonomy of her ego so as

to be able to play Madame Merle's European game. Nanda, on the other hand, chooses to maintain her allegiance to Longdon and Lady Julia, and so, within *The Awkward Age*'s performative extravagances she becomes, simply, impossible. And she becomes impossible because she remains, just as simply, true. "I shall never change," she declares to Vanderbank, "I shall be always just the same….What I am I must remain. I haven't what's called a principle of growth" (*AA* 132). What Nanda is, and what she must remain, is precisely doomed.

At the novel's end, Nanda erupts to Longdon in a moment of great feeling: "It's I – it's I, therefore…*it's I who am the horrible impossible* and who have covered everything else with my own impossibility" (*AA* 309, my emphasis). It seems as if, within the novel's logic, Nanda is discussing the fact that she has become unmarriageable in her mother's market. Longdon has tried to save her by essentially bribing Vanderbank to marry her and take her out of Mrs. Brookenham's vicious circle. However, Vanderbank will not marry her because she knows too much; Nanda has heard the very adult things they all talk about and so, according to his own performative logic, she may as well have done them, since to talk is to do.[68] Nanda, on the other hand, will not marry Mitchy, who sincerely loves her, precisely because he does not mind all the things she knows. And so, caught in an unsolvable double bind and unable to live within this logic of London's marriage market, Nanda accompanies Longdon to his house in the countryside, presumably to leave the entire theater of modernity behind, an ending that can strike one as either triumphant or melancholy.

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[68] While I remain confident in offering this relatively straightforward explanation of Vanderbank's refusal, J. Hillis Miller offers a highly suggestive reading that Vanderbank's action is in fact over-determined, and that its motive is ultimately undecidable. See pp. 137-50.

However, what I want to ultimately suggest is that Nanda's impossibility lies more centrally in her conception of character, in her own anachronistic rhetoric of personhood. She is impossible, not within her mother's circle, but within the very representational system upon which her mother's circle depends. She is impossible because, as she has recently declared to Vanderbank: "Here I am for you therefore as natural as a cold in your head" (*AA* 289). Literal and natural, she simply cannot inhabit a Henry James novel for long. We can see this representational impossibility of Nanda's in an earlier instance in the novel in which she declares something to be "impossible." During a weekend when Longdon has gathered a collection of guests at his country house, Nanda stumbles upon Vanderbank alone in the garden, where he is absentmindedly poring through "a large book of facts" (*AA* 196). As they slowly begin their conversation, "some minutes later, while, near him but in another chair, *she fingered the impossible book, as she pronounced it*, that she had taken from him" (*AA* 197, my emphasis). Finding it impossible, she quickly throws it aside so as to descend into one of their characteristically indirect conversations, one whose very defining law is that it must have nothing to do with facts. Why is it this "book of facts" that Nanda pronounces to be "impossible?" And why is it not *The Awkward Age*'s more famous book, the dirty "French novel in blue paper" (*AA* 223) which plays such a central role in the novel's climactic scene, the one Nanda would find impossible? Nanda's character, it turns out, is integrally related to her own theory of reading, not only books of facts, but French novels as well.[69]

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[69] Two recent essays on *The Awkward Age*, by David Kurnick and Sheila Teahan, though not without their relative merits, are both fundamentally rendered problematic by the fact that each critic's reading is ultimately dependent upon the "impossible book" at *The Awkward Age*'s center. This in itself is not problematic, but what *is,* is that both critics make the egregious mistake of identifying the French novel as

The scandalous French novel becomes the ultimate signifier of Nanda's unmarriageability simply because she has read it. And if, as we know, in this performative world, to talk is to make happen, then to read is essentially to do, as if all the characters are suffering from a collective case of *Bovaryisme*. Nanda's acquaintance with the book comes out during the novel's climactic scene in chapter eight, when all of the characters are gathered together in the drawing room of Nanda's unhappily married friend, Tishy Grendon. Nanda has brought the book along with her from her mother's house, where Vanderbank had left it in the first place. When the book is discovered in Tishy's house, Mrs. Brookenham, in a kind of act of willful destruction, becomes all too intent on forcing Nanda to admit that she has read it:

> "But what on earth did you bring it for? It's too hideous."
>
> Nanda seemed to wonder. "Is it?" she murmured.
>
> "Then you haven't read it?"
>
> She just hesitated. "One hardly knows now, I think, what is and what isn't"
>
> (*AA* 251).

A few moments later, Nanda finally admits it, and her fate is sealed. According to Mrs. Brookenham's logic, the fiction of Nanda's innocence is past any saving. But for Nanda, on the other hand, the novel can hardly be called hideous, let alone impossible, because it is only a novel. To read about scandalous things is not to perform scandalous things, and

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the "impossible" one. Teahan writes, in what essentially amounts to her central claim: "Van's 'impossible book,' the French novel whose circulation stages Nanda's definitive and fatal exposure, thus figures *The Awkward Age* itself. Like Van's, James's book is indelibly inscribed by the impossibility imputed to Nanda" (156). Kurnick explicitly borrows Teahan's mistaken "observation," as his reading finds its major thrust in the novel's tropology of "impossibility" as the key to its own "generic impossibility." See the essay's last ten pages, but p. 121 in particular for the references to Teahan and to the impossible book. I can only stress again that only one book is called "impossible" in the novel, and it is Nanda's reference to Vanderbank's "book of facts."

opinions about literary works do not, for her, create one's moral life, let alone ones experience. The two things belong to entirely separate ontological orders.

The book of facts, on the other hand, Nanda understands to be impossible within the representational system of *The Awkward Age* precisely because it operates according to a mode of signification in which reference is not yet problematized. There is simply no possibility of any such thing as a "fact" in a world whose law is that, as we will remember Vanderbank's early description: "It's impossible to say too much – it's impossible to say enough. There isn't anything any one can say that I won't agree to" (*AA* 29). Everything and anything is possible, only if and when it is said. Nothing is true outside of, or prior to, talk. Language creates facts; it does not report them. Isabel Archer may have accepted what it is to live like a heroine in a novel in which words create thing rather than report them, but Nanda Brookenham will make no such concession. To read, for her, will never be the same thing as to live. Thus, acknowledging her own "impossibility," she can do nothing but remove herself from the scene, both of late modernity and of James's modernist construction of the novelistic character.

Nanda is cast out from a world in which being is nothing but an effect of language, in short, the world of fiction. Her story narrates the final farewell to fiction's faith in its power to simply present the semblance of a person, while at the same time it serves as the ground out of which modernist "personhood" is born. If the literary character exists as a dialectic between implied personhood and impersonal structural position, between metaphoric depths and metonymic continuity, then what James displays in *The Awkward Age*, is that the former is only a result of the latter. What Isabel Archer had to learn, and what James himself only worked out gradually on his path from

realism to modernism, becomes in *The Awkward Age* the novel's very condition of possibility, the ground upon which its ontology rests. Literary personhood is an effect of language. Written in the purity of the scenic method, *The Awkward Age* offers the most innocent kind of mimesis, wherein nothing is told or formed, but bodies are only shown in the physicality of the stage's lights. But mimesis is not, in this new novelistic world, the initial promise, but only the uncanny effect, the creation of life out of death.

The Awkward Age, and any other of James's novels standing on the verge of modernism's representational adventures, is populated by characters whose "consciousness" is a kind of signifying system that points to no prior signified. The actor is in fact a product of the operations of acting; the referent is a product of the very act of referring. The inner life of character does not precede its verbal manifestation, but only emerges from it, for these people without signifying bodies, or even faces whose attributes could amount to anything meaningful. Ghosts, monsters, the immortal survivors of figurative deaths, James's cast of characters inhabit that unique space of immortality erected by the novelist. Complex souls and fierce consciousnesses, they forever haunt fiction's house of the dead.

CHAPTER THREE: UNTANGLING VIRGINIA WOOLF'S WEB

Virginia Woolf writes in her 1924 essay "Character in Fiction" that character lies at the very heart of the enterprise of novel writing. It is her most programmatic statement, not only about character, but about fiction in general, as it is here that she makes her famous distinction between the older generation of the Edwardian novelists, namely Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells, and Johns Galsworthy, and the modern generation of Georgians, including not only herself, but the other key novelists of British modernism, E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence, and James Joyce. The distinction is made between the two generations precisely with regard to their attitude toward character, and to their differing methods in representing the human figure in the language of fiction. Asserting that the novelist's chief impulse is "to create some character" (*EVW III* 421), Woolf begins the essay by explaining her central intention as wanting "to make out what we mean when we talk about 'character' in fiction" (ibid). For Woolf, the form of the novel, it seems, cannot be separated from the character which inhabits it.

Given this basic tenet, Woolf goes on to claim that the Edwardians can be said hardly to have written novels at all, as the scope of their works is found most often to be comprised of the social sphere around the character, the ideological scaffolding in which it is enmeshed, rather than the inner life or subjective reality of the human itself. She writes of the novels of the preceding generation: "Sometimes I wonder if we are right to call them books at all" (*EVW III* 427), speculating that they ultimately function more like political pamphlets rather than what she considers to be proper novels, understood as presentations of and investigations into character. As she continues: "But the Edwardians were never interested in character in itself; or in the book in itself. They were interested

in something outside" (*EVW III* 428). Their novels lead not to any aesthetic understanding, or any insight into the human condition, but rather only the reader's impulse "to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque" (*EVW III* 427). Woolf and her fellow Georgians, on the other hand, are grouped together precisely because of their fidelity to character above all else. While the earlier novelists only illuminate character via everything but what Woolf considers character itself, from the conditions of factories, to the material details of dress and house, to the larger political sphere, the modern novelists aim straight at the subjectivity of the being around which their fictions are built. They aim, in their presentation of character, to convey nothing short of "the spirit we live by, life itself" (*EVW III* 436).

When Woolf sets out to say just what character is for her and her fellow Georgians, though, she does not aim so directly. She offers no alternative definition of character, no differing set of rules and standards for the construction of character by which her generation is to be set apart. The novel is preeminently about character, but just what character is she cannot say. As she is forced to confess: "And this I find it very difficult to explain: what novelists mean when they talk about character" (*EVW III* 422). It strikes one as a strange kind of admission, given that the novelist is figured by Woolf as someone who talks about nothing but character. And so, instead of saying just what character is, Woolf makes recourse to another strategy: "So, if you will allow me, instead of analysing and abstracting, I will tell you a simple story…in the hope that I may show you what I mean by character in itself" (ibid.). Unable to define what she means by character, Woolf instead constructs a narrative. The simple story that Woolf goes on to tell is the famed narrative of Mrs. Brown, the elderly woman sitting across from Woolf in

a railway carriage, a woman on whose slight shoulders Woolf hangs all her speculations

about subjective reality, the world of the inner life, the nature of the human itself.[1] Mrs.

Brown becomes figured as the entire human element that makes the world of fiction what

it is, "Mrs Brown is eternal, Mrs Brown is human nature" (*EVW III* 430); and "at what

whatever cost of life, limb, and damage to valuable property Mrs Brown must be rescued,

expressed, and set in her high relations to the world before the train stopped and she

disappeared forever" (*EVW III* 433). This unassuming woman becomes the banner figure

for the entire modernist movement, as Woolf expresses the recent ways in which writers

have tried to get closer to the articulation of the human in their art.

However, there are two more elements to this "simple story" of Woolf's to which

I want to draw attention, and whose implications I will trace in unfolding a Woolfian

"theory" of character. Woolf begins her essay, and the story she unfolds as illumination

of its thesis, with a casual apology to her audience. After asserting the break between the

Edwardians and the Georgians, and proclaiming her allegiance to her fellow modernists

such as Forster and Joyce, she adds: "And if I speak in the first person, with intolerable

egotism, I will ask you to excuse me. I do not want to attribute to the world at large the

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[1] In her study *Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Brown*, one of the few studies of Woolf to explicitly address her preoccupation with character, Herta Newman astutely notes: "with regard to the issue of contention, the concept of character itself, she is curiously evasive. In place of character, a concept too difficult to articulate, she offers a paradigmatic tale that does not so much resolve the issue as provide the proper approach to its evaluation. The stratagem clearly avoids the falsification she complains of in the Edwardians. But what is more important, it freely acknowledges the complexities they ignore" (19). Moreover, I might add, Woolf's strategy implies that character is not a preexisting given, but rather is a concept that must be formed as a process. Similarly, Pamela L. Caughie argues in *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* that "what ['Character in Fiction'] does is examine not what character is but how character functions, how character is used by writer and reader, how writer and reader respond to character. In pursuing Mrs. Brown, Woolf does not seek a new *type* of character; after all, Mrs. Brown is in many ways like a Bennett character. Rather, Woolf explores the means of expressing character in fiction" (63, Caughie's emphasis). Or, as Bette London notes in *The Appropriated Voice*: "As for Mrs. Brown, she is not what she seems—or at least not what Woolf would have us believe. She is not so much 'life itself' as 'life constructed,' 'life written about.' 'She' is a text to be dismembered: picked apart, reassembled, put to use. Absent herself, 'Mrs. Brown' upholds Woolf's artistic autonomy" (122).

opinions of one solitary, ill-informed, and misguided individual" (*EVW III* 421). She is, after all, about to assert her own theses, and to construct an argument from her own critical position, and so the apology does not at first seem so unusual. But perhaps its implications become more pronounced as she goes on to make her assertions about character, and to tell her "simple story" of Mrs. Brown. Later in the essay she describes the way in which the most powerful of novels are of such lasting importance precisely because of the force of their characters. Citing such famously subjective works such as *Tristram Shandy* and *Madame Bovary*, Woolf writes:

> If you think of these books, you do at once think of *some character to you so real (I do not by that mean so lifelike)* that it has the power to make you think not merely of it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes – of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in country towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul…And in all these novels *all these great novelists have brought us to see whatever they wish us to see through some character*. Otherwise, they would not be novelists; but poets, historians, or pamphleteers (*EVW III* 426, my emphases).

And it is in this passage, read alongside her story of Mrs. Brown, I suggest, that Woolf makes her theory of character more explicit. Woolf has asserted that, in speaking in the first person, she is always ultimately going to be speaking of herself, and so in defining character, she does not illuminate Mrs. Brown so much as construct her. We cannot forget, after all, that it is only a story, and that Virginia Woolf herself sits all along on the opposite side of the railway carriage. Moreover, in constructing Mrs. Brown, Woolf creates a character that is meant to be "real" as opposed to "lifelike." That is to say, the

reality of character is not simply the mimetic representation of a person, but rather the creation of someone who is real; and the essential criterion for that reality is that the world can be seen through that person's eyes.

Here we find ourselves caught tangled in the web of the Woolfian character.[2] It is a thing constructed and formed by the writer, who speaks all along only of herself. But in speaking of herself, the writer does not present the novel's vision of the world through her own voice and eyes, but through the lens of that character. So what kind of life, then, and a life belonging to whom, is Woolf suggesting that the modernist novel tells? Who is the "will-o'-the-wisp" (*EVW III* 420) and the "phantom" (*EVW III* 421) around whom the modernist novel is constructed? Character, as it unfolds in Woolf's argument, is caught somewhere in between the unassuming muteness of Mrs. Brown and the effaced first person of the author herself. It is in this tangle of persons that I want to find the Woolfian character, and position it as the culmination of a certain tendency within the modernist novel's engagement with, and invention of, character.

Since Woolf positions character as a constellation constructed out of the mutually interdependent levels of fictive representation and authorial creativity, I will address a number of Woolf's texts, looking not only at the novels but at her biographical and critical writings as well, in order to untangle the Woolfian knot of personhood. Character, as it emerges in Woolf's art, cannot be isolated from her essays and diary entries, as we cannot forget Woolf's suggestion of her own "intolerable egotism." And over the course

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[2] This phrase is an intentional allusion to Geoffrey Hartman's "Virginia's Web," which remains one of the finest essays written about this author. As will become apparent, this chapter will serve as a slight emendation of his thesis that the subject of Woolf's work as a whole is the activity of the authorial mind, its work of "interpolation" from the known into the unknown. For instance, he writes: "There is only one fully developed character in Mrs. Woolf's novels, and that is the completely expressive or 'androgynous' mind" (23). My emendation, we will see, lies in his characterization of the author's mind as "completely expressive," and consequently, in just what kind of character it is that we can talk about within Woolf's work.

of her novels, Woolf's structure of character will emerge most dynamically in her final work, *Between the Acts*, published shortly after her death in 1941. This novel, we will see, becomes emblematic of the entire complex of personhood around which character is invented, a complex that I suggest we can find in miniature in the story of Mrs. Brown, that figure for modernist "life itself." In this novel, we will see, Woolf adds a further complexity within her own already tangled preoccupation with character, as, on the one hand, the novel contains some of the most realistically drawn characters to be found in all of Woolf's fiction, while on the other, these figures can ultimately be read as the invented creations of Woolf's author-figure *par excellence*, the amateur playwright Miss La Trobe who stands at the novel's heart. In Miss La Trobe, the ostensible heroine of *Between the Acts*, we will see at work the rhetorical operations of the modernist character's invention, and the contradictory web of persons out of which its illusion of life emerges. Character, as it is constructed throughout Woolf's work, is not a thing represented, such that it might preexist its mimetic presentation, but it is rather a process of imagination, a textual production that is always created. And it is created, not by the first person of the author herself, but by the figurative tropics of narrative voice, the modernist novel's impersonal locus of textual authority.

A kind of being for which there is not yet a word

Of the major novelists of modernism, it is Virginia Woolf who is the most explicitly concerned with character. Not only do her diaries and letters consistently record her difficulties over how to transform life into literary language, but they are filled with portraits of friends and acquaintances, brief character sketches. Woolf is always reflecting on just what it is that people are, and how it is that the writer might capture

their specific reality. Human life interested her more than anything else, and she wrote ceaselessly toward its articulation. Her pronouncement that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (*EVW III* 421), as she famously writes in "Character in Fiction," can even be taken as something like a statement of purpose for the modernist writer, working within a time of immense change in human self-understanding. The essential story of the modernist novel, the narrative that not only Woolf seeks to tell in her work, but also Lawrence and Joyce, Svevo and Musil, is that of this modern character, this self suddenly felt to be emancipated from its Edwardian, or Victorian, trappings and conventions into a newly changed world and into an as yet undefined mode of being.

However, for all her interest in human life, and in subjective reality, Woolf had little interest in character in its traditional sense. She wrote numerous essays on the subject, not only with regard to novelistic writing but also to the practice of biography, the telling of lives,[3] and yet there is a certain irony in considering her as the modernist novelist of character *par excellence*. For, as she records in her diary, remarking on her confusion over a critic's review of *The Waves*: "Odd, that they (*The Times*) should praise my characters when I meant to have none" (*WD* 170). As we shall see, Virginia Woolf employs an understanding, and a practice, of character that is more than the simple preexistent form of a person. If she can claim that she meant to have no characters at all in *The Waves*, which seems strange at the very least to say of a novel of such an almost ruthless inwardness, then this is because character becomes, for Woolf, a specifically

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[3] For Woolf's most programmatic statements about character, in addition to "Character in Fiction" (1924), see its slightly different earlier version, "Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown" (1923), as well as "*Books and Persons*" (1917), "Modern Fiction" (1925), and, for her most sustained discussion of the art of biography, "The New Biography" (1927).

literary concept. If "character," as it has traditionally been understood according to the conventions of realist fiction, connotes the mimetic semblance of a person, one who easily could exist in the real world or in a news report, then the figures invented by Woolf belong to a new order, and they demand a new kind of name. Moreover, "character," for Woolf, is a *process* of literary language, rather than an empirically concrete thing which exists outside of language and is then represented within it.

"Human character" may have changed "on or about December 1910," but what must be stressed is that this *human* figure is not what we ultimately encounter in Woolf's novels. Character, as we find it in the language of Woolf, is a distinctly literary or linguistic phenomenon, and the ontological order to which it belongs is not that of all the friends and acquaintances of which Woolf was constantly making portraits and sketches in her diaries and letters. It inhabits a wholly different kind of house, and breathes a wholly different type of air, as it were. She writes in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1923), which is the short essay out of which the more famous and programmatic "Character in Fiction" developed, that the "essence" of the novel is its "character-making power" (*EVW III* 384-5), a figure of language which I propose we actually take quite literally. *Making* character, rather than representing or narrating it, the novel, in Woolf's formulation, essentially creates something out of nothing, the semblance of life out of its absence; it does not borrow character from the real world, or from some other literary mode such as biography or history, but crafts it out of its own resources and materials. What, we have to ask, are those materials? What kind of character is the novel capable of making? Ultimately, perhaps, "character in fiction" is itself something like a misnomer, since what we call "characters" in novels are, as we have seen in Woolf's comment about

The Waves, not actually "characters" at all, in the sense in which the term can be employed in the real world and with reference to real people. Can the word be made to refer to two such disparate entities? Or, as the narrator of *Orlando* (1928) poses the issue: "Life? Literature? One to be made into the other? But how monstrously difficult" (257)!

Woolf notes that she meant to have no characters in *The Waves*, but she does not note what it is that she meant to have instead. She encounters a similar lexical difficulty in 1925, while beginning to compose *To the Lighthouse*: "I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant 'novel.' A new --- by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy" (*WD* 78)?[4] She knows that her texts can no longer be understood as novels in the traditional sense, or in the sense that the Edwardians such as Bennett, Galsworthy, and Wells write them, but she has no word for what it is that she writes instead. As she famously describes *The Waves* as she begins to plan the work: "That was to be an abstract mystical eyeless book: a playpoem" (*WD* 134). The very literary form in which she operates becomes something unnamable for Woolf. She intends to "invent a new name," but this potential new name is never appended to *To the Lighthouse* (although its status as an elegy for her parents is easily discernible), nor to her subsequent work, *Orlando*. In fact, she can only subtitle this latter work with a borrowed word, calling it "a biography," despite its obvious fictive status.[5]

And just as much as her chosen form increasingly has no name, neither too does the being which inhabits it, the Woolfian literary character. Its mode of existence is in the realm of the catachretic, as a thing for which there is no proper word, and so all Woolf

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[4] Similarly, once the reviews for *To the Lighthouse* start appearing, she notes, with a perhaps caustic tone: "Anyhow I'm glad to be quit this time of writing 'a novel'; and hope never to be accused of it again" (*WD* 126).

[5] See her diary entry for 22 September 1928 for a rather humorous account of the material difficulties that result from "the fun of calling [*Orlando*] a biography" (*WD* 130).

can do, despite her intentions to search for new terms, is figuratively borrow words that do not literally refer to this kind of being – character, or moth or wave, as she will alternatively refer to the figures of the novel that will ultimately be called *The Waves*. But if these things are not actually the character, and if there is no name that it could be called, then what kind of being can this possibly be? If it exists outside of any language accessible to Woolf, then must it also necessarily exist outside of knowledge? Character, as we shall see, resists naming precisely because of its relationship to knowledge, to the imaginative operations of Woolf's artist-figures, or to their power for producing fictions. The Woolfian character may not yet have found a name, but it most certainly does exist, to the point where it becomes the defining feature of her work, its ultimate articulation and end product.

The critical literature on Woolf's relationship to selfhood is dauntingly vast. If she can be called the modernist novelist of character *par excellence*, then this is largely due to her reputation as something like a philosopher of life, or of selfhood, rather than as a novelist.[6] At least part of what I hope to achieve in this chapter is to recuperate the notion

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[6] Critical interest in Virginia Woolf's representation of selfhood dates from the earliest studies that appeared on her work, most notably in David Daiches's 1942 monograph, *Virginia Woolf*. See also Harvena Richter's *The Inward Voyage*, Jean Guiguet's psychoanalytically informed *Virginia Woolf and Her Works*, and James Naremore's *The World Without a Self*. While these studies from the 1960s and 70s, particularly Naremore's, do engage with formal elements of Woolf's technique, those elements are made subservient to the larger emphasis on discerning in Woolf's work an account of her specific vision of the inner life. Recent criticism, heavily influenced by various strands of psychoanalysis, feminist critique, and/or deconstruction, has continued in this vein, making of Woolf something like a post-modern theorist of subjectivity *avant la lettre*. These studies of the Woolfian subject include those by Makiko Minow-Pinkney, Mark Hussey, Louise Poresky, Lucio Ruotolo, Baruch Hochman, Herta Newman, and Finn Fordham. These studies have been highly informative to my own critical position in their own right, but my contention is that we must discern character in Woolf, not as a preexistent self that finds its representation in her work, but as a literary figure that is constructed out of the work. A notable exception to this trend is Avrom Fleishman's *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading*, in which he does pose the question of Woolf's vision of the self in each of her novels, but it is a vision that only emerges out of a sensitive and sustained engagement with the formal and structural operations of those novels. He writes, of *Mrs. Dalloway*'s experiments in point of view and the "dialectic of communion and individuation" upon which they are based, that "these carefully constructed perspectival situations are less exhibitions of experimental

of character as an explicitly literary entity in Woolf's work. It has become a commonplace of literary history, and part of a by-now commonsensical understanding of the modernist novel, to refer to the fluidity and instability of modern character, in the sense of personhood. After the disintegration of the moral and biographical integrity of the discrete human form which subtended the novel throughout the nineteenth century, a disintegration wrought by the work of figures as diverse as Darwin, Marx, Flaubert, Nietzsche, and Freud, and whose story is so well-known as to need no recapitulation here, it is beyond doubt that a different sense of character informs the modernist novel. As H. Porter Abbott succinctly summarizes the critical situation in his essay "Character and Modernism," particularly with regard to Woolf:

> But in modernist texts – it is a story we know by heart – traditional character dissolved, giving way to entities like the infinite subjectivity of *Finnegans Wake*, the changeability of Albertine in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and the interpenetrating voices of Woolf's *The Waves*. Since the 1970s, this feature of modernism has been given a lively foregrounding in new, often persuasive ways by feminist readings. Whether drawing on Kristeva or Lacan, Chodorow or Daniel Stern, the watchwords in this appraisal of the modernist representation of personhood have been fluidity, porousness, borderlessness, rupture (393-4).

But like Abbott, I am less interested in this supposed fluidity and dissolution of modernist selfhood than I am in the persistence of something that perhaps one must still call "character" in modernism, and especially the unique methods of its construction in the novels of Woolf. For instance, the evanescence and seeming bodilessness of the figures

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technique or epistemological theory than substantiations of the characters' personal experience," out of which "human life is constituted" (81).

whose voices comprise *The Waves* does not alter the fact that they are some of the most carefully delineated and strongly articulated characters in the history of the novel. The novel's characters may be disintegrated, dematerialized, or destabilized, but they are undoubtedly there, and with an undeniably subjective intensity. Ultimately, I must stress, it is not the story of the self that needs to be discerned in Woolf's novels, as a thing represented, but that of the literary character, as a thing created in her novelistic practice. I do not wish to deny that Woolf was most certainly concerned with human existence, but it is not yet another version of what may or may not be Woolf's philosophy of life that I wish to tell. Instead of a philosophy of life in Woolf's work, what I want to identify there instead is an ontology of literature, and more specifically an ontology of the literary character, the fictive life at the heart of the modernist novel.[7]

What is character made of?

In her long essay "Phases of Fiction" (1929), Woolf describes what is essentially her own personal history of literature, or the version of literary history which has come to be constructed out of her idiosyncratic individual history as a reader. And literary history, in this essay, is for Woolf intimately bound up with the literary character, such that the

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[7] In his sensitive and highly influential study *The Singing of the Real World*, Mark Hussey comes close to suggesting this, as he demonstrates that there is a philosophy of life to be found in Woolf's work, one that may be loosely called transcendentalist, but that it is found in her aesthetic concerns with reading and writing. This is to say that Hussey's aim is to find a vision of life and of the self, one that he claims lies behind appearances and beyond the actual world of known things. He ultimately finds that vision of life, and the self's "essence," in the space of fiction, as a world apart that is accessed through the process of reading. As he suggestively writes: "The 'nothingness' it was earlier suggested the 'self' might be will…be seen to be related to the modes of art in Woolf's aesthetic" (39). And later: "The 'reality' Woolf felt behind and beyond actual life is the virtual property of her fiction because such creation is free from the personal, time-bound, death-tending life of its creator to exist on its own terms in the locationless space of art" (151-2). While I find his thinking highly suggestive, it still explicitly remains within the framework of a philosophy of life, as he stresses that "the nature of self is at the heart of [Woolf's] thinking and…is the dynamic of her fiction" (xv). Instead of such a philosophy of the self, even one that ultimately finds its vision in the nature of literature, what I want to find is a rhetoric of that self, out of which then would emerge the ontology.

history of the novel which she ends up telling is essentially a history of the presentation of character. As opposed to the typically generic chapter headings of literary history that one would expect to find, such as "realism" or "sentimentalism," Woolf instead organizes her history of the novel, which is the essential literary form for her in this essay, according to its relationship to its characters. The "psychologists" of the modern era, chiefly James, Dostoevsky, and Proust, are preceded not by the realists or the Victorians, but by the "character-mongers," among whom Woolf counts Dickens and George Eliot. The world of fiction, for Woolf, is one "as inhabitable as the real world" (*GR* 93), precisely because it is one so essentially inhabited, that is, populated by people without whom it would not be at all what it is. "As we look back," she concludes:

> [I]t seems that the novelist can do anything…But however the novelist may vary his scene and alter the relations of one thing to another—and as we look back we see the whole world in perpetual transformation—one element remains constant in all novels, and that is the human element; *they are about people, they excite in us the feelings that people excite in us in real life*. The novel is the only form of art which seeks to make us believe that it is giving a full and truthful record of the life of a real person. And in order to give that full record of life, not the climax and the crisis but the growth and development of feelings, which is the novelist's aim, he copies the order of the day…Thus we glide into the novel with far less effort and less break with our surroundings than into any other form of imaginative literature. *We seem to be continuing to live, only in another house or country perhaps* (*GR* 141, my emphases).

The novel can take on any shape, and it can capture any mood, but its one constant is "the human element," according to which it incites feelings in its reader that could just as easily be incited by people in the reader's own real world. Novels tell stories *about* people, but strangely, it is not those people who incite feeling in readers of novels; rather, the "they" that create feelings like those created by people in real life are not the people about whom novels tell, but novels themselves. The literary counterpart to a historically living and breathing character is not, as one might assume, a fictive character, but a novel as a whole; it is out of this entire element that the human element, and the human emotions for which one reads novels, arise. The world of the novel is a place in which the reader lives, but it is not the kind of house, or even nation, the reader is used to inhabiting in the real world.

Woolf goes on to qualify this description of the novel's dependency on the human element by claiming that the simple incitement of emotion and sympathy is not enough. If the novel is too much like life, if the differences between real people and literary character is not sharply enough drawn, then the novel becomes too much like the reader's own house. The result of this, "though it may give the novel a short life of extreme vigour, is, as we know even while we are enjoying the tears and laughs and excitement of that life, fatal to its endurance" (*GR* 142). The reader finds himself living in a house or a country whose contours are not too distinct from his own, and the novel is encountered then, not as an aesthetic work, but as an empirical experience. And as such, it lives in the mind as those experiences do. We experience these characters all too similarly to the way in which we experience friends and acquaintances in the real world, and for better or for worse, we are all too capable of forgetting them in a like manner. In contrast, Woolf

claims for the greatest novels and for their enduring characters a heightened distinction between the orders of life and art:

> Indeed the first sign that we are reading a writer of merit is that we feel [his] control at work on us. The barrier between us and the book is raised higher. We do not slip so instinctively and so easily into a world that we know already. We feel that we are being compelled to accept an order and to arrange the elements of the novel—man, nature, God—in certain relations at the novelist's bidding (*GR* 143).

In encountering a truly living character, one that incites the richest feelings and the sharpest emotions, the reader encounters a character that has been explicitly designed and formed according to "the novelist's bidding." People encountered like passersby on the sidewalk slip all too easily into obsolescence, in the field of vision only to pass quickly from it, as if their life is ultimately of little consequence. The characters most admired by Woolf, on the other hand, are strangely those most unlike people encountered in the real world, in that they are so obviously part of a design, and the result of formative process belonging to their creator. The greatest novelistic "life," it seems, involves powers which are not at all present in real life, and a mode of existence that would be impossible to imagine in the order of everyday experience.[8]

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[8] In "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf refers to people remembered from her childhood explicitly as characters that might have come out of the novels of Dickens. She writes: "But in the foreground [of my life as a child] there were of course people; and these people were very like characters in Dickens. They were caricatures; they were very simple; they were immensely alive. They could be made with three strokes of the pen, if I could do it. Dickens owes his astonishing power to make characters alive to the fact that he saw them as a child sees them; as I saw Mr Wolstenholme; C. B. Clarke, and Mr Gibbs" (*MB* 73). Remembering that Woolf's own modernist sense of "character" demands another word entirely, it becomes notable that character in its traditional literary sense, and as it informed the realist novel, becomes aligned with empirical people in the real world. Woolf's own sense of character, it seems, demands the creative work of the writer that is more than Dickens's "three strokes of the pen." Daniel Ferrer, in *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*, comments on this seemingly paradoxical phenomenon in Woolf's

This is not to say that Woolf valorizes the more or less unmediated presence of the author behind his characters, like a Balzacian master puppeteer or a gently guiding hand in the vein of George Eliot's moralizing narrating figures. Rather, what exactly she means can be seen in a criticism she made of Henry James in her diary as she was reading *The Wings of the Dove*. She notes, with exasperation, that "his manipulation becomes so elaborate towards the end that instead of feeling the artist you merely feel the man who is posing the subject" (*WD* 38-9).[9] When entering fiction's house, when breathing the strange air of its country, she knows that it is in the controlling hands of *someone*, and in fact it gains from such a sense of organization and control. But it is not Henry James's house she seeks to enter, but only that belonging to "the artist," an entity quite distinct from the biographical person who writes. So when, in "Phases of Fiction," she praises the most substantive and long-lasting novels comprising her individual literary history by signaling out the emphasized element of design, such that "we obliterate a whole universe at the command of Defoe; we see every blade of grass and snail shell at the command of Proust" (*GR* 142), it is neither Defoe nor Proust precisely to whom she refers. But what kind of entity is it, then, whose design she seeks? Who do "Defoe" and "Proust" signify for Virginia Woolf? And what kinds of characters does she find caught in their design?

Another criticism of James is here illustrative, one made in "Phases of Fiction" as Woolf contrasts his method to that of Proust. She still signals out James's artistry for high

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conception of character as her drive to articulate an "incompleteness" at the heart of her characters, an emptiness that is not simply given. See pp. 13-4. The real people she remembers from her childhood, then, are incomplete because of their very completeness, and the fact that they have not been altered and shaped and interrogated by the writer's performative force of "making character." Or, as Woolf writes of her habit of transposing the lives of her friends and relatives into writing, in her memoir of her nephew Julian Bell: "I am so composed that nothing is real until I write it" (19).

[9] For an insightful discussion of Woolf's criticism of writers who make their own biographical presence too strongly felt in their art, see Alex Zwerdling's *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, pp. 42-4. For an extended account of Woolf's criticisms of James in particular, see Daniel Mark Fogel, *Covert Relations*.

praise, warning that "we are not so foolish as to resent artifice in art" (*GR* 123). But the admiration inspired by his artistry, she notes, is not so much that of a reader for the powerful interest of a novel's human element, but instead "it is a pleasure somewhat akin, perhaps, to the pleasure of mathematics or the pleasure of music" (*GR* 122). In order to "bring about a symmetry which is dear to him" (*GR* 123), James has played his cards too well as a novelist, and the finely wrought consciousnesses for which he is celebrated as a master of the psychological novel are found by Woolf to be as nothing but so many elegant numbers or abstract harmonies. She ultimately does praise the "greatness" of the so carefully drawn world James creates in his novels, but not without resentment over his stifling of his human subjects through excessive design. "We feel him there," she writes, "as the suave showman, skillfully manipulating his characters; nipping, repressing; dexterously evading and ignoring" (*GR* 123). The greatness of his art lies in the depth of his psychological insight and in the fineness of his perceptions, but the reader yearns to gain this rich human insight "free from the perpetual tutelage of the author's presence" (ibid.). And to free herself from James's tight grasp, Woolf turns to the work of Proust.

Like the richly subjective world of James's novels, Proust's "whole universe is steeped in the light of intelligence" (ibid.), but it finds greater favor with Woolf because this intelligence is found to emanate from a different kind of source. The mind is at the root of the entire represented world, but not as something that stands apart from, and above it. Proust does not organize his world like a Jamesian mathematician calculating algebra, beautiful because made to seem unfeeling. Rather, Proust's mind is richly productive of his novelistic world in the sense that he shades every part of it with his own search for understanding, with his own ongoing attempt to make relations and to find

meanings in persons and in things.[10] The mind is not outside its creation but deeply immersed within it, at the same time as it is wholly generative of the world created. The generative mind is not there to tell and to design, but to lay open before the reader, feeling and seeing at the same time as it produces. And subsequently, Proust's characters do not have the coldness of James's, not to mention the flimsy artificiality of a Dickensian character-monger's. Character emerges, in Proust, as that kind of being that we had earlier found to be constitutive of fiction as such for Woolf, the character who is made rather than represented. She writes of Proust's method in *À la Recherche du Temps perdu*:

> Direction or emphasis, to be told that that is right, to be nudged and bidden to attend to that, would fall like a shadow on this profound luminosity and cut off some section of it from our view. *The common stuff of the book is made of this deep reservoir of perception. It is from these depths that his characters rise*, like waves forming, then break and sink again into the moving sea of thought and comment and analysis which gave them birth. In retrospect, thus, though as dominant as any characters in fiction, *the characters of Proust seem made of a different substance. Thoughts, dreams, knowledge are part of them* (*GR* 125, my emphases).

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[10] In his 1926 study of contemporary literature, *Transitions*, Edwin Muir notably makes a similar claim about Woolf's own relationship to her characters, in contrast to the tendencies of the decade's other major novelists. He characterizes the contemporary novel as essentially "inhuman," a quality which he sees especially in Joyce, but also in Lawrence and Huxley. The relationship between these novelists and their characters, he writes, is akin to that of a scientist watching the progress of an experiment. He writes: "There is always detachment in their spirit, a certain hostile watchfulness, a barrier of conscious and unconscious irony" (68). He signals Woolf out for praise, on the other hand, because she meets her characters on their own level: "She accepts them…as people of the same status and existing in the same dimension as herself. She might walk into her novels and be at home in them" (ibid.).

The characters in Proust are unlike any others in fiction, "made of a different substance," but for that distinction they come to have for Woolf a perhaps paradigmatic mode of existence. Like waves, they erupt from the mind of the creative mind, which is distinctly not that of Proust the biographical man, but Proust the artist, as he is found in his own novelistic world. Comprised of a different substance entirely, they are neither flesh and blood people of the real world nor the artificial people of ink and paper who normally fill fiction's pages. They are made, rather, of "thoughts, dreams, knowledge," people imbued with the stuff of life, yet a life that only emerges out of the fictive position of Proust, the man who writes, become Proust the narrating artist who designs.[11]

"Character making," as Woolf had written in the earlier essay, is in fact the essence of the novel, and here we can see just out of what kind of material character is made, and what kind of figure it is who does the making. The life of character emerges out of the form-making capacity of the author, but at the same time, as we have seen in Woolf's criticism of James, that author cannot actually be present in his work, and so we must pursue this source of character even further. In her long autobiographical essay, "A Sketch of the Past," written in 1940 but published posthumously only in 1985 as part of the collection *Moments of Being*, Woolf describes her writing process, and its terms can

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[11] Proust's characters are found, in "Phases of Fiction," to have a surprisingly close affinity to the personages of Laurence Sterne, a novelist who, for all his subjectivism, Woolf groups not with the "psychologists," but with the "satirists and fantastics." As she writes of *Tristram Shandy*: "Laurence Sterne is the most important character in the book. It is true that at the critical moment the author obliterates himself and gives his characters that little extra push which frees them from his tutelage so that they are something more than the whims and fancies of a brilliant brain. But since character is largely made up of surroundings and circumstances, these people whose surroundings are so queer, who are often silent themselves but always so whimsically talked about, are a race apart among the people of fiction. There is nothing like them elsewhere, for in no other book are the characters so closely dependent on the author. In no other book are the writer and reader so involved together" (*GR* 134-5). This description of Sterne's "race apart" becomes, I suggest, paradigmatic for Woolf's modernist understanding of character. It does not precede its representation, but it only emerges, is very concretely made, out of its act of being narrated and being read.

give us a clue to follow on the road to tracing this being at the heart of the Woolfian novel.

She describes a series of formative shocks which she had received throughout her life, moments when the world offered to her a glimpse of a truth, a moment of "being" amidst all the "non-being" that comprises "the cotton wool of daily life" (*MB* 70). The most lasting of these moments is a childhood reminiscence when, at her family's vacation house at St. Ives, she looked upon a flower and suddenly understood that "that was the whole" (*MB* 69), that the flower was connected to the earth around it in a series of concentric relations that ultimately comprised everything. It is a shock she never forgets, and at the end of her life she is able to reflect that this "shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer" (*MB* 70). She experienced the momentary sense of wholeness, and immediately there set upon her a desire to explain it, to put it into words, for "it is only by putting it into words that I make it whole" (ibid.). In writing, the transposition of lived experience into words, she is able to see this wholeness and to capture and maintain it; relations are created where there are none in the mere "non-being" of daily life and empirical experience. She writes of the creative power she finds in writing:

> Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. *But*

there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there

is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see

this when I have a shock (ibid., my emphasis).

The author is the figure who finds the wholeness lying behind things, and who creates relations, makes a scene, makes character. Woolf is, after all, very clearly describing her own relationship to writing. But then that author drops out of the process entirely. Experience is made meaningful by being rendered as an aesthetic entity, a vast work of art in which there are found relations not visible in the light of daily life, but this work of art has no author performing the creative gesture.

Woolf's description of the pleasure she gets in writing, this discovery of relations, is one of the central thematic of her entire work. Just as the flower is seen, in the moment of "being," to be part of an endlessly proliferating earth far wider than itself, so too does she seek, in her novels, to form communion between her characters, to connect isolated and fragmentary subjectivities into anything like a whole. This could be said to be one of the functions of the personalized omniscient narrator, as a stand-in for the biographical author, being able to see into all of his characters' consciousnesses and to deliver what he finds there, assuring that they all belong to a common community of persons. But "there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven," just as Henry James the artist was found to be an entity quite distinct from Henry James the man. If we take this formulation of Woolf's as an allegory of her own novelistic practice, then we can see that we are certainly no longer in the realm of Flaubert's figure for the author as a God-like being, "present everywhere but visible nowhere" in his work. Not only, for Woolf, is the author visible

nowhere in her work, but *she does not even exist anymore*; there is no longer anything like a "person" who could possibly found.[12]

 The omniscient narrator has faded away, and the author has been banished from the stage, "certainly and emphatically there is no God." In Woolf's version of the modernist novel, the figure of the personalized narrator is denied any position of authority from which it might produce those urgently sought relations between its characters, and in fact it is denied any existence at all. In Woolf's novels, this communion, then, is instead an effect of language that is not mimetic and yet not fully linguistic either; for, we must remember, the articulation of "life itself" is still the work's aim. Woolf's community of characters needs the gesture of writing in order to happen, or to be discovered, as she claims that there is wholeness only when the world is "put it into words." At the same time, it must do without the figure who writes, or the God who creates; at the limit even, as we shall see, it must do even without the narrator who tells, since the narrator is nothing but a stand-in for the author.

 What kind of being is it, then, who fills this space in Woolf's novels? Who is there to connect, and to make this work of art a whole? If there is no God, by which we also mean that there is no personal organizing presence, no one doing the telling, then

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[12] Thus Woolf is in no way striving for anything like James Joyce's appropriation of Flaubert's formulation, as he famously has Stephen Dedalus paraphrase it in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, declaring that "the personality of the artist…finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself." The artist, for Stephen, as well, we can assume, as for Joyce, "like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (180-1). But this apparent "impersonalization" becomes, I might suggest, as would Woolf, simply another version of the egocentric strand of self-assertion running through many of the writers of British modernism, from Eliot and Pound through Lawrence and Wyndham Lewis. In *Theories of the Text*, D. C. Greetham has written that Joyce, like Flaubert before him, figures the author as "the creator of a material universe over which he has complete control at the moment of conception but from which type he is absent…in its present, corrupted traces" (30). And this is ultimately the frustration Woolf feels with Joyce, as well as with their contemporary Dorothy Richardson, when she describes "the damned egotistical self which ruins" (*WD* 22) both novelists. The point is, I hope to have shown, that in Woolf there is simply no "self" to be found in the textual utterance.

how, I ask, does Woolf fill the absence of any identifiable narrator in her later novels? To answer this I will look at two essential features of her work: her use of free indirect discourse, perhaps its most rigorous use in novelistic language since Flaubert, as well as the way in which Woolf employs figures of authorship, characters who write, or characters whose actions mirror that of authorship. As we have already seen in Henry James's version of modernism, once the author is placed within the work itself, then the text is increasingly unable to find its locus of authority in any extra-textual outside. The author is replaced, in Woolf, not only by characters who mirror authorship, but by a kind of sentence at whose center lies an essential absence, the sentence of free indirect discourse. These two strands will ultimately come together in the aesthetic moment of Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*, in which we will see the modernist creation of life out of death, the construction of character's illusion of living out of the emptiness at the heart of the impersonal narrative voice that governs the modernist novel's rhetorical operations.

Finding her voice

Woolf's self-proclaimed death of the author is surprising, considering that one of the constant themes of her working life is her search for her own authorial voice. I have already positioned character, or the approximation of human life, as the dominant theme of Woolf's *oeuvre*, and it is matched by the concept of voice, as a red thread that runs throughout her work. She consistently searches for the right tone in which to cast her narratives, and the right position from which they might be told. We need little more proof of this obsession of hers than her copious diary entries and records of her struggles to compose her works, monumentalized posthumously in 1953 by Leonard Woolf as *A*

Writer's Diary, as well as in the complete editions of her diaries and letters which poured out during the following decades. However, as we have seen, Woolf's preoccupation with finding the proper voice for her fictions cannot be a simple matter of asserting her own authorial position – "there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven." Rather, voice, for Woolf, involves finding what we can call the appropriate *rhythm* with which to articulate her novelistic worlds, the right texture out of which they might be fabricated. Paradoxically, as Woolf gradually finds her voice as a novelist, it is increasingly a thing that does not belong to her, but is rather a product of the language to which she gives herself over. Woolf, perhaps as much as any writer before her, lived in and as her writing, but this was not a matter of mere autobiographical transposition. The voice that we find asserting itself in Woolf's novelistic language becomes that of an impersonal subjectivity, one severed from its source in any empirical person. If the novel, for Woolf, is ultimately dependent upon the voice which tells it, then we must discern to what ontological order this voice belongs, ask what kind of personhood lies at its form-giving origin.

Character and voice are the two main components of Virginia Woolf's novels; and it is not simply in the increasingly interdependent relationship between the two that we can locate Woolf's practice as emblematic of the modernist novel as such, but in her radical redefinition of these two essential novelistic conventions. Voice and character have always played a fundamental role in the art of the novel, as the form may be essentially defined as the telling of a story *by* some narrating persona *about* some set of fictive people. A novel that is not about some character is just as unimaginable as a novel that is not, as a seeming matter of course, generated from some creative source. This is the being in whose voice the story is told, whether we refer to this entity simply as the

author, or figuratively as the implied author, or as the narrator, a personalized voice in the first person or the third. But these two essential figures, as we find them employed in Woolf's novelistic practice, bear very little resemblance to the usual role they have played in the history of the novel. In her art, Woolf unites the two strands which have always been central to the novel, and she makes them strange. In so doing, I suggest, her work becomes emblematic of a tendency within the modernist novel, as it seeks more than ever before the approximation of subjectivity in literary language, alongside an interrogation into the voice of that language, as the ground on which literary subjectivity lies, and out of which it emerges. That is, the novel in modernism, more than ever before in its history, is not only about character, but about its own textual authority, the increasingly impersonal voice in which in which it is told. And, as Woolf finds, one question cannot be asked without by necessity also posing the other.

We can look at two early diary entries as emblematic of this trajectory in Woolf's *oeuvre*. It is in an early entry from her diary that these two questions, that of character and that of voice, first become curiously intertwined. Describing her thoughts on the writing of *Jacob's Room* (1922), and on her husband's reaction to it, Woolf writes:

> On Sunday L. read through *Jacob's Room*….We argued about it. He calls it a work of genius; he thinks it unlike any other novel; he says that the people are ghosts; he says it is very strange: I have no philosophy of life he says; my people are puppets, moved hither and thither by fate. He doesn't agree that fate works in this way….But I am on the whole pleased. Neither of us knows what the public will think. There's no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40)

to say something in my own voice; and that interests me so that I feel I can go

ahead without praise (*WD* 45-6).

Leonard clearly praises the novel, calling it a "work of genius," while at the same time

referring to its absence of anything like a human presence, a remark that Woolf curiously

notes without comment. Leonard had, since her earliest writings, served as her most

trusted critic, and certainly such a comment must have carried its weight in Woolf's

mind.[13] His claim that her "people are puppets" would seem to be a major criticism for a

novelist so concerned with articulating human life in her prose. Central to Woolf's

understanding of what the novel should be is the idea that, as she writes in her essay

"Reading," "somewhere, everywhere, now hidden, now apparent in whatever is written

down is the form of a human being" (*EVW III* 156), and here her husband identifies just

what kind of human being it is who inhabits writing's space: ghosts and puppets, moved

around by a fate whose logic bears little resemblance to the way fate works in the real

world. She suggests, by mentioning the criticism, that Leonard's opinion of her

characters is not her own, but she also remains silent when it comes to voicing any

alternative.[14]

Jacob's Room is famously a novel built upon the very absence of its own hero, as

he is for the most part seen only from without, comprised of an interior life at which the

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[13] As an example of Woolf's deep reliance upon Leonard's opinion, see her diary entry of 23 January 1927, where she eagerly records his opinions of *To the Lighthouse*: "[He] says it is much my best book and it is a 'masterpiece.' He said this without my asking him….Having won this great relief, my mind dismisses the whole thing, as usual, and I forget it and shall only wake up and be worried again over proofs and then when it appears" (*WD* 102). The entire future fate of the book, it seems, pales in comparison to the weight placed upon the husband's initial reading.

[14] The terms of Leonard's critique of *Jacob's Room*'s characters are notably similar to Woolf's own in her 1905 review of James's *The Golden Bowl*. She writes, in her rather acerbic critique: "For all the skill and care that have been spent on them *the actors remain but so many distinguished ghosts*. We have been living with thoughts and emotions, not with live people" (*EVW I* 23, my emphasis).

novel's myriad other characters can only guess and speculate.[15] "Where *is* that tiresome little boy," Betty Flanders wonders on the novel's first page, "I don't see him" (*JR* 3), and the question echoes throughout the rest of the novel until Jacob's premature death. The novel is structured according to an oftentimes chaotically rotating series of perspectives, with a proliferating cast of characters whose vast numbers seem disproportionate to the story's relatively simple scope, namely, to shed some light on the inner life of its hero, Jacob Flanders. A character will frequently appear for only the span of a single sentence, as one perspective after another observes Jacob, but in that brief moment, the character's own inner life is entirely open to the reader, as he is given a name, unspoken thoughts, and glances reflected in his mind's eye.

It is a method that will come to dominate Woolf's mature works, though in a more refined form, usually pared down to only a select group of characters grouped around a common event or time-space. The novels are almost entirely comprised of fictive states of consciousness, rotating one after another, such that Erich Auerbach aptly characterizes her world as one in which every point of view is immanent. As he writes in *Mimesis*: "The writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished; almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis personae" (*M* 534). The essential difference, still, in *Jacob's Room*, however, in addition to the sheer number of these perspectives, is the dwindling presence of one point of view that is not entirely immanent. For all its reliance on the thoughts and conjectures of

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[15] See Patrick J. Whiteley's *Knowledge and Experimental Realism* for a thoughtful reading of Jacob as a model for "the Protagonist as Cipher" (155). Similarly, Herta Newman argues that Jacob becomes concretized as the hero of his novel "in negation itself." She writes: "If in his person Jacob tends to evade and at times to disappoint the observer, he is able to sustain a seductive appeal in absentia. Throughout the narrative Jacob vanishes, leaving others to search for him and to long for his return" (35). And in *The Phantom Table*, Ann Banfield asserts, from the perspective of linguistic structure, that "the novel contains only one unambiguous representation of Jacob's consciousness" (331).

fictive consciousnesses, *Jacob's Room* does still have a personalized narrator, a figure who gathers those consciousnesses and who speaks from a stabilized and human position. Figured as "the observer of external sights down below" (*JR* 40), she is a localizable presence, who often refers to herself as "I," as she is forced to conjecture about Jacob along with the novel's other characters. At the same time, she of course possesses the omniscience allowing her to see into the consciousnesses of those characters along whose sides she stands. Her omniscience is so great, in fact, that it allows her to peer from her seemingly limited vantage point across the entirety of Europe, as she in one notable example moves from a depersonalized panoramic view into the room of a character's inner life:

> Now one after another lights were extinguished. Now great towns – Paris – Constantinople – London – were black as strewn rocks. Waterways might be distinguished. In England the trees were heavy with leaf. Here perhaps in some southern wood an old man lit dry ferns and the birds were startled. The sheep coughed; one flower bent slightly towards another….The salt gale blew in at Betty Flanders's bedroom window, and the widow lady, raising herself slightly on her elbow, sighed like one who realizes, but would fain ward off a little longer – oh, a little longer! – the oppression of eternity (*JR* 140-1).

While this passage might seem to emanate from one of the dematerialized "nameless spirits" (*M* 534) whom Auerbach describes as comprising Woolf's populace, its epic flight is quickly rooted by a conjectural observation which can only come from a rooted figure such as the woman forced to stand outside Cambridge's walls earlier in the novel: "As for reaching the Acropolis who shall say that we ever do it, or that when Jacob woke

next morning he found anything hard and durable to keep for ever" (*JR* 141)? And though many critics will refer to the narrator of any of Woolf's mature novels, I follow Ann Banfield's claim, in *The Phantom Table*, that *Jacob's Room* is in fact the last of Woolf's works to feature such a figure (331).[16] It is the last work in which we have someone akin to the narrating figures of George Eliot or Trollope, a discrete, though omniscient figure speaking with a clearly inscribed set of moral presuppositions and from a place in time historically congruent with that of her characters.

I do not mean to claim that critics who speak of the "narrator" of Virginia Woolf's novels are necessarily incorrect, but only that the term is something like a misnomer. The novels are certainly being told, and the characters' thoughts and inner worlds penetrated by some narrating presence, but it is not the personal narrator whose position grounded the conventions of the nineteenth century realist novel. There is no longer any easy move from the voice of the narrator to the biographical position of the author, from the moral truths uttered by the narrator of *Middlemarch* to the philosophy of the biographical person George Eliot. Narrative voice, in the novels following *Jacob's Room* is a far less identifiable entity, one aligned not with the life of Virginia Woolf, but with the impersonal linguistic structures of the works themselves.[17] The narrative voice

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[16] Alex Zwerdling similarly writes: "It was only in her third novel, *Jacob's Room*, that she decided to withhold herself in any deliberate way…From that point on, she never really went back to the use of an evaluative narrator in her fiction" (45). See also Joan Bennet's *Virginia Woolf*, in which she writes notes how Woolf increasingly "eliminates herself from her books" (27).

[17] Terminological differences notwithstanding, there are two excellent accounts of the structure and function of Woolf's narrative voice which have been highly influential on my own reading. The first of these is James Hafley's essay "Virginia Woolf's Narrators and the Art of 'Life Itself'," in which he discusses the essential performative function of Woolf's narrating presences. He subtly argues that Woolf's "narrators are creators and not reporters real or supposed; they do not tell the stories as much as the stories tell *them*; it is they who are the central drama, the central fiction" (31). For instance, as I hope to have shown in "Character in Fiction," the story that Woolf tells is ultimately not about Mrs. Brown at all, who cannot even be said to exist in any mimetic sense, but only about Woolf's act of creating Mrs. Brown.

The second of these critical accounts of Woolf's narrators is J. Hillis Miller's essay on *Mrs. Dalloway* in *Fiction and Repetition*, in which he does firmly establish the novel's narrator according to the

belongs at the same time to everyone, in the sense that it can utter the unspoken thoughts

or convey the barely expressible emotions of any of Woolf's personages, and to no one,

in that when it is not tethered to any of these characters, it is entirely cut adrift from any

entity that might fall under a grammatical category of personhood. There are many

moments throughout the novels when we are in no character's consciousness, most

extremely in passages such as the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse*,[18] or in the

second-order narrative of *The Waves*, but these moments correspond to no speaking

position. Instead, we are in fact in an entirely unoccupied perspective, with no

discernable point of view, speakerless and subjectless.

These moments, I argue, correspond to that "subjectless subjectivity" (70) that

Ann Banfield has identified as the grammatical "person" underlying the structure of the

sentence of free indirect discourse. I take this phrase from Banfield's magisterial study of

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criteria of personhood, writing that Woolf's narrator "is a mind projected by way of speaking, a mind usually endowed with special access to other minds and with special powers for expressing what goes on there" (177). However, over the course of his highly sensitive reading of this particular mind's function within what he calls *Mrs. Dalloway*'s "all soul's day," he finds that it belongs to an increasingly impersonal, and uncanny, ontological order. He writes that the mind of the narrator is associated throughout Woolf's novel with "the region of death," and he continues: "This is a place of absence, where nothing exists but words. These words generate their own reality. Clarissa, Peter, and the rest [of the novel's characters] can be encountered only in the pages of the novel. The reader enters this realm of language when he leaves his own solid world and begins to read *Mrs. Dalloway*. The novel is a double resurrection. The characters exist for themselves as alive in a present which is a resuscitation of their dead pasts. In the all-embracing mind of the narrator the characters exist as dead men and women whose continued existence depends on her words" (199). And this space of death in which Miller finds the "mind" of the narrator to exist, I suggest, can be reconfigured as the impersonal textuality of narrative voice. Its bringing into presence of the minds of its characters, then, can be seen as the creation of life out of death.

      Similarly, in her highly influential study *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels*, Maria DiBattista aligns *Mrs. Dalloway*'s narrator with the novel's mad character Septimus Smith, writing that both are "the transcriber[s] of voices issuing from the land of the dead" (50). In a more recent essay, "Virginia Woolf and the language of authorship," DiBattista argues even more explicitly for the increasing anonymity and impersonality of Woolf's narrative voice. She writes that "Woolf extended modern authorship to the verge where the distinct 'voice of the author' – let us call it the voice of the narrative person, whether young or old, male or female, well- or ill-educated – merges with and is absorbed into a language 'voiced' by no one we can easily identify, much less locate" (132).

[18] Woolf herself asserts the "impersonality" of this passage in her diary as she composes the novel. She writes of her plan for *To the Lighthouse* in 1925: "It might contain all characters boiled down; and childhood; *and then this impersonal thing*, which I'm dared to do by my friends, the flight of time, and the consequent break of unity in my design" (*WD* 79, my emphasis).

Woolf and "the epistemology of modernism," *The Phantom Table*, in which she outlines the logic of Woolf's work as inherited from Bertrand Russell's Cambridge philosophy via the aesthetics of her friend and Bloomsbury companion Roger Fry. Put briefly, Banfield's argument progresses out of a central tenet of Russell's theory of knowledge, that we can have knowledge of the external world without remaining trapped inside the confines of our own discrete consciousness. There must be knowledge of the world that is not rooted in Cartesian solipsism, or in immediate experience, a fundamental tenet "ultimately requiring the thought experiment of imagining the world in our absence" (22). This leads, logically, to "the possibility of an unoccupied privacy" (72), a private world, or a position of observation, that is not *a priori* attached to any subject. Observation and knowledge are reduced to a purely structural position that is always already present before a subject arrives to occupy it. Consequently, for Russell, "the subject is thereby rendered unnecessary to subjectivity by its theoretically possible absence….Subjectivity and the mind are no longer necessarily linked" (75). This theory of knowledge becomes translated by Russell's Cambridge disciple Roger Fry into a Post-Impressionist aesthetics derived in equal parts from the paintings of Cézanne. And these aesthetic principles, "the reduction of the ego to the perspective, of sensation to sensibilia and the logical possibility of unoccupied perspectives," become in Woolf's "modern fiction" linguistic principles, "the elimination of the first person and the representation of a third person privacy" (293).

This is to say, Banfield defines Woolf's modernist practice according to the structure of her most characteristic sentence, that of free indirect discourse, according to which the structure of personhood is maintained without being attributable to any first-

person subjectivity.[19] As we have seen, Woolf's novels are almost entirely constructed out of shifting points of view. And this possibility of shifting perspective occurs, Banfield demonstrates, not by constantly shifting the referent of a first person "I" at the root of each sentence, as in the structure of dialogue. Rather, the novels shift perspective "by a sentence belonging uniquely to the novel's style which eliminates 'I' yet retains a subjective third-person pronoun. Escaping speech's ego-centeredness, it creates a language of multiple perspectives without multiplying speaking I's" (311). This is of course that sentence of free indirect discourse, firmly rooted in a subjective point of view because of its use of demonstratives, its use shifters of time and place reference, and its ability to record momentary sense impressions, yet unattached to any "I," because of its third-person pronoun and its past tense structure, both of which are outside the realm of any grammatical first-person.

It is a kind of sentence that occurs on nearly every page of Woolf's major novels, for instance, in this highly characteristic passage from *Mrs. Dalloway*'s third paragraph:

> He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished—how strange it was!—a few sayings like this about cabbages (*MD* 4).

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[19] On the necessity of the first person pronoun as a condition of the category of subjectivity, see Emile Benveniste's *Problems of General Linguistics*. See in particular the essay "Relationships of Person in the Verb," in which he writes that "the third person is the form of the verbal (or pronominal) paradigm that does not refer to a person because it refers to an object located outside direct address" (229). That is to say, the third-person "he," "she," or "it" refers neither to the I nor to the you constituted by the event of discourse, those being the only persons so constituted. He writes elsewhere: "the third person is not opposed to any other and it is truly *an absence of person*" (209, emphasis mine). On the linguistic absence of personhood in third-person narration, see also Ann Banfield's essay "*Ecriture*, Narration and the Grammar of French," in which she traces, through the thought of Benveniste and Roland Barthes, the way in which the conventions of novelistic discourse establish "an order which might be said to circumvent the personal, which is not organized around a central point which is that of the transcendent subject, an order of reality which belongs to some sphere beyond any which is subjectively ordered" (7).

The sentence is grammatically subjective, and context shows it unambiguously to belong to the thoughts of Clarissa Dalloway, and one can easily imagine it translated into the present tense and first-person, according to the structure of interior monologue. But it contains no tagging mark such as "she thought," and it is attached neither to Clarissa's private world, nor to that of a personal narrator who might be representing her private world. The sentence hovers instead in between these two orders of personhood, linguistically subjective while logically dependent on no subject at all. And throughout the novel, it shifts from subject to subject, interspersed with instances in which no subject is present who might be held accountable for the experience and sensation recorded. For instance, in *Mrs. Dalloway*'s famous scene of the airplane writing an unreadable message in the sky above the heads of its cast of characters:

> It was strange; it was still. Not a sound was to be heard above the traffic. Unguided, it seemed; sped of its own free will. *And now*, curving up and up, straight up, *like something mounting in ecstasy, in pure delight*, out from behind poured white smoke looping, writing a T, an O, an F (*MD* 28-9, my emphases).

The deictic "now," as well as the figurative language of simile, clearly marks the sentence as subjective, and yet it is in no way, within the novel's surrounding context, psychological. It is attached to no person, while maintaining the continuity of the linguistic structure of personhood. As opposed to Flaubert's use of *style indirect libre*, and his famous God-like being, "present everywhere and visible nowhere" in his work,[20] by the time of Woolf's intervention in the style, there is simply no one here at the center

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[20] As Flaubert writes in his letter to Louise Colet from December 9, 1852: "An author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere. Art being a second Nature, the creator of that Nature must behave similarly. In all its atoms, in all its aspects, let there be sensed a hidden, infinite impassivity" (173).

of these sentences. To say that the omniscient narrator has faded away, that the author has been banished from his work, is, after all, it seems, equal to saying that God has died. We have only an empty center which allows for constant transformations of its place-holder. As Banfield concludes, this possibility of shifting points of view can only result from the disappearance of any narrating "I," even the implied first-person of Flaubert's heavily ironic impersonality: "This is because the 'I' alone guarantees the permanence of perspective from sentence to sentence" (349). And she continues: "Without the personal authority of the first person, all but local representations of subjectivity are eliminated. The result is an impersonal style with little stretches of the personal. The novels' language…, detached from all human agency, thus expresses the universe one of whose possibilities is the unobserved" (350).[21] Thus, we can see, the subjects that do populate the novels, the "I" of each "local representation of subjectivity," do not in any way precede their verbal manifestation, as a consciousness to be represented in and as words, but are rather produced out of the verbal medium. The "personality" of the Woolfian character is built out of the impersonality of the sentence that conveys the sensations and impressions of no one at all.

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[21] For Banfield's more programmatic writings about the linguistic structure of free indirect discourse, see her early essay "Narrative Style and the Grammar of Direct and Indirect Speech," as well as *Unspeakable Sentences*. The "subjectless subjectivity" underlying this structure is explored in great detail in "The Name of the Subject: the '*il*'?." For more comprehensive general studies of the style, see Brian McHale, "Free Indirect Discourse: A Survey of Recent Accounts," a survey of critical and theoretical accounts, and Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice*, a survey of the style's development in the nineteenth century novel. In his analysis of Woolf's style in *Mimesis*, Auerbach also addresses her use of the free indirect mode, or *erlebte Rede* as it is known in German. He briefly analyzes the way in which Woolf's use of the style differs from its previous occurrences in the European novel, chiefly in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, an analysis that is remarkably similar to that of Banfield's central theses. He writes that, while Flaubert engendered uncertainty by blurring the line between Emma Bovary's voice and his own, "the author, with his knowledge of an objective truth, never abdicated his position as the final and governing authority" (*M* 535-6). In Woolf, on the other hand, "the writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished" (*M* 534). Moreover, he writes: "The essential characteristic of the technique represented by Virginia Woolf is that we are given not merely one person whose consciousness (that is, the impressions it receives) is rendered, but many persons, with frequent shifts from one to the other" (*M* 536).

Jacob's Room can be seen, then, as something of a transitional work within Woolf's *oeuvre*, as it forms a bridge between the relatively traditional early novels *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919), and the more experimental mature work which will come to serve as hallmarks of the modernist novel. It is the novel in which she claims to begin to say something in her own voice, and for that very reason, I suggest, it marks the end of any personal voice within her work. When Virginia Woolf finds her own voice it is, strangely and uncannily, to find the voice of no one at all, but only the textuality and impersonality of the narrative voice that will come to reign throughout her work. This transformation of voice can be seen in our second diary entry, from 1923, recorded as she begins to compose what will eventually become her next novel, and what is generally considered her first wholly mature work, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). And voice, in this diary entry, is once again curiously related to Woolf's ambivalent relationship to the literary character, as one strand of novelistic composition seems to be unthinkable without the other.

Here Woolf raises the question of character, only to discard it, as she reflects on the claims of critics that she is seemingly unable to articulate character in any traditional or meaningful sense:[22]

It's a question though of these characters. People, like Arnold Bennett, say I can't create, or didn't in *Jacob's Room*, characters that survive. My answer is—but I leave that to the *Nation*: it's only the old argument that character is dissipated into

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[22] Arnold Bennett's review, "Is the Novel Decaying?," was originally published in *Cassell's Weekly*, 28 March 1923. There, he singles out Woolf's technique as symptomatic of the larger trend of young British novelists. He writes: "I have seldom read a cleverer book than Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, a novel which has made a great stir in a small world. It is packed and bursting with originality, and it is exquisitely written. But the characters do not vitally survive in the mind because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness" (113).

shreds now; the old post-Dostoievsky argument. I daresay it's true, however, that I haven't that "reality" gift. I insubstantise, willfully to some extent, distrusting reality—its cheapness. But to get further. Have I the power of conveying the true reality? Or do I write essays about myself (*WD* 56)?

Just as Woolf acknowledges that she meant to have no characters in *The Waves*, while never being able to name what it is that she intended to have in their stead, here she claims quite clearly that she does have an answer to the problem of character, only to avoid telling it. She leaves it to the journalists and to the literary critics to discuss just what kind of character it is that remains after Dostoevsky, and the intense depths into which he plunged in his own characters. As she asks in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown:" "After reading *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*, how could any young novelist believe in 'characters' as the Victorians had painted them" (*EVW III* 386)? In any event, whatever the next generation is to do with Dostoevsky's intensity of inwardness, it is an issue that she seems to have tired of.

In evading the question entirely, Woolf turns it strangely on its head. Claiming that she does not have the "reality gift," she writes that she instead "insubstantises," a neologism by which she presumably means her acknowledgement that Bennett's criticism of her characters in *Jacob's Room* was in fact correct. That is to say, rather than creating "characters that survive," she creates something wholly less material, or void of substance. After all, for all of Dostoevsky's destruction of the Victorian stability of character, he still created characters that are undoubtedly and palpably *there*. "[Raskolnikov, Mishkin, Stavrogin, and Alyosha] are characters without any features at all," Woolf writes, meaning that they have none of the "keywords" appended by the

Victorian novelists to their characters as a means of easily making them imaginable by their readers, such as the famously allegorical physical descriptors so common in Dickens or in Balzac. However, as she continues, "we go down into them as we descend into some enormous cavern. Lights swing about; we hear the bottom of the sea; it is all dark, terrible, and uncharted" (ibid.). They may have no features, but they are of an intensity whose substantiality cannot be denied. For all her admiration of Dostoevsky, though, Woolf claims to be doing something quite different in the realm of character creation. But aside from this declaration that she "insubstantises," she does not say anything about what her method might be. We are left only with the evanescence and immateriality that the term implies, those "ghosts" and "puppets" that Leonard had described upon reading *Jacob's Room*.

She does not create characters as "real" as those of Dostoevsky, or as those of the Victorians for that matter, but is this because she seeks instead to "get further" and to convey the "true reality," or, as she alternatively wonders, is it because she ultimately writes only about herself? She seems to be posing two opposing questions, but in fact she is offering two different ways of saying the same thing. As we have seen in her recollection of the childhood experience of wholeness inspired by the solitary flower at St. Ives, the "true reality" at which she aims in writing can only be reached by means of her own self, but it is a process that, in its dependency on that writing self, negates it entirely. If she worries, during the composition of *Mrs. Dalloway*, that she writes only about herself, then this is because she finds her authorial voice in its very absence. In

writing about herself, she writes about herself become another, become the impersonal voice at the heart of her novelistic style.[23]

The paradoxical structure of Virginia Woolf's narrative voice – that it says nothing but itself, while also saying nothing about Virginia Woolf – becomes apparent as her style progresses up through the writing of her final novel, *Between the Acts*. Upon completing *The Waves* in 1931, she is able to record in her diary, with palpable excitement: "[it] is my first work in my own style!" (*WD* 172). But while she was rapidly composing the novel's final pages nine months earlier, that celebration of her own style is marked quite differently. She writes: "I wrote the words O Death fifteen minutes ago, having reeled across the last ten pages with some moments of such intensity and intoxication that I seemed only to stumble after my own voice, *or almost, after some sort of speaker*" (*WD* 165, my emphasis).[24] Or, perhaps she is already posing the same question two years earlier, while the novel is still being composed under the title of *The Moths*, when she records the "several problems" that still need to be solved in the work: "Who thinks it? And am I outside the thinker" (*WD* 143)? She speaks later of her

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[23] That Woolf in no way strives for authorial self-assertion can already be seen in a diary entry from 1920, in which she condemns the intense subjectivism of her fellow modernists James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson. She writes: "I suppose the danger is the damned egotistical self; which ruins Joyce and Richardson to my mind: is one pliant and rich enough to provide a wall for the book from oneself without its becoming, as in Joyce and Richardson, narrowing and restricting" (*WD* 22)? Thus I would distance myself far from H. Porter Abbott's attempt, in his in many ways suggestive essay "Character in Modernism," to "reorganize Woolf's entire literary production as a project of self-writing" (403). In no way, I hope to have shown, can her *oeuvre* "be seen as a field across the entirety of which she was always playing, and listening to, her personal instrument" (ibid.). I would take similar distance from Zwerdling's characterization of Woolf as "the reluctant satirist," as when he writes: "The *style indirect libre* Woolf frequently adopts masquerades as the narrator's self-effacement while permitting the author to manage the alert reader's response. It was essential for Woolf to keep herself and her readers raised a little above her characters, no matter how sympathetic she found them. Her fastidious ironic poise is ultimately a form of control" (51). While this might, perhaps, be an apt description of Flaubert's heavily ironic use of the style, I would argue, once again, that it cannot be linguistically upheld as what we find in the sentences of Woolf's novels.

[24] While I do not wish to examine biographical questions of Woolf's own psychology, and the potential relationship between her concerns as a writer and her life-long depression, I might point out that Daniel Ferrer's study *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*, though its critical point of view is far from my own, can be seen as a sustained reading of the ramifications of a passage such as this one.

"philosophy of anonymity" (*WD* 206), and it is toward this anonymous voice that her authorial gestures increasingly tend.[25] *Jacob's Room* was the novel in which Woolf felt she was beginning to speak in her own voice, while at the same time the novel is notably the end of any personalized narrating voice in her fiction. By the time of *The Waves*, when she is writing explicitly in her own style, then it is in a style marked by the narrative voice's very distance from its authorial source; Woolf feels only as if she is catching up to it as she writes. Or, as she writes in an entry from 1937: "I think writing, my writing, is a species of mediumship. I become the person" (*WD* 274). To whom, then, does the voice belong? What person is it that she becomes?

Party going

I will ultimately find the answers to these questions in Woolf's last work, both in its own rhetorical operations, as well is in the diary entries recorded during its writing. Before turning to *Between the Acts*, however, I want to turn back to *Mrs. Dalloway* to look at the way in which that earlier novel allegorizes this increasingly uncanny relationship between character and narrative voice. We will remember that this is the novel whose writing caused Woolf to wonder whether, when she writes, all she writes are essays about her own self. This seems paradoxical, considering that it is the first of her wholly mature works to be entirely structured by the impersonal sentence of free indirect

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[25] In December of 1927, Woolf similarly records the following self-admonition: "The dream is too often about myself. To correct this; and to forget one's own sharp absurd little personality, reputation and the rest of it, one should read; see outsiders; think more; write more logically; above all be full of work; and practice anonymity" (*WD* 119). Notably, the act of forgetting her own personality and practicing anonymity is intertwined with the command for intense productivity. Consistently, in Woolf, it is only out of "anonymity" that a certain performative force emerges, for instance that force behind "character making" discussed earlier. For the most sustained account of Woolf's authorial drive toward anonymity, see Maria DiBattista's *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels*. See also Brenda R. Silver's publication of Woolf's final essay, "Anon," in which Woolf searches for the origins of literary language in the pre-modern song of the anonymous bard.

discourse, the mode of conveying fictive consciousnesses without any personal narrator at its basis. From its first page, the novel throws the reader into a space in which it is rarely at first apparent who is doing the speaking or thinking. Its sentences seem to hover in between the discursive realms of the omniscient control of the narrative voice, and the represented world of the characters. And these sentences mirror, in their wavering structure, the novel's central thematic, on the level of its story, namely Clarissa Dalloway's relationship to death, as it makes itself felt over the course of this day in June.

Clarissa is notably the first of the many artist-figures who stand at the heart of Woolf's mature novels, characters whose roles or actions mirror that of her own authorship. These metonymic figures will go on to include Mrs. Ramsay, as her knitting of a brown stocking figures the warp and woof of textual construction; Lily Briscoe, the painter whose dominant concern is how most accurately to represent the human figure in her art; *The Waves*' Bernard, the writer struggling to narrate the lives of his friends into existence; and Miss La Trobe, the amateur dramatist at the heart of *Between the Acts*. But Clarissa's party stands as the precursor to all these more perhaps obvious figures, as it takes over the role that had in Woolf's previous novel, *Jacob's Room*, been performed by the personalized narrator. With no such figure present, the Woolfian novel makes recourse to figures of its own absent textual authority. We could say, even, that Clarissa's party, as it finally occurs at novel's end, *is* the very novel at whose end it occurs, as it gathers together in the novel's present time all the characters who had existed throughout the day in Clarissa's memory and in her past.

The party, finally, brings these characters to life. But it is a strange kind of life that the party brings into existence, Clarissa finds, both for herself, as the hostess, as well

as for her friends, the party-goers. As she descends the stairs, feeling the distress of having to perform her social role, her thoughts begin to seem almost like a repetition of Woolf's own records of the distress of writing characters into existence. "And yet for her own part," Clarissa thinks, "it was too much of an effort. She was not enjoying it. It was too much like being—just anybody, standing there; anybody could do it; yet this anybody she did a little admire, couldn't help feeling that she had, anyhow, made this happen" (*MD* 170). Similar to Woolf's "philosophy of anonymity," Clarissa's feeling is one both of self-negation and of productive creation. She slips into the role of "anybody," at the same time as she undoubtedly makes something happen; and perhaps it is in her very anonymity where her performative force lies.

And what she performs, in her ontologically uncertain role, is the creation of community, the coming together of the novel's discrete and isolated entities into a kind of aesthetic whole, as Woolf had performed with the solitary flower in her childhood. It is a process, however, that does not leave any of its figures unchanged. As Clarissa reflects: "Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that everyone was unreal in one way; much more real in another" (*MD* 170-1). Clarissa's impression of her party is precisely, I argue, the relationship between the author-become-narrative voice and her characters that lies at the heart of Woolf's modernist aesthetic. On the one hand, there is the transformation into a kind of "impersonal performativity," while on the other, there is the creation of mimesis, or the illusion of life, out of the figures' very "unreality." The moment of community engendered by the party results only from a series of uncanny "deaths," and it transpires in the strange ontological state of "living" that goes on after them. Clarissa's role is like that of the bell of St. Margaret's

church, tolling a moment after the more authoritative, and critically acknowledged, peal of Big Ben, as it famously sounds the hours throughout the day of *Mrs. Dalloway*'s narrative. As Peter Walsh reflects of this second bell, sounding the half hour well after the larger clock has already noted its passing:

> Yet, though she is perfectly right, *her voice, being the voice of the hostess, is reluctant to inflict its individuality*. Some grief for the past holds it back; some concern for the present. It is half-past eleven, she says, and the sound of St. Margaret's glides into the recesses of the heart and buries itself in ring after ring after sound, *like something alive which wants to confide itself, to disperse itself*, to be, with a tremor of delight, at rest (*MD* 49-50, my emphases).

Marking the sound of a temporal disjunction, of the uncanny kind of lag in time that makes present in time a moment which has always already officially passed, St. Margaret's bell is like that narrative voice which is able to "make character" come alive in Woolf's art. And it does so precisely as something which asserts its own "life" by virtue of its very dispersal, by its seeming absence of any individuality.

Clarissa's "transcendental theory" (*MD* 153) of immortality, her articulation of the way in which the individual is able to survive her own death, is precisely Woolf's own implicit theory of narration, as it "makes character" by producing life out of the linguistic space of death, the written form of the Woolfian sentence of free indirect discourse. Woolf's "theory of anonymity," or her articulation of writing as a species of "mediumship" gives voice to Clarissa's own hope for surviving her own death; the author is figured not by the personal and discrete entity of the narrating stand-in, but rather by Clarissa's "unseen part of us, which spreads wide, [which] might survive, be recovered

somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death"
(ibid.). Or, as Clarissa reflects as she walks along the streets of London, in a passage
governed by a kind of pronominal and deictic vertigo:

> Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter
> that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she
> resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?
> but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here,
> there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was
> positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and
> pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist
> between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had
> seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself (*MD* 9).

This chaotic rush of thought describes Clarissa's theory of immortality, as she explicitly
muses on the way in which one might survive one's own death, but it also, I suggest,
performs her theory linguistically on the level of its sentences. Aside from the two brief
tags which momentarily attach the thoughts to Clarissa, "she asked herself" and "she was
positive," the sentence (for it is, despite its overwhelming syntactic complexity, all one
long sentence) weaves in and out of any stable grammatical accountability. In imagining
her own death, Clarissa imagines herself as nothing but the absence of any "I" that we
have seen in Woolf's sentences of free indirect discourse. Death becomes the figure for
the structure of Woolf's narrative voice. Clarissa's thoughts of immortality are the mirror
of the sentence which is able to convey those thoughts in the first place.

There is a second author-figure in *Mrs. Dalloway* in whom we can particularly isolate the uncanny quality of this voice which records subjectivity in Woolf's language, and which creates character out of the perspective of death. In a brief scene during which Peter Walsh falls asleep while sitting in Regent's Park, there erupts a suddenly impersonal narrative of the "solitary traveler," perhaps a figure of his dreams, who encounters on his journey a quasi-mythic figure of an eternal feminine. She is described, like Clarissa's strange kind of authorship in her party-giving and in her evanescent hope for immortality, as "one of those spectral presences" (*MD* 56), a ghostly figure who creates something affirmative out of death. She is "an elderly woman who seems…to seek, over a desert, a lost son; to search for a rider destroyed; to be the figure of the mother whose sons have been killed in the battles of the world" (*MD* 58). The figure in whom the dead are mourned and remembered, the woman arises before the solitary traveler out of the natural world as an all-embracing site of communion, while at the same time, perhaps she is only the old woman sitting next to Peter on the park bench, knitting while he slumbers. "*Nothing exists outside us except a state of mind*, he thinks; a desire for solace, for relief…But if he can conceive of her, then in some sort she exists, he thinks" (*MD* 57).

As we have seen, in the absence of any narrating figure in Woolf's novels, it is the meandering work itself, wandering from perspective to perspective, that ultimately allows for unity between its consciousnesses. Like moths around a flame, Woolf's characters each take up the rotating perspective, occupying in turn the dead center of the sentence of free indirect discourse, which, when unoccupied, has the rather odd distinction of being precisely that, dead, filled by no one who sees or tells. If nothing does, as Peter's solitary

traveler muses, exist outside us except a state of mind, then we can attribute this state of mind to the impersonal subjectivity at the heart of free indirect discourse: the "*il*," non-person he, she, or it, we can call it, that functions as the substratum of all the shifting perspectives that the language is able to pick up, of the momentary subjectivities that occupy the empty center. It can be called a state of mind in the sense that the discrete entity of the knitting elderly woman sits next to Peter on the bench, or that Clarissa Dalloway exists or that Woolf herself writes. Each of these figures, however, becomes transposed into an impersonal being who can be called no entity at all to which any mind might be attached, as the woman on the park bench is imagined as the mythic maternal figure, or as Clarissa takes on the role of "anybody," as she feels herself dispersed across the streets of London, just as Woolf herself disappears into the anonymity of her writing voice, an act for her, we will recall, which is nothing but a "species of mediumship."

And while this impersonal state of mind creates character, it is equally, in the formulation of Peter's reverie, created by character. The being he imagines exists only to the extent that he can imagine her in the first place. Or, as J. Hillis Miller has described the dual nature of what he calls Woolf's "narrator:"

> The characters of *Mrs. Dalloway* are therefore in an odd way, though they do not know it, dependent on the narrator. The narrator has preserved their evanescent thoughts, sensations, mental images, and interior speech. She rescues these from time past and presents them again in language to the reader…In another way, the narrator's mind is dependent on the characters' minds. It could not exist without them….In *Mrs. Dalloway* nothing exists for the narrator which does not first exist in the mind of one of the characters, whether it be a thought or a thing….Though

she is bound to no single mind, she is dependent for her existence on the minds of the characters. She can think, feel, see only as they thought, felt, and saw. Things exist for her, she exists for herself, only because the others once existed. Like the omniscient narrators of *Vanity Fair*, *Middlemarch*, or *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, the omniscient narrator of *Mrs. Dalloway* is a general consciousness or social mind which rises into existence out of the collective mental experience of the individual human beings in the story. The cogito of the narrator of *Mrs. Dalloway* is, "They thought, therefore I am" (179-81).

For, after all, if there were no characters, there would be nothing for the narrative voice to relate; without any proper ontological being of its own, it exists only for the purpose of relating the being of the fictive persons whose stories it tells. Creating character, the voice is equally created by character. "It" does not exist unless there is a character already brought into existence. What I have posited as the two major strands of Woolf's art, the question of character and the question of narrative voice, truly cannot exist apart from one another, as either one in isolation would be simply unthinkable. As Virginia Woolf wonders in her diary in 1935 while she composes *The Years* (1937), her long multi-generational novel of the Pargiter family: "I hardly know which I am, or where: Virginia or Elvira: in the Pargiters or outside" (*WD* 189). When writing, she is both narrating thing and narrated thing, narrative voice and character, only to the extent that she has become nothing at all, dispersed according to the logic of this act of "mediumship" that is Woolf's modernist novel. She is that something alive which is yet dispersed, like the bell of St. Margaret's church, existing only as the things which are brought into existence by her own performative gesture.

Who is there who could call a room empty?

This seemingly impossible position of the narrative voice, perhaps a modernist version of the old question of who creates the creator, is allegorized by Woolf in a highly illuminative passage from her early draft of *Between the Acts*, published in 1983 as *Pointz Hall*, the novel's working title. In a section marked "Silence," Woolf pauses after a description of the titular manor house's empty dining room, in order to wonder how such a description could even be possible in the first place:

> But who observed the dining-room? Who noted the silence, the emptiness? *What name is to be given to that which notes that a room is empty*? This presence certainly requires a name, for without a name what can exist? And how can silence or emptiness be noted by that which has no existence? Yet by what name can that be called which enters rooms when the company is still in the kitchen, or the nursery, or the library; which notes the pictures, then the flowers, and observes, though there itself, the room is empty…Certainly it is difficult to find a name for that which is in a room, yet the room is empty; for that which perceives pictures, knife and fork, also men and women; and describes them; and not only perceives but partakes of them, and has access to the mind in its darkness. And further goes from mind to mind and surface to surface, and from body to body creating what is not mind or body, not surface or depths, but a common element in which the perishable is preserved, and the separate become one. *Does it not by this means create immortality*? And yet we who have named other presences equally impalpable – and called them God, for instance, or again The Holy Ghost – have no name but novelist, or poet, or sculptor, or musician, for this greatest of

all preservers and creators. *But this spirit, this haunter and joiner, who makes one where there are two, three, six or seven, and preserves what without it would perish, is nameless*. Nameless it is, yet partakes of all things named; is rhyme and rhythm (61-2, my emphases).

One can only speculate why this passage, which I have quoted at length, was cut from the novel's final draft, but perhaps, I might suggest, it is because it gives it all away.[26] For is it not true that not only this novel, what will become *Between the Acts*, but any novel, is nothing but an empty room. Every novel, no matter how densely it appears to be populated, is a space that houses ultimately no one who speaks or breathes, but only, as in the dining room in Pointz Hall, silent portraits of people, severed from any real-life referent. As it is noted of this particular room: "Two pictures hung opposite the window…The lady was a picture, bought by Oliver because he liked the picture; the man was an ancestor. He had a name" (*BA* 25). And despite the presences of these two figures, one "a picture," an object purely of imagination with no referent in the real world, and the other an "ancestor," the representation of someone who once historically existed, "the room was empty" (*BA* 26). Characters, as we have repeatedly seen in this project, are not living things, but only dead things with the appearance of life, referents of nothing, as they signify according to the circuitous logic of their uncanny semiological chain. Moreover, we will remember that "character" may not even be the proper term for these creatures. They are, for Woolf, in their uniquely literary existence, essentially unnamable beings.

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[26] In the novel's final version, this scene, if it can even be called one, is drastically reduced to one short uncommented upon paragraph: "Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence" (*BA* 26).

And while any novel is nothing but an empty room, *Between the Acts* provides a privileged example of this ghostly architecture. Strangely, this vast echo-chamber, Woolf's final novel *Between the Acts*, initially strikes its reader as the most straightforwardly told of her mature novels. Its events unfold in a clear linear progression, and it seems to have none of those structurally jarring elements found elsewhere throughout Woolf's work, such as the natural interludes that occur throughout *The Waves* (1931) or the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), that might disrupt its narrative coherency. It seems to present a relatively stable collection of characters, who think and feel according to identifiable narrative marks, with little of the poetic extravagance or blurring of voice that have come to be the hallmarks of her other novels.[27] Its relationship to contemporary history, to Woolf's own real world, is the strongest of any of her works. Even its title, if in a slightly roundabout way, announces the unfolding of its own action, or that there will be action of some kind (acts between which something will presumably unfold), as opposed to the vague symbolism or subjective inwardness announced by Woolf's other titles.

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[27] On this point of the novel's straightforwardness, and seeming mimetic simplicity, however, there is very little critical consensus. Gillian Beer, for instance, calls it Woolf's "most mischievous and playful work" (125), while Daniel Ferrer sees in it nothing short of the playing out of a "*théâtre de la cruauté*," "a *radical* theatre, powerfully challenging the western conception of representation" (97, Ferrer's emphasis). Its earliest critics, such as Louis Kronenberger and Mark Schorer, even dismissed it nearly entirely, as little more than a fragmented failure, none perhaps more so than F.R. Leavis, who claimed that the book "can hardly be reviewed" due to the "extraordinary vacancy and pointlessness" (178) of its mannerisms. Of the novel's major critics, then, it is perhaps only J. Hillis Miller who shares with me the opinion that it is, on its admittedly deceptive surface at least, the simplest of Woolf's mature novels. He writes, in *Fiction and Repetition*: "The novel tells a straightforwardly mimetic story about a group of people in an English country house on a day when a village pageant is given to benefit the local church. The reader comes to have as much confidence in the accuracy of Woolf's social notations as in those of Austen or Eliot. The space given to the registering of subjective experience, of what people think and feel, is also an entirely traditional part of the English novel. Moreover, Woolf does not tamper with the chronological sequence in *Between the Acts*…She tells things, for the most part, in the order in which they occur" (208). While I agree entirely with Miller's summation of the novel's method, it will also become apparent that the formulations of the other critics are also correct. The novel's playfulness and its deconstructive elements, however, cannot, I argue, be understood unless we first acknowledge its straightforwardness. See also Liesl M. Olson's recent essay on Woolf's realism, in which she subtly argues that Woolf "transforms, but does not reject, materialist or realist techniques" (48).

The reader encounters *Between the Acts* as the story, not without its own light humor, of a group of people attending a village pageant on a mid-June afternoon in 1939. There are brief intimations that England is about to descend into war, but for the time being, the novel's characters are more concerned with England's past, presented as it is in the pageant created by Miss La Trobe. And, as we might glean from the novel's title, the characters are even more concerned with themselves, with their vague longings and contemplated infidelities, with weather forecasts and local gossip, with the freshness of fish and the poetry of their everyday lives. However, if we take the seeming straightforwardness of the novel at face value, and trust the language of its narrative design, perhaps it is another story that begins to emerge. Neither simply a pastoral of English village life and pastiche of English history, nor a celebration of the everyday "betweenness" of its characters' existence, *Between the Acts* instead opens itself up to an abyssal structure in which no element of its representational world can be said to be ontologically certain.

It is not only despite, but because of its apparent straightforwardness that we can read Virginia Woolf's final novel as the story of her entire novelistic art. And falling as it does at the endpoint of Woolf's *oeuvre*, *Between the Acts* also marks the culmination of a certain tendency within the modernist novel as such, a tendency that I have been calling its "invention of character" and its replacement of the personalized narrator with the impersonal textuality of the narrative voice. Like Henry James's *The Awkward Age* before it, *Between the Acts* is a novel in which we see literature at work and in search of its own ground. If I have chosen this novel as the most privileged place to look at the construction of the Woolfian novel, of the characteristic sentences with which it is

constructed, the representational strategies upon which it depends, and ultimately, the characters who are made to populate it, then we can also find in it the story of modernist mimesis as such, and the modernist construction of character on which that mimesis hinges.

In fact, as I hope to demonstrate, the novel does not even have any characters at all, but rather presents the tropological construction of character. That is to say, it tells the story of the creation of character out of the figurative operations of literary representation, or out of the tropics of the narrative voice. This process, as we have seen, is essentially the creation of life out of death, the construction of the *figure* of "Mrs. Brown" out of the absent presence of her creator.

If most novels at least provide the semblance of living beings, akin to those portraits hanging on the wall in Pointz Hall, then in *Between the Acts*, even these muted references to people real or imaginary are uncannily absent. As the novel progresses, it is as if this ghostly figure who can call the room empty turns the portraits against the wall, such that not even these static representations of people, the ones that if glanced at quickly enough out of the corner of the eye, might bestow the faintest illusion of presence, are gradually nullified. Reading the novel's various rhetorical twists and collapsing of narrative levels, we shall see that its seeming straightforwardness and readability becomes something like a masterly *trompe-l'oeil*. It is ultimately a novel entirely without characters, save one, the slightly unhappy and socially isolated amateur playwright Miss La Trobe. And she herself will ultimately hardly warrant the name "character," as she seeks complete effacement in her work, wishing to be unseen, unacknowledged; aspiring, in short, toward the unnamability of the presence who might be there to call her room "empty."

Like Woolf's negation of her own generative voice in the "simple story" of Mrs. Brown in "Character in Fiction," there is no character in the fiction save for the author's own imaginative projection of the image of a person; but the world opened up in the space of the fiction is not to be seen through the author's eyes, but only through that non-existent character's. If, we will remember, Woolf is only, throughout her novels, writing about her own self, then it is only to the extent that she no longer exists in that textual space, but is dispersed in the words of the narrative voice, which in its turn "makes character" out of its own absent ontological material. Just as much as there is no Beethoven or Shakespeare, there is equally no Mrs. Brown; there is only instead Peter Walsh's state of mind, the unnamable presence who might call a room empty, or the tropics of Miss La Trobe's figurative operations.

Thus, the critics who seek to find one subjective mind at the substratum of all of Woolf's characters both articulate the complexities of her method perfectly while at the same time, I must stress, misinterpret the ontological nature of the structure entirely. Emblematic of this trend in Woolf criticism is Harvena Richter's study of Woolf's "subjective method" (vii) in *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage*. Richter often analyzes the movements of Woolf's method quite astutely, but she remains trapped within "the damned egotistical self" that Woolf herself criticized so strongly, as, for instance, when Richter writes that Woolf's "means of transition from mind to mind are frequently the same as from thought to thought, and so give the reader the impression that he remains, somehow, *within the same mind or a facet of it*" (52, Richter's emphasis). Richter is correct, I suggest, in isolating a continuity beneath the movement from one point of view to another, but, as I have argued, to align this continuity after *Jacob's Room* with

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anything like a proper "subjectivity," however disembodied or ethereal, is linguistically untenable, and unjustified based on Woolf's own critical writings. Similarly, Richter gets the structure of Woolf's work right, while missing the details of its ontological significance, when she argues that the dominant question of Woolf's novels is not that of point of view, but that of voice:

> It is not the spoken voice of the character or the conventional narrator; it is the inner voice whose exact nature resists definition yet attempts, through language and rhythm, to articulate feeling. It is the tone of the internal monologue, but it represents more than mere verbalized consciousness. It is verbalized *being*; giving voice to the total moment, transcending self and time, its vibrations strike the inner ear of the reader as a familiar voice (129, Richter's emphasis).

Richter's terminology is nearly right here, I think, when she finds Woolf's voice to be that of "verbalized being," for what is this uncharacterizable narrative voice but some kind being whose ontology lies precisely in being verbal, but I would resist aligning it with the "inner life" of anyone we might identify according to the category of personhood.[28]

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[28] Perhaps most symptomatic of this tendency in Woolf criticism to recuperate subjectivity at all costs as the underlying thematic and entity of her work are the numerous readings of *The Waves* that forcefully argue for Bernard's role as the novel's sole being, the self whose multiple facets are personified not only as the novel's five other speaking characters, but even as the impersonal voice of the untitled interludes. As Richter herself writes: "In *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf takes the self of a single being, ultimately represented by Bernard, and slices it into six sections which personify, on a varying number of levels, the conscious and unconscious selves and drives within the human personality" (120). See also Fleishman, p. 161-70, Ferrer, p. 94, Fordham, p. 240-3, and Dorrit Cohn, p. 265. A more subtle, and I would argue correct, reading can be found in James Naremore, where he writes of *The Waves*'s characters: "There is a strong suggestion that the voices we hear are detached from their actual counterparts and do not represent consciousness except indirectly. It is as if Virginia Woolf were asking the reader to suppose that the six types she has arranged in the novel can at any given moment be represented by six detached spokesmen who are continuously going through a process of self-revelation. These voices seem to inhabit a kind of spirit realm from which, in a sad, rather world-weary tone, they comment on their time-bound selves below. Even while the voices assert their personalities, they imply knowledge of a life without personality, an undifferentiated world like the one described by the interchapters" (173). This is to say that the

In the passage describing the empty room, Woolf remarks that there is no name for the kind of being who could call a room empty. It is a figure whose powers are very much like those of the novelist herself, as it makes unity out of multiplicity, has access to the inner worlds of other minds and can describe with fidelity what it finds there, and preserves the perishable by recording it in the "common element." Given these characteristics, one might be tempted to call this "haunter and joiner" the narrator of any novel, if not simply Virginia Woolf. The problem with these names, however, is that they would confer presence upon the being in question, and thus the room would no longer be empty. Maria DiBattisa has noted, in her essay on Woolf and the language of authorship, that the "observant presence" Woolf describes here cannot even be called a ghost, "for even a ghost may be said to have had an existence" (141). Instead, this "being" is resistant to any name that knowledge might produce, to any ontological order that might ground it. As Woolf continues in the excised passage:

> This nameless spirit, then, who is not "we" nor "I," nor the novelist either; for the novelist, all agree, must tell a story; *and there are no stories for this spirit*; this spirit is not concerned to follow lovers to the altar, nor to cut chapter from chapter; and write as novelists do "The End" with a flourish; since there is no end; this being, to reduce it to the shortest and simplest word, was present in the dining-room at Pointz Hall, for it observed how different the room was empty

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underlying unity of the novel's six characters is no longer posed as a question of being, but as one of language and of style. Similarly, in her recent study *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past*, Jane de Gay points out that Bernard's final "summing-up" is a palimpsest of literary citations and allusions, such that "Woolf challenges the Romantic conception of the author as creative genius" (184). The novel's underlying unity, then, is not found in any authorial personality, but in the impersonal voice of literary history itself. These terms, we shall see, may also ultimately be used to describe Miss La Trobe's own unstable status as author-figure within *Between the Acts*.

from what the room was when – as now happened – people entered (62, my emphasis).

Forced to call "this nameless spirit" a "being," simply because English offers no better term, Woolf is careful to note that it is not the novelist, for there are no stories for it, just as much as it is neither "we" nor "I." This is not the being that tells stories, or about whom stories could be told; it is neither narrator nor character. Instead, it is something like the performative force out of which stories emerge, the origin of all the stories that comprise the literary history which will be mirrored in the pageant at the heart of *Between the Acts*' narrative.

And as it remains without a name, perhaps we can for the time being refer to it as Miss La Trobe, the manifestation of Woolf's narrative voice in this particular novel. She is the Woolfian author-figure *par excellence*, and the culmination of the trajectory that has included the personalized narrator of *Jacob's Room*, Clarissa Dalloway, and the state of mind imagined by the solitary traveler, as well as some figures I have not examined, such as Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, and *The Waves*' Bernard. As Woolf's most explicit author-figure, she does not simply figure authorship, as in the case of Mrs. Ramsay's knitting of the brown stocking or Clarissa's party-giving, but she actually writes a work, the parodic pageant of English *literary* history in whose audience the novel's cast of characters gathers. Moreover, she not only writes the work within the novel, but she can be seen to write the very novel in which she exists.[29] And in her doubled act of

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[29] Patricia L. Caughie notes that, in Woolf's novels which explicitly engage with the creative process, "the subject of many modernist works (the artist's work or theory) becomes a strategy of the texts themselves. That is, what was once narrated—the doubts, difficulties, and resolutions of the artist—in novels such as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*…becomes a structural principle of these works. Lily Briscoe, Bernard, and Miss La Trobe do not just produce works of art; in addition, they produce—that is, narrate

authorship, she comes to take on the characteristics of the quintessential modernist sentence, free indirect discourse, becoming the dead center out of which character is constructed and in whose uncanny voice narratives are spun.

Miss La Trobe's tropics of character

That the novel is to be cast in a wholly other kind of personal mode – or perhaps in a mode wholly otherwise from that of personhood – can be seen from Woolf's own plans for it in her diary. We have already seen the ways in which this diary served for her as a record of her struggles over many works to find her own voice, one which she curiously finds in its very absence. In 1938, during the early stages of drafting what is then called *Poyntzet Hall*, Woolf writes of the work:

> A centre: *all literature discussed* in connection with real little incongruous living humour: and anything that comes into my head; *but "I" rejected: "We" substituted*: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation? "We" … the composed of many things … *we all life, all art*, all waifs and strays—a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole—*the present state of my mind* (*WD* 279, Woolf's ellipses, my emphases)?

This fragmentary passage, with its jerking ebb and flow between the assertion of her authorial person and its rejection, takes us back into that tangled knot of personhood with which we began, in "Character in Fiction." In a remarkably dense dance for such a few short lines, Woolf records her search for a center for her work, a locus around which it is to be organized, or the code which might hold its secret. She initially finds this center in "all literature," as if the work is to tell the story of literary history, or of literariness itself.

and interpret—the novels in which their art figures" (29). However, while Caughie only means this figuratively, I would urge us to take the claim, as we shall see, quite literally.

Literature, though, is not understood in isolation, as an impersonal form, but rather in connection with "real" and "living" humor, that "cotton wool of daily life" which fascinated Woolf throughout her career and whose importance for hiding within it the essential she never underestimated.[30]

But in maintaining an essential connection between literature and the "real" and the "living," Woolf makes of it a strange kind of real, as she rejects her own discrete personal self, substituting for the first person singular the first person plural. This "we," however, is not simply to be understood as a group of first persons gathered together, as a conglomeration of little "I"s. It contains within its scope not only "all life," but "all art" as well. If the "I" is rejected, then, it is done so at the time as its replacement is made into an inextricably aesthetic object. Whatever "life" with which Woolf's notion of "we" is imbued is constructed of, or only produced as an effect of, art, the "all literature" with which she began. The community of singularities, the urgently sought connection of consciousnesses, each of which in isolation is suddenly felt to be intolerable and to be rejected, occurs, we can say, in a wholly literary existence, in the aesthetic moment of the "I" which explicitly exists as a character, or as a life constructed out of art. For, as Woolf wraps up the circuitous path of the passage, she wonders if the center, and all the "waifs and strays" contained therein, does not ultimately lie in "the present state of [her] mind."

Her own "I" is to be rejected, for as she records in her diary in 1940 as the novel is nearing completion, "the writing 'I' has vanished….That's part of one's death" (*WD* 323). It is replaced, however, by an "I" of another kind. After all, how could the first

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[30] This intimate connection between literature and daily life is not surprising, given the fact that, as she would continue to work on the novel over the next two years, she was also developing alongside it a critical project about the origins of literature in which the reader plays an essential function. This project was initialized as an idiosyncratic literary history, initially entitled *Reading at Random*, and it remains in two fragmentary essays, "Anon" and "The Reader," published by Brenda R. Silver in 1979.

person plural "we" possibly exist without at least more than one first person to constitute it? It is a person, however, not of flesh and blood, but of ink and paper, a member of that community that we had earlier seen Woolf find in Proust, constructed out of the material of artistic "thoughts, dreams, knowledge." And, as we have repeatedly found to be the case in Woolf's art, this mental material cannot be said to belong to the biographical artist who writes, but rather to the voice to which she gives herself over when writing, to that "subjectless subjectivity" around which her sentences are structured. If the entirety of *Between the Acts*, then, is to tell the story of the "present state of [Woolf's] mind," then this brings the passage back to where it began, in the space of "literature" to which that mind belongs. As was the case with *Mrs. Dalloway*, that novel that was perhaps about nothing but Woolf herself at the same time as it was narrated in a voice wholly not her own, but linguistically belonging to a unique kind of sentence of which only the written language of the novel is capable, here "mind" is essentially "literary." Underlying the sentences of the modernist novel, in Virginia Woolf's constellation of literary personhood, we find neither Henry James nor Proust nor Woolf, but only a dead center out of which the semblance of life emerges.

So, like Mrs. Brown in her railway carriage, the characters of *Between the Acts* do not actually exist, in the way one might say that Dorothea Brook or Emma Woodhouse or Julian Sorel "exists." The troubled young married couple Giles and Isa Oliver, the flirtatious Mrs. Manresa, the absent-minded Mrs. Swithin, the mysterious stranger William Dodge, and all the other inhabitants of this quiet English village who gather at Pointz Hall on this June day in 1939 to watch their annual village pageant – they are

found to exist as nothing but products of Miss La Trobe's performative gesture.[31] But according to this seemingly paradoxical structure that we have repeatedly seen throughout Woolf's *oeuvre*, Miss La Trobe ultimately does not exist either, disappearing instead into the impersonality of her own authorial act. The novel ostensibly tells the story of these people over the course of twenty-four fours, as they flirt and fight with one another, as they connect and come apart. These simple events chiefly occur during the performance of Miss La Trobe's pageant, an annual event in which the quintessentially English village comes together to celebrate its history and to commune in its present, a mode of life which the novel intimates may be quickly running its course, as the newspapers tell of foreboding events on the Continent, and airplanes threateningly fly overhead. However, in what Daniel Ferrer has called "the deconstruction of representation going on throughout the book" (120), the novel famously ends with a *mise-en-abyme* that throws into ontological instability everything that has preceded it.[32]

After the pageant has ended, and the villagers each return on their disparate ways, Isa and Giles Oliver, the couple at the center of *Between the Acts*' narrative, are in their

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[31] We should not forget that her very name, as Gillian Beer has demonstrated, is not only resonant of the figurative dimension of language implied by "trope," but that it also implies "troubadour," which itself means "invention." And while pursuing the implications of this etymology would take me too far afield from the present essay, it should be noted that there is an essential impersonality implied by the tradition of "invention" in the songs of the early troubadours and *trouvères*. For an account of the subjective mode of Miss La Trobe's medieval forebears, see Michel Zink's *The Invention of Literary Subjectivity*, in particular pp. 19-60.

[32] Furthermore, Ferrer astutely traces this breakdown of representation to the "carnivalesque tradition" inscribed in Miss La Trobe's pageant. He writes: "The essential feature of this tradition is the removal (or rather the inexistence) of the separation between the audience and the stage. There is no segregation of spaces: the procession does not take place in a closed space set aside for it, but on the stage of everyday life" (100). And not only is there a breakdown of the separation between audience and stage, but also of what Ferrer calls the "scenographic limit," the separation between the play and its own backstage, or its own condition of production. As he continues: "The three limits on which any representation is based are here constantly displaced, skirted, and effaced: the limit separating stage from audience and the one which sets the theatre apart from the external world, as we have just seen, but also the scenographic limit, which passes between stage and backstage. This partition – materialized here by a thin curtain of greenery behind which are Miss La Trobe and the actors waiting to go on stage – allows enough images and sounds to filter through to attract attention backstage, to make it fascinating, and to transform the staging itself into spectacle (101).

bedroom as the long day draws to a close. It has been a day during which their marital strife has become apparent, as Isa's loneliness is made palpable, and Giles' infidelities are suspected. Their fraught relationship, though, is ultimately colored as an element of a pattern far larger than themselves, as they are described as merely an ever recurring part of a natural history. As the novel's final lines read:

> Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent. Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night. Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. *It was night before roads were made, or houses*. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks. *Then the curtain rose. They spoke* (*BA* 148-9, my emphases).

The couple is placed within a seemingly primordial cycle of antagonism and rebirth. It is the most simple of stories, part of the endless story of the disruption and generation of mankind, and the story is told repeatedly throughout *Between the Acts*, as each of the scenes of Miss La Trobe's pageant can be seen as a variation on this fundamental theme. But how are we to read Giles and Isa in this primordial night? Are they mimetic characters, the illusions of real people living out this particular scene, or, as the final line suggests, are they actors, preparing for a scene that will unfold after the novel has ended? And if the latter is the case, then what has been their status throughout the preceding novel, before the curtain rises? What is the real story that is acted out in *Between the*

Acts, and on what kind of stage can its actors be said to perform? Furthermore, as one character wonders at one point: "He said she meant we all act. Yes, but whose play" (*BA* 135)?

The scene has its double only a few pages earlier, again as this long day is drawing to a close, and Miss La Trobe has taken herself to be alone with her thoughts over a drink at a quiet inn. She reflects on her pageant that has been completed, wondering whether it has been a success or a failure. Increasingly convinced that it has been nothing but the latter, she already begins to plan her next play, imagining in her mind's eye a scene such as Isa and Giles find themselves acting out. "It would be midnight," she thinks, "there would be two figures, half concealed by a rock. The curtain would rise. What would the first words be? The words escaped her" (*BA* 143). Gradually, however, as she nurses her drink, inspiration arises out of this primordial setting, and the work begins to take shape:

> Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. She drowsed; she nodded. The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning—wonderful words….There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words (*BA* 144).

Miss La Trobe's new work, we can see, is to become nothing but the very novel we have been reading, *Between the Acts*, with its elemental tensions of hate and love, degeneration and rebirth. If Giles and Isa had earlier appeared as members of her audience, watching the pageant unfold, here it is revealed that they were merely waiting backstage, as it were,

for the true work to begin, the work at whose possibility the novel only gestures, as it lies on the hither side of its closing page, after the curtains open and Giles and Isa begin to speak. If we read these closing scenes at face value, then, *Between the Acts* has not been any kind of novel at all, but only the preparation for a novel, or the performative force out of which a narrative may unfold.[33] Earlier in the day, before the pageant even gets under way, Miss La Trobe is already getting ahead of herself, as she paces backstage amidst the actors' preparations: "'It has the makings…' she murmured. For another play always lay behind the play she had just written" (*BA* 44). With plays lying behind plays, and a novel lurking in the primordial mud, *Between the Acts* tells the story of its own textual generation.

Consequently, I want to draw this chapter to a close by looking at the way in which Miss La Trobe performs this textual generation, not only of her village pageant, but of the very novel in which that pageant figures. As I have repeatedly suggested, Miss La Trobe is ultimately the only thing like a "person" in this novel, as all the other characters do not exist alongside her, or at the same ontological level of representation as her, but only emanate from her. She is the figure who writes all the other figures in *Between the Acts*, as the force of her aesthetic gesture literally constitutes them as characters and brings them into being as such. Then, we must ask, how is her seemingly impossible role structured? How does she inhabit the novel's center? And how, in

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[33] As J. Hillis Miller describes the novel's closing gesture, as well as its larger "play within a play" structure: "The climactic use of the device of the play within a play in *Between the Acts*, however, does make the text as a whole an illogical combination of singleness and dissimulation. In this alternation the text has two levels, the fictive and the real, and at the same time it has only one surface. This surface is both fictive and real at once….Just beyond the margin of the text, in an extrapolation into the void where there are not yet more words, Miss La Trobe's fiction and the reality of the life of Isa and Giles will become indistinguishable. The text the reader would be reading then would be simultaneously Woolf's novel and a fiction created by one of the characters in that novel. In its end, or just beyond its end, *Between the Acts* becomes a single verbal surface which merges the two levels of 'real' people and play kept separate earlier in the novel" (211-2).

inhabiting that center, is Miss La Trobe made to be not only the preeminent author-figure in Woolf's *oeuvre*, but the Woolfian character *par excellence*? The story of Miss La Trobe is, ultimately, the story of the modernist character, in the various guises in which we have seen it manifested, and in the multiple shapes we have seen it take form.

Woolf has already offered an allegory of Miss La Trobe's position in the excised passage from the early draft of *Pointz Hall*, in which she attempts to describe the figure who might be capable of calling the dining room empty, that kind of being whose form of presence lies in being wholly absent, and for which there is no name. There is another allegorical figure, however, which does survive in the final version of *Between the Acts*, one which mirrors not only Miss La Trobe's structure of absence, but also her relationship to character, to that construction of life out of death which we have seen as emblematic of Woolf's art. On the grounds of Pointz Hall, as one of the numerous realist details lending *Between the Acts* its air of straightforward mimeticism, there sits a lily pond filled with fish. The characters walk by it and discuss it, the scullery maid cools herself on its borders during a moment of repose and Mrs. Swithin uses it as a reflection of her own accumulation of memories. It stands as an object which is factually there on the level of representation, as evidenced by the detail and vividness with which it is described: "Water, for hundreds of years, had silted down into the hollow, and lay there four or five feet deep over a black cushion of mud. Under the thick plate of green water, glazed in their self-centered world, fish swam—gold, splashed with white, streaked with black or silver" (*BA* 30). And the description of these depths and the life contained therein carries on, but it holds within it much more than the accumulation of detail which creates the air of reality in *Between the Acts*. In its depth is hidden, so carefully that it is

easily lost amidst the wealth of concrete description, a story, or perhaps only the semblance of a story:

> It was in that deep centre, in that black heart, that the lady had drowned herself. Ten years since the pool had been dredged and a thigh bone recovered. Alas, it was a sheep's, not a lady's. And sheep have no ghosts, for sheep have no souls. But, the servants insisted, they must have a ghost; the ghost must be a lady's; who had drowned herself for love. So none of them would walk by the lily pond at night, only now when the sun shone and the gentry still sat at table (*BA* 30-1).

It is one of these characteristically deceptive passages that we have seen repeatedly in Woolf, moving forward and back upon itself, cancelling out its own assertions only to reassert them once again, in a tangled representational web. The lady did once drown herself in the pool, but she did not. The bone belongs only to a sheep, but it is still the remnant of a ghost. The pool contains within its depth stories which possess an irresistible pull in the "real" world, even though it is all entirely imaginary, and even its ghosts are imaginary things.

And it is in this accumulation of fictions and ghosts that the pool also contains within it the operations of Miss La Trobe, and so, I suggest, the operations of the entire novel.[34] It is not without accident that the pool is forcefully used as an image of Miss La Trobe as she prepares for the pageant to get underway: "She splashed into the fine mesh like a great stone into the lily pool. The criss-cross was shattered. Only the roots beneath water were of use to her" (*BA* 45). Sinking into the pond like a stone, and having an affinity with the roots which lurk in the depths of its floor, where the light does not shine,

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[34] From a very different point of view than my own, Stephen D. Fox has also identified the supreme importance of this pond within *Between the Acts*, noting that, in its various symbolic levels, it "is a microcosm of Pointz Hall, of the world, of the universe" (472).

Miss La Trobe's act of authorship is ultimately the mirror of the drowned lady, herself perhaps only a fiction. And furthermore, like that lady, it is a gesture caught in a tangled web of imaginary stories, producing even ghosts that are only imaginary. Miss La Trobe creates fictions only to the extent that, in that act of creation, she does not exist.

As the pageant unfolds, and Miss La Trobe replaces her own authorial control with the impersonal voice of the gramophone, we witness the transition of a character, and an ostensible author, into the impersonality of narrative voice. At the pageant's end, the author fades further into the backstage, and the audience is left without any presence that might be held accountable for the aesthetic moment around which they have been gathered: "But before they had come to any common conclusion, *a voice asserted itself. Whose voice it was no one knew*. It came from the bushes—a megaphonic, anonymous, loud-speaking affirmation" (*BA* 127, my emphasis). And as they leave the spectacle behind, they are cast into doubt and confusion: "Whom could they make responsible? Whom could they thank for their entertainment? Was there no one" (*BA* 132)? The audience is left only with themselves, with their own sense of community created by the pageant's aesthetic transformation. Miss La Trobe is doubly absent, as she gives her voice over to the neutrality of the gramophone, and as she bodily flees the scene, wanting to be neither thanked nor acknowledged. "What she want[s]," instead of authorial self-assertion, "like that carp (something moved in the water) was darkness in the mud" (*BA* 138), drowning irrevocably into the depths, amidst the roots that lie unseen at the bottom of the lily pool.

But in her gesture of self-effacement, she has quite literally made character, constructing the novel's community of persons as the pageant famously ends in "present

time," with a sea of mirrors and reflective surfaces held up to the audience. And along with this breakdown of representational stability, as the various fictive planes on which the novel has existed merge into one another, the very language of the narrative itself erupts into a kind of discordant fluidity, the extremity of which has not before occurred within Woolf's work:

> Look! Out they come, from the bushes—the riff-raff. Children? Imps—elves—demons. Holding what? Tin cans? Bedroom candlesticks? Old jars? My dear, that's the cheval glass from the Rectory! And the mirror—that I lent her. My mother's. Cracked. What's the notion? *Anything that's bright enough to reflect, presumably, ourselves*?
>
> > *Ourselves! Ourselves!*
>
> > Out they leapt, jerked, skipped. Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping. Now old Bart…he was caught. Now Manresa. Here a nose…There a skirt…Then trousers only…Now perhaps a face…*Ourselves?* But that's cruel. To snap us as we are, before we've had time to assume…And only, too, in parts…That's what's so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair (*BA* 125, my emphases).

The novel's straightforward realism and conventional structure descends into a din of cacophony and uncontrollable voices, as its language loses all markings that might attach any given sentence or phrase to any consciousness or authority. And amid it all, the only anchor is provided by the gramophone which proclaims, despite its mechanical impersonality, unity and communion: "The gramophone was affirming in tones there was no denying, triumphant yet valedictory: *Dispersed are we; who have come together. But*, the gramophone asserted, *let us retain whatever made that harmony*" (*BA* 133). And all

the characters, united into one unattributed rush of language, wonder together: "Was that voice ourselves? Scraps, orts and fragments, are we, also, that" (*BA* 128)?

The pageant "narrated" by the impersonal voice unifies the isolated members of its audience into a whole, gathering them in this aesthetic event. You may go out into the world again alone, the voice intones at the pageant's end, but do not forget that here, in this space, you were together for a moment.[35] The community of singularities, the urgently sought connection of consciousnesses that Woolf had articulated in her rejection of "I" in favor of the pluralized "we," happens in that literary existence, in the aesthetic moment in which the novel's personages explicitly exist *as characters*. That to which, each alone, they had only comprised the audience has now created them anew within its space, and in that same gesture has brought them together. The voice that belongs to no one has become the voice of everyone. But it is not a social collective that emerges here, but only a grammatical one, grounded in no referential basis.

The members of the audience are only constituted as characters, made to recognize themselves as "ourselves," in this chaotic collection of sentences of free indirect discourse, when it becomes entirely impossible to attach any given thought or utterance to a particular character. If Woolf had begun the novel with the plan to replace "I" with a "we" that she had aligned with "all literature," then we can finally see here that the collective first-person plural which emerges in *Between the Acts* is produced by a language which belongs solely to the novel. This is to say, it is a kind of existence that is

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[35] As Avrom Fleishman writes, in one of the most sensitive and insightful critical readings of *Between the Acts*: "The most prominent participant [of the pageant's audience] is, however, neither a protagonist of the frame story nor one of the invited neighbors but an anonymous voice which emerges from the audience as a whole. This collective point of view is assigned a special way of being introduced and of speaking, so that it develops a personality of its own, a synthetic identity formed from the response of divergent perspectives to a common experience. In other Woolf fictions, a dinner party or the apparition of an old woman can fuse disparate characters into a unitary consciousness; here, an ongoing work of art performs that function" (208).

only possible in literature, created out of a uniquely literary language. Moreover, it is a type of sentence for which any first-person singular "I" is entirely anathema. I follow here Ann Banfield's characterizations of sentences of this type, throughout her writings on the free indirect mode: they are sentences that are organized "around subjective centers that are not egos but third-person centers of subjectivity" and that present "unoccupied perspectives" (29). These sentences are "unmarked by the person of even a single speaker" (23),[36] while still, impossibly, maintaining an essentially subjective register.

And thus this language, so characteristic of the type of literary work we categorize as modernist, and of which Woolf's novels are emblematic, creates the uniquely literary kind of being that we call character. This being is not simply an a-personal diacritical mark, a word on a page, since it refers to a certain type of "subjectivity" with a certain mode of "ontological" capacity; nor is it merely a "person" that would carry with it all the theological and psychological certitude of a speaking entity of flesh and blood. Rather, it is that uncanny kind of living that emerges between these two dimensions, created only by language but not entirely equal to it. And the essential figure for this language which creates life out of death within Woolf's *oeuvre* is the author-figure. We have seen this figure take on various shapes, in various genres of Woolf's writings, from Clarissa Dalloway to Peter Walsh's "state of mind," and from Proust's "thoughts, dreams, knowledge" to the non-existence of Beethoven and Shakespeare, from Miss La Trobe's disappearance in her work to the impossible being in the empty room; this figure which, ultimately, resides in Woolf's own obfuscation of her presence in that corner of the

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[36] These formulations, while resonant of many of Banfield's writings on free indirect discourse, are taken from her 1991 essay "L'ectriture et le Non-Dit."

railway carriage. Each of these figures functions as a metonymy for the very language of the modernist novel, "dying" into an impersonality that mirrors the dead center of the sentence of free indirect discourse. And out of that death is born Mrs. Brown, the literary "life itself" which inhabits the pages of modernism.

CHAPTER FOUR: SAMUEL BECKETT AND COMPANY

"A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine."

So begins Samuel Beckett's late text *Company* (1980), with a peculiar invocation whose origin and destination are from the start equally unknown. The reader, or perhaps we ought to keep ourselves to the mentioned "one," is given an imperative, to imagine, and yet this command is already shadowed in ambiguity and doubt. It is not apparent from where this injunction is coming, whose voice is coming to whom in the dark, and what these unidentifiable people, if they could even be called people, have to do with the command in the first place. Who is to imagine? Who is it that wants the imagining done? Amid all of the confusion as to personhood, one might easily forget to even ask the question of what it is that is to be imagined in the first place. From the novel's first sentence on, everything here takes place in the dark, and as the reader is soon warned, "only a small part of what is said can be verified" (*C* 3). The sudden emergence of a nameless and depersonalized voice, the faintly felt presence of one *lying* on his back in the dark, and the invocation to imagine; out of these barest of traces Beckett constructs *Company*, this slim volume inaugurating his final decade of writing.

What is constructed from these traces, what is invented in Samuel Beckett's invention of company, we shall see, is ultimately the invention of something out of nothing. And to create something out of nothing, I want to suggest, is to perform the creation of life's illusion out of the impersonal texture of literary language. What Beckett's novel performs is the invention of character as such. For is not the invocation that we find at the start of *Company* – "A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine" – the very opening gesture implied by any act of representational literature that relies upon the

idea of personhood? It is the emergent voice of Augustine's confessional self, marking the gulf that lies between the biographical person who lives and the textual person who narrates that life, and it is the cry in the dark with which Farinata's infernal shade calls out to Dante's pilgrim, asking for recognition from his countryman. The voice is that auto-generative talk with which Henry James's consciousnesses bring themselves into being on their awkward stage, and it is Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway saying that she will buy the flowers herself. A voice coming to one in the dark marks the emergence of company, and in so doing, it also signifies the most fundamental gesture of the creation of character.

Beckett's inauguration of company asks its reader to imagine that essential figure upon which any piece of narrative art, or any work of literature organized around the category of the person, implicitly depends: the arrival of a voice out of the dark. "Company," we might say, becomes the ultimate rhetorical figure for the literary invention of character, and *Company* then functions as an allegory of the figurative creation of the illusion of consciousness without which any fiction would not be what it is. A model for the construction of fiction and its inhabitants, this short novel exists at the ground out of which stories emerge. Its narrative becomes the story not only of these uncanny beings who inhabit fiction's space, but also of that singular kind of being in whose voice stories are told. For the central question of *Company*, as it is throughout all of Beckett's prose *oeuvre*, becomes the question of who or what it is that speaks. What kind of being lies at the voice's origin? Who demands the work of imagination? And who imagines? The answer to these questions, Beckett's work shows us, lies at the very

ground of all the personal representations out of which literary history has been built, and upon whose wily and deceptive mode of being the house of fiction rests.

This voice that is isolated and, as it were, characterized in Beckett's late prose work is neither a character nor its opposite, that is, the absence of character – which is, after all, a state in which fiction, or any written representation of personhood, would be unthinkable. Without *some* kind of fictive, or exclusively textual, "person," fiction would not be what it is, but would rather be an utterance of a wholly other kind, something like an abstract scientific report, or the purported presence of a fleeting onomatopoeic speech act. Thus, this entity that speaks in Beckett's late work exists somewhere in between the two poles of character and its absence, and it is out of its singular mode of being that the company provided by character emerges. This impossible Beckettian protagonist, I propose, is the "unnamable" and unutterable discursive "I" of novelistic discourse. It is, namely, the narrative voice, that presence which is never the same thing as a narrator, a character, or an author, but rather the figure that subtends all of them, the impersonal voice in which stories are told, and in which literary language unfolds.

Beckett's singular achievement in the art of the novel is to strip the form of all its masks and conventions, the traditional markers, including even characters, according to which the form has been practiced. Tearing the house of fiction down to the ground, Beckett's works seek to uncover and perform the simple facticity of stories happening, the fact that something like literature exists. And, as a novelist, Beckett works within a tradition for which stories are always ultimately about, and essentially dependent upon, the characters inhabiting them. What would a novel be without some approximation of life at its center? Writing neither literary criticism nor philosophical treatises on art,

Beckett instead interrogates the ontology of fiction from within the realm of fiction itself, and thus his endeavor must also been understood as an interrogation into the ontology of the literary character. With the act of literature then stripped to its most meager essentials, we shall see, in *Company*, the gradual rebuilding of fiction's house, and the invention of character upon which fiction depends.

Beginning at the beginning

Beckett creates a prose universe that asks to be taken as one single entity, a kind of demented *comédie humaine* for the ontological bewilderments and literary extravagances of the twentieth century. From his earliest stories, through the longer novels composed in French during the late 1940s, and up to the many short "closed space" texts of his final decades, Beckett's prose work can be read as comprising one multi-layered and protean textual utterance.[1] And if his fictive world is even more hermetic than that of the preceding century's grand social taxonomist, then this is not only because of the many characters who reappear in one work after another, but because of the singular unity of voice, perspective, and tone which the reader finds in Beckett's

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[1] Similarly, Hugh Kenner compares Beckett's *oeuvre* to T. S. Eliot's pronouncement on Shakespeare, in that "fully to understand any of him we must read all of him, for all his work is a single complex Work" (*Reader's Guide*, 11). S. E. Gontarski also notes in "From Unabandoned Work," particularly of the short prose pieces, "that it is all part of a continuous process, a series" (xxx). See also John Fletcher's *The Novels of Samuel Beckett*, in which he traces the evolution of Beckett's novelistic style by charting the concomitant evolution of the Beckettian hero, understood as a singular entity: "Throughout this study, the point has continuously been made that Beckett's fiction shows an overall consistency and harmony of development that is striking…We have witnessed the innovations of form and style going hand in hand with the gradual evolution of the hero; every step has seemed natural and justified. We can now survey an *oeuvre* which has never once marked time but always moved forward to the next position. Each novel or short story has appeared the obvious successor to the one before" (223-4). And in *Trapped in Thought*, Eric P. Levy refers to Beckett's canon as a "closed system," arguing that "each Beckettian text foregrounds a different aspect of the conceptual nexus constituting the core of meaning expressed in the canon as a whole" (7). For the most exhaustive study of Beckettian repetition, and of the seeming unity engendered by this device, see Rubin Rabinovitz, *Innovation in Samuel Beckett's Fiction*, particularly the essays "Repetition and Underlying Meanings in Beckett's Trilogy" (pp. 65-105) and "*Fizzles* and Beckett's Earlier Fiction" (pp. 137-157).

work. One voice seems to speak the entire *oeuvre*, and it is a voice into whose orbit all of the characters that have been wandering across Beckett's landscapes increasingly collapse.

This intertextual blurring of Beckett's inhabitants occurs initially, and most explicitly, on the mimetic level of content. *Mercier and Camier*, composed in 1946 but not published until 1970, ends with its titular roving heroes making the acquaintance of Watt, Beckett's last hero whose novel was written in English, in a bar. There, Mercier even mentions to Watt: "I knew a poor man named Murphy, who had a look of you, only less battered of course. But he died ten years ago, in rather mysterious circumstances" (111), referring, of course, to the hero of Beckett's first novel published in English, ten years earlier. The relative straightforwardness of the scene makes its effect similar to that of casually encountering Balzac's Rastignac making a brief appearance, years after his initial starring role in *Père Goriot*. Watt is also mentioned in *Molloy* (1951), first in a passing reference made by Molloy, in an apparent non sequitur: "So there was no way of coming at my town directly, by sea, but you had to disembark well to the north or the south and take to the roads, just imagine that, for they had never heard of Watt, just imagine that too" (*TN* 76). *How It Is* (1961) even makes reference to Belacqua, "fallen over on his side tired of waiting forgotten of the hearts where grace abides sleep" (24), which of course may be only a reference to Dante's purgatorial figure, but within Beckett's world cannot help also echoing the early protagonist of his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (written in 1932), and the short story collection *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934).

Characters reappear throughout Beckett's novels, like a collection of specimens growing dimly aware that they are all roaming through the same experimental landscape. But that Beckett is after an effect more fundamental than Balzac's practice of simply recurring figures becomes apparent when one begins to discern just what kind of landscape this is through which they wander, and when one seeks to untangle the relations that exist between them. Beckett's fictive universe is clearly neither Paris nor Dublin, nor any space that might exist on any map. And the characters of this world exist in no mimetically sound relationship with one another, as if they might be roamers on the same streets or acquaintances passing one another at a party.

Beckett hints at this conception of his work as a unified whole when he writes in 1948, in a letter to his friend and confidante George Reavey, discussing his work on the novel that will eventually be published as *Malone Dies*: "[It is] the last I hope of the series Murphy, Watt, Mercier & Camier, Molloy, not to mention the 4 Nouvelles & Eleuthéria."[2] But in another letter of the same year, to his friend Tom MacGreevy, Beckett makes it clear that his conception of his novels as a "series" is no simple matter of one novel functioning as a kind of sequel to the last. The novels exist instead according to a more unsettled logic, one that hinges precisely upon the continuity of their heroes: "*Molloy* is a long book, the second last of the series begun with Murphy, if it can be said to be a series. The last is begun and then I hope I'll hear no more of him."[3] Here Beckett figures his works not as a series of volumes, with one coming after the other, but,

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[2] This letter, dated 8 July 1948, is housed in the Reavey collection at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas at Austin. By "4 Nouvelles," Beckett is referring to the first short prose works that he had composed in French during the preceding years, *Premier amour* (*First Love*), *L'Expulsé* (*The Expelled*), *Le Calmant* (*The Calmative*), and *La Fin* (*The End*), the latter three of which were first collected and published in 1955 as *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien*.
[3] The letter is dated 4 January 1948, and is housed in the Manuscript Room at Trinity College Dublin, MS 10402/175.

curiously, as a unified being. It is as if the works exist in a realm of simultaneity rather than one of sequential and discrete entities. Belacqua Shua does not give way to Murphy to Watt to Mercier and Camier and so on, but instead they are all part and parcel of the same person, the "him" to whom Beckett's letter refers.

Or, to rephrase the issue, we might say that the heroes are figured as different facets of the same being, made of the same material and existing within the same space. This seems to be the case in *Molloy*, when Moran, the private detective who narrates the novel's second half, claims in an aside: "What a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others…Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them. I shall not be able to tell this one" (*TN* 137). Although even this statement, as the trilogy progresses, is revealed to be a red herring, as Moran's report bleeds into Malone's death bed confession in *Malone Dies*, which in turn leads to the incessant rumblings and paradoxical dead-ends of the Beckettian protagonist *par excellence*, the titular "Unnamable" of the trilogy's final volume. The reader is initially led into thinking that all the other characters existed only within Moran's head as he sets out to write his report of his search for his errant predecessor, Molloy, stories told by the hero of yet another story, fictions proffered by a figure who himself is nothing but an invented fiction. But by the time of *The Unnamable* (1953), we are seemingly led into Beckett's novelistic endgame. Near the novel's end, the reader is told that "Moran never spoke" (*TN* 403), nor did anyone else, for that matter. The only person left to speak in Beckett's novels is no person at all.

The *invention* of character, then, which I will ultimately trace in *Company*, at first glance seems to be precisely its opposite within the Beckettian canon, as characters

collapse and dissolve into one another, a domino effect that leads to the seeming absence of anything we might comfortably refer to as a "character," to a figure who remains unnamable and uncharacterizable. Finding its apotheosis in what I will find to be the Unnamable's de-personalized existence, the Beckettian story of character appears to be, not a story of invention, but one of dissolution.

This general process of the disintegration of character can be traced all the way back to Beckett's first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, written in 1932, and altered drastically in order to provide much of the material for his published work, the short stories of *More Pricks than Kicks*. In *Dreams*, which was not published in its original form until 1992, its hero Belacqua Shua is described as "centripetal, centrifugal and…not" (120, the ellipsis is very notably Beckett's own). The narrator, named "Mr. Beckett," quickly adds, in a passage that one can only imagine Beckett never published during his lifetime because it gave away the rules of his novelistic game too explicitly: "He [Belacqua] was bogged in indolence, *without identity, impervious alike to its pull and goading*. The cities and forests and beings were also without identity, they were shadows, they exerted neither pull nor goad….*There is no real Belacqua, it is to be hoped not indeed, there is no such person*" (120-1, my emphases). Similarly, Belacqua's friend Lucien is described as "disintegrating bric-à-brac" (117).[4] The Beckettian hero, then, belongs, along with the entire cast of miscreants, dropouts, and Chaplinesque bums surrounding him, to a race of people who are from the very start under constant erasure and threat of collapse.

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[4] For a detailed reading of the theme of disintegration in this early novel, particularly as it relates to Beckett's criticism of Proust, see Shane Weller's *A Taste for the Negative*, pp. 49-56

The dissolution of character within Beckett's prose universe will reach a kind of climax in *The Unnamable*, this maddeningly dense and seemingly impossible novel in which the reader is left with nothing that might be called character at all. As this novel's central figure, who has neither a name nor a shape nor a place, intones near the end of his interminable monologue:

> I've always been here, here there was never anyone but me, never, always, me, no one, old slush to be churned everlastingly, now it's slush, a minute ago it was dust, it must have rained. He must have travelled, he whose voice it is, he must have seen, with his eyes, a man or two, a thing or two, been aloft, in the light, or else heard tales, travellers found him and told him tales, that proves my innocence, who says, That proves my innocence, he says it, or they say it, yes, they who reason, they who believe, no, in the singular, he who lived, or saw some who had, he speaks of me, as if I were not he, as if I were not he, both, and as if I were others, one after another (*TN* 403).

And just when this disintegration of any discernible character is beginning to become a concomitant disintegration of anything that might resemble logic, plot, grammar, or even meaning, the narrating voice steps back and at least appends names to this chaotic pronominal and syntactical confusion:

> he thinks I can come out, he wants me to be he, or another, let us be fair, he wants me to rise up, up into him, or up into another, let us be impartial, he thinks he's caught me, *he feels me in him, then he says I, as if I were he*, or in another, let us be just, then he says Murphy, or Molloy, I forget, as if I were Malone, *but their day is done*, he wants nothing but himself, for me, he thinks it's his last chance, he

> thinks that, they taught him thinking, *it's always he who speaks, Mercier never spoke, Moran never spoke, I never spoke, I seem to speak, that's because he says I as if he were I*, I nearly believed him, do you hear him, as if he were I, I who am far, who can't move, can't be found, but neither can he, he can only talk, if that much, perhaps it's not he, perhaps it's a multitude, one after another, what confusion, someone mentions confusion (ibid., my emphases).

And so on, *ad infinitum*. To attempt an entirely exhaustive reading of the Unnamable's logical turns and paradoxical cul-de-sacs is, perhaps, ultimately impossible, and at the very least, it would remain beyond the scope of the present inquiry.[5] So instead, to keep to our present concerns as to the logic of the Beckettian character, perhaps we can turn to Beckett himself for a brief summation. As he succinctly puts it in 1956, in an interview with Israel Shenker: "My people seem to be falling to bits" (3).

The last man standing

Beckett finds that his "people seem to be falling to be bits," and as we will see, the space into which they collapse is the textual void figured by the Unnamable's vast and entirely impersonal utterance. All fictions, in a sense, are ultimately "about" the Unnamable; he is the hero to end all heroes, at the same time as he represents the first hero, the origin of what it is to have anything like a fictional world and a fictive person. Beckett razes the house of fiction down to its ground, and in so doing, his novels interrogate the novel form's unique ontology, and they articulate the most fundamental

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[5] I would refer the reader to the excellent rhetorical readings of the novel to be found in Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction*, particularly pp. 40-99; and Richard Begam, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*, pp. 149-83. While I will continue to refer to both works, as well as others, I will state here that these two studies, to my mind, are two of the most rigorous and thoughtful works available of their kind, of any of Beckett's works.

materials out of which the house has all along been constructed. And at the ground of fiction, Beckett finds, there lies only the impossible voice of an unnamable being – *nothing*, a dead center.

But to arrive at nothing, Beckett first charts his hero – for there is but one, after all – on a wild course through the wealth of literary history that has been constructed upon that nothing. To get to the ground, one has to set out on a backward motion, an errant adventure across centuries of literary space. For if, as I mean to suggest, every act of fiction that has ever occurred can ultimately be ascribable to the impersonal figure of the Unnamable, then I will leave him to speak for the atemporal constancy of his strange and uncanny existence: "No, I have always been sitting here, at this selfsame spot, my hands on my knees, gazing before me like a great horn-owl in an aviary….Nothing has ever changed since I have been here. But I dare not infer from this that nothing ever will change" (*TN* 293). This is the figure that has always been there behind every other one, not only within Beckett's *oeuvre*, but since the light of the first story, and presumably it will always be his existence until stories cease to be told. Or, as Hugh Kenner has put it: Beckett's trilogy "is, among other things, a compendious abstract of all the novels that have ever been written, reduced to their most general terms" (63).[6] This interminable voice of the Unnamable, the voice of *nothing*, is the voice in which all stories have from the beginning been told. Beckett's novels tell the story of what it means that something like a novel exists at all.

We will eventually see how the trilogy ends with the absence of all character, though an absence out of which character and the stories told about it are generated, a nothingness out of which something persists in being created. Before turning to a detailed

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[6] See Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*.

investigation of this impossible articulation of the absence and impersonality figured by the Unnamable, however, I will look briefly at the trilogy's beginning. *Molloy* marks the beginning of the end of recognizable character within Beckett's prose *oeuvre*, as its narrative charts the process of disintegration that will lead us to *The Unnamable*'s originary ground. In its first figure, Molloy, the trilogy already encapsulates all the fictions that have come before, both those by Beckett himself and those by any other writer, and it begins to discover the principle of their telling.

Beckett's early novels are filled with mad wanderers, intellectual explorers, and traveling scholars, protagonists who journey far and wide across increasingly abstract landscapes. This archetypal quest figure, an absurd knight errant for the twentieth century, is found in such heroes as Belacqua Shua and Murphy, both of whose adventures occur in a more or less recognizably mimetic version of Dublin, and he is also Watt, Mercier, and Camier, as their journeys take them further into spaces found on no map. He finds his richest embodiment in *Molloy*. In this novel, Beckett's wandering hero finds both his culmination and his dissolution, his grandest journey that is at the same time the end of all journeying. Molloy marks the beginning of the end of recognizable character in Beckett's novels.[7] His story tells the dissolution of the Beckettian hero, as he sets off on the last of the great novelistic journeys, his destination the originary site of his mother's house, though his purpose and his impulse remain unclear: "I no longer know what I am doing, nor why, those are things I understand less and less" (*TN* 45). And on his journey, he wanders through a countryside increasingly void of any traditionally mimetic markers or reference points. But what his landscape loses in material reference, it vastly gains in

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[7] It is not my intention to look at the first novel Beckett wrote, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, but I would refer the reader to Shane Weller's excellent analysis of the process of disintegration that is already underway there. See my reference to Weller's discussion in note 4.

literary-historical allusions. Lost in what his quasi-double Moran will later term "Molloy country," Molloy's quest takes him through a space that reverberates with echoes of heroic travelers that have come before him.

A major reference point of course is Western literature's originary epic quest of Homer's *Odyssey*. Molloy makes reference to a past in which he may have been a sailor, referring to a sea voyage he once took, possibly on the Aegean (*TN* 30). The novel contains a number of scenes recalling Odysseus's long journey home to Ithaca, and the visit to the underworld that he makes along the way (*TN* 51).[8] Like Odysseus, Molloy travels through a hostile and foreign landscape before making his way home to a woman who waits for him. Along the way he is unjustly detained, uses his cunning to outwit strangers, and experiences the temptations of repose. Beyond this broad Homeric framework, there are also numerous patterns and figures echoing biblical wanderers and journeymen, from Adam and Abraham to Isaiah and Job, and, most frequently, to Christ. These references are too many to list here, but to offer only a couple of examples, Molloy at one point compares his progress through the hostile landscape to the biblical flight into Egypt: "And the cycle continues, joltingly, of flight and bivouac, in an Egypt without bounds" (*TN* 66) Elsewhere, he speaks of being devoured by a "passion without form and stations" (*TN* 25).[9] And Moran, the protagonist of the novel's second half who may or may not be another version of Molloy, is commanded by a mysterious and absent figure, named Youdi, to depart from the peace of his garden in order to set out on what will be

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[8] For discussions of *Molloy*'s Homeric allusions, see Rubin Rabinovitz, "*Molloy* and the Archetypal Traveler," in *Innovation in Samuel Beckett's Fiction*, pp. 37-8; John Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett's Art*, p. 122; and Dieter Wellershoff, "Failure of an Attempt at De-Mythologization: Samuel Beckett's Novels." Rabinovitz's essay has been particularly helpful in explicating many of *Molloy*'s complex and varied allusions to a variety of literary-historical texts in addition to Homer's *Odyssey*.

[9] These are only two examples of many, and for an exhaustive list of the novel's Biblical allusions, I again refer the reader to Rabinovitz's study, pp. 38-40. See also David Hayman, "*Molloy* or the Quest for Meaninglessness: A Global Interpretation."

his hellish quest. These biblical and Homeric echoes are matched by a number of allusions to Dante's *Commedia*.[10] Molloy at one point compares himself to the figures of Belacqua and Sordello from the *Purgatorio* (*TN* 10). Like Dante in the opening of the *Inferno*, Molloy finds himself lost in a dark wood, in search of a straight line that might guide him ("that way of which I knew nothing, qua way" (*TN* 26). As he describes the world in which he finds himself, and into whose infernal depths he plunges: "The horizon was burning with sulphur and phosphorus, it was there I was bound" (*TN* 27). And like the Italian poet who features so strongly throughout Beckett's *oeuvre*, Molloy relies on a boatman to take him across a river and into this hellish landscape (*TN* 26).

While these three essential literary-historical reference points are the most explicit in Beckett's novel, numerous critics have also drawn parallels between Molloy's travels and such other epic narratives as Jason's quest on the Argo, Theseus's journey into the labyrinth, the courtly quests of the knights of medieval romance, the spiritual trajectory of Bunyan's Pilgrim, the mad expeditions of Don Quixote, the episodic adventures of early picaresque heroes, and the pursuit of the whale by Captain Ahab.[11] However, I am less interested in pursuing the direct references to all of these figures than I am in simply

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[10] The weight of Dante, of course, is present throughout much of Beckett's work. Pascale Casanova has discussed this at length, and while I am not entirely convinced by her central thesis that Ireland functioned for Beckett as his *Purgatorio*, she does nicely sum up Beckett's lifelong affinity with Dante, when she writes that Dante's work "supplied [Beckett] with a substratum, a grid for interpreting the world, an inexhaustible reservoir of metaphors and learned allusions, and became a motor of literary creation. *The Divine Comedy* is a prodigious palimpsest, a founding text, that is quoted, parodied, corrupted, appropriated" (51). For a detailed discussion and illumination of these many allusions and citations, see Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes*. See also Eric P. Levy, *Beckett and the Voice of Species*, pp. 41-52.

[11] For general discussions of Beckett's uses and abuses of mythological sources, see Mary Doll, *Beckett and Myth: An Archetypal Approach* and Laura Barge, *God, the Quest, the Hero: Thematic Structures in Beckett's Fiction*, as well as Roch Smith's essay "Naming the M/inotaur." On the relationship between Molloy's journey and the thematic of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, see Fletcher, p. 135, as well as Hélène Baldwin's *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence*, in which she writes of Moran: "he starts with a small family in relative affluence and loses all to wander the world as what we must call a pilgrim" (21). And Molloy's quest has been linked to the novelistic figures of Quixote and Ahab by Andrew Kennedy, in *Samuel Beckett*, pp. 109-10.

noting the sheer number of Beckett's allusions. The world of *Molloy*, through its multiple layers of allusions and citations, becomes a vast echo-chamber of literary history, and most particularly of the mad quests and errant journeys accumulated throughout its centuries. Molloy's journey becomes a multi-layered palimpsest of all the quest narratives that have come before him, a dense collage of the knights, heroes, and wanderers who have inhabited literary history and who have defined many of its most fundamental forms.

As Molloy becomes increasingly lost in a world of literary-historical allusions and citations, the narratives of Dante and Odysseus, alongside the passion of Christ, may have the most strongly felt resonance in his own journey, but I must stress that no one reference-point can take precedence over any other. I would follow critics such as H. Porter Abbott, Hugh Kenner, and Rubin Rabinovitz who, while tracing many of Beckett's allusions within *Molloy*, have urged against seeking extended one-to-one parallels between Molloy's narrative and any one literary-historical precedent. Kenner, for instance, upon tracing a reference within *Molloy* to the biblical angel Gabriel, quickly adds: "We shall do well to make little of this." He continues: "Like the hints of detective-story format, it is one of Beckett's devices for imparting to the narrative a sense of near-familiarity, near-intelligibility. To hint at numerous patterns that do not really fit, that will certainly not fit the way the *Odyssey* can be fitted to *Ulysses*, is a device among many for installing us in a world that dissolves" (97-8).[12] Any attempt, then, to take Dante's

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[12] In Kenner, *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett*. For a similar admonition, see H. Porter Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett*, where he writes: "Thus Beckett drives many of his critics to allegory, even though allegory is the kind of coherence he has striven to avoid" (9). Rabinovitz also has given great attention to the novel's many allegorical dead-ends and aporias: "The abundance of allusion may suggest that *Molloy*, like Joyce's *Ulysses*, takes its structure from an earlier work and presents characters who are modeled on specific epic figures. So it may appear, but readers who seek to extend these parallels soon find themselves enmeshed in contradictions. For example: if Molloy is Adam, why does he compare himself to

Commedia or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as the chief allegorical referent or intertext of Molloy's world is only going to lead to dead-ends and contradictions. No one text holds the key that might unlock the novel's hermeneutic difficulties. The reader attempting to make sense of *Molloy's* wealth of literary references is no longer in the world of traditional allegory, as it relies upon one-to-one correspondence, but finds himself instead in a figurative complex of allusion and citation that rests upon no such homology.

This breakdown of the allegorical chain has been oftentimes cited by critics as an example of Beckett's humor, an ironic device which holds Molloy up against his numerous forerunners in order to parody his narrative's form.[13] Coming as it does at the end of the line of so many quests, most of them spiritual, Molloy's process of dissolution and decay does certainly throw into great relief the absurdity of his epic ambitions. He can be read as an Odysseus-figure who does in fact reach home, but without clothes or even limbs, and to find not the warm embrace of Penelope, but only the rotting corpse of his mother. Or, the reader is easily invited to understand him as a spiritual pilgrim in the tradition of Dante, but one who finds not transcendence but only the empty core of his own inner life. While this parodic element is most certainly present in the quest structure of *Molloy*, I would argue that the novel's rich texture of allusion to, and fundamental disruption of, the tradition of quest narratives gets at something more fundamental, namely, the wholly textual nature of its hero. As much as Molloy is the last recognizably human figure to inhabit Beckett's prose universe, his ontological build-up is also of a

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the serpent? If he is Abraham, why does he wonder whether he has been mistaken for the sheep entangled in brambles?....Such apparent contradictions indicate that the biblical parallels should not be extended too far. There are similar difficulties in attempting to enlarge on the parallels involving Odysseus or Dante: no sooner is such a pattern discerned than its limitations begin to emerge" (41).

[13] For the best critical discussions of the parodic element in Beckett's work, see Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence*, as well as Ruby Cohn's highly influential study of Beckettian humor, *Back to Beckett*.

wholly other kind than that which might be used to describe any other traditionally realistic hero. He is a person of paper through and through, made of all the texts before; his illusion of humanness is constructed, not out of any reference to an implied person, but out of reference to *other* implied persons. His landscape akin to a library, his quest is that of literature itself, toward its own ground, and toward those "fundamental sounds" out of which its space is composed.[14] The novel's *bricolage* of wanderers and knights errant, assembled piecemeal from the entirety of literary history, serves as a guide map to the very space through which Molloy wanders, which is nothing but the very space of literature as such, a space in which to say is to invent, and to invent is to bring about the advent of nothing at all.[15]

In the second half of the novel, as the private detective Moran sets off to find the lost wanderer, he attempts a description of the landscape in which he finds himself, a world he labels "Molloy country:" "By the Molloy country I mean that narrow region whose administrative limits he had never crossed and presumably never would, either because he was forbidden to, or because he had no wish to, or of course because of some extraordinary fortuitous conjunction of circumstances" (*TN* 133). In this empty and

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[14] This phrase is taken from Beckett's oft-quoted pronouncement to his friend and collaborator Alan Schneider, in which he claims that his "work is a matter of fundamental sounds." I will have more to say about this phrase later, see note 40.

[15] For brevity's sake, I will avoid a detailed comparison between Molloy's journey and that of Kafka's K. in *The Castle*, but I would like to simply suggest here that their fundamental principles are remarkably similar, particularly following Marthe Robert's brilliant reading of Kafka in *The Old and the New*, in particular pp. 171-322. There, she does a remarkable job of tracing the many literary-historical allusions of K.'s quest, most notably to Don Quixote and to the Arthurian legends. And following from the density of these allusions, she argues that it is through literary space that K. wanders, a thesis that I will not attempt to reconstruct here. To briefly suggest the direction such a reading would take, I can instead cite Maurice Blanchot from his own reconstruction of Robert, in "The Wooden Bridge," in *The Infinite Conversation*: "[*The Castle*] does not consist in an immediate narrative, but in a confrontation of this narrative with all the books of the same type, which, though they be of dissimilar age, origin, signification, and style, in advance occupy the literary dimension in which it, too, would like to find a place. To put this differently, *the Surveyor does not survey imaginary and still virgin countries but the immense space of literature; he thus cannot keep from imitating – and thereby reflecting – all the heroes who have preceded him into this space*" (*IC* 391, my emphasis).

desolate landscape of which Moran can offer no physical description, Beckett's heroes wander endlessly, not through a world that might be called "Dublin," "Ireland," or "Paris," but only through the endlessly proliferating pages of literary history itself.[16] The goal of Molloy's wandering is not toward some truth to be attained, or toward a new land to be discovered, but, as we will remember, toward the most originary place, which in the novel is coded as his mother's house. Setting out on what Malone, in the trilogy's middle volume, will call "the last journey" (*TN* 194), his aim is not to create something new, or to live yet another story that might be told, but only to uncover the ground upon which he walks. In short, his journey tells the story of the ontology of narrative prose, and so it takes him through all the quests that have come before his own, referencing the vast storehouse of literary history in whose wake he exists. The purpose of Beckett's numerous quest allusions, then, becomes neither allegory nor strict parody, but rather, they make up the very land across which Molloy makes his calamitous peregrinations.

The invention of nothing

A knight errant lost in a world built out of words, wandering across a land mapped by his literary-historical precedents, Molloy discovers what it is to live in and as a fiction. Whatever "life" that may be granted him is the only kind of life available to the inhabitants of the unique ontology of narrative prose, and, once again, it is a life that amounts to nothing at all. Ensconced in his mother's house, his journey completed, he sets out to tell the story of his wanderings, reflecting on the space through which he has

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[16] As Beckett remarks elsewhere, in one of his early essays on modern painting, "*Peintres de l'empêchment*:" "Heureusement il ne s'agit pas de dire ce qui n'a pas encore été dit, mais de redire, le plus souvent possible dans l'espace le plus reduit, ce qui a été dit déjà" (*D* 133). In *Trapped in Thought*, Eric P. Levy translates this passage as: "Fortunately it is not a question of saying what has not yet been said, but of repeating, as often as possible in the most reduced space, what has already been said" (7).

traveled to arrive at his originary destination. This reflection leads him, not to a detailed description of place, but to a discourse upon words and the vast difference that lies between them and things. He remarks to himself in an apparent *non sequitur*:

> *And truly it little matters what I say, this, this or that or any other thing. Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing*, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept. To hell with it anyway. Where was I (*TN* 32, my emphasis).

Molloy's very existence, and the goal of the quest upon which he has embarked, is nothing but the work of literature. He moves through a world created by every instance of literature that has come before his own, exemplified as I have suggested in the novel's dozens of allusions to literary heroes ranging from Odysseus to Abraham and from Don Quixote to Captain Ahab. As Malone later intones: "Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. I have tried" (*TN* 194). As we have seen, Beckett's trilogy invites its readers to believe that Malone is nothing but a continuation of Molloy, who himself is only the precursor to Moran – a paradoxical complex of personhood that all dissolves into the Unnamable's interminable textual monologue. Thus, if Molloy discovers that to say is to invent, and to invent in the realm of fiction is to invent nothing, then by the time Malone takes the stage, this narratological structure has become the structure of his own life – to live as a fictive person is to exist according to the same logic as fiction's unstable inventions. Seeking to uncover the heart of the literary, to articulate those "fundamental sounds" toward which his work aims,

Beckett has fashioned a character whose life is comprised of nothing but the mode of being proper to literary language, this invention of nothing described by Molloy.

Fiction, Molloy finds, invents, in that it brings into existence the semblance of a place and the illusion of people and events which did not exist before its own inaugural act. Each work, every time, is always new. But this inaugural act is precisely an invention of nothing in that it marks the existence of its places, people, and events *as fictions*, that is, as entities bearing none of the materiality and verifiability that one would expect from the fruits of invention. Only words are invented, chains of reference and intertextual allusion that follow no homological course. In short, nothing at all is invented, which is to say, another instance of literature happens, built from the same evanescent matter as every other instance of the literary which has preceded it. This structure, of a saying that is an invention but the invention of nothing proper and instead only a repetition of what has come before, is ultimately the general principle of Samuel Beckett's novels, and in this principle we can find nothing short of a Beckettian theory of the narrative work of art. To write fiction, Beckett finds, is to invent – saying is making; but to invent in a fiction is to invent precisely nothing at all.

This principle can be gleaned from the title of one of Beckett's collections, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, or *Textes pour rien*, composed at the same time as the trilogy and published in 1955. The phrase is adapted from the musical term *mesure pour rien*, or "a bar's rest," as John Fletcher has helpfully explained:

> Thus a *texte pour rien* would be a grouping of words conveying nothing, and this
> is in fact, more or less, what we find: we have, in a form of a fragile beauty, a
> content of extraordinary tenuousness, a kaleidoscope of continually changing

half-meanings, and structures as brittle as thin glass, at the slightest tap flying

apart (196).

In this remarkable description of Beckett's short pieces, Fletcher is of course entirely

correct. Such "fragile beauty" and "extraordinary tenuousness" is what the reader finds in

encountering these most fundamental of all Beckett's prose works, the *Texts for Nothing*.

But is it not also what any reader ultimately finds in encountering any fiction? Is it not

the fragile house of glass in which any fictive character is brought to life?

Stories, in Beckett's increasingly minimalist world, amount to *nothing* precisely

because of a realization that no fiction ever properly "means." That is, *qua* fiction, it

suspends the relation between language and its supposed reference, as opposed to

language that describes factual matters or states of affairs. Fiction throws into doubt the

very *aboutness* of something upon which meaning would seem to rely. A fiction

ostensibly describes acts and events that occur prior to, or at least outside of, its own act

of describing those events – and yet, as a fiction, it is actually the performative creation

of those events. Any fiction, Beckett's texts understand, invents the thing it is supposed

to name, but moreover, *in naming*, the "invention" is also that of that thing's very

absence, as a thing that is not present, but must in fact be named at all. Every fictional

utterance embarks upon a kind of whirligig of missed encounters and voided referents,

such that not even self-reference would be entirely possible. The most compendious

fiction written would still, as a fiction, amount ultimately to nothing.

Here we might think of a not entirely unsurprising similarity between the concept

of invention as Molloy defines it and that offered by Jacques Derrida, in one of the

numerous glances into the nature of literary language scattered across his work. Derrida

comments on the nature of invention, literary or otherwise, in an essay initially published in 1987, titled "Psyche: Invention of the Other." He is writing about Ponge's "Fable," though the statement could be read as a working definition of any instance of the literary:

> [It, the fable] creates nothing, in the theological sense of the word (at least this is apparently the case); it invents only by having recourse to a lexicon and to syntactical rules, to a prevailing code, to conventions to which in a certain fashion it submits itself. But it gives rise to an event, tells a fictional story, and produces a machine by introducing a disparity or gap into the customary use of discourse, by upsetting to some extent the mind-set of expectation and reception that it nevertheless needs; it forms a beginning *and* it speaks of that beginning, and in this double, indivisible movement, it inaugurates (24, Derrida's emphasis).

Literary writing uses a language that has preexisted it, not only words made available by a given lexicon, but also various codes and structures that govern a kind of historical body of work whose "literariness" can be agreed upon by a certain number of people. There is a certain inheritance without which no piece of writing could be what it is; if it were absolutely new, truly creative in the theological sense of the word, then it would be entirely incomprehensible, not even able to be called writing, of whatever kind.

The literary act is one of freedom, whereby one can say seemingly anything, and each time the act is always new. No work of literature is ever quite the same thing as anything that has been brought into existence before. But this air of apparently absolute freedom lasts, as it were, only for an instant. By the light of day, words must still mean, stories must still be told, literary histories must continue to generate. There is, for Derrida, an event in the literary, disruptive of any history, and yet that history, and any

reader who lives within it, must still be able to pick it up and call it a text that is readable, placing it in the *literary* history that has governed its rules. While there is an inheritance in the sense that no literary work is a creation *ex nihilo*, it is never a simple repetition of whatever laws or structures comprise the inheritance. For a work to be a work, to attain the status of event-hood, there is always a difference with the repetition, a shift in the workings of the code.

Derrida describes the task of this creation of the literary, the way it takes its materials from the world preceding it and makes of them a new world, a fictive one whose haunted architecture lies on no map: "To invent not this or that, some *tekhnē* or some fable, but to invent the world—a world, not America, the New World, but a novel world, another habitat, another person, another desire even, and so forth" (22). A piece of literature, then, is on the one hand inaugural, because this is a world that has never existed before, each time wholly new, territory entirely uncharted; while, on the other hand, it is laden with inheritance and materials that belong not to itself but to all those entities that have come before it, or that lie outside of its own space. A piece of fiction, we might say, performs itself while always still having to say something else – or vice versa. In the literary whirligig, it becomes increasingly impossible to separate these two aspects of uttering.

Derrida points to Ponge's "Fable" as an exemplary invention of this literary kind, since it is both performative and constative from its very first line: "It invents by means of the sole act of enunciation that performs *and* describes, operates *and* states" (12,

Derrida's emphases).[17] It points to, or says, what is, while at the same time producing that very thing to which it points. While Ponge's text explicitly tackles both registers of its act of fictive invention, Derrida himself quickly cites Paul de Man's point, from "The Rhetoric of Temporality," that all literary language operates according to an ultimate undecidability between performing and stating, between connotation and denotation. Every act of invention opens itself up to the "inorganic temporality" of de Man's structures of irony and allegory, the way in which any work "can only restate and repeat [its inauthenticity] on an increasingly conscious level, [remaining] endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the real world" (*BI* 222). Any text is, in a sense, ironic, in that it is a fiction, a created invention infinitely removed from the domain of empirical experience.[18] Thus in Ponge's "Fable," in not only its undecidability between, but its explicit combination of, the performative and the constative uses of language, when "a fabulous invention becomes the invention of truth: of its truth as fable, of the fable of truth, of the truth of truth *as fable*" (19, Derrida's emphasis), what Derrida

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[17] That exemplary first line of Ponge's "Fable" reads: "*Par le mot* par *commence donc ce texte*," or, in Catherine Porter's English translation: "With the word *this* begins then this text" (cited in Derrida, 8, Ponge's emphasis).

[18] Perhaps here we might even think of Georg Lukács' reflections on irony as the very constitutive structuring principle of the novel form, in any of its modern instantiations. See *Theory of the Novel* (1920), in which he goes so far as to claim that the novel's essentially ironic structure makes it a genre in fact antithetical to any kind of mimesis. Lukács calls the novel "the adventure of interiority," writing that "it is a desperate, purely artistic attempt to create, with the means of composition, structuring, and organization, a unity that is no longer organically given: a desperate attempt and a heroic failure (55). Hopelessly grounded in the subjectivity of the novelist, while at the same time trying to present itself as an organic and unified whole, the novel is in a constant situation of irony, which Lukács characterizes as that position which sees the novelistic world as a unified world, but then recognizes it as one that is merely formal, which is to say, nothing but a created totality, made of discrete parts that can never quite add up to a rounded whole, as they would in epic structures and the totality of an empirical world from which they spring. As J.M. Bernstein writes in *The Philosophy of the Novel*: "Novelistic irony begins with the fictiveness of its world, with the distance separating fiction (form-giving) and social reality, and ironically reflects on that fact….For a novel to come to self-consciousness is for it to call into question its own removal from or transcendence of experience. *Novelistic irony begins with the madness of fiction, with the unreality of all that lies within its domain*, with, finally, the reduction of the world to writing, and 'figures' through the instrumentality of form a return to the world" (215, my emphasis). And every work of fiction, then, would be caught in this ironic double-bind, seeking to connote the world, but ultimately only denotatively performing itself.

finds is the act of every literary invention *qua* fictive utterance. Any literary work announces its own "truth" as invention, as something new that was not there before; and at the same time, it announces its truth *as fiction*, whereby its "truth" is announced as an invented falsehood. Oscillating between these two registers, of performing a truth in the same movement as it states a falsehood, the work of fiction upsets any clear distinction between the two, such that, after all, perhaps *nothing* has been said at all.

Thus we find ourselves back in the vast landscape of "Molloy country," that realm through which Beckett's last hero wanders and whose terrain is comprised of nothing but all the wanderings that have come before his own. It is a land in which something is made to happen, a new work of narrative literature has occurred, with the semblance of people, things, events. And yet, at the same time, nothing happens at all. Nothing, that is, but literature itself. As the novel ends, with Moran sitting down to write the report of his findings, the report that presumably will become the novel we have just read, the fabulous invention of fiction is enacted once again: "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (*TN* 176). And what Moran writes, in this instance, is the "truth" proper to any fictive utterance; it hardly matters, then, whether or not it is raining, or what the time may or may not be, for in his gesture, anything said becomes true, in so far as it is contained in a discursive act in which empirical truth is a thing to be bracketed.[19]

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[19] In *Samuel Beckett*, Hugh Kenner brilliantly comments on this passage, in that it invites its reader to reflect ironically on its complete absence of truth: "Fiction is precisely like mathematics in this, that its normal processes handle nonexistent beings (points without magnitude, lines without breadth, persons without being), and that a knowing extension of its normal processes will generate beings that cannot be assimilated by the world of experience….[Beckett's work] is the unassimilable product of a set of operations with words, every word of which retains its meaning and every operation its validity….Item: what I am telling you is a story, the substance of which is that it is a story; now since my statement that these facts are fiction is part of the fiction, they may very likely be facts, but if they are facts then you are to believe what they say, namely that they are fictions. (Was it or was it not raining when Moran began to

The world of fiction, Molloy finds, is one in which everything is all "very rightly wrong" (*TN* 32).[20] And this principle of "fictive truth" uncovered by Molloy, the narratological structure whereby to say is to invent nothing, becomes the very ontological mode of existence for the Unnamable. Here we will remember what Malone discovers in his protracted state of limbo between the two, that to live and to invent are for him ultimately the same thing: "Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is Live. No matter. I have tried" (*TN* 194). To live in the world of fiction, which is to say to live as a character, is to live in and as invention. And invention, within the space of fiction, is a process that amounts to nothing at all.

This central figure around which the question of character has been orbiting, then, the Unnamable who resides at fiction's dead center, is a figure whose mode of existence amounts to nothing. It is the narrative voice in which any fiction is cast, neither a narrator, nor an author, nor a character, but rather simply the impersonal voice in which stories are told – with no qualities that might be attributable to anything called a "person," it is the voice of no one, of nothing. The voice of a being reduced to the textuality of writing, in no way does it refer to a body or a mind that might lie outside of or preexist its textual gesture. Its being is wholly its act of narration, with no remainder outside of its act of telling.

The inextricable literariness of the Unnamable has perhaps most excellently been analyzed by Richard Begam in his study *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*.

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write? *For his statement that it was not is contained in the lie which it is the point of the statement to expose as a lie*). This last antinomy was known to our fathers as the paradox of the Cretan liar: all Cretans are liars, said the man from Crete. It exercised logic classrooms for centuries. And indeed Beckett's fictions are at bottom rather like scholarly jokes" (202-3, my emphasis).

[20] Leslie Hill, in his invaluable study, *Beckett's Fiction*, has also commented on the aporias and paradoxes encountered by Molloy on his journeying. According to Hill, Molloy finds that fiction is a realm that "entertains no stable relationship with either truth or falsehood. Rather it displaces the meaning of both truth and falsity so that the one is the condition and consequence of the other" (77).

There, Begam considers this Beckettian protagonist *par excellence* as a figure for "the beginning of writing," and as a being whose existence is wholly dependent upon "a condition of pure textuality" (155). The opposed figures of narrator and narrated may still be operable in the trilogy's first two novels, however diminished, as a story is told *about* Molloy and Moran *by* a kind of narrating presence. But in *The Unnamable*:

> Beckett succeeds in collapsing the narrator/narrated into an undifferentiated third term, the mediating slash that formerly stood as the sign of demarcation but now disperses itself into an interstitial zone, the space of an in-between that not only refuses to resolve itself into either of these two terms but renders impossible their very articulation (156).

Begam later suggestively describes this collapsed narrational figure as "*a dead center*, a point of convergence where nothing converges" (172, my emphasis).[21] Neither a narrating presence nor a narrated thing, but rather an impossible amalgamation of both of these entities so fundamental to any narrative work, the Unnamable is a written existent through and through. It may be the figure for literary writing as such: the center out of which literary life emerges, and yet a *dead* center still, to which anything that we might call "living" would seem to be entirely anathema.

It is a purely literary figure that refers to nothing, and yet, impossibly still, he – or perhaps we may only after all refer to him as "it" – speaks. And in speaking, it invents.

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[21] We must also remember here Maurice Blanchot's short review essay of *The Unnamable*, first published in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1953, and collected in 1959 in *The Book to Come*. Asking of Beckett's novel "Where now? Who now?," as the essay's title announces, Blanchot seeks to articulate how we may understand who it is that speaks in Beckett's work. And it is not the author who speaks any longer, Blanchot finds, but rather "a neutral speech that speaks itself alone." In encountering *The Unnamable*: "We may be in the presence not of a book but rather something much more than a book: the pure approach of the impulse from which all books come, of that original point where the work is lost, which always ruins the work, which restores the endless pointlessness in it, but with which it must also maintain a relationship that is always beginning again, under the risk of being nothing" (213).

Before reading *The Unnamable*, then, we have to ask how it is that we are even supposed to interpret this novel. What framework does Beckett provide for his work? What, if any, heritage does this most formidable of Beckett's prose works inhabit? In creating a dead center within the space of narrative prose, just what, exactly, does Beckett perform?

Without aesthetic

Much has been made of the Unnamable's plight, and his story has served numerous critical agendas spanning decades of exegesis. For many early critics, Beckett's work was understood as an expression of post-war nihilism, and the Unnamable became the most central figure of the despair, fragmentation, alienation, and decay seen as endemic to modern life. At the same time, there were many critics who found in Beckett the most authentic expression of an existentialist humanism which, while acknowledging the nothingness and absurdity at the heart of the human condition, still triumphantly affirmed man's capacity for freedom, as a being that can choose to bring his own self into existence.[22] But what both of these critical perspectives share is the assumption that Beckett is operating within a philosophical paradigm, and that his novels are primarily, if not solely, about the human subject. What is often neglected within interpretations of Beckett's work, no matter how masterful and insightful they may be, is that this work is taking place within fiction's house.

While many of these critical accounts are highly valuable, in that they have shed much interpretive light on what can only be described as difficult and obscure texts, I

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[22] The nihilist view of Beckett's work is perhaps most clearly and influentially on display in Fletcher's study from 1964, while important humanist readings of Beckett can be found in the work of Kenner and Cohn, as well as Michael Robinson's beautifully argued, if slightly naïve reading from 1969, *The Long Sonata of the Dead*. Beckett, for Robinson, ultimately "speaks of the heroic absurdity of human endeavour in the face of death" (32). Perhaps, I can only suggest, if one replaces the word "face" with "space," then one is closer to the heart of the matter.

would argue that they operate within the wrong framework, as Beckett, perhaps more than any major literary writer of the twentieth century, was consistently concerned with the demands of generic specificity. As he famously writes in a letter to his close friend and American publisher Barney Rosset in 1957: "If we can't keep our genres more or less distinct, or extricate them from the confusion that has them where they are, we might as well go home and lie down."[23] Problems of interpenetration between the stage, the screen, and the page would plague Beckett throughout his career, but in 1937, he is already writing to Tom McGreevy about the dangers of transposition from one artistic medium to another: "I'm afraid I couldn't write about pictures at all. I used never to be happy with a picture till it was literature, but now that need is gone" (*LSB* 388).[24] Beckett here offers a personal dictum that will remain with him throughout the rest of his career, a warning that amounts to a version of "the medium is the message." And nowhere in his career is his medium a philosophical one, as he is careful to assert in one of his rare interviews, with Gabriel D'Aubarède, first published in *Nouvelles Littéraires* in February, 1961:

> Interviewer: Have contemporary philosophers had any influence on your thought?
>
> B: I never read philosophers.
>
> I: Why not?
>
> B: I never understand anything they write.
>
> I: All the same, people have wondered if the existentialists' problem of being may afford a key to your works.

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[23] This letter is dated 27 August, 1957, and it is housed in the Grove Press collection at SUNY-Syracuse. Beckett is speaking specifically about his resistance to allow the stage piece *Act without Words* to be made as a film, though, as I hope to demonstrate, his claim can be understood to speak to his entire *oeuvre*.

[24] This letter, dated 28 November 1937, has recently been published by Lois More Overbeck in the first volume of *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*.

B: There's no key or problem. I wouldn't have had any reason to write my novels

if I could have expressed their subject in philosophic terms (217).

Most emphatically not operating within philosophical discourse, Beckett's novels have instead another set of concerns, and their central subject is a remainder which philosophical modes of argumentation would be unable to handle.

Neither a nihilist nor a humanist, and neither a philosopher of living nor a thinker of dying, Beckett works instead within a purely artistic mode, as he produced, with a single-minded consistency spanning over five decades, a wealth of novels, stories, plays, radio dramas, and scenarios for film and television.[25] And this artistic mode is, moreover, one of an inextricably *literary* specificity. As his comment from 1937 makes clear, he is certainly not a painter. Thus many recent critical attempts to construct a Beckettian aesthetic of "abstraction" or "nonrepresentation," such as those of Pascale Casanova, Eric P. Levy, and J. E. Dearlove, slightly miss the point in that they still seek to transpose to the realm of the literary Beckett's own critical thoughts on the visual arts.[26] It is true that Beckett did write frequently about painting, mostly in his early years, and most of his only explicit pieces of criticism are devoted to the realm of the visual. One could see, for instance, his numerous short essays and catalogue contributions devoted to his friends Jack B. Yeats, the brothers Bram and Geer Van Valde, Henri Hayden, and Avigdor Arikha, as well as his famous "Three Dialogues" with the art critic Georges Duthuit.[27]

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[25] Thus, for the precise reasons that I am currently discussing, I am of course ignoring all of Beckett's non-prose work, as rich as its many insights into the structure of character may be.

[26] This is a widespread tendency throughout Beckett criticism, although I have singled out these critics as they have most systematically sought to explicate Beckett's literary achievements via his considerations of modern painters. See Levy's *Trapped in Thought* and Dearlove's *Accommodating the chaos*, and most recently, Pascale Casanova's *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*.

[27] These have all been collected by Ruby Cohn in *Disjecta*, which Beckett only reluctantly allowed to be published in 1984. The most famous of these pieces is the "Three Dialogues," first published in the journal *Transition* in 1949.

The temptation is quite strong to see in these pieces an expression of Beckett's own ideas on literature, particularly since most of them date from the same years as his feverish composition of not only the trilogy, but also of his first mature pieces composed in French, the *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien*. Moreover, no comparable pieces devoted to literature exist, aside from a very small collection of juvenilia, critical pieces that he had composed in what he once referred to as his "hack's capacity."[28]

In one such piece, given the rather exuberantly Joycean title "Ex Cathezra," first published in 1934 in *The Bookman*, Beckett reviews a collection of essays by Ezra Pound, *Make It New*. The essay is only a few paragraphs in length, and it touches upon everything from medieval Troubadour verse to the novels of Henry James, and it is notable for being one of Beckett's only explicit pieces of *literary* criticism, as his formal pronouncements on other writers remain few and far between. And in a casual aside, Beckett perhaps unintentionally provides a clue to his own method, and illuminates the reasons for the extreme scarcity of his critical views. As he ironically writes of Pound's comparison between James and Fielding: "The suggestion that Fielding was deficient in comprehension of the novel as a form, because we have no notes (no?) from his hand on the subject, is very nice" (*D* 78).[29] Fielding's own contributions to the history of literary critical views on the subject of the novel notwithstanding, the statement certainly resonates with Beckett's own role as a "theorist" of the novel, that form which he

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[28] See Beckett's letter to McGreevy of 8 September, 1935 (*LSB* 273).

[29] Pound's reference to Fielding comes at the end of a close reading of Henry James's notes for his unfinished late novel *The Ivory Tower*, in a lengthy essay on James and Remy de Goncourt. These notes, Pound writes, comprise "a landmark in the history of the novel as written in English. It is inconceivable that Fielding or Richardson should have left, or that Thomas Hardy should leave, such testimony to a comprehension of the novel as a 'form'" (305). Beckett's joke, of course, is that Fielding did have a tremendous amount to say about his chosen form, what one might even call the form that he helped to invent. Most notably, there are the many discursive introductions to the individual books of *Tom Jones*, as well as the famous preface to *Joseph Andrews*, collected in a volume of Fielding's *Selected Essays* as a treatise on "The Comic Epic on Prose" (pp. 9-16).

tirelessly practiced throughout his career, alongside his more popularly recognized dramatic works. Like Fielding, at least as Pound would have it, Beckett formally has nothing to say about the novel. We do not have, as we do from James, his thoughts on the practice of writing his own novels, nor do we have, as with Woolf, volumes of programmatic essays about other novelists, let alone sketches for entire literary historical projects. If we are to find a Beckettian theory of the novel, then we can only find it in the novels themselves.

This is not to say that to properly understand Beckett's novels would require a concomitant theoretical statement about the form from the author's own hand, a kind of key to the otherwise inscrutable puzzle. If we read the novels of James or Woolf, not to mention those of Conrad, Ford, Lawrence, or even Fielding for that matter, alongside their published and well documented critical views, this is simply because we have them, oftentimes in spades, and the power of their insight is almost impossible to ignore. What I mean to suggest, with regard to Beckett's ostensible critical silence, is that his works themselves contain the theory of literature that he never wrote elsewhere. Every piece of literature, Beckett's work invites us to understand, is first and foremost its own piece of criticism, and every work is the beginning of its own hermeneutic unraveling.

However, it must of course be noted that I am making ample use of Beckett's letters, which are currently beginning to be published by Lois More Overbeck. The importance of the correspondence's appearance cannot be overstated, as Beckett's decades' worth of letters to friends and colleagues go a long way to filling the void of his critical silence and self-interpretive reticence. But even with these letters, Beckett was clear to stress that his work is ultimately all there is, as his one request to the editors was

that they publish "those passages only having bearing on my work" (*LSB* xxi). The letters may help us to situate the work alongside the biographical life, or to identify Beckett's larger relations to his contemporary literary field, but the finally remain most essentially a statement about the works themselves. It is in this spirit that I make such extensive use of them.

If the novels and the plays do not sit alongside a Beckettian theory of literature, it is because they themselves comprise that Beckettian theory of literature, and we should not search for it elsewhere. It is not to be transposed from the writings on painting, and it is not to be derived from any implied philosophical framework.[30] Instead, it is already present in the work which it would seem to help explicate, a point that we have seen Beckett repeatedly suggest in letters and interviews, but perhaps never so clearly as in a letter to the critic Sighle Kennedy from 1967, in response to an interpretation of Beckett's work that Kennedy had sent the author:

> *I don't have thoughts about my work*…I simply do not feel the presence in my writings as a whole of the Joyce & Proust situations you evoke. If I were in the unenviable position of having to study my work my points of departure would be the "Naught is more real …" and the "Ubi nihil vales …" both already in *Murphy* and neither very rational (my emphasis).[31]

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[30] This is perhaps what Jacques Derrida means when he describes his relationship to Beckett in his famous interview with Derek Attridge, published as "This Strange Institution Called Literature." There, Derrida remarks that he feels "too close" (60) to Beckett's work to write on him, and he goes on to suggest that there is something in Beckett that philosophy will forever be unable to handle. While Beckett's work may present a vision that can loosely be labeled "nihilist," Derrida goes on to argue that "this question should not be treated as a philosophical problem outside or above the texts" (61) Derrida finds, in dealing with Beckett, that there is ultimately a force which, as a philosopher, he finds himself unable to handle: "The composition, the rhetoric, the construction and the rhythm of his works, even the ones that seem the most 'decomposed,' that's what 'remains' finally the most 'interesting,' that's the work, that's the signature, this remainder which remains when the thematic is exhausted" (ibid.).

[31] This letter, dated 14 June, 1967, has been published in *Disjecta*, p. 113.

Beckett begins by claiming that he has no thoughts about his work, as if the secondary task of interpretation would be impossible, or at the very least unnecessary. The work, it seems, can only speak for itself; it is already its own interpretation.

However, Beckett, goes on to warn, if some interpretive apparatus is to be built on his work, it is not to be found in his predecessors in literary modernism, Proust and Joyce. Rather, he selects as his chosen hermeneutic points of departure two philosophical quotations, both more or less present from the start of his *oeuvre* in his first published novel, *Murphy*. The first of these is a phrase attributed to the Pre-Socratic philosopher Democritus of Abdera, and it occurs at the end of the novel, as Murphy finally attains the palpable experience of nothing toward which he has been striving:

> Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat, being the absence (to abuse a nice distinction) not of *percipere* but of *percipi*. His other senses also found themselves at peace, an unexpected pleasure. Not the numb peace of their own suspension, but the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to *the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real* (246, my emphasis).

Or, as the phrase is simply restated by Malone in *Malone Dies*: "Nothing is more real than nothing" (*TN* 192). Beckett's second point of departure sends his critic on a similar journey toward nothingness, although this time it is not an ontological statement about the nature of nothing, but rather an ethical question concerning the value of this nothingness: "*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*" (178), or, where you are worth nothing, there you should want nothing. This phrase, which becomes something of an unspoken *leitmotif* throughout the subsequent trilogy, is attributed to the seventeenth-century Dutch

Cartesian philosopher Arnold Geulincx, whose writings Beckett actively sought out and read carefully for the first time at Trinity College, Dublin, in early 1936.[32] Two points of departure, each of which is itself doubled into two; the positing of a nothing that is somehow even more ontologically *there* than anything else, and a nothing else that is required by a something whose value is nothing. In either case, *nothing* becomes a kind of absolute substantive that is very much a *something*.

In recent years, critics have begun to look more closely at Beckett's relationship with this nothing, and many have found in it the central key of his entire work. Within the realm of philosophical discourse, Shane Weller has been most the most astute critic in tracing Beckett's philosophical lineage, as he pointedly picks up on Beckett's own references to these twin points of departure, Democritus and Geulincx, and argues that the tradition of nihilism can entirely replace literature as the origin of Beckett's work, and as its central expression.[33] And, as I have previously mentioned, critics such as Casanova, Dearlove, and Levy have looked at the tendency toward nothing within Beckett's art criticism. Of these critics, it is Pascale Casanova, in *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, who has most systematically sought to trace an entire outline, or "anatomy," as her title promises, of Beckett's literary aesthetic via his writings on and lifelong interest in visual art. In particular, she looks closely at his championing of those painters, such as the van Velde brothers, who repudiate representation, and who create for painting an aesthetic built upon the absence of its own object, a challenge to visualize its own impossibility. She argues that the ideas explored in Beckett's writings on these

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[32] Beckett's copious notes on Geulincx can be found as an appendix in the recently republished volume of the philosopher's *Ethics*, published in English in 2006, and edited by Han van Ruler and Anthony Uhlmann.

[33] See Weller's *A Taste for the Negative*. Despite our methodological differences, I must still stress that Weller's is a highly valuable and well-argued work.

painters can account for his sudden productivity in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as he "integrated the formal questions posed by avant-garde painters into his thinking as a writer" (79). Within Casanova's story, what Beckett learns from his friends in the art field is transposed into the realm of fiction, and his "literary revolution" is born, as "the search for the appropriate road to abstract art in literature led him not only to alter the forms of organization of the text, but to undermine the foundations of literature." What Beckett takes from the art world, in short, inaugurates his plan to dismantle literature of all the representational assumptions and mimetic claims which had subtended it for centuries, and to create instead "abstract literature" (26).

Casanova's study is a valuable one, impressively argued, and I do not mean to suggest that we should ignore the many obvious elective affinities between Beckett's literary art and his friends' visual dismantling of painting's referential claims. When, for instance, Beckett writes in 1948, in "Peintres de l'Empêchement," not only of the van Velde brothers but also of such painters as Braque, Matisse, and Kandinsky, that modern art may be defined by a growing consciousness that "the object of representation is at all times in resistance to representation," the terms of debate seem very close to Beckett's own literary aims.[34] "What," Beckett asks, "remains to be represented if the essence of object is to elude representation?" And he finds in the van Velde brothers that this resistance to representation, the fact that an unreachable gulf exists between painting and its object, becomes the very subject of modern painting. The revolution of the modern school of painters is that they make painting's own failure and its impossibility its own

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[34] This essay, composed in French, is printed in *Disjecta*, pp. 133-7. I am using an English translation that was printed as "The New Object" in the invitation for the Bram and Geer van Velde exhibition at the M. Kootz Gallery in New York, in 1948, for which there are no page numbers.

object. Painting is not about the world, but about itself, *qua* mode of expression that is supposed to have some relationship with the world, but always ultimately does not.

And with only a few changes of words, these formulations could very well serve as a working definition of a certain school of modern writers, as literature comes increasingly to take itself as its own subject matter in the twentieth century, with mimesis no longer a means to the object's end, but with the strategies of mimesis as the literary object itself. But I want to stress is that this aesthetic of nothing, this growing consciousness of the gulf that divides literature from its object, is already a literary principle within Beckett's world. It requires no transposition from the world of art, just as fiction's relationship to "nothing" requires no set of philosophical terms inherited from the nihilistic tradition.

In a short piece of criticism on "Recent Irish Poetry," published in *The Bookman* in August, 1934, Beckett is already addressing a "rupture of the lines of communication (*D* 70)" that is specific to the realm of the literary.[35] A growing sense of this rupture, Beckett writes, is becoming the criterion according to which the modern poets are to be distinguished from their "antiquarian" predecessors: "The artist who is aware of this [rupture] may state the space that intervenes between him and the world of objects; he may state it as no-man's-land, Hellespont, or vacuum, according as he happens to be feeling resentful, nostalgic, or merely depressed" (ibid.). And the modern unease over the lines of communication between literature and the world of objects that it supposedly

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[35] And in a letter to Duthuit in 1949, Beckett himself recalls this short essay in the midst of a discussion of Bram van Velde: "I remember coming out once, the regulation 20 years ago, being at that time less little than now, with an angry article on modern Irish poets, in which I set up, as criterion of worthwhile modern poetry, awareness of the vanished object. *Already! And talking, as the only terrain accessible to the poet, of the no man's land that he projects round himself, rather as the flame projects its zone of evaporation*" (my emphasis). This letter is housed privately in the papers of the Georges Duthuit estate.

represents is not necessarily the result of something that has recently happened. Instead, Beckett enigmatically ascribes this change in literary consciousness to a "breakdown of the object, whether current, historical, mystical, or spook" (ibid.). That is perhaps to say, the object of literature has always already been broken down, and the lines of communication have always already been ruptured. It is not that something has suddenly happened to literature's potential, but that the younger writers have begun to realize what has always been the condition of literature's potential, that it has none. And this "no-man's-land" that divides the writer from the world of objects, the land only now finding explicit expression, has always been literature's space. *Nothing*, then, need not be borrowed from any other realm; it already belongs to writing, and it is the very real *something* out of which fiction is built.

"I still the teller and the told"

If *The Unnamable* is "about" anything, if it has any plot that one might recapitulate, then it is about this *nothing* that lies, for Beckett, at the heart of the literary enterprise. The novel narrates the interminable existence of this unnamable being who speaks from no describable place and in no recognizably historical continuum of time. He, or "it," is the remainder of all these people fallen to bits, these characters imploded in on one another until no one is left standing. And yet, there is still this "someone" who *speaks*, in this space without place, and in his duration without temporal markers: "I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never" (*TN* 291). He begins by speaking of his predecessors, Murphy, Molloy, and Malone, "a few puppets" (*TN* 292) as he calls them, but these figures are quickly cast aside in favor of what proves to be a far more difficult task: "Perhaps it is time I paid a little attention to myself, for a change. I shall be reduced

to it sooner or later. At first sight it seems impossible. Me, utter me, in the same foul breath as my creatures" (*TN* 300)? The bulk of the novel, then, tells of his struggles to overcome this seeming impossibility, as he seeks to describe his own self "laid bare" in the same language that has always been used to describe others, being, of course, the only language available to him.

Out of exhaustion, boredom, or simply out of a recognition of the task's essential meaninglessness, the Unnamable is unable, or at the very least unwilling, to continue with the project of storytelling that has sustained him thus far. And so it gives up the project of constructing fictions, of stringing out words in the shape of other people, of all the characters that have come before him. "Let us first suppose," he suggests, "that it is in fact required of me that I say something, something that is not to be found in all I have said up to now. That seems a reasonable assumption. But thence to infer that the something required is something about me suddenly strikes me as unwarranted" (*TN* 311). And by everything that has been said "up to now," he refers of course to Beckett's earlier novels and to the figures of whose stories they told:

All these Murphys, Molloys and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and of me alone. But I just said I have spoken of me, am speaking of me. I don't care a curse what I just said. It is now I shall speak of me, for the first time. I thought I was right in enlisting these sufferers of my pains. I was wrong. They never suffered my pains…Let them be gone now, them and all the others, those I have used and those I have not used, give me back the pains I lent them and vanish, from my life, my memory, my terrors and shames. There,

now there is no one here but me, no one wheels about me, no one comes towards

me, no one has ever met anyone before my eyes, these creatures have never been,

only I and this black void have ever been....*Nothing then but me, of which I know*

nothing, except that I have never uttered, and this black, of which I know nothing

either, except that it is black, and empty. That then is what, since I have to speak,

I shall speak of, until I need speak no more (*TN* 303-4, my emphasis).

Finished with the old heroes, but still as yet without the right words to speak of the last one – himself – the unnamable at first sets about to construct a new cast of characters to fill his black space, new puppets who might suffer his pains.

And so he begins to construct a story about a character named Basil, although he quickly changes his name to Mahood. Initially described (like Molloy and eventually Moran before him) as a one-legged man moving along on crutches, Mahood quickly loses even any such embodiment allowed by that state, as he morphs into an armless and legless creature residing in a jar hanging outside of a restaurant. This being, though, is eventually abandoned, as he still bears traits similar enough to his forbears – "Always talking about mammals, in this menagerie" (*TN* 337) – and becomes just one more role of the dice in the same old game. The narrative then turns instead to an even more primordial creature, one named "Worm," "the first of his kind" (ibid.). And Worm suffices for a while, before his prolonged birthing pains are eventually abandoned as well, as he is recognized as simply one more imperfect play thing, a piece of invention categorically the same as all the others, no matter how much his impoverished species may promise to differ in kind. Even to imagine a creature such as Worm is still to invent some kind of company, no matter how pitiful or abject, and it is just one more version of

the same old song: "For if I am Mahood, I am Worm too" (*TN* 338). When one is playing endgames, it seems, even a Worm will do. Or, as the voice will claim nearly thirty years later, in *Company*: "Better a sick heart than none" (*C* 18).

After the abortive attempts to bring Mahood and Worm into existence, the Unnamable is finished with stories, because they are all found to be variations of the same story: "all these stories about travellers, these stories about paralytics, all are mine" (*TN* 412). And at the same time, he finds that the last story, the one that would impossibly tell of his own uncharacterizable state of being, remains forever yet to be told: "It is I invented him, him and so many others, and the places where they passed, the places where they stayed, in order to speak, since I had to speak, without speaking of me, I couldn't speak of me, I was never told I had to speak of me, I invented my memories, not knowing what I was doing, *not one is of me*" (*TN* 395-6, my emphasis). Inventing characters, he finds, is only to speak of his own self. At the same time, however, he is without self, without name, without identity.[36] Caught in a double-bind from which there

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[36] For an excellent reading of *The Unnamable* as a project that rigorously dismantles the notion of self presence upon which Western metaphysics, and the entire genre of autobiography has depended, see Richard Begam's *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*, which as a whole remains, to my mind, perhaps the single best critical work on Beckett's novels. Following de Man's criticism of Rousseau in *Allegories of Reading*, Begam reads how Beckett's trilogy enacts the principle that "the self becomes imaginable [to itself] only after it has been transformed into something other than itself" (67). Thus, when the Unnamable seeks to speak about himself, to philosophically "know himself," he can only do so by speaking of a character instead, with an ultimate void lying at "his" origin. This project has been continued by Sarah Gendron in her recent essay "A Cogito for the Dissolved Self," in which she reads Beckett's Unnamable in relation to the "deconstructions" of selfhood's claims to self-presence as found in the work of Derrida and Deleuze. Similarly, in *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*, H. Porter Abbott explores the "dense paradox" upon which the *Trilogy* hinges, namely that "reporting the self is a doomed and potentially infinite literary experiment, just as telling stories is a continual return to the self" (123). And most recently, in *Saying I No More*, Daniel Katz has explored the way in which Beckett "dismantles the concept of the narrational or subjective *source*…[and] disrupts the traditional function of the first-person pronoun as mark of the source of utterance" (8, Katz's emphasis). Through a series of exemplary close readings, Katz demonstrates how Beckett's novels "present subjectivity as an originary catachresis, and expression as prosopopoeia" (12), and how *The Unnamable* in particular turns "the form of the soliloquy inside out, refus[ing] every imaginable literary or metaphysical convention concerning interiority, sincerity, and mimetic representation of consciousness in the Western tradition" (97). While these works, particularly Begam's, are truly invaluable interpretations of Beckett's novels, I would suggest that they all still

seems to be no escape, this voice of Beckett's unnamable protagonist is the voice of the impossible entity who is ultimately the unspoken protagonist of any work of narrative art. It is the narrative voice in which stories are told and in which writing occurs. "I still the teller and the told" (*TN* 310), the Unnamable finds that, just as much as his characters would not exist without his acts of invention, so too would he not exist without his characters. For, as a being whose sole purpose is to narrate, to speak solely of his self is ultimately impossible, since to speak of his self would be to speak of his own act of speaking. His existence is exclusively devoted to the act of telling fictions, and, as in a kind of liar's paradox to which no answer might be found, "I am telling a fiction as I write this right now" is not any kind of fiction at all.

If all of Beckett's novels, as I have been suggesting, take place at one time and in one space, then it is a space that we might conveniently label, remembering Moran's identification of the landscape into which he sets out on his journey, "Molloy country." Here we can recall his attempt at a description of this landscape, one whose map we saw was comprised of the very ground of literary history itself: "By the Molloy country I mean that narrow region whose administrative limits he had never crossed and presumably never would, either because he was forbidden to, or because he had no wish to, or of course because of some extraordinary fortuitous conjunction of circumstances" (*TN* 133). In this empty and desolate landscape of which Moran can offer no physical description, Beckett's heroes wander endlessly, not through mimetically recognizable landmarks or amidst life-like populations, but only through the endlessly proliferating pages of their own textual existence, lost in the space of literature.

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erroneously assume that these novels are operating within the domain of subjectivity, that is, that they are novels that take "the self" as their subject matter, as opposed to their own "novelness," or textuality.

This "Molloy country" is the non-space from which the Unnamable speaks, and out of which characters are invented. This is not to say that "Molloy country" functions as the map of a generative narrating consciousness, an author-like figure endowed with the powers of imaginative creation. As Northtrop Frye has put it, to refer to the Unnamable as having the traits of a conventional character or any kind of personal figure is a mistake, since his "endless, querulous, compulsive, impersonal babble…suggests a 'stream of consciousness' from which real consciousness is somehow absent" (32).[37] This is to say that in "Molloy country," and in the Unnamable's purgatorial realm of which it is the chief geographical figure, we are in nothing like a head or any kind of imagination, no matter how abstractly conceived.[38] Instead, as the Unnamable himself remarks at one point, there is "no need of a head:"

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[37] I think that Frye's formulation, which appears in his essay "The Nightmare Life in Death," is remarkable astute, although I cannot agree with his wider argument, which is largely situated in the tradition of reading Beckett's novels as a kind of reversal of the Cartesian process, a tradition that is most rigorously exemplified in Hugh Kenner's landmark study from 1963. There, he refers to Beckett as an "orthodox Cartesian" (61), and famously terms the typical Beckettian hero as a "Cartesian Centaur" (121). This is also largely the tradition in which John Fletcher's *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* is situated, although he does perform (in 1964) some of the earliest examples of textually close readings of the novels.

[38] Similar to the Cartesian tradition of interpretations of Beckett's novels, those which read them within a psychological or psychoanalytic framework remain equally problematic in their assumption of some kind of selfhood, however dismantled, situated at the novels' source. Eric P. Levy, for instance, in *Trapped in Thought*, refers to *The Unnamable* as "an identity crisis more fundamental…than any occurring elsewhere in literature" (100). And in an earlier work, *Beckett and the Voice of Species*, the same author argues that Beckett's novels are uniformly "preoccupied with self-consciousness" and that his narrators are to be defined by their "introspection" (1). See also Ruby Cohn's *Back to Beckett*, in which she writes that "the Unnamable seeks himself, and by extension the essence of selfhood" (100). Most recently, there has been Gary Adelman's *Naming Beckett's Unnamable*, in which the great promise of his title is met with a rather perplexing reading of the Unnamable as a "condemned Jew" who becomes "the new figure of epic grandeur for the age of Kafka and the death camps" (84).

Thomas Trezise's explicitly deconstructionist reading of Beckett, in *Into the Breach*, would seem to promise an alternative to this tradition, as he explicitly seeks to challenge "the assumptions underlying virtually the entire corpus of Beckett criticism" (ix), which are essentially the traditions of an existentialist humanism inherited in equal parts from Husserl and Sartre. Trezise polemically, and I think correctly, states that "the various ways in which Beckett's fundamentally critical work has been recuperated all rely on an unexamined notion of the human subject" (ibid.). However, to argue then that we must "interpret Beckettian subjectivity from scratch" (x) seems to me to rely on an equally unexamined assumption, not about the subject, but about literature, and Trezise ultimately remains just as tethered to the notion of a subject *qua* origin as any other critic. The same problem haunts Carla Locatelli's oftentimes remarkable *Unwording the World*, in which she seeks to find in Beckett's project of the "unword" not just an

> I'm in words, made of words, others' words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me, I'm the air, the walls, the walled-in one, everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows, like flakes, I'm all these flakes, meeting, mingling, falling asunder, wherever I go I find me, leave me, go towards me, come from me, nothing ever but me, a particle of me, retrieved, lost, gone astray, I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing, coming together to say, fleeing one another to say (*TN* 386).

"In words, made of words," the Unnamable suffers an existence that is wholly textual. But of course, this is the fate of any literary person, no matter how realistically drawn their consciousness. Every character that has ever seemed to live is ultimately only "in words" and "made of words." But here, in "the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words" it is as if the house of fiction that has housed this characters is itself being given over to utterance, and so the Unnamable differentiates his own kind of textual existence one step further:

> that I am they, all of them, those that merge, those that part, those that never meet, and nothing else, yes, something else, *that I'm something quite different, a quite different thing, a wordless thing in an empty place*, a hard shut dry cold black place, where nothing stirs, nothing speaks (ibid., my emphasis).

Made of words, but without the semblance of a consciousness that they might serve to figure, the Unnamable is furthermore "a quite different thing," "a wordless thing." To

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aesthetics, but a hermeneutics of experience. And the recent wealth of criticism inspired by Alain Badiou's interpretation of Beckett as a kind of ontological thinker of the "event of being" is no better. See, for instance, the essay by Peter Poiana, "The On-tology of Beckett's Nowhow On."

what kind of thing, then, has Beckett's novelistic endgame led us? And in what wordless language does it speak?

To uncover the ground out of which character is invented, Beckett has taken us to another realm, one where all is dead and empty, and yet there remains still *something*, this strange thing called writing, a speaking existence without subjective individuation, the incessant murmur of something that is properly "nothing." Something like the terrifying silence of Pascal's infinite spaces, it is a realm to which Beckett's early works have oftentimes already gestured. It is "the life of afterlife" (123) through which Mercier and Camier meaninglessly wander, and in which they comingle with Watt; and it is the universal vantage point from which "Dante and the Lobster," the opening story of *More Pricks than Kicks*, ends, as Belacqua learns about the structure of living in death and the cooking of lobsters:

> She lifted the lobster clear of the table. It had about thirty seconds to live.
>
> Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death. God help us all.
>
> *It is not* (22, my emphasis).

It is the impossible being who emphatically utters this "it is not," a being who knows about death and about the long process of being born out of it, a being who speaks from the perspective of death and its end of personhood, who gradually takes center stage in Beckett's work. It speaks in a space with no world, no thing, no "I," but yet, a space in which there is an impersonal and nonsubstantive "something." In no way amenable to any category of personhood, it is the narrative voice, without masks, without inventions, and, at least for the time being, without company, who speaks in Beckett's work. And so, like Dostoevsky in *The Idiot*, "in spite of all our efforts, we find ourselves in the decided

necessity of giving a bit more attention and space to this secondary character of our story than we had hitherto intended" (484). Our story of the Beckettian invention of character must, by necessity, become a story of the narrative voice underlying it, and thus, a story of the work of fiction as such.

"Nobody left to utter"

From two different angles, then, we have seen Samuel Beckett's prose *oeuvre* amount to an expression of nothing.[39] "Nothing" stands at the origin of his own critical apparatus, and it is ultimately the hermeneutic key to his work, borrowed as it is from subtle clues and bits and pieces. And "nothing" is how one may characterize the complex of textual personhood that is constructed throughout his novels, as their central character becomes reduced to that "unnamable" figure in whose voice every other story is told and of whom every other character is but a kind of place-holder, or, as the Unnamable puts it, a "surrogate" (*TN* 392). In the seemingly self-defining words of the Unnamable: "It's about him who knows nothing, wants nothing, can do nothing, if it's possible you can do nothing when you want nothing, who cannot hear, who cannot speak, who is I, who cannot be I, of whom I can't speak, of whom I must speak, that's all hypotheses, I said nothing, someone said nothing" (*TN* 404). And this, it seems, is ultimately what all of novels could be about.

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[39] While I would again stress against reading too much into Beckett's literary practice from his considerations of painting, one may think here of the "Three Dialogues," in which Beckett emphatically defines art as: "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (*D* 139). For an astute reading of the similarities between this passage and Maurice Blanchot's positioning of literary language as a nothingness which comprises the writer's very materiality, see Weller, pp. 61-7. See also Joanne Shaw's recent study of "impotence and making" in Beckett's work, in which she argues that Beckett "sees negativity as being a potentially creative element out of which something can be made" (109). Similarly, in his essay "Beginning Again," H. Porter Abbott has suggested that the essential component of Beckett's prose works is "that absence out of which something keeps miraculously coming" (110).

The novels of Beckett, then, can be seen as a continuation of that project inaugurated by Flaubert's dream, recorded in his famous letter to Louise Colet in 1852:

> What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is *a book about nothing* [*un livre sur rien*], a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support; a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible (300, my emphasis)

This book about nothing, without external attachments and "almost" without subject, is the book whose story it has been the task of the modernist novel to tell, as the form's external attachments have gradually been shed and as the fundamental ground of the literary endeavor has been sought. It is the book ceaselessly composed by Beckett throughout his works, as they orbit around the dead center of the act of fiction. Before something, there lies nothing; and before the invention of character and its illusion of life, there lies the impersonality of the narrative voice and the work of its dead letters.

Describing his writing in a letter to his friend and longtime collaborator Alan Schneider, Beckett famously asserts that his "work is a matter of fundamental sounds,"[40] and what I want to propose that Beckett shows us in his interrogation into these "fundamental sounds" is the very ground of fiction. As I have repeatedly pointed out, his work comprises neither an aesthetic statement about "abstraction" nor a philosophical treatise on subjectivity or being. Instead, in shedding one by one every traditional figure and representational convention that has defined the art of the novel, Beckett's novels

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[40] This letter is dated December 29, 1957. It has been published in *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, ed. Maurice Harmon, p. 24.

seek to get to the heart of what it is to write fictions. Paring the form of the novel down to its barest essentials, with nothing left to tell and no means with which to tell it, Beckett still somehow writes novels, a fact which most of the critical literature has seemed to take for granted. They may be works that tell no clearly discernible story, and they have no individuated characters in any traditional sense, and yet, it is out of this very poverty that they show us how fiction happens and how stories are told. *Nothing* may be these novels' very substance, but *invention*, we will remember, is still the game that they play.

We have seen how this voice that belongs to no one and that gives apparent embodiment to nothing operates in *The Unnamable*, as it tries and fails to bring new characters and stories into existence, ultimately left only with its abortive efforts to narrate its own act of telling. It is, in short, the narrative voice of fiction as such, without any characters to inhabit its ghostly house. And this voice continues to speak throughout Beckett's prose spanning nearly three decades. It is the voice that, in brief fits and starts, continues Molloy's project of invention throughout the *Texts for Nothing* and it is the voice that murmurs in the primordial mud of *How It Is*. The voice continues its failed attempts at storytelling throughout the dozens of short texts that Beckett produced throughout the 1960s and 70s, texts of an equally uniform brevity and maddening opacity that S. E. Gontarski has termed "closed space tales." These works, Gontarski explains,

> not infrequently resulted in intractable creative difficulties, literary culs-de-sac into which Beckett had written himself, and so were abandoned. As often they were unabondened, resuscitated, revived, and revised as Beckett periodically returned to his "trunk manuscripts," and *that stuttering creative process of experiment and impasse, breakthrough and breakdown, was folded into the*

narratives themselves. These are tales designed to fail, which were continued until

they did fail, and then continued a bit more (ix, my emphasis).

The "closed space" texts, in short, are essentially texts about their own failed acts of composition, and the story they consistently seek to tell is about their own narrating figures' aborted attempts to tell anything at all. In pieces such as *All Strange Away* (1964), *Ping* (1966), *Lessness* (1969), and the eight short works collectively known as *Fizzles* (1973-5), Beckett offers his reader various attempts and failures at a reconstruction of the house of fiction, that house that had been virtually razed to the ground in the trilogy. In Susan D. Brienza's words, these are "compositions about composing at the phrase level. These strange texts make us ponder anew the relationship between writer and text, and between text and reader: we learn about the writing process and the reading process—about imagination, creation, and imaginative reconstruction" (5). While an attempt at brevity prevents me from analyzing these writings, I would refer the reader to Brienza's excellent study, *Samuel Beckett's New Worlds*. Not only does she provide one of the only critical works that closely treats Beckett's prose work explicitly *as* literature, that is, not as a philosophical or psychological project, but she provides, to my knowledge, the only sustained close reading of these short and difficult pieces that Beckett produced throughout the 1960s and 70s. I agree with her suggestion that these texts are texts about writing, but I would slightly amend her claim, and propose that they are texts about writing *from which the writer has dropped out*.

And not only is the presence of the writer entirely absent from these works, but so too is any recognizably personal narrator, that traditional stand-in figure for the author's governing consciousness. Discussing the creative impasse into which he had been led

after writing *The Unnamable*, Beckett notes in his 1956 interview with Israel Shenker: "In the last book, there's complete disintegration. No 'I,' no 'have,' no 'being,' No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There's no way to go on" (1). As we have seen, there remains only a *writing* that manages to persist in the complete absence of anyone who might be held accountable for it. Or, as Beckett writes in 1952, in a letter to his friend Aidan Higgins, upon completion of the trilogy's final novel: [*The Unnamable*] seems about the end of the jaunt as far as I am concerned, *there being nobody left to utter* and, independently perhaps, certainly superfluously, nothing left to utter about" (my emphasis).[41] There is "nobody left to utter" and "nothing left to utter about," but still, of course, Beckett's texts persist, and in fact they continue to be rather rapidly produced. This "nothing," then, about which the texts utter, is not the absence of a *something*, but is itself, as we have seen, a very material substantive. "Nobody uttering about nothing" becomes the story line, as it were. And to utter "nothing" is to utter a fiction, to invent according to the contradictory logic of fictional utterances, whereby the very absence of the thing said becomes its material presence, and where what is performed is a dead reference to a thing, and to a world, that is not.

Beckett writes in the opening lines of *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965): "No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine" (182). Without life, but yet with at least some trace of imagination, whatever "person" it is who speaks these texts belongs neither to philosophy nor to psychology, but solely to language. And from its void, with no trace of life to be found, what this voice seeks to accomplish, I would suggest, is once again to

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[41] Dated 2 August, 1952, the letter is housed in the Beckett collection at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

tell stories, to imagine fictive life, and to achieve the invention of company out of whose presence the house of fiction might begin to be rebuilt.[42] This, we shall see, begins finally to emerge in *Company*, as the title of this short novel promises the construction of some semblance of a person who could possibly repopulate the voided space of literature reduced to its dead center.

The voice that speaks the absence of character in Beckett is the voice of this textual entity lying at fiction's dead center that we have found at the heart of our preceding discussions of Auerbach, Dante, Flaubert, James, and Woolf. The life of character, this collection of writers has shown us, emerges uncannily out of the dead center of literary language's rhetorical operations. This space of death that precedes and generates literary life is the infernal space in which Auerbach found the birth of the novelistic representation of personhood, and it is the dead letter office the critic identified as the space of nineteenth-century French realism; it is the haunted house of fiction that James erected to house the shades and ghosts that populate literature's afterlife, and it is the empty center of Woolf's modernist sentences, the stagnant pool into which the life of the author disappears in order to generate the "life itself" of her aesthetic beings. And it is in this space that Beckett's chief protagonist, the hero to end all heroes, resides, and out of which he eventually enacts the invention of company.

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[42] I would again refer the reader to Brienza's study, which, although it reads texts with which I am not particularly concerned here, I have still found invaluably helpful. To my mind, Brienza is the only critic who has read Beckett's late work particularly as an expression of the absence of traditional representations of personhood, in fact, the absence of persons in general, and her critical point of view is very close to my own. Describing the *Texts for Nothing* as attempts to "produce a main character," she writes: "By employing a noncharacter as a narrator, Beckett opens up a world of possible content, the creation of a protagonist. But these texts still ultimately remain "futile attempts to make a being…[and] words that depict imagination, invention, and creativity even if they never create a character or define a self" (24). All Beckett can achieve, in the many false starts and abandoned works of these decades, is to create "rudiments of people depicted in rudiments of grammar" (248). As we shall see, this impasse will at least be tentatively overcome not until *Company*, a text which receives only a cursory glance in Brienza's otherwise excellent work.

I have called this voice that speaks in Beckett's text the "narrative voice," that impersonal voice in which any fictional utterance is told. The term is of course familiar to readers of twentieth-century narratology and structuralist poetics. Critics such as Gerald Prince and Seymour Chatman have distinguished the narrative voice from the personalized figure of the narrator, aligning the former with Wayne Booth's concept of the "implied author."[43] These studies, however, remain essentially concerned with systems of classification, identifying these figures in order to organize them. But if we position this textual figure as the very ground of any and all fiction, the narrative voice, I propose, requires not simply a structuralist or formalist grammar, but an ontology. That is to say that, while the narrative voice may linguistically stand for no one at all and nothing, it still manages to produce the illusion of life in fiction's house. It invents the characters that provide the history of the novel with its "company," however grammatically null they may be. Without personhood and for all intents and purposes *dead*, some kind of ontological problem yet remains; the *life* of character emerges from its unlit space.

Thus, to understand the voice that speaks ceaselessly throughout Beckett's late novels – from the breakdown of recognizable character in the first trilogy, particularly in its first and last volumes, *Molloy* and *The Unnamable*, to the dim reemergence of character in his last "trilogy," *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, and *Worstward Ho* (1980-83) – I will turn now to the thought of Beckett's French contemporary Maurice Blanchot, the

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[43] See, for instance, Chatman's *Story and Discourse*, in which he carefully, and I think quite deftly, distinguishes the personalized narrator from the narrative voice, or implied author: "Unlike the narrator, the implied author can *tell* us nothing. He, or better, *it* has no voice, no direct means of communicating. It instructs us silently, through the design of the whole, with all the voices, by all the means it has chosen to let us learn" (148, Chatman's emphases). Later, and even more emphatically, Chatman writes: "There are hundreds of reasons for telling a story, but those reasons are the narrator's, not the implied author's, who is without personality or even presence, hence without motivation other than the purely theoretical one of constructing the narrative itself" (158).

major thinker of *l'espace littéraire* and *la voix narrative*. If the question of character is ultimately one of the narrative voice, then that is found, as I have been suggesting, in Beckett and in Blanchot, to be the very question of the literary act itself.

This narrative voice that Beckett identifies, and that Blanchot interrogates throughout his *oeuvre*, cannot name itself – it is both the very condition of narrative language and what remains most resistant to it. It is simply the fact that fiction is happening, in the voice of no one to whom we may point. As Beckett's Unnamable intones at one point: "can it be of me I'm speaking, is it possible, of course not, that's another thing I know, I'll speak of me when I speak no more" (*TN* 392). So if Beckett isolates this voice, this grammatical person who no longer masks himself through characters or narrators, who no longer even bothers to tell stories to deflect attention from his own strange existence, one might ask then just what it is that "happens" in these novels, what does this narrative voice do? If there are no longer characters or stories, but there are still novels, what we claim is that the task of this Beckettian voice becomes to tell the last possible story, or perhaps the first, originary one – namely, that of its own telling. The narrative arc becomes, we could say, "I am saying this right now, I am telling a fiction" But all Beckett's narratives can do is attempt to mark the failure to tell this narrative, which paradoxically engenders always more narratives, according to the Beckettian dictum to always "fail better," to somehow go "nohow on." Reading Beckett with Blanchot, I suggest, helps us to identify the impossibility of this act, why the "I" of writing would never be able to name itself in its own performative gesture, and why it remains the figure least amenable to the very stories it produces.

The voice can neither cease speaking nor speak its own act of speaking, and all it can do is attempt to register this failure. And so, by the time of *Company*, the voice must once again find a story to tell, and find a figure of whom any story it might invent can be told. Tiring of its solitude, and in seeming recognition of the failure to tell its own story, Beckett's narrative voice once again desires company, and so works to invent a character out of its own interminable impersonality. And what Beckett shows us is the model for the creation of any character, of all of these people who have inhabited fiction's spaces at least since their first deaths in Dante's *Inferno* – the creation of life out of death, the invention of an implied person out of narrative's figurative operations.

La voix narrative

The voice that speaks in Beckett's later prose "did not use the words that Moran had been taught when he was little and that he in his turn had taught to his little one" (*TN* 176); it is a voice that "speaks" in another kind of way: the voice of the silence of the universe, the sound of a voice that speaks beyond intelligibility or sense, a voice of an entirely different order than that of communicative speech. What Moran begins to detect in the air around him is the "speech" of this impossible voice that one might call the presence in narrative, in these worlds comprised solely of the strange materiality of language, of the demand of all literature, the neutral space of the outside that is "the mad game of writing."[44] There is *something*, this strange thing called writing, a speaking existence without subjective individuation, the incessant murmur of something that is

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[44] This phrase, used frequently by Blanchot in his essays concerning the narrative voice, comes from Mallarmé, for whom of course there is a similar interest in the conditions of possibility for literature. Of course the complexity of Beckett resides in the fact that, instead of trying to articulate the impossible book of "pure literature," as was the project of Mallarmé, he continued to write pieces that could more or less be called "novels."

properly "nothing." It is the voice of literature with no world, no thing, no "I," but yet, there with still an impersonal and nonsubstantive "something."

As the work of Maurice Blanchot informs us, it is precisely this "something" that might be the very ontological nature of any novelistic text, the condition of possibility of the form of writing called narrative. "To tell a story is a mysterious thing" (*IC* 381), writes Blanchot in his essay "The Narrative Voice (the *il*, the neutral)," collected in 1969 in *The Infinite Conversation*. And the entirety of Blanchot's critical project might be seen as an attempt to unravel this mystery, or at the very least, to find a name for it, which in itself is no small task for him. The strangeness of stories, the mysterious heart of "the space of literature," is ultimately for Blanchot the fact that something like a world outside of the world may exist. Literature, we might say, invents a *world without world*. From an anonymous somewhere that is entirely elsewhere, literature, particularly the form of the novel, is the creation of a small world, but one that properly is made of nothing real and in no concrete place.

The novel exists in the strange materiality of language, which knows no logic of our own empirical world, yet it is populated by characters, little subjectivities who speak, have names, travel distances, and dwell among objects. It is in this way that literary writing can be said to mask its own alterity, by placing a series of personal pronouns and personalities, places and objects, over its own impersonality and unverifiable origin. Any novel, one can have one's pick from the entire canon, is ruled by a certain pact made with reality, an agreement to maintain a certain degree of mimetic adherence to the phenomenal world closely resembling our own, made of ideologies, subjects, and things. This pact of literature, most evident of course in the realist novel, yet agreed upon by any

work which has a story to tell, is a promise to tell narratives that take place in a space much like our own, and that move along a path of time recognizable to readers. This is the level at which narrative works in familiar and comfortable terms of plot and character, and is discussed at the level of tone, point of view, and all the other elements of the traditional intrinsic study of literature.

And yet there is another articulation of narrative, this mystery of the story to which Blanchot refers, and that can be said to motivate his entire critical project. It is that mystery born in the voice that fills the air of Molloy's increasingly unsteady world. We can remember here Molloy's quasi-Derridean discovery that saying is inventing but, within the space of fiction, the invention properly of nothing at all. Similarly, Blanchot identifies the fact that writing, apart from naming and speaking the world in which it exists, also responds to and speaks an impersonality and a certain neutral annulment of the world. Writing names its object, and in so doing, it names its absolute absence. But because literary language has its own singular materiality, because it is itself an object, this absence is then made into a new object, one inextricably ridden with the figurative death conferred on it by the act of naming. As he writes in his essay from 1949, "Literature and the Right to Death," literary language is that kind of language that "endures death and maintains itself in it" (336).[45]

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[45] That is, as opposed to spoken language, which makes of its object an abstraction that becomes the figurative death of its supposed referent, literary language turns that abstraction into a new object, with its own materiality: "My hope lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things, too, are a kind of nature—this is given to me and gives me more than I can understand….A name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence….Yes, happily language is a thing, a bit of bark, a sliver of rock, a fragment of clay in which the reality of the earth continues to exist. The word acts not as an ideal force but as an obscure power, as an incantation that coerces things, makes them *really* present outside of themselves….*And it is not death either*, *because it manifests existence without being, existence which remains below existence*, like an inexorable affirmation, without beginning or end—death as the impossibility of dying (327-8, my emphasis and ellipses).

In his essay on the narrative voice, Blanchot describes narrative as a kind of circle, a closed off singularity and totality. This circle speaks meaningful language that is understandable and decodable by its readers, and it bears a relation to the life and "reality" in which it exists, but this relation the narrative has to the world is one that, in Blanchot's terms, neutralizes. The meaning of the written text is not that of the language of men in the world, laden with ideology and overuse. Rather, the meaning of writing is a certain inexpression of this given language, so as to articulate the inexpressible "worklessness," to use Blanchot's term, from where the literary work emerges. For Blanchot, this neutralizing relation between the circle of writing and reality is the very singularity of narrative: "it as though the center of the circle lay outside the circle, behind it and infinitely far back" (*IC* 380). The center of the circle is its very absence of center, the outside from which it comes, and of which it speaks. This neutralizing distance of written language is, for Blanchot, "altogether exterior, but inhabits language and in some sense constitutes it" (ibid.). Writing is maintained, then, in a neutral voice, which lies beyond representation, speakability, and unity, but which is at the same time the limit of any speakability or unity. And since this dimension of writing is without meaning or wholeness, it is a dimension that cannot be spoken in the narrative itself, since the latter must abide by certain rules of form, style, and expression so that writing can exist in the unitary form of the book, with its unitary horizon of expectations, in the material world of men and the ideological system of literature. In narrative the outside speaks, without speech, by delegation of its own unspeakable authority. It forces its presence into the small "he's" and "she's" and "I's" that populate novelistic discourse.

Blanchot asks how one might characterize this impersonal speaker of writing that delegates its authority to the little egos that make up the art of the novel. He writes that, "if to write is to pass from 'I' to 'he,' but if 'he,' when substituted for 'I,' does not simply designate another me,…what remains to be discovered is what is at stake when writing responds to the demands of this uncharacterizable 'he'" (ibid.). To understand one aspect of what Blanchot means here by the passing from "I" to "he," we can turn briefly to the linguistic work of Emile Benveniste.[46] In a series of reflections on personal pronouns and French verb tenses, gathered as *Problems of General Linguistics* (1966), Benveniste posits the elimination of the third-person pronoun from the category of personhood. His basis for this delegation of the third-person to neutral non-personhood lies in a reconstitution of the idea of the subject, which, for Benveniste becomes "the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance I" (218). This "I," as well as its always implicit and necessary "you," has no value except in the instance in which it is produced, in the utterance of a discourse that constitutes the subject as such.

Contrasted to the first and second persons, Benveniste defines the third-person, he, she, it, as "the form of the verbal (or pronominal) paradigm that does not refer to a person because it refers to an object located outside direct address" (229). This is to say that language as it is spoken is defined by the person who utters it, the "I," and the person

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[46] To my knowledge, this theoretical pairing has not yet been made in any of the critical literature on Blanchot. As we have seen the case to be with Beckett, the literary and linguistic specificity of Blanchot's project is largely overshadowed by critics who seek to place him within a philosophical heritage stretching back to Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. See, for instance, Simon Critchley's *Very Little … Almost Nothing*, as well as his essay "Who Speaks in the Work of Samuel Beckett?" In *A Taste for the Negative*, Shane Weller also astutely reads Blanchot alongside Beckett, but wholly within the philosophical tradition of nihilism. And just as I have been seeking throughout this chapter to emphasize the novelistic tradition within which Beckett works, so too is it necessary that Blanchot be recuperated as a literary critic and as a thinker of language.

to whom it is uttered, the "you." And as a distinctly human tool which constitutes the very advent of subjectivity, spoken language has no space in which to accept the third person as person. Since discourse is constitutive of subjectivity, spoken language can only refer to he, she, or it, as being outside of the present instance of discourse itself.[47]

Moreover, Benveniste makes a further distinction between written language and the uttered discourse which I have just described, characterizing writing as that which uses the third-person pronoun and the simple past tense of the verb, which, at least in the French language, is used only in writing and never in spoken language. In the story, because of its absence of person and its lack of reference to the present time of the writing, "there is no longer even a narrator (that is, a speaking subject). The events are set forth chronologically, as they occurred. *No one speaks here*; the events seem to narrate

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[47] One might consider here more in depth just how Benveniste further characterizes this non-person "he," the pronoun that "refers neither to the I nor to the you constituted by the event of discourse, those being the only persons so constituted." However, the third person "exists and is characterized only by its opposition to the person I of the speaker who, in uttering it, situates it as 'non-person'" (229). Benveniste supplies a rather startling example of this phenomenon by referring to languages for which the third person is *literally* non-person. He writes that for the possessive pronominal prefixes of the Yuma language, the third person is presented as *zero*, "a zero reference outside the *I/you* relationship" (221). While "I" and "you" maintain a specific oneness in their moment of utterance, the third-person can refer to "an infinite number of subjects-or none" (199). Benveniste provides a list of examples finding languages whose third-person verb forms are constructed around a zero marker, lacking the ending that defines and constitutes the first and second person forms. In particular, he cites the case of Eskimo languages, wherein the third person singular verb form is "of a neutral character, lacking any mark of personality," such as in the verb *kapiwoq*: "there is a stab, one is stabbed" (198). Indo-European languages, he finds, are in fact the extreme irregularities, in that they have allowed the third person verb form to conform to the first two for reasons of symmetry "and because every Indo-European verbal form tends to make the sign of the subject stand out since it is the only one it can show" (199).

And if these non-Indo-European verb forms are understood as the majority of the languages of mankind, one can begin to see, along with the case of the third-person possessive form in Yuma mentioned above, a proliferation of absence, nullity, and *zero*. To understand how truly radical this reconstitution of subjectivity in language is, I might briefly acknowledge here Charles Seife's remarkable study *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea*. There, Seife finds that the concept of zero was invented by Babylonian mathematicians as a "*placeholder* mark" for an empty space in a string of otherwise meaningful numbers (Seife 15, my emphasis). Zero is an indicator that a number is missing, not any specific number, but the absence of number as such, of any number. It is in fact a placeholder for infinity and its strange affinity with the void and nothingness. This follows with Benveniste's description of the definitions of pronouns used by Arab grammarians, for whom the third person is "the one who is absent" (197), which is to say, everyone and no one. I shall have more to say about this "placeholder mark" in due course, or, what Beckett's Unnamable refers to as "the man on duty" (*TN* 404).

themselves. The fundamental tense is the aorist [the simple past], which is the tense of the event outside the person of a narrator" (208, my emphasis). Benveniste, I suggest, provides valuable insights into how Blanchot, writing his essay on the narrative voice during approximately the same years, moves from the impersonality of writing, in the third person singular simple past tense, to a more radical understanding of the neutral space of literature.

The third person pronoun, then, exists outside of personhood – and it is the pronoun that belongs to the "voice" of narrative language. "He," "she," or "it" – Blanchot's *il*, confer, not stability, presence, and selfhood, but absence, zero, *nothing*. Not unsurprisingly, Beckett himself is explicitly concerned with these pronominal categories in his novels. If Molloy was still a hero in relation to some kind of tradition of wanderers and men whose experiences are able to add up to a portrait of a person, then we have seen how the trilogy's last novel has broken irreparably with this lineage. We no longer have anything which denotes a concrete figure by or upon whom any action of the novel could be said to be performed. Instead, we simply have the narrative voice, unceasingly speaking without any person who might be able to be held accountable for it. And if it is the plight of the narrative voice to remain forever "unnamable," and if he is ultimately never able to tell a story about himself, then he finds that this is "the fault of the pronouns" (*TN* 404):

> *there is no name for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that, that,*
> *it's a kind of pronoun too, it isn't that either, I'm not that either*….you can't speak
> of that, no one can speak of that, you speak of yourself, someone speaks of
> himself, that's it, in the singular, a single one, the man on duty, he, I, no matter,

the man on duty speaks of himself, it's not that, of others, it's not that either, he doesn't know, how could he know, whether he has spoken of that or not, when speaking of himself, when speaking of others, when speaking of things, how can I know, I can't know, if I've spoken of him, I can only speak of me, no, I can't speak of anything, and yet I speak (ibid., my emphases).

Molloy, Moran, Mercier and Camier, Watt, and Murphy, these heroes who more or less conformed to traditional novelistic conventions of character, could at least utter "I" and thus gain the illusion of personhood. Even if their words were never their own, and they are but flimsy pawns played by the narrative voice in the made game of writing, they are still paltry semblances of "people," those delegates identified by Blanchot. But they are only, after all, "men on duty," placeholders for that one voice in which narrative is told and that one figure about whom any narrative is about.[48]

But the voice of narrative itself can find no such anchor. He may utter "I" numerous times throughout his monologue, but none of its instances stick, and ultimately it is to the realm of the third person *non-person* to which he belongs. He belongs wholly to narrative itself, rather than to its representational impulse; his only abode is this form of writing that, because of its tense and because of its pronominal designation, has no space in which to allow any category of personhood, any speaking subjectivity to whom the writing might be held accountable. The house of fiction has been entirely dismantled, its rooms emptied out of their last ghosts and specters.

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[48] For more on this "placeholder" construction of pronouns in the language of the novel, see Ann Banfield's "The Name of the Subject: The 'il'?." In this remarkable essay, Banfield offers an account of the fate of the first-person pronoun "I" in both twentieth-century philosophy and in the novelistic language of free indirect discourse. As she writes, the "*il*" for Blanchot "can be the semantically empty 'dummy subject' of impersonal constructions, 'neuter' in the sense that it neutralizes not so much the gender distinctions but reference to persons that 'il' otherwise has" (172). When thinking of this "*il*" in asking the question of who speaks in the work of Beckett, one might here think of such impersonal constructions as "it rains," "*es gibt*," or "*il y a*."

The unnamable resides in and as the neutral, the nameless and impersonal ground of all narrative writing. As Blanchot remarks, there is often the impression in novelistic narrative that there is a voice in the background of the text, a presence behind the events, prompting the characters to speak. This presence is neither the narrator of the story, some sort of god-like presence who knows and speaks for everyone, not is it the voice of the intentional author. Rather, if understood in Benveniste's configuration of personhood in narrative, perhaps we can say that this voice that speaks from behind the text, the imperceptible voice barely heard in any act of fiction, is itself the very absence of person, speaker or writer. And in Beckett's novels, without masks or puppets, it speaks of itself alone. Fiction, here, does not tell, but rather it simply and impossibly *is*.

Company calling

The complications of *Company*, then, are for this voice to try once again to create a story to tell, to delegate its authority to some speaking subjectivity. With its opening command of "Imagine," the novel explicitly positions itself back in the world of stories. The narrative voice that we have identified throughout Beckett's *oeuvre* is no longer content merely to *be* after so many years alone, but it wants to find something to *say*. And it must undertake this project through the work of imagination, which is to say, in the narrative language of stories and of poetics.[49] Nothing must become something.

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[49] This recourse to the imaginary could at the least be contrasted with a text such as *Imagination Dead Imagine*, which seems to offer a muted death knell for the possibility of any stories to be told in Beckett's prose world. As it has barely even managed to offer a description of two almost imperceptible figures lost in an impossible landscape, the work ends: "Leave them there, sweating and icy, there is better elsewhere. No, life ends and no, there is nothing elsewhere, and no question now of ever finding again that white speck lost in whiteness, to see if they still lie still in the stress of that storm, or of a worse storm, or in the black dark for good, or the great whiteness unchanging, and if not what they are doing" (185). Certainly, one might surmise, there seems to be nothing yet left to imagine.

The novel's first line – "A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine" (*C* 3) – enacts the event of the voice, and now there is also an unidentified subject to whom it is directed. But without origin or horizon, the voice still speaks all the ambiguity and indetermination of the narrative voice. There is no clarification as to the speaker of the voice, nor to whom the one being spoken to is, whether the reader, or a character within the space of the text. All we have is this simple command, but still, it is a voice that seems to be saying *something* substantive, if not quite yet referential. Out of the limitless neutral voice of narrative, something that might come to resemble a subject is given substance.

As I have suggested, *Company* can find its implicit companion piece in Blanchot's essay on the narrative voice. And just as that essay essentially offers a reflection on the history of the novel form as it has been organized and subtended by the impersonality of the neutral, so too does *Company*, in the words of Leslie Hill, stand as "a kind of cryptic memorial to all the texts that have gone before" (160). Moreover, not only is *Company* "about" every previous text within Beckett's own *oeuvre*, but it is ultimately about that "fundamental sound" out of which every text that has ever been constructed in literary history is built, the interminable "nothing" that is the sound of the narrative voice. It is "about" the work of literature and its necessary invention of character.

Nearly every critical work on this slim novel has assumed that *Company* is about a single subject, and it has been read, not as a novel about the work of literature, but as a text about the work of selfhood. In recent years, the novel has been read through a variety of critical lenses, as a text about memory, the work of psychoanalysis, autobiography,

and the epistemology of the subject in the wake of poststructuralist thought. For example,

Sarah Gendron reads the novel as a kind of parody of the psychoanalytic endeavor, as it

highlights the impossibility of ever forming a whole subject when "being a subject *in*

language entails being *subject to* language" (58, Gendron's emphases). Similarly, Justin

Beplate has recently read *Company* as a continuation of a philosophical project

inaugurated by Hume and Nietzsche, according to which the question of epistemology

"turns on the complex relations between memory, identity, and language" (154). The

novel, for Beplate, asks "whether some form autobiographical self can ever be

distinguished from the already signed memories deposited in language; whether, in other

words and through other grammars, language and memory can be made to serve some

prior, pre-linguistic agency: the first person singular who speaks" (156). Critics such as

Nirit Salmon-Bitton and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan have read the work according to Paul

Ricoeur's conception of "narrative identity," such that *Company* becomes, as Salmon-

Bitton puts it, a "postmodern literary act of self-construction" and expresses "a dynamic

process that does not decenter and dehumanize all sense of self" (142).[50] For James

Olney, *Company* stands as our late modern version of Augustine's confessional

imperative, but one in which "the impulse to narrate, which could be and was given

rational analysis and logical explanation by Augustine, has become irrational and

illogical, compulsive, obsessional, repetitive, unwilled and often unwanted but not to be

denied" (858). And as such, the novel is turned into a statement about the rhetoric of

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[50] See Gendron, "A Cogito for the Dissolved Self;" Beplate, "Who Speaks? Grammar, Memory, and Identity in Beckett's 'Company';" Salmon-Bitton, "Himself He Devises Too for Company;" and Rimmon-Kenan's *A Glance beyond Doubt*, pp. 93-103. Another highly psychoanalytic reading of the novel, within a Lacanian framework, can be found in Gary Handwerk's "Alone with Beckett's *Company*," in which he argues that the novel "lays out a view of identity as strictly differential" (70).

memory and the construction of the subject through writing, whether that self is Beckett the writer, or the figure of Western selfhood as such.[51]

But if *Company* is about any kind of selfhood at all, then it is about that specifically *literary* subjectivity called character. Additionally, and more importantly, as opposed to these monological readings of the novel, I propose that we must take the figure of its title literally. That is, *Company* is not about one person, but two, one of whom happens to be no one at all, the non-person *nothing* that we had identified with the help of Benveniste.[52] Neither a divided subject nor a remembering self, the protagonist of *Company* is instead this narrative voice whose progress I have been charting throughout Beckett's novels. And after spending decades' worth of texts alone and in an unlit space without anything that might be called a story to tell, it is once again joined by another figure, a stutteringly invented character who might provide the work's titular company.

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[51] See Olney, "Memory and the Narrative Imperative." This reading of Beckett's inheritance from Augustine's confessional rhetoric has recently been continued by Elizabeth Barry in "One's Own Company." Even a critic such as Susan D. Brienza, who has performed close formalist analyses of so many of Beckett's late texts, is tempted to read autobiography into *Company*, a novel whose plot she simply sums up as: "the writer reflecting on his life" (217). In one of *Company*'s earliest reviews, John Pilling even goes so far as to ascribe the impetus behind the novel to the first biography of Beckett, Deirdre Bair's recently published *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*. In the wake of its popularity, Pilling writes, Beckett sought, with *Company*, to "establish the proper conjunctions and disjunctions" (127) between his life and his work.

[52] Even some of *Company*'s best readers have ultimately made it a novel about the subject. For instance, Carla Locatelli suggestively writes that the novel tells the story of the creation of the "hermeneutical code" required by any reader of fiction in order to construct the idea of a semblance of a person. However, her actual sustained reading of *Company* becomes yet another version of the oft-told critical story according to which the novel is reduced to an account of the subject's attempt to "know itself" or to narrate itself into existence. She ultimately finds that "the subject in *Company* is 'company,' precisely because he manifests itself as a subject that never totally coincides with himself….The 'I' is established as the outcome of the dialogue of several selves" (159-60). See *Unwording the World*, pp. 157-867. Similarly, Daniel Katz offers a brilliant rhetorical reading of the novel, only to conclude that the rhetoric he finds to exist between personhood in writing is ultimately about "the scission of the subject into speaker and spoken" (174). See *Saying I No More*, pp. 157-80.

     To my mind, Ed Jewinski has been the only critic to read *Company* explicitly as a book about its own textual processes, in his essay "Beckett's *Company*, Post-structuralism, and *Mimetalogique*." In a thesis very similar to my own present reading of the novel, Jewinski argues that *Company* is "primarily a reflection on rhetoric, a reflection on how written language deceives readers into believing they are hearing 'voices'. The central test of the book, then, is to read the work with constant attention to the problems of how language creates illusions" (148).

A voice comes to one in the dark, and out of this sudden event, the work of imagination is once again underway, and the impersonal "one" on his back in the dark must begin the project of constructing a literary person. But just as soon as the project of invention is begun, the two voices at play in the novel already begin to blur into one another, as it is announced that "to one on his back in the dark the voice tells of a past" (*C* 4). Here, it seems, the roles becomes reversed. The "one on his back" is not in fact the motionless narrative voice, but he is the newly emergent character, ready to be born into textual existence, and the voice coming from some still undefined space would be that voice in which the story is told. That is, the emergent voice begins to tell the story of the one lying on his back in the dark. In any event, the reader can only remember the novel's opening injunction that "only a small part of what is said can be verified" (*C* 3). Someone or something, we cannot forget, is *lying*.

This sudden reversal, however, that the voice marks the narrative voice and the "one" refers to the character, is thrown back into doubt just as it begins to emerge. When, once again entering the realm of properly novelistic content, the voice of *Company* soon faces the difficulty of affixing pronouns to these figures, one emerging from the dark and one awakening on his back, we are told: "*Use of the second person marks the voice. That of the third that cankerous other. Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a first*. But he cannot. He shall not. You cannot. You shall not" (*C* 4, my emphasis) If the use of the second person pronoun marks the existence of the voice, this presumably is to mean that the voice which comes to one is the one saying "you," while the third person pronoun, in signifying "that cankerous other," designates the one being spoken to, and the one of whom the voice speaks. The one lying on his back in the dark is

the "he," or "*il*." The reason for the absence of any possibility of a first person "I" is that this "he" cannot speak it. It is to be assumed from this that the voice who says "you" and "he" could, if he so chose, say "I," and that all "I's" which occur from here on out in the narrative belong to this voice. The *il*, the "you" addressed by the voice, unable to say "I," is thus that which is unnamable, that which cannot be assimilated into the unity of any proper subject, the non-person neutral. For, as was seen in Benveniste, it is the ability to say "I" which is the definitive characteristic of any subjective existent. In *Company*, then, it does after all seem to be the case that the voice becomes precisely that which marks the emergence of a speaking and unified character out of the voiceless murmuring of the neutral. Just as the novelist is he who must forego saying "I" in favor of writing the impersonal "he," so also must that "he" then split into another "he" of novelistic writing, "the man on duty," as it was called in *The Unnamable*, a fictive "he," "she," or, even, "I."

This necessary split of the impersonal "*il*" has been described by Blanchot in "The Narrative Voice" as a necessary precondition for the modern novel, built as the form has been from its beginnings on the highly mimetic representation and illusion of subjectivity. We will remember that for Blanchot, the narrative voice always speaks in stories, resulting in the impression that it seems as if something were behind the text, prompting it all from a space outside and infinitely far back, that there is always in the language of fiction "something indeterminate speaking….The unlighted event that occurs when one tells a story" (*IC* 381). And yet, once narrative art evolved into the form of the modern novel, there is also, in this *il*, the introduction of the character, in all of his seeming subjective richness. And since this event is tied to the dawn of the novel, particularly within the realist tradition, it is a split of the *il* that can be assumed to be of a

more or less responsibly mimetic quality. Regarding this second half of the *il*, Blanchot writes:

> This real [the objective story, the thing that is told, that is, the first half of the *il*] is reduced to a constellation of individual lives, of *subjectivities* – a multiple and personalized "he," an "ego" manifest under the cloak of a "he" that is apparent. In the interval of the narrative, the narrator's voice, sometimes fictive, sometimes without any mask, can be heard more or less accurately (ibid., Blanchot's emphasis).

The speakerless language which constitutes the experience of writing must always, one can say, be supplied with its real-world referent, no matter how artificial. Plunging itself into the strangeness and anonymity of existence without world or without individualized existents, writing is ultimately forced to tell *something*, to offer some way in which it can be read and recognizable. The narrative voice thus consistently tells new things and creates new fables, lending its impossible voice to the very possible voices of these little subjectivities that roam about the spaces of prose fiction.

While it would seem, based on Blanchot's overall schema in "The Narrative Voice," that there is always only one true voice in narrative, the uncharacterizable one, infinitely far back, it is also the voice that can ultimately *not* speak, and so it borrows the cloak of character, those "puppets" and "delegates" described by the Unnamable. The narrative voice uses an entire populace of fictive egos to tell itself, an endless series of placeholders standing in for the real subject of narrative, that voiceless existence without existents. And thus Blanchot describes the impression in bad narratives, if there is such a thing, that "someone is speaking in the background and prompting the characters" (*IC*

380). And yet even this sense of a master puppeteer is just another illusion, for, as we will remember, in the language of narrative, no one has the power to say "I." It is not any kind of puppeteer or intentional mind, then, who is prompting the characters to speak, but rather something like an impersonal force. And as this background figure is without any guarantor of subjectivity identity or self-presence, these fictive people of paper through whom it speaks become the narrative's last resort at maintaining its ties to the everyday world of men and things. As we saw to be the case in *The Unnamable*, a novel that might try to exist without these stand-in figures is hardly no kind of novel at all.

This way in which character becomes a kind of last-ditch effort on the part of literary language to maintain its ties to the real world of readers and writers was already addressed by Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*, from 1955. There, he writes of character:

> If to write is to surrender to the interminable, the writer who continues to sustain writing's essence loses the power to say "I." And so he loses the power to make others say "I." Thus he can by no means give life to characters whose liberty would be guaranteed by his creative power. *The notion of characters, as the traditional form of the novel, is only one of the compromises by which the writer, drawn out of himself by literature in search of its essence, tries to salvage his relations with the world and himself* (27, my emphasis).

The moment of the neutral, the experience of dread towards which the writer is drawn in the act of writing, can last for only an instant. Historical time marches on, dread must somehow become language, and light will never stop shining once again. The work opens up to an outside beyond subjective intentionality, and yet as a book, it still must be

written in the world, and no writer, not even Kafka, can give himself over entirely. After all is said and done, which is most likely to say when nothing is said and when everything is done, there still remains that pact that writing must maintain with the world. As a literary text which must exist in the form of the book, the work, after its own impossible experience, must tell a story, in recognizable literary language, signifying *something*. And it is largely in the figures of literary characters, these more or less recognizable people that populate the art of prose fiction, that Blanchot finds this sort of pact that writing must make with reality, this way writing has of keeping some sort of relationship with the world, offering it the things that it knows, people and places and things and words that can mean.

Characters speak and inhabit their own fictive world, more or less mimetic figures which assure a certain amount of accountability for the literary work. Characters, then, are the most explicit form of this compromise.[53] In this place without a place that is the neutrality of writing, characters come to exist in a kind of world, a world with its speaking subjects that will bear the appearance of the comfort of the light of day when the work becomes the cohesive unity of the book. But this does not change the fact that the writer is the man who has given up the power to say "I," articulating instead this strange and uncharacterizable "he." This third person who speaks in the space of literature "is myself become no one, my interlocutor turned alien" (*SL* 28); it is the non-person identified by Benveniste. In giving himself over to this impersonal stance, Blancot

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[53] As Blanchot writes in *The Space of Literature*: "In the world of culture, the work becomes the guarantor of truths and the repository of meaning. None of this is surprising; *this movement is inevitable*….It takes part in the public dialogue. It expresses or refutes what is generally said; it consoles, it entertains, it bores, not by virtue of itself or by virtue of a relation with the void and the cutting edge of its being, *but via its content*, and then finally thanks to its reflection of the common language and the current truth" (*SL* 205-6, my emphases).

writes, the writer "does not move toward a surer world, a finer or better justified world where everything would be ordered according to the clarity of the impartial light of day" (ibid.). He abandons himself instead to the world without world that is the space of literature. And as we have seen, throughout his *oeuvre*, it is Beckett's singular achievement in the art of the novel that he makes the voice of this other world heard, as if he lets the very material in which he works speak for itself, without attachments and without compromise.

That is, until the event of the voice in *Company*; for now the *il* which has impossibly made itself heard in Beckett's novels since *Molloy* once again in this late text begins assuming a character, and hence a story and a position. The voice, here, no longer marks the figure without voice, but instead belongs to its emergent company. This hypostasized character is made more evident when the voice articulates its first "I," when he says, "In the end you will utter again. Yes I remember. That was I. That was I then" (*C* 14). This voice that has come to one on his back in the dark, rather than the underlying *il* of the narrative voice, belongs now to that other *il* of novelistic writing, the *il* that assumes the pronominal speaking positions of novelistic discourse. Banished from Beckett's novels for decades, since the disappearance of Molloy, Moran, and Malone, this "placeholder" *il* emerges slowly and faintly out of the neutral dark of the unlighted event, but emerges still. And with what might be almost a kind of fondness, the voice remembers the ability to say "I," to say anything in the world of the narrative, before its house of fiction was razed to the ground of bare novelistic existence.

The two figures into which the *il* splits in novelistic discourse, the narrative voice and the literary figure, seem to become the two "characters," or perhaps one should still

only say "voices," at play in *Company*. Their relationship with one another becomes clearer as the voice, the "I," considers naming the hearer, the one lying on his back, "H:" "Is it desirable? No. Would he gain thereby in companionability? No. Then let him not be named H. Let him be again as he was. The hearer. Unnamable. You" (*C* 22-3). The voice then tries to construct a place for he who lies on his back in the dark, but he soon quickly give up the effort, for "further imagination shows him to have imagined ill" (*C* 23). And later, the voice tries once again to name the hearer, this time "M," and at the same time he even decides to give himself a name as well, choosing "W:"

> Wearied by such stretch of imagining he ceases and all ceases. Till feeling the need for company again he tells himself to call the hearer M at least. For readier reference. Himself some other character. W. Devising it all himself included for company. In the same dark as M when last heard of (*C* 31).

But then he seems to catch himself and recognizes the futility of the effort: "W? But W. too is creature. Figment" (*C* 33). When one is of the same material as one's inventions, it seems, names hardly matter.

The stories invented by the voice begin to shed increasingly less clarity and light, and, just as the *il* seems about to be pulled into existence, the voice finds him (which him becoming less and less clear) to be "devised deviser devising it all for company. In the same figment dark as his figments" (ibid.). The movement and resonance previously ascribed to the voice fall into rest and faintness: "To rest where? Imagine warily" (*C* 34). Soon all attempts at devising company fail, revealing themselves as fables and chimeras. By the novel's end, the relationship between the voice and the hearer has collapsed once again into the undifferentiated unity in which it began, laying bare nothing but the infinite

solitude and silence of the devised deviser, the Unnamable, the neutral. As the voice remarks in the novel's final pages: "You do not murmur in so many words, I know this doomed to fail and yet persist. For the first person singular and a fortiori plural pronoun had never any place in your vocabulary" (*C* 45). The voice could by this point be talking either to himself or to the one on his back in the dark, it no longer matters since they have already been found to be the same figure, to the extent that neither of them really exists *as* figure. Neither of them, at least, would certainly have the power to say "I" in a sense that would lend any concrete definition of subjectivity.

Having given up "I," the novel's torrential last lines revert to the second-person "you," which is normally understood as the necessary correlate of the subjectivity-constitutive "I." Without that first-person pronoun to correspond to it, however, the "you" becomes a word absolutely meaningless, spoken as it is by no one, an implied person without any proper subject present who would have been the one doing the implying.[54] And so the novel ends, stories and person having both failed to have been properly constituted by the impersonal narrative voice, though not without the best of intentions, as the novel is filled not only with attempts at pronominal designation, but also with glimmers of stories that can never quite be told, such as the account of the hedgehog dying in a box, or brief visions of the wandering adventures of what could be a young man now grown old and alone with his reminiscences. But the stories can never expand

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[54] It should be remembered that in Benveniste's structure, the "you" is located between the subjective "I" and the "non-person" "he." As he comments, the second person "is a form which assumes or calls up a fictive 'person' and thereby institutes an actual relationship between 'I' and this quasi-person…When I get out of 'myself' in order to establish a living relationship with a being, of necessity I encounter or I posit a 'you,' who is the only imaginable 'person' outside of me…One could thus define 'you' as the *non-subjective person*" (201, Benveniste's emphasis).

into anything that might be held onto, and what remains is only this "you," doomed to remain as it always was, alone and in the dark.

If *Company* provides the facticity of the event of the voice, in its incalculability and unassimilability, then the nomination of this apparent subjective hypostasis is followed by a withdrawal from and an interrogation of that nomination. That is, it begins to tell a story and to devise a character, only to step back and to attempt to reflect on what it is to even tell a story or to devise a character. The voice, as devised by the "you" of the narrative voice, or what has been referred to here as the hearer, becomes what remains as a spectral force in the writing of the event, which, although very little of what was said can be verified, did in fact occur, from nowhere in particular and nowhere identifiable, but still *somewhere*. In the withdrawal from the event of speech, when all is only "same figment dark as his figments" (*C* 33), that event, with its light and sense, becomes precisely the Unnamable that remains always inaccessible to and wholly apart from the *writing* of the event, comprising both the "you" and the voice which names it, neither of them yet a proper character, while at the same time neither of them quite "nothing." Beckett's commitment to the event of the novelistic subject is always concurrent with an equally unceasing commitment to the Unnamable figure which subtends that event, to that which remains outside of being, nomination, and representability. The voice who could say "I," the privileged character prepared to inhabit a mimetic novelistic universe, is nothing but an attempt at a fiction, and the figure in the dark, devising it all for company, remains always and only the neutral zero point of writing, where language does not speak, but *is*.

"Supine you now resume your fable where the act of lying cut it short…The fable of *one* with *you* in the dark. The fable of *one* fabling. And you as you always were. Alone" (*C* 46, my emphases). And who is this you, who is also the "he," the voice, the unnamable, the one who attempts to say "I" but fails and yet must always continue to fail in the world of Beckett? It is that impossible voice that we have seen Blanchot circling around: "this is the narrative voice, a neutral voice that speaks the work from out of this place without a place, where the work is silent" (*IC* 385). This voice from outside the world speaks the utter strangeness of the fact that there is writing, in the impersonal voice of the *il*. After the stories are told, after the strange "I" that appears as a mask for the non-present neutral is allowed to speak, there will always and only remain the *il* of the neutral voice, in its interminable chatter, infinite, with no limit and with no interlocutor, alone and in the dark. Character has been invented in *Company*, in its most fundamental form and with the most meager of tools, only once again to vanish into the dead center out of which it was born. For, in the invention of character, *nothing at all is what is invented*, and nothing at all is what remains after it has had its say and its uncanny kind of life has run its course.

CONCLUSION: THE AFTERLIFE OF MODERNISM

This study began by talking about characters, those intensely lifelike beings upon whose implied humanness the form of the novel has depended, and out of whose semblance of feelings and psychologies the literary language of representation has been constructed. But we have ended up talking about no one and nothing, the absolute absence of life that goes by the name of death. It is as if the intense illusion of life that Erich Auerbach had identified in Dante's shades has dissolved into the infernal setting out of which these ghosts and apparitions call out to the poet.

But as we have seen, most explicitly in the novels of Samuel Beckett, perhaps these two figures – character and no one – amount to the same thing. There is, after all, perhaps only one type of personhood to which we might refer when we speak of the "life" that exists in literary language, and it is precisely that grammatical *non-person* identified by Emile Benveniste, the *impersonal* narrative voice that impossibly speaks in the work of Beckett and that is identified throughout the criticism of Maurice Blanchot. It is out of the absence of personhood and out of literature's dead space that the life of character is invented. To talk about character is always, uncannily, to remain still in its nonexistence.

In Blanchot's essay on the narrative voice, which I positioned as a kind of essential companion piece to Samuel Beckett's prose *oeuvre*, he provides a brief history of the novel form organized around this neutral figure of the narrative voice. What Blanchot terms "the neutral" is what has always spoken in writing; from the mad wanderings of Don Quixote and the enchanted world of fairy tales, to the comfortably personalized social spaces depicted by Balzac and Dickens, the neutral, more or less

hidden by the novel's representational gestures, has been present simply by virtue of the fact that stories are being told. Narrative was born of the idea that there was the impersonal coherency of a story, an event that happened at which its speaker was not necessarily present, and does not necessarily contain the presence of this speaker in its own unfolding. The story is something that stands on its own, and thus, without intervention, there is nothing left to do but tell it. Whenever one has told a story, as long as stories have been written, there is always something indeterminate speaking, and it is not the "I" of any author or authorial delegate, but merely the "he" or "it" that is the grammatical marker of the fact that writing exists. The depersonalized "he" or "it" denotes the fact that narrative is happening, and there is no ontologically present person who may be aligned with its source, or who could stand in a position of grammatical accountability.

Impersonality begins to assert itself and become an explicit concern for the novel with Flaubert and his practice of aesthetic distance. Most famously characterized by his dream of a book about nothing, which would hold itself up by its own internal force, Flaubert's impersonality is one that explicitly conceives of the novel as a self-enclosed, and self-referential literary object, keeping a distance at the level of both its creation and its reception, such that the novel becomes an unreal thing in the world, an object set apart, as if from out of this world. To use the image of the circle to which Blanchot makes recourse, one might say that narrative's circle has finally been sealed off, its lines separating it from the reality of and to which it speaks irreparably thickened.[1] And this

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[1] Regarding this figure of the circle, Blanchot writes: "Narrative would be like a circle neutralizing life, which does not mean without any relation to it, but that its relation to life would be a neutral one. Within this circle the meaning of what is and of what is said is indeed still given, but from out of a withdrawal, from a distance where all meaning and all lack of meaning are neutralized beforehand" (*IC* 379-80). And

impersonality continues to reign in literary modernism, in writers like Henry James and Virginia Woolf, and in techniques such as free indirect discourse and the effacement of any stabilizing narrating presence; neutral distance moves increasingly into the center of the novel, decentering the circle of meaning and unity. The neutral becomes, in literary modernism, the very substance of the novel form.

By the time of these high modernist writers, Blanchot writes, "the narrative 'he' or 'it' unseats every subject just as it disappropriates all transitive action and all objective personality" (*IC* 384). Blanchot points to the novels of Kafka as exemplary of this turn in literary history, when the neutral enters the work at the level of content, as an unnamable and unlocalizable force governing the story's very action. It is that unspeakable law broken by Josef K. as it determines his every move, and the impenetrable castle to which K. can never gain access all the while remaining forever in its thrall. The form of the novel, in Kafka's hands, takes its very neutrality as its subject matter; its strangeness and its impersonality becomes what the novel is about. And the same holds true, as we have seen, in writers such as James and Woolf, as their novels paradoxically create the intense illusion of character's living from which all signs of ontological presence or stability have been eradicated.

The tendency toward neutrality and depersonalization reaches a kind of climax in the later novels of Beckett, in which one is confronted by a novelistic world that offers,

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the circle's contours are further complicated as, shortly thereafter, Blanchot comments on the uncanny sense that someone is speaking in the background of narratives, like a prompter feeding its characters their lines: "But it is also true that the impression that someone is talking 'in the background' is really part of the singularity of narrative and the truth of the circle: as though the center of the circle lay outside the circle, behind it and infinitely far back; as though *the outside* were precisely this center that could only be the absence of any center" (*IC* 380, Blanchot's emphasis). As Blanchot constructs this almost impossible geometry, the center of narrative's circle has always impossibly lain on its outside. But with the rise of Flaubertian impersonality, with which one may more or less identify the emergence of those narrative tendencies I have called modernist, that absence of any center comes to be the circle of narrative's very substance; a nothing subtended by nothing.

instead of the usual cast of fictive subjectivities whose stories the novel form typically serves to tell, simply the strange fact of writing itself, uttered in the voice of the neutral, from no one and from nowhere. To talk about characters in Beckett's later novels, as if one meant the same race of beings that inhabits the works of Dante, George Eliot, or Dostoevsky, seems almost scandalous. Instead of the implied humans whom one expects to meet in fiction's pages, one hears only this wholly other voice, that of the neutral; this voice, as Blanchot characterizes it, "is neither the one nor the other, and the neutral that indicates it withdraws it from both" (*IC* 385). In Beckett, there is no longer even any narrative content that might help to mask this fact, no longer even Kafka's K. to stand in awe of the castle's impersonality: the neutral impossibly speaks, alone. This voice that speaks in Beckett's novels is the very facticity of narrative, and it is a voice that ultimately does not even say *anything* really, but merely is, with no origin or communicative direction. "Having nothing to say," Beckett's Unnamable utters, "no words but the words of others, I have to speak" (*TN* 314). With those others banished from the scene, with the characters and narrators who typically speak fiction's language willfully destroyed and done away with, fiction, here, simply and impossibly *is*.

And so there lies in Beckett's prose universe the illogical rules of the novel form's endgame, as the figure of the character upon which novelistic representation has always relied is obliterated entirely in order to show the logic of character's invention and the contours of its strange kind of "living." Beckett's novels arrive at the endpoint of Blanchot's literary genealogy of the decentering of a privileged subjective standpoint in novelistic language, culminating in these densely typographical prose worlds populated by no people, but that strangely are novels still. What these novels show us is the very

absence of personhood that constitutes the novel's ground. They tell the story of fiction's house emptied of all its inhabitants; they give voice to that impossible figure hinted at by Virginia Woolf when she speculates on what kind of being there might be who could call a room empty:

> *But this spirit, this haunter and joiner, who makes one where there are two, three, six or seven, and preserves what without it would perish, is nameless. Nameless it is, yet partakes of all things named; is rhyme and rhythm…*This nameless spirit, then, who is not "we" nor "I," nor the novelist either; for the novelist, all agree, must tell a story; *and there are no stories for this spirit*; this spirit is not concerned to follow lovers to the altar, nor to cut chapter from chapter; and write as novelists do "The End" with a flourish; since there is no end (61-62, my emphases and ellipses).

This impossible entity for which there exists no proper term, this nameless being who persistently remains in fiction's vast echo chamber even in the absence of anyone to whom stories might be happening, is the narrative voice. Receiving its most rigorous critical attention from Maurice Blanchot, it finds perhaps its clearest attempt at a definition in Woolf's excised passage from her working drafts of the novel that will become *Between the Acts*. It is the voice in which stories are told and in whose tenor writing happens. It is the language of the novel outside of, and before, the invention of character; the language of the novel itself, with no one to whom it might belong and no being to whom yet anything is happening.

And yet, as Woolf eloquently describes it, this nameless being "partakes of all things named;" it haunts and joins, and it "preserves what without it would perish." This

non-present being, a being without being that is still somehow present in all things, subtends all those seemingly very real beings whose ontological stability we see easily take for granted when we enter fiction's house. If the literary character seems to have what we call "life," then this because of this force for which living is somehow not the appropriate term. And not only are the characters of fiction granted *life* by the generative presence of this impossibly absent being, but they are granted a life that uniquely persists in ways that life of course does not in the real world of persons who die, objects that decay, and things that must inevitably pass:

> Certainly it is difficult to find a name for that which perceives pictures, knife and fork, also men and women; and describes them, *and has access to the mind in its darkness*. And further goes from mind to mind and surface to surface, and from body to body creating what is not mind or body, not surface or depths, but a common element in which the perishable is preserved, and the separate become one. *Does it not by this means create immortality* (61, my emphases)?

Not only does this nameless being of Woolf's partake of the lives of her fictive beings and things, as it haunts and joins them, but it does so with an uncanny depth and intensity, having "access to the mind in its darkness." The fictive beings that constituted by this presence, and that are moreover "preserved" by it, are strangely *more real* than people in the real world.

Characters are granted a privileged ontological status whereby their inner lives are just as knowable and concrete as their outward appearances and superficial significations. In fact, with even the most seemingly realistic characters of literary history, one might go so far as to say that the inner life of character is even more concretely present than its

exterior. After all, for everything that we as readers know of, say, Emma Bovary's inner complexity and of the depths of what we might call her "soul," who is to say what she looks like on the outside? She looks, perhaps, like nothing at all. A person turned inside out, and for all that, she is so intensely, and yet forever strangely, real. Is this not, perhaps, the paradox that Henry James's Henrietta Stackpole unwittingly strikes upon, in one of *The Portrait of a Lady*'s most bizarrely ironic moments:

> "*But I'm not talking about imaginary characters; I'm talking about Isabel. Isabel's intensely real*. What I wish to tell you is that I find her fearfully changed….Isabel's changing every day; she's drifting away – right out to sea. I've watched her and I can see it. She's not the bright American girl she was. *She's taking different views, a different color, and turning away from her own ideals*" (*PL* 174-5, my emphases).

Referring to the "intensely real" life of her friend Isabel Archer, this most formidably deep of literary-historical heroines, Henrietta is of course "talking about imaginary characters" nonetheless. And it is this wholly *imaginary* realm to which they belong that grants such intense reality.

To claim that the illusion of character's being occurs as a result of that nameless figure evoked by Woolf, the lifeless voice interrogated by Blanchot and impossibly actualized in the novels of Beckett, is not to deny the life of character. There *are*, of course, characters in novels; one might even go so far as to say that we read novels for no reason *but* to read character. Without character's illusion of so intensely living and dying, feeling and breathing, the fictional enterprise could hardly be what it is. Any kind of

writing that tells a story is inextricable from these small "he's" and "she's" who run about its pages, these little egos many of whom quite oftentimes even say "I."

And so, if character has ultimately become aligned with no one and nothing, if fictive life is but the illusion generated out of literary language's dead letters, then this is not to say that these "people" whom we have discussed do not in some sense "live." No reader can say that Isabel Archer or Dante's infernal shades, Mrs. Dalloway or Beckett's mad Molloy, does not in a sense *come to life* off their pages. But the question of *how* these characters live – how, as James's Henrietta has it, they come to seem so "intensely real" – must be set aside for another time; it would require a whole other sort of study, perhaps something approaching a hermeneutics of character, as they come to take on meaningful contours within the mind's eye of both reader and writer. The question I hope to have answered, though, at least in part, is *what* the life of character is. After all, even that masterwork of twentieth-century hermeneutics, *Truth and Method*, could not get underway without first taking on the ontology of the literary work of art. "Understanding," Gadamer notes, "belongs to the encounter with the work of art itself, and so this belonging can be illuminated only on the basis of the *mode of being of the work of art itself*" (87, Gadamer's emphasis). Whether discussing the work of narrative art as such, or the fictive inhabitants of the unique kind of life world opened up by its figurative strategies, ontology must necessarily precede hermeneutic understanding. We must first discern *what* character is before we can enter into discussions of *how* character comes to be read.[2]

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[2] Thus, Blakey Vermeule's notable recent study, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?*, is fundamentally marred by its willful upsetting of the primacy of ontology over understanding, whether that understanding be hermeneutical or, in her case, ethical. In arguing that the ethical question of character, as opposed to the ontological or the epistemological, is "the one that presses most urgently again and again"

And beyond their ontological complexity, and their apparent overturning of what it is *to be* as a person, the existence of character is rendered doubly uncanny in the sense that, being already dead, characters can never die. As Woolf's unnamable narrative voice, in the passage quoted above, explicitly reminds us, characters are granted nothing short of immortality. To live as a character is to live not simply with more depth than a real person could ever have for another, but it is also, impossibly, to live forever. Of the unnamable being underlying and constituting character, Woolf asks: "Does it not by this means create immortality?" But of course, one can say, characters die all the time, in the sense that their lives end, within the life-world of their own particular literary text; many novels and stories are in fact entirely structured according to the lifespan of a particular individual. Emma Bovary dies tragically, and thus, after a little bit of tidying up some loose ends, so must *Madame Bovary*.

But, as we have repeatedly seen, in one form or another, in Auerbach's Dante as well as in his version of Bovary, in James and Woolf, as well as in Beckett, this is not exactly the case. While every book must end, and every last page must be written, the characters who live in these books survive the wrapping up of their own plots. Any character is always going to live forever, never able to die completely, since character's

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(p. 12), Vermeule ultimately proposes that cognitive approaches to narrative hold the key to unlocking character's mystery. That is to say that, within Vermeule's schema, we care about fictive people for the very same reasons that we care about people in the real world. By assuming that one school of thought can unproblematically be aligned with the other, Vermeule shortchanges one of her project's most important contributions. That is, in assuming that we can use cognitive theory to talk about literary characters, she essentially assumes that literary characters do not deserve to be discussed at all. If characters are ultimately positioned as not unlike the celebrities who populate gossip rags or the strangers who control our very real economic policies, then where do cognitive science and sociology end--and where does literary criticism begin? One might well wonder whether literary characters are both more *and* less than Vermeule allows them to be. They are of course like real people, while still remaining nothing like flesh-and-blood people at all. Vermeule lucidly and expertly tackles the ethical question of character, but that cannot make up for the fact that the ontological problem remains to be grasped and dealt with. Unless we understand exactly *what* we talk about when we talk about literary characters, then the *how* and the *why* are going to remain somewhat muddled.

entire existence is generated out of that impersonal and atemporal realm of fictive language. Emma Bovary's fate is still, after her death that is only apparent, to drink endless cups of tea and read cheap paperback novels so as long as there will always be books and readers in the world, until some day when there might be an end to reading. She does these things because she is much like a real person in the empirical world, the kind of being we might know who does these things every day; she does these things forever because the world she inhabits always remains not quite ours, but that neutral one of paper whose lifespan lasts as long the text can be reproduced. To live as a character, we have seen, is to undergo the figurative deaths of becoming literary, to gain a kind of living by virtue of emerging out of a rhetorical chain of dead letters and broken referents. The life of character happens only after death, and, as one cannot die twice, to live is a character is to live forever.

Thus, joining the cast of modernism's fictive subjectivities already examined throughout this project, I might briefly suggest Kafka's eternal wanderer Gracchus as the paradigmatic figure for the impossibly eternal, because death-ridden, life of character. Falling from a cliff in the Black Forest while on a hunt sixteen centuries ago, Gracchus has experienced his death and found his own peace with it. Questioned in the present time of the story's narrative, Gracchus asserts that he is in fact dead, but yet, he claims, "in a certain sense I am alive too" (228). As he relates his strange tale:

> My death ship lost its way; a wrong turn of the wheel, a moment's absence of mind on the pilot's part, the distraction of my lovely native country, I cannot tell what it was; I only know this, that I remained on earth and that ever since my ship has sailed earthly waters. *So I, who asked for nothing better than to live among*

my mountains, travel after my death through all the lands of the earth (ibid., my emphasis).

"Always in motion" (ibid.), Gracchus has been doomed to wander the world eternally, due to some unforeseeable and unknowable error. His death was a happy one, but it was only the beginning of the strange tale that has become his life as a character belonging to literary history's pages.

He traces his plight's blame to his death ship's pilot, who was supposed to have simply led him across the sea to the afterlife, ending the tale of his life on earth by bringing him across death's space. He claims fervently that he never asked to be a seafarer, not to mention an eternal wanderer, and that his life in the Black Forest was all he was meant to live, and that what has happened subsequently was beyond his control and his own personal agency. "I had been glad to live and I was glad to die," he claims, "I followed my calling as a hunter in the Black Forest, where there were still wolves in those days (229-30)." And wandering the face of the earth, it is this inexplicable tale that Gracchus repeatedly tries to tell to the people whom he meets in every corner of the globe. His story, however, is met with ears that cannot understand him, and men who refuse to help his case. A dead man suddenly welcome nowhere, his story intelligible to no one, Gracchus is a man whose lifespan as a meaningful and real person, a man who asked to be a hunter and nothing more, seems to be over, and yet this set of human characteristics remains in a precarious afterlife without cessation and without rest. Not knowing why he still remains, he can only bemoan the mysteriousness of his plight: "I am here, more than that I do not know, further than that I cannot go. My ship has no rudder, and it is driven by the wind that blows in the undermost regions of death" (230).

And even more pitifully: "I fell down a precipice and was killed on the rocks. Don't ask any more. Here I am, dead, dead, dead. Don't know why I'm here" (234). Once a man, and now something more like a specter, Gracchus cannot however shake off his previous existence, because the death that was supposed to have properly ended it brought in fact no such completion. His project seems to be only to find a way in which this endless process of dying can end, to find that elusive second death forbidden by the empty promise of the disrupted first death.

Alive as a character because void of all signs of life that might be attributable to a person – this is the terrible truth of character's ontology, and the beginning of how we might consider their relationship to our own world of reading and writing, of understanding and giving meaning. Characters are dead, like Gracchus, and like Dante's damned shades Farinata and Cavalcante, because they inhabit the world of literature, that neutral space that belongs to no one and that can maintain no personhood. Kafka's melancholic hero has died, and yet *he is going to wander forever*, until Kafka's text exists no longer. Gracchus is a real man, very much like someone any reader might be able to point at in their empirical world, a hunter and a hero, and yet he is dead and he exists in a space without time and without finitude. The fact that he lives forever does not change the fact that he still acts and speaks, that he still embodies characteristics and can say his own name. Characters are those figures that are portrayed as so intensely living, yet whose existence consists precisely in not living, in remaining a fiction. They will forever be caught between these two worlds, between their ways of being as both implied people and as effaced individuals in the world of fiction's dead letters.

Each of these writers, whom I have gathered together as distinctively modernist, has demonstrated that the life of character does not preexist its textual formation. It is not a thing with some kind of "life" that is then transposed into the house of fiction; but rather, its uncanny way of living emerges only out of its textual existence as an inhabitant of that strange kind of dwelling that the space of literature is. The figurative inhabitants of any work are but invented company, and we have explored a few of its various guises from throughout literary history: the community of dead souls in the realm of the damned that Erich Auerbach had found to be the birth of modern character in Dante's *Inferno*; the catechretic dead letters of Flaubertian realism, figures of people who ultimately refer to no kind of literal entity; the "ghosts" and "corpses" roaming the halls of Henry James's haunted house of fiction; and Virginia Woolf's "life itself", the complex construction of Mrs. Brown's modernist personhood out of the figurative death of her maker. And throughout his novels, we have seen, Beckett uncovers the voice that has subtended them all, the voice without life out of which literary life is generated, the deathly space of no one and nothing in which the bountiful afterlife of fiction unfolds.

The modernist invention of character, we have seen, is an act governed by abyssal acts of figuration, figures of so many deaths, echoing Paul de Man's pronouncement in "Autobiography as De-Facement" that "death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament" (*RR* 81). Character, as a figure of language, belongs to the tropology of prosopopoeia, as it bestows the illusion of life, the oftentimes highly realistic semblance of voice, body, and face, on that which properly has none, but remains only a word on a page, a dead letter. It is the trope according to which the radically impersonal narrative voice in which stories are told is made familiar and recognizable, as it constructs "life"

out of its own deathly figurative gestures. If the modernist invention of character takes

place in that "life of afterlife" (*MC* 123) of which Beckett speaks, then this afterlife, each

of these modernist thinkers has shown us, is but the beginning of the life of fiction.

KEY TO FREQUENTLY CITED WORKS

AA	Henry James, *The Awkward Age*
BA	Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*
BI	Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*
C	Samuel Beckett, *Company*
D	Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*
DPSW	Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*
EVW	Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, 3 vols.
GR	Virginia Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow*
IC	Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*
JR	Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room*
LD	Henry James, "Is There a Life after Death?"
LL	Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*
LSB	Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Lois More Overbeck
M	Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*
MB	Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*
MC	Samuel Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*
MD	Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

PL   Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*

PNY   Henry James, *The Prefaces to the New York Edition*

RR   Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*

RT   Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*

SDEL   Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*

SL   Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*

TN   Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*

WD   Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*

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