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**OUTSIDER CITIZENS:
THE REMAKING OF POSTWAR IDENTITY
IN WRIGHT, BEAUVOIR, AND BALDWIN**

by

Sarah Flemming Relyea

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York**

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in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

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This project explores the intersection between the writing of race and gender in the postwar years and a major philosophical premise of that era—that consciousness is necessarily embedded in the lived experience of the body. In the context of demands for a more democratic and inclusive modernity, the outsider emerged in various cosmopolitan guises as both representative and ambiguous, the figure of an undetermined future. I begin by examining the development of Richard Wright's construction of the black man from *Native Son* to *The Outsider*. Wright's engagement in the 1950s with modern theories of consciousness—existentialism and psychoanalysis—represented a broadening of his concern with African American modernity in *Native Son*. In *The Outsider*, he embeds the newly "free" consciousness of Cross Damon within a world structured by race, murderous acts, and police investigations and profiles. Wright depicts the adventure of an outsider whose desperate bid for a freedom in which "all is permitted" ends in entrapment. Cross runs aground on the sands of desire—the lure of power that succeeds by seducing man's deep sensual needs—and on the modern racial symbols supplanting discarded religious beliefs. I then argue that Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of gender in *The Second Sex* adapts environmental theories of race from Gunnar Myrdal's

An American Dilemma, revising them for a philosophical investigation of whether and how women exist. Beauvoir's account of women's lived experience is, moreover, a dissenting response to psychoanalytic theories of femininity, especially Helene Deutsch's concept of "feminine masochism." Beauvoir redefines masochism as a response to social oppression and sexual conquest, and she proposes that it conceals a desire to participate in the power of the father, God, the lover, or the authoritarian State. To the extent that women evade the Hegelian desire for recognition, it is retained in masochistic longings that undermine women's authenticity and the democratic State. My final chapter examines James Baldwin's representation of the remaking of a white American man in *Giovanni's Room*. Through the return of the gaze, David confronts the sexual outsider within. Baldwin responds to the triumph of American power by challenging the myths of a nation beholden to Puritan notions of sin and salvation and an unspeakable past. Love and betrayal are, he argues, problems of identity—and, finally, arbitrary choices. All three writers offer the figure of the outsider to the modern citizen as a mirror, disclosing black alienation and the mob, immanence and masochism, homophobia and betrayal.

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Chapter I

Introduction

When W.E.B. Du Bois began his sociological research on black American life, in the 1890s, he hoped that science could be used to disperse the veil of double consciousness that set black Americans apart from the whites among whom they lived. Du Bois's purpose was to describe black Americans with greater sociological accuracy and to use his scientific findings as the basis for projects of social reform. As Adolph Reed, Jr., has noted, "Science and reform were linked in his thinking; he saw the former as giving direction to the latter" (47). Yet the scientific paradigm on which Du Bois relied endorsed contemporary concepts of a soul that expresses the race. He proposed in *The Souls of Black Folk*, in 1903, that blacks live in a condition of "double consciousness" and declared: "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world. . . . One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (16-17).¹ This concept assumes that national identities, although arising from events of history, become forms of inborn consciousness.

By 1940, following trends in sociology and the work of American anthropologist Franz Boas, Du Bois had rejected the biological basis implicit in such definitions of race. In *Dusk of Dawn* he wrote:

I lived to see every assumption of Hoffman's "Race Traits and Tendencies" contradicted. . . . When the matter of race became a question of comparative culture, I was in revolt. I began to see that the cultural equipment attributed to any people depended largely on who estimated it; and conviction came later in a rush as I realized what in my education had been suppressed concerning Asiatic and African culture. (627)

Moreover, Du Bois now rejected the premise of a national consciousness or soul of the

¹ For a discussion of "double consciousness" in Du Bois, see Reed 91-125.

race:

Human beings are infinite in variety, and when they are agglutinated in groups, great and small, the groups differ as though they, too, had integrating souls. But they have not. The soul is still individual if it is free. Race is a cultural, sometimes an historical fact. . . . I recognize it quite easily and with full legal sanction; the black man is a person who must ride "Jim Crow" in Georgia. (666)

The concept of race as a form of national consciousness, based in biology or born of the historical process, cedes to the concept of race as a statistical and legal myth. Du Bois may be regarded as a precursor to the writers discussed in this dissertation, Richard Wright, Simone de Beauvoir, and James Baldwin, for he proposed in 1940 that racial myths and the segregation they help to perpetuate impose a burden on the consciousness and agency of black Americans. He argued:

I was by long education and continual compulsion and daily reminder, a colored man in a white world I could not stir, I could not act, I could not live. without taking into careful daily account the reaction of my white environing world. (653)

Turning to the analysis of race as a myth, Du Bois emphasized, through the influence of psychoanalysis, the importance of repressed and irrational thoughts. Commenting on the unconscious sources of white racism and the slow progress that should be expected in the work of eroding superstitious beliefs, he attributed the black condition to "that deep conviction of myriads of men that congenital differences among the main masses of human beings absolutely condition the individual destiny of every member of a group" (656).

During the 1940s and 1950s, Wright, Beauvoir, Baldwin, and others whose status as citizens was vitiated by their identities as outsiders proposed interpretations of the myths of identity—referred to by Beauvoir as "notions of the eternal feminine, the black

soul, the Jewish character" (xx)²—that shaped their lived experience. The development of Beauvoir's views suggests that new research on racial differences was the most important scientific source for postwar theories of identity as the effect, not of biology or national culture, but of myth and ideology. When she discussed race in *America Day by Day*, in 1947, Beauvoir cited the arguments of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, a massive study incorporating contemporary research on the environmental causes of racial differences. In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, published in French in 1949, Beauvoir adapted some of Myrdal's analysis to a philosophical investigation of "whether and how women exist" (Bauer 50). She took as her premise the paradigm shift in the study of group characteristics:

The biological and social sciences no longer believe in the existence of immutably fixed entities that define given characteristics, such as those of woman, the Jew, or the Negro; they regard character as a secondary reaction to a *situation*. (xx)³

Turning to a concept found in existential philosophy, Beauvoir proposed that sexual differences exist only as an effect of the *situation* or objective conditions of women's experience:

To refuse the notions of the eternal feminine, the black soul, the Jewish character is not to deny that there are today Jews, Negroes, women—for those concerned, this denial does not represent a liberation but an inauthentic flight. (xx)⁴

For Beauvoir, as for Du Bois, Wright, and others concerned with the sociology of race, human nature is theorized in Hegelian or Darwinian terms as a developing construct

² "les notions d'éternel féminin, d'âme noire, de caractère juif" (*Deuxième sexe* I 13).

³ "les sciences biologique et sociales ne croient plus en l'existence d'entités immuablement fixées qui définiraient des caractères donnés tels que ceux de la femme, du Juif ou du Noir; elles considèrent le caractère comme une réaction secondaire à une *situation*" (*Deuxième sexe* I 12).

⁴ "Refuser les notions d'éternel féminin, d'âme noire, de caractère juif, ce n'est pas nier qu'il y ait aujourd'hui des Juifs, des Noirs, des femmes: cette négation ne représente pas pour les intéressés une libération, mais une fuite inauthentique" (*Deuxième sexe* I 13).

rather than a fixed entity. Although women as such exist today, the problem, as Beauvoir proposed it, is "to know whether this state of affairs must be perpetuated" (xxx).⁵

However, the unprecedented brutality of the recent war, especially the Nazi genocide of the Jews and America's development and use of atomic weapons, had posed, in the starkest terms, the problem of what a randomly evolving human nature might become.

Beauvoir began to build an existential ethics based on Heidegger's concept of the relation of each person to "human reality," and she concluded that although each consciousness is formed in the movement of society, one's actions may reject or confirm the common choice:

Heidegger had convinced me that "human reality" accomplishes and expresses itself in each existent; conversely, each person engages with and compromises that reality *as a whole*. Depending on whether a society proposes to move toward freedom or endures passive bondage, the individual comprehends himself as either a man among men or an ant in an anthill; yet each one of us has the power to question the collective choice, to reject or confirm it. (*Prime of Life* 373)⁶

In view of the ethical relation of the individual to society, the assertion of group identities—for example, through nationalist movements—becomes ethically complex, even ambiguous. Beauvoir argued that despite their segregation and exclusion from much of social life, women have never formed a separate group to oppose the dominant caste, as blacks and Jews have sought to do. Rather, "The bond that unites her to her oppressors is not comparable to any other. The division of the sexes is in effect a biological fact, not a moment in human history. . . . she is the Other at the core of a

⁵ "de savoir si cet état de choses doit se perpétuer" (*Deuxième sexe* I 25).

⁶ "Heidegger m'avait convaincue qu'en chaque existant s'accomplit et s'exprime 'la réalité humaine': inversement, chacun l'engage et la compromet tout entière; selon qu'une société se projette vers la liberté ou s'accommode d'un inerte esclavage, l'individu se saisit comme un homme parmi les hommes, ou comme une fourmi dans une fourmilière: mais nous avons tous le pouvoir de mettre en question le choix collectif, de le récuser ou de l'entériner" (*Force de l'âge* 538).

totality, the two terms of which are necessary to one another" (xxv-xxvi).⁷ Whereas Du Bois regarded black subordination to the other, the whites, as a recent and historically determined development, Beauvoir did not posit women's separatism as a present or even future possibility. The foremost concerns of *The Second Sex* are the ethical and psychological meanings of the unity of the human *mitsein*—the condition of being-with-others that is fundamental to human consciousness—and the fate of women, who remain subordinated within the *mitsein*. Beauvoir argued that the condition of women as a group would change only with the movement of society as a whole.

The convergence of existentialism and analyses of race, suggested by Beauvoir's responses to *An American Dilemma*, is an important phenomenon of the 1940s and 1950s. Beauvoir, Wright, and others, such as Frantz Fanon, believed that blacks in the West share the central concerns of existential philosophy. Existentialism defines human consciousness as a phenomenon of negation of the world and, consequently, as a series of improvisatory acts surpassing the given situation. Wright regarded the black American who confronts an oppressive society as an epitome of the negating activity of consciousness and as central to modernity. In the novels *Native Son*, in 1940, and *The Outsider*, in 1953, Wright represents the consciousness of black protagonists who stand in rancorous opposition to the American scene and explode in murder. Although Wright's black outsiders foreshadow the anarchic violence of other 1950s rebels, such as Norman Mailer's "white Negro," his pessimism distinguishes his outlook from Mailer's "affirmation of the barbarian" (354). "The White Negro" is a neo-surrealist fantasy—or nightmare—in which Mailer proposes that man is fundamentally creative:

Hip . . . surpasses even the unforgettable solution of the Marquis

⁷ "Le lien qui l'unit à ses oppresseurs n'est comparable à aucun autre. La division des sexes est en effet un donné biologique, non un moment de l'histoire humaine. . . . elle est l'Autre au coeur d'une totalité dont les deux termes sont nécessaires l'un à l'autre" (*Deuxième sexe* I 19-20).

de Sade to sex, private property, and the family, that all men and women have absolute but temporary rights over the bodies of all other men and women—the nihilism of Hip proposes as its final tendency that every social restraint and category be removed, and the affirmation implicit in the proposal is that man would then prove to be more creative than murderous and so would not destroy himself. (354)

In this statistical gamble, though the libertine hipster surpasses de Sade, Mailer recoils from the full potential of human anarchy and asserts a communitarian teleology: "in widening the arena of the possible, one widens it reciprocally for others as well, so that the nihilistic fulfillment of each man's desire contains its antithesis of human co-operation" (354). There is no such affirmative teleology in *Native Son*. Having trusted his feelings "even unto murder," Bigger Thomas later senses that he has acted in blind hysteria. He has succumbed to the "white folks" who live, he says, "Right down here in my stomach" (464).

After the war, Wright proposed a more conscious form of outsider: Cross Damon, a black American who has passed beyond the rituals, laws, and racial ideologies of the West to become a vanguard figure of modernity, an "individual mob." In Wright's novel of existential identity, the search for freedom and self-invention becomes the murderous adventure of a "little god." Having fled his former life as a Chicago postal worker, Cross recognizes himself in his opposition to the law and his kinship with a persecutory double, District Attorney Ely Houston. He is drawn to the ruthless power of Communist leaders; they present him with a challenge, a chance to forge a new identity in battle against them. Cross moves in with Gil Blount, a Communist who seeks to use him for political schemes. Acting on an urge, Cross murders Blount and the landlord, an American racist or, as Wright terms him, a "fascist." The Communists suspect that Cross is the murderer, yet he remains opaque to them, for his ideas have passed beyond their radar. Houston, however, is an outsider who brings psychological kinship and

recognition to the work of identifying the outlaw or marginal man. In Cross's double murder of Communist and fascist, Houston recognizes a man who is both atavistic and hypermodern, a skeptic "in whose mind and consciousness all the hopes and inhibitions of the last two thousand years have died" (426). He understands the unknown murderer as the "free spirit" of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*: a rebel who has abandoned all truth and who murders not in rage or for an ideal, but just because he happens "to feel like that one day" (564). Yet Houston must let Cross go free, for his proof of Cross's guilt comes from having the same outlaw urge. Abandoned to his lonely freedom, Cross must then confront the rough justice of the Communists. Gunned down by Party henchmen, he asserts his final innocence; he has moved beyond: beyond confession and the law to an inner space that ends at the barrel of a gun. In Wright's fantasy of the black outsider, Cross has assumed an identity whose traces are obscured—though not effaced—by the sign of black skin. The question is: What freedom inheres in the outsider, the vanguard figure and his unreadable traces of desire?

For Hegel, consciousness *is* desire; and consciousness becomes free—it becomes *self-conscious*—only through recognition by another consciousness. As Houston remarks to Cross, "Desire is the mad thing, the irrational thing. . . . Desire is what snared you, my boy" (565-66). Despite his vanguard status, Cross is contained by his desire. The *mise-en-scene* of Oedipal desire shifts from the black world to the white world as Cross abandons his mother and his wife, Gladys, to enter the household of Gil and Eva Blount, where he becomes the black son.

In the Greek myth of Oedipus, the curse on the House of Thebes is a communal punishment that is fulfilled by the uncanny outsider, the banished son Oedipus. As is well known, Oedipus is fated to slay his father and marry his mother; when he is an infant, he is given to a servant to be destroyed, but the servant leaves him on a hillside,

where he is rescued by a shepherd. In time, Oedipus grows to manhood and enacts the curse. Freud, who describes the psychological rather than physical banishment of the child, argues that outsiders appear uncanny—strange yet familiar—through the repression and projection of incestuous desire. In the American context, where black sons and daughters have been banished to evade the curse on the nation, the myth of Oedipus connects with narratives of black American experience, and the figure of the uncanny outsider assumes a new significance. The primal curse on the city-state; the stranger who returns to enact unknown vengeance and desire; the horror of recognition—all correspond to aspects of *The Outsider*. When Cross enters the Blount household as a black son, he does not yet know that he wants Eva. However, he soon murders Gil and sleeps with her. Horrified by his murders, he confesses to Eva, who now recognizes Cross as someone who is not a victim, as she had believed, but a ruthless tyrant like Gil, a pathological and primitive outsider. Wright reframes the problem of blackness as a problem of inner compulsion and desire, enacted within the interracial family of the American scene. Having entered the Blount household, Cross becomes ensnared by unknown and ultimately banal compulsions. In the end, he succumbs to the superstitions of race that he has sought to escape; he and Eva are doomed by the law that draws them together.

The murderous events of *Native Son* and *The Outsider* differ from the French existentialists' invocations of black culture. For Wright's characters, death is an effect of oppression; Bigger and Cross encounter death when they oppose the other. In *America Day by Day*, however, Beauvoir proposes that black musicians confront death through the fleeting performance of jazz rather than through social violence.⁸ Describing a young trumpeter in New Orleans, Beauvoir represents nightclub jazz as a performance haunted

⁸ See M  nil 131 for a similar perspective in *  grit  * writing. M  nil was co-editor, along with Aim   C  saire, of the Martinican journal *Tropiques*.

by impermanence and death; it offers:

the privileged emotional impact of a communication that is immediate and fleeting, like the very moments it transfigures. If these men's lives are often tormented, it's because instead of keeping death at a distance, like other artists, they are always mindful of the marriage of existence and death. It's against this background [*fond*]⁹—the background of death—that the inspired refrains of the young trumpeter stand out [*s'enlèvent*], and you can't listen only with your ears and your mind: he offers an experience in which you must immerse your whole self. (226)⁹

The passage alludes to Heidegger's concept of authenticity: individual existence stands out (*s'enlever*) against a background (*le fond*). This concept of authenticity recurs throughout Beauvoir's work. Here, in what existentialism regards as the fundamental situation of every existent, the trumpeter stands out through musical improvisation against the background of death. The terms *s'enlever* and *le fond* occur in another passage in *America Day by Day*, where Beauvoir observes that after months in the United States, the background of the old world has given way to the new: "There is no longer another world on the horizon, against which these houses, these advertisements and window displays stand out as strange shapes; Europe is forgotten and it's *this* world that is the backdrop [*le fond*] against which my life stands out [*s'enlève*]" (254).¹⁰ The background—death or a new country—is the context or situation against which consciousness defines its unique existence. The concept of background recurs in *The*

Second Sex, where it refers, rather momentarily in the development of Beauvoir's

⁹ "le pathétique privilège d'une communication immédiate et fugace comme les instants mêmes dont il transfigure la substance. Si la vie de ces hommes est souvent tourmentée, c'est qu'au lieu de tenir la mort à distance comme les autres artistes, ils réalisent minute par minute le mariage de l'existence et de la mort; c'est sur ce fond—sur fond de mort—que s'enlèvent les chœurs inspirés du jeune trompette; et on ne peut pas l'entendre seulement avec ses oreilles et son cerveau: il propose une expérience dans laquelle il faut se couler tout entier" (*L'Amérique* 316-17).

¹⁰ "Il n'y a plus à l'horizon un autre monde sur lequel ces maisons, ces affiches, ces étalages se détacheraient en formes singulières; l'Europe est oubliée et c'est ce monde même qui est le fond sur lequel s'enlève ma vie" (*L'Amérique* 352).

thought, to gender. There she writes: "if I want to define myself I must first of all declare: 'I am a woman'; this truth constitutes the background [*le fond*] from which all other claims will stand out [*s'enlèvera*]" (xxi).¹¹

Death is an essential condition of human existence, according to Beauvoir (*Second Sex* 7).¹² By contrast, the background of France or America is accidental and changeable; in time, Europe gives way to America as a background for Beauvoir's authenticity. However, gender has a peculiar and intermediate status, as a myth or mystification naturalized as "fact"; this is the central discovery announced and developed in philosophical terms in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir argues that gender is *unnatural*, a role elaborated by culture:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate defines the figure that the human female assumes at the heart of human society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this product, intermediary between the male and the eunuch, that is termed feminine. (267)¹³

Following contemporary research on race, Beauvoir proposes that femininity and, by implication, other forms of human gendering are not innate; rather, they are the products of culture. That is, gender is an accidental, not essential, characteristic of the human condition. Yet it assumes a stubborn facticity, because human civilization produces and elaborates gender *as though it were essential and innate*. Moreover, no specific event has brought femininity into being, as some have argued that slavery has created the American Negro. Beauvoir therefore poses the question of "whether and how women exist" in

¹¹ "Si je veux me définir je suis obligée d'abord de déclarer: 'Je suis une femme'; cette vérité constitue le fond sur lequel s'enlèvera toute autre affirmation" (*Deuxième sexe I* 14). See Toril Moi's analysis of this passage in *What Is a Woman?* (169-250).

¹² *Deuxième sexe I* 40.

¹³ "On ne naît pas femme: on le devient. Aucun destin biologique, psychique, économique ne définit la figure que revêt au sein de la société la femelle humaine; c'est l'ensemble de la civilisation qui élabore ce produit intermédiaire entre le mâle et le castrat qu'on qualifie de féminin" (*Deuxième sexe II* 13).

philosophical rather than historical terms. Moving from gender to the more fundamental matter of sexual differentiation for purposes of reproduction, she concludes that, at least in philosophical terms:

the perpetuation of the species does not require sexual differentiation. It may be assumed by existents in such a manner that, in return, it enters into the concrete definition of existence: so be it. It remains no less true that a consciousness without a body or an immortal man is strictly inconceivable, whereas one can imagine a society reproducing itself by parthenogenesis or composed of hermaphrodites. (*Second Sex* 7)¹⁴

Such passages were ridiculed by some early commentators on *The Second Sex*.¹⁵ Yet Beauvoir was not recommending, like Myrdal, new directions for public policy but proposing a thought experiment to expand the borders of skeptical inquiry.¹⁶ She suggests a new conceptual framework for the analysis of gender, one that regards gender as existentially open or unfinalized. Such a framework assumes, as the starting point for her investigation, that the situation of women, however determining of femininity it now seems to be, may be changed along with the human culture that has produced it.

Fanon poses similar problems with respect to race in *Black Skin, White Masks*, a work that may have been influenced by some of Beauvoir's arguments in *The Second Sex*. Fanon cites Sartre and several other of Beauvoir's friends and colleagues from the late 1940s: Wright, Michel Leiris, and Bernard Wolfe.¹⁷ Although Fanon never mentions *The Second Sex*, he had probably read the excerpts that appeared in *Les Temps modernes*,

¹⁴ "la perpétuation de l'espèce n'entraîne pas la différenciation sexuelle. Que celle-ci soit assumée par les existants de telle manière qu'en retour elle entre dans la définition concrète de l'existence, soit. Il n'en demeure pas moins qu'une conscience sans corps, qu'un homme immortel sont rigoureusement inconcevables, tandis qu'on peut imaginer une société se reproduisant par parthénogenèse ou composée d'hermaphrodites" (*Deuxième sexe* 140).

¹⁵ See, for example, Hardwick.

¹⁶ See Bauer's analysis of *The Second Sex* as a rewriting of Descartes's *Meditations*.

¹⁷ In a letter to Algren, Beauvoir describes Wolfe as "my best friend in New York" (*Transatlantic Affair* 84).

and, as Toril Moi observes, both he and Beauvoir use concepts from existentialism, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis to theorize the subjectivity of the oppressed. Despite these parallels between the two works, "Fanon's explicit invocation of Sartre and his total neglect of Beauvoir exemplify the usual response of male intellectuals to existentialism" (Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir* 204).¹⁸

Both Beauvoir and Fanon argue that the subordinate caste has never demanded recognition but has, instead, identified with the values of the other—man or the white master—with profound consequences for the situation of women and blacks, respectively. As Beauvoir proposes, women have evaded rather than surmounted the master-slave conflict: "between her and the male there has been no combat. . . . woman aspires to and recognizes the values that are concretely attained by the males" (64-65).¹⁹ Fanon produces a similar analysis of black French subjectivity, with reference specifically to Martinique, for he argues that blacks have neither demanded recognition nor struggled for it; rather, "The upheaval reached the black man from without" (220).²⁰ And, while Beauvoir proposes woman as the absolute Other, Fanon asserts that "the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man" (161 n. 25).²¹ However, Fanon affirms that blacks, unlike women as described by Beauvoir, will assert themselves through struggle in the near future, and he comments that in America the battle has begun. Nationalism, the ability to say "we," has profound meanings for Fanon's theory of the black man's relation to the other.²²

Although Beauvoir and Fanon present convergent analyses of the subjectivity of

¹⁸ For the influence of phenomenology on Fanon, see Macey 126, 163-65; for Fanon's neglect of *The Second Sex*, see Macey 126.

¹⁹ "entre le mâle et elle il n'y a jamais eu de combat . . . la femme vise et reconnaît elle aussi les valeurs qui sont concrètement atteintes par les mâles" (*Deuxième sexe* I 114).

²⁰ "Le bouleversement a atteint le Noir de l'extérieur" (*Peau noire* 178).

²¹ "le véritable Autrui du Blanc est et demeure le Noir" (*Peau noire* 131 n. 25).

²² Much of Fanon's analysis refers specifically to black *men*.

women and black men, they do not agree on a framework for analysis of the other. In *The Second Sex*, the starting point for an analysis of men's myths of woman is the category of the Other, a concept that opens up an exhaustive gathering of myths from biology, psychology, history, and literature. Beauvoir traces the myth of woman not to a concrete figure but to men's—and women's—disavowal of death, the flesh, and all aspects of human immanence. Her elaboration of the manifold and contradictory meanings of the myth of woman as the Other is indispensable to the phenomenological method of her argument.

Fanon rejects such a comprehensive description of myths of the black man. He asserts, rather, that the essential task is not to gather facts but "to disclose their mechanics" and "to find their meaning," thereby advancing toward a solution (168).²³ Through a crude use of Freud, Fanon argues that the black man is a "phobogenic" object, representing for the white unconscious the biological, the uncivilized sexual instinct—the penis. Although Fanon mentions the figure of the scapegoat and the categories of "Evil" (*le Mal*) and "Ugliness" (*le laid*) (180), in his view the phobogenic object—the black man—has an inescapable sexual significance. He goes on to argue that most *negrophobes* are women whose masochism finds expression in an ambivalent fear of the black man. Drawing on the lurid imagery of sexual myths, he proposes that white women "invariably perceive the black man at the impalpable gate that opens onto the realm of orgies, of bacchanals, of delirious sexual sensations" (177).²⁴ In this vein, Fanon uses Freudian concepts of feminine masochism as the basis for an analysis of white myths of the black man. Beauvoir, by contrast, produces a thorough critique of analyst Helene Deutsch's theory of feminine masochism.

²³ "d'en montrer le mécanisme"; "de dégager leur sens" (*Peau noire* 136).

²⁴ "aperçoivent régulièrement le nègre à la porte impalpable qui donne sur le royaume des Sabbats, des Bacchanales, des sensations sexuelles hallucinantes" (*Peau noire* 143).

Beauvoir and Fanon also present contrasting perspectives on solidarity. In an ambivalent manner, Fanon assumes a black consciousness, or *négritude*, while also articulating a form of humanism. By contrast, Beauvoir argues that women cannot form a separate group in opposition to men. Moreover, she refers in chilling terms to the dangers of group consciousness:

The proletariat can propose to massacre the ruling class, and a sufficiently fanatical Jew or Negro might dream of getting sole possession of the atomic bomb and making humanity wholly Jewish or black; but woman cannot even dream of exterminating the males. . . . she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another. (xxv-xxvi)²⁵

In 1949, after the tragedies unleashed by nationalism and during the early years of the Cold War and nuclear arms race, Beauvoir understood the indivisibility of the human *mitsein* less as a danger than as a possible means of human solidarity and survival.

The Second Sex contains a sustained critique of the psychoanalytic concept of feminine masochism proposed by Freud and elaborated in the 1940s by Helene Deutsch.²⁶ In Beauvoir's view, masochism is not a normal psychological attitude; it signifies a frustrated narcissism and a subordinate relation to power. A response to social oppression and sexual conquest, masochism in women conceals a desire to participate in the masculine power of the father, God, the lover, or the authoritarian State. In a society in which women's desire for power is thwarted and expressed through identification with a dominant other, the male, democratic regimes will be undermined from within.

Beauvoir's critique of masochism suggests, more generally, an analysis of the widespread acquiescence and collaboration shown by the French during the Nazi occupation. She

²⁵ "Le prolétariat pourrait se proposer de massacrer la classe dirigeante; un Juif, un Noir fanatiques pourraient rêver d'accaparer le secret de la bombe atomique et de faire une humanité tout entière juive, tout entière noire: même en songe la femme ne peut exterminer les mâles. . . . elle est l'Autre au coeur d'une totalité dont les deux terms sont nécessaires l'un à l'autre" (*Deuxième sexe* I 19-20).

²⁶ See Freud, "Femininity"; and Deutsch.

writes that those who renounced violence against the Germans "even under provocation . . . felt a profound alteration in their situation in the world: the caprice of others determined whether they were to be changed into objects; their subjectivity no longer had means of concrete expression, being only a secondary phenomenon" (331).²⁷ Any group barred from the full rights of citizenship could be described in such terms; Beauvoir observes that Southern blacks were forbidden the "conquering actions" of the dominant caste, and "this command is the key to the mysterious 'black soul'; the way the Negro feels in the white world, . . . his whole way of feeling and acting are to be explained on the basis of the passivity to which he is condemned" (330-31).²⁸

By contrast, Fanon appropriates the dubious charge of masochism and turns it against the dominant caste of white women *and* men. He asserts that women *negrophobes* are defending themselves against an unconscious desire to be raped by a black man (*Black Skin* 154-67).²⁹ Citing Bernard Wolfe's analysis of the Uncle Remus tales, published in *Les Temps modernes*, Fanon argues that many white men are masochistic in relation to black men. The concept of white masochism has a political meaning in the context of the wartime experiences of French colonial soldiers such as Fanon, who served with de Gaulle's forces in North Africa. For the French of the metropole, the war was a crushing experience of surrender and occupation by the German army. By contrast, Fanon left Martinique in March 1944, at age 18, to join de Gaulle's

²⁷ "même en cas de provocation . . . sentaient leur situation dans le monde profondément bouleversée: il dépendait du caprice d'autrui qu'ils fussent changés en objets, leur subjectivité n'avait plus le moyen de s'exprimer concrètement, elle n'était qu'un phénomène secondaire" (*Deuxième sexe II* 93).

²⁸ "conduites conquérants"; "c'est cette consigne qui est la clé de la mystérieuse 'âme noire'; la façon dont le Noir s'éprouve dans le monde blanc, . . . toute sa manière de sentir et d'agir s'expliquent à partir de la passivité à laquelle il est condamné" (*Deuxième sexe II* 92-93). Parshley translates "conduites conquérants" as "competitive attitude" (*Second Sex* 330).

²⁹ *Peau noire* 125-35.

army (Macey 91-92). He regarded himself as French and was determined to fight the Nazi occupation, serving with the Allied forces in southern France from September through December 1944 (Macey 98-102).³⁰ Deeply disillusioned by the racism he observed in the French army and as a student in Lyon after the war, Fanon renounced an identification with France and later became a spokesman for the Algerian FLN. Fanon's assertions regarding the masochism of whites—whom he says will "accommodate" expressions of black aggression (142)—occur in a context of intense debates on the causes of the French surrender to Nazi Germany. Fanon's argument strongly suggests that as the French surrendered to the Germans, so will they "accommodate" a colonial uprising.

Baldwin's American and integrationist perspective on race shares more with Beauvoir's view of the indivisible *mitsein* of the couple than with Fanon's outlook. From an early age, Baldwin was familiar with arguments formulated by anthropologist Franz Boas and writers such as Alain Locke, who defined Americans and their culture as the product of contributions by many ethnic and racial groups. Drawing on the perspective of Harlem Renaissance writers Locke, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes, he argued in early essays such as "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Preservation of Innocence" that harsh Puritan ideals construed in terms of race and centered on concepts of sin and purification, the devil and the other world, had distorted American culture and identity. A coherent American identity therefore remained to be achieved.

During the 1950s, Baldwin became an important voice for the vision of America as an inevitably integrated culture and for a politics centered on the notion, articulated in *Giovanni's Room*, that "the end of innocence is also the end of guilt" (148). *Giovanni's Room* foretells the remaking of American masculinity through the risks of exile and the return of the gaze. Baldwin analyzes myths of race, gender, and desire in the context of

³⁰ For a full discussion of Fanon's wartime service, see Macey 87-108.

America's rise as a superpower, and he represents love and betrayal as arbitrary choices, questions of identity. For Baldwin, the discovery of identity is predicated on the shattering of social categories; this idea underlies his distrust of universals and refusal to adopt the role of victim. His prophetic disruption of racial and sexual identities opposes the myths of a newly powerful America, beholden to Puritan categories of sin and salvation and an unspeakable past.

Baldwin's analysis of racial identity in American society cannot be separated from his analysis of American sexuality and its close kinship to mob violence, its fusion of racial and sexual fears, and its denial of the personal acts of communion and confession:

it does not demand a mass conversion to persuade a mob to lynch a nigger or stone a Jew or mutilate a sexual heretic. It demands no conversion at all: in the very same way that the act demands no courage at all. . . . To destroy a nigger, a kike, a dyke, a faggot, by one's own act alone is to have committed a communion and, above all, to have made a public confession more personal, more total, and more devastating than any act of love: whereas the orgasm of the mob is quenched in the blood of the lamb. (*Price* xiv)

Baldwin represents mob violence as an act between people that has much the same intimate sources as a sexual act, although the mob would repudiate the "communion" and public "confession" contained in individual acts of sex or violence. This repudiation of the act and, more importantly, the relation with another that the act expresses and embodies (hence the communion), is part of the denial of emotional life that, for Baldwin, made white Americans singularly naïve and dangerous. In a discussion of the structure of *Another Country*, Baldwin suggests that Ida, a young black woman, occupies the central ground of the novel, and he explains why he nevertheless chose to reveal her largely from the outside:

what Ida thought had to remain for all of them the mystery which it

is in life, and had to be, therefore, a kind of mystery for the reader, too, who had to be fascinated by her and wonder about her and care about her and try to figure out what was driving her to where she was so clearly going. ("Words of a Native Son" 397)

Through the uncertain role of witness described here, in which the reader must "somehow be trapped into the reality you want him to submit to" ("Words of a Native Son" 397), Baldwin sought to convey the mystery at the core of America.

Chapter 2

The Indestructible Kernel of Night¹

(1)

Richard Wright's *Native Son* represents the endemic problems of American racism through the fate of black migrants from the rural South to 1930s Chicago, amidst the poverty and social decay of the Depression years. In Europe, the uprooting of masses by war and economic chaos was giving rise to fascism. Wright, a Communist Party member, supported the Party's stated goal of forming a united movement of the black and white working classes. However, few among the tens of thousands of blacks on Chicago's South Side responded to the Communists' organizing efforts.² Wright was keenly aware of this problem, as he stated in a letter to party colleague Mike Gold:

I do not agree with Ben Davis when he implies that the majority of the Negroes are with the labor movement. Such an implication can become a tragedy as grave as that which the German working class made in estimating Hitler's chances for success. . . . Despite the heroic struggles the Party has put forward to win the Negro, it is still possible for a wave of nationalism to sweep the Negro people today. (qtd. in Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 186)

In the urban malaise of the 1930s, Wright set out to understand the mutual incomprehension between poor blacks and their would-be organizers. His analysis incorporated a wide range of material: personal observations of black life in Mississippi and Chicago, close contact with the Communist Party, and concepts from his reading of Marxism, Freudian psychology, and the Chicago School of sociology. Psychology and sociology were crucial for Wright's development as a novelist, since they drew on autobiographical narratives to trace the environmental sources of neurosis and crime

¹ "L'fracassable noyau de nuit" (André Breton qtd. in *Second Sex* 231; *Deuxième sexe* 1 367).

² Contemporary sources claim that only 500 blacks joined the Chicago chapter of the Communist Party during the 1930s; see Myrdal 495.

(Rowley 95); moreover, American sociology after World War I argued that observed differences between blacks and whites were not innate but socially determined.³

Wright's perspective diverges from that of Charles S. Johnson and other researchers who, during the boom years of the 1920s, studied the adaptation of black migrants to urban life and industrial work. Chicago during the 1930s became, instead, a test case for theories relating poverty to social pathology, and Wright stresses this connection. When a relief agency found work for him at the South Side Boys' Club for unemployed youths, he observed the young men and kept notes of their conversations:

For hours I listened to their talk of planes, women, guns, politics, and crime. . . . The Communists who doubted my motives did not know these boys, their twisted dreams, their all too clear destinies; and I doubted if I should ever be able to convey to them the tragedy I saw here. (*Black Boy* 401-02).⁴

Wright observed an incoherence between the world of the South Side and the views of the Communists; this incoherence forms part of the larger problem of racial alienation that suffuses the atmosphere of *Native Son*.

The reader of *Native Son* becomes immersed in the consciousness and perceptions of Bigger Thomas. Wright's relentless psychological probing was intended to correct the omissions of Communist Party theory. He defended the novel to his Communist colleagues by charging that the Party, through its inattention to the "dark and hidden places of the human personality," had abandoned blacks to the competing mass ideology of fascism. As he argued to Mike Gold:

We are in a race with the Nazis, who today possess the offensive. . . . Are we Communist writers to be confined merely to the political and economic spheres of reality and leave the dark and hidden places of the human personality to the Hitlers and Goebbels? I refuse to believe such. . . . If I should follow Ben

³ See Myrdal 91-93, 1003, 1036, 1189-90.

⁴ Wright's work at the South Side Boys' Club is discussed in Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 107-08; and Rowley 90-91.

Davis's advice and write of Negroes through the lens of how the Party views them in terms of political theory, I'd abandon the Bigger Thomases. I'd be tacitly admitting that they are lost to us, that fascism will triumph because it alone can enlist the allegiance of those millions whom capitalism has crushed and maimed. (qtd. in Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 185-86)

Native Son reveals the consciousness of Bigger Thomas as a besieged realm where fantasy clashes with harsh internal taboos. Bigger senses these taboos, which arise from the deprivation and segregation imposed on blacks by American society, as physical forces inside him. His thoughts and actions have the structure of symptoms—what Freud terms "compromise" formations, for they are shaped by "a compromise between the need for satisfaction and the need for punishment" (*Inhibitions* 19).⁵

We are shown the world from Bigger's perspective behind the veil of repression. His imprisonment behind a psychological veil of myth, hatred, and paranoia represents a defining experience of industrial modernity. He stands apart from whites and also other blacks. Wright's aesthetic strategy tests the Communist narrative of class solidarity against the conditions he witnessed among the unemployed young men of Chicago's South Side, those most likely to respond to the appeal of fascism or Communism. In Wright's view, they formed the dubious vanguard of modern black consciousness— young men of the urban underclass, frustrated in their human needs, terrorized by white power, and seeking release in sex and violence.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher's introduction to the 1940 edition set the tone for interpretations of *Native Son* as a sociological novel (Rowley 184-85). By contrast, in 1941 Ralph Ellison praised *Native Son* as "the first philosophical novel by an American Negro" (qtd. in Rowley 192). However, he later condemned Wright's Marxism, observing in 1963, in "The World and the Jug," that Wright "could not for ideological reasons depict a Negro as intelligent, as creative or as dedicated as himself" (120).

⁵ See also *Introductory Lectures* 358-61.

Ellison argues that Bigger Thomas is presented as "a near-subhuman indictment of white oppression. . . . Here environment is all—and interestingly enough, environment conceived solely in terms of the physical, the non-conscious. Well, cut off my legs and call me Shorty!" (114). These comments target not only Marxism but the environmental sociology of the Chicago School, which stressed the influence of social conditions. Yet Ellison traduces the ideas of Wright and others, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon, who adapted concepts of environmental influence to an analysis of oppressed subjectivity.⁶ For all three writers, myth, consciousness, and agency are central problems connected with, but not reduced to, the physical environment, including the body. Wright's contribution in *Native Son* includes a probing analysis of what he regarded as a new form of black consciousness. Ellison understandably chaffed against the narrow focus on *one* form of black humanity, a focus that shades into synecdoche for readers who regard Bigger as emblematic of the race. It is also true that Wright's relentless concern with one perspective poses problems for the novel form; however, it was a deliberate choice, one that Wright repeats in two later novels, *The Outsider* (1953) and *Savage Holiday* (1954).⁷ Wright is fascinated by what Toril Moi has termed the "melodramatic horror at the heart of skepticism"—the problem of other minds and the question, "How can I know that you are in pain?"⁸ In the modern universe of *Native Son*, one simply cannot know this.

Ellison's quarrel with twentieth-century American realism did not begin or end with Wright. In the 1946 essay "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Mask of Black Humanity," Ellison charts the failure of twentieth-century American realism to respond to the moral challenge posed by the figure of the Negro. He begins with the "hard-boiled"

⁶ Discussions of Bigger's subjectivity include JanMohamed, "Sexuality on/of the Racial Border"; and Baker.

⁷ See Wright's comments in "How Bigger Was Born" (878-79).

⁸ See "Skepticism, Melodrama, and the Body."

style of Hemingway, "a marvelous technical virtuosity won at the expense of a gross insensitivity to fraternal values" (35), and argues that:

It is instructive that Hemingway, born into a civilization characterized by violence, should seize upon the ritualized violence of the culturally distant Spanish bullfight as a laboratory for developing his style. For it was, for Americans, an amoral violence (though not for the Spaniards) which he was seeking. Otherwise he might have studied that ritual of violence closer to home, that ritual in which the sacrifice is that of a human scapegoat, the lynching bee. Certainly this rite is not confined to the rope as agency, nor to the South as scene, nor even to the Negro as victim. (37)

Yet during the 1930s Wright turned precisely to the lynching bee as a "laboratory for developing his style."⁹ Unlike Hemingway, he does not describe ritual violence through culturally distant eyes, as an aesthetic and technical exercise, but reveals it through the tormented consciousness of the victim. Seen from this perspective, the audience—or lynch mob—appear as agents of blood lust, not aesthetic connoisseurs. As Wright later said of the bullfight, "the only wild beast in the arena is the audience" (*Pagan Spain* 116). One can see the beast at work in the hysterical mobs that clamor for the death of Bigger Thomas. It has clamored in Bigger's mind as he smothered Mary Dalton and bludgeoned Bessie Mears.

Although Wright never practiced a strict realism, he sought techniques for adapting what he described as the "simple" style of Hemingway to the representation of social problems. He acknowledged Hemingway's influence on members of the Federal Writers' Project in Chicago:

We liked the simple, direct way in which he wrote, but a great many of us wanted to write about social problems. The question came up: how could we write about social problems and use a

⁹ For Wright's representations of lynching, see *Uncle Tom's Children*, especially "Big Boy Leaves Home." Other stories in this collection confirm Ellison's claim that lynching takes many forms.

simple style? Hemingway's style is so concentrated on naturalistic detail that there is no room for social comment. One boy said that one way was to dig deeper into the character and try to get something that will live. I decided to try it. (qtd. in Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 122)

The suggestion to "dig deeper" into the character bore fruit in *Native Son*. Wright moves beyond sociological research on black urban life, of the kind that he undertook for the Federal Writers' Project, to explore the myths shaping modern consciousness.¹⁰ He represents the social problems of an incompletely achieved modernity through the problems posed for and by the consciousness of a young black man uprooted from the South, with its black peasant traditions and rigid segregation, to Chicago's South Side, in the heart of industrial modernity. When Bigger meets Mary Dalton and her lover Jan Erlone, for example, he perceives himself as despised black skin:

His entire mind and body were painfully concentrated into a single sharp point of attention. . . . He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin. . . . they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. (507-08)

Bigger's painful descent into an epidermal consciousness anticipates postwar analyses of racial oppression, especially Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.¹¹ Fanon knew Wright's work well enough to write to him in early 1953, and he comments briefly on *Native Son*

¹⁰ For Wright's activities as a member of the Federal Writers' Project, see Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 127, 133-38, 165-68; and Walker 68-69, 393. See also *12 Million Black Voices* and Fabre's discussion of it (*Unfinished Quest* 232-34).

¹¹ See Chapter 5, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man" ("L'expérience vécue du Noir").

in *Black Skin, White Masks* (139).¹² Although Fanon uses concepts from structuralism and existentialism to analyze the black man's response to the white gaze, Bigger Thomas provides the literary model for such forms of consciousness. Fanon's anguished prose describes how the black man's "corporeal schema" collapses under the white gaze, as he senses his body through a third-person consciousness, "solely a negating activity" (110).¹³ Beneath the corporeal schema, he has created "a historical-racial schema" comprised of myths given by "the other, the white man, who has woven me from a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" (111).¹⁴ Under the white gaze, Fanon's corporeal schema cedes its place to "a racial epidermal schema. . . . I was at the same time responsible for my body, responsible for my race, my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics" (112).¹⁵ In *Native Son*, the Sartrean nausea of such encounters with white myths of his inhumanity overwhelms Bigger repeatedly.¹⁶

Even Bigger's lawyer, Mr. Max, engages in myth when he argues that his client's crimes were not an act of protest but an expression of organic identity, the inevitable outcome of "an accomplished fact of life":

"Your Honor, injustice blots out one form of life, but another grows up in its place with its own rights, needs, and aspirations. What is happening here today is not injustice, but *oppression*, an attempt to throttle or stamp out a new form of life." (812)

¹² *Peau noire* 113. For Fanon's correspondence with Wright, see Macey 280. Fanon described himself as working on a new study of Wright's novels; according to Macey, Wright "does not appear to have replied, and no trace has been found of Fanon's projected essay" (280).

¹³ "schéma corporel"; "une activité uniquement négatrice" (89).

¹⁴ "un schéma historico-racial"; "l'autre, le Blanc, qui m'avait tissé de mille détails, anecdotes, récits" (90).

¹⁵ "J'étais tout à la fois responsable de mon corps, responsable de ma race, de mes ancêtres. Je promenai sur moi un regard objectif, découvris ma noirceur, mes caractères ethniques" (90).

¹⁶ Note that *Native Son* parallels (and perhaps anticipates) Sartre's concept of the gaze, described in *Being and Nothingness*. Fanon draws on both sources.

Max speaks of Bigger in organic metaphors as a new and distinct species. Yet there are dangers in defining human types through the myth of organic identity—a variant biology with its natural "rights, needs, and aspirations." Wright knew this from his experience with Southern whites and from accounts of Nazi anti-Semitism. Max sees in Bigger's crimes a dialectical movement of consciousness, a "sudden and violent rent in the veil behind which he lived, a rent which allowed his feelings of resentment and estrangement to leap forth and find objective and concrete form" (813). Viewed in Marxist terms this suggests, tragically and parodically, that murder and rape are the "labor" by which Bigger seeks to recognize himself in objective reality and achieve self-consciousness.¹⁷ Crushed by the oppressive forces of society, he transforms the objects of desire into dismembered things, like himself. As Wright argues in the essay "How Bigger Was Born," the world that created Bigger was "a world whose limited area and vision imperiously urged men to satisfy their organisms, a world that existed on a plane of animal sensation alone" (866).

Bigger Thomas lives in the black community of Chicago's South Side, where he confronts the underside of modern capitalism: poverty, racism, unemployment, housing shortages, restlessness, and crime. Struggling for control of this dispossessed corner of the world are ruthless landlords, philanthropists, relief agencies, preachers, politicians, racist mobs, labor unions, and Communists. Bigger must also contend with inner tensions as his surging desires meet the white myths of the surrounding culture. His mind swirls with robbery schemes, movie images of rich white women, and stories of lynching. Trapped by his terror of white people and their hatred and incomprehension of him, Bigger sees the world through a hazy veil.

Native Son unfolds from a basic premise: in the modern world, one cannot grasp

¹⁷ For discussion of the confusion of violence with Marx's concept of labor, see Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* 113-16.

the complex whole or the lived experience of others.¹⁸ When they come face to face, Wright's characters are fumbling, obtuse, racist, or explosively violent. Mary Dalton says wistfully, riding with Bigger and Jan through the South Side, "We know so *little* about each other. I just want to *see*. I want to *know* these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we live. They're *human*. . . ." (510; ellipsis in original). Yet Mary's vague humanism cannot dispel her ignorance of Chicago's black population. By contrast, Bigger has entered the strange and menacing Dalton home, as the new chauffeur, yet he wants to blot out whatever disturbs him there. Although he has seen newsreel footage of Mary, offered up as an object of fantasy to movie audiences,¹⁹ her actual presence fills him with confusion and anger: "On the screen she was not dangerous and his mind could do with her as it liked. But here at home she walked over everything, put herself in the way" (496). Mary and Bigger perceive each other through hazy fantasies and fears.

Unable to construct an objective knowledge of 1930s Chicago, Mary and Bigger rely on superstitious notions to understand the modern city and each other. Mr. Max cannot grasp Bigger's existential experience, either, despite a sophisticated analysis of economic and social forces; though the two men share a brief rapprochement, Bigger finally eludes Max. After Max talks to him for the first time, Bigger has a vision of belonging to a common humanity that supersedes race: "he was standing in the midst of

¹⁸ This point is developed by both Burgum and Nagel.

¹⁹ At the request of Book-of-the-Month Club, Wright rewrote or censored several scenes for the 1940 edition; these changes continued to appear in all editions prior to 1991, when the Library of America published the restored text. Wright rewrote the scene in the movie theater (472-77; 1940 ed. 27-32), eliminating the section in which Bigger and Jack masturbate and replacing the description of newsreel footage of Mary Dalton with the lengthy description of a feature film, *The Gay Woman*. Wright also removed several sentences of explicit sexual description from the scene in Mary's bedroom just prior to the murder (524; 1940 ed. 80), and he revised the scene in which Bigger rapes Bessie to exclude the most explicit passages (664; 1940 ed. 217-18).

a vast crowd of men, white men and black men and all men, and the sun's rays melted away the many differences, the colors, the clothes, and drew what was common and good up toward the sun" (784-85). Max's act of recognition has provoked a sudden and sentimental conversion by which Bigger senses that he exists "in relation to other men, a thing he had always feared to do, so deeply stained was his own mind with the hate of others for him" (783). Having been sentenced to death, he wants to go deeper into this new feeling and learn what he is in relation to others.

Yet the bond with Max breaks during their final meeting. As Bigger prepares for death, he searches in anguish for a common human response, "ground beneath his feet" (783), only to hear Max confirm the old fears and hatreds that have led him to murder. In a desperate plea Bigger tells Max, "'I never wanted to hurt nobody,'" and "'I'll b-b-be feeling inside of me like I was crying. . . . I'll be feeling and thinking that they didn't see me and I didn't see them. . . .'" (845; ellipsis in original). He stammers a fantasy of remorse and recognition, the last hope of a man sentenced to death by his fellow men:

"Mr. Max, I know the folks who sent me here to die hated me; I know that. B-b-but you reckon th-they was like m-me, trying to g-get something like I was, and when I'm dead and gone they'll be saying like I'm saying now that they didn't mean to hurt nobody . . . th-that they was t-trying to get something, too. . . ." (846; ellipsis in original)

Remorse has no meaning without an answering consciousness beyond the electric present that awaits. In Norman Mailer's "The White Negro," the "electric present" (342) designates a romantic and primitivist notion of the condition of the Negro or hipster as pathological rebel. Yet for Bigger such an image is terrifyingly real:

If he reached out with his hands, and if his hands were electric wires, and if his heart were a battery giving life and fire to those hands, and if he reached out with his hands and touched other people, reached out through these stone walls and felt other hands connected with other hearts—if he did that, would there be a reply,

a shock? (784)

Here as throughout the novel, Bigger's need has fused with the world's harsh reply—the shock of recognition becomes the shock of execution. Max refuses Bigger's fantasy of recognition and remorse from his enemies, the whites who clamor for his death, and responds instead with a vision of class struggle, oppressed against oppressor. He urges Bigger to believe in himself and die free of the burden of how others have seen him (848).

Yet Bigger cannot recognize himself in Max's political sermon, except through the hatred he has always felt. He grasps instead at the words of Jan Erlone, who has refused to condemn him for the murder of Mary. Jan has told Bigger that he must have thought he was "settling something," or he wouldn't have killed (715). Now Bigger remembers these words in a desperate attempt to wring recognition from them again:

"What I killed for must've been good!" Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. "It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something" (849).

Max has not saved Bigger's life, nor does his ideology acknowledge the central narrative controlling Bigger's fate: racial taboos and the lynching of black men. Bigger's alienation and sullen anger reassert themselves, and he chases Max from the cell: "'Mr. Max, you go home. I'm all right. . . . I ain't trying to forgive nobody and I ain't asking for nobody to forgive me. I ain't going to cry" (849).

Although Jan has loved Mary and suffers by her death, he refuses to condemn Bigger for the murder. In the strange ethical universe of *Native Son*, in what James Baldwin has termed a "lamentable scene" ("Many Thousands Gone" 76), Jan grants a limited form of recognition, proposing to trade one group of victims for another. The horror of collective guilt falls on Mary, a white woman and class enemy; her death should not be avenged but stand as atonement for crimes against the black man—or so Jan says.

Throughout the novel, the murders of Mary and then Bessie, his own girlfriend, have been presented only from Bigger's perspective. He responds to the murders as disasters that have befallen *him*. His trauma is not that he has murdered, but that he has broken the most harshly defended of white taboos. No wonder that Bigger calls on Jan as Max retreats from his cell: "Tell. . . . Tell Mister. . . . Tell Jan hello. . . ." (850; ellipsis in original). The sulphurous atmosphere of *Native Son* comes from Wright's probing of the problem of other minds through a stubborn focus on one consciousness alone—that of Bigger Thomas.

Max's ideology cannot meet the challenge of coordinating social and political ideas with the subjective experience of Bigger. In Wright's view, the Communist Party was facing a similar problem. Fredric Jameson has argued that in postmodernity, or the world system of late capitalism, the production of "functioning and living ideologies" is in crisis and may not be possible at all (53). Quoting Althusser, Jameson defines the function of ideology as "the representation of the subject's *Imaginary* relationship to his or her *Real* conditions of existence" (Jameson 51). As Jameson observes, this formula designates "a gap, a rift, between existential experience and scientific knowledge" (53); the function of ideology is to coordinate these two dimensions with each other. In the world of *Native Son*, as in postmodernity as Jameson describes it, the invention of a functioning ideology has become impossible. In the final scene, Bigger struggles to compare what he feels with the abstract arguments of Max. The dissonance of Bigger's final outburst, "'what I killed for, I *am*!'" (849), marks a frustrated explosion—a new ideology, perhaps, and a disastrous one. The failure of ideology, its descent into delusion and fantasy, determines the fundamental alienation of Wright's characters.

Wright himself would resist the postmodern pull of his disillusionment with the Communist Party and its blundering approach to "the Bigger Thomases" by taking up

existentialism and psychoanalysis, grand narratives of the postwar era. However, a significant number of critics have resisted the ideological *aporia* of *Native Son* by recuperating Bigger Thomas for a narrative of black revolt.²⁰ C.L.R. James was among the first reviewers to interpret Bigger as a figure for the black revolution; he later wrote *The Black Jacobins*, an important study of the Haitian revolution. He and Wright became friends during the early 1940s (Rowley 267), and his wife, Constance Webb, wrote the first biography of Wright. Published in *The New Internationalist* in May 1940, James's review of *Native Son* argues that the career of Bigger Thomas is "a symbol and prototype of the Negro masses in the proletarian revolution" (49). In developing this view, James plays on the ambiguity between the black and proletarian revolutions, slyly suggesting that they are one and the same. First he describes a black revolution that would seem to foreclose any form of interracial solidarity. If Southern society disintegrates, if it "ever goes to pieces," then:

wherever the Negroes outnumber the whites, we shall see some of the bloodiest massacres that this continent has known. Whoever doubts this should study the slave revolt of Spartacus, and the black revolt in San Domingo: the end of the San Domingo revolt was the complete annihilation of the white population. (50)

Since a massacre of such scale would be unlikely in the American South, James presumably intends a threat or warning, or perhaps he seeks to appeal to the fantasies of some of his readers. Yet he also argues that the white proletariat of the North could intervene to shape the revolt of Southern blacks into a struggle of blacks and poor whites against a common enemy. In this second scenario, he refers to "social disintegration in the South driving blacks and poor whites closer together" (50). Which of these two contradictory roads does James predict for the South—annihilation of the whites or class solidarity among the poor of both races? He doesn't say.

²⁰ See, for example, James, Siegel, and Skerret.

When James turns to a discussion of Bigger Thomas, a new factor enters the scene, and that is the psychology of the oppressed. Although Bigger kills Mary Dalton by accident, his acceptance of "full responsibility" for the murder is "a revolutionary act." He must now struggle against the white world, and "in this conflict he finds himself. . . . To scheme, to plan, to fight—this is to be free." James continues:

Men, personalities, will be freed from the centuries of chains and shame, as Bigger's personality was freed, by violent action against their tyrants. It is on the evening after the battle, with smoking rifle and dripping bayonet, that the Negro will be able to look all white men in the face, will be able to respect himself and be respected. (50)

James proposes that changes in psychology would follow from struggle and the seizure of power, freeing the oppressed from centuries of shame and creating a new consciousness. Once again, however, he plays on the ambiguity between the black and proletarian revolutions when he observes that Bigger attains "the highest stage of his development" in prison, where he learns that the white Communists Max and Jan are his friends. Yet, as this implies, Bigger gropes toward a new consciousness less through struggle against the white world than in the desperation of defeat, as he faces death. James's reading of *Native Son* through a paradigm of revolution depends on a political and psychological paradox. If the black revolution is successful, then after the battle the black man, "with smoking rifle and dripping bayonet," will look into the faces of poor whites whose friends, neighbors, and families he has murdered. Where the white Communist Jan has shown solidarity with Bigger after his capture, these poor whites will feel only hatred. Jan's implausible forgiveness depends on the unusual circumstance that his slain lover, Mary Dalton, is a daughter of the ruling class. As he says to Bigger, "You thought you were settling something, or you wouldn't've killed." (714-15). Can the same be said of the murder of Bessie Mears?

Indeed, the rape and murder of Bessie reveal even more starkly the political contradictions of James's reading. For James as for Fanon, the organization and self-consciousness of the dispossessed will be achieved through their participation in the revolution and all that is necessary to its successful outcome. James admits that some of the dispossessed—Bessie, for example—must be sacrificed to the struggle: "He couldn't leave Bessie behind, and he couldn't take her. Therefore he had to destroy her" (51). This pitiless comment nowhere acknowledges that Wright portrays the murder of Bessie not as an expedient act of self-preservation, but as a brutal rape and murder. Wright endorsed coercive methods where they served to enlarge, in his words, the "islands of the rational"—for example, through the forced modernization of newly independent countries in Africa and Asia (*White Man, Listen!* 99).²¹ However, he describes the murder of Bessie in a scene loaded with senseless and brutal violence. As in other scenes of Bigger's violence, his mind is submerged in tensions and fantasies arising from the refusal of his desires by a harsh and hostile world. He relieves his tensions by striking out blindly. First there is the rape by which he blots out Bessie's personality and smothers her voice:

His cold fingers touched her warm flesh, and sought still warmer and softer flesh. Bessie was still, unresisting, without response. His icy fingers touched inside of her and at once she spoke, not a word, but a sound that gave forth a meaning of horror accepted. Her breath went out of her lungs in long soft gasps that turned to a

²¹ For Wright's views on superstition, decolonization, and modernization, see *White Man, Listen!* and *Black Power*. I address these issues in more detail in Chapter 3. It should be noted that Wright's views do not adequately acknowledge the irrationality—and utter inhumanity—of Soviet methods of "modernization." These include the use of mass deportations and vast networks of concentration camps, as well as agricultural requisitioning and collectivization that led to severe famines (Courtois et al.). Admittedly, Soviet policies were poorly understood in the West during Wright's lifetime, although some eyewitness accounts were certainly available. Wright argues in *White Man, Listen!* that such coercion is no worse than the methods used by the West in its own process of modernization and may be necessary to assure the independence of newly decolonized nations.

whisper of pleading.

"Bigger. . . . *Don't!*"

Her voice came to him now from out of a deep, far-away silence and he paid her no heed. The loud demand of the tensility of his own body was a voice that drowned out hers. . . . He was conscious of nothing now but her and what he wanted. . . . He heard her give a soft moan that seemed not to end even when she breathed in or out; a moan which he heard, too, from far away and without heeding. (664)²²

A short time later, Bigger crushes Bessie's skull with a brick. In his frenzy and confusion of motive, he forgets to take a wad of money from Bessie's pocket before he dumps her body down an air shaft. And then there is the final revelation that she did not die quickly of the blows, but froze to death trying to climb out of her prison. Apparently, something beyond the lessons of scheming, planning, and fighting is needed to make a viable cadre out of Bigger Thomas or to transform his alienation into a relation to the world.

Fanon became a central figure in such interpretations after the publication of *The Wretched of the Earth*, in 1963.²³ Fanon there argued that the alienation of colonized consciousness could be purged by the violent overthrow and expulsion of the colonial regime. However, *Black Skin, White Masks* attributed a more fatalistic sense to Bigger's violence:

No one yet knows who he is, but he knows that fear will inhabit the world when the world knows. And when the world knows, the world always awaits something from the black man. . . . In the end, Bigger acts. To put an end to his tension, he acts, he responds

²² See n19. At the request of Book-of-the-Month Club, Wright revised the first three sentences of this passage to read as follows: "He was swept by a sudden gust of passion and his arms tightened about her. Bessie was still, inert, unresisting, without response. He kissed her again and at once she spoke, not a word, but a resigned and prolonged sound that gave forth a meaning of horror accepted" (1940 ed. 217).

²³ This work was first published as *Les damnés de la terre* in 1961. Fanon's theory of revolution builds on his psychiatric work with North Africans in France and Algeria, which made him aware of the role of social dislocation in mental illness. For a discussion of Fanon's psychiatric practice and writings, see Macey.

to the world's anticipation. (139)²⁴

Bigger's course of action lacks existential openness because it is foreclosed on all sides by fear. The world regards him always already as a murderer and a rapist; committing murder and rape, he embraces the fate that awaits the black man.

In *Native Son*, events are narrated from the perspective of Bigger, though his fate intersects with, and blots out, the lives of other people. The smothering of the woman's breath or cry reveals the full horror of Bigger's relation to the world and his suffocating imprisonment within his own skin. The world doubts Bigger's humanity, and he has absorbed its skepticism into his very being, in a confused and angry sense that he is "guilty, condemned" (491) before Mr. Dalton, and that his body is "the badge of shame that he knew was attached to a black skin" (508). Nor does Bigger see others as human; he blots them out of his mind before he assaults them in fact; and his fantasies, which are distorted by racial taboos, explode on Gus, Mary, and Bessie. C.L.R. James and other critics who claim Bigger for the revolution miss the psychological problem as Wright conceives it.

There is some irony in the fact that Bigger Thomas is repeatedly described as

²⁴ "On ne sait pas encore qui il est, mais il sait que la peur habitera le monde quand le monde saura. Et quand le monde sait, le monde attend toujours quelque chose du nègre. . . . A la fin, Bigger Thomas agit. Pour mettre fin à la tension, il agit, il répond à l'attente du monde" (113).

"hysterical."²⁵ *Hysteria* is characterized by "emotional excitability, excessive anxiety, sensory and motor disturbances, and the simulation of organic disorders" ("Hysteria," def. 1). Moreover, it has always been regarded as a women's disease.²⁶ Yet Bigger is commonly seen as unambiguously masculine. Eldridge Cleaver writes with approval that "the men in Wright's books, albeit shackled with a form of impotence, were strongly heterosexual. . . . And Bigger Thomas, Wright's greatest creation, was a man in violent, though inept, rebellion against the stifling, murderous, totalitarian white world" (106). Cleaver has chosen Bigger as the masculine alternative to James Baldwin and his creation, Rufus Scott, but something is awry in his description. One pauses to ask: why impotent? or inept?

Ralph Ellison observes that hysteria, defined as the physical expression of stifled intellectual energy, is one response to black Southern life. New modes of expression arise among blacks in the North, where "energies are released and given *intellectual* channelization—energies which in most Negroes in the South have been forced to take either a *physical* form or, as with potentially intellectual types like Wright, to be expressed as nervous tension, anxiety and hysteria" ("Richard Wright's Blues" 88).

Moreover, since in Wright's time Southern blacks were forbidden the use of violence, at

²⁵ References to Bigger's hysteria occur in the following scenes: Bigger crushes the rat, "cursing hysterically" (450); he feels "hysterical tensity" and "hysteria" while planning the robbery of Blum's store (468, 471); he laughs "hysterically" after kicking Gus to the ground (479); he is seized by a "hysterical terror" when Mrs. Dalton enters Mary's bedroom (524); he pauses, "hysterical," after failing to decapitate Mary's body with a knife (532); his voice is "tense and hysterical" when Jan confronts him on the street him after the murder of Mary (605); he is "full of hysteria" after a newsman looks into the furnace (638); words "boiled hysterically out of him" at the preacher (762); his "hysteria" passes (763); he responds "hysterically" when Max asks him to appear on the witness stand (789); he grows "hysterical" during his last conversation with Max (845). Max refers to the "hysteria" of the mob (797, 807, 809), and he describes both Bigger and the mob as "hysterical" (811).

²⁶ The word derives from the Greek *hystera*, or womb, while *hysterical* derives from the Greek *hysterikos* and Latin *hystericus*, a suffering in the womb ("Hysteria"; "Hysterical").

least against whites, they had restricted channels even for physical expression. Simone de Beauvoir argues that Southern blacks were forbidden the "conquering actions" of the dominant caste, and "this command is the key to mysterious 'black soul'; the way the Negro feels in the white world, . . . his whole way of feeling and acting are to be explained on the basis of the passivity to which he is condemned" (330-31).²⁷ Among blacks, however, an apprenticeship in violence is possible, as long as other blacks remain the targets of aggression. These two warring impulses within one body—the harsh smothering of anger and frustration, and explosive aggression toward other blacks—form the double consciousness of Bigger Thomas. They determine the tense hysteria of his responses, the ineptness of his revolt.

Freud uses the term "conversion hysteria" to designate psychosomatic symptoms. He interprets them as signifying a combined wish and prohibition and stipulates that "whatever case and whatever symptom we take as our starting-point, *in the end we infallibly come to the realm of sexual experience*" ("Aetiology of Hysteria" 183). Although Bigger Thomas does embody the fundamental antagonism of wish and prohibition, the sources of the clashing energies within him are not inevitably sexual and familial, as Freud contends, but are imbibed from the racial structure of the surrounding society. Bigger's arousal and terror during the crucial scene in Mary Dalton's bedroom have no obvious reference to a putative Oedipus complex and everything to do with sexual taboos regarding white women, movie images offering them up for consumption, and reports of lynching. This is one of the major innovations in Wright's use of Freudian

²⁷ "conduites conquérants"; "c'est cette consigne qui est la clé de la mystérieuse 'âme noire'; la façon dont le Noir s'éprouve dans le monde blanc, . . . toute sa manière de sentir et d'agir s'expliquent à partir de la passivité à laquelle il est condamné" (*Deuxième sexe* II 92-93). Parshley translates "conduites conquérants" as "*competitive attitude*" (*Second Sex* 330).

theory.²⁸

Bigger's hysteria typically appears in the form of emotional excitability—for example, when he crushes the rat, "cursing hysterically" (450), and when Jan confronts him on the street after the murder of Mary and his voice becomes "tense and hysterical" (605). He also suffers an incipient conversion symptom in the form of tension and burning in the solar plexus, seat of the body's vital energies. His explosive violence serves to release the energies that are warring in his body before they become fully somatic. Arising from Bigger's situation as a black man conditioned by a childhood in Mississippi and migration to Chicago's South Side, the pressure and burning he feels suggests a furnace or steam engine, the confinement of energy in too small a space. When he smothers Mary Dalton, in an act patterned on his desperate suppression of inner energies, the warring forces inside him leap forth into the world. The smoldering fires of his inner core find an analogue in the furnace in the Dalton basement, in which he burns her body in an effort to vaporize evidence of the murder.

The nature of the forces warring within Bigger is established in an early scene. Standing on a street corner with his friend Gus, Bigger watches the planes flying overhead and knows he cannot fly them because he is black. He protests that being black is "just like living in jail" and then adds an ominous warning: "'Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me. . . .'" (463; ellipsis in original). The

²⁸ However, psychoanalyst Frederic Wertham later analyzed this scene with Wright, concluding that it represents Oedipal desire for the mother and matricidal wishes; see "An Unconscious Determinant in 'Native Son'." Wright apparently accepted this interpretation. The only critical commentary on Wertham's theory is Tate, "Rage, Race, and Desire"; unfortunately, Tate accepts Wertham's analysis as fact. In my view, the Wright-Wertham collaboration deserves further research, since it documents the influence of psychoanalysis on Wright's construction of male identity in *Black Boy* and later works; however, Wertham's analysis of Wright's unconscious remains hypothesis rather than fact.

foreboding signals Bigger's submission to the alien forces that have surrounded and invaded him, as in Freud's image of the super-ego as "a garrison in a conquered city" (*Civilization* 71). Freud's metaphor for the super-ego had a good deal of circulation among black writers with an interest in psychoanalysis. René Ménéil, co-editor with Aimé Césaire of the Martinican journal *Tropiques*, revised Freud's image to describe the psychology of colonized people; Fanon later quoted this passage from Ménéil's essay (*Black Skin, White Masks* 145).²⁹ Bigger's struggle against the alien forces within is expressed in physical symptoms. Admiring the freedom of a city pigeon, Bigger says to Gus, "I reckon we the only things in this city that can't go where we want to go and do what we want to do," and then he adds, "You know where the white folks live?"

Bigger doubled his fist and struck his solar plexus.
 "Right down here in my stomach," he said.
 Gus looked at Bigger searchingly, then away, as though
 ashamed.
 "Yeah; I know what you mean," he whispered.
 "Every time I think of 'em, I *feel* 'em," Bigger said.
 "Yeah; and in your chest and throat, too," Gus said.
 "It's like fire."
 "And sometimes you can't hardly breathe. . . ."
 Bigger's eyes were wide and placid, gazing into space.
 "That's when I feel like something awful's going to happen
 to me. . . ." Bigger paused, narrowed his eyes. "Naw; it ain't like
 something going to happen to me. It's. . . . It's like I was going to
 do something I can't help. . . ." (464-65; ellipsis in original)

The references to intrusion, suffocation, compressed heat, and fire set up the psychological argument of the novel as well as its action and imagery. The constrictions and threats shaping Bigger's life have become an inner presence opposing his desire, and the combustion of these warring forces is felt in physical symptoms and tensions demanding discharge. The vague foreboding that arises from his sense of inner conflict

²⁹ Ménéil 132; and Fanon, *Peau noire* 118. Fanon borrowed the Ménéil quotation from Leiris, "Martinique, Guadeloupe, Haïti."

bursts forth as hard fact when he smothers Mary. The event is thrust on him from within and without, a deadly union with the hostile world. At first, he does not recognize the murder as something *he* has done; rather, he is aware only of the world's response, the terror that overcomes him as he imagines a white mob. Later, he will recover a sense of agency by seizing on the murder as an inner essence, an expression of will, that has torn the veil separating him from the world. Once in jail, however, he comes to understand this as a delusion.

Through his fear of the white world, Bigger responds with violence to other blacks, on whom he discharges the tensions that must remain suppressed in the presence of whites. During the scene in the pool room, as Bigger and his friends argue about whether to rob Blum's store, Bigger struggles to manage his fear of robbing a white man. Gus is the final hold-out, and as Bigger awaits the decision he feels the familiar sensation of tension and burning in his stomach:

the fear that Gus would really go made the muscles of Bigger's stomach tighten; he was hot all over. He felt as if he wanted to sneeze and could not; only it was more nervous than wanting to sneeze. He grew hotter, tighter; his nerves were taut and his teeth were on edge. He felt that something would soon snap within him. (468)

These are the sensations described earlier by Bigger and Gus: tension in the stomach, chest, and throat, like fire, as though an invader lived inside them. Bigger is now gripped by a terror of violating white taboos; his fear of Gus is a fear of whites:

He had argued all of his pals but one into consenting to the robbery, and toward the lone man who held out he felt a hot hate and fear; *he had transferred his fear of the whites to Gus*. He hated Gus because he knew that Gus was afraid, as even he was; and he feared Gus because he felt that Gus would consent and then he would be compelled to go through with the robbery. (468; emphasis added)

The description of Bigger's feelings is precise, even clinical. Such psychological

probing distinguishes Wright as a realist from Hemingway, who avoids analytic comments on the inner lives of his characters. Wright describes Bigger's agony:

Like a man about to shoot himself and dreading to shoot and yet knowing that he has to shoot and feeling it all at once and powerfully, he watched Gus and waited for him to say yes. He edged toward Gus, not looking at Gus, but feeling the presence of Gus over all his body, through him, in and out of him, and hating himself and Gus because he felt it. Then he could not stand it any longer. The hysterical tensivity of his nerves urged him to speak, to free himself. (468)

As Bigger's tension is prolonged beyond endurance, he feels compelled to ease it by assaulting Gus. The scenes with Gus set the pattern for Bigger's response to the white as well as the black worlds. In fear, and sensing Gus "over all his body, through him, in and out of him," Bigger is driven to discharge his tension and "drain off his energies" (471), first by provoking an argument with Gus, and then by going to the movies, where he masturbates. Later, as the four young men gather for the robbery, Bigger assaults Gus, kicking him to the ground and threatening him with a knife. Having wrecked the robbery scheme, Bigger is spared the danger of rebellion, and even the knowledge of his fear:

Like a man staring regretfully but hopelessly at the stump of a cut-off arm or leg, he knew that the fear of robbing a white man had had hold of him when he started that fight with Gus; but he knew it in a way that kept it from coming to his mind in the form of a hard and sharp idea. . . . his courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness. He had fought Gus because Gus was late; that was the reason his emotions accepted and he did not try to justify himself in his own eyes, or in the eyes of the gang. (484)

Bigger understands himself and his actions through surface motives. The murder of Bessie follows a similar pattern, as Bigger conjures up a motive out of fear: "he had to stand here until that picture came back, that motive, that driving desire to escape the law. Yes. It *must* be this way. A sense of the white blur hovering near, of Mary burning, of

Britten, of the law tracking him down, came back. Again, he was ready" (667).

When he suffocates Mary Dalton, Bigger is unaware that he is murdering a human being, so consumed is he in choking off his movie-induced fantasy of union with a white woman. The murder is a physiological response occurring beyond his consciousness—neither wholly an accident nor a deliberate act whose motive can be discerned. Mary becomes an object of fantasy for Bigger in the movie theater, as he watches a newsreel of her and Jan on a Florida beach.³⁰ An announcer's voice identifies her as the daughter of the Daltons, the family that has agreed to hire him as a chauffeur. He begins to spin fantasies around her:

Maybe Mary Dalton was a hot kind of girl; maybe she spent lots of money; maybe she'd like to come to the South Side and see the sights sometimes. Or maybe she had a sweetheart and only he would know about it because he would have to drive her around; maybe she would give him money not to tell. (476)

At the movies, Bigger's imagination is not dampened by fear; there is no tension or fire in his chest, no feeling of suffocation. Yet later that afternoon he veers toward hysteria as he approaches the Dalton house, "feeling constricted inside. All he had felt in the movie was gone; only fear and emptiness filled him now" (486). The interior of the house appears menacing: "dim lights burned round him; strange objects challenged him; and he was feeling angry and uncomfortable" (487). Confronted by Mr. Dalton's gaze, Bigger feels "conscious of every square inch of skin on his black body" (488), so that he wants "to wave his hand and blot out the white man who was making him feel this. If not that, he wanted to blot himself out" (489). Mary appears, and he discovers with anger that she is not as pliable as she seemed on the screen: "On the screen she was not dangerous and his mind could do with her as it liked" (496). But her presence gets in his way. He is smothered by tangled and contradictory feelings: rage, when he senses himself as
³⁰ See n19. In the 1940 Book-of-the-Month Club version of *Native Son*, there is no description of newsreel footage of Mary Dalton.

despised black skin; fear, when Mary asks whether he belongs to a union; and a "guarded feeling of freedom," when she responds to him "as if he were human, as if he lived in the same world as she" (506).

As Bigger chauffeurs Mary and Jan, they make patronizing efforts to connect with him, but he is frozen by anger, fear, and confusion. Later, Mary and Jan drink and make love in the back seat, and Bigger's fantasies begin to return. When they arrive back at the house, Mary is in a drunken stupor; she no longer seems human or threatening as Bigger carries her upstairs to her room. Yet her body offers a powerful stimulant:

His senses reeled from the scent of her hair and skin. She was much smaller than Bessie, his girl, but much softer. Her face was buried in his shoulder; his arms tightened about her. Her face turned slowly and he held his face still, waiting for her face to come round, in front of his. Then her head leaned backward, slowly, gently; it was as though she had given up. (524)

Bigger no longer senses the presence of white people or his fears. Standing in the bedroom with Mary in his arms, he perceives her as a figment of his dream: "He eased his hand, the fingers spread wide, up the center of her back and her face came toward him and her lips touched his, like something he had imagined" (524). Bigger holds Mary upright and brings her lips toward his, watching as her face looms toward him. Kissing her again, he feels her body "moving strongly" and concludes that Jan has slept with her "a lot" (524).³¹ With this thought, he becomes more insistent. He is submerged in fantasy that has the power to blot out everything but physical sensation and the lure of access to a tabooed woman. Even the censored Book-of-the-Month Club version conveys an atmosphere of rape. Ellison, who had commended *Native Son* in *New Masses* as "the first philosophical novel by an American Negro" ("Recent Negro Fiction": qtd. in Rowley 192), defended its crude sexual politics in less public forums. Having discussed

³¹ See n19. These last details were removed from the 1940 Book-of-the-Month Club version.

the novel with a group of white women, he comments to Wright in the following terms: "Spent the evening in a beautiful Village apartment patiently explaining to the nice, if insipid, bitches just why Bigger felt like laying Mary when he had a hand full of breast. They seemed fascinated by that part" (qtd. in Rowley 198). Perhaps the fascination was more on Ellison's part. In the 1960s, Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver pursued the confusion of rape with political revolt to its logical conclusion, defining the rape of white women as a political act (*Soul on Ice* 14). As Michele Wallace has argued, Bigger would become the model for a destructive form of Black Macho (55-57, 73).

However, before the scene between Bigger and Mary culminates in rape, fantasy meets once again with prohibition. Bigger's arousal turns to fear when Mrs. Dalton enters the room; they are one and the same stiffening:

He was aware only of her body now; his lips trembled. Then he stiffened. The door behind him had creaked.

He turned and a hysterical terror seized him, as though he were falling from a great height in a dream. A white blur was standing by the door, silent, ghostlike. It filled his eyes and gripped his body. (524)

The arrival in the room of Mrs. Dalton, blind and ghostlike, turns Bigger's desire into terror. The event is upon him; he cannot escape the room or the meaning of his presence there. In other scenes, the opposing wish and prohibition have tormented him with a feeling of burning and suffocation; now the clashing urges fill the room, compelling him to act. Bigger smothers Mary to prevent Mrs. Dalton from approaching the bed; he is so dominated by his "frenzy" (525) that he doesn't know that she has suffocated; she is a nightmare object that must be stifled, along with his desire, at any cost. Not until Mary has ceased to struggle can Bigger "see Mrs. Dalton plainly" (526); and only when Mrs. Dalton has left the room does he remember Mary, and discover that she is dead:

He looked at the shadowy bed and remembered Mary as some person he had not seen in a long time. She was still there. . . .

She's dead. . . .

The reality of the room fell from him; the vast city of white people that sprawled outside took its place. . . .

In the darkness his fear made live in him an element which he reckoned with as "them." (527)

Through the murder of Mary, the conflict between Bigger's fantasy and the opposing retribution ceases to be an internal force or symptom and becomes an event in the world, assuming the dimensions of plot. Much is visible now, thrust from Bigger's inner confusion back into the world of racial hatred in which it originated. Bigger has suffocated Mary, the sign of his transgressive desire. Yet her dead body remains, to be seen by all. In the grisly scene in the Dalton basement, Bigger works to vaporize her into fantasy once again and return her to the smoldering furnace inside his chest.

Bigger instantly recognizes the murder of Mary Dalton as a familiar story: a black man is hunted down and lynched by a white mob. The crime corresponds to the fate that he has always feared, the fate of the black man in the white world:

Though he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident. He was black and he had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killed her. That was what everybody would say anyhow, no matter what he said. (542)

There is a traumatic belatedness to his claim to murder and the identity it bestows, or perhaps inflicts, on him:

And in a certain sense he knew that the girl's death had not been accidental. He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim or circumstance to make visible or dramatic his will to kill. His crime seemed natural; he felt that all his life had been leading to something like this. It was no longer a matter of dumb wonder as to what would happen to him and his black skin; he knew now. (542)

Through the encounter with Mary, the myth by which Bigger has lived becomes a material event, leaving its trace on the world. The sudden sense of recognition endows

the mythic event with powerful emotional force, for Bigger has always sensed it as *his* situation in the world. He begins in a conscious way to enact the narrow plot of the black man. He claims the murders of Mary and, later, of Bessie as "the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes" (669-70). Although he cannot burst the prison of the white world, his plot has burst the veil of repression; he has become what he senses the world has always meant him to be.

Having murdered, Bigger is free of an internal burden of repression and feels an initial—and irrational—sense of elation. The internal veil of repression has been projected back into the world. The thought of the murder seems to shield him, forming:

a barrier of protection between him and the world he feared. He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him. . . . His crime was an anchor weighing him safely in time; it added to him a certain confidence which his gun and knife did not. He was outside of his family now, over and beyond them; they were incapable of even thinking that he had done such a deed. (542)

Bigger remains apart from the world, for he feels that he *alone* truly sees and exists, and he now feels free to blot out whatever annoys. Yet the scenes in which Bigger returns home after the murder expose the flaw in this fantasy. He is not unseen by his mother and brother, or by Bessie, all of whom who guess that something is wrong. Moreover, although Bigger wants to control the gaze and wield it against them, he does so by adopting a white perspective. Comparing his brother, Buddy, with Jan and Mr. Dalton, Bigger sees him as "aimless, lost, with no sharp or hard edges, like a chubby puppy" (544). He notes how different his sister is from Mary: "The very manner in which she sat showed a fear so deep as to be an organic part of her" (545). Finally, Bigger cannot guess how others see him; he too suffers from blindness, and it signals dangerous

solipsism rather than power.

Bigger's sense of having created a "new life" follows from the sudden change in his relation to the white world represented by access to the Dalton home. We are told that: "Gus and G.H. and Jack seemed far away to Bigger now, in another life, and all because he had been in Dalton's home for a few hours and had killed a white girl" (541). Having returned home after the murder, Bigger looks around the cramped room in which his family lives, compares it contemptuously with what he has seen at the Dalton home, and concludes:

He hated this room and all the people in it, including himself. Why did he and his folks have to live like this? What had they ever done? Perhaps they had not done anything. Maybe they had to live this way precisely because none of them in all their lives had ever done anything, right or wrong, that mattered much. (541)

Such passages led James Baldwin to argue that Bigger "does not redeem the pains of a despised people, but reveals, on the contrary, nothing more than his own fierce bitterness at having been born one of them" ("Many Thousands Gone" 75).

A job in the Dalton home and an accidental murder provoke a rupture with the past, creating the hallucinatory impression that "his whole life was caught up in a supreme and meaningful act" (552). Although such passages have been read as statements of Wright's political perspective, they express Bigger's fantasy. Much later, as he struggles with despair after signing a confession that fails to "link up his bare actions with what he had felt" (734), Bigger will come to distrust what the murders have made him feel:

Once before he had accepted completely what his life had made him feel, even unto murder. He had emptied the vessel which life had filled for him and found the emptying meaningless. Yet the vessel was full again, waiting to be poured out. But no! Not blindly this time! He felt that he could not move again unless he swung out from the base of his own feelings; he felt that he would

have to have light in order to act now. (736)

Wright refuses in advance Norman Mailer's concept of the "philosophical psychopath" or hipster, as defined in "The White Negro" (343). Mailer declares that Hip, the "affirmation of the barbarian," can overturn the appeal of authority and return us to ourselves (354). Mailer's hipster has chosen to live in a "Negro" mode, with death—as a psychopath and noble savage. In choosing to live with death, "one must be able to feel oneself—one must know one's desires" (341); raw emotions become the necessary guide. The hipster's reward is the knowledge that what happens at each moment of the "electric present" is good or bad for him alone and for his need (342). Through the career of Bigger Thomas, Wright throws doubt on the ugly solipsism of such a vision and on the faith that one can truly know one's desires. For a brief time, Bigger discovers meaning and identity in the accidental murder of Mary Dalton. He has not created this meaning, but merely suffered it.

(2)

Simone de Beauvoir comments in *The Prime of Life*¹ on her and Sartre's refusal of the concept of the unconscious during the 1930s:

One of our contradictions was our denial of the unconscious. Yet Gide, the surrealists, and, despite our resistance, Freud himself had convinced us that in every being there exists what André Breton called an *infracassable noyau de nuit*, an indestructible kernel of night, something that cannot pierce social routines or the commonplaces of language, but does, now and then, burst forth scandalously. In these explosions, some truth is always revealed, and we were especially moved by those that brought about an access of freedom. We set particular store by any upheaval that exposed the defects and hypocrisies of the bourgeoisie. (107-08).²

Apparently, Beauvoir's resistance to Freud did not prevent her from absorbing psychoanalytic concepts through the work of Breton and others. She adds: "I don't think surrealism had any direct influence on us, but it had impregnated the very air we breathed" (259).³ In France after 1914, psychoanalysis was disseminated by not only members of the psychoanalytic movement and physicians, but the surrealists (Roudinesco 3-34). Combining Freudian concepts with Marxism, the surrealists began the work of translating psychoanalysis and its powerful myths of the human psyche into new forms of art in which "chance becomes the moment when the habitual veil of repression is rent, allowing a true hidden order of things to surge forth" (Margaret Cohen 135). Surrealists

¹ The French edition was published in 1960; the English edition appeared in 1962.

² "Une de nos contradictions, c'est que nous nions l'inconscient; cependant Gide, les surréalistes et, malgré nos résistances, Freud lui-même, nous avaient convaincus qu'il existe en tout être un "infracassable noyau de nuit": quelque chose qui ne réussit à percer ni les routines sociales ni les lieux communs du langage mais qui parfois éclate, scandaleusement. Dans ces explosions, toujours une vérité se révèle, et nous trouvons bouleversantes celles qui délivrent une liberté. Nous accordions un prix particulier à toutes les turbulences qui mettaient à nu les tares et les hypocrisies bourgeoises" (*Force de l'âge* 150).

³ "Je ne crois pas que le surréalisme ait eu sur nous une influence directe; mais il avait imprégné l'air que nous respirions" (*Force de l'âge* 370).

proposed to use art to subvert bourgeois culture. Breton and Michel Leiris rejected the "insipid spectacles" of bourgeois art and argued that in the chance encounter, the unconscious enters the world, where it becomes "insurrection."⁴ Such concepts intrigued Beauvoir and, despite strong differences of style, show a conceptual continuity with Wright's American realist fusion of Marx and Freud. In each case, the gray area between psychology and sociology is explored by intellectuals advocating cultural as well as political change.

Breton and the French surrealists combined Marx and Freud, and they also drew on myths of the feminine and the African.⁵ As Freud had done, they represented the European unconscious through primitivist images centered on the figure of the child, the woman, and the native. Although psychoanalysis developed from Freud's interpretations of childhood and femininity, he made frequent use of colonial narratives, such as the following metaphor for the psychoanalytic method of analyzing hysterical symptoms:

Imagine that an explorer comes in his travels to a region of which but little is known and that there his interest is aroused by ruins showing remains of walls, fragments of pillars and of tablets with obliterated and illegible inscriptions. He may content himself with inspecting what lies there on the surface and with questioning the people who live near by, perhaps semi-barbaric natives, about what tradition tells of the history and meaning of these monumental remains, and taking notes of their statements—and then go his way. But he may proceed differently; he may have come equipped with picks, shovels and spades, and may press the inhabitants into his service and arm them with these tools, make an onslaught on the ruins, clear away the rubbish and, starting from the visible remains, may bring to light what is buried. If his work is crowned with success, the discoveries explain themselves; the ruined walls are part of the ramparts of a palace or a treasure-house, from the ruined pillars a temple can be constructed, the many inscriptions, which by good luck may be bilingual, reveal an alphabet and a

⁴ Michel Leiris, "Civilisation" *Documents* 4 (1929) (qtd. in Archer-Straw 142).

⁵ The representation of women in French surrealism is analyzed by Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*; for the connection between surrealism, anthropology, and *l'art nègre*, see Archer-Straw.

language, and when deciphered and translated may yield undreamed-of information about the events of the past, to commemorate which these monuments were built. *Saxa loquuntur!* ("Aetiology of Hysteria" 176-77)

In this elaborate metaphor, Freud equates the unconscious with archaeological ruins encountered by a European explorer. Since the traditions of "semi-barbaric" natives cannot, Freud assumes, be trusted to reveal the past commemorated by the ruins or their true purpose, the explorer learns to decipher the language of the stones themselves—*saxa loquuntur!* Freud argues that the psychoanalyst must learn to read the language of symptoms in a similar way, for they too were constructed to commemorate a personal past whose true meaning and history must be excavated from the unconscious and deciphered. Or as Freud concluded: *Sexus loquitur!* In the development of psychoanalysis, such a structure of knowledge was used to uncover what were presumed to be the repressed wishes of women and others defined as neurotic—the casualties of European modernity. Given such gaudy anthropological images, it is not surprising that French surrealists identified the unconscious with not only children and women but Africans. Michel Leiris and Georges Bataille, for example, who edited the journal *Documents* from 1929 to 1931, used images of Africa and *l'art nègre* to shock conventional taste. Leiris reprinted photographs of black leather masks, documenting the voodoo beliefs of Haiti, to accompany an essay on sexual violence, fetishism, disguise, and the masking of the self.⁶

Beauvoir analyzes Breton's myth of the feminine in *The Second Sex*, and, apart from some comments on jazz in *America Day by Day* (1948), her work avoids primitivist images of Africans.⁷ There are some connections between her refusal of each myth. She

⁶ *Documents* 8 (1930); the images were reprinted from William B. Seabrook's *Magic Island* (Archer-Straw 145).

⁷ See *The Second Sex* 231-37 (*Deuxième sexe* I 366-75); *America Day by Day* 221-27, 264-67 (*L'Amérique* 309-19; 366-70).

had chosen to reject many of the conventions of femininity, especially marriage and motherhood; and in the early planning of *The Second Sex*, she also adapted concepts from Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944), a massive work of sociology that included analyses of white American myths of the Negro. As a context for understanding this connection, however, let us examine more closely Beauvoir's comments in *The Prime of Life* on the *infracassable noyau de nuit*—the indestructible kernel of night.

Commenting on her outlook during the 1930s, Beauvoir recalls several sensational cases that were reported in the newspapers. One involved a young chemical engineer and his wife, "married for three years and very happy,"⁸ who brought home an unknown couple one night. Beauvoir asks: "to what orgies did they surrender? In the morning, the young couple committed suicide."⁹ Beauvoir observes that she and Sartre were surprised that "a passing aberration" could have led to such an explosive act.¹⁰ In her view, they lacked "daring" and were without proper theoretical tools to understand the dynamics of the chance encounter:

we have since learned from the psychoanalysts that a trauma does not release serious disorders unless an ensemble of circumstances has predisposed the subject in the direction which he finally takes. But we should not have consented to remain in perplexity; we should have rejected the newspaper clichés and, starting from the double suicide of the married couple, tried to imagine their true relations: the debauch that had preceded it was certainly not a simple accident. (108)¹¹

⁸ "mariés depuis trois ans et fort heureux" (*Force de l'âge* 151).

⁹ "à quelles orgies se livrèrent-ils? Au matin, le jeune ménage se donna la mort" (*Force de l'âge* 151).

¹⁰ "un égarement passager" (*Force de l'âge* 151).

¹¹ "nous avons appris depuis des psychanalystes que jamais un traumatisme ne déclenche de sérieux troubles sans qu'un ensemble de circonstances y ait prédisposé le sujet. Mais nous n'aurions pas dû nous en tenir à la perplexité; il fallait récuser les clichés des journaux et partir du double suicide des époux pour essayer d'imaginer leurs vrais rapports: la partouze qui l'avait précédé n'était certainement pas un simple accident" (*Force de l'âge* 151).

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir defines such an "ensemble of circumstances" in her analysis of women's sexual development—specifically, the girl's response to the onset of menstruation and sexual initiation.¹² However, whereas psychoanalysis traces the girl's often traumatic reactions to complications arising from the Oedipus complex, Beauvoir regards the traumatic effects of these events as arising from their significance for her sense of subjectivity and agency. Menstruation and sexual initiation constitute crises when they confirm the girl's suspicion that she is the Other, an inessential being to be dominated by her body and by the male; for as Beauvoir argues, "woman, like man, *is* her body; but her body is something other than herself" (29).¹³ The girl senses some of her otherness through her body, but she perceives much of it through her situation, which is determined by human civilization and conveyed through the "facts" of gender: woman's subordinate status in the family and society; prohibitions on her use of physical aggression; and the masochism taught by myths, fairy tales, and popular songs.

Beauvoir further comments on her interest in crimes and criminal trials, the most "dismal" of which "call into question the relation of the individual to society."¹⁴ When problems of the social order figured in the case, she and Sartre were "quick to sense mystifications."¹⁵ Unlike the suicide of the young couple, such crimes lent themselves to a social analysis that seemed at first to suffice for an explanation. Beauvoir comments on the trial of the Papin sisters, two maids convicted of murdering their mistress:

There was much that was responsible for what they were, their childhood orphanage and subsequent enslavement, the whole ghastly system, organized by respectable folk, for producing madmen, murderers, and monsters. The horror of this mill-like

¹² I argue this point in detail in Chapter 4.

¹³ "la femme, comme l'homme, *est* son corps: mais son corps est autre chose qu'elle" (*Deuxième sexe* 167).

¹⁴ "le plus morne met en question le rapport de l'individu à la collectivité" (*Force de l'âge* 151).

¹⁵ "prompts à flairer les mystifications" (*Force de l'âge* 151).

machine could not be justly denounced except by an exemplary horror: the two sisters had become both the instruments and the martyrs of a grim justice. (108)¹⁶

She and Sartre were once again baffled when they discovered that the crime could not be explained by rational motives:

The papers told us that they loved each other as lovers do, and we mused on their nights of caresses, and of hatred, in the desert of their attic room. Yet when we read accounts of the preliminary hearing we were distinctly shaken: the elder sister was, undeniably, suffering from acute paranoia, and the younger one was wedded to her delirium. We had been therefore wrong to regard their excesses as the savage unleashing of freedom; they had struck more or less blindly, in a state of terror and confusion. We could not bring ourselves to believe this, and we continued obstinately to admire them. (109)¹⁷

The Papin sisters were the models for Jean Genet's *The Maids*, a work of monotonous fantasy that undercuts any interpretation of their act as "the savage unleashing of freedom." Beauvoir, who had regarded their murder in such terms, concludes that it revealed more of madness than freedom. Although their act was the response of consciousness to a given situation that it sought to change or destroy, the motives of consciousness remained opaque, indecipherable, double-voiced—even to consciousness itself. As I have argued, deafness to Bigger Thomas's terror and confusion has led many readers to interpret him through the monologic language of revolt; in Wright's brilliant

¹⁶ "Il fallait en rendre responsable l'orphelinat de leur enfance, leur servage, tout cet affreux système à fabriquer des fous, des assassins, des monstres qu'ont agencé les gens de bien. L'horreur de cette machine broyeuse ne pouvait être équitablement dénoncée que par une horreur exemplaire: les deux soeurs s'étaient faites les instruments et les martyres d'une sombre justice" (*Force de l'âge* 152).

¹⁷ "Les journaux nous apprirent qu'elles s'aimaient d'amour, et nous rêvâmes à leurs nuits de caresses et de haine, dans le désert de leur mansarde. Cependant, quand nous lûmes les comptes rendus de l'instruction, nous fûmes déroutés; indéniablement, l'ainée était atteinte d'une paranoïa aiguë, et la cadette épousait son délire. Nous avions donc eu tort de voir dans leurs excès le sauvage déchaînement d'une liberté; elles avaient frappé plus ou moins à l'aveuglette, à travers des terreurs confuses; nous répugnions à le croire et nous continuâmes sourdement à les admirer" (*Force de l'âge* 152).

rendering, Bigger also regards the murders in this way, grasping them belatedly and through a haze of fear and need.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir contrasts Bigger's "revolt" with the girl's "complicity" in her oppression and its suggestion of both entanglement and complexity in relation to the other. The girl who has first sensed herself "as subject, autonomy, transcendence . . . the One" later discovers herself as otherness, characterized by "inferiority in the quality of a given essence."¹⁸ This happens when, "making her apprenticeship of the world, she seizes herself in the world as a woman"—as the Other.¹⁹ Ever aware of her contingency in relation to the male, the girl belongs to a sphere that is everywhere "enclosed, limited, and dominated by the male universe"; she cannot escape the presence of these "gods in human guise."²⁰ Man, in contrast to this, has assumed a secular consciousness that affirms his identity as the One. As Beauvoir argues, rather than rebelling against her gods, woman often consents to the feminine myth, worshipping the mysteries of love and motherhood. Although black Americans are also enclosed in a narrow universe of "gods in human guise," they assume a different attitude. Beauvoir proposes that the girl's situation:

is not unique. It is known to the American Negroes, partially integrated in a civilization that nevertheless considers them an inferior caste; what Bigger Thomas feels with such rancor at the dawn of his life is this definitive inferiority, this accursed alterity that is written in the color of his skin: he sees airplanes passing and he knows that because he is black, the sky is forbidden to him. The little girl knows that, as a woman, she is forbidden the sea and the polar regions, a thousand adventures, a thousand joys: she was born on the wrong side of the line. The great difference is that the Negroes suffer their fate in revolt: no privilege compensates for its

¹⁸ "comme sujet, autonomie, transcendance . . . comme l'Un"; "à titre d'essence donnée l'infériorité" (*Deuxième sexe II* 52).

¹⁹ "faisant l'apprentissage du monde elle s'y saisit comme une femme" (*Deuxième sexe II* 52).

²⁰ "enfermée, limitée, dominée par l'univers mâle"; "dieux à face humaine" (*Deuxième sexe II* 52).

harshness; whereas woman is invited to complicity. (297-98)²¹

The distinction here between revolt and complicity is too stark. Bigger certainly feels resentment and rancor, but his revolt emerges in distorted and deflected forms, and it includes the entanglements of identification and scapegoating. When offered inducements to complicity, he immediately begins to feel their lure: "Maybe Mary Dalton was a hot kind of girl . . . maybe she had a sweetheart and only he would know about it because he would have to drive her around; maybe she would give him money not to tell" (476). In a more elaborate example, *The Outsider's* Cross Damon becomes involved in a web of paranoid homosocial relations with a District Attorney and several men of the Communist Party.²² These murderous relations reveal his fascination with and loathing for the Communist leaders' control of the women and men below them in the Party hierarchy. Cross aspires to be a Hegelian master rather than slave to the "voluptuousness" of men like Party leader Gil Blount, whose life strategy is profoundly and intimately sadistic (267). Grasping after a form of white, working class masculinity, Cross abandons black communal revolt to struggle for manhood as the black son in an interracial Oedipal drama.

For Wright's black characters and for women, as Beauvoir describes them in *The Second Sex*, the modern project of freedom remains incomplete. Indeed, the problem

extends beyond these groups to society as a whole, pervaded by superstitious and

²¹ "n'est pas unique. C'est aussi celle que connaissent les Noirs d'Amérique, partiellement intégrés à une civilisation qui les considère comme une caste inférieure; ce que Big Thomas éprouve avec tant de rancœur à l'aurore de sa vie, c'est cette définitive infériorité, cette altérité maudite qui est inscrite dans la couleur de sa peau: il regarde passer des avions et il sait que parce qu'il est noir le ciel lui est défendu. Parce qu'elle est femme, la fillette sait que la mer et les pôles, que mille aventures, mille joies lui sont défendues: elle est née du mauvais côté. La grande différence, c'est que les Noirs subissent leur sort dans la révolte: aucun privilège n'en compense la dureté; tandis que la femme est invitée à la complicité" (*Deuxième sexe II* 52-53).

²² For a discussion of "paranoid homosocial" relations between men, see Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 83-117.

sexualized relations of power. The seeds of totalitarianism may be found in these same relations, which promise participation in the transcendence of the dominant group through a masochistic submission to it.

The conception and framework of *The Second Sex* build on implicit comparisons between the status of women and black Americans. Beauvoir arrived at these comparisons through observation of the United States, discussions with Wright and other Americans, and her reading of *An American Dilemma*. Published in 1944, Myrdal's work examines race relations in American society. As Beauvoir was completing work on *America Day by Day*, based on her travels in the United States from January through May 1947, she turned to Myrdal's book to supplement her observations of the South. Beauvoir praised Myrdal in a letter to Nelson Algren and commented that he makes "very interesting analogies" between the status of blacks and women, adding, "I felt it already" (*Transatlantic Affair* 113).²³ She included a summary of Myrdal's arguments in *America Day by Day* to inform French readers of "what seems crucial for accurately interpreting the impressions gathered during a journey like mine" (236).²⁴ Parts of this summary would reappear in the introduction to *The Second Sex*, mostly in passages suggesting comparisons among women, blacks, and Jews. There is a general resemblance, moreover, between the perspectives adopted in the two works, for Beauvoir revises Myrdal's framework of analysis, based in contemporary American trends in the anthropological and sociological study of race, by recasting it in the terms of existential philosophy and applying it to the analysis of gender. Several of Myrdal's premises

²³ Dated 1 December 1947, the letter confirms that Beauvoir introduced Algren to *American Dilemma*, not vice-versa; see Léon 65-66, 77n18.

²⁴ "ce qu'il me semble nécessaire de savoir pour interpréter correctement les impressions qu'on peut recueillir au cours d'un voyage comme le mien" (*L'Amérique* 327-28). The summary of Myrdal appears on pages 236-48 (*L'Amérique* 327-43).

proved useful to Beauvoir, specifically his claims that: the value premises of the researcher must be stated, since the analysis of social problems involves a choice of values or ethics; the attitude of the dominant group is decisive; and the subordination of black Americans has created moral contradictions, especially for whites, giving rise to ideological evasions and racial myths. Moreover, Myrdal proposes a sociological analysis of racial myths, arguing that: myths of black inferiority, though erroneous, must be treated as social facts because "when people define situations as real, they *are* real" (lxxiii); the low status of blacks results from "cumulative causation" or a "vicious circle" of myths and social facts (101); and racial myths have an irrational element deriving from magical forms of thought. Beauvoir adapts all of these arguments to a philosophical analysis of the status of women.

An American Dilemma was a collaborative research project funded by the Carnegie Corporation (Kepple; Myrdal li-lxii). Myrdal, a Swedish economist, headed the massive project and wrote the final manuscript. An outsider to American culture and race relations, he was chosen because he was assumed to have fewer preconceptions than an American scholar would have regarding racial problems in the United States. Myrdal comments on the position of an outsider who undertakes such a study:

Things look different, depending upon "where you stand" as the American expression runs. The author fully realizes, and hopes the reader will remember, that he has never been subject to the strains involved in living in a black-white society and never has had to become adjusted to such a situation—and that this condition was the very reason why he was asked to undertake the work.

As he, in this problem—to which he previously had given hardly a thought—was nearly stripped of all the familiar and conventional moorings of viewpoints and valuations, he had to construct for himself a system of coordinates. He found this in the American ideals of equality and liberty. (lx-lxi)

Myrdal approached work on *An American Dilemma* with a sense of aloofness from the

problems and pressures of a world structured by race. One may doubt whether such detachment is possible.²⁵ However, he acknowledges that research on social problems always proceeds from value premises and that the researcher must state these premises as the ground for a limited claim to objectivity. In a move common to many analyses of inequality in America, Myrdal proposes to use American ideals to assess the nation's race problem and plot a road map for resolving it.

There can be no outsiders to the problem of *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir asks: "how then shall we pose the question? And, to begin with, who are we to pose it? Men are judge and party to the case; so are women. Where shall we find an angel?" (xxxiii).²⁶ Nor does Beauvoir value complete detachment: "In truth, an angel would be poorly qualified to speak, knowing nothing of the given circumstances of the problem" (xxxiii).²⁷ She asks, "What is a woman?" from a position, rather, of embodiment. As Nancy Bauer argues, *The Second Sex* appropriates the philosophical skepticism of Descartes' *Meditations* to investigate "whether and how women exist. . . . I think of her as rewriting the *Meditations* from the point of view of someone who finds herself unable to doubt her existence as an embodied person in a world of other embodied people" (50). In *The Second Sex*, skeptical inquiry depends not on outsider status, as it does for Myrdal, or doubting of the senses and body, as for Descartes, but on Beauvoir's paradoxical doubting of "whether and how women exist," even as she recognizes that she *is* a woman. Beauvoir enacts a thoroughly existential form of skepticism in the oscillation between *being* and *becoming*, for she speaks as one whose being—designated as *woman*—is in the process of becoming something other than it is. Partly as a consequence of the

²⁵ See Southern for a survey of responses to *An American Dilemma*.

²⁶ "alors comment poserons-nous la question? Et d'abord qui sommes-nous pour la poser? Les hommes sont juge et partie: les femmes aussi. Où trouver un ange?" (*Deuxième sexe* I 29).

²⁷ "En vérité un ange serait mal qualifié pour parler, il ignorerait toutes les données du problème" (*Deuxième sexe* I 29).

contradictions inherent in her speaking position, Beauvoir has been censured for both writing as a voyeur, "far removed from the concerns of most women" (Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir* 383), and relying overly on personal experience. Michele Le Doeuff, for example, suggests that *The Second Sex* is autobiography written in "the mode of the universal":

there is no reason why any group of women should agree, unless it is structured around a guru who can impose her speech as the speech of women. When there is freedom of speech and everyone tells her own story, we discover a kind of liberating differentiation. Even those physical events assumed to be most similar in all women, biologically speaking, can be experienced in extremely different ways. When Beauvoir talks rather sadly about puberty, she is speaking for herself alone and the chapter on this issue in *The Second Sex* should be read in the light of the *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. She recounts her experience twice: once in the mode of the universal and once in that of an autobiographical narrative. Obviously for her it was a sad fate. (227).

Le Doeuff uses a central argument of *The Second Sex*—that a woman can live her body in different ways—to propose that the distressing aspects of Beauvoir's theory speak for Beauvoir alone. Yet *The Second Sex* is not a confession but a philosophical investigation of the situation of women in human culture. We may doubt the universal mode of its discourse without regarding it as autobiography. As the presence of women's words throughout the text suggest, and as Nancy K. Miller has argued, Beauvoir gathered testimony from women in France and the United States and wrote as a witness to the condition of women.²⁸ In claiming to speak as a modern woman whose human rights have been restored, Beauvoir does not arrogate the role of "guru" but, asserting her objectivity, attempts to establish her right to speak at all:

It appears to me that certain women are in the best position to elucidate the situation of woman. . . . Many of today's women, fortunate in the restoration of all the privileges of the human being,

²⁸ Personal communication (4 March 2003). See also Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir* 382-84.

can afford the luxury of impartiality—we even recognize its necessity. We are no longer combatants, like our elders; by and large we have won the game. . . . Many problems appear to us to be more pressing than those which concern us in particular, and this detachment even allows us to hope that our attitude will be objective. Still, we know the feminine world more intimately than do the men because we have our roots in it, we grasp more immediately than do men what it means to a human being to be feminine, and we are more concerned with such knowledge. (xxxiii-xxxiv)²⁹

Such a statement responds to the pressures of a woman philosopher's speaking position and counters the charge, "You think thus and so because you are a woman" (*Second Sex* xxi).³⁰ As Beauvoir argues, a man is regarded as the human type, a woman as particular; her only defense to such a charge is to reply, "'I think it because it is true,' thereby removing [her] subjectivity from the argument" (xxi).³¹ *The Second Sex* proposes another response, one that does not erase women's subjectivity but uses an abstract ethics based in existentialism as the value premise by which to investigate that subjectivity.

An American Dilemma was intended as a work of practical research to be used in the development of social policy. According to Myrdal, practical research involves "relating value judgments to factual situations and to actual trends of change and, from their combination, deriving scientific plans for policies" (1059). He formulates value

²⁹ "Je crois que pour élucider la situation de la femme, ce sont encore certaines femmes qui sont le mieux placées. . . . Beaucoup de femmes d'aujourd'hui, ayant eu la chance de se voir restituer tous les privilèges de l'être humain, peuvent s'offrir le luxe de l'impartialité; nous en éprouvons même le besoin. Nous ne sommes plus comme nos aînées des combattantes; en gros nous avons gagné la partie. . . . beaucoup de problèmes nous paraissent plus essentiels que ceux qui nous concernent singulièrement: ce détachement même nous permet d'espérer que notre attitude sera objective. Cependant nous connaissons plus intimement que les hommes le monde féminin parce que nous y avons nos racines; nous saisissons plus immédiatement ce que signifie pour un être humain le fait d'être féminin; et nous nous soucions davantage de le savoir" (*Deuxième sexe I* 29-30).

³⁰ "Vous pensez telle chose parce que vous êtes une femme" (*Deuxième sexe I* 14).

³¹ "'Je la pense parce qu'elle est vraie' éliminant par là ma subjectivité" (*Deuxième sexe I* 14).

premises for research on the status of blacks within American society, and he bases these premises on the "American Creed," as stated in the founding documents of the republic. Myrdal's inquiry into the judicial system, for example, presupposes that, "Negroes are entitled to justice equally with all other people" (526). With respect to black economic status he assumes, "There is nothing wrong with economic inequality by itself," yet "no American population group shall be allowed to fall under a certain minimum level of living," and "Negroes shall be awarded equal opportunities" (214). An example of Myrdal's use of such value premises to formulate practical proposals may be seen in the following statement on the racial attitudes of whites:

Assuming as our *value premise* that we want to reduce the bias in white people's racial beliefs concerning Negroes, our first practical conclusion is that we can effect this result to a degree by actually improving Negro status, Negro behavior, Negro characteristics. The impediment in the way of this strategy is, of course, that white beliefs, directly and indirectly, are active forces in keeping the Negroes low. We have already referred to this vicious circle.

A second line of strategy must be to rectify the ordinary white man's observations of Negro characteristics and inform him of the specific mistakes he is making in ascribing them wholesale to inborn racial traits. (109)

Myrdal grounds the value premises of his study of American race relations in the principles of the Constitution, but he also states that these values are "no American monopoly. . . . 'American ideals' are just humane ideals as they have matured in our common Western civilization" (25). Beauvoir, however, grounds her value premises in philosophical and supposedly universal concepts of the individual and her moral existence, without reference to the specific laws or institutions of any nation. *The Second Sex* proposes an ethics, a value premise, grounded in existentialism, a philosophy that evolved in Germany and France partly in response to the collapse of constitutional governments committed, even if only in principle, to fundamental human rights.

Beauvoir's choice of such untethered values arises from women's exclusion from *liberté, égalité, fraternité*—the French equivalent of democratic ideals—and from the national trauma of war, occupation, and continuing political instability. Not surprisingly, Beauvoir turns to philosophical, comparative, and abstract concepts of human consciousness and individual ethics. Moreover, she was writing at the dawn of an era of international institutions. She observes that, "the United Nations has consistently and urgently demanded that equality of the sexes become an achieved reality" (xxxiii).³² Yet in 1949 the U.N. was the only governmental body in the world to have made such demands, and it had no means of enforcement. There was no Carnegie Corporation support for research on the status of women, nor was there a government to which proposals could be directed. Beauvoir chose, reasonably enough in this institutional vacuum, to speak to the consciences of women themselves.

Beauvoir outlines her premises, having observed that it is impossible to treat any human problem "without preconceptions," since "there is no objective description, so called, that does not stand out from an ethical background" (xxxiv).³³ She writes:

we propose to judge institutions from the perspective of the concrete opportunities they give to individuals. . . . We adopt the perspective of existentialist ethics. Every subject posits herself concretely through projects as a transcendence; she achieves her freedom only by her perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; present existence has no justification other than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future. . . . The drama of woman is the conflict between the fundamental demand of every subject, who always posits herself as the essential, and the compulsions of a

³² "l'O.N.U. n'a cessé de réclamer impérieusement que l'égalité des sexes achève de se réaliser" (*Deuxième sexe* I 29).

³³ "sans parti pris"; "il n'est pas de description soi-disant objective qui ne s'enlève sur un arrière-plan éthique" (*Deuxième sexe* I 30).

situation that constitutes her as inessential. (xxxv)³⁴

As this suggests, *The Second Sex* focuses on the consciousness of the subordinate group—that is, on "the drama of woman," defined in Beauvoir's existentialist ethics as a conflict between the demands of the subject as transcendence and the constraints imposed by her situation as a woman. Contrastingly, Myrdal locates the decisive moral tensions within the dominant group, the whites, and proposes changes in public policy designed to strengthen the values of the American Creed and weaken the myths of black inferiority.

Myrdal asserts that "the Negro problem is predominantly a white man's problem," since whites have the power to impose their attitudes on reality. The problem is determined, moreover, by its "total American setting" (lxxvi-lxxvii). Myrdal interprets the racial attitudes of whites in terms of the "tension of suppressed moral conflicts" arising from the contradiction between declared American values and the past enslavement of blacks and continuing enforcement of segregation and inequality (37). According to Myrdal, whites have learned to circumvent this contradiction through various racial myths and "escape mechanisms" (40); Southern whites who deny that there is a racial problem are often self-deceiving rather than merely insincere. A similar denial by a black person, however, is "likely to be much more overt and, indeed, sometimes cynically so. It has not the same character of a self-deceiving defense construction against one's own moral feelings" (32). Myrdal

³⁴ "c'est du point de vue des chances concrètes données aux individus que nous jugeons les institutions. . . . La perspective que nous adoptons, c'est celle de la morale existentialiste. Tout sujet se pose concrètement à travers des projets comme une transcendance; il n'accomplit sa liberté que par son perpétuel dépassement vers d'autres libertés; il n'y a d'autre justification de l'existence présente que son expansion vers un avenir indéfiniment ouvert. . . . Le drame de la femme, c'est ce conflit entre la revendication fondamentale de tout sujet qui se pose toujours comme l'essentiel et les exigences d'une situation qui la constitue comme inessentielle" (*Deuxième sexe* I 30-31).

analyzes the psychological tensions underlying white attitudes, but he dismisses the responses of blacks as "secondary reactions to the more primary pressures from the side of the dominant white majority" (lxxv).

Myrdal's assumptions led him to regard the moral tension within whites as more relevant to his research than the psychological adjustment of blacks to a racist society. Such an approach has been challenged by decades of scholarship on black agency in slavery and after emancipation. In the late 1930s, however, psychological research on blacks was sparse and of doubtful validity. Limited to empirical research such as intelligence testing, it revealed little about subjective experience (*American Dilemma* 144-53). Unlike women, and perhaps fortunately so, blacks were not the objects of psychoanalytic theory or practice. The absence of psychological research mirrors the ignorance of the average white person who, Myrdal argues, was not aware of "such subtle influences as the denial of certain outlets for ambition, social disparagements, cultural isolation, and the early conditioning of the Negro child's mind by the caste situation, as factors molding the Negro's personality and behavior" (98). These are precisely the kinds of subtle influences whose effects on women are central to the argument of *The Second Sex*.

As one proof of the moral tension within whites, Myrdal refers to the system of rationalization used to justify black subordination. The foremost example is the dogma of biological inferiority. By the late 1930s, American social and biological sciences had come to regard psychological and most physiological characteristics as environmental rather than fixed biological traits. Beauvoir comments in *America Day by Day* on the paradigm shift away from biological explanations of racial differences, and in *The Second Sex* she goes on to apply the environmental theory to women. *America Day by Day* argues:

Generally, social and biological sciences today tend to view physiological and psychological variations as depending on the setting in which the individual develops, not on fixed hereditary factors. In the last twenty years there hasn't been a single serious work that dared to defend the prejudice, however convenient, of biological inferiority. (239)³⁵

The same argument reappears in a philosophical and comparative context in the introduction to *The Second Sex*, where Beauvoir observes:

The biological and social sciences no longer believe in the existence of immutably fixed entities that define given characteristics, such as those of woman, the Jew, or the Negro; they regard character as a secondary reaction to a *situation*. (xx)³⁶

The concept of *situation* renders Myrdal's sociological principles of "cumulative causation" or the "vicious circle" in the terms of Beauvoir's existential philosophy. In Myrdal's primary example of the vicious circle, he argues that although white perceptions of black inferiority are erroneous in biological terms, they must be treated as social facts because "when people define situations as real, they *are* real" (lxxiii). Despite the conclusions of science, Myrdal comments, many racists continue to declare that blacks *are* in fact inferior. He adds:

And inferior the Negro really is; so he shows up even under scientific study. . . . The Negro is judged to be fundamentally incorrigible and he is, therefore, kept in a slum existence which, in its turn, leaves the imprint upon his body and soul which makes it natural for the white man to believe in his inferiority. This is a vicious circle; it is, indeed, one of the chief examples of cumulative causation. (97-101)

³⁵ "D'une manière générale, les sciences sociales et biologiques tendent aujourd'hui à considérer les accidents physiologiques et psychologiques comme dépendant du milieu où se développe l'individu et non de facteurs héréditaires fixes; il n'y a pas eu en vingt ans un seul ouvrage sérieux qui osât défendre le préjugé pourtant commode d'une infériorité biologique donnée" (*L'Amérique* 331).

³⁶ "les sciences biologique et sociales ne croient plus en l'existence d'entités immuablement fixées qui définiraient des caractères donnés tels que ceux de la femme, du Juif ou du Noir; elles considèrent le caractère comme une réaction secondaire à une *situation*" (*Deuxième sexe* I 12).

America Day by Day renders Myrdal's argument in more philosophical terms:

But many racists, ignoring the rigors of science, insist on declaring that even if the physiological reasons haven't been established, the fact is that blacks *are* inferior to whites. You have only to travel through America to be convinced of it. But what does the verb "to be" mean? Does it define an immutable substance, like oxygen? Or does it describe a moment in a situation that *has evolved*, like every human situation? That is the question. And to fresh eyes it's clear that the second meaning is the correct one: "Blacks are uncultured." (239)³⁷

Beauvoir also refers to Myrdal's "vicious circle" and to the philosophical concept of "bad faith," which she uses to describe the attitude of whites who, for example, regard black women as immoral even though the women have no means to protect themselves from the sexual advances of white men: "the women are simply prey" (240).³⁸ The same arguments reappear in the introduction to *The Second Sex*, rendered in a fully elaborated philosophical vocabulary:

This vicious circle is met with in all analogous circumstances; when an individual, or a group of individuals, is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he *is* inferior. But the significance of the verb *to be* must be rightly understood here; it is in bad faith to give it a static value when it really has the dynamic Hegelian sense of "to have become." Yes, women on the whole *are* today inferior to men; that is, their situation affords them fewer possibilities. The problem is to know whether this state of affairs must be

³⁷ "beaucoup de racistes, passant outre les rigueurs de la science, s'entêtent à déclarer que même si on n'en a pas établi les raisons physiologiques, le fait est que les noirs *sont* inférieurs aux blancs. Il suffit de traverser l'Amérique pour en être convaincu. Mais que signifie le verbe *être*: définit-il une nature immuable comme celle de l'oxygène? ou décrit-il le moment d'une situation qui *est devenue*, comme toute situation humaine? C'est là la question. Et pour des yeux non prévenus, il est clair que c'est le second sens qui est juste: "Les noirs sont incultes" (*L'Amérique* 331).

³⁸ "elles sont des proies" (*L'Amérique* 333).

perpetuated. (xxx)³⁹

Myrdal argues that the white Southerner's myth of a black "race" derives from magical forms of thought, and he compares it to primitive concepts of the profane and the unclean. Whites surround blacks by a web of taboos; as with other superstitions, notions of black inferiority contain a fear of the unknown. Viewed through this haze of magical thinking, blacks appear as an "inner enemy" or "the opposite race," a "contrast conception" denoting the "antithesis of character and properties of the white man. . . . Black stands for dirt, sin, and the devil." Behind these associations to the color black is the "heritage of magic and primitive religion" from prehistoric times, a heritage preserved in the metaphorical meanings of words (100-01). In her account of men's myths of woman, Beauvoir cites similar concepts of the opposition of good and evil, "lucky and unlucky auspices, right and left, God and Lucifer" (xxiii);⁴⁰ she refers them to a Hegelian framework to argue that "we discover in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject posits itself only by opposing: it intends to affirm itself as the essential and to constitute the other as inessential, as object" (xxiii).⁴¹

Although Beauvoir shifts the terminology from sociology to philosophy, she proposes a framework for the analysis of women's subordination that derives significantly

from *An American Dilemma*. Yet *The Second Sex* drew harsh comments from many

³⁹ "On retrouve ce cercle vicieux en toutes circonstances analogues: quand un individu ou un groupe d'individus est maintenu en situation d'infériorité, le fait est qu'il *est* inférieur; mais c'est sur la portée du mot *être* qu'il faudrait s'entendre; la mauvaise foi consiste à lui donner une valeur substantielle alors qu'il a le sens dynamique hégélien: *être* c'est être devenu, c'est avoir été fait tel qu'on se manifeste; oui, les femmes dans l'ensemble *sont* aujourd'hui inférieures aux hommes, c'est-à-dire que leur situation leur ouvre de moindres possibilités: le problème c'est de savoir si cet état de choses doit se perpétuer" (*Deuxième sexe* I 25)

⁴⁰ "des principes fastes et néfastes, de la droite et la gauche, de Dieu et de Lucifer" (*Deuxième sexe* I 16).

⁴¹ "on découvre dans la conscience elle-même une fondamentale hostilité à l'égard de toute autre conscience; le sujet ne se pose qu'en s'opposant: il prétend s'affirmer comme l'essentiel et constituer l'autre en inessentiel, en objet" (*Deuxième sexe* I 17).

American intellectuals, whereas Myrdal's work became a tool of social policy through its influence on court decisions opposing racial discrimination (Southern 127-55). American race relations had taken on sudden international importance in the context of the Cold War; the problems of women, however, continued to be regarded as a marginal issue and treated, in works such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, as a misogynous joke.⁴²

Many American reviewers of *The Second Sex* refused to accept the premise that observed differences between men and women, like differences between whites and blacks, were largely environmental. Elizabeth Hardwick asks in *Partisan Review*, "Are women 'the equal' of men?" and responds flatly, "This is an embarrassing subject." She elaborates:

Women are certainly physically inferior to men and if this were not the case the whole history of the world would be different. . . . To say that physical weakness doesn't in a tremendous number of activities, "condemn her to a subordinate role" is a mere assertion, not very convincing to the unmuscle, light breathing, nervously unstable, blushing feminine reality. (327-28)

Hardwick admits that it is "not absurd" to call women's work "*slavery*" but argues that it would be impractical to allow such workers to choose otherwise:

housework, child rearing, cleaning, keeping, nourishing, looking after—these must be done by someone, or worse by millions of someones day in and day out. In the home at least it would seem "custom" has not been so much capricious as observant in finding that women are fairly well adapted to this necessary routine. And they must keep at it whether they like it or not. (326)

Although there were many Americans in the 1950s who still regarded blacks as "well adapted" to low-status work, liberal journals such as *Partisan Review* refused to provide a forum for their views.⁴³

⁴² Ellison, *Invisible Man* (399-419); for a discussion of the Cold War and American race relations, see Borstelmann and Dudziak.

⁴³ For a discussion of early responses to *An American Dilemma*, see Southern (71-99).

Chapter 3

The Vanguard of Modernity: Richard Wright's *The Outsider*

(1)

Richard Wright published *The Outsider* in 1953, thirteen years after the success of *Native Son* first made him a national figure.¹ Wright's early publications had given him a "central place in the radical political culture of the international communist movement," as Paul Gilroy has noted (*Black Atlantic* 147); *Native Son* and *Black Boy* had also entered into the theorizing of alienation by French intellectuals such as Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre.² During the mid-1940s, Wright's public affiliations shifted away from the American scene that had formed the context for his early writing. He resigned from the Communist Party in 1944, citing its control of his political and aesthetic decisions; he became more closely associated with leaders of the Pan-African movement, including C.L.R. James and George Padmore;³ and in 1946, he moved his family from New York to Paris to escape American racism and intrusion by the FBI.⁴ From his new home in France, Wright would produce an ambitious analysis of the modern West in a series of works published between 1953 and 1958: *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1954), *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956), *Pagan Spain* (1956), *White Man, Listen!* (1957), and *The Long Dream* (1958). Taken together, they offer a wide-ranging analysis

¹ In 1940, *Native Son* was the first book by a black author to become a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and a best-seller; see Fabre 177-78 and Rowley 180-84, 191-92.

² Beauvoir, *Second Sex* 297-98, 698; and Sartre, *What Is Literature?* 71-74. It is possible that Wright's description of the white gaze and its effect on Bigger Thomas informs Sartre's concept of the gaze (or Look) in *Being and Nothingness*; see my discussion in Chapter 2.

³ Wright's relations with Pan-Africanists are discussed in Fabre 308, 318-20, 383-406; Gayle 192, 237, 271-72; Rowley 416-37; and Walker 120, 214-19, 239-43. See also Wright's introduction to Padmore's *Pan-Africanism or Communism?*

⁴ Wright announced his break with the Communist Party in "I Tried to Be a Communist," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in August and September 1944. For a discussion of the FBI's investigation of Wright during the mid-1940s, see Gayle 152-98.

of Europe's colonial adventure and its impact on European and non-European peoples alike, integrating philosophical and psychological factors with political, economic, and cultural ones. *The Outsider* is the first of these works; its existentialist concerns, rejection of realism, and attack on Communist Party leaders and methods mark Wright's transition toward a postwar stance that combined internationalism, nonalignment, and an anticolonial analysis of the modern West.

Wright described his exile as "more than a geographical change. It was a break with my former attitudes as a Negro and a Communist. . . . I was trying to grapple with the big problem—the problem and meaning of Western civilization as a whole and the relation of Negroes and other minority groups to it" (qtd. in Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 366). He begins with *The Outsider*, which examines the philosophical and psychological forces of rebellion shaping that quintessentially modern agent, the mob. In the early Cold War years, the concept of "the mob" suggested the Nazi and Communist movements and Southern lynch mobs. Michel Fabre has suggested that the ideological concerns of *The Outsider* were, for Wright, "a means of obliterating the past, not of announcing the future" (*Unfinished Quest* 316). However, the mob had survived the defeat of Nazism; as colonialism and industrialization continued their assault on traditional ways of life, the danger posed by totalitarian movements would grow. Wright's black outsider, Cross Damon, embodies the forces of alienation that were threatening to destroy the modern West and what Wright termed its "islands of the rational" (*White Man, Listen!* 99). Defying the moral institutions and revolutionary movements of the West and their methods of control, Cross passes beyond all ethical laws to become a vanguard of modern consciousness—a Darwinian monster, product of an amoral process of evolution. In his thorough skepticism and endless desire, he tests the principle, articulated by the

revolutionaries of 1789, that "all is permitted."⁵ Nietzsche, in his philosophical elaboration of this political principle, argued that the atheists and free spirits of modern Europe were not truly free since they still believed in rational truth (*Genealogy of Morals* 584-89). He proposed comparison with an eleventh-century Islamic sect, the Assassins, for whom "Nothing is true, everything is permitted" (586). Wright depicts the adventure of an outsider whose desperate bid for freedom in which "all is permitted" ends in entrapment. He runs aground on the sands of desire—the lure of power that succeeds by seducing man's deep sensual needs—and on the modern racial symbols supplanting discarded religious beliefs.

As the novel opens, Cross's life as a Chicago postal worker and student of philosophy has hit bottom. He is estranged from his wife, mired in debt, and threatened by his girlfriend with charges of statutory rape; he struggles, moreover, with the existential dread that has led him to the study of Nietzsche and other modern philosophers. Suddenly one evening, he is trapped in a subway wreck. He escapes from the darkened and overturned car, leaving behind his coat and identification papers; he later learns that he has been counted among the dead. Assuming the chance to shed his past and invent a new identity, Cross begins to withdraw from the world he has known, by disappearing into a hotel. Meeting a friend in a hallway of the hotel, he murders the man on impulse to ward off discovery. Severed from the past, he flees to New York on an adventure of desire and self-invention. It is a project shrouded in uncertainty and dread:

The outside world had fallen away from him now and he was alone at the center of the world of the laws of his own feelings. . . . he knew where his sense of dread came from; it was from within himself, within the vast and mysterious world that was his and his alone, and yet not really known to him, a world that was his own

⁵ For a discussion of the origins of this concept in the French Revolution, see Arendt, *On Revolution* 91-92.

and yet unknown. And it was into this strange but familiar world that he was now plunging. (148)

He is already drowning in desire:

He had merely shifted his cares from without to within him, from that which he could deny to that which he could not. Imprisoned he was in a state of consciousness that was so infatuated by its own condition that it could not dominate itself; so swamped was he by himself with himself that he could not break forth from behind the bars of that self to claim himself. (149)

Trapped in the anguished narcissism of imprisoned desire, Cross meets a series of powerful, ruthless men, including a District Attorney and several Communist leaders. He is fascinated by these men; he recognizes himself, in the Hegelian sense, in their amoral ruthlessness. Yet through his blackness—or outsider status—he has surpassed them, moving beyond modern ideology to become a man who murders not for an idea but on a whim: an individual mob. As Cross's gestures of freedom—his Nietzschean *deeds*—reconnect him to the world, he enters a new narrative in which his erotic and murderous desires become fatally marked by race as he enacts the role of black, prodigal son to a Communist couple, Gil and Eva Blount. *The Outsider* ends in the entrapment of the black body by modern webs of ideology, as Cross is gunned down for the murder of Gil Blount and another Communist leader. Through the portrayal of a young black man who has moved beyond the modern skepticism of the West, Wright examines the project of freedom initiated by this tradition, a project that remains incomplete because it is enmeshed in the symbols and ideology of race and the lust for power.

Recent critics have called for a reassessment of Wright's later work in view of his philosophical project; notably, Paul Gilroy has argued that "the depth of his philosophical interests has been either overlooked or misconceived by the almost exclusively literary enquiries that have dominated analysis of his writing" (147). Although I concur with

Gilroy's assessment, in my view *The Outsider* remains, significantly, a novel: its philosophical concepts assume their full meaning as the thoughts and actions of characters inhabiting a world demarcated by race. This embodied speaking position accords with Wright's standpoint epistemology, described in "Tradition and Industrialization":

my critical attitude and detachment are born of my position. I and my environment are one, but that oneness has in it, at its very core, an abiding schism. Yet I regard my position as natural, as normal, though others, that is, Western whites, anchored in tradition and habit, would have to make a most strenuous effort of imagination to grasp it. (79)

Given this view, it is understandable that Wright should have turned to the novel and its focalizing structures as a forum for his philosophical concerns. Yet it must be admitted that his attempt in *The Outsider* to make others see the world as he saw it has been largely unsuccessful. For many critics, *The Outsider* remains a failed philosophical novel, a "mixture of melodrama and rhetorical exposition" (Fabre, *World of Richard Wright* 172); they have never accepted its basic premise of the correspondence between European existentialism and the experience of black Americans. Others, while acknowledging this correspondence and Wright's response to existentialism in *The Outsider*, have given scant attention to the intersection between the novel's philosophical concerns and its analysis of modern ideology, including Communism and the racial ideologies that inform relations between the characters and aspects of the plot.⁶

In *The Outsider*, Wright interprets subjective experiences and desires, along with the opposing mechanisms of social control, through existentialist and Freudian theories of consciousness that are no longer consonant with realism. For this reason, the novel was rejected by most contemporary American reviewers, who charged that Wright had

⁶ For discussions of Wright's use of existentialism in *The Outsider*, see Adell; Fabre, "Richard Wright, French Existentialism"; and Tate, "Christian Existentialism."

abandoned realism for a European discourse incompatible with black American life.

J. Saunders Redding sums up the response of early reviewers when he argues that existentialism is "no philosophy to accommodate the reality of Negro life" (Gates and Appiah 42). Max Eastman, claiming that facts inevitably exceed ideologies and philosophical systems, attacks *The Outsider* as lacking in verisimilitude and terms existentialism a "literary swamp . . . a product of the purely literary mind, a mind interested in having ideational experiences and making art works or commodities out of them, rather than in ascertaining facts and using ideas for guidance among them" (Gates and Appiah 47). These arguments charge that Wright's philosophical interests and his exile in France had removed him from the sources of his art—that is, the facts of black American life.

Yet Wright was hardly alone in the project of appropriating philosophical concepts for the analysis of racial ideologies. In the aftermath of the Nazi genocide, philosophers such as Sartre and Hannah Arendt were producing important analyses of anti-Semitism and mob violence as central expressions of European modernity. Wright had met both Sartre and Arendt and was familiar with the arguments of *Anti-Semite and Jew* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.⁷ The concerns of *The Outsider* and *White Man, Listen!* resemble some of Arendt's arguments and themes, perhaps too much so to be

⁷ After he moved to Paris, Wright met with Sartre for long discussions and wrote an introduction to *The Respectful Prostitute*, Sartre's play based on the Scottsboro case (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 320-22; 326). He met Arendt in New York in late 1944 at the home of Dorothy Norman (Fabre 299). It is possible that Wright read sections of Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* that appeared in journals during the late 1940s.

merely accidental.⁸ *The Outsider* contributes to the postwar analysis of modernity by examining the existential meaning of blackness in the West. A major concern for existentialism is how consciousness experiences its relation to the world of others that it inhabits as a negation. Wright viewed his own position—as both inside and outside the West—as an epitome of this experience of negation. Through an interest in forms of consciousness that arise within hostile, negating conditions of oppression, he appropriated modern discourses of consciousness, especially existentialism and Freudian theory, for his claim that the experience and ideology of blackness in the West are integral to modernity. In *The Outsider*, Wright has embedded his existentialist narrative in a popular genre plot of murder, flight, and fraudulent identity; this plot becomes a site for recasting purportedly universal philosophical and psychological theories of consciousness within a world structured by race and centered on criminal acts and police investigations and profiles. By recasting these theories within an American scene of racial fact, Wright establishes a dialogic relation between their universalist paradigms and the racially structured world of modernity.

Wright had been interested in modern consciousness since at least the late 1930s, when he still wrote from within the ranks of the Communist Party. Commonly interpreted as a work of sociological realism, *Native Son* in fact probes deeply into the

⁸ Only a few of the resemblances can be enumerated in a footnote. *The Outsider* seconds Arendt's description of the Hobbesian character of totalitarianism (*Origins* 146, 156-57) and her claim that "a global, universally interrelated civilization may produce barbarians from its own midst by forcing millions of people into conditions which, despite all appearances, are the conditions of savages" (302). *White Man, Listen!* describes the "misfits, adventurers, indentured servants, convicts and freebooters" who founded the European colonial system (25); this may be a verbal and conceptual echo of Arendt's statement that Hitler's early party was "almost exclusively composed of misfits, failures, and adventurers" (317). Some aspects of Cross's situation correspond to Arendt's analysis of the situation of stateless persons (286-87). Finally, Wright's representation of the Communist Party in *The Outsider* corresponds in many ways to the arguments of Arendt's concluding chapter, "Ideology and Terror" (460-79).

mind of Bigger Thomas. As James Baldwin observed in "Many Thousands Gone," we are limited to Bigger's view of other blacks, "part of a deliberate plan which might not have been disastrous if we were not also limited to Bigger's perceptions" (72). Yet Bigger's isolation—a condition of solipsism and alienation—is a defining, not accidental, aspect of industrial modernity. His perceptions, which are consonant with literary realism, also express Wright's analysis of the dissonance between black urban life and the Communist movement. Work in the Dalton home, producing better-tended masters, sharpens Bigger's sense of worthlessness even as it seems to lift him above other blacks. Crushed by the oppressive forces of society, he senses himself as black skin and responds by wanting to "blot out" the sources of discomfort. Deprived of productive work, he turns to violence rather than labor to transform the world. Bigger embodies the Hegelian concept of consciousness ensnared in sensory being, for he experiences himself and others as things to be used and exploited. He functions through sense-certainty rather than self-consciousness, which "*achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*" (Hegel 110). In Bigger's consciousness and works, Wright offers a parody of the Communist narrative of proletarian consciousness, testing it against conditions among the unemployed young men of Chicago's South Side. In Wright's view, the Party could not see the world of the Bigger Thomases.

Wright, then, never fully adopted literary realism but, from the beginning, explored forms of modern black consciousness. Once in France, he did not progress—or digress, as Eastman argues—from facts to ideational experiences. Rather, with *The Outsider* we move from Bigger Thomas—inarticulate, ensnared in the physical world, objectified by the white gaze—to Cross Damon, a man whose skeptical intellect and ruthless desire enable him to command and manipulate recognition. The distinction between Bigger and Cross corresponds to the gulf between the philosophical premises of

Communism and the existentialism of Nietzsche and Sartre. Marxism develops from the Hegelian concept of a slave consciousness that recognizes itself in the products of its labor. However, most forms of existentialism emphasize that consciousness seeks to recognize itself in a struggle for power against another consciousness, not through shaping the material world.

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* identifies *The Outsider* as a vital statement of the relation between blackness and modernity. Emphasizing that Wright's later work seeks to conceptualize an international rather than specifically American context, he argues:

In Wright's mature position, the Negro is no longer just America's metaphor but rather a central symbol in the psychological, cultural, and political systems of the West as a whole. The image of the Negro and the idea of "race" which it helps to found are living components of a western sensibility that extends beyond national boundaries, linking America to Europe and its empires. The transmutation of the African into the Negro is shown to be central to western civilisation, especially to the primitive, irrational, and mystical elements in European culture that Wright would seek to explore in *Pagan Spain*, his study of Franco and Spanish fascism. (159-60)

Moreover, by adapting Freudian concepts to argue that the "primitive, irrational, and mystical elements" derive from sexual sources, Wright suggests that the repression and psychic transformation of these elements will merely lead to the emergence of new symbols, rituals, and forms of superstitious violence. The modern ideology of race and the symbol of the "Negro" were invented to reconcile the warring elements—political and psychic repression and the diverted expression of demands for human freedom—within the psyches of Europeans. The modern symbols of race are, in effect, descendants of the pagan and Catholic symbols Wright observed in Spain.

Before her death in 1946, Gertrude Stein had urged Wright to go to Spain to study the origins of European civilization (Walker 249). *Pagan Spain* describes the emergence

of substitutive and symbolic rituals from a "distorted protest . . . an impulse toward hot rebellion" that has submitted to the powers of Church and State. The "insurgent instincts" emerge,

disguised, deflected, shrinking from frontal attack. I was not long in learning to detect, under a thousand varied masks, the all-pervading, substitutive, and symbolic nature of most Spanish reactions—reactions that ranged all the way from the offering of the mass to bullfighting.

Wright is interested in the public rituals of culture rather than the private rituals of the neurotic. He replaces the prohibitions of the father with those of the State, adopting the literal sense of Freud's metaphor of the super-ego as "a garrison in a conquered city" (*Civilization* 71).⁹ In Wright's words:

The human heart is a universe in which a rough sort of government reigns; it has its tribunals, its judges, its police; its prosecutors, for and against. The maintenance of emotional peace demands the subordination, the outlawing, or the condemning of disobedient instincts.

Concerned with the problem of lynching and its possible sources in Europe in rituals such as the Spanish bullfight, Wright proposes that the scapegoat is a substitute or proxy, by which the condemned instincts elude psychic prohibitions:

a most complicated adjustment takes place in the heart's governing council where claim and counterclaim clash. The heart, buffeted and naive, finds an ingenious but disastrous solution; it condemns the criminal instinct and, at the same time, keeps it, honours it, exalting it at the price of death. This robbing of Peter to pay Paul is achieved by the heart's inventing a proxy for the condemned instinct, a proxy whose objectification assumes the guise of an enemy or a devil. Then, with a glad blare of trumpets, with

⁹ Wright was not the only black writer to make use of Freud's metaphor. In 1944 René Ménénil, co-editor with Aimé Césaire of the Martinican journal *Tropiques*, revised Freud's image to describe the psychology of colonized people (132). Fanon quotes this passage from Ménénil's essay in *Black Skin, White Masks* (145; *Peau noire* 118). Fanon borrowed the Ménénil quotation from Leiris, "Martinique, Guadeloupe, Haïti" (*Temps modernes*, February 1950).

colourful ritual and ceremony, with the whole wide world looking avidly on, the stand-in for the indicted instinct is publicly sacrificed and—*retained*! (78)

The world of *The Outsider* is necessarily abstract, for it represents Cross's *internal* struggle between subjective impulses toward freedom and institutional repression.

Wright's sources and concerns are no longer congruent with sociology and literary realism. The black body is foremost among the symbols of a modern racism that had, in Wright's view, "almost become another kind of religion" ("Tradition" 80-81). Bereft of identity, the body of Cross becomes a proxy in the ritual of the narrative, a textual figure for the indicted instincts that are "publicly sacrificed and—*retained*!"

As Gilroy argues, *The Outsider* explores connections between the anxieties of black Americans and those of modern Europeans:

The book represents Wright's first attempt to account for the correspondences and connections which joined the everyday lifeworld of African-Americans to the visceral anxieties precipitated in modern European philosophy and letters by the collapse of religious sensibility in general and the experience of twentieth-century life in particular. (160)

In the early 1950s, Wright described his analysis of modernity in "Tradition and Industrialization." There he argues that the rational foundations of the modern West cannot be separated from the ideological and historical effects of Europe's contemporaneous colonial project, with its racial modes of thought and social organization. Gilroy refers to this analysis when he argues that:

The Outsider elaborates a view of blackness and the relational ideologies of race and racism which support it, not as fixed and stable historical identities to be celebrated, overcome, or even deconstructed, but as metaphysical conditions of the modern world's existence that arise with, and perhaps out of, the overcoming of religious morality. (160)

Racial oppression and the "visceral anxieties" of Europeans both result from the

disruption of traditional ways of life by a form of modernity that remains steeped in superstition and violence. Cross is an outsider through his position as a modern intellectual as well as his origins in an uprooted underclass. Excluded from power and supremely skeptical, without faith in God, family, race, or even ideology, Cross is unmoved by fascism or Communism; except for his brief and deadly association with Communists in New York, he remains aloof from mass political movements as well as social tradition.

Wright derived his initial view of modernity from the fate of black Americans, uprooted from the peasant culture of the South and transplanted to the most industrialized cities of the world. He understood this process as a foreshortened version of the experience of the West over the last five hundred years and as a window onto its problems and failures. *The Outsider* is one of several works in which Wright's black American protagonist functions as a dubious vanguard of the West, revealing modernity through its contradictions—political, economic, legal, racial, and sexual—in the trajectory from a submerged peasant identity to urban entrapment, alienation, and criminal violence. Wright regards the will to power, economic exploitation, and racism of totalitarian movements as forms of irrationality and superstition endemic to modernity. Yet he also represents them as problems of a transitional era of *incomplete* modernity in which skepticism has not yet eroded the forces of superstition.

"Tradition and Industrialization" argues that modernity began as a push for freedom and rational skepticism by European Protestants, who initiated the move "from simple, naive credence toward self-skepticism, from a state of sensual slavery to the sights, sounds, and colors of the external world toward a stance of detachment" (88). However, the new, skeptical outlook also created the conditions for an expansive release of the restless energies that were to fuel the colonial system—the energies of "misfits,

adventurers, indentured servants, convicts and freebooters" ("Psychological Reactions" 25), people whom Wright describes as stripped of tradition yet far less rational in outlook than the Protestant philosophers who invoked skepticism to justify their rebellion against the Catholic Church. As a result of these conflicting yet contemporaneous historical trends, the rational outlook of modern Europeans became sabotaged by their colonial project, whose ideology of race has inherited the irrational power of discarded religious beliefs ("Tradition" 87-88). As Wright argues:

merely rational motives could not have sustained the white men who damaged and destroyed the ancient Asian-African cultures and social structures; they had perforce to believe that they were the tools of cosmic powers, that they were executing the will of God. (95)

Thus there emerged the quasi-religious symbols and rituals of the modern institutions of slavery and colonial conquest.

Wright believed that the modern world's "islands of the rational" (99) should be preserved and expanded, though he remained pessimistic about this possibility. Gilroy refers to Wright's "sceptical evaluation of the possibility of social perfectibility and progress—at least in the overdeveloped countries" (151). As this suggests, however, Wright believed at least for a time during the 1950s that industrial modernity was the key to social progress for the emerging nations of Asia and Africa. Moreover, he argued that the freedom of the West, under assault by Cold War rivalries and the suffocating materialism of American and Soviet ideologies, depended for its survival on the independent development of the former colonies. The West should give the new states free reign to develop, without undue concern for the methods used:

THE WEST, IN ORDER TO KEEP BEING WESTERN, FREE, AND SOMEWHAT RATIONAL, MUST BE PREPARED TO ACCORD TO THE ELITE OF ASIA AND AFRICA A FREEDOM WHICH IT ITSELF NEVER PERMITTED IN ITS OWN DOMAIN. THE ASIAN AND AFRICAN ELITE MUST BE GIVEN ITS HEAD! . . .

Yes Sukarno, Nehru, Nasser and others will necessarily use quasi-dictatorial methods to hasten the process of social evolution and to establish order in their lands—lands which were left spiritual voids by a too-long Western occupation and domination. Why pretend to be shocked at this? ("Tradition" 100)

Wright conjectured, somewhat implausibly it now seems, that the elites in question would surrender their personal power once "social evolution" and order had been established.

In *The Outsider*, as in *Native Son*, Wright digs ever deeper into his protagonist's consciousness as a technique for exploring social problems. However, by appropriating existentialism as the narrative framework for the spiritual crisis of a black man in the West, *The Outsider* goes much further than *Native Son* in embedding an ideologically unfamiliar discourse within the American scene. Wright's shift to existentialism is compelled by his search for a philosophy through which to represent the black consciousness in its bid for freedom. Cross Damon claims a finally impossible freedom from the symbols and rituals of race—notably the black body—that are used to police the desires of the men and women who inhabit the modern West. Wright's ideological shift poses the question of race within the context of a modern philosophy of consciousness, advancing his theory that the problems of race and racism are endemic to modernity and to the forms of consciousness that have emerged within the modern world. His explicit engagement with existentialism and Freudian psychology represents a deepening of his concern in *Native Son* with the forms of modern black life; but whereas Bigger Thomas remains inarticulate, his consciousness ensnared in materiality and therefore encompassed within the conventions of realism, Cross Damon exemplifies the hyper-modern consciousness and freedom from tradition that Wright attributed to black intellectuals in the West.¹⁰ As District Attorney Houston says to Cross in their final confrontation, "*You went all the way! You have drawn all the conclusions and*

¹⁰ For a recent discussion of concepts of the black intellectual in the twentieth century, see Posnock.

deductions that could be drawn from the atheistic position and you have inherited the feelings that only real atheists can have" (564). Given Wright's view that the philosophical justifications of modern skepticism had been sabotaged from their inception by the racial ideologies of Europe's colonial conquests, his appropriation of a modern and purportedly universal philosophy of consciousness such as existentialism should be viewed not as a rejection of racial themes, but as a challenge to accounts of modern consciousness that fail to provide an analysis of the racial concepts embedded in the structure of modern forms of consciousness in the West.

(2)

The Outsider presents a new type, a vanguard of modernity. In his skepticism and freedom from tradition, Cross Damon is "more Western . . . than the West" ("Tradition" 97). Wright was following the precedent he had set in *Native Son*, where a black urban youth emerges as a new and marginal consciousness. Cross, too, grasps at freedom as an outsider; he has moved beyond the rituals and laws of Western modernity toward a more thorough skepticism. In his vanguard outlook, he resembles the Western-educated Asian and African elites described in "Tradition and Industrialization," Wright's controversial speech to the first *Présence Africaine* conference, convened in Paris in 1956. Whereas the African and Afro-Caribbean writers proposed a cultural program of *négritude*, founded on a psychological and cultural essence supposedly common to all African peoples, Wright asserted that he was both black and of the West, and he urged the emerging nations of the Third World to secure independence from the West by turning toward the skeptical outlook and industrial development of modernity. Wright announced to the African writers in the audience that their traditional beliefs had been "psychologically condemned beyond recall" by Europeans who had "instilled in them the ideas of the West so the eventual Westernized Asian and African products could become their collaborators" (94). With nothing to guide them, the elites had been thrust into the modern, technological world created by the West:

Shorn of all deep-seated faiths, these Westernized Asians and Africans had to sink or swim with no guides, no counsel. Over and above this, the Europeans launched vast industrial enterprises in almost all of the lands that they controlled, vast enterprises that wrought profound alterations in the Asian-African ways of life and thought. *In sum, white Europeans set off a more deep-going and sudden revolution in Asia and Africa than had ever obtained in all of the history of Europe.* (95)

Wright argued that catastrophic disruptions of the ancient cultures, followed by

continuing exclusion from Western freedoms, had created an avant-garde force of Westernized Asians and Africans for a more complete modernity. Describing the destruction of traditional ways of life, Wright did not imagine the emergence of new cultural forms from the surviving fragments; rather, he saw a cultural absence, the absolute erasure of a superstitious past.

Wright began by defining his own outlook and "double vision" as a man who was both black and of the West. He defined objectivity as a "synthetic intellectual construction"; reflecting the standpoint, assumptions, and environment of the speaker, it persuades the listener by engaging his empathy and imagination:

The basic assumptions behind all so-called objective attitudes are this: If others care to assume my mental stance and, through empathy, duplicate the atmosphere in which I speak, if they can imaginatively grasp the factors in my environment and a sense of the impulses motivating me, they will, if they are of a mind to, be able to see, more or less, what I've seen, they will be capable of apprehending the same general aspects and tones of reality that comprise my world, that world that I share daily with all other men. (77-78)

Such a standpoint epistemology—based on a shared perception of the world from a given place and time—poses obvious problems for a vanguard outlook. As Wright discovered during the 1950s, few readers cared to see what he had seen. The problem also plagues his creation, Cross Damon, who learns to manipulate others but rarely encounters recognition of the objective truth of his being.

Wright went on to define the outlook of black Americans and others who are both insiders and outsiders to the West:

my position is a split one. I'm black. I'm of the West. These hard facts are bound to condition, to some degree, my outlook. I see and understand the West; but I also see and understand the non- or anti-Western point of view. . . . This contradiction of being both Western and a man of color creates a psychological distance, so to speak, between me and my environment. . . . Hence, though

Western, I'm inevitably critical of the West. Indeed, a vital element of my Westernness resides in this chronically skeptical, this irredeemably critical, outlook. (78-79)

Wright's concept of double vision—or thorough skepticism—should not be confused with the double consciousness described by W.E.B. Du Bois as "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings . . . this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals" (17). For Du Bois, the "American Negro" longs "to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost" (18). But Wright did not describe unreconciled ideals; he asserted psychological distance from his environment. According to Wright, the culture of the Asian and African elites had been destroyed by the West; and once the non-Western soul has been destroyed, the conditions for double consciousness cease to exist. The prospects of the Western-educated elites lay, rather, in their unmooring from all tradition, their void of self-skepticism. Wright explained:

That part of the heritage of the West that I value—man stripped of the past and free for the future—has now been established as lonely bridgeheads in Asia and Africa in the form of a Western-educated elite, an elite that is more Western, in most cases, than the West. (97)

Wright argued that the anticolonial elites should be allowed to modernize their emerging nations without interference by the West, even where that meant the temporary use of "quasi-dictatorial" methods. Those familiar with Wright's bitter account of his experiences with Communist Party methods in the United States may wonder how he managed to reconcile insistence on his own political and artistic independence with a pragmatic acceptance of dictatorial regimes in the new nations of Asia and Africa. Wright regarded the decolonizing societies of Asia and Africa as a new force that could help to roll back "the curtains of race, color, religion, and tradition—all of which hamper

man's mastery of his environment" ("Tradition" 98). The Westernized Asians and Africans must therefore be allowed to construct new and "rational" societies. Wright knew the dangers of political and social repression. Yet he urged rapid Third World development, by repressive methods if necessary—a prescription for the kind of economic and psychological suffering he had observed among the transplanted peasant population of Chicago's black ghettos. Uneven modernization and rapid social change tend to create conditions for the emergence of the mob and for ethnic rivalries and civil war. Moreover, Wright's model of a rational, vanguard elite in Asia and Africa dismisses much of the population, particularly the women, as mired in traditional superstitions that hamper national development. And as the representation of Cross Damon suggests, an elite cut loose from the traditions of any community becomes ripe for anarchic violence, not programs of national construction.

Compared with Wright's views in "Tradition and Industrialization," *The Outsider* proposes a far more gloomy forecast of the vanguard type of the 1950s. District Attorney Houston, the only character privileged to peer into the soul of Cross, offers the following profile:

Desire is the mad thing, the irrational thing. Damon, you peeled off layer after layer of illusion and make-believe and stripped yourself down to just simply naked desire and you thought that you had gotten hold of the core of reality. . . . It's an illusion, but the most solid one! Desire is what snared you, my boy. You felt that what brooked desire could be killed; what annoyed, could be gotten rid of. (565-66)

For Houston, the mob is suddenly everywhere because it is now in each of us: "the compulsive acts of the lynching mobs have become enthroned in each individual heart" (564). By his interpretation, Cross is merely one such "individual mob," riding the crest of the wave to a general destruction.

Wright's conception of the vanguard type surely owes much to Nietzsche, whose

Beyond Good and Evil defines two types of skeptic. The first is characterized by "sickliness of the will," which Nietzsche attributes to the sudden crossing of "races or classes that have long been separate." This "sickly" skepticism anticipates the warring ideals—the national "souls"—of Du Bois's double consciousness. Nietzsche writes:

In the new generation that, as it were, has inherited in its blood diverse standards and values, everything is unrest, disturbance, doubt, attempt; the best forces have an inhibiting effect, the very virtues do not allow each other to grow and become strong. . . . But what becomes sickest and degenerates most in such hybrids is the *will*: they no longer know independence of decisions and the intrepid sense of pleasure in willing—they doubt the "freedom of the will" even in their dreams. (320)

As his name suggests, Cross Damon is a hybrid soul; the opening scenes of *The Outsider* reveal a man drowning in a sea of dread. In the ensuing adventure, he seeks to assert his freedom through a second, conquering form of skepticism, which Nietzsche has described as:

that more dangerous and harder new type of skepticism . . . the skepticism of audacious manliness which is most closely related to the genius for war and conquest. . . .

This skepticism despises and nevertheless seizes; it undermines and takes possession; it does not believe but does not lose itself in the process; it gives the spirit dangerous freedom, but it is severe on the heart. (322)

Cross begins his apprenticeship in the "dangerous and harder" skepticism during his marriage to Gladys, as he learns to perform a demonic masculinity, carving out a space of freedom for himself alone through planned acts of terror against her. His violence asserts a masculine and master consciousness against a feminine, familial, and racial one, as he seeks to escape an identity defined epidermally and communally by blackness, for one founded on self-invention and desire.

Cross and Gladys are first drawn together because they are outcasts:

Her consciousness of being an outcast moved him toward her, enabled him to drape about her a net of tender compassion. Underneath sex and common interests flowed a profounder tide of identity.

... he hungered for her as an image of woman as body of woman, but also as a woman of his own color who was longing to conquer the shame imposed upon her by her native land because of her social and racial origin. (66)

Gladys places Cross "at once in the role of a strong and reliable man" (65). He soon learns that her response to the world is defined by her color consciousness. Even when she is alone with him, her world is constituted and ordered by the white gaze. Cross responds to her sense of shame by arguing that he is free:

"They think they're *something* and we're *nothing*," she snapped.

"It's up to us to make ourselves something," he argued. "A man creates himself. . ."

"You are a *man*," she said simply.

He understood now; it was the helplessness of dependence that made her fret so. Men made themselves and women were made only through men. (65-66; ellipsis in original)

Cross asserts an existential transcendence—or proposes to do so—whereas Gladys does not. Both perceive that he holds an advantage over her; they conflate her color consciousness and her dependence as a woman.

Although Gladys is attracted to Cross's manhood, she also seeks sameness, as a protection against the white gaze:

Nestling close to him, she mumbled as out of a dream: "I hate white people."

"Why?"

...

"'Cause they're *different* from me. I don't like 'em even to look at me. They make me self-conscious, that's why. Ain't that enough?"

"If you say so, baby. But, listen, *I'm* not white."

"That's what's so nice about it." (67-68)

Cross and Gladys form a solidarity with each other, but underlying their sexual passion is the recognition of a shared alienation, as the Sartrean us-object. According to Sartre, this condition arises when I and the other, having existed in a state of conflict, are transcended by the look of a third consciousness. Whereas I and the other formerly constituted two separate worlds, a third consciousness now constitutes us as an alienated solidarity in its own world. We now discover ourselves as instruments or objects: "I suddenly experience the alienation of my possibilities, and I discover by the same token that the possibilities of the Other are dead-possibilities."¹ Our common existence as instruments ordered by the gaze of another brings about a leveling and dissolution of difference between us:

suddenly there is effected a leveling of the two opposed situations:
 . . . I am organized with the Other in an indissoluble, objective whole, a whole in which I am fundamentally *no longer distinct* from the Other but which I agree in solidarity with the Other to constitute. (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 540-41)²

Gladys cannot escape the presence of a third consciousness, the white gaze. As with Bigger Thomas, white folks inhabit her very core. Her many references to the white gaze perform a situational solidarity with Cross in which gender oppositions are leveled. From Cross's perspective, Gladys wants to ensnare him in her dependence as both a black person and a woman. He emerges weakened and dependent from her bed to discover that she has mastered him. Wright's representation of Gladys as a black woman who desires an empty blackness—the "not-white"—finds a correspondence in the refusal of Cross to recognize her difference as a black woman, to see in it something other than dependence

¹ "j'éprouve, d'un même coup, que mes possibilités sont aliénées et, du même coup, je découvre que les possibilités de l'Autre sont mortes-possibilités" (*L'Etre et le Néant* 489).

² "du coup il se fait un nivellement des deux situations inverses . . . je suis organisé avec l'Autre en un tout indissoluble et objectif, un tout où je ne me *distingue plus* originellement de l'Autre mais que je concours, solidairement avec l'Autre, à constituer" (*L'Etre et le Néant* 489).

or mastery. He soon rebels, refusing not only her color consciousness and what he regards as her dependence as a woman, but her domination of his sensual desire. He breaks free by asserting his will as a skeptical, marauding adventurer.

Gladys wants Cross as a fetish that enables her to disavow and displace her shame and fear in the presence of the white gaze. Homi Bhabha argues that in everyday colonial scenes of the kind described by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, both colonizer and colonized disavow blackness, the sign of difference:

the black child turns away from himself, his race, in his total identification with the positivity of whiteness which is at once colour and no colour. In the act of disavowal and fixation the colonial subject is returned to the narcissism of the Imaginary and its identification of an ideal ego that is white and whole. ("The Other Question" 76)

In the third world ordered by the white gaze, Cross and Gladys cease to be a black woman and black man and become the same: "she simply clung to him and when she spoke at all on general topics it was about how good it was to have someone to be with when the whole world was white and she was colored" (68). Substance inheres in the white world, from which Gladys feels banished, rather than in blackness. Yet she desires Cross's body and the traces of abjected blackness that it bears. As Bhabha argues, "in that form of substitution and fixation that is fetishism there is always the trace of loss, absence" ("The Other Question" 76). It is this ambivalence that marks Cross as a fetish object for Gladys.

Bhabha defines the racial fetish or stereotype according to two theories: Freud's concept of the scopic drive (the libidinal cathexis of visual stimuli), and Sartre's concept of the look. It shares the ambivalence of the sexual fetish, which, according to Freud, "denies the unwelcome fact of the woman's castrated condition" yet retains traces of the perceived absence or loss ("Fetishism" 218). For both Freud and the male fetishist,

sexual difference is signified, not by the presence of woman, the other, but by an absence of the phallus. The absence of the maternal phallus—a fantasy object—leaves traces in consciousness and in the fetish itself, as a form of melancholia: "the horror of castration sets up a sort of permanent memorial to itself by creating this substitute" ("Fetishism" 216). Sartre, however, argues that another consciousness can assert its positive presence by returning the look. In *The Outsider*, Cross asserts a black presence in purely phallic terms; in other words, the presence he asserts is less black than male, though it bears fetishistic traces of blackness.

Within such a system of meaning, Cross rejects Gladys's black and woman's consciousness as permanent dependence, and he asserts his presence through violence and sadism. Cross's "revolt," like that of Bigger Thomas, begins as something unplanned and almost unconscious. When Gladys enters the hospital, pregnant with their first child, Cross goes on a drinking spree, picks up a woman in a bar, and brings her home. Gladys discovers them in bed together when she returns from the hospital, and though she comes to accept it as an "accident," their troubles continue. Cross decides that he must act decisively to create a new situation, "setting her free as well as himself" by forcing her to acknowledge the "demonical as a motive for his actions" (70-71). He now plans an act of domestic terror, a "complicated psychological attack whose consequences would clarify Gladys' feelings about him" (72). Arriving home from work before the expected time, he abruptly knocks her to the floor and leaves. From then on, he pretends no knowledge of what has happened, leaving her to conclude that he has dangerous "fits." Although Cross means to destroy her faith in him and set her free, the scene is hardly liberating:

Her chest heaved, emptying her lungs; then she looked distractedly about the room like a rat searching for a hole. She was a tiny child hearing a grownup tell a tale that it did not believe, but it dared not challenge that tale because it had no way of successfully disputing it, feeling that its reasoning was not acceptable. (78)

Wright draws on imagery from *Native Son*—Bigger smashing a rat as his family watches in fear—to position Cross as an abusive and unpredictable parent to the terrified Gladys. Cross has moved from dread and dependence to a perverse manhood of misogyny, cunning, and violence. He resembles Bigger in another way: both men learn the use of aggression against other blacks, Bigger as a street bully and Cross as a "demonic" husband. Cross's domestic terror comes to an end when Gladys throws him out, threatening to shoot him and declaring that the law will support her act of self-defense. However, she refuses to grant Cross a divorce; moreover, she blackmails him by threatening to assist his girlfriend, who is pregnant and underage, in charging him with statutory rape. Cross's sense of entrapment clearly repeats the old accusation that black women have collaborated with white men and their laws and institutions.³ However, Wright also offers an analysis of the psychological sources of this charge.

Much later in the novel, Houston tries to wring an admission of identity from Cross by confronting him with Gladys and their three sons. Brought face to face with his family in the presence of Houston, Cross withdraws from the world into a demonic identity:

Cross made his face a mask. . . . Cross shut out the sight of the world and tried not to hear. (520-21)

He performs a pagan identity that suggests the idols of the ancient peoples who refused the one God:

Their idols *are* silver and gold, the work of men's hands.
They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but
they see not:
They have ears, but they hear not: noses they have, but
they smell not:

. . .

They that make them are like unto them; *so is* everyone that

³ For discussion of this issue, see Davis, "Reflections."

trusteth in them. (*King James Bible*, Psalms 115.4-8)

Houston urges Cross to throw off the mask of the pagan god, but Cross refuses. Houston concludes,

when you stared so unfeelingly at your sons, when you laughed when your poor wife could not summon enough strength to identify you, I knew that you were beyond the pale of all the *little* feelings, the *humble* feelings, the *human* feelings . . . *I knew that you could do anything!* Not in a towering rage, not to save falling mankind, not to establish social justice, not for glory . . . But just because you happen to feel like that one day . . ." (564; ellipsis in original)

Cross's identity as a black skeptic is established in another early scene, in which Wright plainly asks: What meaning does the black body have for the emergence of modern, secular philosophy? Cross's sense of entrapment and despair have complex sources in the contradictions of modernity. Though outwardly free of his mother's Christian values, he remains engaged in a deadly internal struggle centered on the new symbols, rituals, and policing institutions of "a racism that has almost become another kind of religion" ("*White Man, Listen!*" 80-81). Foremost among the symbols of this new religion is the black male body. In his spiritual crisis in Book One, following the rift with Gladys, Cross seeks to rid himself of his body and its desires: "He was despairingly aware of his body as an alien and despised object, a burden that was always cheating him of the fruits of his thought, mocking him with its stubborn and supine solidity" (16). Kierkegaard defines despair as a condition in which man wants to, but cannot, rid himself of himself: so it is with Cross and his body. In a black American context, the desire to be rid of oneself—especially the black body—suggests desire for an impossible social mobility. Wright, it should be noted, created several passing characters in his fiction.⁴

⁴ The female protagonist of the unfinished novel "Little Sister" passes as white, as does Gladys in *The Long Dream* (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 188-91). The male protagonist of "Man of All Work" passes as a woman to obtain work.

One night, three friends question Cross about his life. Joe, a "big, fat, black man" (2), says, "'We ain't your mama and your papa,'" and proposes that the problem is between Cross and God. Cross, however, regards his problem in Kierkegaardian terms as "one of a relationship of himself to himself" (10), and he points to Joe's fat, black body in a challenge to God:

"It's between you and Your Maker, your problem," Joe said.

"Lucky Joe," Cross murmured in a tone of envy.

"What do you mean?" Joe asked.

Cross rose, smiled widely for the first time, pointed his finger into Joe's fat, black, round face, and intoned: "And God made man in His own image . . ."

Pink and Booker yelled with laughter. Joe passed his hand caressingly and self-consciously over his black face and looked puzzled. Cross demanded in a mockingly serious voice: "Did God really make *that* face? Is He guilty of *that*? If He did, then He was walking in His sleep!" Cross shook with laughter. "To blame God for making Joe is to degrade the very concept of God!" (10-11; ellipsis in original)

These black men know that white Christians have denounced blackness as abomination and sin, yet many blacks continue to accept the white man's God. Although Cross never mentions Joe's color, he counts on the men to respond to the paradox of the black Christian—one whose own body seemingly degrades the concept of God. This idea informs their own rebel desires. Yet Joe adheres to the God who has cast him out. Cross mocks Joe with the hatred of blackness that is embedded in Christianity and much secular philosophy, suggesting that the God who has made men black cannot be the perfect God. The arguments of secular philosophers are driven home as Cross insinuates that God is black, guilty, and unconscious—a degraded image of man's own making.

Struggle over the symbolic burden of the black male body, evident in Cross's challenge to the existence of God, recurs throughout the novel as a thematic and narrative element. The detective plot is structured by the paranoia of Cross's flight from the

sensual world and its insistent and persecutory return. During the subway accident, his leg becomes trapped by a dead man's head, which blocks his escape. Cross decides to free himself by any means necessary:

no breath seemed to be coming from the nostrils or mouth. Cross shuddered. If the man was dead, then any action he took to free himself was right. . . . He panted with despair, regarding the man's head as an obstacle; it was no longer flesh and blood, but a rock, a chunk of wood to be whacked at until it was gone. (95)

Cross uses a gun to bludgeon aside the new obstacle to freedom:

He shut his eyes and hammered again and suddenly he heard a splashing thud and he knew that the head had given way, for his blows were now falling on air . . . He looked; the mangled face was on the floor; most of the flesh had been ripped away and it already appeared skeletonlike. He had done it; he could move his leg. (96; ellipsis in original)

Cross has struggled free of the corpse and he now begins to emerge from the wreck that his life has become.

The subway scene represents a murder after the fact. Though the man is dead, through violent struggle Cross prepares psychologically to become a master consciousness. Having at last freed himself from the ascetic ideal described by Nietzsche, he can now become a man who says, "all is permitted." The subway scene also represents a suicide in which Cross sheds his former self. In his frenzy to escape, he abandons his overcoat and identity papers. These are later matched with a body of his race and stature, which has been mangled in the wreck. Pronounced officially dead, Cross seizes on the chance to shed the past for an unknown future, one that is consciously chosen. Viewed in Kierkegaardian terms, however, Cross can never rid himself of himself in this way—his body remains fastened to him. The tension between these two outlooks is maintained throughout the novel.

After his act of murder/suicide, Cross flees as though from the scene of a crime

and withdraws from the sensual world into his own consciousness. However, in abandoning his situation in the world, he also loses the world as a site of *his* meaning:

since last night, since he had broken all of the promises and pledges he had ever made, the water of meaning had begun to drain off the world, had begun to dry up and leave the look of things changed; and now he was seeing an alien and unjustifiable world completely different from him. It was no longer *his* world; it was just *a* world. (116)

Despite detachment from the world, Cross does not become the thinking "I" of Cartesian philosophy. Rather, he discovers that he is the object of another's gaze—a gaze that is elusive and undefined yet seemingly as inescapable as the white snow that shrouds this section of the novel. He must enter into a paranoid and Sartrean contest of gazes. Cross's skepticism has enabled him to stand outside others and manipulate them, yet he cannot master his own desires sufficiently to impose his consciousness on external reality, to recognize others or be recognized by them. In shedding the past, moreover, Cross has only intensified his problem of recognition. Possessed of a secret, he now must police the boundary between his past and future identities, and this internal policing renders communication with others impossible.

Cross soon finds himself hiding in a Chicago hotel where he is approached by Jenny, a white prostitute. In any other work by Wright, these circumstances would set in motion the black man's fear of a lynch mob; however, Wright refuses that narrative here. Instead, Cross encounters his friend, Joe. Joe is stunned to find Cross alive, and he quickly concludes that Cross has merely found a new way of pursuing outside sex:

"Say, who you're shacking up with in here? Bertha, Mamie, Della, or . . ."

"Jenny," Cross said.

"She's great!" Joe approved. "Boy, she can go when she feels like it. She's got some build . . ."

Joe went on talking and Cross stared at him. He had to do something. But what? This clown was tearing down his dream,

smashing all he had so laboriously built up. And there he sat: fat, black, half-laughing and half-scared, with beads of sweat popping on his forehead. (135-36; ellipses in original)

Cross's attention is once again fixed on Joe's body, but he has slipped from an attitude of metaphysical irony to one of murderous anger at the danger posed by Joe, with his clownish and predictable desire for white prostitutes. With a sudden blow, Cross murders Joe, blotting out the new obstacle to freedom. Through this act, his subjective desire to be rid of the black male body assumes a concrete and criminal form in the plot. Joe's corpse is proof that Cross is alive; Cross has transformed the "fat, black" body of his friend into a signifier of the past. It represents the threat of discovery and the return of the repressed. Thus the murder of Joe is a founding condition of Cross's new identity. Fittingly, Cross soon encounters a persecuting double in the person of District Attorney Ely Houston.

Fleeing Chicago for New York, Cross withdraws into a subjective dream world suffused with the anxiety of repression and thwarted action: "Cross's world was now sunk in sleep and, in his compulsiveness to rouse it from its slumber, the moments of his life became a dream of anxiety" (149). His dream world, like the Freudian unconscious, operates by an alternative logic of fantasy dominated by projection, paranoia, and identification. When approached by a black waiter, Bob Hunter, in the dining car of the train to New York, Cross responds with self-conscious skepticism to the man's wink, even though he recognizes its meaning:

The waiter had given him an innocent, racially fraternal greeting common among Negroes and Cross knew that most whites never dreamed that their behavior towards Negroes had bred in them, especially when Negroes were in the presence of whites, a situationally defensive solidarity that possessed no validity save that occasioned by the latent pressure of white hostility. (153)

In their first encounter, Cross responds in a muted way to Bob's gestures of alienated

solidarity. Bob then gives him a newspaper in which Cross reads that Joe's body has been found on a roof. For a moment, Cross's awareness of the law as a defining force brings sharp clarity to his consciousness. Gazing at the "sunny fields of snow" outside his window, he sees "a normal world whose events flowed intelligibly and each object had a sharp, precise meaning" (154). Cross's sudden apprehension of a lucid, gleaming, white world is an effect of the nature and purpose of law. As Cross later reflects,

The real aim of law was to *inhibit* in the consciousness of man certain kinds of consciousness which the law had to *evoke* clearly and sharply in man's consciousness, for the law possesses the strange capacity of creating vividly in man's consciousness a sense of the reality of the crime it seeks to suppress . . .

[. . .] Implied in law is a free choice to each man living under the law; indeed, one could almost say a free challenge is embedded in the law: if you are *strong* enough, you can do so . . . But you must *know* what you are doing . . ." (411-12; ellipses in original).

The challenge that Cross imagines here is inherent in the identity of any man who seeks to choose his fate, to live it out *consciously*. However, his self-control is shattered by the intrusion of the waiter's gaze upon him, with its insistent and, as Cross imagines, perhaps treacherous appeals for racial solidarity:

He looked in the direction of the waiter and was surprised to see the waiter looking at him, winking, smiling . . .

Out of a void, anxiety rose and captured his senses; he could feel the reality of the dining car falling away as alien powers claimed his consciousness, projecting menacing meanings upon the look of the world. He fought against it feebly, but in the end he succumbed, trembling and embracing what he dreaded. (154; ellipsis in original)

Unable any longer to suppress the fears evoked by the return of the repressed, Cross responds to the waiter's smiling gaze with an attack of paranoia that suggests, in part, his resistance to entering into a relation of solidarity—or identification—with Bob.

Cross's paranoia also signals the reappearance of the white gaze. When Cross

first encounters District Attorney Ely Houston on the train a short time later, the two men recognize that they share the outsider consciousness of the rebel against society, even though Houston is pledged to uphold the law. Cross finds the recognition offered by Houston fascinating but also dangerous; he perceives that this District Attorney could discern his deepest motives.

Having arrived in Harlem, Cross soon reinvents himself as a murderous rival to various ruthless and powerful white men, including Communist leaders such as Gil Blount. Cross is determined to be the Hegelian master, rather than a slave to the "voluptuousness" of men like Gil, whose life strategy is profoundly and intimately sadistic:

It related man to man in a fearfully organic way. To hold absolute power over others, to define what they should love or fear, to decide if they were to live or die and thereby to ravage the whole of their beings—that was a sensuality that made sexual passion look pale by comparison. (267)

In this image of the voluptuous cruelty of power, Wright again draws on Nietzsche, who argues that the sadism of power derives from the early relation of creditor to debtor, when the creditor inflicts physical suffering to balance the broken promises of the debtor. As Nietzsche says, "it was here that a memory had to be *made* for those who promised." In lieu of payment, the creditor accepts:

a recompense in the form of a kind of *pleasure*—the pleasure of being allowed to vent his power freely upon one who is powerless, the voluptuous pleasure "*de faire le mal pour le plaisir de le faire*," the enjoyment of violation. This enjoyment will be the greater the lower the creditor stands in the social order, and can easily appear to him as a most delicious morsel, indeed as a foretaste of higher rank. In "punishing" the debtor, the creditor participates in a *right of the masters*. (*Genealogy of Morals* 500-01)

Wright represents the Communists precisely as creditors who, as working class men, stand low in the social order yet arrogate for themselves the right of the masters to

torment those beneath them. Cross covets such power for himself, though loathing the men who practice it; by committing a series of murders, he claims power for himself and tests his strength as a little god. Cross resembles the Communists, yet with a difference that arises from his blackness—for he is more thoroughly deceiving than they are, more thoroughly a negation of all the assumptions of the past, his and theirs. Unlike them, Cross refuses to believe even in the meaning of the Party.

Living from now on in a mostly white world, Cross takes a room in the apartment of Communist Party leader Gil Blount and his wife, Eva. His relations with Gil and other Communists—and, in a more ambiguous way, with Houston as well—follow the pattern of persecutory violence theorized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her discussion of the "paranoid Gothic" novel, in which homosocial bonds between men are intensely but negatively charged (*Between Men* 83-117). In these circumstances, Cross commits three more murders, two of Communist leaders, and he is a factor in the suicide of a fourth person, Eva.

As Houston and the Communists search for the murderer who has surged among them, they must decipher a new form of human nature produced, in Darwinian mode, by adaptation to the world born of modernity. In Houston's words, they seek "a man in whose mind and consciousness all the hopes and inhibitions of the last two thousand years have died" (426). Though suspicion falls on Cross, no motive can be identified; as one Communist tells him, "You don't add up" (470). Anne McClintock has described knowledge in imperial discourse as a relation of power between two gendered spaces—as male penetration and exposure of a "veiled, female interior" and conversion of its secrets into a "male science of the surface" (23). *The Outsider* figures Cross as such a veiled, female interior in relation to the white men who seek to penetrate his mystery. Yet both the crude appeal to skin color and the more subtle concern with ideology as signifiers fail

to penetrate his mask. In the end, only Houston proves to be adept at reading Cross through racial signifiers, for he shares, to some degree, the outsider situation and perspective of the man he hunts. Houston recognizes Cross as the truly "free spirit," one who no longer believes even in truth, one who could kill, as he says to Cross, "just because you happen to feel like that one day" (564). Through this knowledge, Houston penetrates Cross's mask and gains ultimate power over him, but he merely returns Cross to the world unpunished to live as his own tormentor. It is the Communists who exact revenge by killing him. As Nietzsche writes in *On the Genealogy of Morals*,

It is not unthinkable that a society might attain such a *consciousness of power* that it could allow itself the noblest luxury possible to it—letting those who harm it go *unpunished*. "What are my parasites to me?" it might say. "May they live and prosper: I am strong enough for that!" (508)

Those who harm such a society are merely "parasites." Nietzsche suggests, moreover, that they belong to a conquered race, for he traces the origins of the state to "some pack of blond beasts of prey, a conqueror and master race" (522), and he defines punishment as "simply a copy, a *mimus*, of the normal attitude toward a hated, disarmed, prostrated enemy" (507). Although Houston is a modern enforcer of the law, he is not the pure descendant of a conquering beast of prey but a hybrid, a hunchback whose physical deformity has given him special insight into black Americans, whom he defines as "both *inside* and *outside* of our culture at the same time" (163). As he tells Cross during their first encounter, "My personal situation in life has given me a vantage point from which I've gained some insight into the problems of other excluded people" (162). In Nietzsche's terms, Houston too is marked as an enemy of society; but he has turned his double vision to investigative advantage.

Houston's hybridity is revealed in physical characteristics and ideas that distinguish him from most whites. Cross notes his unusual appearance:

The man had a huge head of remarkably black, unruly hair; a long, strong, too-white face; clear, white-apart brown eyes; and a well-shaped mouth that held always a hint of a smile at its corners. His shoulders were Herculean with long arms that terminated in huge hands with delicately strong fingers. The hump on the back was prominent. . . . Cross had not particularly noticed this deformity when Houston had first sat down, but now he remembered that Houston had moved forward to the table with a motion that slightly resembled that of a creeping animal, holding his body still as he walked. He reminded Cross of a giant, patiently waiting white spider whose temper was never ruffled but whose mental processes ground both fast and exceedingly fine. (161-62)

Houston resembles first a gorilla, with huge shoulders and long arms, and then a giant white spider, with delicate fingers and fast, fine mental processes. The latter image may, again, have its source in Nietzsche, who writes that:

our entire modern way of life, insofar as it is not weakness but power and consciousness of power, has the appearance of sheer *hubris* and godlessness our attitude toward God as some alleged spider of purpose and morality behind the great capacious web of causality, is *hubris*—we might say, with Charles the Bold when he opposed Louis XI, "je combats l'universelle araignée";⁵ our attitude toward *ourselves* is *hubris*, for we experiment with ourselves in a way we would never permit ourselves to experiment with animals and, carried away by curiosity, we cheerfully vivisection our souls. (549)

Cross finds that he must, indeed, fight "the universal spider" in the figures of Houston and the Communists. Revising Nietzsche's metaphor, Wright replaces God with the state and its policing powers as the targets of our rebellious pride. Houston is all the more fascinating and dangerous for Cross in that he brings psychological depth to the racial and criminal profiles through which he interprets the world. Using terms that repeat Wright's self-definition in "Tradition and Industrialization," Houston expounds his theory of Negro consciousness:

"Negroes, as they enter our culture, are going to inherit the

⁵ "I fight the universal spider."

problems we have, but with a difference. They are outsiders and they are going to *know* that they have these problems. They are going to be self-conscious; they are going to be gifted with a double vision, for, being Negroes, they are going to be both *inside* and *outside* of our culture at the same time. Every emotional and cultural convulsion that ever shook the heart and soul of Western man will shake them. Negroes will develop unique and specially defined psychological types. They will become psychological men, like the Jews . . . They will not only be Americans or Negroes; they will be centers of *knowing*, so to speak . . ." (163-64; ellipses in original)

It is important for an understanding of Cross and Houston to observe that Wright revises Nietzsche's conception of the free spirit. As noted previously, Nietzsche locates authentic freedom of spirit not within but beyond the borders of Christian Europe, comparing the atheists of modern Europe unfavorably with an eleventh-century Islamic sect known as the Assassins:

When the Christian crusaders in the Orient encountered the invincible order of Assassins, that order of free spirits *par excellence*, whose lowest ranks followed a rule of obedience the like of which no order of monks ever attained, they obtained in some way or other a hint concerning that symbol and watchword reserved for the highest ranks alone as their *secretum*: "Nothing is true, everything is permitted."—Very well, *that was freedom of spirit*; in *that* way the faith in truth was *abrogated*.

Has any European, any Christian free spirit ever strayed into this proposition and into its labyrinthine consequences? has one of them ever known the Minotaur of this cave *from experience*?—I doubt it. (586)

In an Orientalist gesture, Nietzsche proposes the Assassins as a demonic counter-ideal to modern Europe, a hierarchical social order in which the despotism of an elite holds sway over the monastic obedience of the lower ranks; and he offers this counter-ideal as a challenge and temptation to the timid rebels of Europe who endorse the liberal values of scientific progress and universal rights. In contrast to Nietzsche, Wright emphasizes that Cross is morally and psychologically of the West, inside as well as outside its laws. By

the end of the novel, Houston will describe Cross as a man who has moved dangerously beyond the laws of the West. Yet Cross maintains a shrewd sense of the D.A.'s psychological kinship with him and the forces of repression and projection that compel Houston to perceive him as a black double. Here Wright moves beyond the world of his early fiction, where whites reaffirm their own moral and racial purity through the anxious repetition of a racial stereotype of black criminality and guilt—a repetition that requires the ritual sacrifice of black men. The doubling of Cross and Houston, black man and white justice, marks a deepening analysis of the construction of racial stereotypes, suggesting Bhabha's definition of the racial stereotype as a fetish. Even while theorizing its discriminatory uses, Bhabha describes such fetishism as:

a non-repressive form of knowledge that allows for the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official and one secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division. (80)

The epistemological problems of identity suffusing the relations between Cross and Houston arise from a similar, non-repressive form of knowledge. Each constitutes the other through his gaze as a contradictory identity, at once official and secret, archaic and progressive, original and self-divided. Further, the scenes between the two men emphasize the return of the gaze—and perhaps the Bakhtinian consummation—that passes between them.⁶ Cross looks at Houston, who looks at Cross and defines him as "both *inside* and *outside* of our culture" (163), adding that, "hidden under that veneer of order the jungle still seethes" (171). Cross returns the gaze by suggesting to Houston that "maybe the whole effort of man on earth to build a civilization is simply man's frantic and frightened attempt to hide himself from himself"; moreover, "this 'awful' part of himself might not be as awful as he thinks, but he finds it too strange

⁶ Bakhtin discusses the concept of consummation in *Art and Answerability*.

and he does not know what to do with it" (171). When Houston, who is intrigued by this revelation of his own nature, asks what man must hide from himself, Cross points to an uncanny absence: "'Maybe man is nothing in particular'" (172). With this, the scene has reached an epistemological impasse posed by the stereotype and its erasure of the other. Yet it also has revealed the construction of the stereotype. As Bhabha argues:

the recognition and disavowal of 'difference' is always disturbed by the question of its re-presentation or construction.

The stereotype is in that sense an 'impossible' object. . . . Stereotyping is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, over-determination, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of 'official' and phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse. (81-82)

As Cross ponders the nature of his own crimes and the likelihood that Houston will bring him to justice, he asks himself,

Were not the queer motives of his crimes in themselves a kind of ally? Would not Houston, precisely because of his position of public trust, instinctively hesitate to expound an idea that went contrary to the basic tenets of normal and even abnormal actions? . . . Would not his accuser have to place himself, in branding him guilty, in a *psychological* attitude that would spell the same kind of guilt that resided in the heart of the criminal? There was an inescapable element of contagion here . . . Who could possibly suspect him of being guilty on the basis of his *real* motives unless he himself had wrestled fatally with the same serpentine motives in his own heart? And if one had so wrestled, might he not, on finding Cross guilty, feel inclined to cross the line of law and arraign himself on Cross's side? (410; ellipses in original)

Cross concludes that he will escape becoming a scapegoat for Houston and for society, but only because Houston himself is not psychologically free to offer him up to the public. Houston must forgo the ritual sacrifice and the purity it confers: guilt

has become a universal contagion. He and Cross are tainted with the same psychological urges, bound together in a common identity:

was Houston psychologically free to act upon what he found? Had not Houston admitted that maybe some men had the right to become lawgivers? Was there not, maybe, in Houston's heart the capacity to *respect* some forms of forceful crime? Had not men respected the crimes of Napoleon, Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler . . . ? (411)

The doubling of detective and criminal goes to the heart of Wright's conception of law in *The Outsider*. Cross continues with a meditation on the psychological sources of law:

Did not the positive aspects of law imply a conspiratorial understanding on the part of vast numbers of men to prevent, in terms of action, certain areas of consciousness from *thoughtlessly* assuming the upper hand in their lives? Was not law a struggle of man against man within man? [. . .]

Law, then, by inhibiting man's actions, posits a sense of crime in man; law makes the criminal consciousness of man; law makes crime a sensual object, but it casts about that sensually forbidden object a dark halo of dread . . . (411-12)

Through the use of profiles, law makes a sensually forbidden object of the criminal, as well, by evoking his image "clearly and sharply in man's consciousness." Yet with the displacement of a visible, epidermal definition of race by an internal and psychological one, the racial stereotype loses even the appearance of fixity and definition. And although Bhabha argues that "the fetish of colonial discourse—what Fanon calls the epidermal schema—is not, like the sexual fetish, a secret," his emphasis on the ambivalence of the fetish belies any simple transparency in its meaning (78). Freud, moreover, does not describe the sexual fetish as a secret but states: "The significance of fetishes is not known to the world at large and therefore not prohibited" ("Fetishism" 216). The fetish *object* need not be hidden and may be publicly displayed; the secret is in

the *meaning* of the object to the fetishist. The fetish is an illegible but not invisible sign.

The plot of *The Outsider* centers on attempts to decipher Cross as a signifier. He exceeds definitions of blackness, for he asserts an identity in which visible signs conceal hidden and unstable meanings. Where a stereotype cannot be referred to visible signs, we can no longer know with any certainty what difference it is meant to invoke. Defying the fixed image of the black man as criminal and rapist, Cross is seen through an undecipherable blur of contradictory signs—racial, ideological, sexual, and geographical.⁷ In his encounters with Houston—in a context of intensified bonds between men formed during a chance encounter on a train—there is an emphasis on contagion, male doubles, and the shared secret of "queer" and "serpentine" guilt. This introduces into the discourse of Cross's criminality and his bid for freedom a thematics associated with homoerotic desire and its prohibition, although the overt references are to a thematics of hybridity. The 1950s were a period in which homosexuals came to be seen as potentially treasonous—politically tainted by a supposed association with Communism.⁸ The imagery of homophobia and paranoia becomes salient after Cross escapes the constraints of identity and racial definition imposed on him in Chicago; it pervades his relations not only with Houston, but with Communist Party members. Both the train car and the Communist Party foster a blurring and destabilizing of identities through which Cross will invent a new self founded on masculine empowerment. Yet in the end, the risks of asserting an aggressive masculinity through the mastery of homophobic violence prove to be inseparable from the dangers and despair of Cross's black identity. In relation to Eva, Cross finally is reinscribed in the role of black beast though not rapist, when he confesses his murders to her in a fever that passes into sexual

⁷ For a discussion of the absence of the sign of homoerotic desire, see Sedgwick, "The Beast in the Closet."

⁸ See my discussion of this issue in Chapter 5.

desire. At first she refuses to believe him, and when she can no longer deny it, her horror compels her to leap from a window to her death. Eva's suicide becomes a clue to Cross's role in the murders.

Wright bases much of the narrative trajectory of Cross's adventure on Freud's analysis of paranoia. Freud traces the early stages of paranoid disorders to a "detachment of the libido" from the external world. However, he concludes that since detachment of libido is in itself a normal part of mental life, paranoia develops only where a powerful narcissism is also present, that is, where "the liberated libido becomes fixed on to the ego, and is used for the aggrandizement of the ego." The delusional symptoms associated with paranoia are in fact an *"attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction"* of the world that has been lost by this transfer of love to the ego:

Such a reconstruction after the catastrophe is more or less successful, but never wholly so; in Schreber's words, there has been a "profound internal change" in the world. But the man has recaptured a relation, and often a very intense one, to the people and things in the world, although the relation may be a hostile one now, where formerly it was sympathetic and affectionate. ("Psychoanalytic Notes" 174-76)

Finally, Freud proposes a link between paranoia and what we now refer to as homophobia; in his view, "patients suffering from paranoia are struggling against an intensification of their homosexual trends, this pointing back to a narcissistic object-choice," while "the persecutor is in reality the loved person, past or present" ("A Case of Paranoia" 99).

Wright was interested in the uses of psychological detachment. In *White Man, Listen!*, he argued that psychological detachment from the world is essential to achieving human freedom; and he sought to understand how racial ideologies had taken root within European Protestantism in its move away from "sensual slavery" to the sights and sounds of the world, toward detachment and interiority. These concerns reappear in *The*

Outsider as a thematics of interiority appropriated by Wright from that most Protestant of philosophers, Kierkegaard. Moreover, Wright's description of Cross may be referred in detail to Freud's analysis of paranoia, which corresponds, first, to Cross's psychological detachment from his life in Chicago and from blackness, culminating in his withdrawal into his own mind after his "death" in the subway crash. Paranoid structures virtually define his self-invention: the posture of a free spirit who enjoys absolute power over himself and others; the hostility, persecution, and violence that characterize his attempts to reinvent a world, beginning with the murder of Joe and continuing in the scenes in New York; and Cross's construction of an elaborate system of ideas to justify the murders. In addition, many of the specific details cited by Freud in his account of Dr. Schreber's delusions have parallels in *The Outsider*. Thus Freud writes of Schreber that he:

became convinced of the imminence of a great catastrophe, of the end of the world. Voices told him that the work of the past 14,000 years had now come to nothing. . . . He himself was "the only real man still surviving," and the few human shapes that he still saw—the physician, the attendants, the other patients—he explained as being "men miracled up, cursory contraptions." ("Psychoanalytic Notes" 171-72)

Without knowing it, Houston is speaking of Cross when he asks, "'Could there be a man in whose mind and consciousness all the hopes and inhibitions of the last two thousand years have died? . . . A man who would be the return of ancient man, pre-Christian man?'" (426). Cross recognizes himself at once in this portrait and offers an elaboration of Houston's idea, "discussing himself in terms that were displaced and projected." He argues that the moral world of the last two thousand years is dying out and in the wake of the catastrophe, *man* is returning, pagan man—both ancient and new. This man is Cross himself:

"He'd be something like a pagan, but a pagan who feels no need to

worship . . . And, by the nature of things, such a man sooner or later is bound to appear. Since we are speculating about this, why can't we say, in theory, that maybe he is appearing already? Modern man sleeps in the myths of the Greeks and the Jews. Those myths are now dying in his head and in his heart. They can no longer serve him. When they are really gone, those myths, *man* returns. Ancient man . . . And what's there to guide him? Nothing at all but his own desires, which would be his only values." (426-27; ellipses in original)

Like Schreber, Cross believes that a catastrophe has overtaken the world. He is psychologically and morally alone: a form of life both ancient and new, the first of a pagan race of conquerors returned, guided only by the random impulses of desire. Freud comments that Schreber in his fantasies sometimes abandoned the place of lone survivor for "a converse current of feeling":

a newspaper was put into his hands in which there was a report of his own death (p. 81), he himself existed in a second, inferior shape, and in this second shape he one day quietly passed away (p. 73). But the form of his delusion in which his ego was retained and the world sacrificed proved itself by far the more powerful. ("Psychoanalytic Notes" 172)

Cross also passes away in a "second, inferior shape," during the subway crash. His murder of Joe repeats this event, forestalling the return of an abandoned identity, symbolized by Joe's baffled recognition and by the fat, black body that Cross kills with a single blow. The threatened return of identity lies at the center of Wright's tale of disavowal of the self. Thus we find a departure from Freud's analysis of paranoia, for in Cross's relation to himself, there is as much abjection as aggrandizement, as much hatred as love.

In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard defines the self as a *relation* of itself to itself, a relation that nevertheless has been established by another, God. The self is a concession given to man, but "it is also eternity's claim upon him" (21). In the claim of

eternity there arises the possibility of a *misrelation*, which Kierkegaard calls despair. The essential form of misrelation of the self occurs when the self wants to be rid of itself: "To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself—that is the formula for all despair" (20). At the opening of *The Outsider*, Cross wants to be rid of himself but he cannot bring himself to die; as Kierkegaard states, "When the danger is so great that death becomes the hope, then despair is the hopelessness of not even being able to die" (18). In the depths of despair, Cross forgets he has sought death and tears himself free of the overturned subway car. He must live on, for "the dying of despair continually converts itself into a living" (Kierkegaard 18).

Kierkegaard defines a second form of despair, in which one "despairingly wills to be himself." He writes:

The self that he despairingly wants to be is a self that he is not . . . that is, he wants to tear his self away from the power that established it. In spite of all his despair, however, he cannot manage to do it; in spite of all his despairing efforts, that power is the stronger and forces him to be the self he does not want to be. (20)

Eternity will not let man become the self that he wants to be; staking its claim on him, it "will nail him to himself so that his torment will still be that he cannot rid himself of his self" (21). It is this form of despair that dominates Cross as he attempts to create a new life, "to imagine this thing out, dream it out, invent it, like a writer constructing a tale" (110). Cross wants *to be* other than he *is*, but the self that he *is* insistently returns, nailed to him by another. This abjected self is his blackness and the memory of its meanings, which have been nailed to him—burned into him, as Nietzsche says of the uses of punishment to create human memory—by the power that established him and finally

forces him to inhabit that self again.⁹ It is a power that inheres in human institutions and not, as Kierkegaard argues, in God.

⁹ Nietzsche says of memory:

perhaps indeed there was nothing more fearful and uncanny in the whole prehistory of man than his *mnemotechnics*. "If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to *hurt* stays in the memory"—this is the main clause of the oldest (unhappily also the most enduring) psychology on earth. . . .

In a certain sense, the whole of asceticism belongs here: a few ideas are to be rendered inextinguishable, ever-present, unforgettable, "fixed," with the aim of hypnotising the entire nervous and intellectual system with these "fixed ideas"—and ascetic procedures and modes of life are means of freeing these ideas from the competition of all other ideas, so as to make them "unforgettable." (*Genealogy of Morals* 497)

Chapter 4

Sexual Dialogics:
Hegelian and Psychoanalytic Discourses in *The Second Sex*

(1)

Feminist critics have argued persuasively for the philosophical originality of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.¹ Whereas recent theorists have framed the discussion of Beauvoir's originality largely in philosophical terms, her project is also a multi-styled text whose opposing ideological accents reveal all existing discourses as "equally inadequate to encompass a concrete woman" (*Second Sex* 60).² Through her critique of discourses about women, Beauvoir demonstrates that none of the intellectual systems of the late 1940s can encompass her lived experience as a woman. Her investigation of women's social existence hinges, rather, on a series of partial perspectives, each situated in socially contested space, and on her ironic voicing of each perspective as it is accented by gender and women's subjectivity. Such irony and contestation of social discourses may be described in Bakhtinian terms as "double voicing."³ Reworking femininity through a double voicing of male speech, Beauvoir posits women's subjectivity—characterized by marginality—as an alienated presence or trace within the interanimation of philosophical, psychoanalytic, and Marxist discourses. At the same time, her representations of women's speech voice a collective subjectivity from the social space of marginality. Women's lived experience—to the extent that it is excluded from formal discourse—is represented in the text only by the untheorized speech of women novelists, diarists, and psychiatric patients. In Beauvoir's account of lived experience, women's marginal discourses—including her own philosophy—answer the claims of men's theories of women. In the process, the discourses of women become

¹ Among the best recent discussions is Bauer.

² "également impuissantes à enfermer une femme concrète" (*Deuxième sexe* I 105).

³ See Bakhtin's discussion of double voicing in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

reaccented toward a revisioning of femininity. Beauvoir's text interweaves languages of and about women, performing the self-other relations of women that she theorizes—relations shifting among opposition, alterity, subordination, complicity, recognition, and independence.

The struggle in *The Second Sex* over the image of woman may be analyzed through aspects of Bakhtinian theory. Bakhtin's "Epic and Novel" contrasts the epic image of the human being—distant and mythical, "a function of the plot fate assigns him" (36)—with the image characteristic of novelized forms, in which the individual is either "greater than his fate, or less than his condition as a man. He cannot become once and for all a clerk, a landowner, a merchant, a fiancé, a jealous lover, a father and so forth" (37). As Beauvoir argues, the individual can no more become, forever, a daughter, mistress, wife, mother, or prostitute. *The Second Sex* extends to women the open-ended image of the human that appears in both existentialism and Bakhtinian theory. It supplants the mythic image of Woman, wholly contained by her situation and fate, and elaborates an image of woman for whom there is, in Bakhtin's words, "no mere form that would be able to incarnate once and forever all of [her] human possibilities and needs" (37).

Bakhtin observes that other literary forms, including philosophical prose, have become "novelized" and proposes that the novel is "a different breed . . . the future of all literature. . . . In the presence of the novel, all other genres somehow have a different resonance. A lengthy battle for the novelization of the other genres began, a battle to drag them into a zone of contact with reality" (39). Novelized genres position the author "in a zone of contact with the world he is depicting" and are based in "memory of one's own contemporaneity and of one's own self" (28, 24). Nonmonumental and deheroizing, novelized memory is structured around a single life rather than preexisting chronological

patterns of fathers or generations. Contemporaneous and modern, temporally oriented toward the present and future, novelized genres pass judgment on the past of epic memory by satirizing myth, legend, and heroizing. The shift from the past toward the future produces utopian overtones. (24-27).

Beauvoir investigates the philosophical problem of "whether and how women exist" (Bauer 50) through a *novelized* form of philosophical discourse. *The Second Sex* is an unconventional philosophical work grounded in the present and future of novelized temporality and having women as its collective or composite subject. Beauvoir presents a nonmonumental and demythologizing view of both male ideologies and women's lived experience, psychology, and sexuality. Exploring images of women in historical, literary, and philosophical memory, Volume I critiques a patriarchal past and tradition.⁴ Drawing on psychoanalytic models that refer the sources of high art and social institutions to libidinal drives, Beauvoir traces the "bad faith" of men's myths and ideologies to their fears of the flesh, especially the mother's body. Volume II investigates women's lived experience in the present and development as sexual subjects; here the influence of psychoanalysis is even more striking. A final section, "Toward Liberation,"⁵ completes the judgment of past times by looking toward the future.

In Volume I, Beauvoir uses "Socratic degradations" to analyze the gender ideologies of European philosophers and writers. Socratic degradations are a "system of metaphors and comparisons borrowed from the lower spheres of life" and designed to "bring the world closer and familiarize it in order to investigate it fearlessly and freely" (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 25). Beauvoir also represents women as individuals and sexual subjects, thereby critiquing myths of Woman. Her representations of sexuality

⁴ The English text is published in one volume. *Deuxième sexe I* corresponds to pages xix-xxxvi and 1-263 of the English text; *Deuxième sexe II* corresponds to pages 265-732.

⁵ "Vers la libération."

and motherhood were denounced by many contemporary readers, who rejected Beauvoir's attitude of satirical inquiry (Bair 407-410). *The Second Sex* indeed has many features of the Menippean satire, as described by Bakhtin:

The liberty to crudely degrade, to turn inside out the lofty aspects of the world and world views, might sometimes seem shocking. But to this exclusive and comic familiarity must be added an intense spirit of inquiry and a utopian fantasy. Nothing is left of the distant epic image of the absolute past; the entire world and everything sacred in it is offered to us without any distancing at all, in a zone of crude contact, where we can grab at everything with our own hands. In this world, utterly familiarized, the subject moves with extreme and fantastic freedom; from heaven to earth, from earth to the nether world, from the present into the past, from the past into the future. ("Epic and Novel" 26)

Although the encyclopedic qualities of *The Second Sex* have rightly been traced to Beauvoir's phenomenological and sociological concerns, the satirical and familiarizing humor by which she links disparate ideas, personalities, and eras is closer in spirit to the Bakhtinian novel and its staging of socio-ideological struggles.

Beauvoir uses familiarizing satire in her comments on Freud's theory of penis envy. She proposes that the child's entourage "confers value on the child . . . in conferring it on his double," the penis (271); the girl therefore envies the penis as a signifier of the male's elevated status.⁶ According to Beauvoir, the girl appears privileged in early childhood, when bodily contact and indulgent looks protect her from feelings of anguish and solitude, whereas the boy is expected to be "a little man." As a result, "Many boys, frightened by the hard independence to which they are condemned, wish they were girls" (271).⁷ Beauvoir cites several famous men as examples, defining them exclusively in terms of the attitude each adopts toward the penis. She refers first to Maurice Sachs, who confesses in *Le Sabbat*, "I wanted passionately to be a girl, and I pursued my

⁶ "On valorisera donc l'enfant en valorisant son double" (*Deuxième sexe II* 19).

⁷ "Beaucoup de garçons, effrayés de la dure indépendance à laquelle on les condamne, souhaitent alors être des filles" (*Deuxième sexe II* 17).

unawareness of male grandeur to the point of claiming to piss sitting down" (271).⁸ She identifies Sachs as homosexual but fails to mention that he was both a collaborator and, on his mother's side, a Jew; the refusal of "male grandeur" metonymically replaces the political paradox of a Jewish collaborator.⁹ Citing another figure well-known in France, Charles Maurras of *L'Action Française*, Beauvoir goes on to argue that if the boy at first appears less privileged than his sisters, "it is because one has grander plans for him" (271).¹⁰ Although Maurras sympathized with many Nazi goals, including anti-Semitism, his conservative, monarchist vision of the French nation compelled him to reject the politics of collaboration. Beauvoir refers to none of this but merely comments: "Maurras recounts that he was jealous of a younger brother whom his mother and grandmother were cajoling. His father took his hand and led him from the room, saying to him: 'We are men, let us leave those women'" (271).¹¹ She then describes how adults, as compensation for the independence they demand of the boy, encourage him to be proud of his manhood, represented by the penis:

Mothers and nurses perpetuate the tradition that identifies the phallus and the male idea; . . . they treat the infantile penis with remarkable complacency. Rabelais conveys to us the games and comments of Gargantua's nurses, and history has preserved those of the nurses of Louis XIII. (271)¹²

From Maurice Sachs through Louis XIII, *The Second Sex* presents a spectrum of men

⁸ "Je souhaitai passionnément d'être fille et je poussai l'inconscience de la grandeur d'être homme jusqu'à prétendre pisser assis" (*Deuxième sexe II* 17-18).

⁹ See Modiano's satirical portrait of Sachs. For a discussion of Sachs's relationship with Violette Leduc, who also knew Beauvoir, see Houlding.

¹⁰ "c'est qu'on a sur lui de plus grands desseins" (*Deuxième sexe II* 18).

¹¹ "Maurras raconte qu'il était jaloux d'un cadet que sa mère et sa grand-mère cajolait: son père le saisit par la main et l'emmena hors de la chambre: 'Nous sommes des hommes; laissons ces femmes', lui dit-il" (*Deuxième sexe II* 18).

¹² "Mères et nourrices perpétuent la tradition qui assimile le phallus et l'idée de mâle . . . elles traitent le pénis enfantin avec une complaisance singulière. Rabelais nous rapporte les jeux et les propos des nourrices de Gargantua; l'histoire a retenu ceux des nourrices de Louis XIII" (*Deuxième sexe II* 18).

who have regarded the penis as a masculine double. Where Sartre and others attacked collaborators for assuming a "feminine" position in relation to the German occupiers, Beauvoir instead satirizes Freud's concept of femininity.¹³

Beauvoir's project in *The Second Sex* parallels Bakhtin's analysis of discourse in the novel in another way: the concern with shifts in self-other relations. Bakhtin argues that the theme of the novel, as a genre, is the inadequacy of the subject's fate and situation to the individual or collective self. The novel arises in times of social change, disintegration, and struggle, as the subject acquires the ideological and linguistic initiative necessary to change her own image in inner speech. When there is a breakdown in the unity between inner and outer representations of the self, there begins a search for a new point of view on one's own self, creating a new epistemological need for the answering speech of the other. Bakhtin's definition applies to Beauvoir's search for a new point of view on woman, one that diverges from her historically determined definition as the absolute Other. Women have been defined in formal discourse largely by the speech of men; Beauvoir cannot insert her "I" into philosophical speech without confronting the problem of sexual difference. To elaborate a new perspective on women, therefore, she must establish a new relation to others through her speech. This is precisely what *The Second Sex* does by reaccenting male discourse. Moreover, the composite voicing of women subjects, including the authorial persona of independent woman, establishes an altered context of signification. Finally, although Beauvoir's projection of an adequate readership for her text has proven stubbornly utopic in the context of much disciplinary study, it has had a powerful mobilizing effect on previously imaginary audiences of women readers.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir discovers that she can begin to speak of herself with authenticity only by first displacing the discourses that monologically define her as other.

¹³ Sartre, "Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?"

An account of her analysis of women's lived experience should therefore study the interplay of discourses in the text. But first, how does Beauvoir define authentic speech? What might it mean for her to speak of herself with authenticity, and how is such speech to be distinguished from inauthenticity or from the idioms given by others?

Beauvoir's concept of authenticity shares certain assumptions with those defined by Heidegger and Michel Leiris. For Heidegger, the characteristic of *being-with-others* through a common project—in the mode of the *mitsein*—is fundamental to human reality; no subjectivity exists prior to this relation. As Sartre comments, Heidegger regards the relation of *being-with-others* or *mitsein* as an "essential structure of my being" (*Being and Nothingness* 330). Sartre rejects the concept of *mitsein*, arguing that the fundamental form of relation is the frontal opposition of I and the other—the mode of *being-for-others*. Yet for Heidegger, the other is not an *object*; the relation of *mitsein* expresses a fundamental solidarity. As Sartre observes:

"with" does not intend the reciprocal relation of recognition and of conflict which would result from the appearance of a human-reality other than mine *in the midst of* the world. It expresses rather a sort of ontological solidarity for the exploitation of this world. . . . to be-in-the-world is to haunt the world, not to be ensnared in it; and it is in my "being-in-the-world" that the Other determines me. Our relation is not a *frontal* opposition but rather an *oblique* interdependence. (*Being and Nothingness* 331)

According to Heidegger, authentic being stands out from the common ground of the *mitsein*, whereas inauthentic being exists only in the anonymous mode of *they*. In the *mitsein*, I am not yet autonomous and authentic and do not seek recognition or reciprocity from the other; rather, I become known to myself through a common world of instruments. Sartre comments that in Heidegger's account:

through the world I make known to myself what I am. In particular when I am in the unauthentic mode of the "they," the world refers to me a sort of impersonal reflection of my

unauthentic possibilities in the form of instruments and complexes of instruments which belong to "everybody" and which belong to me so far as I am "everybody": ready-made clothes, common means of transportation, parks, gardens, public places, shelters made for *anyone* who may take shelter there, *etc.* Thus I make myself known as *anybody*. (*Being and Nothingness* 331-32)

I must earn authenticity and individuality by "standing out on the undifferentiated ground of the human by means of the impulse of my freedom, by the choice of my unique possibilities" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 333). Beauvoir adopts this Heideggerian definition of authenticity when she represents her situation as author of *The Second Sex* in terms of defining herself against a common ground through speech acts: "if I want to define myself I must first of all declare: 'I am a woman'; this truth constitutes the ground from which all other claims will stand out" (xxi).¹⁴ Here the choice of "unique possibilities" conceals a forced gesture, for she must stand out from the ground of "woman," rather than the human. In the anonymous mode of *they*, which reveals her inauthentic *being-with-others*, she is defined through myths of the feminine; she must first say, "I am a woman." By contrast, Heidegger proposes to affirm his individuality by standing out on the undifferentiated ground of the human, the universal. Beauvoir glimpses this same ground shifting beneath her feet and asks: What does it mean to find myself placed on the common ground of "woman"? What does it mean to choose myself in a world of instruments—ideologies—that first make me known to myself as Woman?

Seeking to stand out from the common ground of the human, Beauvoir finds her authenticity constrained though not wholly foreclosed. Some limits are, of course, inherent in language and other symbolic systems, since they are instruments elaborated by a human reality that is simultaneously *mitsein* and separation. As Beauvoir states:

¹⁴ "Si je veux me définir je suis obligée d'abord de déclarer: 'Je suis une femme'; cette vérité constitue le fond sur lequel s'enlèvera toute autre affirmation" (*Deuxième sexe I* 14). See Moi's discussion of this passage in *What Is a Woman?* 169-250.

The symbol does not appear to me to be an allegory elaborated by a mysterious unconscious; it is rather the perception of a meaning through an analogue of the significant object. From the fact that all existents share an identical existential situation and must confront an identical given reality, symbolic meanings are revealed in the same way to many individuals. Symbolism did not come down from heaven nor rise up from subterranean depths; it has been elaborated, like language, by that human reality which is at once *mitsein* and separation. (47)¹⁵

Beauvoir included these comments in her critique of Freud, who proposed that the unconscious produces universal ideas—for example, the equation of penis and baby, which, he argues, is central to the development of femininity. Freud argued that universal unconscious ideas of this kind are products of human culture, acquired in response to events in human history and recapitulated in the early life of the child, according to the principle that ontology recapitulates phylogeny.¹⁶ At issue, therefore, is not the nature of certain symbols—both she and Freud regard them as effects of human history—but the processes by which signs are elaborated by individual and collective subjects. Beauvoir suggests that shared meanings arise among people who confront a common "existential situation." Yet she must also account for the emergence of individual consciousness from the *mitsein*—an event that Freud regarded as the normative outcome of the strivings of ego instincts. Separation is also fundamental for Sartre, who rejects Heidegger's *mitsein* as a useless concept for resolving the concrete, psychological problem of recognition of the other. By contrast, Beauvoir superimposes the *being-for-others* of Hegel and Sartre on the *being-with-others* of Heidegger as distinct

¹⁵ "Le symbole ne nous apparaît pas comme une allégorie élaborée par un mystérieux inconscient: c'est l'appréhension d'une signification à travers un analogon de l'objet signifiant; du fait de l'identité de la situation existentielle à travers tous les existants et de l'identité de la facticité qu'ils ont à affronter, les significations se dévoilent de la même manière à quantité d'individus; le symbolisme n'est pas tombé du ciel ni surgi des profondeurs souterraines: il a été élaboré, tout comme le langage, par la réalité humaine qui est *mitsein* en même temps que séparation" (*Deuxième sexe* I 89).

¹⁶ This argument is elaborated in *Totem and Taboo*.

historical stages. She argues that although autonomous and separate existence is an *a priori* drive of human consciousness, it did not assert itself as an objective force until humans had developed tools for the domination of nature, enabling each to apprehend himself as autonomous activity (56-57).¹⁷ By this theory, Beauvoir interprets relations of *being-for-others* historically, as the emergence of the leader and, later, of others from the clan or collectivity. Men's greater role in the creation of the human world of instruments has in turn altered the nature of the common *mitsein* and led to the alienation of women within it.

Beauvoir and Leiris became close friends during the war (Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir* 284). She admired *Manhood* (*L'âge d'homme*), a confessional work in which Leiris sought to introduce "even the shadow of a bull's horn into a literary work" (154)¹⁸—to transform the act of writing through risk. The first seed of *The Second Sex* was a confessional project on the same model:

I wanted to write about myself. I liked Leiris' *L'Âge d'homme*: such sacrificial essays [*essais-martyrs*], in which the author strips himself bare without excuses, appealed to me. I let the idea begin to take shape, made a few notes, and talked to Sartre about it. I realized that the first question to come up was: What has it meant to me to be a woman? At first I thought I could dispose of that pretty quickly. (*Force of Circumstance* 94)¹⁹

Wanting in the years after the war to write a personal confession, Beauvoir abandoned the project for an analysis of women's collective experience. This story provides an important rhetorical context for *The Second Sex*. *Manhood* was first published in 1939; it

¹⁷ *Deuxième sexe* 100-01.

¹⁸ "ne fut-ce que l'ombre d'une corne de taureau dans une oeuvre littéraire" (*L'âge d'homme* 11).

¹⁹ "j'avais envie de parler de moi. J'aimais *L'âge d'homme* de Leiris; j'avais du goût pour les essais-martyrs où on s'explique sans prétexte. Je commençai à y rêver, à prendre quelques notes, et j'en parlai à Sartre. Je m'avisai qu'une première question se posait: qu'est-ce que ça avait signifié pour moi d'être une femme? J'ai d'abord cru pouvoir m'en débarrasser vite" (*Force des choses* I 135).

was reissued in 1946 with a preface, "The Autobiographer as *Torero*,"²⁰ in which Leiris recounts that he had reached his majority in 1922, "four years after the war which, like so many other boys of his generation, he had experienced as scarcely more than a long vacation" (153).²¹ He sought, therefore, to prove himself through another form of danger by writing in brutal honesty of himself. Yet a second world war cast doubt on the risks encountered through writing:

On this scale, the personal problems with which *Manhood* is concerned are obviously insignificant: whatever might have been, in the best of cases, its strength and its sincerity, the poet's inner agony, weighed against the horrors of war, counts for no more than a toothache over which it would be graceless to groan: what is the use, in the world's excruciating uproar, of this faint moan over such narrowly limited and individual problems? (155)²²

No longer believing that writing can confer manhood, Leiris confesses that he aspired to be like a bullfighter:

The matador who . . . reveals the whole quality of his style just when he is most threatened: that is what enthralled me, that is what I wanted to be. By means of an autobiography dealing with a realm in which discretion is *de rigueur*—a confession whose publication would be dangerous to the degree that it would be compromising and likely to make more difficult, by making more explicit, my private life—I intended to rid myself for good of certain agonizing images, at the same time that I revealed my features with the maximum of clarity and as much for my own use as to dissipate any erroneous sense of myself which others might

²⁰ "De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie"

²¹ "quatre ans après la guerre, qu'il avait traversée, comme tant d'autres garçons de sa génération, en n'y voyant guère que de longues vacances" (*L'âge d'homme* 9).

²² "A cette échelle, les tourments personnels dont il est question dans *L'Age d'homme* sont évidemment peu de chose: quelle qu'ait pu être, dans le meilleur des cas, sa force et sa sincérité, la douleur intime du poète ne pèse rien devant les horreurs de la guerre et fait figure de rage de dents sur laquelle il devient déplacée to gémir; que viendrait faire, dans l'énorme vacarme torturé du monde, ce mince gémissement sur des difficultés étroitement limitées et individuelles?" (*L'âge d'homme* 11).

have. (155-56)²³

Surveying Le Havre, a city devastated by war, Leiris comments with irony on the risks of the writer but never abandons the concept. Rather, he calls on the writer to "contribute evidence to the trial of our present system of values and tip the scales . . . toward the liberation of *all* men, without which none can achieve his own" (164).²⁴ The same sentiment pervades much of Beauvoir's work.

When Beauvoir termed *Manhood* an *essai-martyr*, she referred to more than personal risk. In an essay on Georges Bataille, Sartre defines the *essai-martyre* as a genre that exhibits "suffering."²⁵ The author exposes the signs of human misery in his ulcers and wounds, veering from philosophical critique to confession, from abstract reasoning to *ecce homo*. As Sartre says of Georges Bataille, "If he reveals himself, he does it to prove something. We have scarcely glimpsed his miserable nakedness and he has already covered himself, and off we go, reasoning with him about the system of Hegel or the *cogito* of Descartes. And then the argument suddenly shifts and the man reappears."²⁶ Sartre also mentions Pascal for his "feverish contempt and the will to speak

²³ "Le matador qui . . . montre toute la qualité de son style à l'instant qu'il est le plus menacé: voilà ce qui m'émerveillait, voilà ce que je voulais être. Par le moyen d'une autobiographie portant sur un domaine pour lequel, d'ordinaire, la réserve est de rigueur—confession dont la publication me serait périlleuse dans la mesure où elle serait pour moi compromettante et susceptible de rendre plus difficile, en la faisant plus claire, ma vie privée—je visais à me débarrasser décidément de certaines représentations gênantes en même temps qu'à dégager avec le maximum de pureté mes traits, aussi bien à mon usage propre qu'afin de dissiper toute vue erronée de moi que pourrait prendre autrui" (*L'âge d'homme* 12-13).

²⁴ "apporter des pièces à conviction au procès de notre actuel système de valeurs et peser . . . dans le sens de l'affranchissement de *tous* les hommes, faute de quoi nul ne saurait parvenir à son affranchissement particulier" (25).

²⁵ "question de supplice" ("Un Nouveau mystique" 134). Note that Sartre uses the word *martyre* ("martyrdom"), whereas Beauvoir uses *martyr* ("martyr").

²⁶ "S'il se montre, c'est pour prouver. A peine nous a-t-il fait entrevoir sa nudité misérable que déjà il s'est couvert, et nous voilà partis à raisonner avec lui sur le système de Hegel ou le *cogito* de Descartes. Et puis le raisonnement tourne court et l'homme reparait" (134).

quickly";²⁷ Nietzsche, with his "impassioned symbolism" and "tone of prophesy";²⁸ and the surrealists, who desire to establish "a kind of carnal promiscuity" between author and reader.²⁹ Lastly, he mentions *Manhood* and Leiris's aesthetic of confessional risk. This is the genre of confession that appealed to Beauvoir; by revealing the lived experience of women—exposing the alienation of women's embodiment—and by accepting personal risks in doing so, Beauvoir adopted some of the goals and methods of the *essai-martyr*.

Like Leiris, Beauvoir adopted the concept of aesthetic risk after a devastating war, in which she never assumed the personal risks of fighting the Nazi Occupation.³⁰ As suggested by the references to Sachs, Maurras, and others, *The Second Sex* critiques the myths not only of Woman, but of manliness and the State. Also like Leiris, she wanted to create an authentic self-portrait both for her own use and to dissipate erroneous views that others held of her. Yet a project of aesthetic risk and self-definition proved to be even more vexed for Beauvoir than for Leiris. She could not speak with authenticity or challenge erroneous views of herself without taking on the vast question of: "What has it meant for me to be a woman?" In a sense, Beauvoir's analysis of femininity prepared the ground for her autobiographical project of the late 1950s by unmasking the myths and institutions that formed, in part, her situation as a woman:

wanting to talk about myself, I became aware that to do so I should first have to describe the condition of woman in general; first I considered the myths that men have forged about her through all their cosmologies, religions, superstitions, ideologies and literature. (*Force of Circumstance* 185)³¹

²⁷ "ce mépris fiévreux, et cette volonté de dire vite" (134).

²⁸ "symbolisme passionné"; "ton de prédication prophétique" (134).

²⁹ "une sorte de promiscuité charnelle" (135).

³⁰ For discussions of Beauvoir's activities during the Occupation, see Bair 215-96; and Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is*.

³¹ "voulant parler de moi, je m'avisai qu'il me fallait décrire la condition féminine: je considérais d'abord les mythes que les hommes en ont forgés à travers les cosmologies, les religions, les superstitions, les idéologies, les littératures" (*Force des choses* I 257-58).

What Beauvoir discovers at the outset of *The Second Sex* is that the word "I"—the sign of the self—never refers to a purely self-defining consciousness. Rather, it is an ideological sign accented by the overall context in which she speaks: it marks a subject within culture. The ideological accenting of woman's "I" becomes the starting point for *The Second Sex* when Beauvoir observes: "if I want to define myself I must first of all declare: 'I am a woman'" (xxi).³² There she must begin. What Beauvoir chooses to say is "I," but the word becomes reaccented to say, "I, a woman, lack."

Sartre suggests a different, but related, way to understand the problem. He proposes that the other is defined "not as the absence of a consciousness in relation to the body which I see but by the absence of the world which I perceive, an absence discovered at the very heart of my perception of this world" (*Being and Nothingness* 344). The other's presence poses the threat of a world brought into being and organized by the other, who disintegrates *my* world by positing another world, giving familiar objects a different order than I have given them. In this way, the other calls my world into question and constitutes an absence in its very midst. And since I live in a world "haunted" by others, my concrete situation is revealed not only by my own ends—by instruments having a meaning given to them by my free project—but by the other as "a center of reference to which these meanings refer." The existence of divers meanings implies more than another choice of myself: it implies "the plurality of meaningful systems each of which refers to a consciousness which I am not" (*Being and Nothingness* 654-55). In Sartrean terms, Beauvoir discovers a black hole at the heart of her world when she encounters an excess of meanings in her "I," for these meanings have the other as their center of reference. Beauvoir's world, organized by her consciousness,

³² "Si je veux me définir je suis obligée d'abord de déclarer: 'Je suis une femme'" (*Deuxième sexe* I 14).

disintegrates when she begins to speak of herself in the presence of others—men for whom she becomes "I—a woman, lack." To speak from this disintegrated world is to assume the risks of the *essai-martyr* as an *ecce femina*. Refusing to become an object in another's world, Beauvoir enters into the struggle, posing her individual existence through speech.

Bakhtinian theory can be usefully applied to the rhetorical structure of *The Second Sex*. As Bakhtin argues, words are not ideologically unified, but unstable and accented by social and ideological struggles. Novels, moreover, represent social and ideological conflict through heteroglossia—the interanimation of social languages. The heteroglossia of prose discourse, and especially the novel, usually appears as free indirect discourse inflecting the narrative voice with the speech of characters. These interanimating languages are associated with social groups as well as individuals. We are given the words of characters as social ideologies in which "an alien utterance begins to sound like a socially alien language . . . within the boundaries of one and the same national language" ("Discourse in the Novel" 285).

By contrast, Nancy Bauer distinguishes between "ordinary" and "metaphysical" registers in Beauvoir's text: between a public space of ordinary concepts in which Beauvoir identifies as a woman, and a space of philosophical concepts in which it becomes possible for her to ask, "What is a woman?" Bauer argues:

The problem for someone who wants to conduct an investigation into the nature of sex difference that is at once philosophical and feminist is to figure out how to do so without denying the social fact of sex difference. You have to be able at one and the same time to question what a woman is *and* to identify yourself as a woman—or, as the case may be, as a man. You have to operate simultaneously at the level of our ordinary concepts—the level, after all, on which feminism situates itself—and at the level of philosophy, where these ordinary concepts are put in question. (40-41)

Having distinguished ordinary and philosophical concepts, Bauer argues that the ordinary meanings of "woman" refer to a public identity and are, moreover, monologic:

what Beauvoir finds unavoidable, at the very outset of her work, is the *ordinary* fact of her finding and taking herself to be, in the first instance, a being whose identity is at root . . . *public*. The problem, after all, with being a "woman" is being *treated* as such by other people. (72)

Bauer's definitions refer more accurately to recent feminist debates than to the uses of ordinary and philosophical concepts of "woman" in *The Second Sex*. For Beauvoir, the problem does not arise from meanings that are ordinary or public but from the attitude of individuals and collectivities who would escape an existential condition of transcendence or *becoming* for a static condition of *being*. Within this fundamental tension, women's transcendence has been foreclosed by philosophical as well as ordinary meanings, both of which articulate public forms of what Beauvoir calls the "myth of Woman." Moreover, the discourse of *The Second Sex* reveals tensions within, as well as between, ordinary and philosophical meanings of "woman." As Beauvoir argues, the myth of woman has evolved in response to historical, social, and existential pressures: being treated as a "woman" by other people becomes a problem not because public identity is inherently essentialist, but because "woman" has been defined through social contestation as a category of eternal lack. As Bakhtin argues, ordinary speech is often more dialogic and double-voiced than the tightly-controlled speech of philosophical and scientific discourse. One would expect this to be especially true of speech about women, given their long exclusion from philosophy and science. Beauvoir uses many examples of women's language to reaccent and reinterpret ordinary, philosophical, and psychoanalytic discourses. This is central to her investigation of women's lived experience, for the reaccenting of women's language removes it from the sphere of male discourse. The

everyday "I"—her own and other women's—is crucial to Beauvoir's text not so much as "the one thing that she can take for granted, the one thing on which she can ground her philosophical inquiry," in the manner of Descartes' cogito, but precisely because it is the site of definitional struggle (Moi, *What Is A Woman?* 188).³³

Sartre describes the existential choice of transcendence or immanence as a contest between the worlds of I and the other. Bakhtin's theory of language allows us to reconfigure this choice as a struggle over the languages of social worlds. Sartre lives within a contest of gazes having no final resolution, since in theory each consciousness can disintegrate the world of the other, making him or her into a thing. Beauvoir, on the other hand, argues that women are the absolute Other: events have seemingly been settled in favor of men; women have relinquished subjectivity, becoming objects in the world seen and spoken by men. Beauvoir's project in *The Second Sex* of speaking authentically from the ground of the human, and unsettling the words that make women into things, therefore demands answerability—the presence of response—of the kind theorized by Bakhtin ("Author and Hero").

Beauvoir invents rhetorical strategies by which to answer and thereby decenter the languages—ordinary, mythical, literary, philosophical, and scientific—through which she must speak herself. Her double-voiced and allusive method of representing her society's discourses of woman has obscured our understanding of her responses to them. In particular, her detailed response to psychoanalysis, which I will discuss in the second half of this chapter, remains largely overlooked by critics. In Volume I, Beauvoir uses Hegelian and existentialist ontology to argue against myths of the "eternal feminine" and the determinism of scientific discourses of sexual difference—biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism. These disciplines form a flawed triad, each "equally

³³ See Bauer's analysis of *The Second Sex* as a rewriting of Descartes' *Meditations*.

inadequate to encompass a concrete woman" (*Second Sex* 60).³⁴ Yet Beauvoir also gives a place in her analysis of lived experience to some of their concepts. Volume II responds to psychoanalytic theories of femininity with existentialism and lived experience as it is spoken by women novelists, memoirists, and psychoanalytic patients themselves. In this way, she creates a counter-psychology of women that rejects the causality—the "bad faith"—of scientific discourses of sexual difference.

* * *

The term "lived experience," which is also the title to Volume II of *The Second Sex*,³⁵ refers to a phenomenological term for the study of the ways in which the world appears, or presents itself, to us in experience. Beauvoir had long been familiar with the term and had used its German form, *erlebnis*, in her personal correspondence with Sartre as early as 1937, when she wrote to him, "I've had a night punctuated by the most passionate little *Erlebnisse* for you—which has meant that I've slept very badly. I had a delightful dream about Maurice Chevalier, who was simultaneously Colette and very surprised by this: 'Isn't she a woman?', he was saying" (*Letters to Sartre* 8). Beauvoir's *Erlebnisse* or lived experiences arise from moments of desire for Sartre. Rejecting the concept of *mitsein*, Sartre defined such moments as purely subjective. Yet, given their pledge of full disclosure to each other, Beauvoir's lived experiences of desire, whether for Sartre or for others, were neither private nor purely subjective. Rather, these *Erlebnisse* arise from the *mitsein* of the couple as words having Sartre as object and interlocutor. They represent her relation to him through the desire created by absence.

In this context of social speech, Beauvoir's dream may be seen as an early staging of the othering and alienation of women, which she analyzes a decade later in *The Second Sex*. Indeed, the scene foreshadows the moment in which the act of self-authoring reveals

³⁴ "également impuissantes à enfermer une femme concrète" (*Deuxième sexe I* 105).

³⁵ The English edition translates "L'expérience vécue" as "Woman's Life Today" (265).

an excess of meaning in her "I." Similarly, Beauvoir's moments of desire or *erlebnis* in relation to Sartre lead to speech and constitute her as a separate being—at once a woman and a writer. The dream figure, Chevalier, also discovers separation—his embodiment as Colette, a woman and famous writer. The dream may be "delightful" to Beauvoir in part because it is an ambitious dream: in 1937, she had not yet published. It also suggests that the hero—the *chevalier* or knight—may be a writing woman. The figure of Chevalier is embedded in human culture as well: the choice of a writing *woman* to embody his separate and gendered consciousness expresses the cultural logic by which the sexed body must be a woman's body. *The Second Sex* would later describe man's insistence that he is the universal, whereas woman's particularity is necessarily sexed:

Man superbly forgets that his anatomy also includes hormones and testicles. He comprehends his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as weighed down by everything specific to it: a hindrance, a prison. (xxi-xxii)³⁶

The dream anticipates Beauvoir's arguments in *The Second Sex* in other ways. Chevalier's double consciousness, where he is "simultaneously Colette and very surprised by this," suggests women's alienation and the girl's shock at discovering her cultural status. The dream enacts a moment in which Beauvoir's perception of herself as a writer, one who would speak her lived experience, is inevitably crossed with the knowledge that she is gendered—a woman. This moment of discovery of her situation as a writing woman informs the opening pages of *The Second Sex*.

When *The Second Sex* first defines woman as the absolute Other, Beauvoir refers this concept to Hegel's definition of a general category of the other as "a fundamental

³⁶ "L'homme oublie superbement que son anatomie comporte aussi des hormones, des testicules. Il saisit son corps comme une relation directe et normale avec le monde qu'il croit appréhender dans son objectivité, tandis qu'il considère le corps de la femme comme alourdi par tout ce qui le spécifie: un obstacle, une prison" (*Deuxième sexe* I 15).

category of human thought" (xxiii).³⁷ Using Hegel's *a priori* category, she explains how consciousness renders others as objects:

following Hegel, we discover in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject posits itself only by opposing: it intends to affirm itself as the essential and to constitute the other as inessential, as object. (xxiii)³⁸

However, Beauvoir distinguishes man's myth of Woman as the Other from Hegel's more general category, which is assumed to be a universal, *a priori*, and reciprocal process.

The myth of Woman, Beauvoir argues, is an historical invention (though not a specific event, such as American slavery) and an expression of male privilege. Despite its universal claims, it externalizes the partial viewpoint of male consciousness. In this context, it is significant that Beauvoir's dream explicitly stages a *man's* surprised recognition that he has become sexed—a writing woman. If we locate Beauvoir inside the frame of her dream, then the figure of Beauvoir as Chevalier as Colette presents an image of reciprocity in which both woman and man discover themselves in the other. The problem of reciprocity in the relation of woman to man is central to *The Second Sex*.

Sartre defines *erlebnis* or "lived experience" as "a purely subjective experience (*Erlebnis*)."³⁹ This is in contrast to Beauvoir and follows from his rejection of the concept of *mitsein*. Sartre writes that the We-subject is "a purely subjective experience (*Erlebnis*)" that "does not appear on the foundation of a concrete ontological relation with others and does not realize any *Mitsein*" (*Being and Nothingness* 429, 425).³⁹ As we have seen, Heidegger's concept of *mitsein* refers to an original relation of *being-with-others* through a common project, rather than to Sartrean *being-for-others* with its

³⁷ "une catégorie fondamentale de la pensée humaine" (*Deuxième sexe* I 16).

³⁸ "suivant Hegel on découvre dans la conscience elle-même une fondamentale hostilité à l'égard de toute autre conscience; le sujet ne se pose qu'en s'opposant: il prétend s'affirmer comme l'essentiel et constituer l'autre en inessentiel, en objet" (*Deuxième sexe* I 17).

³⁹ See Flynn 24, 216.

necessary alienation. Beauvoir identifies the reproductive couple as a *mitsein*:

it is not as individuals that human beings are defined in the first place. Men and women have never stood opposed to each other in single combat; the couple is an original *mitsein*, and always appears as a permanent or temporary element in a larger collectivity. Within these societies, which is more necessary to the species, male or female? (35)⁴⁰

Beauvoir argues that the reproductive couple arises within the original *mitsein* through both opposition and *being-with-others* in a common project: "The division of the sexes is a biological given, not a moment in human history. The opposition of male and female was apparent within a primordial *mitsein* and did not subjugate her. . . . Here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another" (xxv-xxvi).⁴¹ Although sexual difference has always existed, our lived experiences of it are the result of human choice and instrumentality. Woman's status as the Other results from her seeming exclusion from the indestructible *mitsein*, an effect of human history rather than biological division.

Beauvoir's belief in the Heideggerian *mitsein* suggests that by the terms *erlehnis* and "lived experience" she means neither the purely subjective experience of Sartre nor the abstract whole of Hegelian consciousness, but concrete human lives within society. In *The Prime of Life*, Beauvoir traces her disillusionment with Hegel's abstract universals to the war and her experiences during the Nazi Occupation. The Occupation forced upon

⁴⁰ "ce n'est pas comme individus que les hommes se définissent d'abord; jamais hommes et femmes ne se sont défiés en combats singuliers; le couple est un *mitsein* originel; et lui-même apparaît toujours comme un élément fixe ou transitoire d'une collectivité plus vaste; au sein de ces sociétés, qui du mâle ou de la femelle est le plus nécessaire à l'espèce?" (*Deuxième sexe* I 75).

⁴¹ "La division des sexes est en effet un donné biologique, non un moment de l'histoire humaine. C'est au sein d'un *mitsein* originel que leur opposition s'est dessinée et elle ne l'a pas brisée. . . . C'est là ce qui caractérise fondamentalement la femme: elle est l'Autre au coeur d'une totalité dont les deux termes sont nécessaires l'un à l'autre" (*Deuxième sexe* I 19-20).

her an ambiguous situation of isolation and passivity that bordered, she sensed, on collaboration. Bound to others in a disaster of history, Beauvoir recognized her situation only belatedly and failed to participate in acts of resistance (*Prime of Life* 373-74).⁴² The wartime experience later prompted her to develop a less individualistic definition of freedom, in which we must assume responsibility for our inevitable connections with others. Beauvoir began to build an existential ethics based on Heidegger's concept of the relation of each person to "human reality," and she concluded that although each consciousness is formed in the movement of society, one's actions may reject or confirm the common choice:

Heidegger had convinced me that "human reality" accomplishes and expresses itself in each existent; conversely, each person engages with and compromises that reality *as a whole*. Depending on whether a society proposes to move toward freedom or endures passive bondage, the individual comprehends himself as either a man among men or an ant in an anthill; yet each one of us has the power to question the collective choice, to reject or confirm it. (*Prime of Life* 373)⁴³

Forced into unwilling complicity with the Nazi occupiers and later disillusioned by the postwar political struggles over public discussion of torture and the purging of collaborators, Beauvoir lived with the problems of political marginality and a resulting sense of complicity throughout much of the 1940s. Her need to understand complicity in oppression led her to analyze not only the political and ethical conflicts arising from the war, but the position of women in society.⁴⁴ Beauvoir's description in *The Prime of Life*

⁴² *Force de l'âge* 538.

⁴³ "Heidegger m'avait convaincue qu'en chaque existant s'accomplit et s'exprime 'la réalité humaine': inversement, chacun l'engage et la compromet tout entière; selon qu'une société se projette vers la liberté ou s'accommode d'un inerte esclavage, l'individu se saisit comme un homme parmi les hommes, ou comme une fourmi dans une fourmilière: mais nous avons tous le pouvoir de mettre en question le choix collectif, de le récuser ou de l'entériner" (*Force de l'âge* 538).

⁴⁴ See *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (*Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*).

of her sense of powerlessness and complicity during the war echoes her analysis of the oppression of women:

But my guilt and remorse revealed that I had helped to create the situation imposed on me. The individual is not absorbed into the enveloping universe: enduring it, he acts on it, though it be through immobility itself. (*Prime of Life* 373)⁴⁵

Should we conclude that Beauvoir's understanding of women's complicity—the choice to become a thing—has its origin in political events of the war? Perhaps. Yet the reverse is also true. Beauvoir recalls the ways in which her wartime situation was marked by her sex. Her relationship with Sartre, for example, became strained after he returned from a German prisoner-of-war camp determined not to compromise with the Occupation (381). Beauvoir attributes this moral absolutism to Sartre's solidarity with other prisoners and contrasts it with the isolation and moral compromises of civilian life; indeed, Sartre was also forced into compromises as a civilian. It seems that from her earliest thinking about the problem of solidarity, Beauvoir had begun to reflect on the influence of gender on her equivocal solidarity with others. Before the war, she used the term *erlebnis* in gendered contexts in her private letters to Sartre. During the Occupation, she came to understand "lived experience" in social, gendered terms. Beauvoir's disillusionment during the war with Hegel's abstract universals and her analysis of French complicity and collaboration are, therefore, marked from the beginning by gender.

⁴⁵ "Mais cette situation qui m'était imposée, mes remords m'avaient découvert que j'avais contribué à la créer. L'individu ne se résorbe pas dans l'univers qui l'investit: tout en le supportant il agit sur lui, fût-ce par son immobilité même" (*Force de l'âge* 538).

(2)

The ultimate question is whether a woman is born or made.

- Ernest Jones, 1935¹

On ne naît pas femme: on le devient.

- Simone de Beauvoir, 1949²

Few scholars have acknowledged the extent or complexities of Beauvoir's response to psychoanalysis in Volume II of *The Second Sex*. Her detailed but allusive and double-voiced response to psychoanalysis has sunk like a pebble in a pond; although it has sent ripples in widening circles, its context became instantly invisible. Beauvoir's stated distrust of psychology, her rejection of basic Freudian principles, and above all her use of free indirect discourse have obscured the psychoanalytic sources of her study of women's sexual development and her use of case histories for information on women's sexuality. Contemporary French critics refused to comprehend Beauvoir's sexual dialogics as an alternative psychology, and instead denounced the book as obscene.³ Recent scholars continue to underestimate her engagement with psychoanalytic discourses of women's sexuality. Biographer Dierdre Bair, for example, refers to Beauvoir's "lifelong suspicion" of psychology and notes that in the last years of her life, Beauvoir often expressed the idea that it was "something to distrust or at least to be wary of" (*Simone de Beauvoir* 426, 655). At the same time, Bair acknowledges that in researching *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir was "inquisitive about contemporary scholarship" in psychology (*Simone de Beauvoir* 390). Yet she does not explore this contradiction, despite Beauvoir's own comments in *The Prime of Life* on her evolving response to psychoanalysis (22-23).⁴

¹ "Early Female Sexuality" 495.

² *Deuxième sexe II* 13.

³ Beauvoir describes contemporary French responses in *Force des choses I* 257-68; see also Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir* 407-10.

⁴ *Force de l'âge* 27-29.

There have been exceptions to this trend, mostly from feminist scholars with an interest in psychoanalysis.⁵ Toril Moi has argued that Beauvoir's:

rejection of psychoanalysis is based on the Sartrean grounds that the unconscious does not exist and that to claim that human dreams and actions have sexual signification is to posit the existence of essential meanings. When it comes to the phenomenological description of women's fantasies or behavior, however, Beauvoir is perfectly happy to accept psychoanalytic evidence. (Moi, "Alienation" 91)

However, Beauvoir's challenge to and revision of psychoanalysis goes far beyond a general adherence to Sartrean principles. In its structure, arguments, and details, Beauvoir's interpretation of women's lived experience reads as a direct response to the psychoanalytic debates on femininity of the 1920s and 1930s—and especially to the work of Helene Deutsch, whose comprehensive *Psychology of Women* is the most important psychoanalytic intertext for *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir's text voices detailed and oppositional interpretations of the case histories and words of women patients, as recorded by analysts and psychologists. In this, she recognizes that psychoanalysis creates "evidence" through acts of interpretation and theory building. This challenge to specific psychoanalytic interpretations is misrepresented by Moi's description of Beauvoir as "perfectly happy to accept psychoanalytic evidence." As Margaret Simons has argued,

rather than discard it, Beauvoir modified psychoanalytic theory using feminist, Marxist, and existentialist insights. She then utilized this revised psychoanalysis extensively as a mediator between the individual and society. Beauvoir saw the family as the locus of intersection of individual experience and historical forces operating in society. (Simons, "Beauvoir and Sartre" 177)

Beauvoir's engagement with psychoanalysis is driven by the absence of an alternative discourse on women's subjectivity. Beauvoir could not simply ignore or refute

⁵ See Charbonneau; Mitchell; and Moi, *What Is a Woman?*.

psychoanalysis; she found it necessary to appropriate and reinterpret it.

In the early work *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, published in 1905, Freud describes the clitoris as the leading erotogenic zone in female children, "homologous to the masculine genital zone" of the penis (86). Referring to observation and the conclusions of biology to justify his claim, he proposes that for both girls and boys, early childhood sexuality has an active, "masculine" character. In regard to auto-erotic activity, "owing to this uniformity there is no possibility of a distinction between the two sexes such as arises after puberty" (85). Freud's 1913 study of "Obsessional Neurosis" repeats the claim that early female sexuality is governed by the clitoris, "an organ that is essentially male," and he argues that the girl's final development in puberty "must eliminate this masculine sexuality and promote the vagina, a derivative of the cloaca, to the position of leading erotogenic zone" (96). Freud later withdrew his assumption of complete symmetry between the sexes in early childhood, when he theorized the girl's development in relation to the Oedipus complex. However, the active character of the girl's pre-Oedipal sexuality, and the related claim that she is "overcome by envy for the penis" when she discovers it in boys, remained central to his theory of female sexuality until his death, in 1939 (*Three Essays* 61).

By 1925, Freud had expanded his theory of femininity to include the observation that for girls as well as boys, the original object is the mother ("Some Psychological Consequences" 186). Taken together, Freud's hypotheses mean that girls are burdened with two developmental tasks not required of boys if they are to achieve "normal" heterosexuality in adulthood. That is, girls must change both their erotogenic zone and their object. The processes that lead girls to make such momentous changes, and their motives for doing so, became an important topic for psychoanalytic theory during the 1920s and 1930s. As Freud commented, in 1933, "In conformity with its peculiar nature,

psycho-analysis does not try to describe what a woman is—that would be a task it could scarcely perform—but sets about enquiring how she comes into being, how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition" ("Femininity" 144). Beauvoir was to take up this question as the basis for her discussion of women's lived experience.

Freud's description of how a woman comes into being—how she is made—is rendered doubtful by the fact that he uses the erotic life of the heterosexual man as the model for the erotic life of the "bisexual" child. As a result, he argues that femininity, whether in a man or woman, is produced by a combination of constitutional, traumatic, and cultural factors leading to a diversion from the active, phallic eroticism that supposedly dominates the life of both sexes in early childhood. Freud argues that when a man turns away from his active, phallic strivings, he will either sublimate them through cultural work or succumb to neurosis or perversion;⁶ when a woman adopts passive aims, however, they will open up a new path for "normal" development through her discovery of the vagina and her desire for a baby. Under normal circumstances, the girl will resolve her unconscious wish for a penis through motherhood. Although other resolutions are certainly possible, according to Freud they are unlikely to lead to successful adaptation in all but exceptional cases. Woman's lesser capacity for sublimation through cultural work, he argues, means that her successful development usually depends on maternity. Freud's willingness to acknowledge exceptional cases—but only as exceptional—may be seen in a reference to disagreements with women analysts over the problem of femininity:

the ladies, whenever some comparison seemed to turn out unfavourable to their sex, were able to utter a suspicion that we, the male analysts, had been unable to overcome certain deeply-rooted prejudices against what was feminine, and that this was being paid for in the partiality of our researches. We, on the other hand, standing on the ground of bisexuality, had no difficulty in avoiding impoliteness. We had only to say: "This doesn't apply to *you*. You're the exception; on this point you're more masculine

⁶ Freud analyzes a man's neurotic "masochism" in "Dostoevsky and Parricide."

than feminine." ("Femininity" 145)

Though he acknowledges variations in individual development, Freud posits a normative development of femininity. His theory attributes universal, unconscious ideas to women, such as the equation "baby = penis." As Peter Gay argues, for Freud "there are no accidents in the universe of the mind," although the "intertwined causal threads . . . are too remote in origin, large in number, and complex in their interaction to be readily sorted out" (119). Once Freud has theorized the role of anatomical difference in the Oedipus complex, with its corollary effect in girls of an unconscious belief in castration, he assumes that penis envy will exert an influence on the development of every woman: "the morphological distinction is bound to find expression in differences of psychical development" ("Dissolution" 177-78). It should be noted that when Freud published this statement, in 1933, American anthropologist Franz Boas had ceased to apply such a principle to racial differences.⁷ The severity of penis envy, the type of response it produces, and the success of that response in terms of psychological adjustment, vary with individual circumstances. However, Freud views the girl's discovery of sexual difference, symbolized by the penis, as an inevitable trauma whose unconscious effects would bring about a final break with her original desire for the mother and with her original organ, the clitoris. Although a woman may exhibit an active, "phallic" sexuality, Freud concludes that in each case the usual diversion has taken place following her

⁷ The 1911 edition of *The Mind of Primitive Man* states: "Differences of structure must be accompanied by differences of function, physiological as well as psychological; and, as we found clear evidence of difference in structure between the races, we must anticipate that differences in mental characteristics will be found" (114-15, qtd. in Myrdal 146). Boas also writes: "it would be erroneous to assume that there are no differences in the mental make-up of the Negro race and of other races On the contrary, if there is any meaning in the correlation of anatomical structure and physiological function, we must expect that differences exist" (271-72, qtd. in Myrdal 146). These statements are not found in the 1938 edition of *The Mind of Primitive Man* and are replaced by an emphasis on "variability of function" of any given structure. See Myrdal's discussion (146f., 1216).

discovery of sexual difference; "masculine" activity in an adult woman must be a secondary development, an effect of her "castration complex." Freud attributed a castration complex to both sexes; the great difference, he believed, was that men feared castration, whereas women regarded it as an accomplished fact.⁸

Many analysts were unconvinced by Freud's theory of the castration complex and its implications for women's sexual development, and sought alternative explanations. Freud's opponents in this psychoanalytic debate saw a tension between what seemed in his theory to be the "external and accidental" causes of the girl's penis envy and its ubiquitous effects. In proposing alternative explanations, however, some analysts were less circumspect than Freud about applying forms of biological determinism to the psychology of women. In her defense of Freud's theory of femininity, Juliet Mitchell shows that revisionists such as Ernest Jones, Deutsch, Karen Horney, Wilhelm Reich, and Beauvoir have downplayed or ignored the specific social context in which, according to Freud, the child discovers sexual difference: the Oedipus complex. As Mitchell correctly argues, Freud's theory proposes that the girl's trauma arises not through the perception of anatomical difference *per se* but because she *interprets* the difference as castration, a punishment suffered at the hands of the father.⁹ Jones and Deutsch argue that femininity is not a response to the Oedipus complex but an innate disposition in young girls. Although Horney asserts that psychoanalysis shows a male bias and that women are at an actual disadvantage in society, like Jones and Deutsch she also proposes that physical differences *in themselves* produce psychological differences between the sexes. Horney states, for example:

⁸ *Three Essays* refers to the "castration complex" of boys, a concept that led Freud to the theory of the Oedipus complex (23n2, 61). See "Femininity" for a comparison of the castration complex in boys and girls (154-62).

⁹ Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* remains one of the most thorough accounts from a feminist perspective of psychoanalytic theories of femininity.

The girl's nature as biologically conditioned gives her the desire to receive, to take into herself; she feels or knows that her genital is too small for her father's penis and this makes her react to her own genital wishes with direct anxiety, she dreads that if her wishes were fulfilled, she herself or her genital would be destroyed. . . . these processes take place purely instinctively on the basis of organ sensations and the tensions of organic needs. ("The Dread of Woman" 142)

Although Beauvoir echoes some of Horney's claims regarding male bias and the weight of actual social conditions, she refuses to regard physical differences as in any way decisive and argues, against Freud, that woman is made by a much wider social context than the family triad of early childhood. In any case, disagreement on these points is at the center of the psychoanalytic debates on femininity and women's sexuality.

In a 1935 paper on "Early Female Sexuality," British analyst Ernest Jones summed up his challenge to Freud's theory of femininity. Taunting Freud as a "feminist," Jones declared that women develop from an innately feminine constitution:

femininity develops progressively from the promptings of an instinctual constitution. In short, I do not see a woman—in the way feminists do—as *un homme manqué*, as a permanently disappointed creature struggling to console herself with secondary substitutes alien to her true nature. The ultimate question is whether a woman is born or made. (495)

Among psychoanalysts, both Jones's dismissive reference to feminists and his "ultimate question" were familiar territory by 1935. As Peter Gay comments, Jones "had no doubt" that woman is born (521). As though responding directly to Jones, Beauvoir asserts in the most famous line of *The Second Sex* that, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (267).¹⁰ Elsewhere she offers another revision, or rather a reversal, of Jones's statement when she describes girls as "'garçons manqués'—that is to say, children who

¹⁰ "On ne naît pas femme: on le devient" (*Deuxième sexe II* 13).

lack the license to be boys" (296).¹¹ It seems that Beauvoir had read Jones's 1935 paper and offers her own resolution of what he terms the "ultimate question" of whether a woman is born or made. Indeed, when we turn to Beauvoir's discussion of the young girl's lived experience, her famous sentence reads as the first move in an elaborate response to, and refutation of, both Freud's and the British analysts' theories of femininity.

The account of women's lived experience in *The Second Sex* begins, in the manner of a psychoanalytic study, with an account of infancy. Although Beauvoir's theoretical framework was largely that of existentialism and phenomenology, her concern with situation and embodiment led her to assimilate a loosely psychoanalytic model of development—preserving the focus on sexuality—to a philosophy of consciousness and the State. Thus she proposes that self-consciousness first encounters the other through the infant's separation from the mother in early childhood. Beauvoir states the problem in this way:

The nursling lives directly the basic drama of every existent: that of his relation to the Other. Man experiences with anguish his being turned loose, his forlornness. In flight from his freedom, his subjectivity, he would fain lose himself in the bosom of the Whole. Here, indeed, is the origin of his cosmic and pantheistic dreams, of his longing for oblivion, for sleep, for ecstasy, for death. He never succeeds in abolishing his separate ego; but at least he wants to attain the solidity of the *en-soi*, to be petrified into a thing. It is especially when he is fixed by the gaze of other persons that he

¹¹ "'garçons manqués', c'est-à-dire enfants à qui manque la licence d'être des garçons" (*Deuxième sexe II* 51). The English edition mistranslates this as "'garçons manqués'—that is to say, children who lack something of being boys" (296).

appears to himself to be an existent. (268-69)¹²

In Hegelian terms, this means that desire for another desire—for recognition by another "I"—defines not only the struggle that constitutes master and slave, but also the child's early relation to the mother and to others in his immediate circle. The young boy, for example, views his penis as an *alter ego*; and adults, by recognizing it as a bodily trophy, "lend value to the child by conferring value on his double" (271).¹³

Beauvoir proposes that the infant experiences immersion in the mother's body as immersion in Being, in "the bosom of the Whole." However, within the embodied unity to which he belongs, the child gradually discovers the mother as separate from himself. As Beauvoir writes: "Little by little he learns to perceive objects as distinct from himself and to distinguish himself from them; meanwhile, he is detached more or less brutally from the nourishing body. Sometimes he reacts to this separation by a violent crisis" (268).¹⁴ Emerging from what Freud had defined as primary narcissism, the infant discovers that he is disjoined from Being; powerless to command the gaze of others, he now exists in an unpredictable universe. With weaning, the child discovers existential solitude—also desire; and the desire that constitutes the child's "I" may seek, before all else, a nostalgic return to Being.

Beauvoir's text represents the original moment of desire—in which a subject

¹² "D'une manière immédiate le nourrisson vit le drame originel de tout existant qui est le drame de son rapport à l'Autre. C'est dans l'angoisse que l'homme éprouve son délaissement. Fuyant sa liberté, sa subjectivité, il voudrait se perdre au sein du Tout: c'est là l'origine de ses rêveries cosmiques et panthéistiques, de son désir d'oubli, de sommeil, d'extase, de mort. Il ne parvient jamais à abolir son moi séparé: du moins souhaite-t-il atteindre la solidité de l'en-soi, être pétrifié en chose; c'est singulièrement lorsqu'il est figé par le regard d'autrui qu'il s'apparaît comme un être" (*Deuxième sexe II* 14-15).

¹³ "On valorisera donc l'enfant en valorisant son double" (*Deuxième sexe II* 19).

¹⁴ "Peu à peu il apprend à percevoir les objets comme distincts de lui: il se distingue d'eux; en même temps, d'une façon plus ou moins brutale, il est détaché du corps nourricier; parfois il réagit à cette séparation par une crise violent" (*Deuxième sexe II* 14).

seeks nostalgic return—as a moment of gendering. Citing the memoirs of Judith Gautier, Beauvoir introduces as evidence the words of a young girl, noting that: "Judith Gautier relates in her memoirs that she wept and pined so piteously when taken from her nurse that they had to be reunited again. She was not weaned until much later" (268).¹⁵ In this brief passage, Gautier recalls her early initiation into subjectivity and her flight from it. In Bakhtinian terms, her words perform a double voicing and reaccenting of discourses of desire previously grounded in "an absolute human type, the masculine" (xxi). As Beauvoir argues, these discourses have regarded woman's body, though not man's, as deviating from the human type—that is, as "weighed down by everything specific to it—an obstacle, a prison" (xxii).¹⁶ Freud, for example, had initially theorized a phallic infant with an active, aggressive libido directed toward the mother. When he later turned to the analysis of femininity, he theorized a pre-Oedipal period characterized by denial of separation; it supposedly exerted greater influence on the lives of women than men. It appears from this that Freud's investigation of women's development led him to modify his views on the abstract human type by theorizing a pre-Oedipal phase; however, the modifications were seen as somehow truer for women, who therefore remained in a sense marginal to the masculine and human. Beauvoir recasts the infant of Freudian theory—implicitly a son—as a daughter, a desiring subject within a female dyad. Yet her voicing of women's "I" also has a marginalizing effect: the citations of Gautier and other women present a discourse in which women are the point of departure for a discussion of subjectivity, yet this often alienated subjectivity still seems to stand apart from the abstract human type.

To speak is, in a sense, to affirm one's self-identity, one's unique possibilities,

¹⁵ "Judith Gautier raconte dans ses souvenirs qu'elle pleura et dépérit si lamentablement quand on l'eut arrachée à sa nourrice qu'il fallut les réunir à nouveau. On ne la sevrà que beaucoup plus tard" (*Deuxième sexe II* 14).

¹⁶ "alourdi par tout ce qui le spécifie—un obstacle, une prison" (*Deuxième sexe I* 15).

through acts of self-authoring. As we have seen, however, in reflecting on her own speaking position as she undertakes to write *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir foregrounds certain limits, stating: "if I want to define myself I must first of all declare: 'I am a woman'; this truth constitutes the ground from which all further claims will stand out" (xxi).¹⁷ Here, a forced gesture intervenes between the speaker and her possibilities—namely, the requirement that her claims be judged in relation not to the human situation, but to her situation as a woman. Beauvoir says "I" only to hear her words inevitably reaccented to mean, "I, a woman." In a similar way, the appearance of Judith Gautier in the text, the voicing of her "I," is a moment of gendering, or rather of *transgendering*, in which the subject deviates from the masculine, defined as the abstract human type. Women's "I" is crucial to Beauvoir's text not in the manner of Descartes' *cogito*, as "the one thing on which she can ground her philosophical inquiry" (Moi, *What Is A Woman?* 188), but precisely because it is a site of social and definitional struggle. This site will be one of limitation and alienation, though not inevitably so; Beauvoir's feminized subject of desire chooses to flee her project of being, alienating herself in the figure of the mother as she exists in the imaginary. That is, by assuming femininity, she assumes her identity as the Other. Different attitudes are possible for her, but the thwarting of a woman's transcendence by her body and by social institutions makes this choice the easiest and most obvious one.

Post-Hegelian philosophy proposes that the desire of each consciousness to lose itself in the totality of Being can find satisfaction only within the imaginary, which exists outside of time. Judith Butler writes that:

for Sartre and his Hegelian predecessors . . . desire can achieve satisfaction only through the temporary denial of time, i.e., through

¹⁷ "Si je veux me définir je suis obligée d'abord de déclarer: 'Je suis une femme'; cette vérité constitue le fond sur lequel s'enlèvera toute autre affirmation" (*Deuxième sexe* 14).

the *imagined conjectured state of presence* for which time discriminations are irrelevant. The ideal of self-sufficiency that haunts post-Hegelian thinking is a nostalgia for a life . . . that could escape a fate of continual self-estrangement and then death. (*Subjects of Desire* 93-95)

In her turn toward psychoanalysis, Beauvoir reconfigures post-Hegelian philosophy by introducing into it two fundamental aspects of the human situation—our physical emergence from the body of the mother, perceived as a totality, and our inevitable desire for return. As I have argued, Beauvoir further proposes the infant daughter as a prototype for the existential consciousness. Beauvoir's narrative of women's subjectivity—our discovery of solitude and the other, our alienation in desire—reconfigures human desire for an imagined and timeless presence as the desire for a presence embodied in the mother but, clearly, exceeding her as well. In her study of women's lived experience, Beauvoir explores the ways in which women as desiring subjects choose to live their situation, including their relation to an imagined presence of the mother. What is in question here, of course, is not only or even primarily the literal mother; for her imagined presence reverberates symbolically through various cultural forms. As the girl grows older, her desire is channeled by the thwarting of her transcendence; it comes to be expressed in her relation to the divine, certainly, but more importantly for Beauvoir's argument, in her relation to femininity—women's embodiment of a myth—and in relation to the authoritarian State. Beauvoir asks how—and why—women as subjects of desire seek an imagined presence through their own embodiment of femininity, their alienation as the Other.

Beauvoir argues that men's desires for a timeless presence are similarly haunted by the body of the mother, with its implication of finitude and death. The original other is always the body of the mother, as she is becoming a separate and external being. Indeed, the Other is haunted by the body of the mother. Beauvoir writes that for man:

The mother is the root which, sunk in the depths of the cosmos, can draw up its juices; she is the fountain whence springs forth the living water that is also a nourishing milk, . . .

But more common is man's revolt against his carnal state; he sees himself as a fallen god: his curse is to have fallen from a luminous and ordered heaven into the chaotic shadows of the maternal womb. This fire, this pure and active breath in which he wishes to recognize himself, is imprisoned by woman in the mud of the earth. (145-46)¹⁸

For women as well as for men, the desire for return and annihilation in Being is opposed by the assertion of transcendence. The blunting of women's transcendence—our struggle against absorption into the totality—is central to Beauvoir's account of women's situation.

Alexandre Kojève argued before a French audience during the 1930s that Hegel had replaced the transcendent universal, God, with an immanent one, the State. Beauvoir represents the myth of Woman, similarly, as an immanent universal; it has sources for both men and women in the infant's immersion in the body of the mother and becomes embodied by women as femininity. Moreover, Beauvoir suggests that the myths of Woman and the authoritarian State are parallel expressions, both incarnations of the Other. She asserts that:

[Woman] has not represented for [man], however, the only incarnation of the Other, and she has not always held the same importance throughout history. There are moments when she is eclipsed by other idols. When the City or the State devours the citizen, he can no longer occupy himself with his private destiny. The cult of the leader, whether Napoleon, Mussolini, or Hitler, excludes all other cults. In military dictatorships and totalitarian

¹⁸ "La mère est la racine enfoncée dans les profondeurs du cosmos et qui en pompe les sucs, elle est la fontaine d'où jaillit l'eau vive qui est aussi un lait nourricier, . . .

"Mais plus générale est chez l'homme sa révolte contre sa condition charnelle; il se considère comme un dieu déchu: sa malédiction c'est d'être tombé d'un ciel lumineux et ordonné dans les ténèbres chaotiques du ventre maternel. Ce feu, ce souffle actif et pur dans lequel il souhaite se reconnaître, c'est la femme qui l'emprisonne dans la boue de la terre" (*Deuxième sexe* I 245-46).

regimes, woman is no longer a privileged object. (142)¹⁹

In her revisioning of post-Hegelian philosophy through psychoanalytic concerns, Beauvoir performs a satiric revisioning of the universal State proposed by Hegel and, later, Kojève. Tracing the myths of Woman and the State to the desire for return to the body of the mother, Beauvoir debunks both femininity and the authoritarian State. Both are shown to rely on an erotics of power founded on the alienation of the subject in an all-powerful other: the lover or the leader.

Kojève argues that, for Hegel, the process of historical evolution had come to its end with the appearance of Napoleon. "History stops at the moment when the difference, the opposition, between Master and Slave disappears"—that is, with the founding of a universal State, ushered into being by the reciprocal recognition of the State and all its members. Kojève writes that:

Man can be truly "satisfied," History can end, only in and by the formation of a Society, of a State, in which the strictly particular, personal, individual value of each is recognized as such . . . by Universality incarnated in the State as such; and in which the universal value of the State is recognized and realized by . . . *all* the Particulars. (58)

By eliciting recognition from all, and, in turn, recognizing the value of all, a godlike man such as Napoleon would found the universal State. Kojève recasts the satisfaction of human desire in secular terms as the end of historical action, to be realized in a future state founded on universal democracy. We may contrast this with the post-Hegelian view that the desire for secular satisfaction and for unity with the world is bound to fail and can be realized "only in an *imaginary* mode" (Butler, *Subjects of Desire* 95).

¹⁹ "Elle n'a cependant pas représenté pour lui la seule incarnation de l'Autre, et elle n'a pas toujours gardé au cours de l'histoire la même importance. Il est des moments où elle est éclipsée par d'autres idoles. Quand la Cité, l'Etat dévorent le citoyen, il n'a plus la possibilité de s'occuper de son destin privé. . . . Le culte du chef, qu'il soit Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler, exclut tout autre culte. Dans les dictatures militaires, les régimes totalitaires, le femme n'est plus un objet privilégié" (*Deuxième sexe* I 240-41).

It was during the war that Beauvoir came to reject Hegel's system, in which each consciousness becomes subsumed in the Universal, recognizing and recognized by it. Beauvoir offers a satire of the universal State—of "godlike" men and the recognition they command—in her discussion of the father's position within the family. "The father's life is surrounded by a mysterious privilege," she writes, and his activities "all have a sacred character. . . . It is through him that the household communicates with the rest of the world. He is the incarnation of this immense, difficult, and marvelous world of adventure; he is transcendence, he is God" (287).²⁰ The girl perceives that she will never take the place of the godlike father. The bond attaching her to the mother was, Beauvoir says,

an active emulation—from the father she can but passively await a valorization. . . . what Freud calls the "Electra complex" is not, as he presumes, a sexual desire; it is a profound abdication of the subject, who consents to become an object in submission and adoration. (287)²¹

The godlike qualities of the father are recognized by the daughter only in submission and abdication, while her desire to emulate him is opposed by the myths and institutions through which she will discover herself. Under social conditions such as these, the universal State must be a failure, a collective fiction: authoritarian power remains ever-present. Beauvoir describes the experience of an individual who senses herself "as

²⁰ "La vie du père est entourée d'un mystérieux prestige: les heures qu'il passe à la maison, la pièce où il travaille, les objets qui l'entourent, ses occupations, ses manies ont un caractère sacré. C'est lui qui nourrit la famille, il en est le responsable et le chef. Habituellement il travaille dehors et c'est à travers lui que la maison communique avec le reste du monde: il est l'incarnation de ce monde aventureux, immense, difficile et merveilleux; il est la transcendance, il est Dieu" (*Deuxième sexe II* 39).

²¹ "le lien qui l'attachait à sa mère était une active émulation—du père elle ne peut qu'attendre passivement une valorisation. . . . ce que Freud appelle 'complexe d'Electre' n'est pas, comme il le prétend, un désir sexuel; c'est une abdication profonde du sujet qui consent à se faire objet dans la soumission et l'adoration" (*Deuxième sexe II* 39-40). As Mitchell points out, it is Jung who speaks of an "Electra complex," whereas Freud rejected the term (311-13).

subject, autonomy, transcendence, as an absolute," but discovers inferiority in herself "in the quality of a given essence."²² Yet this is what commonly befalls the girl when "she seizes herself in the world as a woman"—as otherness.²³ In Beauvoir's view, whereas man has arrived at a largely secular consciousness, woman belongs to a sphere that is "everywhere enclosed, limited, and dominated by the male universe."²⁴ Rather than rebel directly against this male universe, she often chooses to immerse herself in the mysteries of sexuality, assuming an outlook that is at once erotic and religious. As Beauvoir says, "The gods of man are in a sky so distant that in truth, for him, there are no gods: the little girl lives among gods in human guise" (297).²⁵ In distinguishing between the distant, faded gods of man and the gods of woman, present and imposing, Beauvoir asserts that the modern project of freedom remains incomplete; under a gender system in which women's transcendence is thwarted and realized only as alienation, in abdication to a powerful male, a democratic state cannot come into being. The failure of freedom is to be found in a residue of myth and religiosity, the displacement of reciprocal recognition by eroticized relations of power that buttress the authoritarian State.

Beauvoir offers an elaboration of this problem when she describes the yearning of young women for valorization in the love of a superior being. Citing the memoirs of Marie Bashkirtseff, Beauvoir argues that the apparent desire to be subjugated is, in fact, a frustrated desire for transcendence. Beauvoir writes of Bashkirtseff that:

What she truly desires is the exaltation of her ego; but for a woman, and especially a woman of her era and class, there could be no hope of attaining success through an autonomous existence. She lucidly notes at the age of eighteen, ". . . I would like to be a man. I know that I could become someone; but in skirts, what

²² "comme sujet, autonomie, transcendance, comme un absolu"; "à titre d'essence donnée" (*Deuxième sexe II* 52).

²³ "elle s'y saisit comme une femme" (*Deuxième sexe II* 52).

²⁴ "de partout enfermée, limitée, dominée par l'univers mâle" (*Deuxième sexe II* 52).

²⁵ "Les dieux de l'homme sont dans un ciel si lointain qu'en vérité, pour lui, il n'y a pas de dieux: la petite fille vit parmi des dieux à face humaine" (*Deuxième sexe II* 52).

would you have me do? Marriage is the only career for women."²⁶

Beauvoir comments that Bashkirtseff:

therefore needs the love of a man; but before he can confer a sovereign value on her, he must himself be a sovereign consciousness. "I could never be pleased by a man below my position," she writes. "A rich and independent man bears with him pride and a certain comfort. Self-assurance rather has the scent of victory. I love in H [an unavailable nobleman] . . . that capricious manner, self-sufficient and cruel: he has something of Nero." And again: "That abasement before the superiority of the man she loves must be the greatest pride that a superior woman could feel." (348)²⁷

The narcissism of such a woman has no course of action but to seek abasement before a supremely exalted lover. Beauvoir argues that in her case:

narcissism leads to masochism. . . . The ego is formed for and by others: the more powerful the others are, the richer and more powerful the ego becomes; . . . loved by Nero, Marie Bashkirtseff *would be* Nero. To annihilate oneself before others is to realize others at once in and for oneself. This dream of nothingness is, in truth, a proud will to be. (348)²⁸

²⁶ "Ce qu'elle souhaite, en vérité, c'est l'exaltation de son moi; mais étant femme et surtout à l'époque et dans la classe à laquelle elle appartient, il ne pouvait être question pour elle d'obtenir le succès par une existence autonome. A l'âge de dix-huit ans, elle note ludiquement: 'J'écris à C . . . que je voudrais être un homme. Je sais que je pourrais devenir quelqu'un; mais avec des jupons, où voulez-vous qu'on aille? Le mariage est la seule carrière des femmes'" (*Deuxième sexe II* 115-16).

²⁷ "Elle a donc besoin de l'amour d'un homme; mais pour qu'il soit capable to lui conférer une valeur souveraine, il doit être lui-même conscience souveraine. 'Jamais un homme en dessous de ma position ne saurait me plaire, écrit-elle. Un homme riche, indépendant, porte avec lui l'orgueil et un certain air confortable. L'assurance a un certain air victorieux. J'aime en H . . . cet air capricieux, fat et cruel: il a du Néron.' Et encore: 'Cet anéantissement de la femme devant la supériorité de l'homme aimé doit être la plus grande jouissance d'amour-propre que peut éprouver la femme supérieure'" (*Deuxième sexe II* 116).

²⁸ "Le narcissisme conduit au masochisme Le moi est constitué comme pour autrui, par autrui: plus autrui est puissant, plus le moi a de richesses et de pouvoirs; . . . aimée de Néron, Marie Bashkirtseff *serait* Néron; s'anéantir devant autrui, c'est réaliser autrui à la foi en soi et pour soi; en vérité ce rêve de néant est une orgueilleuse volonté d'être" (*Deuxième sexe II* 116).

Read alongside Kojève, this passage suggests the actual perversity of any state claiming legitimacy through the reciprocal recognition of each by All. Beauvoir's account of women's lived experience examines a variety of abuses of power, most of which seemingly fall within the category of the personal. These include the abuse of a woman by a man during her sexual initiation; a woman's deception in her maternal role, a deception carried out by institutional structures and by the situation of motherhood itself; and a woman's desire to seek, through dominance of her child, either transcendence or an *alter ego*.

The Second Sex, then, assimilates the life of the individual—specifically one who exists in a woman's body—to a philosophy of consciousness and the State. Within this framework, Beauvoir critiques many of the interpretations offered by another theory of consciousness: psychoanalysis. Having drawn on psychoanalysis to integrate women into a philosophy of consciousness and the State, she proceeds to deconstruct the myth of Woman by narrating women's lived experience of the body, especially sexuality and motherhood. Beauvoir offers the first detailed philosophical response to psychoanalytic theories of femininity, with the question posed by Ernest Jones of "whether a woman is born or made." Her narrative of women's formative years begins by rejecting Freud's theory of the castration complex. The following chapters examine the larger context—her situation as defined by family, society, and the body—of the girl's initiation into sexuality. Beauvoir then analyzes the existential significance for the girl of menstruation, erotic sensations, and sexual initiation; lesbianism—sexual experience outside the "classic solution" of heterosexuality (403)²⁹—is also interpreted in existentialist rather than psychoanalytic or normative terms. However, the foundation for this narrative, in both structure and detail, is clearly psychoanalytic. Moreover, Beauvoir

²⁹ "la solution classique" (*Deuxième sexe II* 191).

explicitly argues with the theory of feminine masochism advanced in Deutsch's two-volume *Psychology of Women*, the most important psychoanalytic source for *The Second Sex*.³⁰ Although Deutsch's views are now outdated in many ways—not least her analysis of a normal "feminine masochism" enabling women to resolve unconscious conflicts of early life through motherhood—her work was significant for its attempt to analyze the development of women throughout their lives and for its research on women of extremely varied class backgrounds and circumstances.

Deutsch divides her material into two volumes reflecting what she defines as the "fundamental duality" of woman's condition: her individual personality and role as servant of the species. Deutsch argues that woman's "inclination is in favor of the species" (I 172); unless individual development is diverted from femininity by neurosis, the duality will be resolved in motherhood. Deutsch's approach is therefore teleological, since it seeks to analyze the deeper psychological preparation for what she refers to as this "most favorable" of outcomes. She begins with an exposition of the girl's "psychologic development into womanhood" and the formation of her "feminine core," with its "three essential traits of . . . narcissism, passivity, and masochism" (I xiii). The tendentious developmental narrative is followed by closer analysis of the feminine core. Finally, Deutsch discusses "types of women and modes of feminine behavior that seem to be at variance with our concept of femininity" (I xiii), including the "masculinity complex" and homosexuality. Deutsch devotes a second volume to motherhood, which she terms the "central problem of femininity" (I xiii).

Beauvoir also regards the duality between autonomous existence and service to the species as woman's fundamental problem, but she rejects other aspects of Deutsch's argument—especially the theories of feminine masochism and normative resolution in motherhood. Beauvoir also rejects the basic psychoanalytic principle of the unconscious.

³⁰ It was published in the United States shortly before Beauvoir's visit in 1947.

Given these crucial differences in theory, it is surprising to find close correspondences of structure and detail with the work of Deutsch. *The Second Sex* also begins with the girl's psychological development and responses to internal and external pressures toward femininity, followed by an analysis of woman's situation in maturity. Beauvoir does not present motherhood as a normative or even favorable outcome; rather, she represents it quite critically within a broader analysis of women's experiences in marriage, society, and old age and as domestic workers, prostitutes, and independent women. There is also analysis of feminine erotic types, termed "justifications," and of women's prospects for independence.

Deutsch and Beauvoir both draw on a wide range of evidence. Deutsch cites examples from a wide range of medical sources, including her own observations as a psychoanalyst, case histories recorded by other physicians and social workers, and material found in routine hospital records. She also refers to anthropological evidence and myths, creative literature, and the experiences of women writers and artists. Beauvoir's evidence is equally interdisciplinary; moreover, she adapts some concepts and many specific examples from Deutsch. These close correspondences have been overlooked by most commentators, perhaps because Beauvoir does not document indirect references to *The Psychology of Women* and often places Deutsch's arguments and evidence in a new interpretive context that refers only obliquely to psychoanalysis.³¹ However, the influence of Deutsch can be inferred when the following conditions are present. Firstly, the two authors are discussing closely related topics, such as adolescent fantasies or sexual initiation. Secondly, there are theories, details, or quotations appearing in both texts; such correlations often occur in clusters, with a set of closely connected details from *The Psychology of Women* reappearing in *The Second Sex*.

³¹ Since this chapter was written, the connection between Beauvoir and Deutsch has also been analyzed by Charbonneau.

Beauvoir treats Deutsch's material selectively, revising, challenging, and simply omitting her psychoanalytic interpretations of the unconscious; she also supplements Deutsch's examples with other sources. In each case one must therefore ask, thirdly, whether Beauvoir offers a response—whether affirmation or challenge—to Deutsch's interpretations. By identifying passages where all three conditions pertain, I have concluded that Beauvoir's narrative of the girl's formative years—and much of her analysis of motherhood—respond closely to Deutsch and seek to refute the theory of a primary femininity "largely associated with passivity and masochism" (I 220). The examples that follow can suggest only a few of the correlations between Deutsch's *Psychology of Women* and *The Second Sex*.

In discussing the girl's erotic awakening, both Deutsch and Beauvoir suggest that the physical signs are diffuse and imprecise; the girl finds her body opaque. According to Deutsch,

In young girls eroticism remains separated from awareness of sexuality for a longer time than in boys. . . . The erotic fantasies of boys are soon accompanied by obvious genital processes; they are, so to speak, discredited by these. . . .

Girls, however, do not so easily discover that their genitals are the executive agents of their yearning for love. (I 119)

As a result, girls replace sexual curiosity and its risks with romantic fantasies, which, however, present their own dangers through the "regressive sexualization of older emotional relations" with the parents (I 119). Unconscious dangers develop when the sexual drive is strengthened before the girl's heterosexuality has been stabilized into what Deutsch refers to as "full feminine readiness" (I 120). If a girl fails to free herself from her mother, for example, her friendships with other girls and women may become eroticized, and if her hostility toward her mother is transferred to her relations with men, she may fear sexual dangers and attempt to avoid them. Similarly, if the girl's "passive-

masochistic" (I 254) attitude toward her father and other men receives an influx of unconscious aggression, she may have dreams and fears "relating to penetration of the body" (I 255). Symbolic dreams of rape include "the terrifying male persecutor with knife in hand, the burglar who breaks in at the window, the thief who steals a particularly valuable object" (I 255). Deutsch argues that these dreams, along with more clearly erotic rape and seduction fantasies, arise regressively from the past and are at odds with present reality.

Beauvoir repeats Deutsch's claim that girls "see little relation between their sexual emotions and the existence of their genital organs" because their sensations are diffuse and imprecise (320).³² But Beauvoir omits mention of the unconscious sources of girls' emotions and fantasies, suggesting instead that girls become aware of their bodies through accidental contacts and surreptitious fondling: "some of the caresses of family friends, uncles and cousins, not to mention grandfathers and fathers, are much less inoffensive than the mother imagines; a teacher or a priest or a doctor may have been bold, indiscreet" (319).³³ Even more than their own sensations, it is these crude approaches that girls cannot reconcile with their romantic longings. In Beauvoir's words, "Between their romantic daydreams of men—that is, love—and the crudeness of certain facts revealed to them, there exists such a hiatus that they can devise no synthesis of the two" (320).³⁴

Alienated from a sexual desire that cannot be localized, the girl becomes passive.

More dangerously for her, she becomes dependant on man for knowledge of her body,

³² "établissent peu de rapport entre leurs émois sexuels et l'existence de leurs organes génitaux" (*Deuxième sexe II* 81).

³³ "certaines caresses d'amis de la maison, d'oncles, de cousins pour ne rien dire des grands-pères et des pères, soient beaucoup moins inoffensives que la mère ne le suppose; un professeur, un prêtre, un médecin, ont été hardis, indiscrets" (*Deuxième sexe II* 79).

³⁴ "Entre leurs rêveries romanesques concernant l'homme, l'amour, et la crudité de certains faits qui leur sont révélés, il existe un tel hiatus qu'elles n'inventent entre eux aucune synthèse" (*Deuxième sexe II* 81).

and as his prey, "she feels endangered in her alienated flesh" (321).³⁵ Beauvoir relies on Deutsch's description of the girl's emotional relations—her preference for fantasies, symbolic dreams of rape, and erotic relations with other girls or older women. But she regards the fantasies as expressions of the girl's lived experience in the present and does not trace them, as Deutsch does, to unconscious erotic and aggressive drives shaped by past relations with the parents. Beauvoir's consistent translation of the dreams and fantasies of women into present lived experience creates a surreal atmosphere of anxiety, horror, and paranoia. Beauvoir writes that the girl's "diffuse hope, her dream of happy passivity, reveals her body to her clearly as an object destined for another," and she adds, "The young girl finds it hateful that someone can perforate this body which she confuses with herself as one perforates leather, or can tear it as one tears cloth" (321).³⁶ For Beauvoir, the girl's nightmare of being pierced is neither a regressive fantasy nor a figure of speech, but a representation of her frightening and surreal situation in the world. The girl discovers erotic desire in the form of passive and diffuse longings, but the longings soon become flesh: then is her alienation fully revealed. Even though she now seeks contact, she continues to desire sexual experience only in its immanence; in Beauvoir's view, "she leaves in shadow the image of her partner, or she drowns it in ideal mists; however, she cannot prevent his presence from haunting her" (321).³⁷ She revolts against the desires that seemingly destine her for possession; moreover, physical possession finds its obvious and most detestable symbol in penetration by the male. The girl's nightmares and fantasms give expression to her lived experience as alienated flesh, soon to be

³⁵ "elle se sent en danger dans sa chair aliénée" (*Deuxième sexe II* 82).

³⁶ "espoir diffus, son rêve de passivité heureuse lui révèlent avec évidence son corps comme un objet destiné à un autre" (*Deuxième sexe II* 82); "Ce corps qu'elle confond avec elle-même, la jeune fille hait qu'on puisse le perforer comme on perfore du cuir, le déchirer comme on déchire une étoffe" (*Deuxième sexe II* 83).

³⁷ "elle laisse dans l'ombre l'image de son partenaire, ou elle la noie dans des vapeurs idéales; cependant, elle ne peut empêcher que sa présence ne la hante" (*Deuxième sexe II* 82).

possessed as prey, and not to unconscious impulses, as the psychoanalysts claim:

the very time she feels within herself an insidious willingness is just when the idea of rape in many cases becomes an obsession. This idea is manifested in dreams and in behavior through numerous more or less definite symbols. Before going to sleep the girl explores her room in fear of finding some robber with dubious intentions; she thinks she hears burglars in the house; an attacker comes in through the window, armed with a knife, and stabs her. (322)³⁸

Beauvoir cites another example, in which the girl fantasizes violation by a man in the presence of an older woman: "they are symbolically asking their mother's permission to yield to their desires" (322).³⁹ For Beauvoir, such fantasies express the hypocrisy of the girl's situation: she is "dedicated to 'purity' and innocence just when she is discovering in herself and around her the mysterious stirrings of life and of sex" (322).⁴⁰

The same details of dreams and fantasies are found in Deutsch's chapter on female masochism (Deutsch I 157). Deutsch extends her theory of feminine masochism to include even prostitution fantasies and the behavior of prostitutes, concluding that, "Inasmuch as we consider the processes described here to be intensifications of 'normal' feminine psychologic states, we assume that woman is exposed to very great dangers in her development" (I 270). The "crueler character" (I 256) of many of these fantasies may be traced, according to Deutsch, to the girl's relations with her father, whose games with her were seductive but prohibited aggression.

³⁸ "c'est au moment où elle sent en soi une insidieuse complaisance que l'idée de viol devient en beaucoup de cas obsédante. Elle se manifeste dans les rêves et dans les conduites à travers quantité de symboles plus ou moins clairs. La jeune fille explore sa chambre avant de se coucher, dans la peur d'y découvrir quelque voleur aux intentions louches; elle croit entendre des cambrioleurs dans la maison; un agresseur entre par la fenêtre, armé d'un couteau dont il la transperce" (*Deuxième sexe II* 83).

³⁹ "elles demandent symboliquement à leur mère la permission de s'abandonner à leurs désirs" (*Deuxième sexe II* 84).

⁴⁰ "vouée à la 'pureté', à l'innocence précisément au moment où elle découvre en elle et autour d'elle les troubles mystères de la vie et du sexe" (*Deuxième sexe II* 84).

Deutsch traces another source of women's masochism and passivity to physiology, or what she terms "genital trauma"—that is, the girl's presumed lack of an "adequate" genital organ throughout much of childhood. Although Deutsch accepts Freud's view that the clitoris is the genital organ in young girls, she rejects his claim that the girl gives up this "active organ" because of the castration complex and threatened punishment by the father. Rather, it is because of a "real inability of the organ to gratify the active and aggressive instinctual impulses" (I 229). As Deutsch explains, "psychoanalysis has discovered a sufficient amount of active-aggressive components in the little girl's fantasy life to support the view that her genital organ is an inadequate outlet for them" (I 228). As a consequence, "those impulses that need an active organ are given up. Thus the inadequacy of the organ can be considered a biologic and physiologic cause of the psychologic sex differences" (I 229). This is a thoroughly biologicistic argument of the sort that Freud avoided.

According to Deutsch, the girl's active organ will be replaced eventually by a "passive-receptive one," the vagina; however, "between the turn to passivity and the full availability of the corresponding organ a long period of time elapses," during which the vagina is not yet sensitized (I 229). Here we arrive at the crux of Deutsch's theory of women's development: "what seems to be in preparation for later femininity during the childhood phase is passivity and masochism; what is added subsequently, if the development is favorable, is their *correct elaboration* and the discovery of the vagina as a functioning organ" (I 231). That is, the girl's masochism is well in place before her discovery of the vagina as a sensitized organ. Deutsch regards the more extreme fantasies mentioned earlier as merely *incorrect* elaborations of normal feminine masochism—masochism which prepares the girl for heterosexuality and motherhood.

Masochism, in Deutsch's view, has another important function, for it provides

necessary preparation for discovery of the vagina. Deutsch proposes that "The vagina—a completely passive, receptive organ—awaits an active agent to become a functioning excitable organ" (I 230) and will continue to lack responsiveness until the time of the girl's sexual initiation by a man, an act that Deutsch terms a "rape." As she explains,

The "undiscovered" vagina is—in normal favorable instances—eroticized by an act of rape. By "rape" I do not refer here to that . . . fantasy in which the young girl realistically desires and fears the sexual act as a rape. That fantasy is only a psychologic preparation for a real, milder, but dynamically identical process. This process manifests itself in man's aggressive penetration on the one hand and in the "overpowering" of the vagina and its transformation into an erogenous sexual zone on the other. (II 79-80)

In Deutsch's theory of feminine masochism, frightening fantasies of rape prepare the girl for the physiological transformation of her vagina into an organ of pleasure as well as reproduction. Deutsch again insists on the biological basis of psychological events, proposing that women's sexual response has irreducibly masochistic sources in human prehistory. She hypothesizes that it was through rape that:

primitive man took possession of woman and subjected her to sexual desire. . . . [T]he sexual act, which originally was an act of violence, . . . was gradually transformed for her into an act of pleasure. The violent penetration and mighty embrace, perhaps accompanied by wooing and caresses, thus became the woman's sexual enjoyment. (I 222-23)

Deutsch adds in support of her theory that in many myths and fantasies, "brutal possession is interpreted as a kindly act of rescue" (I 222). Beauvoir, too, comments on such myths, but refuses the view that they express a primary masochism instilled in the girl through a phylogenetic inheritance. She claims instead that the girl is taught by myths, literature, and popular songs that "she will become all-powerful through deepest

resignation; she takes delight in a masochism that promises supreme conquests" (291).⁴¹

Beauvoir repeatedly argues, in opposition to Deutsch, that masochism is an expression of frustrated narcissism and the desire for conquest.

Beauvoir nevertheless repeats the argument of Deutsch connecting the dualism of clitoris and vagina to a division in woman between individual and species life: "the female is prey to the species and its interests, which are dissociated from the female's individual goals. This contradiction reaches its climax in woman; it is expressed, for one thing, by the opposition of two organs, clitoris and vagina" (372).⁴² Beauvoir, however, insists that there is no physiological resolution in one direction or the other, since the clitoris preserves its excitability: woman retains this "erotic autonomy" throughout her life (372).⁴³

Beauvoir also repeats the peculiar argument that the vagina is first sensitized through a kind of rape, or penetration by the male. She states:

Woman is penetrated and fecundated by way of the vagina, which becomes an erotic center only through the intervention of the male, and this always constitutes a kind of violation. Formerly it was by a real or simulated rape that woman was torn from her childhood universe and hurled into her wifehood; it remains an act of violence that changes her from a girl into a woman: one therefore speaks of "taking" a girl's virginity or making her "lose" her flower. This defloration is not the harmonious outcome of a continuous evolution, it is an abrupt rupture with the past, the

⁴¹ "qu'en consentant aux plus profondes démissions elle deviendra toute-puissante: elle se complait à un masochisme qui lui promet de suprêmes conquêtes" (*Deuxième sexe II* 45).

⁴² "la femelle est en proie à l'espèce dont les intérêts sont dissociés de ses fins singulières; cette antinomie atteint chez la femme son paroxysme; elle s'exprime entre autres par l'opposition de deux organes: le clitoris et le vagin" (*Deuxième sexe II* 147).

⁴³ "la femme conserve toute sa vie cette autonomie érotique" (*Deuxième sexe II* 148).

beginning of a new cycle. (372)⁴⁴

It is striking that Beauvoir, who so clearly rejects the theory of feminine masochism, would borrow its physiological foundation: the notion that the vagina must be transformed by penetration into a fully erotic organ. Among psychoanalysts, moreover, the claim is specific to Deutsch. Freud, admittedly, proposes that the vagina remains for a long time "undiscovered," but he argues that it becomes known as a result of unconscious fantasy, not by an act of penetration. Karen Horney and Ernest Jones, by contrast, insist that girls have vaginal sensations even in early childhood. The question therefore arises: why did Beauvoir accept this aspect of Deutsch's theory?

Beauvoir regards sexual initiation not as the end of a sequence, the final event in the development of feminine masochism, but as the beginning of a new cycle in woman's erotic life. Even so, the new cycle is not a wholly new departure but requires "a sort of 'montage' of the nervous system, the elaboration of a form not previously sketched out"; significantly, it "should also include the clitoroid system" (373).⁴⁵ Much from the erotic life of the girl is therefore preserved in the woman. According to Beauvoir, the process of elaboration happens slowly—sometimes not at all—and can occur only with the profound consent of the individual (373). And with or without such consent, sexual initiation is a decisive passage for a woman (380). Her initiation into service to the species is not the end or final stage of development; rather, it is an event in which she is

⁴⁴ "C'est par le vagin que la femme est pénétrée et fécondée; il ne devient un centre érotique que par l'intervention du mâle et celle-ci constitue toujours une sorte de viol. C'est par un rapt réel ou simulé que la femme était jadis arrachée à son univers enfantin et jetée dans sa vie d'épouse; c'est une violence qui la change de fille en femme: on parle aussi de 'ravir' sa virginité à une fille, de lui 'perdre' sa fleur. Cette défloration n'est pas l'aboutissement harmonieux d'une évolution continue, c'est une rupture abrupte avec le passé, le commencement d'un nouveau cycle" (*Deuxième sexe II* 148).

⁴⁵ "une sorte de 'montage' du système nerveux, l'élaboration d'une forme qui n'est pas encore ébauchée et qui doit envelopper aussi le système clitoridien" (*Deuxième sexe II* 149).

effectively conquered. The argument proposed here revises the claim put forth in the introduction to Volume I that women's dependence "is not the result of a historical event or transformation—it was not something that *occurred*. Otherness here appears as an absolute in part because it lacks the contingent or accidental nature of historical facts" (xxiv).⁴⁶ With Deutsch's theory of sexual initiation as a rape through which the vagina becomes an organ of individual pleasure as well as service to the species, Beauvoir arrives at the historical event by which a woman ultimately becomes the Other. For according to Beauvoir, a woman rarely experiences vaginal pleasure at first, and often not for years. Woman's duality continues to manifest itself in the opposition between clitoris and vagina; as Beauvoir states, "It is striking that woman can choose between two cycles, one of which perpetuates juvenile independence while the other vows her to man and child" (373).⁴⁷ In this context, it is significant that Beauvoir describes vaginismus as "a revolt" or "feminine refusal" (374);⁴⁸ moreover, most of the examples she includes of women's sexual initiation are accounts of seduction or rape. She argues that the attitude of the man is a significant and often decisive force in transforming the act of love into a battle.

With respect to a more general eroticism, Beauvoir insists the young woman's sensuality is not awakened by a man: "the majority of young girls long feverishly for caresses before any hand has ever touched them" (376).⁴⁹ She refers to the American dancer Isadora Duncan, who describes her adolescent desires in vivid terms: "through

⁴⁶ "n'est pas la conséquence d'un événement ou d'un devenir, elle n'est pas *arrivée*. C'est en partie parce qu'elle échappe au caractère accidentel du fait historique que l'altérité apparaît ici comme un absolu" (*Deuxième sexe I* 18).

⁴⁷ "Il est frappant que la femme ait le choix entre deux cycles dont l'un perpétue l'indépendance juvénile, tandis que l'autre la voue à l'homme et à l'enfant" (*Deuxième sexe II* 149).

⁴⁸ "une révolte"; "le refus féminin" (*Deuxième sexe II* 149).

⁴⁹ "la plupart des jeunes filles appellent fiévreusement des caresses avant qu'aucune main les ait jamais effleurées" (*Deuxième sexe II* 152).

my whole being I felt an immense sense of waiting, a call arose in me whose meaning was only too clear: I could no longer sleep at night but tossed and turned in feverish, painful unrest" (376).⁵⁰ As further evidence, Beauvoir includes Duncan's account of her first sexual experience and, as though to leave no doubt, elaborates it considerably.

Duncan recalls in her autobiography that the young man:

carried me into the room. Frightened but ecstatic, the realization was made clear to me. I confess my first impressions were a horrible fright, but a great pity for what he seemed to be suffering prevented me from running away from what was at first sheer torture.

They spent the next day in the country, with the young man "frequently hushing my cries and drying my tears." She writes that by evening,

he was in such a state of joy and elation that I felt repaid for all my suffering and only desired to recommence, especially as he assured me tenderly that I would finally know what heaven was on earth. A prophecy which was soon fulfilled (*My Life* 103)

Duncan was known not only for her contributions to modern dance but for her many love affairs, and she complained that the publisher of *My Life* demanded fewer "highfalutin" comments on art and more romance (Kurth 536). Her book is, one supposes, somewhat but not overly truthful. In any case, Beauvoir chose to improve upon the account in her own way and for her own purposes. Duncan's "horrible fright" is rendered more concretely as "horrible fright and atrocious pain, as if someone had torn out several of my teeth at once."⁵¹ "Sheer torture" appears more explicitly as "sheer mutilation and torture,"⁵² and Duncan's cries and tears now seem to refer to renewed mutilation: "Next

⁵⁰ "par tout mon être, je ressentais une immense impression d'attente, un appel qui montait en moi et dont le sens n'était que trop clair: je ne pouvais plus dormir la nuit, je me retournais, je m'agitais, fiévreuse et douloureuse" (*Deuxième sexe II* 152-53).

⁵¹ "une horrible frayeur, une douleur atroce, comme si l'on m'avait arraché plusieurs dents à la fois" (*Deuxième sexe II* 164).

⁵² "une mutilation et une torture" (*Deuxième sexe II* 164).

day what was at that time no more than a painful experience for me continued amidst my martyred cries and tears. I felt as if I were being mangled" (384).⁵³ In these passages at least, Beauvoir seems to have taken the term *essai-martyr* quite literally. As for "heaven on earth," it has mysteriously vanished.

Deutsch, for her part, translates Duncan's experience completely. Deutsch arrived at an "objective understanding of the function of the vaginal orgasm," she says, through the work of a modern dancer. Though the dancer is not mentioned by name, the description suggests Duncan. Deutsch proposes that vaginal contractions normally follow "a rhythm completely adjusted to the male's rhythm," thereby maintaining the passive-receptive function of the vagina (II 83). Referring to the work of a modern dancer for whom "music of a strictly defined type, classical and monumental—was a powerful assault to which she must abandon herself in complete passivity and submission," Deutsch comments that:

The rhythm of such music pervaded her like a power that she was forced to follow with her own rhythm, her whole body. Her dancing was an almost compulsive expression of this rhythmic abandon to the outside rhythm of the music she chose. (II 87)

Beauvoir's purpose in quoting Duncan, in somewhat expanded and altered form, is to challenge Deutsch's view of women's sexuality, since Duncan describes herself as a young woman consumed with desire, who yet found little pleasure in submitting to the man's rhythm. Beauvoir later insists that men and women have different sexual rhythms; a woman must therefore seek pleasure in her own individual way (396). The discussion of sexual initiation in *The Second Sex* leads to the conclusion that masochism is a perversion, not an authentic solution. As throughout the analysis of women's development, Beauvoir is engaging with and refuting Deutsch's theory of primary

⁵³ "(Le lendemain), ce qui m'était alors pour moi qu'une expérience douloureuse reprit au milieu de mes gémissements et de mes cris de martyr. Je me sentais comme estropiée" (*Deuxième sexe* II 164).

feminine masochism.

Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* takes Beauvoir to task for her refusal to accept the central role of sexuality in human life and notes that Freud "would have commented sarcastically, as he did of Jung, on how much pleasanter this version makes the whole issue" (317). Yet *The Second Sex* scarcely offers a "pleasant" interpretation of women's lives and sexual experiences. Rather, through her suspicion of psychoanalysis Beauvoir questions how a theory of unconscious erotic drives could be used to critique the tyranny of "idolatrous love" in women's lives (650).⁵⁴ What tools could psychoanalysis provide for opposing the exaggerated place that sexuality and sexual fantasy have for women? Freud traces women's neuroses to childhood traumas, wishes, and prohibitions that can never be fully resolved; such a theory cannot help women to understand or resist social oppression, nor was this Freud's purpose. Freud states in *The Ego and the Id* that one aim of psychoanalytic therapy is "to give the patient's ego *freedom* to decide one way or the other" (51). Yet during the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, the psychoanalytic project of enhanced freedom to decide was opposed by social traditions that limited the sexual choices of women far more than those of men; this paradox led Deutsch to propose a convoluted "normal" development through masochism into motherhood. Beauvoir rejects psychoanalytic narratives in which women's normal development ends teleologically in motherhood. As Nancy Bauer explains,

When Beauvoir says that women are "biologically destined for the repetition of life," what she is referring to, of course, is woman's child-bearing capacity. But this is all she is referring to. She is not arguing that women are *psychologically* destined to bear children, that they are naturally inclined to crave producing children more than they desire anything else. (Bauer 173)

Beauvoir argues that psychoanalysis cannot produce a coherent theory of femininity but

⁵⁴ "l'amour idolâtre" (*Deuxième sexe II* 556).

instead relies on presumed unconscious symbols, such as penis = baby, or interprets psychological processes through hypotheses based in anatomy and evolution. Since *The Second Sex* was published, in 1949, sexuality has become for the first time in history a matter of choice for significant numbers of women. In this changed context, feminist theorists such as Mitchell have sought to revise Freudian theory as an analysis of patriarchy, a descriptive tool of critique.

Beauvoir did not attempt to reclaim Freud's account of sexual difference for feminism. Yet her work in *The Second Sex* suggested how existentialist concepts could be used by feminists to arrive at thoroughly nondeterminist readings of Freud. Moi writes, for example: "Freud stresses that it is her discovery of the Other, and the gaze of the other on the little girl, that sets in motion the whole process of sexual differentiation that occurs in society" (*What Is a Woman?* 389). The existentialist concepts of the Other and the gaze are not found in Freud; rather, they connect with psychoanalytic theories of femininity through the work of Lacan, as is well known, and before that, through Beauvoir's engagement with psychoanalysis in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir replaces the theory of the Oedipus complex, as source of psychological differences between the sexes, by an analysis of the existential impasse. The infant responds to an experience of separation—"the original drama of every existent, which is the drama of his relation to the Other" (268)⁵⁵—and attempts to compensate for this catastrophe "by alienating his existence in an image, the reality and value of which others will establish" (269).⁵⁶ The penis takes on symbolic significance within this existential drama. Whereas Freud defines the other through sexual difference alone, as defined within the cultural conditions of patriarchy, Beauvoir defines the other as *any* external consciousness.

⁵⁵ "le drame originel de tout existant qui est le drame de son rapport à l'Autre" (*Deuxième sexe II* 14).

⁵⁶ "en aliénant son existence dans une image dont autrui fondera la réalité et la valeur" (*Deuxième sexe II* 15).

Beauvoir's central concern is how the Hegelian category of the other came to be embodied by Woman as the absolute Other of sexual difference. Hegel implicitly excludes woman from consciousness; her status and subjectivity require no explanation. Freud discovers sexual difference as a category of consciousness that has been produced by human history, but excludes all other forms of self-other relation. Beauvoir asks how these two competing discourses of self and other can be brought to bear on the question of woman.

Beauvoir proposes a female dyad as a universal on which she grounds her discussion of "the original drama of every existent, which is the drama of his relation to the Other" (268). The feminized subject of the universal drama suggests to Beauvoir a revisionary fusion of the Freudian narrative and the existential impasse. When we read that the subject of desire, represented as an infant daughter, "would like to lose himself in the bosom of the Whole" (268),⁵⁷ the totality includes among its meanings the mother as the origin of her dreams and her desire for death. In Beauvoir's account, the original other is always the body of the mother, as she is becoming a separate and external consciousness. That is, consciousness is haunted by the body of the mother.

⁵⁷ "voudrait se perdre au sein du Tout" (*Deuxième sexe II* 15).

Chapter 5

Identity Undone:
James Baldwin and the Destiny of America

(1)

James Baldwin began publishing book reviews in April 1947, when he was 22.¹ A native of Harlem, he had studied with Countee Cullen at Frederick Douglass Junior High School and graduated from the prestigious De Witt Clinton High School in the Bronx. He had become a Pentecostal preacher at the age of fourteen, but he quit the pulpit while still in high school, preferring to hone his skills as a secular writer. In his sermons he had begun to develop the poetic and prophetic aspects of his style, adapting Biblical texts and images to the historical experience of black Americans. He put this knowledge to work, along with a complex use of double voicing, in "The Harlem Ghetto" (1948), an early essay that established him as a commentator on Harlem life and double-edged informant for white readers. Baldwin later credited *Commentary* editor Robert Warshow with having pressed him to write a probing account of Harlem, including black-Jewish relations (Leeming, *James Baldwin* 51). Other early essays, such as "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949), "Preservation of Innocence" (1949), and "Many Thousands Gone" (1951), use the book review format to probe American racial and sexual myths. Baldwin rejects the protest novel, charging that its sociological categories confirm the role of victim. He distances himself from the aesthetic program of the Popular Front but also poses important challenges to the new criticism of the postwar era.

Postwar criticism was fueled by the reaction against Stalinism. Many writers and intellectuals, including many former leftists, repudiated the sociological forms of literary realism endorsed in the 1930s by the Communist Party and the Popular Front. Influential critics of the 1950s denounced sociological realism as artistically shallow and complicit

¹ See "Maxim Gorky as Artist."

with Stalinism, in favor of a new modernist aesthetic of subjectivity and ambiguity, a preference for psychological analyses of political and cultural dissent, and a newly consolidated sense of their identity as Americans.²

It has been argued that Baldwin aligned himself with postwar anti-Communism and the new ideology of "America" in his critique of Richard Wright's *Native Son* and other protest novels. Carol Polsgrove, for example, writes that Baldwin distances himself from the radical thirties and adopts the rhetoric of allegiance to America in "Many Thousands Gone," where he states, "Negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny."³ Yet the intertwining of histories and identities in America is, for Baldwin, an evident and irrevocable fact: his statement suggests, rather differently, that black Americans hold the key to the fateful future of America. It poses, moreover, a series of questions and challenges. How are Americans to imagine themselves or their nation? How are they to represent the truth of American life? What are the meanings of American myths of innocence and the "nigger"? Baldwin argues that the protest novel is inadequate to these questions and to the analysis of Americans, whom he termed "a handful of incoherent people in an incoherent country" ("Notes for a Hypothetical Novel" 238). He parts company not only with the aesthetics of the Popular Front but with 1950s intellectuals who strove toward a cohesive ideology of America.

Baldwin aligns himself with the modernist trend of the 1950s, asserting, for example, that a human being "is not, after all, merely a member of a Society or a Group or a deplorable conundrum to be explained by Science" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 29). However, whereas critics such as Lionel Trilling adopted Freudian psychology as a more complex form of human science, Baldwin turns to problems of identity and representation, voicing a disillusionment with myths and categories of social identity.

² See Pells, Teres, and Carol Polsgrove.

³ "Many Thousands Gone" 77; Polsgrove 87-94.

Baldwin's early analysis of protest novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may be contrasted with Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s attack on "Doughface" progressives in *The Vital Center*, published in 1949. "Doughface" commonly designates a Northern progressive accused of submitting to the propaganda of Southern slaveholding interests. Schlesinger uses the term rather differently to refer to Popular Front progressives who defended their support for Stalinism by a sentimental "mystique of the proletariat." However, Schlesinger does not identify with the object of progressive myth, as Baldwin does; the problem of proletarian (or black) subjectivity is not on his agenda. Schlesinger writes:

Progressive dreams are tinged with a brave purity, a rich sentiment and a noble defiance. But, like most dreams, they are notable for the distortion of facts by desire. . . . As the gap has widened between the sentimental abstractions of Doughface fantasy and the cruel complexities of life, the need has increased for mythology to take up the slack. One myth, to which the Doughface has clung in the face of experience with the imperturbable ardor of an early Christian, is the mystique of the proletariat. (42, 46)

Schlesinger traces progressivism to the Enlightenment and to its belief in progress, which "dispensed with the Christian myths of sin and atonement" (38). The progressive, having banished the "dark and subterranean forces in human nature" behind official optimism, was unprepared for Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini (39). Schlesinger notes with approval the recent revival of "skeptical insights" in the liberal mind. He attributes this both to the psychology of Freud, which "has renewed the intellectual's belief in the dark, slumbering forces of the will," and, somewhat incongruously, to the theology of Barth and Niebuhr, which "has given new power to the old and chastening truths of Christianity" (165).

Baldwin, too, criticizes the liberal's sentimental myth, by which he means the myth of the purified Negro. However, he had abandoned Christianity and remained suspicious of the newly popular Freudian myths. As he stated in 1963, "I am far from convinced that being released from the African witch doctor was worthwhile if I am

now—in order to support the moral contradictions and the spiritual aridity of my life—expected to become dependent on the American psychiatrist" ("Fire Next Time" 375). Schlesinger praises the complexity of Christian concepts of sin and atonement, whereas Baldwin accuses Puritans of a "medieval morality" of innocence and sin. Schlesinger views the Enlightenment belief in progress as an unfortunate break with Christian belief, whereas Baldwin asserts a continuity. In doing so, he anticipates Wright's arguments in *White Man, Listen!* as well as recent scholars such as Paul Gilroy.⁴ Most significantly, Schlesinger is not concerned with the problems of representation that are central to Baldwin's analysis.

It should surprise no one that Baldwin adapted some of the rhetoric of his early essays to the literary world he sought to enter, that of the anti-Stalinist intellectuals who wrote for and edited journals such as *Commentary* and *Partisan Review*. He seemingly asserts his affinity with them when he demands "truth" of the novelist, and adds:

truth, as used here, is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted. This is the prime concern, the frame of reference; it is not to be confused with a devotion to humanity which is too easily equated with a devotion to a Cause; and Causes, as we know, are notoriously bloodthirsty. We have, as it seems to me, in this most mechanical and interlocking of civilizations, attempted to lop this creature down to the status of a time-saving invention. ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 28-29)

Yet Baldwin's rhetoric is only superficially similar to the 1950s critique of leftist causes. This passage from "Everybody's Protest Novel" follows a discussion of the puritanical constriction evident in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and it echoes W.E.B. Du Bois's admonition to the black public in "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926). Du Bois advised: "you have got to build yourselves up into that wide judgment, that catholicity of temper which is going to

⁴ See my discussion of this in Chapter 3.

enable the artist to have his widest chance for freedom. We can afford the Truth. White folk today cannot" (1001). In the 1950s and later, Baldwin similarly argues that black Americans are better positioned than whites to recognize the truths of American life.⁵ However, he writes his early essays in a voice that is racially undefined. As he later explains: "I had to use 'we' and let the reader figure out who 'we' is" (Standley and Pratt 275). In such a narrative context, should we understand "freedom" and "truth" as the terms of an evolving black aesthetic, as they are for Du Bois? Or should they be read as terms in the cultural Cold War? In Baldwin's double voicing, they are both, and the effect is to voice the demand for American freedom as, simultaneously, an urgent demand for racial truth.

Although the Truman administration provided some support for black civil rights, notably by desegregating the armed services, government officials and intellectuals were less concerned with the official racism of the American South than with conditions in Europe, where the defeat of German fascism had created conditions for the expansion of Soviet power.⁶ In their view, the totalitarian threat had moved east to Moscow. Hannah Arendt's brilliant analysis in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* focused on European anti-Semitism, its transformation in the era of imperialism, and the emergence of totalitarian regimes in Europe. Arendt argued that social discrimination, in itself, "had little influence on the rise of political anti-Semitism" in Europe (55). She again emphasized the dangers of political rather than social anti-Semitism when she noted the "sudden entirely unprecedented emergence of governmental anti-Semitism" in the Soviet Union after the establishment of Israel and suggested that it was "calculated to win sympathies

⁵ See, for example, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?"

⁶ Dudziak 79-102.

for the Soviet Union in the European satellite countries" (424-25).⁷ *Commentary* also reported on this problem during the late forties and early fifties.⁸ Arendt regarded political anti-Semitism as a danger in the United States, as well. She argued that in a country where discrimination is "the only means of distinction," anti-Semitism can become a "crystallization point for a political movement that wants to solve all the natural difficulties and conflicts of a multinational country by violence, mob rule, and the sheer vulgarity of race concepts." Arguably, such a movement had long empowered Southern whites against blacks; but this was not Arendt's point. She suggested, rather, that Jews could become the target of political racism in America because they, "alone among all other groups, have themselves, within their history and their religion, expressed a well-known principle of separation." Arendt concluded that this was not true of other groups in the United States, such as blacks and Chinese, who were "therefore less endangered politically" (55). Arendt legitimately viewed political anti-Semitism as a peculiarly dangerous form of racism; but this led her to ignore the political character of racism against blacks in the American South.

Similarly, black American writers were relatively silent on the Nazi persecution and extermination of European Jews. Richard Wright read extensively about the rise of the Nazis, and he was certainly opposed to fascism.⁹ Moreover, he was married to a Jewish woman and deeply concerned with the problem of racism in the United States. Yet he refused to criticize the Soviet Union for signing a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany in August 1939, and he remained pacifist in his convictions, regarding the war

⁷ Kenez argues that the creation of a Jewish state "presented the danger of divided loyalties among Jews. Given the ambitions of a totalitarian state, such divided loyalties could not be tolerated" (182).

⁸ Anti-semitism was common among the Russian population regardless of official policy, and there were good reasons to fear renewed persecution. See, for example, Harvey Schwartz; Solomon M. Schwartz; and Meyer.

⁹ See Wright's comments in "How Bigger Was Born" 864.

as imperialist and of no concern to blacks.¹⁰ Wright's perspective on the war may have some bearing on his comments on Nazi Germany in "How Bigger Was Born," written in early 1940 before Hitler's assault put an unceremonious end to the pact with Stalin.

Wright refers in passing to the Nazi oppression of Jews, but he does not pursue a comparison with the oppression of black Americans. Rather, he aligns Bigger Thomas with the German and Russian masses:

more than anything else, as a writer, I was fascinated by the similarity of the emotional tensions of Bigger in America and Bigger in Nazi Germany and Bigger in old Russia. All Bigger Thomases, white and black, felt tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless. From far away Nazi Germany and old Russia had come to me items of knowledge that told me that certain modern experiences were creating types of personalities whose existence ignored racial and national lines of demarcation, . . . that these personalities were mainly imposed upon men and women living in a world whose fundamental assumptions could no longer be taken for granted: a world ridden with national and class strife; a world whose metaphysical meanings had vanished; a world in which God no longer existed . . . a world that existed on a plane of animal sensation alone. (865-66)

If Wright had compared "Bigger in America" only to "Bigger in Nazi Germany," this would read as a warning of the appeal that fascism holds for uprooted masses of people; and Wright would clearly be condemning mass movements based in such feelings. The inclusion of "Bigger in old Russia," however, suggests a more ambiguous analysis. Like the German and Russian masses, Bigger in America could turn either way: to fascism or Communism. Wright still believed in Communism in 1940; he did not yet hold the view, expressed in *The Outsider*, that Communism and fascism are equivalent totalitarian systems, bent on ruthless control. He may well be suggesting that the German masses, like the masses in old Russia and Bigger in America, could somehow be saved.

Baldwin also makes few references to the Holocaust, at least prior to the

¹⁰ Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 192-93, 222-26.

publication of *The Fire Next Time* in 1963, although he came of age during the war, graduating in 1941 from a high school attended by many Jewish students.¹¹ His outlook in the late forties differs from that of white intellectuals, who turned their attention to the analysis of European fascism and Stalinism and to problems of industrial and managerial conformity in America.¹² Baldwin was steeped in the rhetoric of the black Church, in which the "images of the suffering Christ and the suffering Jew are wedded with the image of the suffering slave, and they are one" ("Harlem Ghetto" 8). These subversive identifications, with their images of martyrdom and salvation, embodiment and exile, inform Baldwin's analysis of his own experience as a black homosexual in America. Moreover, he used them to explode what he viewed as the theological premises of American racial and sexual myths.

"Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone" are statements of Baldwin's emerging aesthetic and his defining theme of identity, although they are known primarily for their criticisms of *Native Son* and the resulting tensions with Wright.¹³ Along with other essays from *Notes of a Native Son*, published in 1955, they set the terms for Baldwin's representation of American identity, particularly its racial dimensions, in the early novels *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and *Another Country* (1962). "Preservation of Innocence," the first of Baldwin's three essays on homosexuality, adds a crucial analysis of homosexual persecution and the American ideal of manhood.¹⁴ "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Preservation of Innocence" were

¹¹ For comments on Baldwin's references to the Holocaust in *The Fire Next Time*, see Dickstein 94.

¹² See Pells.

¹³ For a balanced view of the relationship between Baldwin and Wright, see James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates* (9-32, 62-70).

¹⁴ "Preservation of Innocence" *Zero* 1:2 (Summer 1949). The other essays are "The Male Prison" originally published as "Gide as Husband and Homosexual" *The New Leader* 37 (Dec. 13, 1954): 18-20; and "Here Be Dragons," originally published as "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" *Playboy* (Jan. 1985).

written in early 1949, during Baldwin's first months in Paris, and published in the new Paris journal, *Zero*. Back in New York, *Partisan Review* quickly picked up "Everybody's Protest Novel," but "Preservation of Innocence" vanished until 1989.¹⁵ This neglect may have been due less to the essay's focus on homosexuality, which with the publication of the Kinsey Report in 1948 had suddenly become a much-discussed topic, than to Baldwin's specific arguments. His rejection of God, as man's invention and the arbiter of a dubious distinction between the natural and the unnatural, ran afoul of renewed religious sentiment, and his assertion of the "ever-present danger of sexual activity between men" defies contemporary attempts to define homosexuals as a psychologically afflicted minority (45).

Wright had told the editors of *Zero* about Baldwin, and they met him upon his arrival in Paris in November 1948 (Leeming, *James Baldwin* 57). Baldwin's editors in New York had asked him to review books on black Americans, but he had grown tired of protest novels, which in his view confirmed blacks in the role of victim. He was determined to take another direction as a writer and later commented that for his editors, "the color of my skin made me an expert. And so, when I got to Paris, I had to discharge all that" (Standley and Pratt 237). Baldwin's search for "a new vocabulary and another point of view" began with "Everybody's Protest Novel" (Standley and Pratt 237). He planned an essay that would ridicule white liberal stereotypes of blacks, but Paris proved unsettling, and in the end he decided to pair *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "that cornerstone of American social protest fiction," with Wright's *Native Son* ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 27).¹⁶

In "Everybody's Protest Novel" Baldwin condemns *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its

¹⁵ "Preservation of Innocence" was reprinted, with a preface by Melvin Dixon, in the short-lived gay academic journal *Out Look* 2 (Fall 1989): 40-45.

¹⁶ Weatherby 69; Leeming, *James Baldwin* 64-67.

author for their sentimentality and "failure of perception" (28). Stowe and her characters never question the "medieval morality" of their vision; "black, white, the devil, the next world—posing its alternatives between heaven and the flames—were realities for them . . . They spurned and were terrified of the darkness, striving mightily for the light" (27-28). They denounce slavery as "perfectly horrible" but are betrayed by an "aversion to experience," and Uncle Tom was born of this contradiction, a figure of liberal myths of race (28). There is nothing surprising in Baldwin's judgment of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a "very bad novel," marred by "self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality" (28); it is the standard censure of women's sentimental fiction.¹⁷ However, his argument does not identify the flaws of Stowe's novel with women's writing—or even, necessarily, with what is commonly recognized as sentimentality. Baldwin notes that sentimentality is "the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel . . . and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity" (28). Baldwin charges that Stowe is motivated not by sentiment but by violence and "terror of the human being"; her novel shares its faults with *Native Son* and hard-boiled novels such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (29).

Baldwin acknowledges that Stowe attempts to present the complete picture of slavery but asks, "what constriction or failure of perception forced her to so depend on the description of brutality—unmotivated, senseless—and to leave unanswered and unnoticed the only important question: what it was, after all, that moved her people to such deeds" (28). The essential question Baldwin poses is *why*, though he fails to acknowledge that Stowe herself seems to pose this question, especially in the scenes on Simon Legree's plantation. Baldwin demands of the novelist greater truth, not "devotion to a Cause" (29). Significantly, this leads to a discussion of representation and of the method Stowe used "to solve the problem of writing about a black man at all" (29).

Stowe cannot tell the truth about slavery, Baldwin suggests, since she fails on the crucial

¹⁷ See Tompkins for an analysis of the critical reception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

level of representation. Tom's triumph is "metaphysical, unearthly; since he is black, born without the light, it is only through humility, the incessant mortification of the flesh, that he can enter into communion with God or man" (30). Stowe's "virtuous rage" is motivated by "nothing so temporal as a concern for the relationship of men to one another . . . but merely by her panic of being hurled into the flames, of being caught in traffic with the devil" (30). Compelled by her religion to do good works among the slaves, she also fears contact with their impurity:

if, being mindful of the necessity of good works, she could not cast out the blacks—a wretched, huddled mass, apparently, claiming, like an obsession, her inner eye—she could not embrace them either without purifying them of sin. (30)

This is the crux of Baldwin's objection to the protest novel—that it surrenders the human being to a set of essentially theological myths. Baldwin demands, instead, a realism that does not propose to save Tom by sacrificing his blackness or his life to "unearthly" triumph.

Baldwin describes *Native Son* as "a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy" (33). This idea may have been suggested to him by Wright himself. In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright attempts to explain the genesis of his novel and says, among other things, that he wrote it to destroy sentimental images of black suffering—images that he had helped to create. Wright published a book of early stories, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), as he was planning *Native Son*, and he recalls his reaction to the reviews:

I realized that I had made an awfully naive mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest. (874)

Wright's stories were, in other words, unintentionally sentimental.¹⁸ Not only were they named after Stowe's novel, but they suggested, in their catalogue of senseless violence against black men, a modern retelling of the sufferings of Uncle Tom. Wright's solution in *Native Son* was to efface the innocence of his protagonist by having him kill a wealthy young white woman. Bigger does not intend to kill Mary Dalton; but having done it, he must save himself, and so he incinerates her body in the family furnace, blackmails her elderly parents, and rapes and kills his girlfriend, Bessie. He is no figure of the suffering Christ; bankers' daughters do not read of his capture and weep.

In Baldwin's view, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Native Son* present two sides of the same myth of sin and redemption, black and white. Because Uncle Tom is black, his body must be purified of sex to stifle the sinful "nigger" lurking within, while Bigger Thomas *is* the "nigger" and embodies the theological terrors and frightened longings of those around him. Americans who believe in the myth of the "nigger" are driven to carry out the necessary and often violent purification. Blacks are purified by being whitened or stripped of their full humanity, while whites defend their presumed purity to the death. The oppressed collaborate in these myths even in rebellion: "It must be remembered," Baldwin writes, "that the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality" (32). Wright's method leads to futile and perpetual struggle within the same narrow cage.

The purging of terror through bloody ritual survives in modernity in the violence of the mob. Stowe's "terror of the human being" exceeds ideology, linking the abolitionist writer with the racist mob:

Uncle Tom's Cabin, then, is activated by what might be called a

¹⁸ For an analysis of male sentimentality, see Sedgwick, "Some Binarisms."

theological terror, the terror of damnation; and the spirit that breathes in this book, hot, self-righteous, fearful, is not different from that spirit of medieval times which sought to exorcise evil by burning witches; and is not different from that terror which activates a lynch mob. One need not, indeed, search for examples so historic or so gaudy; this is a warfare waged daily in the heart, a warfare so vast, so relentless and so powerful that the interracial handshake or the interracial marriage can be as crucifying as the public hanging or the secret rape. (30)

Elsewhere Baldwin traces man's invention of the deity and of the alternatives of sin and salvation to the evasion of the primal terrors of hunger, danger, and darkness. Baldwin shares this analysis with Wright, whose works of the 1950s, especially *White Man, Listen!* and *Pagan Spain*, describe the survival of religious superstition in modern concepts of race.¹⁹ Wright, however, turns to rational systems of thought to free the modern West of its racial superstitions, while Baldwin rejects abstract universals for a poetic and corporeal truth. In *No Name in the Street*, for example, Baldwin suggests that he learned to live beyond color through love, in the body. He writes that love:

began to pry open for me the trap of color, for people do not fall in love according to their color. . . . Because you love one human being, you see everyone else very differently than you saw them before—perhaps I only mean to say that you begin to *see*—and you are both stronger and more vulnerable, both free and bound. Free, paradoxically, because, now, you have a home—your lover's arms. And bound: to that mystery, precisely, a bondage which liberates you into something of the glory and suffering of the world. (23)

Baldwin invokes the mystery of the incarnation of Christ to describe the transformative power of human, sexual love. Love, corporeal presence, is not a sacrifice but a way of freeing oneself from the deadly tyranny of abstract universals. Bound to his lover's body, he is liberated from the "trap of color" into lived experience, the "glory and suffering" of the world.

¹⁹ See my discussion of this in Chapter 3.

Faith in abstract universals motivates the Puritan and the lynch mob, but also the social scientist who reduces Americans to a "race of neatly analyzed, hard-working ciphers" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 31). Baldwin's revolt against religion, racism, and American modernity takes the form of a refusal of abstract categories of identity. However, Baldwin's argument against universals derives less from contemporary philosophy than from his rebellion against biblical theology. St. Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*, for example, proposes to transcend the categories of Judaic law through belief in the beauty, dread, and power of Christ. Yet as Baldwin well knew, St. Paul merely revises the categories of Judaic law; they would no longer distinguish between the circumcised and the uncircumcised, but between the spirit and the flesh:

I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me.

For I delight in the law of God after the inward man:

But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. (*King James Bible*, Romans 7.21-23.)

The schism of the law, or of consciousness, has survived many conversions: this is the perception behind Baldwin's evasion of the universal. Baldwin had fled the Pentecostal church and its condemnation, in writhing ecstasy, of homosexuality and the flesh, but he did not desire another conversion. He wrote bitterly of Norman Mailer and the other prophets of Hip, whose nostalgia for a primal past of sexual fantasy led them to embrace the id, the orgasm, and that "walking phallic symbol," the black man ("Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" 290). Mailer's "The White Negro" proposes that sexual anarchy be unleashed against totalitarian society, since anarchy, for Mailer, is less dangerous than totalitarian control. Baldwin, however, gives sex an unstable meaning, often representing it as a weapon of control rather than a means of personal liberation. In *No Name in the Street*, for example, he describes being groped by a powerful white man in the South and

comments: "This man, with a phone call, could prevent or provoke a lynching. . . .

Therefore, one had to be friendly: but the price for this was your cock" (62). *Giovanni's Room* represents a homosexual underworld balanced precariously between two forms of power and powerlessness, aged wealth and youthful hunger; Giovanni, a bartender who is young and leonine and desperate, must endure groping by his employer, Guillaume.

Baldwin's response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* departs from the usual dismissal of Tom by readers who favor an image of black male resistance through violence.²⁰ Although Tom refuses to cede to the temptations of a satanic master, Simon Legree, he appears weak to many readers because he does not take up armed revolt. Claudia Tate, however, has argued that black women writers of the late nineteenth century created alternative, domestic narratives of black liberation (*Domestic Allegories*). Jane Tompkins proposes that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a typological narrative in which Tom's death reenacts the sacrifice of Christ. Stowe's novel "retells the culture's central religious myth, the story of the crucifixion, in terms of the nation's greatest political conflict—slavery—and of its most cherished social beliefs—the sanctity of motherhood and the family" (513). Her characters are defined "according to whether they are saved or damned" (513); and their salvation represents a political act, since reality "can only be changed by conversion in the spirit because it is the spirit alone that is finally real" (511). In this Puritan reading, Tom's confrontation with Simon Legree repeats the triumph of Christ over the classical hero, of the merciful redeemer over the warrior, transformed as in *Paradise Lost* into satanic majesty. Stowe has construed these conflicting ideals of heroism through a rhetoric of gender. Tom refuses the power offered by Legree to brutalize other slaves and asserts instead a maternal compassion for them and even for Legree. Tom's spiritual

²⁰ For an analysis of 19th-century responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany, see Levine. As I have argued in Chapters 2 and 3, Wright's *Native Son* and *The Outsider* explore the limits of violence as a means of liberation. See Posnock, *Color and Culture*, on *The Outsider* as a limit case.

power over Legree is figured in a lock of Eva's hair, which he carries with him and which reminds Legree fatefully of his own mother.

Baldwin departs from the gendered terms of this debate. He argues that Stowe found it necessary to bury "the carnal man, the man of the flesh," and that Tom is divested not only of his righteous wrath but of "his sex" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 30). Prior to African independence in the 1960s, Baldwin suggested that the return of the gaze that occurs in the sexual encounter was the key to American identity and black survival.²¹ Baldwin's dismissal of causes and ideologies is an effect of his assessment of the politics of representation. Protest novels have refused to see black men and women as human beings, or to see the witness as other than a victim. Baldwin does not acknowledge, however, that Stowe understands the problems posed for abolitionism by issues of empathy and representation; Miss Ophelia, for example, cannot see Topsy as human, or feel maternal love for her. In *Giovanni's Room*, as well, David betrays the human needs of his lover, Giovanni—a betrayal that signifies David's refusal to love.

According to biographer A.J. Weatherby, Baldwin was influenced in his discussion of *Native Son* by seeing Wright in the company of French existentialists. As Baldwin explained years later in an interview with Julius Lester, "I didn't think that Simone de Beauvoir or Jean-Paul Sartre—to say nothing of the American colony—had any right whatsoever to patronize that man. It revolted me and made me furious. And it made me furious at Richard, too, because he was better than that."²² These comments refer, it seems, to a form of patronizing myth—the myth of the black rebel—in the minds of both whites and blacks. In "Everybody's Protest Novel" Baldwin argues that "the oppressed and oppressor are bound together within the same society," so that it is

²¹ Baldwin began to move away from this view in 1961; see "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King."

²² Weatherby 69. The comments were made to Julius Lester of the *New York Times Book Review*.

"romantic, more, meaningless, to speak of a 'new' society as the desire of the oppressed" (32). Bigger Thomas is "controlled, defined by his hatred and fear. . . . Bigger is Uncle Tom's descendant," and *Native Son* is "a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy" (33). Baldwin elaborates these arguments in "Many Thousands Gone," where he writes that Bigger's kinsmen:

are quite right to weep and be frightened, even to be appalled: for it is not his love for them or for himself which causes him to die, but his hatred and his self-hatred; he does not redeem the pains of a despised people, but reveals, on the contrary, nothing more than his own fierce bitterness at having been born one of them. (75)

Wright responded angrily to Baldwin's essay, claiming, "*All literature is protest*" (278). Baldwin recalls that,

To this I could only weakly counter that all literature might be protest but all protest was not literature. "Oh," he would say then, looking, as he so often did, bewilderingly juvenile, "here you come again with all that art for art's sake crap." . . . Our rare, best times came when we managed to exasperate each other to the point of helpless hilarity. "Roots," Richard would snort, when I had finally worked my way around to this dreary subject, "what——roots! Next thing you'll be telling me is that all colored folks have rhythm." ("Alas, Poor Richard" 278)

Wright's dismissal of "art for art's sake" and "roots" repeats his criticisms of New Negro writers of the twenties and thirties who, in his view, sought approval from white publishers and critics by creating a bourgeois modernism marked by racial exoticism.²³ Like Baldwin, New Negro writers such as Alain Locke combined an interracial conception of American culture with an emphasis on aesthetic expression; and like him, some were bisexual or homosexual. Writing in 1925, Locke argued that black writers and artists bring a cultural gift to art, and that the "newer motive . . . in being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art" ("Negro Youth Speaks" 51). Blacks deserve entry into

²³ For Wright's views on black American writers, see "The Literature of the Negro in the United States."

the realm of modern art as "a people who still have the ancient key . . . an imagination that has never broken kinship with nature." The work of younger black writers and artists, Locke suggests, unites this "transfiguring imagination" and "cosmic emotion" with modern European art, in "the marriage of a fresh emotional endowment with the finest niceties of art. . . . Art must accept such gifts, and reevaluate the giver" (52).

Yet Locke also acknowledges the "social promise" of recent art, and observes that:

reason and realism have cured us of sentimentality: instead of the wail and appeal, there is challenge and indictment. Satire is just beneath the surface of our latest prose, and tonic irony has come into our poetic wells. . . . [U]nder some spiritualizing reaction, the brands and wounds of social persecution are becoming the proud stigmata of spiritual immunity and moral victory. . . . [W]e are at last spiritually free, and offer through art an emancipating vision to America. (52-53)

Locke was educated at Harvard and went on to become the first black Rhodes scholar at Oxford; his class background differs sharply from that of Baldwin (Posnock 191-92). Wright, however, correctly observes that Baldwin shares some of Locke's aesthetic, in which blacks were to play a central role in the emergence of an interracial and non-Puritan culture in America. Moreover, like other black writers, including Wright, Baldwin was dependent on white editors, publishers, and readers.

Much has been written about Baldwin's relations with Wright, whom he described as a literary mentor and friend, albeit one who proved disappointing.²⁴ Baldwin's criticisms of *Native Son* are often viewed by critics as an unmotivated attack on a father figure, although there are some dissenting voices.²⁵ Biographer James Campbell, for

²⁴ See "Alas, Poor Richard!"

²⁵ Baldwin himself suggested that he regarded Wright as a father figure; see "Alas, Poor Richard!" For recent comments that characterize Baldwin's relation to Wright as "filial," see Boggs 156n4; Ross 46n13; Dudley 137-65; and Darsey 191. Dissenting views include Michelle M. Wright, Joshua L. Miller, and Ferguson.

example, argues that the quarrel "was actually over something more tangible—the social and artistic responsibilities of the writer" (*Talking at the Gates* 69). Moreover, Sondra A. O'Neale suggests that social contact between the two writers was limited and, at least on Wright's part, distant. O'Neale, who conducted interviews in 1980 and 1981 with Baldwin and his family and associates, comments that Baldwin's brother David "painfully recalls the benignly discourteous treatment that Baldwin received from Richard Wright and other members of the post-Renaissance New York circle." She adds that "the true character of their relationship and of Wright's refusal to sponsor or associate with the younger writer is barely seen in 'Alas, Poor Richard' or 'Everybody's Protest Novel'" (139).²⁶ Chester Himes, who knew Wright and Baldwin in Paris, observed Wright's cruelty toward Baldwin during a 1953 meeting at the cafe, Deux Magots, with "Dick playing the fat cat and forcing Baldwin into the role of the quivering mouse."²⁷ Finally, Wright commented in a public lecture in 1960 that between Baldwin's "sensitive sentences there were echoes of a kind of unmanly weeping." As James Campbell remarks, the comment refers to Baldwin's homosexuality, which Wright disparaged on other occasions as well. Wright follows the reference to Baldwin's "unmanly weeping" with an implausible and cruel account of the argument at Deux Magots, which he claims ended with Baldwin screaming, over and over again, "I'm going to destroy you."²⁸ Perhaps Wright was waging his own form of Oedipal attack.

Wright's contemptuous response to Baldwin, then, follows not only from Baldwin's criticisms of *Native Son* but from conflicting aesthetics, which in turn correlate with antagonistic class, regional, and gender positions. Wright was, in fact, more receptive than Baldwin to literary modernism. He wrote of Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha"

²⁶ O'Neale was preparing a biography of Baldwin, but it remains unpublished.

²⁷ Himes, *The Quality of Hurt* (qtd. in Campbell, *Talking at the Gates* 68).

²⁸ Wright, "The Position of the Negro Artist and Intellectual in American Society" (qtd. in Campbell, *Talking at the Gates* 65-66); Campbell, *Talking at the Gates* 71.

that "it was as if I were listening to my grandmother for the first time . . . I suddenly began to *hear* the English *language* for the first time."²⁹ Wright read extensively in existentialism and psychoanalysis, among the theoretical premises of modernism. In *The Outsider*, Wright creates a modernist fusion of high and low culture; and an important character, Eva Blount, is an abstract painter and Communist Party member whose work is suppressed because it violates the Party's aesthetic. Wright also acknowledges the use of modernist techniques by writers of the Black Atlantic, to use Paul Gilroy's term. In his introduction to George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, Wright observes that Lamming's prose combines poetic, realist, and vernacular elements to describe Caribbean society and the experience of modernity and exile, and that it "is faithful not only to social detail, but renders with fidelity the myth-content of folk minds." Noting the political uses of Lamming's modernism, Wright praises his "autobiographical summation of a tropical island childhood that, though steeped in the luminous images of sea, earth, sky, and wind, drifts slowly toward the edge of the realms of political and industrial strife."³⁰

However, Wright understood that despite his break with the Party, in 1944, he remained subject to harassment by the FBI and the newly-formed CIA, while American Communist and anti-Communist critics alike questioned his departure for France in 1946.³¹ In this context, Wright's comment to Baldwin that "all literature is protest" challenged the political and social conformity of the attacks on him. Dismissing "art for art's sake," he expressed his contempt for critics who praised the formal experimentation and transgressive subjectivity of high modernism, but who ignored those aspects of

²⁹ Gollomb, *Book-of-the-Month Club News* 8; Wright, "Memories of My Grandmother," *Biblio.* (166), U 58 Wright Misc. 473 (18)(qtd. in Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* 150). Stein wrote to Wright in April 1945, in response to his review of *Wars I Have Seen* (Rowley 323-24).

³⁰ Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* 219-220.

³¹ See Gayle 222-25, 285-86.

Native Son and never mentioned writers such as Lamming at all.

Encountered in the pages of *Partisan Review*, Baldwin's distrust of moral and ideological absolutes, his claim that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offers merely "the formula created by the necessity to find a lie more palatable than the truth" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 29), resonates in some respects with Lionel Trilling's call for moral realism in the novel. Like Baldwin, Trilling argues that novels of "moral indignation" omit large areas of reality; yet the two writers part company there, for they offer rather different versions of the omitted reality. In "Manners, Morals, and The Novel" (1948), Trilling defines the novel as "a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always the social world, the material of its analysis being always manners as the indication of the direction of man's soul" (212). Whereas Baldwin claims that political novels fall short by perpetuating social myths, Trilling argues that they exclude style and thought—subjectivity—from their field of reality. Reality is seen as "whatever is external and hard, gross, unpleasant. . . . Power is assumed to be always 'brute' power, crude, ugly, and indiscriminating" (215). This vision of reality excludes as trivial the novelist's "awareness of manners," which for Trilling is "a function of his love" (216). As a consequence, the political novelist offers broad social feeling but little power of love, for "the basis of his creation is the coldest response to abstract ideas" (217).

Trilling faults the protest novel for its abstractions and consequent loss of feeling and detail, but for him the abstractions do not hide "theological terrors," as Baldwin claims they do. Rather, the danger of moral indignation lies in its willful and imperious aspect. Referring to a John Dash novel that had attracted a large male readership through the "depiction of Nazi brutality," Trilling comments that "in this instance the pleasure in the cruelty is protected and licensed by moral indignation. In other instances moral indignation . . . may be in itself an exquisite pleasure." In these comments, ideological

deviance shades into psychological deviance—sadism or the "exquisite pleasure" of indignation—as moral passion is charged with perverse motives. Unchecked by an awareness of motive, these subterranean pleasures become dangerous through their sheer willfulness:

the moral passions are even more willful and imperious and impatient than the self-seeking passions. . . . Some paradox of our natures leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion. (221)

Here we encounter the Cold War opposition between the "moral passions" of socialism and the "self-seeking passions" of capitalism. The capitalist passions are, for Trilling, the less urgent, unconscious, and therefore threatening of the two. In short, they are normal.

(2)

The blurring of ideological and psychological forms of deviance found its target in a third kind of passion, homosexuality, which by 1950 would come under close scrutiny by the American government, intellectuals, and the public. In what has come to be known as the "pink scare," homosexuals were rooted out of the federal government as part of a Communist threat. According to the U.S. government, homosexuals might be subject to blackmail and therefore were regarded as a national security risk. They were seen, moreover, as psychologically unstable; along with the abnormal moral passions, same-sex passions weakened American resolve in the face of Communism. The arguments against homosexuals had evolved as government policy during World War II, when the U.S. military sought to avoid psychiatric casualties, common in the previous war, by screening out psychologically unfit recruits. The armed services relied on standards set and enforced by psychiatrists who sought to identify "personality disorders," including homosexuality, deemed likely to make a recruit unfit to withstand the stresses of war. In practice, psychiatrists at the recruitment centers lacked the time and often the training to implement the policy, and many interpreted the profile for homosexuals as a set of broadly defined, observable behaviors. Yet as Allan Bérubé argues, by defining homosexuality as "a personality type unfit for military service," psychiatrists shifted attention from the sexual act to the character of the individual (2). Moreover, the problem of detection remained, since the psychiatric profile emphasized character traits and behavior rather than physical traits. During the early years of the Cold War, the phenomenon of passing would come to be regarded as a problem of national security as homosexuals, Communists, and Jews came to be seen as subversive and potentially treasonous. Homosexuals and Communists, especially, could pass

undetected among the political and cultural elite.³² Leslie Fiedler, for example, represents Alger Hiss as indistinguishable from the Establishment for which he worked ("Hiss"). Fears of an internal enemy or fifth column led to the HUAC hearings and the policing excesses of J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, and they also spurred the development of complex theories of social adjustment, assimilation, marginality, and pathology. Not surprisingly, such theories came to include black Americans, who had been studied for decades by sociologists; now psychologists and avant-garde writers such as Jack Kerouac and Norman Mailer began to include them in concepts of pathology and psychological dissidence.³³ At the same time, the civil rights movement would pose an unprecedented threat to the color line. Wright's *The Outsider* represents the tensions between forms of dissidence—protest and passing, marked and unmarked identity, racial and psychological marginality.

The psychiatric view of homosexuality as a behavior that was not easily detected found support in 1948, when Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* published statistics claiming that 37% of the male population had engaged in homosexual acts (650). Although such a statistic defies the notion of a homosexual minority distinct from the heterosexual norm, the Kinsey Report did not pose a successful challenge to the dominant postwar view of homosexuals as a minority characterized by psychological faults. Rather, Kinsey's study lent support to fears of an unseen yet prevalent threat. In 1950, Congress passed Public Law 733 purging homosexuals from the federal government, on the claim that they were psychologically unstable and therefore constituted a national security risk.³⁴

Among the intellectuals, Trilling's "The Kinsey Report" offered qualified support

³² For a discussion of changing attitudes toward American Jews during the 1950s, see Borstelmann 63-64.

³³ See Mailer, "The White Negro"; and Kerouac.

³⁴ See D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace" and *Sexual Politics* 33-37.

for the government's judgment. Trilling faults the Report for its statistical and purportedly scientific method, which leads to an emphasis on physiological rather than psychological aspects of sexual experience, and for its "reliance on animal behavior . . . to establish a dominating principle of judgment, which is the Natural" (226-27).

Moreover, the Report is not:

averse to letting the idea of the Natural develop quietly into the idea of the Normal. The Report has in mind both a physical normality—as suggested by its belief that under optimal conditions men should be able to achieve the orgasmic frequency of the primates—and a moral normality, the acceptability, on the authority of animal behavior, of certain usually taboo practices. (227)

Trilling argues that some of the sexual behaviors condoned in this way, such as homosexuality and early ejaculation, are psychologically and socially undesirable. He criticizes the Report for attempting to establish a "democratic pluralism of sexuality" (234) by suggesting that "homosexuality is to be accepted as a form of sexuality like another and that it is as 'natural' as heterosexuality, a judgment to which the Report is led in part because of the surprisingly large incidence of homosexuality it finds in the population" (233). Trilling asserts the irreducible difference of homosexuals, by contrast, and he invokes the authority of psychiatrists to argue that the conditions that produce homosexuality "also produce other character traits on which judgment would be passed." Nor is it merely a matter of private behavior: "there can be no doubt that a society in which homosexuality was dominant or even accepted would be different in nature and quality from one in which it was censured" (233). Opposing the Kinsey Report's expansive, statistical definition, Trilling affirms homosexual difference by proposing a definition based in developmental psychology, with implications of pathology and political subversion.

Trilling argues that the Report ignores the psychological aspects of heterosexual

behavior, as well, since it focuses only on men and treats women as incidental participants in sex. Once again, the charge had political meaning in a postwar culture that sought to keep women at home as wives and mothers. As Trilling notes, Kinsey describes rapid ejaculation as "normal," relying for comparison on mammalian behavior. Kinsey argues further that a person who is "'quick and intense in his responses'" is generally regarded as "'superior, and that in most instances is exactly what the rapidly ejaculating male probably is, however inconvenient and unfortunate his qualities may be from the standpoint of the wife in the relationship'" (229). According to Trilling, such reasoning resists the "folk feeling" that measures male potency not "merely by frequency, but by the ability to withhold orgasm long enough to bring the woman to climax" (228). The male altruism endorsed here is strangely at odds with Trilling's preference for the "self-seeking passions"; and it may be contrasted with Mailer's enthusiasm in "The White Negro" and elsewhere for a state of nature modeled on de Sade. Rather, Trilling argues that Kinsey offers a simplistic understanding of "the natural in the human," confusing the traits of "natural infancy" with those of "natural manhood." He proposes instead "the *natural* ability and tendency of man to grow in the direction of organization and control" (229), and he demands a more complex definition of human nature—or the natural in the human—than offered in the Report. Not surprisingly, neither Trilling nor Mailer presents women as sexual agents; the appearance of the English translation of *The Second Sex* in 1952, along with the work of Mary McCarthy, would begin to change this.³⁵

In "Preservation of Innocence" (1949), Baldwin interprets the natural in religious rather than scientific terms and argues that the concept does not apply to human behavior. As he well knew, Christianity uses the category of the natural to damn blacks and

³⁵ See, for example, McCarthy's "Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt" and "Dottie Makes an Honest Woman of Herself." For a discussion of responses to the latter story, see Nancy K. Miller, "Women's Secrets and the Novel."

homosexuals for opposing reasons, condemning blacks as sinfully natural and homosexuals as sinfully *unnatural*. Caught in this contradiction, Baldwin asserts that human beings cannot be defined by such concepts. Stowe was driven by them to purify what she viewed as Tom's sinful nature, his "intimidating nakedness" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 30); similarly, the debasement of the homosexual man, "his ambiguous and terrible position in our society," arises from fear of the unnatural and the impure ("Preservation of Innocence" 41). Melvin Dixon describes "Preservation of Innocence" as "a bold attempt to develop a moral defense for homosexuality by arguing against the presumption of 'unnaturalness' in same-sex relations" ("This Light" 39); but Baldwin goes further, rejecting the concepts of sin and purity and innocence that underlie faith in heterosexual myths. He does not propose a homosexual *identity*; rather, he argues that Americans will not achieve a viable sexual or national life until they relinquish claims to purity and innocence, including "immaculate manliness" (44). Rejecting the new concept of homosexual identity, Baldwin proposes an interpretation of *American* identity through a critique of masculinity that parallels his critique of American racial ideals.³⁶ He elaborates this critique in *Giovanni's Room*, where Europe is a destabilizing context—a third term and a new background for the remaking of an American.

"Preservation of Innocence" begins by examining the category of the natural as it relates to man. People who have not removed themselves from a state of nature "are not admired as natural but are feared as primitive or incarcerated as insane" (40). Moreover, concepts of the natural and unnatural have their source in religious myth; along with the Deity, they "sprang into being on the cold, black day when we discovered that nature cared nothing for us" (41). Baldwin describes the resulting tension between God and nature through which the homosexual is condemned as unnatural:

³⁶ See Chauncey for an analysis of changing definitions of homosexuality in early twentieth-century New York, the context most relevant to an understanding of Baldwin.

Before we were banished from Eden and the curse was uttered, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman," the homosexual did not exist; nor, properly speaking, did the heterosexual. We were all in a state of nature.

We are forced to consider this tension between God and nature and are thus confronted with the nature of God because He is man's most intense creation and it is not in the sight of nature that the homosexual is condemned, but in the sight of God. This argues a profound and dangerous failure of concept, since an incalculable number of the world's humans are thereby condemned to something less than life; and we may not, of course, do this without limiting ourselves. (41-42)

Baldwin opposes the myths and social categories of an outmoded Puritan morality, as he had done in "Everybody's Protest Novel." Yet the myths of Uncle Tom and Bigger Thomas existed alongside the long history of black communities, whereas homosexuals were just beginning to assert a common identity and to form communities.³⁷ Rejecting myths of the homosexual, Baldwin does not affirm the existence of a "real" homosexual world; rather, he concludes that desire between men is everywhere present, a possibility or a danger. By contrast, Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948) posits a homosexual identity, but it is blank and without depth.

Baldwin's subject in "Preservation of Innocence," then, is American masculinity and the continuity between heterosexual and homosexual plots. In James M. Cain's *Serenade*, for example, a homosexual is stabbed to death when he threatens to come between the virile hero and his mistress. Cain's novel contains a "curious admission" that there is "always somewhere a homosexual who can wear down the resistance of the normal man by knowing which buttons to press" (44). The homosexual is dispatched, therefore, to preserve the "immaculate manliness" (44) of the hero; as Baldwin observes, the brutality that "rages unchecked" in American literature is "testimony to our renowned and cherished innocence" (44). As we have seen, Baldwin makes the same argument

³⁷ See Chauncey, *Gay New York*; and D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*.

about Stowe's representation of Uncle Tom. The purifying violence also occurs in *The City and the Pillar*, a novel in which the homosexual protagonist murders "his first and only perfect love when at length they meet again, for he cannot bear to kill instead that desolate and impossible dream of love which he has carried in his heart so long" (44). Vidal's novel, Baldwin concludes, is "not concerned with homosexuality but with the ever-present danger of sexual activity between men" (44-45). The phenomenon now known as "homosexual panic" was a proleptic concept in 1949, though it was real enough, as the purges of homosexuals from the federal government soon would attest.³⁸ Yet despite the growing pink scare and the dangerous government control of personal behavior that it posed, none of the New York journals that had published Baldwin's work picked up this essay. For *Partisan Review*, Baldwin was more acceptable when he wrote about race and the shortcomings of *Native Son*.

"Preservation of Innocence" concludes with an image of American purity—the Boy Scout—that conceals much more than it reveals. Baldwin writes:

Once the novelist has created a human being, he has shattered the label and, in transcending the subject matter, is able, for the first time, to tell us something about it and to reveal how profoundly all things involving human beings interlock. Without this passion, we may all smother to death, locked in those airless, labeled cells, . . . and without this passion when we have discovered the connection between that Boy Scout who smiles from the subway poster and that underworld to be found all over America, vengeful time will be upon us. (45)

³⁸ Sedgwick uses the term "homosexual panic" to designate the use of homophobia as an ideological means of social control. She refers to "the acute *manipulability*, through the fear of one's own 'homosexuality,' of acculturated men; and second, a reservoir of potential for *violence* caused by the self-ignorance that this regime constitutively enforces" ("Beast in the Closet" 186). Since the purge of homosexuals from the federal government during the early 1950s did not advance national security, it is reasonable to suggest that it served another, more amorphous purpose of controlling federal employees who were *not* homosexual. See Henderson's use of the term in reference to *Giovanni's Room*. For a discussion of the purges, see D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace."

Trapped in the cell of the other, the Boy Scout and the homosexual of the underworld sing America together; but as long as the Boy Scout must preserve his immaculate masculinity, there will be violence. *Giovanni's Room* elaborates the meanings for a white American of love for another man, but the darker sources of the Boy Scout image in Baldwin's experience would appear only in the late essay, "Here Be Dragons," published in 1985 when Baldwin was 60.³⁹

Almost none of Baldwin's many essays on identity written during the 1950s and 1960s comments on homosexuality.⁴⁰ In seemingly probing accounts of growing up in Harlem, Baldwin either passes over sexual matters in silence, as in "Notes of a Native Son," or presents a heterosexual persona, as in *The Fire Next Time*. Although he had represented homosexual encounters in the narrative events and poetic imagery of novels, he had never made them the *explicit* grounds for a discussion of identity. This changed with the publication in 1985 of "Here Be Dragons," in which Baldwin's adolescent encounters with men in Harlem, on 42nd Street, and in the Village are the documentary basis for a statement on androgyny that expands on his arguments decades earlier in "Preservation of Innocence," and echoes his critique of racial authenticity. He describes events that had occurred more than forty years earlier and, as in other autobiographical statements, presumably has reworked memory to fit a given rhetorical purpose and argument. Yet the essay contains a belated account of what was, for Baldwin, a defining reality.

Baldwin asserts that we are all androgynous, having "the spiritual resources of

³⁹ The essay appears under this title in *Price of the Ticket*. It was originally published in *Playboy* (Jan. 1985) as "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood."

⁴⁰ By contrast, three novels written during these decades represent homosexual or bisexual characters: *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *Another Country* (1962), and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968). Among the essays the exception is "The Male Prison," a discussion of André Gide that originally appeared in *The New Leader* as "Gide as Husband and Homosexual" (13 Dec. 1954).

both sexes"; the hermaphrodite merely "reveals, in intimidating exaggeration, the truth concerning every human being" (677). The American ideal of manhood suppresses the androgynous truth, so that it becomes a source of abject identity, and therefore of personal and social torment. Baldwin's concern is with the forms of sexuality produced by men's refusal to acknowledge androgyny. We all see ourselves, Baldwin says, "in the eye of the beholder. . . . This judgment begins in the eyes of one's parents (the crucial, the definitive, the all-but-everlasting judgment), and so we move, in the vast and claustrophobic gallery of Others, on up or down the line, to the eye of one's enemy or one's friend or one's lover" (680). Baldwin comments that he never felt threatened "when I was growing up in Harlem, my home turf"; but he adds:

On the other hand, I was certainly unbelievably unhappy and pathologically shy, but that, I felt, was nobody's fault but mine. My father kept me in short pants longer than he should have, and I had been told, and I believed, that I was ugly. This meant that the idea of myself as a sexual possibility, or target, as a creature capable of desire, had never entered my mind. And it entered my mind, finally, by means of the rent made in my short boy-scout pants by a man who had lured me into a hallway, saying that he wanted to send me to the store. That was the very last time I agreed to run an errand for any stranger. (681)

At an early age Baldwin found that he was a target for men who approached him furtively and abusively. He had to struggle, moreover, with his own sense of shame. Biographer David Leeming offers a somewhat different version of the story based on conversations and interviews with Baldwin.⁴¹ Leeming describes the event in terms that are at once more ambiguous and less suggestive of rape:

Jimmy . . . was running an errand for his mother when a tall man, probably in his mid-thirties, asked him to go to the store for him. Jimmy agreed, hoping to earn a dime, and went with the man to

⁴¹ Leeming states that he first met Baldwin in Istanbul in 1961 and worked for him as a part-time assistant from 1963 until 1967. He conducted interviews with Baldwin during the 1970s and 1980s (*James Baldwin* xi).

what he supposed was his house to get the necessary money. On the second landing the man stopped, touched Jimmy on the face, said he was cute, and, before the boy fully understood what was happening, began to caress him sexually. Jimmy was at once horrified and aroused. Frightened by a noise on the landing above, the man gave him some money and disappeared. Jimmy ran home and threw the money out of the bathroom window. (*James Baldwin* 23)

Although Baldwin often renders childhood events in passages that are poetic and shaped by the context and argument of each essay, his reference to "the rent made in my short boy-scout pants" does suggest, unambiguously, a sexual assault. Moreover, each of his novels explores the effects of rape, which Baldwin sometimes referred to as a central aspect of slavery and therefore of American identity. Through images, characters, and narrative circumstances, Baldwin conveys the destruction wrought by sexual abuse and the commodifying eye in the "claustrophobic gallery of Others." As a black spokesman during the 1960s, he was subjected to slurs as a homosexual and apparently resolved to represent homosexual experience only through the distance afforded by the novel.⁴²

In "Here Be Dragons," Baldwin follows the story of the man in the hallway with the description of a rather different initiation:

Yet I was, in peculiar truth, a very lucky boy. Shortly after I turned sixteen, a Harlem racketeer, a man of about thirty-eight, fell in love with me, and I will be grateful to that man until the day I die. I showed him all my poetry, because I had no one else in Harlem to show it to, and even now I sometimes wonder what on earth his friends could have been thinking. . . . But I knew that he was showing me off and wanted his friends to be happy for him. . . .

And though I loved him, too—in my way, a boy's way—I was mightily tormented, for I was still a child evangelist, which everybody knew, Lord. My soul looks back and wonders. (681)

Through these memories, Baldwin arrives at the statement that "all of the American

⁴² See Cleaver's "Notes on a Native Son" for an example of the insults to which Baldwin was subjected. For a discussion of Cleaver's homophobia, see Spurlin.

categories of male and female, straight or not, black or white, were shattered, thank heaven, very early in my life" (681). The sexual categories—"straight or not"—are a reminder that Baldwin never accepted "gay" as a term of identity. As he said to Richard Goldstein in a 1984 interview, "There's nothing in me that is not in everybody else homosexual is not a noun. At least not in my book" (183). "Here Be Dragons" goes on to describe encounters with men on Forty-Second Street and in the Village, before Baldwin fled to Paris in 1948, at the age of 24. Of the men he saw in movie theaters and stores around Forty-Second Street, he says:

These men looked like cops, football players, soldiers, sailors, Marines or bank presidents, admen, boxers, construction workers; they had wives, mistresses, and children. . . . Sometimes, eventually, inevitably, I would find myself in bed with one of these men, a despairing and dreadful conjunction, since their need was as relentless as quicksand and as impersonal, and sexual rumor concerning blacks had preceded me. As for sexual roles, these were created by the imagination and limited only by one's stamina.

At bottom, what I had learned was that the male desire for a male roams everywhere, avid, desperate, unimaginably lonely, culminating often in drugs, piety, madness or death. (683)

James A. Dievler identifies this passage, erroneously, as a description of "gay men from other parts of the city and the suburbs" who flocked to the Village "for sex that was often anonymous and degrading" (167). Baldwin suggests, rather, that these men were not gay, in the modern sense of the term, but driven by unacknowledged need, stealth, fear, and objectification. They are, moreover, furtive and dangerous. Baldwin encountered the same phenomenon in another form when he moved to the Village at the age of 19, several months after his stepfather's death, in 1943. He recalls that:

On every street corner, I was called a faggot. This meant that I was despised, and, however horrible this is, it is clear. What was *not* clear at that time of my life was what motivated the men and boys who mocked and chased me; for, if they found me when they were alone, they spoke to me very differently—frightening me, I

must say, into a stunned and speechless paralysis. For when they were alone, they spoke very gently and wanted me to take them home and make love. . . . I was far too terrified to be able to accept their propositions, which could only result, it seemed to me, in making myself a candidate for gang rape. (684)

Baldwin was determined to understand what motivated these men and boys; and his conclusions were to become an important source for his portrait of American masculinity in David, the white narrator of *Giovanni's Room*. Baldwin's problems on 42nd Street and in the Village suggest another, hidden aspect to his charge, almost forty years earlier, that Stowe had left "unanswered and unnoticed the only important question: what it was, after all, that moved her people to such deeds" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 28). In "Here Be Dragons" and *Giovanni's Room*, men are moved to violent deeds by the ideal of masculinity in a country where desire and identity are fractured by fear, hatred, and hidden lusts. With the publication of "Here Be Dragons," it becomes even more evident than it had been that despite his confessional mode and relentless probing of identity, Baldwin's autobiographical personas often leave large areas of experience to poetic suggestion. One example of powerful yet indecipherable imagery is the description of religious conversion in *The Fire Next Time*. Through a heterosexual persona, Baldwin describes his terror of what it meant to come of age in Harlem, and his escape into the Church. Then on the night of his conversion:

everything came roaring, screaming, crying out, and I fell to the ground before the altar. . . . [W]ith no transition, no sensation of falling, I was on my back, with the lights beating down into my face and all the vertical saints above me. I did not know what I was doing down so low, or how I had got there. And the anguish that filled me cannot be described. It moved in me like one of those floods that devastate counties, tearing everything down, tearing children from their parents and lovers from each other, and making everything an unrecognizable waste. All I really remember is the pain, the unspeakable pain; it was as though I were yelling up to Heaven and Heaven would not hear me. And if

Heaven would not hear me, if love could not descend from
 heaven—to wash me, to make me clean—then utter disaster was
 my portion. ("Fire Next Time" 343-44)

The anguish is at once physical and psychological, threat and purgation and natural force—anguish personal, communal, and historical. The probing light of interrogation and the looming saints; devastation, waste, and the silence of Heaven—the promiscuous blend of images churns up memory, rendering it opaque.

As one of the few blacks in the Village, Baldwin found that his color made him a "walking phallic symbol" ("Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" 290). He was involved with a few white women, who "paralyzed me, because I simply did not know what, apart from my sex, they wanted" ("Here be Dragons" 685). He claims that he learned to distrust the motives of the woman in such relationships, who sometimes "intended to civilize you into becoming an appendage or who had found a black boy to sleep with because she wanted to humiliate her parents" ("Here be Dragons" 685). According to James Campbell, such descriptions present an unfair and tendentious judgment of the women he knew during this period and misrepresent his relations with them (32-34). There is some incoherence in the essay on the subject of Baldwin's responses not only to white women, but to their male "imitators." He writes of the "queer" world that, "it seemed to me that many of the people I met were making fun of women, and I didn't see why" ("Here be Dragons" 685). He then describes the gay bars of the era in rather dysphoric terms centered on the image of "imitation white women":

perhaps the very last thing this black boy needed were clouds of
 imitation white women and speculations concerning the size of his
 organ: speculations sometimes accompanied by an attempt at the
 laying on of hands. . . .

In short, I was black in that world, and I was used that way,
 and by people who truly meant me no harm. ("Here Be Dragons"
 686)

Why use this term to criticize the men he met in bars of the 1940s? Perhaps the comment is another instance of the reversal that appears in the work of Wright, Ellison, and Fanon—the notion that white women are unconsciously obsessed with black men.

Critics have been rather obtuse to Baldwin's comments on sexual objectification, a significant aspect of the experience revealed in "Here Be Dragons." Biographer W. J. Weatherby, drawing apparently on interviews as well as Baldwin's published account, produces a version that is strikingly different in tone and meaning. He writes that Baldwin found himself "a star" in the few openly gay bars of the village, "exotic, simply because he was usually the only black. The passes and propositions were apparently flattering to 'Frog Eyes,' and for a time the freedom of brief relationships with no responsibilities went to his head, and in looking back at that time he referred to it as his 'season in hell'" (46). A recent essay by Roderick A. Ferguson adapts Weatherby's account to a narrative of the formation of gay and lesbian identities in postwar New York:

Gay bars allowed men and women to evolve and exercise a personal and collective identity as gays and lesbians. It was in the gay bars of Greenwich Village that Baldwin, often the only black, became a local celebrity, an exotic figure who enjoyed many brief sexual liaisons. Hence, Baldwin—like many others—came of age in the wake of a capitalist economy shaped by World War II and its promotion of homoerotic and homosocial spaces, and in a city that attracted men and women who were exploring and constituting a gay identity. (236)

Ferguson's comments about the Village bars may be true, on some level, but they evade the anguish and objectification Baldwin describes and transform his story, instead, into an upbeat narrative of the formation of gay identity.

As though to forewarn the reader, Baldwin comments on the misuse of testimony. In his discussion of Billie Holiday in *The Devil Finds Work*, he argues that when the

victim becomes articulate, she becomes a threat whose testimony must be denied. In *Lady Sings the Blues*, he writes, Hollywood represented Holiday as "a gifted, but weak and self-indulgent woman . . . not equal, either to her gifts, or to the society which had made her a star" (630). He concludes that to deny the survival of the victim as a moral agent, the testimony is altered:

That victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim: he, or she, has become a threat.

The victim's testimony must, therefore, be altered. But, since no one outside the victim's situation dares imagine the victim's situation, this testimony can be altered only after it has been delivered; and after it has become the object of some study. The purpose of this scrutiny is to emphasize certain striking details which can then be used to quite another purpose than the victim had in mind. (628)

Without *some* form of testimony from the victim, the story cannot be told; the distortion follows the truth, building on it and obscuring it. Even so, once the testimony has been delivered, the witness remains: "there is, thereafter, forever, a witness somewhere," whose eyes render judgment and who must therefore be kept in bondage, for "when the prisoner is free, the jailer faces the void of himself" (628). As long as the witness is kept in bondage, she cannot return the gaze. In writing of Holiday and the distortion of her sexual reality in *Lady Sings the Blues*, the erasure of her exploitation and survival and therefore of her moral agency, Baldwin perhaps refers to another moral agency threatened by distortion—his own.

(3)

E io, che riguardai, vidi una insegna
 che girando correva tanto ratta,
 che d'ogni posa mi pareva indegna,
 e dietro le venia sì lunga tratta
 di gente, ch'io non avrei creduto
 che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta.
 Poscia ch'io v'ebbi alcun riconosciuto,
 vidi e conobbi l'ombra di colui
 che fece per viltà il gran rifiuto
 - Dante¹

Giovanni's Room is at once a confession and a prophesy, the memoir of a Judas and a story of the unmaking of an American through the risks of exile and the return of the gaze. In Baldwin's second novel, the prophetic undoing of racial and sexual identities holds a mirror—a "darkening gleam" (7)—to the myths of the new superpower, myths elaborated from the Puritan categories of sin and salvation and from a yet unspeakable past. Escaping his father's house and its uncertain choices for *le vieux continent*, David has not abandoned American innocence but merely follows the banner of the deferred. But as he learns through the body, "my body, which is under sentence of death. . . . lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of a mystery" (223), one cannot defer oneself. In the end he, too, is undone, by the unchosen, by Giovanni and the death of Giovanni.

As the novel opens, David looks through the window of a house in the South of France and sees a darkening world. He has shared the house with Hella, his fiancée; and he confesses to the betrayal of Giovanni. Giovanni will perish in the morning on the guillotine, which is less the instrument of 1789 than of what came after: betrayal, terror, and empire. As Giovanni says, looking at early morning Paris, "Some rats have gone in . . . and now other rats come out" (62). The guillotine cannot free Giovanni, a young

¹ "And I looked and saw a whirling banner which ran so fast that it seemed as if it could never make a stand, and behind it came so long a train of people that I should never have believed death had undone so many. After I had recognized some of them I saw and knew the shade of him who from cowardice made the great refusal" (*Inferno* Canto III, 55-57).

immigrant from Southern Italy, who will die as he has lived, a little fish, knowing that, "The big fish eat the little fish and the ocean doesn't care" (48-49). But *Giovanni's Room* is from the first the story of David, who does not *choose* to love a man and so betrays Giovanni through a *gran rifiuto*. David sets the scene; he speaks of the early death of his mother, of an unhappy adolescence in his father's house, of the night he spent with another boy and of his rejection of the boy, Joey. Later, he goes to Paris, where he meets an American woman, Hella, who may or may not agree to marry him. As he awaits her decision, David takes up with a new crowd, including a middle-aged homosexual, Jacques. One evening, in the company of Jacques, David meets a handsome and desperate bartender in the homosexual underworld of Paris. Under the jealous and watchful eyes of Jacques and the bar owner, Guillaume, David and Giovanni meet and become lovers. Later, abandoned by David and fired by the spiteful Guillaume, Giovanni descends to status of a street boy. The story ends in the murder of Guillaume; David learns from the papers of the ensuing manhunt, then of the arrest and sentencing of Giovanni.

In the introduction to his confessional book, *Manhood*, Michel Leiris explains that he sought to introduce risk into the act of writing, approximating, as far as possible, the situation of the bullfighter endangered by the tusk of the bull. He would do so by revealing his most shameful failings, and though this would not expose him to the physical risks of the bullfighter, it would alter his situation in the world and thereby constitute an act:

To expose certain obsessions of an emotional or sexual nature, to admit publicly to certain shameful deficiencies or dismays was, for the author, the means—crude, no doubt, but which he entrusts to others, hoping to see it improved—of introducing even the shadow

of a bull's horn into a literary work. (154)²

Yet in reflecting on his project, Leiris detects in it a certain duplicity and narcissism, signaled by the seductive qualities of his writing. He notes that he has used his technical proficiency to make an accomplice of the reader:

To expose myself to others, but to do so in a narrative which I hoped would be well-written and well-constructed, perceptive and moving was an attempt to seduce my public into being indulgent, to limit—in any case—the scandal by giving it an aesthetic form. I believe, then, that if there has been a risk, a bull's horn, it is not without a certain duplicity that I have ventured to accept it: yielding, on the one hand, once again to my narcissistic tendency; trying, on the other, to find in my neighbor less a judge than an accomplice. Similarly, the matador who seems to risk everything is concerned about his "line" and relies, in order to overcome the danger, on his technical sagacity. (156-57)³

In *Giovanni's Room*, David confesses to a cowardly betrayal. Exposing his despicable faults, he does so, like Leiris, in an aesthetic form that seeks to seduce the reader. David seduces through nostalgia, irony, and regret—the backward-looking glance not of the witness, but of one who has suffered through too great innocence. In tone he shares something with Nick Carraway, the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, but where Nick learns that the world of Tom and Daisy and the crowd at Gatsby's parties is rotten to the core, David is absorbed by the face that confronts him from the mirror, "a

² "Mettre à nu certaines obsessions d'ordre sentimental ou sexuel, confesser publiquement certaines des déficiences ou des lâchetés qui lui font le plus honte, tel fut pour l'auteur le moyen—grossier sans doute, mais qu'il livre à d'autres en espérant le voir amender—d'introduire ne fût-ce que l'ombre d'une corne de taureau dans une oeuvre littéraire" (11).

³ "Me dévoiler devant les autres mais le faire dans un écrit dont je souhaitais qu'il fût bien rédigé et architecturé, riche d'aperçus et émouvant, c'était tenter de les séduire pour qu'ils me soient indulgents, limiter—de toutes façons—le scandale en lui donnant forme esthétique. Je crois donc que, si enjeu il y a eu et corne de taureau, ce n'est pas sans un peu de duplicité que je m'y suis aventuré: cédant, d'une part, encore une fois à ma tendance narcissique; essayant, d'autre part, de trouver en autrui moins un juge qu'un complice. De même, le matador qui semble risquer le tout pour le tout soigne sa ligne et fait confiance, pour triompher du danger, à sa sagacité technique" (14).

face you have seen many times" (7). Self-doubt is the source of David's irony, yet the narrative tone verges on something *other* and beyond the carefully managed risks of confession. Irony here is double-voiced, inflected by an authorial irony that exceeds the probing of self and undermines David's seduction of the reader. The authorial voice—the other that returns David's gaze—sees what he cannot see, consummates him in ways he cannot know, and constitutes the risk, scandal, and undoing of self within his narrative.

At times, David indulges in Wildean aphorisms: "People are too various to be treated so lightly. I am too various to be trusted" (10). Or he parodies the postured innocence of Nick Carraway, who confides, "Every one suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (*Gatsby* 60). David, by contrast, no longer suspects himself of innocence nor even regards innocence as a virtue. Of his father he says:

I was always able . . . to tell him what he wished to hear. And we got on quite well, really, for the vision I gave my father of my life was exactly the vision in which I myself most desperately needed to believe.

For I am—or I was—one of those people who pride themselves on their willpower, on their ability to make a decision and carry it through. (30)

David projected innocence as the moon projects solar rays; the innocence that he strove to preserve was a reflection, a compelling image that he needed to assume. Such innocence is preserved through power—over himself, his image, and the gaze of others. As David confesses, his power to control the image has succumbed to the temptation of Giovanni. Power over oneself, moreover, is double-edged:

This virtue, like most virtues, is ambiguity itself. People who believe that they are strong-willed and the masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception. Their decisions are not really decisions at all . . . but elaborate systems of evasion, of illusion, designed to make themselves and the world appear to be what they and the world are

not. This is certainly what my decision, made so long ago in Joey's bed, came to. I had decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me. (30)

In such passages, where the confession suggests regret and evokes the reader's empathy, we do not distinguish the authorial voice from David's ironic perspective. David's perspective on the past, however, is colored by present emotion. The authorial voice remains aloof from these wayward feelings. The night with Joey, for example, is remembered in intensely romantic terms that convey the approaching doom of Giovanni:

We had our arms around each other. It was like holding in my hand some rare, exhausted, nearly doomed bird which I had miraculously happened to find. I was very frightened; I am sure he was frightened too, and we shut our eyes. To remember it so clearly, so painfully tonight tells me that I have never for an instant truly forgotten it. (14)

Yet the scene ends with another tone, almost another voice, as David confesses to a cruel refusal of Joey that foreshadows his betrayal of Giovanni:

Then I, who had seen him that summer nearly every day till then, no longer went to see him. He did not come to see me. . . . when school began again I picked up with a rougher, older crowd and was very nasty to Joey. And the sadder this made him, the nastier I became. (16)

The sources of authorial irony, which extend far beyond David's regret for the past, infuse the narrative voice with surreal distance and oppositions. *Giovanni's Room* is a double-voiced narration that conveys, through an authorial voice and gaze, a critique of the American masculinity that David represents—a critique that he never fully recognizes. Undermined by these darker glimpses, David's self-probing falters in its intended seduction of the reader, and confession assumes unpredictable risks colored, so to speak, by the authorial voice and the return of the gaze.

Giovanni's Room is organized around a series of specular scenes, which become the sites of double voicing. Even as David looks out on the world in these scenes, he is revealed by others: other characters, the authorial voice, and finally the reader.⁴ The many reflections threaten to transform the irony of David's confession into self-contempt and ghastly self-parody. As the novel opens, David gazes at the first of these reflections, an image of American identity:

I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past. (7)

Whereas the narrators of Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* and Norman Mailer's *Barbary Shore* confront images of themselves that they do not recognize, David consummates the reflected image with unnerving, even damning, sureness. The consummation of David's image arises from the authorial gaze, which defines him as the other, transforming the straight arrow of the nation into a poster boy for genocide. The *mise-en-scene* of doubleness is, significantly, a window, which returns David's gaze as he attempts to look through it at the "darkening" world. Through the verbal and specular doubling of the scene, David seems to speak in a voice that is both white and not-white.⁵

A second scene of specular doubling occurs when David accompanies a middle-aged American businessman, Jacques, to a bar patronized by homosexuals. David, who wants to position himself as an aloof spectator, becomes the spectacle during his meeting with Giovanni—at the moment when his desires had become, as he says, "visible . . . they

⁴ For an interpretation of specularity in *Giovanni's Room*, see Henderson.

⁵ To adapt Judith Butler's concept of parodic repetition to a racial context, David's voice is a repetition and recapitulation of whiteness in non-white terms, "a site in which all sorts of resignifying and parodic repetitions become possible" ("Imitation and Gender Insubordination" 23).

stormed all over me, my awakening, my insistent possibilities" (59). David's descriptions of the bar's patrons reveal, from the beginning, his fear of femininity:

There were, of course, *les folles*, always dressed in the most improbable combinations, screaming like parrots the details of their latest love affairs—their love affairs always seemed to be hilarious. Occasionally one would swoop in, quite late in the evening, to convey the news that he—but they always called each other "she"—had just spent time with a celebrated movie star, or boxer. Then all of the others closed in on this newcomer and they looked like a peacock garden and sounded like a barnyard. (38)

Parrots and peacocks, exotic and colorful birds, gossip in the language of the vulgar barnyard. Under David's gaze, *les folles* are both unnatural, like the homosexual, and too natural, like the African. The images suggest the ambivalent myths of femininity and the exotic other of the tropics. David rejects *les folles* for transgressing the boundaries of gender: "a man who wanted a woman would certainly have rather had a real one and a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of *them*" (38). He accuses them of transgressing the boundaries of species as well, when he says of a young man in drag:

People said that he was very nice, but I confess that his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs. They might not mind so much if monkeys did not—so grotesquely—resemble human beings. (38-39)

In this hallucinatory and jungle atmosphere, David and Jacques notice the magnetic presence of the new bartender, Giovanni. Jacques prepares himself "for conquest," as David watches, feeling the "necessity for tolerance" (40). Tolerance is the virtue recommended in *The Great Gatsby* by Nick Carraway's father, though Nick has learned that his own tolerance has limits (*Gatsby* 1-2). David suggests that tolerance may be little more than the manipulation of "malicious knowledge," and proceeds to detail his manipulation of Jacques:

"I'm sure," I said, "that you'll want to get to know the

barman. So I'll vanish anytime you like."

There was, in this tolerance of mind, a fund, by no means meagre, of malicious knowledge . . . I knew that Jacques could only hope to conquer the boy before us if the boy was, in effect, for sale; and if he stood with such arrogance on the auction block he could certainly find bidders richer and more attractive than Jacques. (40)

Through his "tolerance," David threatens to abandon Jacques to certain humiliation. Moreover, he now transforms his own racial obsessions into an accusation against Jacques, who is seen as the bidder at a slave market. Distancing himself from his own desire, David preserves his immaculate masculinity and denies his collusion in the trading of human flesh. This claim to innocence entails a certain blindness, however. Although David imagines Giovanni as a slave to be conquered by the highest bidder, he does not notice—though it is obvious enough—that Giovanni has already been conquered, by his employer, Guillaume, who has placed him on the auction block. Nor does David understand that Giovanni must be saved from Guillaume, and that Giovanni has chosen *him* to do this. Conquest does not describe what is about to happen between them.

When he talks to Giovanni, David's "awakening," his "insistent possibilities," are witnessed by all. David has lost, in the eyes of those present, his immaculate masculinity, and as another man approaches him, he is overcome by panic:

Now someone whom I had never seen before came out of the shadows toward me. It looked like a mummy or a zombie—this was the first, overwhelming impression—of something walking after it had been put to death. And it walked, really, like someone who might be sleepwalking or like those figures in slow motion one sometimes sees on the screen. It carried a glass, it walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a dead, horrifying lasciviousness. It seemed to make no sound; this was due to the roar of the bar, which was like the roaring of the sea, heard at night, from far away. It glittered in the dim light; the thin, black hair was violent with oil, combed forward, hanging in bangs; the eyelids gleamed

with mascara, the mouth ragged with lipstick. The face was white and thoroughly bloodless with some kind of foundation cream; it stank of powder and a gardenia-like perfume. (54)

David's more paranoid moments produce specular scenes of hallucinatory intensity. The monstrous image is an effect, in part, of authorial irony, for David's mind alone could not produce such fantasies. The figure is David's nightmarish self-portrait, a composite of his dead mother and "overdressed, overmade-up" aunt (19), the sources of his terror of femininity. Beauvoir argues in her analysis of men's myth of woman that a central aspect of the myth is the association of the mother's body with death (*Second Sex* 165, 172-75).⁶

David remembers his aunt as:

carrying a great bag full of dangerous-looking knitting needles There she was, dressed, as they say, to kill, with her mouth redder than any blood, dressed in something which was either the wrong color, or too tight, or too young, the cocktail glass in her hand threatening, at any instant, to be reduced to shards, to splinters, and that voice going on and on like a razor blade on glass. (20)

Though David is compelled by fear and loathing of women's flesh, to demonstrate that he is not homosexual he also rejects men such as Jacques. Later, after he has gone to live with Giovanni, David feels uncomfortably feminized:

I invented in myself a kind of pleasure in playing the housewife after Giovanni had gone to work. . . . But I am not a housewife—men never can be housewives. And the pleasure was never real or deep, though Giovanni smiled his humble, grateful smile and told me in as many ways as he could find how wonderful it was to have me there. (116)

David's claim that his pleasure with Giovanni is "invented," "never real or deep," implies that some other pleasure—with Hella perhaps—is the genuine article. Yet he feels love only for the "leonine" and masculine Giovanni, while his feelings for Hella turn to

⁶ For another perspective, see DeGout's discussion of *Giovanni's Room* and 1950s theories of the psychological sources of male homosexuality.

physical disgust in the house in the south of France: "A body which had to be covered with such crazy, catty-cornered bits of stuff began to seem grotesque" (209).

David transforms the grotesque mother figure, as she surges out of the shadows, into a "mummy" or "zombie"—references to the dead, but also to Egypt and Africa, scenes of European conquest, empire-building, and ambivalent desire for the other. As in David's description of *les folles*, the horror of femininity fuses with the imagery of primitivism. There are references throughout the scene to Napoleon, "an adventurer who sowed a crop in Europe which is being harvested until today," and who, moreover, sent an army to occupy Egypt (60). In a second reference to Egypt, David stops at a cafe on rue des Pyramides to read a letter from Hella (123). The letter, which announces that she wants to marry him, proposes to erect a monument to the dead and reassert the norms of gender. It proposes the end of everything that has passed between David and Giovanni.

The grotesque caricature of the human advances toward David, as though sleepwalking or in slow motion on the screen, soundless but raging with mascara and lipstick, foundation cream, powder, and perfume—tools of what Beauvoir calls "this product, intermediary between the male and the eunuch, that is termed feminine" (*Second Sex* 267).⁷ Yet the creature suggests not only the mummy of the past, but David's future, as represented by Giovanni, Guillaume, and Jacques:

The shirt, open coquettishly to the navel, revealed a hairless chest and a silver crucifix; the shirt was covered with round, paper-thin wafers, red and green and orange and yellow and blue, which stormed in the light and made one feel that the mummy might, at any moment, disappear in flame. A red sash was around the waist, the clinging pants were a surprisingly somber grey. He wore buckles on his shoes. (54)

The crucifix and its desecration suggest Giovanni, who has fled Southern Italy and

⁷ "ce produit intermédiaire entre le mâle et le castrat qu'on qualifie de féminin" (*Deuxième sexe II* 13).

patriarchal village life. As David later recounts, Guillaume is strangled with the sash of his dressing gown, apparently by Giovanni; the buckled shoes, too, are associated with Guillaume, the scion of a wealthy family. The somber grey pants of the businessman suggest Jacques, whose desperate pursuit of boys represents David's future—for David has just flown, mothlike, into the flame of Giovanni, consumed by hunger for a doubtful sacrament.

The scene, with its exotic jungle inhabitants, *les folles*, and the nightmare image of David, repeats the imagery of a scene from *Invisible Man*. For Ellison, primitivism is the sign of the homosexual, whereas for Baldwin, *les folles* reveal David's refusal of homosexual desire and its hallucinatory projection. In *Invisible Man*, the narrator takes his last letter of introduction to the office of a man named Mr. Emerson, the director of an import company. He is greeted by the secretary, Mr. Emerson's son, who reads Freud's *Totem and Taboo* among the caged birds and tropical decor of the outer office. In line with Freudian theory, young Emerson is marked as homosexual by his neurotic submission to the father; he has not freed himself through the act of masculine assertion—parricide by the sons of the primal horde—hypothesized in *Totem and Taboo*. However, he reveals the contents of the narrator's letter of introduction from the college president, Bledsoe, thereby exposing Bledsoe's complicity with the white fathers. Yet young Emerson remains ensnared in the global trading company and its economy of desire. When he asks the narrator to the Club Calamus—as lover or valet?—he invites him to accept a place among the colorful tropical birds of the company's outer office. The narrator has felt drawn to these colorful birds and their song earlier in the scene:

A large bird began a song, drawing my eyes to the throbbing of its bright blue, red and yellow throat. It was startling and I watched the surge and flutter of the birds as their colors flared for an instant like an unfurled oriental fan. I wanted to go and stand near the cage for a better view, but decided against it. It might seem

unbusinesslike. . . .

These folks are the Kings of the Earth! I thought, hearing
the bird make an ugly noise. (181)

Hearing the bird's cry, he remembers the college museum and the "cracked relics from
slavery times" (181), and comments blandly that, "They had not been pleasant" (181).

The birds suggest a deeper reality:

Suddenly there came a harsh cry from the cage, and once more I
saw a mad flashing as though the birds had burst into spontaneous
flame, fluttering and beating their wings maliciously against the
bamboo bars, only to settle down just as suddenly when the door
opened and the blond man stood beckoning, his hand upon the
knob. (182)

Heeding the birds' warning, the narrator refuses what he perceives as an offer of doubtful
brotherhood with young Emerson at the Club Calamus—or among the captured birds.
Later, he understands the deeper meaning of the offer—and more importantly, of the
betrayal by Bledsoe—when, having made his way to the back of a bus, he hears a man
whistle the tune of poor Robin:

*Well they tied poor Robin to a stump
Lawd, they picked all the feathers round from Robin's rump.* (193)

The song conveys the discovery of the fate Bledsoe had prepared for him. As an obtusely
normal man, the narrator cannot band with young Emerson but rather seeks a more open
revenge on the fathers. Whereas Ellison represents young Emerson in standard Freudian
terms, in masochistic submission to the father, Baldwin uses a similar set of images to
stage the undoing of American manhood.

A number of recent critics have proposed that Giovanni represents a black
American presence in *Giovanni's Room*.⁸ As Donald Mengay argues, for example,
the rhetorical terms of the narrative tend to position Giovanni as black. Yet the
authorial voice and Giovanni's own speech position him as European, an

⁸ See, especially, Mengay and Chancy.

impoverished immigrant from Italy, in contrast to David, who is American, middle-class, and white. Giovanni does not occupy the position of other that David posits, whether as black or feminine, but functions instead as a third term, throwing into confusion the American categories of white and black, masculine and feminine.

Viewed from David's perspective, Giovanni represents a form of excess, the flip side of his horror of *les folles*. What may appear as a fusion of identities is not a coding or masking of one identity by another, but a strategy for conveying a possibility that exceeds the given categories. For example, Baldwin used "we" in the early essays collected in *Notes of a Native Son* to suggest something beyond the terms of "them" and "us." As he explains in a 1986 interview:

Since I wouldn't write from the perspective, essentially, of the victim, I had to find what my own perspective was and then use it. I couldn't talk about "them" and "us." So I had to use "we" and let the reader figure out who "we" is. That was the only possible choice of pronoun. It had to be "we." And we had to figure out who "we" was, or who "we" is. (Standley, *Conversations* 275).

The use of "we" is meant to compel Baldwin and the reader toward a yet unstated, unconsummated perspective. The strategy was successful to the extent that it provoked some early readers to question the race of the author. Norman Podhoretz read the essays as a student at Columbia in the early 1950s, before the publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and remembers arguing about whether the author was black or white.

Readers searching for a black gay subjectivity in *Giovanni's Room*, therefore, should look beyond notions of a coded text, in which Giovanni represents the supposedly "absent" black gay subject, to the authorial voice—and gaze—in relation to David. In *Giovanni's Room*, the distance between authorial and narrative voices is unstable.⁹ It may suggest bitter irony, as when David looks out at the "darkening"

⁹ For a discussion of distance in the author-narrator relationship, see Phelan.

world through a window that reflects his gleaming blond, conquering image. The distance narrows when David speaks of Joey or Giovanni, or when he moves beyond self-contempt to the knowledge that "the end of innocence is also the end of guilt" (148). At these moments, the narrative voice performs the undone, unconsummated American identity of the early essays.

Giovanni is not American, however, but southern Italian, marked by many of the region's class and patriarchal assumptions. He fled in anger at God after his son was born dead:

"I took our crucifix off the wall and I spat on it and I threw it on the floor and my mother and my girl screamed and I went out. . . . and then I left my village and I came to this city where surely God has punished me for all my sins and for spitting on His holy Son, and where I will surely die." (185)

When Giovanni refers to Guillaume as "'my savior, my *patron*,'" he parodies the Catholic peasant's view of the aristocrat. He also espouses a sexual culture that contrasts with David's Protestant ideals and assumptions regarding companionate marriage. David believes that marriage to Hella is incompatible with love for men, a notion that Giovanni ridicules: "'To arrange, *mon cher*, *la vie pratique*, is very simple—it only has to be done.' He reflected. 'Sometimes things go wrong, I agree; then you have to arrange it another way. But it is certainly not the English melodrama you make it'" (108-09). For Giovanni, manhood is measured in thoroughly patriarchal terms, less by the connection to a woman than by engendering an heir.

When they meet, David and Giovanni articulate contrasting concepts of time, defined by the New World and by Europe. David, as an American, believes that time is a progression, in which Paris is beautiful but "'old . . . many centuries,'" while New York is "'very high and new and electric—exciting'" (46). Americans, he tells

Giovanni, have "led different lives than you" and have become a "different people" (47). In essays such as "Stranger in the Village," Baldwin advances a similar theory of American identity from a less triumphalist perspective. Giovanni retorts: "'it seems to have turned you into another species!'" (47), as though to mimic David's attitude toward *les folles*. Through an ambiguous status as European, he returns the American gaze and asserts the power of othering that David has sought to control. Unsettled and shorn of complacency, David responds in an unguarded way to Giovanni.

Giovanni does not unsettle David from a black American position, as Mengay argues, but as a third term, through an ambiguous European status that David cannot master. Although David attempts to turn an American lens on Giovanni, perceiving him as, for example, "on an auction block" (40), Giovanni offers other terms: "'You have a funny sense of time—or perhaps you have no sense of time at all, I can't tell. Time always sounds like a parade *chez vous*—a triumphant parade, like armies with banners entering a town'" (48). Or, though he does not say so, like American troops marching up the Italian peninsula in 1943, or into Paris in 1944. From this perspective, time is not a medium of change and progress, to be mastered, but a sea in which the peasant perishes endlessly for the profit of the *patron*: "Time is just common, it's like water for a fish. Everybody's in this water, nobody gets out of it, or if he does . . . he dies. And you know what happens in this water, time? The big fish eat the little fish . . . and the ocean doesn't care" (48-49).

Giovanni projects an ambiguous position within this hierarchy. He speaks at first as a "little fish" and laughs when David protests, in very American terms, that, "'Time's not water and we're not fish and you can choose to be eaten and also not to eat—not to eat . . . the little fish, of course'" (49). But when David refers to

Giovanni's enthusiasm as a "blacker brand than mine" (49), Giovanni assumes a new posture: "I don't see what you can do with little fish except eat them. What else are they good for?" (49). David, who suddenly feels that he has been called a little fish, an American lacking in "grandeur" (49), has no recourse but to comment sullenly, "You people dumped all this *merde* on us . . . and now you say we're barbaric because we stink" (50). The obscene terms are David's, however; he, not Giovanni, fears the "stink of love" (187).

Giovanni undermines David's assertion of American identity by refusing to be defined by him. The postwar context of the scene is suggested by a minor prop, an emblem of America's economic power over Europe—the Coke that David buys for Giovanni, who sips it throughout the scene. In "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," Baldwin comments on the decline of Europe through a reference to the Eiffel Tower. Baldwin suggests that black and white Americans meeting in Paris "do not . . . discuss the past, except in considerably guarded snatches. Both are quite willing, and indeed quite wise, to remark instead the considerably overrated impressiveness of the Eiffel Tower" (37).¹⁰ The Eiffel Tower—an overrated, outmoded monument to modern France—serves as a reference to the setting star of Europe and the rise of postwar American power. For both blacks and whites, Baldwin suggests, this architectural symbol of modernity has surrendered its prestige along with France, conquered by Nazi Germany and then by American economic influence. For the black and white American G.I.s, whose common past includes the segregated armed services, the only safe and neutral contact occurs through a shared

¹⁰ See Michelle M. Wright for another reading of the essay. Wright describes the Eiffel Tower as a monument of transnational Western modernity. She argues that the Eiffel Tower and the black American experience both possess, for Baldwin, "overwhelming symbolic importance," but when approached directly and literally they "escape meaningful definition and even seem to avoid any particular importance whatsoever" (226).

perception of the "overrated impressiveness" of Europe. Gazed on by Americans, the Eiffel Tower becomes a symbol of the change to a postwar order, the defeat of the older European empires before a new power whose past is unspeakable, and whose uncompleted identity remains to be seen. Baldwin suggests that it can be seen only from *over there*.

Giovanni's room on the outskirts of Paris—near *Nation* and the zoo—is a space of identity in the making. David first describes the room after he remembers a moment of childish high spiritedness on the streets of Paris, when he was with Giovanni. The moment is cut short by the specter of another boy who passes between them on the pavement. The boy's presence reveals to David that happiness is an anarchic force that cannot be contained or embalmed: "I invested him at once with Giovanni's beauty and what I felt for Giovanni I also felt for him. Giovanni saw this and saw my face and it made him laugh all the more" (110). Yet this scene of anarchic pleasure turns into a "nightmare" for David, who recalls that he felt "sorrow and shame and panic and great bitterness" (110). The boy reveals a future to him, one that he fears:

The beast which Giovanni had awakened in me would never go to sleep again; but one day I would not be with Giovanni anymore. And would I then, like all the others, find myself turning and following all kinds of boys down God knows what dark avenues, into what dark places?

With this fearful intimation there opened in me a hatred for Giovanni which was as powerful as my love and which was nourished by the same roots. (111)

David is led by the question to remember the room he shared with Giovanni. The intimation of the beast within evokes the jungle outside; and it is as a beast trapped in the jungle under hostile and watchful eyes that David comes to experience the room, and all rooms, as imprisoning. As critics have argued, Giovanni's room represents the

homosexual closet, a marginal space marked by the failed performance of American ideals of masculinity and of American national ideology.¹¹ The closet is suggested by other homosexual spaces in the novel, especially Guillaume's bar and Giovanni's prison cell. In Guillaume's bar, for example, David confronts the beast of his desire in paranoid projections, images of feminized jungle inhabitants, *les folles*, that return the hostile voyeurism of the gaze. David perceives Giovanni, by contrast, as a lion among peacocks and parrots, "insolent and dark and leonine" (39). This image suggests the jungle, as Donald Mengay has noted (61), and more specifically, Giovanni's masculinity and pride. David notices, for example, that when Giovanni introduces him to an acquaintance, Madame Clothilde, "Something is burning in his eyes and it lights up all his face, it is joy and pride" (71).

The awakening of the beast within alters David's relation to the closet and to the time that passes there. Of Giovanni's room he says, "it still seems to me that I spent a lifetime there. Life in that room seemed to be occurring underwater, as I say, and it is certain that I underwent a sea change there" (112). The time of the room is both European and American, an enveloping sea, in Giovanni's terms, yet productive of change. The room could become a procreative and female space, yet through the abjection of the feminine, the two men destroy their chance for a shared future. When they last meet there, they confront each other with the bricks that Giovanni had hoped to replace with bookshelves—bricks that suggest the weapon used by Bigger Thomas to kill Bessie.¹²

As he describes the room, David shifts from images of time and the sea to paranoid images of the jungle:

¹¹ See, for example, Henderson and Drowne for discussions of spaces of abjection in *Giovanni's Room*.

¹² For a discussion of this point, see Porter (141-52).

To begin with, the room was not large enough for two. It looked out on a small courtyard. "Looked out" means only that the room had two windows, against which the courtyard malevolently pressed, encroaching day by day, as though it had confused itself with a jungle. (112)

In yet another specular scene, the two windows seem to look in rather than out, as the encroaching jungle of the courtyard threatens to penetrate the room. The windows are without curtains, for Giovanni apparently lacks all domestic skills, and covered only with a "heavy, white cleaning polish" (112-13). The room remains unseen within the surrounding jungle: "We sometimes heard children playing outside our window, sometimes strange shapes loomed against it. At such moments, Giovanni . . . would stiffen like a hunting dog and remain perfectly silent until whatever seemed to threaten our safety had moved away" (113). The timeless aspect of life in the room is conveyed by static wallpaper images in which "a lady in a hoop skirt and a man in knee breeches perpetually walked together, hemmed in by roses" (113). The garden flower symbolizing desire, the rose, encroaches on the heterosexual couple of a previous century as the jungle now encroaches on David and Giovanni. The couple in the garden has entered the room and represents the most intrusive aspect of the jungle. There are no other visitors, for the room has no telephone and lies on the outskirts of Paris, near *Nation* and the zoo.¹³ David remembers the first day he spent there, when he woke to find "Giovanni fast asleep beside me, heavy as a fallen rock. The sun filtered through the room so faintly that I was worried about the time. I stealthily lit a cigarette, for I did not want to wake Giovanni. I did not know how I would face his eyes" (113). The wilderness looms in this description of rock, dim light, and stealthy movement, and perhaps a suggestion of the prison as well. David

¹³ *Nation* was the *place du Trône* during the reign of Louis XIV. In 1793, after one of three guillotines was erected there, it was renamed *place du Trône-Renversé*. It has been known as *place de la Nation* since 1880.

sees in the room "Giovanni's regurgitated life" (114), and perceives that this disorder "was a matter of punishment and grief" (115).

As he awaits Giovanni's execution, David reframes the meaning of guilt and innocence. He says,

My executioners are here with me, walking up and down with me I might ask to be forgiven—if I could name and face my crime, if there were anything or anybody anywhere with the power to forgive.

No. It would help if I were able to feel guilty. But the end of innocence is also the end of guilt. (148)

David confesses for the first time that he loved Giovanni. The intimation of immortality, of the absence of innocence and forgiveness, or even the relief of punishment, prompts David to remember a man he met once long ago. The man suggests Jean Genet. David recalls:

I met a man at a party at Jacques' house who was celebrated because he had spent half his life in prison. He had then written a book about it which displeased the prison authorities and won a literary prize. But this man's life was over. He was fond of saying that, since to be in prison was simply not to live, the death penalty was the only merciful verdict any jury could deliver. I remember thinking that, in effect, he had never left prison. Prison was all that was real to him; he could speak of nothing else. All his movements, even to the lighting of a cigarette, were stealthy, wherever his eyes focused one saw a wall rise up. . . . And he described to us in avid, nostalgic detail the barred windows, the barred doors, the judas, the guards standing at the far ends of the corridors, under the light. (148-49)

Through this memory, David imagines Giovanni's cell, as though in recognition that he is now the one who "could speak of nothing else." David imagines Giovanni's isolation; but also hopes that he is being sheltered in someone's arms.

In the fantasy of the prison cell that houses Giovanni, of the judas and guards, visible under the light, "Everything is dark and cold, except for those patches of light,

where authority stands (149). Through the novel's final specular site, the judas window, the prisoner is seen by the guards but he also sees that they "are in black, they carry guns, they are always afraid, they scarcely dare be kind" (149). David's premonitions of entrapment in the prison and in the specular relations of the judas are precipitated by two events: the arrival of Hella's letter announcing her decision to marry him, and Guillaume's firing of Giovanni, on false charges of stealing. David's moment of decision has arrived. Faced with Giovanni's desperation, he wavers, feeling "that Judas and the Savior had met in me" (147). Remembering these events, David senses that executioners are everywhere, within and without, that he stands at once within and without the judas window of his own wavering perceptions and specular identifications:

My executioners are here with me, walking up and down with me, washing things and packing and drinking from my bottle. They are everywhere I turn. Walls, windows, mirrors, water, the night outside—they are everywhere. (148)

The judas brings a new, rigid, and terrifying organization to the more fluid spaces he has occupied elsewhere in the novel, transforming David's world into a prison. In doing so, it starkly reframes the terms of the moral choice he has thus far evaded. Moral existence, he discovers, does not follow from the judgment of good and evil but involves an arbitrary choice, a question of identity, the end of innocence and guilt.

In *Giovanni's Room*, David regards the execution of Giovanni as a defining experience and the motive for narration. David confesses on the night before Giovanni is to be executed for the murder of Guillaume. Though the criminal usually offers confession, and Giovanni admits to the murder, David insists that the important question remains unanswered:

The newsprint told the unforgiving world how Giovanni repented, cried for mercy, called on God, wept that he had not meant to do it.

And told us, too, in delicious detail, how he had done it: but not why. Why was too black for the newsprint to carry and too deep for Giovanni to tell. (202)

David asks *why*, as Baldwin had done in "Everybody's Protest Novel" and as he would do throughout his career—for Baldwin, *why* is the central question. As in a detective novel, David leaves clues for the reader to gather, suggesting why Giovanni has murdered Guillaume.¹⁴ We learn that Guillaume "rescued" Giovanni from a dreadful job at Les Halles and that Giovanni despises this man whom he calls, sardonically, "my savior, my *patron*" (66). Giovanni confesses to David that Guillaume "'has more hands than an octopus, and no dignity whatever'" and that he tolerates Guillaume out of desperation. Although Guillaume now leaves him "'mostly alone,'" he fears more trouble from him: "'we are certainly going to have a little trouble soon again. Not right away, of course; that is not his style. But he will invent something to be angry about'" (83). When David first hears this, he wants to go home to "people I knew and understood," for he senses, fearfully, that to be "so abruptly, so hideously entangled with a boy . . . was but one tiny aspect of the dreadful human tangle occurring everywhere, without end, forever" (84).

After the murder, David gathers together the details of Giovanni's confession—of his various confessions. He accepts Giovanni's confession even as he analyzes the political pressures that have constructed his guilt. David says of the days immediately following Guillaume's murder:

Giovanni was nowhere to be found. All of the evidence, above all, of course, his disappearance, pointed to him as the murderer. Such a scandal always threatens, before its reverberations cease, to rock the very foundations of the state. It is necessary to find an explanation, a solution, and a victim with the utmost possible speed. Most of the men picked up in connection with this crime were not picked up on suspicion of murder. They were picked up on suspicion of having what the French, with a delicacy I take to be sardonic, call *les goûts particuliers*. . . . It was remembered that

¹⁴ For a discussion of *Giovanni's Room* and the detective genre, see Henderson.

there perished with Guillaume one of the oldest names in France. . . . Guillaume's name became fantastically entangled with French history, French honor, and French glory, and very nearly became, indeed, a symbol of French manhood. (197-99)

We can hear Baldwin's voice in this passage, intruding on his character in a way that has displeased some critics.¹⁵ This intrusion, however, establishes thematic connections between the policing of gender and of race, between the events of the novel and political events that Baldwin returns to again and again in his novels and essays.¹⁶ David knows things that, by and large, as a white American he should not know; herein he discovers his doubleness and undoing. As it exceeds David's perspective, the authorial voice sets the scene for the reversal that occurs when he imagines the events that led to the murder. Not only does he come to view his own image as "other," but through imagining Giovanni's ordeal, he assumes Giovanni's identity. We can see the fusion of the two characters after Giovanni's arrest, when David asserts, "I may have been the only man in Paris who knew that he had not meant to do it, who could read *why* he had done it beneath the details printed in the newspapers" (203).

The story that David invents—the one that is too *black* for the newspapers, the one that he could not have imagined before Giovanni—is a tale of economic and sexual exploitation. Giovanni returns with bravado and swagger to Guillaume's bar: "love was over, and he could do with Guillaume anything he liked. He could, indeed, have done with Guillaume anything at all—but he could not do anything about being Giovanni" (203). As becomes clear, "being Giovanni" refers to his status among the fish in Guillaume's sea. Hoping to be rewarded with a job, Giovanni submits to sex with Guillaume, only to find that his market value has eroded since his affair with *le jeune*

¹⁵ See Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*.

¹⁶ Black men imprisoned on false charges, including rape, appear in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, among Baldwin's fictional works.

Américain. David imagines his lover's rape:

Guillaume seems to surround him like the sea itself. And I think that Giovanni, tortured into a state like madness, feels himself going under, is overcome, and Guillaume has his will. I think if this had not happened, Giovanni would not have killed him. (205-06)

The passage has two rather different implications. On the one hand, it suggests an understanding of the relation between power and sexual consent. Guillaume's social and economic power transforms him not into a big fish but into the sea itself, the medium in which Giovanni is forced to live—and drown. Moreover, the charge of rape that has been brought so frequently against black men figures here as an act committed by a rich white man against Giovanni, who responds with a deeply personal act of murder. On the other hand, the scene repeats David's own gender anxiety while projecting it onto Giovanni, in its insistence that Giovanni kills because—and only because—he is turned into a woman, an object, a "fallen movie star, [who] has lost his drawing power" (206). Giovanni's rage represents a parodic repetition of masculinity, for it partakes of male sexuality, becoming "swollen" and uncontrollable until he chokes Guillaume with the sash of his dressing gown and another transfer of sexual power takes place. Of course, the very act through which Giovanni seeks to reassert his manhood is a confession of his physical intimacy with men and a communion in which the two are joined for a transfer of energy: "Then he simply held on, sobbing, becoming lighter every moment as Guillaume grew heavier, tightening the sash and cursing" (207).

Yet David knows that part of the *why* is elsewhere and concerns himself. Since he loves Giovanni, he must understand *why* Giovanni has murdered Guillaume, and to do this he must reconstruct Giovanni's situation. David is part of Giovanni's situation, however, for he has failed to save him from—and knowingly abandoned him to—Guillaume. When David first heard that Giovanni was menaced by

Guillaume, he wanted to flee back to America. Now he, too, is part of "the dreadful human tangle occurring everywhere, without end, forever" (84). The murder takes shape in David's mind; the crime is not what interests Baldwin, but the narrator's identity, his myths of guilt and innocence. Giovanni's guilt is secondary to David's mythical reconstruction, which derives significance, as experience, from its indeterminacy. The arbitrary indeterminacy of the moral choice compels David to confront his identity—finally to *choose*.

In *No Name in the Street* (1972), Baldwin describes his arbitrary decision, during his years in Paris, to regard the destiny of the Algerians he encountered there as somehow tied to his own:

The question of my identity had never before been so crucially allied with the reality—the doom—of the moral choice. The irreducible inconvenience of the moral choice is that it is, by definition, arbitrary—though it sounds so grandiose—and, on the the surface, unreasonable, and has no justification but (or in) itself. (41)

To answer *why* Giovanni has murdered, we must understand the acts and consciousness not of Giovanni, the murderer, but of David, the Judas. The problem of *why* no longer refers to Giovanni alone, but to the motives, knowledge, and loyalties—the identity—of David. Although we know that Giovanni is "about to perish, sometime between this night and this morning, on the guillotine" (10), it is David's suffering that we are asked to share or condemn, as we will. This is established in the first sentence of the novel: "I stand at the window of this great house in the south of France as night falls, the night which is leading me to the most terrible morning of my life" (7). Giovanni will be dead by morning and David will be alone. He will take a train from the house he had shared with Hella toward Paris. There he will have to choose and choose again.

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