

Varieties of Ecstatic Autobiography: James Joyce to Jean Genet

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Abstract

Varieties of Ecstatic Autobiography: From James Joyce to Jean Genet

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This dissertation examines how Modernist autobiographical prose texts centralize *ecstasy*, the paradoxical experience of being beyond the normal awareness of self and time. Even seminal autobiographers such as Augustine and Rousseau confront problems in self-representation that are themselves rooted in both the limitations of linear time for articulating certain moments in a life and narrative reliance on absolute distinctions between the sentient subject and the world's objects. Alternative modern models on literary subjectivity and perspectives on discontinuous time are distilled from essays by Walter Pater, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, and Walter Benjamin. I integrate these literary interventions with phenomenological theories of subject-object collaboration in sensation and perception and Leo Bersani's theory of reciprocity between the self as an 'aesthetic subject,' and the world. The project then turns to a reexamination of autobiographical projects by James Joyce, Colette, and Jean Genet. Even in its earliest draft forms, Joyce's novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914) equates the spontaneous linguistic inventions in childhood with a foundational, sense-based form of body-world association that is severely undermined by the civilizing maturation of Stephen Dedalus, a predicament informed by Joyce's interest in cyclical theories about human history. Turning to the work of Colette, I evaluate how her novel about music-hall pantomime and dance, *La Vagabonde* (1910) and her pictorial and poetic memoir *La Naissance du jour* (1928) depict ecstatic experience in figurations of silence and solitude, breaking with the representational style around dialogue and sociability most associated with her literary self-portraits. Jean Genet's first and final memoirs *Journal du voleur* (1947) and *Un Captif amoureux* (1986), as well as his hybrid fragment essays on perception and the visual and plastic arts exemplify how lived experiences achieve significance only when their latent ecstatic properties are articulated in a nonlinear lyrical form. The dissertation concludes by suggesting how the force of authorial presence and the ecstatic dimensions of experiences are reconciled in the materiality of a highly personalized language, a perspective made paradigmatic by the idiosyncratic style of autobiographer Michel Leiris.

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Table of Contents

Chapter One: Toward a Definition of Ecstatic Autobiography	1
Chapter Two: Chapter Two: The Paradoxical Reality of an Ecstatic Self	22
Chapter Three: James Joyce, the Autobiographer as Ecstatic Child	67
Chapter Four: Colette's Living Word of Autobiography	113
Chapter Five: Jean Genet, Ecstatic Prisoner	178
Conclusion	261

Chapter One: Toward a Definition of Ecstatic Autobiography

The prose autobiography uneasily partakes of historical and fictive methods and relies on narration to locate, explore, and clarify its subject's created identity within time. Because the autobiography is temporally limited to describing the presence of a self within the fundamental categories of past, present and future, the autobiography faces profound challenges when representing experiential moments, or instants.

As Augustine discovers towards the conclusion of his *Confessions*, the dubious factuality of narrative time undermines the prose autobiography's veracity. Disturbed by the empirically undeniable absence of the past and the future, as well as by his work's failure to express the present as such, Augustine confronts the artificiality of narrative time and asks of his implied addressee, God, "how can...the past and the future *be*, when the past no longer is and the future is not yet?...and [since] the present is time only by reason of the fact that it moves on to become the past, how can we say the present is?" (264).

The suprahuman truth of eternity does not resolve Augustine's all-too-human autobiographical quandary.

Viewed from the secular perspective of modern literary concerns, Augustine's interrogation of time's ontology can be focused around its unrest about how prose autobiography objectifies and abstracts its author's experience of time, transferring experience into an integrated, sequential text which eclipses and censors experiential moments that might be rendered in and of themselves. Writing

on how Augustine's text grapples with questions of time, space and the individual, Hannah Arendt writes that "Life is always either no more or not yet" (14), and that Augustine views memory as the space of "the no more (*iam nun*)" and the future as the space of "the not-yet, (*nudum*)" (Arendt 16). However, within the infinitesimal transition between the past and the future, Arendt notes how Augustine glimpses an a-temporal facet of experience, "Now," that might correspond to the equally unfathomable concept of eternity. For Augustine the past and future meet in the present, and "for a fleeting moment (the temporal Now) it is as though time stands still and it is this Now that becomes Augustine's model for eternity" (Arendt, 15; *parenthesis H.A.'s*).

If the prose autobiography proposes to substantiate the truth of its subject's lived experience, then that elusive Now that seems to rise above the absent past and absent future, that very real, factual experience of such moments, appears central and demands articulation. The problem, as the Augustinian aporia indicates, arises in how subjectivity, "I," is formulated, if not utterly conceived and forever defined by demarcations between that "I's past, present and and future, demarcations rationally explained by the living subject's varying relationship to his or her space.

Lived experiences are often discrete instants that stand apart and elude prose representation. Because of their discontinuous and disconnected uniqueness, various recalled *present's* deny the prose autobiographer the self-contextualizing tools of retrospection (reference to the lived past) and anticipation (reference to subsequence). Such exceptional moments that have no apparent relevance to

chronology and which evoke an experience that defies their placement within a coherent past, present, and future indicate that one's lived experience is not always amenable to one's normal subjectivity, i.e., to that historically derived character and life under the heading of *I* which, at least since Augustine, the autobiography commits to describing. Many recalled events loom as disconnected *Now's* in which that authorial *I* cannot be verified in normal narrative time. Within such instants, the autobiographer recognizes that he or she has lost the habitual location of a self in space and time, or was dislocated beyond any usual self-recognition. A recalled instant sometimes carries with it the sense of an authentically lived-through *Now* that propels the narrator beyond a biographical awareness of itself, into a state akin to the delirium of erotic pleasure and absorbed physical exertion, or the oceanic feeling and expansion of consciousness that occurs in certain encounters with the sublime dimensions of the phenomenal world of things, and in the dissolutions of self-awareness that occur in the throes of intense aesthetic productivity or in highly pitched intellectual labor.

Because certain moments seem impervious to their representation within a narrative sequence, and adverse to the literary reproduction of a coherent first-person *I*, these unsettling and exalted instants tend to be expressed within the privileged domain of lyrical poetry, with its attenuated structures and asynchronous pivots around epiphanies. Conversely, such random instants are usually filtered out of life narrative to conform experience with the sequential bias of the prose autobiographical mode, even in its more fictive manifestations.

The undeniable reality of such self-extinguishing moments has led memoirists to reflect self-consciously on the narrative and structural problems within the autobiography itself. In the beginning of the sixth book of *Confessions*, Rousseau explains that his initial experiences living at Les Charmettes in *Chambéry* were so felicitous that, though he can remember all its “moments précieux,” the inexorable flow of his memories prevents his narration from singling out a self-representative exemplary episode to share with his reader. Rousseau pauses within his personal history to meditate further on this predicament: “Moments précieux et si regrettés ! Ah ! coulez plus lentement dans mon souvenir, s'il est possible, que vous ne fites réellement dans votre fugitive succession” (*Confessions* 227). [Precious and ever-regretted moments! Ah! recommence your delightful course; pass more slowly through my memory, if possible, than you actually did in your fugitive succession (*Confessions* 221)].

The narrator is certain that he lived happily and effortlessly for that period, yet the harmony between the subject, I” and the objects in his world fail to provide anything more than a succession of blanks:

Je me levais avec le soleil, et j'étais heureux ; je me promenais, et j'étais heureux ; je voyais maman, et j'étais heureux ; je la quittais, et j'étais heureux ; je parcourais les bois, les coteaux, j'errais dans les vallons, je lisais, j'étais oisif, je travaillais au jardin, je cueillais les fruits, j'aidais au ménage, et le bonheur me suivait partout (*Confessions* 227).

I rose with the sun, and was happy; I walked, and was happy; I saw Madam de Warrens, and was happy; I quitted her, and still was happy!- Whether I rambled through the woods, over the hills, or strolled along the valley; read, was idle, worked in the garden, or gathered fruits, I helped in the house, happiness continually accompanied me (*Confessions* 221).

Perplexed by the lack of clear distinctions between his contented self and his idyllic environment that would allow him to narrate a life story from within that period the narrator locates reality in the originating power of “I,” and decides that the happiness must have derived from that interiority for “il n'était dans aucune chose assignable, il était tout en moi-même, il ne pouvait me quitter un seul instant” (*Confessions* 227) [it did not lie in any assignable object, but wholly within myself and it did not leave me for a moment (*Confessions* 220)]. Unsatisfied with that explanation, and as the representational impasse threatens the memoir, he chooses an accessible, yet arbitrary moment of happiness from *Les Charmettes*, describing how, during a walk, “maman,” points out to him a plant he has never seen before, a flowering periwinkle. “Voilà de la pervenche encore en fleur (*Confessions* 289). [“Look at the periwinkle still in flower” (*Confessions* 220).] The image encapsulates an experiential moment entirely separate, in terms of causality and meaning, from the text’s linear logic, underscored by the two uncanny facets of time which the plant embodies: it is the first such sighting for the narrator and *maman* is surprised it remains in flower so late in season.

Further sidestepping normal temporality, Rousseau explains how, nearly thirty years later, he sees the same periwinkle flower again, in *Cressier* in 1764, and he describes how this second sighting later in life induces a rapture (*transport*) which he reproduces alongside the *Charmettes* moment: “En montant et regardant parmi les buissons, je pousse un cri de joie: *Ah! voilà de la pervenche!* et c'en était en effet. Du Peyrou s'aperçut du transport, mais il en ignorait la cause; il l'apprendra, je

l'espère, lorsqu'un jour il lira ceci" (*Confessions* 290). "walking and looking among the bushes, I exclaimed in bliss, 'Ah, there's some periwinkle!" Du Peyrou, who perceived my rapture, was ignorant of the cause, but will some day be informed, I hope, on reading this. The reader may judge by this impression, made by so small an incident, what an effect must have been produced by every occurrence of that time" (*Confessions* 222). The periwinkle encounter mitigates the representational stalemate about which Rousseau had wrestled, and articulates what Wordsworth in his *Prelude* calls autobiographical "spots of time": "There are in our existence spots of time/That with distinct pre-eminence retain/A renovating virtue" (*Prelude* 12.208-210).

Rousseau's example points out how a close and uncanny personal identification of the self with an object permits the autobiographer to write about seemingly timeless moments. Such instances of past *Now's* that challenge the very clear demarcations between subject and object, between I and world, become increasingly important to modern autobiographers, especially in the age of a post-Freudian skepticism about the stable reality of *I*, of *self*, and of a subjectivity fully separable from the physical spaces in which the subject exists. Rousseau's periwinkle passages demonstrate that in writing of an unusual affinity awakened by a random object within the concrete world (a flowering plant) emancipates the autobiographer from the *no more* and the *not yet* of chronology so he can resuscitate an exceptional moment that is crucial to who he is even though it is not able to be integrated into that sequential narrative. Rousseau's two spots of time indicate that

the autobiography has stumbled upon a previously unnoticed dimension of lived reality. In this dimension of the instantaneous, the narrating *I* finds that a particular encounter with an object crystalizes an *instant* of experience as such, temporarily suspending the chronometric *I* on which the autobiographical method has been premised. The periwinkle encounters disrupt continuity because the exalted sympathy of the *I* toward the seen “object” cannot be contextualized or integrated into the other events and relationships of the narrator’s life. However brief and fleeting they are, the flower sightings uncover more than just a memory. They reveal a dimension of being in which reality is purely instants wherein the narrating subject finds that he is, and was, suspended into a state of being *outside* an historical and linear subjectivity. Rousseau’s narrator arrives at meaning as precisely being *outside* the limits of a serialized self. The semantic importance of this simple plant sighting means that autobiographical knowledge originates neither entirely within the historical *I* who is created through narrative time, nor entirely outside that individual *I* in the concrete and abstractions that are other than *I*: God, Nature, other people, physical objects.

Autobiography inevitably confronts the problem that certain substantial, undervalued experiential truths reside not in the stable representations that rely on sequence, before and after, but rather are experiences which are magnified beyond the normal account of durations, placing the self into an a-temporal *situs* in which identity is constituted equally by the narrator’s self-consciousness and by a sensuous exteriority, a flux between seer and seen normally obscured by the

habitual and practical demarcations between subject and objects in the world. Such moments challenge the autobiographer to reconsider how much of the meaning of his lived experience, in the form of such random moments, constitute the value of the lived life quite apart from coherence or sequentially arranged stories. Even though Rousseau's text treats these instants as exceptional rather than central to his *Confessions*, their inclusion points to an overlooked dimension of reality that raises the stakes for modern autobiography by implicitly posing this question: is it possible that the artifice involved in narrative time, that is, the predominant, patterning of events into a cumulative "beginning, middle, and end," suppresses and even censors exceptional, real moments of being simply because such instants cannot be readily represented, integrated and organized in the work?

Seminal thinkers such as Walter Pater, Virginia Woolf and Walter Benjamin provide modern alternatives for rethinking the experience of lived time and for redefining the relationship between the living subject and the objects of the world. Pater posits that human experience reaches its pinnacles in discrete instants. "All that is actual in it [is] a single moment in time, gone while we try to apprehend it" (*Renaissance* 188). From this vantage point he draws his famous conclusion that all the arts aspire to the "perfect moment of music itself" (*Renaissance* 106). In this view, echoed by Rainer Maria Rilke decades later, music is the apotheosis of experience. Music's instantaneous and temporariness remind the listener of his own

emergent, provisional and transient being.¹ Pater sees the discontinuous and instantaneous significance of many other arts as well when he writes that, “Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face...for that moment only,” advocating that the tremulous and transient content of a pictorial representation can be found by utmost concentration on perceived objects, without regard to their practical use or to how such an act is relevant to life’s wholeness, continuity and progression. Pater indicates that a *Now* can be attained via sense perception so long as the individual is “present always at the focus where the greatest number of forces [in a perceived object] unite in their purest energy” (*Renaissance* 188). Unstable, provisional knowledge gleaned from such concentrated focus requires a deliberative engagement in sense perception against all other forms of cognition, such as reflection or intellection. Through such concentration on the senses, the self subsists not in the rational parameters of before-and-after but rather, as Pater puts it in his famous metaphor for consciousness, in how the consciousness of the stable *I* burns, and thus disperses, within a present that is a “gem-like flame,” producing an “ecstasy,” that is “success in life” (*Renaissance* 188-189). Both art objects and everyday objects can remind the self that its firsthand experience of the world is

¹ In the work-notes around his *Duino Elegies* (1912-22), Rainer Maria Rilke, in a Paterian parallel, valorizes music as capturing the evaporation of being: “Saying to himself from time to time that it could not last, he nevertheless had no fear about the cessation of this extraordinary condition, as though, just as from music, all that was to be expected from it was an infinitely legitimate close.” His translator J.B. Leishman underscores that, for Rilke, the autobiographical purpose of poetry was “to taste in every instant, even the most ecstatic... a spice of the blossom of parting, of transience of death; to be perpetually aware that it could not last, and yet to have no fear about its cessation. in *Rainer Maria Rilke - Poems 1906 To 1926* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957) p 36.

never finished, and that the quintessence of lived experience is not in historical analysis of what has happened but in “the freshness, the uncertain and diffident promise” (*Renaissance* 48). Within these compartments of time that are concentrated around the prolonged permutations of sense perception, the progress of time is arrested and the boundaries between the perceiving individual and his perceived world recede as if they were merely fictive constructions. Pater implies that when cultural forces demand that the individual engage with objects and spatial reality in the normal course of daily action, then that culture deprives the individual of the value of his very life. Cultural norms of action contain prescriptive and predetermined significances to experience; cultural imperatives contain consciousness within a prophylactic “ wall of personality” (*Renaissance* 187). Facing this predicament, Pater advocates that resisting those participatory coercions will permit an understanding of the ephemeral properties of lived reality, properties that can only be experienced in sensuous perception in any given *Now*:

At first sight experience [as culture] seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action. But when reflexion begins to play upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force seems suspended like some trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions— colour, odour, texture—in the mind of the observer. And if we continue to dwell in thought on this world not of objects in their solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them it contracts still further (*Renaissance* 187).

Pater’s advocacy of “reflexion,” is not a call to solipsistic passivity. By

radically prioritizing responsive attentiveness to the fleeting and evanescent reality through sensuous apprehension of the world, Pater's theory turns away from modern systems of knowledge that distort experience by imposing either quantitative and progressive terms upon experience, such as philosophy's teleological confidence in socio-political evolution (Hegel), in scientific certitude about biological adaptation (Darwin), and in literary criticism toward a perfected civilization (Matthew Arnold). Instead Pater argues that by resisting "facile orthodoxy" or any "theory or idea or system which requires us to sacrifice any part of experience," the individual can remediate their desensitizing effects and prevent awareness from its interment within "the thick walls of personality" (*Renaissance* 187).

Examining painting, Pater defines experiences of being transported beyond the static self within, "The sudden act, the rapid transition of thought, the passing expression," maintaining that meaning resides "wholly [in the] concrete moment—into which, however, all the motives, all the interests and effects of a long history, have condensed themselves, and . . . absorb past and future in an intense consciousness of the present" (95). In examining landscapes by the French painter Alphonse Legros, he singles out how the representational work of the painted image produces its significance within a vanishing point made visible as the road in the picture seems to vanish at a hilltop. The road appears *and* disappears, giving the viewer a concrete example of how a moment is most real when it evokes its inherent disappearance. To Pater, art provides a countless number of such reminders of how

reality exists in such forgotten and ignored ephemerality. This shift towards moments has practical and philosophical implications for modern autobiographers.

One such autobiographical project oriented around such a notion of time is Virginia Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past" (1939). While struggling to write her personal biography of her friend Roger Fry, she considers the problem with memoir to be that it starts by realizing the unfeasibility of describing an *individual* in the fullest sense of the word, and therefore rather resignedly resorts to comparative measures, dates and abstractions such that in describing the life "they leave out the person to whom things happened" (*Moments of Being* 65). The incongruity of the biographical form comes from the basic reality that a person *as a person* exists in individuated experiences of such extreme particularity that they would seem to be incommunicable within a collective language. Yet Woolf attempts this herself by describing a sensuous memory from her Cornwall nursery so powerful that, as she writes it, it awakens "the feeling which even at this moment [is] very strong in me" (*Moments* 65). Like Pater, Woolf believes that art, and in particular prose memoir, can become conducive to exceptional moments on which the very concept of an *individual* as such depends. Woolf conceives of daily existence as most consequential in the recall and the writing of assorted lived-through *Now's* from her past which "can be still more real than the present moment" (*Moments* 67). In this formulation, the act of writing collapses categories of time. As it resonates within the autobiographer as she writes, the past turns on her with all its latent affective and physiological force, removing the buffer provided by a consciousness of the past as

distant. In putting the person into the life, these autobiographical records evoke unfamiliar spatial and sensuous interactions between the body and the world that are the essence of individuality, moments that defy causativeness to linger in memory for reasons that have no apparent relevance to a chronological, integrated life story. What Woolf calls “colour and sound memories” are defined by how the self merges into the immediate, brute force of the world, like the apprehensions of the elements at St Ives. Language, rather than memory alone, actualizes that immersion. The nonlinear writing of the past brings that past *Now* to bear so overwhelmingly on the present that time in its usual sense and the self in its stable situation disappear:

I stopped at the top to look at the gardens. They were sunk beneath the road. The apples were on a level with one’s head. The gardens gave off a murmur of bees; the apples were red and gold; there were pink flowers; and grey and silver leaves. The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane. (*Moments of Being* 66).

Woolf describes several such events around interior-exterior interlacing in “A Sketch of the Past.” In a fight with her brother Thoby during which she is poised to throw a punch she has a flash of recognition about her brother as flesh and she realizes it is pointless to “hurt another person” (*Moments* 72). She writes about a childhood experience of seeing flowers that seemed uncontainable within the linguistic concept “flowers” because, in their soil-bed, they seem much more than language permits: “Part flowers, part earth” (*Moments* 71). Another occurrence involves her finding out about a family friend named Valpy who committed suicide, and how within an unrelated second moment that same that day, she sees an apple

tree that becomes inexplicably associated, in a flash, with the person's suicide. In each episode, the physiological *body* of the narrator is foregrounded as the self exceeds its ordinary temporal basis. As a child, she knew only that these "exceptional moments brought with them a peculiar horror and a physical collapse" (*Moments* 72). Woolf concludes that these shocks contain within them a "revelation of some order" and "a token of the real behind the appearances," so that by writing it, the contact is no longer, as it was in childhood, "simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton-wool of daily life" (*Moments* 72).

The autobiographer is beset by the intrinsic disorientation of a past fact and preserves the encounter in a language that records its disorienting effects. The vision of peace within the fight with Thoby, the flowers revealed and also hidden in soil, the apple tree irrationally identified with a local suicide lacked *meaning* in their non-literary actualities. Being is aesthetic, in Woolf's view, insofar as it is only by writing of such moments that the reality of existence can be affirmed. This form of autobiographical writing is a reconnoitering identity as neither entirely resolved within the inner life nor is it formulatable in terms of the world outside. Who Woolf *is* in the world of the not-I with which she had that shocking contact. These contacts complicate the sharp distinctions between the past and the present, as well as the boundary between the world's phenomenal data and the perceiving narrator, between, outside and inside; being is a sudden collaboration between seer and seen, an artwork underway in the background, muted or obscured by daily habit: "[T]he whole world is a work of art," Woolf writes, linking language to the understanding of

this self-world co-identification, “we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself” (*Moments* 72).

Woolf’s autobiographical reclamation of moments of being is invested with a moral tenor. Autobiography and individuality depend on past experiences whose significance is that they were a pure present. What Woolf names as “the shock receiving capacity,” is her ability to recognize how her presence, her very identity, in such past *Nows*, was an action in which she seemed to take residence in the properties of things in the world and they occupy her, a paradox that nevertheless materializes in the language that articulates and reenacts that reciprocity. This layer of selfhood is what Woolf alludes to more than once as a “membrane” in her assessment of the Cornwall nursery (*Moments of Being* 64, 72). By highlighting this ability to receive shocks Woolf is not simply declaring herself hyper-sensitive. Her text suggest that there exists within the living and experiencing subject a site of being more receptive to the physical world than is the normal self of habit.

“A Sketch of the Past,” parallels ideas about an autobiography of moments put forth by Walter Benjamin in his fragmentary memoir and essay, “A Berlin Chronicle” that also focuses on unique sensory events from childhood unlocked by an improvisational nonlinear form of writing. Like Woolf, Benjamin juxtaposes his prescriptions for a new type of life writing with an actual model of it that he executes within “A Berlin Chronicle.” He calls for an assemblage of “reminiscences” that differ from the “continuous flow of life” that concerns autobiography. (*Reflections* 28). Benjamin differentiates a text of reminiscences from traditional

autobiography because the latter “has to do with time, with sequence” while chance “reminiscences,” bring to awareness a different facet of the self, a self transported by the sounds, scents and sightings of his native German city. Benjamin studies the predominance of playing in a child’s life and is invested in how the body in that period of life is spatially oriented with little regard for or even consciousness about time as an arbiter of his reality. A memoir that can achieve that freedom from time through language must “talk of space and of moments and discontinuities” (“Berlin Chronicle” 28). Sharing Woolf’s skepticism about chronicles and biography, Benjamin theorizes that a new form of autobiography would privilege the randomness involved in writing about the past, and he advocates a turn to the uncertain sifting process accomplished by words themselves, instead of the reflective, willful analysis of static recall. He values, as does Woolf, those past *Now’s* for their intense shocks rather than for their episodic or sequential linkages between or among other past experiences. In Benjamin’s extended acoustic metaphor for the *déjà vu* effect of the present, he claims that a past experience, or shock, achieves its fullest significance, even if opaquely or partially, from a prose form attuned to how that past resonates in the present moment, making the past and present virtually the same thing through a meditational, improvisational language that defies narrative time and its normalizing orderliness. The autobiographer “ought to speak of events that reach us like an echo awakened by a call, a sound that seems to have been heard somewhere in the darkness of past life. Accordingly, if we are not mistaken, the *shock* with which moments enter

consciousness as if already lived usually strikes us in the form of a sound” (“Berlin Chronicle” 59; italics mine). The shock is a sensory event from the past realized in the present by a language that either releases its latent force or, as Benjamin suggests in his study of Baudelaire, the expressive language used to describe that shock is *itself* the substantiating force of the moment. The moment of being is outside time, a really lived space beyond the *no more* of the author’s past and the *not yet of* the author’s future still to come. “A Berlin Childhood Around 1900,” non-linearly notes boyhood ecstasies, a self finding itself in its “sparkling entanglements with colors” within which, he, “traveled throughout the room and mingled in the play of colors of the cupola, until it burst. While considering the sky, a piece of jewelry, or a book, I would lose myself in colors” (*Berlin Childhood* 110). Both by example and in his interrogations Benjamin critiques autobiography’s tendency to distill reality so that lived time and lived space of the self accords with an already fixed memory. Instead Benjamin’s theoretical and exemplary text sketches how an isolated paroxysm of a past childhood event is instigated in a present language and that discrete reminiscence closes up the temporally regulated difference between the self and world.

The unsettling impacts, or shocks of the past, for both Woolf and Benjamin, are accomplished once the memoir’s language renders moments such that personal subjectivity finds itself *outside* itself within the physical world. The impressionistic style or collage-like form is not simply an aberrant rhetorical flourish or a deliberate fragmentation of a complete text. The prose impressionism and the patchwork of

moments correspond to how the real impressions and textures of objects on the writing subject form elements of the past beyond a stable or fixed *I*, as in how Woolf describes the uncanny moment in her nursery, with its “impression of the waves and the acorn on the blind; the feeling...of lying in grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow...There were passion flowers growing on the wall; they were great starry blossoms, with purple streaks, and large green buds, part empty, part full. If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver and green” (“Sketch of the Past” 65-66).

In these various examples from Benjamin and Woolf, the past moment resonates into a present, collapsing time because the autobiographical language is as idiosyncratic and particularized as the individual who experienced it. The moment’s significance surfaces strictly within the words themselves and those words are chosen at the moment of writing in order to speak to how the past moment converges with and resounds into its author’s *Now*, creating an affective and intellectual continuum that exceeds the prosaic boundaries of narrative time. These events exceed their status as purely past by affecting and altering their authors in the present. The descriptions trace the collapse of the boundaries between the self and the physical world, foregrounding how their respective individualities reached their most intense states of awareness within a comingling with the sensuous world outside *I*.

Given this phenomenological complexity about both the experience of time and the experience of space, how can an such autobiography be said be about a

singular entity, or a singular recognizable subject? And what kind of autobiography is it that accrues its author's individuality through the uncertainties of sense perception and through extreme identifications of the self with physical objects that are beyond it?

This model of prose autobiographical writing is rooted in an overlooked and under-examined condition of being, known as "ecstasy," derived from Late Latin *extasis*, meaning terror, from Greek *ekstasis*, astonishment, distraction, and from *existanai*, to displace, derange. The particular, discontinuous moments in an "ecstatic autobiography," involve the author in documenting how his or her presence in the world seemed at times in his or her life to take hold *outside* or *beyond* the historical consciousness through an immersive form of interaction with the premade world *out there*. This definition as it applies to these modern autobiographies breaks with the ingrained notions of ecstasy in two key respects. Ecstasy has been considered above all else a *temporary* condition, an aberrant state of being occasionally undergone by unique people in extreme circumstances that induce a psychologically based negation of *I* (i.e. saints, mystics, lovers, drug users, the possessed, the mad, etc.). Traditionally defined, ecstasy has carried an ascetic requirement that it involve a purifying rapture of the soul out of the body towards union with the One, as in the contemplative ecstasies recorded by Plotinus, Christian mystics such as Theresa of Avilla, St. John of the Cross and Thomas Eckhart, and in 17th century English metaphysical poetry. In its most recent re-conceptualization and daily use, ecstasy has more commonly been diluted from its quality as a self-

transcending state to refer to even commonplace experiences of elation and joy, making ecstasy seem to be more a psychological state than an ontological one.

However, authors such as Pater, Woolf and Benjamin, as well as James Joyce, Colette and Jean Genet conceive and represent their respective presences in the world as ecstasies recognized and understood in autobiographical texts that manifest the paradox that identity frequently involves being *other than* and *outside of* the restrictions of being contained by the *I* around which everyday life is grounded. These modern autobiographers build life stories around momentary transports out of the usual temporal and spatial limitations. These occur through a corporeal co-identification of the author's presence with the physical and sensuous features of the given world. Identity is no longer based in an abstract consciousness in a fixed point in time and unfolds in a recognized fluctuation between the inside and the outside that supersedes the imposition of a point in time. The corporeal ecstasies of the lived life are triggered by the autobiographical language and not wholly separable from the writing process. In Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past" she describes "hearing the [window] blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the line out" (*Moments* 65). As she *writes* that past by focusing on its effect on her *now*, she induces the displacement of selfhood that was latent in the lived memory and which now comes about in language: "It is lying and hearing this splash across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is lying and hearing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive" (*Moments* 65).

This dissertation examines how the works allow the past to release ecstatic realities of being *linguistically*, in the syntactic limitations of linear prose. In doing so, the writing makes the author's past co-extensive with the author's present while the work also actualizes, in its recording of sensuous intensities, the reciprocal motion between the narrator's interiority and the exterior objects of his or her milieu, as Woolf does in her account of the ecstasy between her younger self and the physical elements at St. Ives--the window blind, the acorn, the wind, the splash and the falling of the light. Such autobiographical emphasis coincides with modern philosophical definitions of time in existentialist rather than idealist terms, particularly Heidegger's theory of Being as an "instancy" [*Instandigkeit*] and his investigations into how the living individual's being in the world happens less as a sequence than as a single temporal trinity in which time is always "outside itself," an "ekstasis" [a word linked by Heidegger to *ek-sistence*] in which the past merges constantly into the present while the present itself constantly dissolves into the future. In these autobiographies, the idiosyncratic and lyrical self-displacements which concern the work coincide with precisely such a dropping away of the notions of the past, present and future, into the nearly unspeakable and foregrounded *Now*, the elusive *present* of lived life that had perplexed Augustine.

Chapter Two: The Paradoxical Reality of an Ecstatic Self

In "La Poésie ou les lois mystérieuses," (1908) Proust presents a crisis derived from personal passivity as the starting point for a new form of autobiography. In this exemplary text about a particular form of life-writing, Proust explores a nameless aesthetic force that operates within the self and within appearances and everyday realities. It is a form of hermetic knowledge that he calls metaphorically "l'inconsciente et sûre pensée architecturale" [the unconscious and infallible architectural mind] of any given object.

In the beginning of the essay, Proust represents himself, in surrogate form, as a nameless poet who is inexplicably and suddenly transfixed by the apparently simple sight of a blossoming cherry tree which looks, at his first glance, uncanny and somewhat unreal. The initial flash when he sees the tree is described as an impression he will seek to recapture. The deepening absorption in visual content and the changing aromas emanating from the blossoming tree detaches the Proustian poet from of any kind of physical action or social interaction. He ignores society represented by the surrounding urban park and frequent passersby. The sensuous concentration on the tree strips him of a habitual consciousness about his fixed place in the world. The longer he contemplates the tree's features, the more

intensely his understanding of his own self is disoriented. Ignoring the demands of storytelling and a clear elucidation of the event's timeframe, Proust focuses on the initial uncertain cause of this private absorption in the tree. Alternating among the degrees of renewed attentiveness he brings to its features, the essay vacillates more than once about whether the tree-as-object itself or something within the poet-perceiver causes him disequilibrium and leads to his detached and seemingly passive immobility: "Le poète regarde et semble regarder à la fois en lui-même et dans le cerisier double" (*Essais* 114). [The poet looks and seems to be looking into both the cherry tree and his own mind (*Art & Literature* 308)].

This overpowering encounter with the blossoming cherry tree parallels the liquidations of self-awareness evoked in Walter Pater's essays on the effects of paintings or music on one's experience of time. However Proust advances further than Pater's Aestheticism, as he argues that such erasures or transports are potentially present in the apparition of the most ordinary mundane objects. Proust's law around the immediate sight of the tree, the allure of it that he seeks to retain and retrace as he stares at it over and over, indicates a belief that there is some layer of reality in any seen object that draws the observer to it instantaneously. The obedience to that law requires the seer to study the object further to determine the meaning of its influence for its source is neither wholly *out there* in the seen object nor entirely *within* the seer but rather somewhere between the two in a reciprocal correspondence which the autobiographical writing can clarify.

Proust compares the poet's mystified, concentrated and stubborn demeanor

to that of a student endlessly re-reading an insolvable text: “Ils est devant les choses comme l’étudiant qui relit sans cesse le texte” (114). His inability to explain the object’s aura motivates an act of writing that might articulate those realities. As he ruminates on the invisible magnetism within the visible properties, he detects in the initial encounter and in his extended preoccupation with the object admixtures of appearance *and* disappearance and of transparency *and* opacity. These absent-present dualities suggest to the poet something equally present and nascent within him. Understanding this nascence is central to the essay’s autobiographical purpose. The need to write about his cognition of the instigating object leads to a psychical and physiological urgency: the uncertainties within a past perception and the act of writing are here an equivalent impulse. Proust’s figure of the poet maintains this uncertain, inchoate resonance of the sighting in the park by avoiding human contact as he retreats to the writing desk, as if any conversation would shatter the timeless and semi-inebriated state he is in. As he writes of the encounter, he names the object’s initial sudden appeal as a metaphorical insemination within which he undergoes an exhilarating feeling that an exteriority has intruded into and comingled with his interiority. In writing about that inner invasion by something nameless, the text both recounts and produces the ecstasy of the lived event that caused it:

A ce *moment*, il a changé son âme contre l’âme universelle. Ce grand transfert s’accomplit en lui, et si vous entriez et le forciez à redevenir lui, quel coup! Vous le trouvez là l’air égaré, en proie à une agitation inouïe. Il vous regarde sans comprendre, puis vous sourit, n’ose même rien dire, attendant que vous soyez reparti, sa pensée inerte comme la méduse sur le rivage et qui mourra là si le flot ne vient la rechercher. Vous pouvez chercher pourquoi il

s'enfermait, vous ne voyez là le complice en rien du crime que vous dérangez et pourtant l'air égaré. Qu'est-ce donc ? la victime disparaît donc dès que vous entrez ? *C'est que c'est sur lui-même qu'il travaille : dès que vous le retrouvez lui, l'autre n'y est plus* (Essais et articles 116; italics mine).

Within this moment he has exchanged his soul for the soul of the universe. This large transfer is accomplished in him, and if you enter and force him to become him, what a blow! You find him consumed in some mysterious agitation. He looks at you without comprehension and smiles, waiting for you to leave him be, his thought immobilized like a stranded jellyfish that will die if the tide fails to come back and get it. You try to figure out why he has shut himself indoors like this, and seeing no evidence of the crime you have happened upon, you wonder, did the victim disappear the minute you entered? *But it is himself he is doing away with. As soon as you find one, the other is not there* (Art & Literature 311).

Proust's poet does not retreat into the writing studio because he thinks he can compose an interpretative account of that happenstance using the devices of conventional autobiography. Rather, he secludes himself to establish a style of autobiographical writing that involves the extinction of the stultified self and its displacement by a presence that is as much a self *within* as it is a self *without* in sensory objects, an ecstatic truth affirmed by writing the nearly unanswerable affinity he finds in perceived externalities. The essay serves as an autobiographical gesture of obedience to the intuited law in its title.

Yet this obedience is shown to be extremely problematic. Obeying the law that reveals how his interiority and the tree's exteriority correspond requires the poet to chart the disquieting and sublime properties of that visual exaltation to the very limits of its intelligibility: "écrire est plutôt réservé à une sorte de procréation à laquelle ils sont invités par un désir spécial qui leur signifie de n'y point résister"

(*Essais* 116). [Something to be kept in reserve for a sort of procreation to which they are invited by a special desire that intimates that they must under no account hold out against it, a procreation that other types of writing can only impair (*Art and Literature* 312)]. Through the essay itself, Proust contrasts this autobiographical style with other writings which prevent the representation of such a reversibility between the seer and the seen: “Procréation que ces autres sortes d'écrits ne peuvent qu'affaiblir” (*Essais* 116). The “lois” essay makes real, *realizes* in the literal sense, the reciprocal flow between himself and the flowering tree. The discovered law also opens up a chain of correspondences that his own alliance with the particularly seen object causes him to realize exists within all objects and artworks. Proust advocates that the writer ought to invest his accounts of lived experience with this mysterious law of interconnection, this principle of kinetic reversibility for self-world, subject-object, the like and the unlike, artificial objects and natural ones:

Pendant qu'il regarde un arbre, le passant s'arrête pour regarder un équipage ou pour regarder une devanture de bijoutier. Mais le poète, qui éprouve avec allégresse la beauté de toutes choses dès qu'il l'a sentie dans les lois mystérieuses qu'il porte en lui, qui bientôt nous la fera trouver charmante en nous la montrant avec le petit bout des lois mystérieuses, le petit bout qui aboutit à elles, le petit bout qu'il peindra aussi en les peignant, touchant à leurs pieds ou partant de leur front, le poète éprouve et fait connaître avec allégresse la beauté de toutes choses, d'un verre d'eau aussi bien que des diamants, mais aussi des diamants aussi bien que du verre d'eau, d'un champ aussi bien que d'une statue, mais d'une statue aussi bien que d'un champ. Quand on a vu Chardin, non seulement on voit la beauté d'un repas bourgeois, mais on croit que la poésie n'est que dans les repas rustiques et on détourne les yeux quand on voit des bijoux. Mais quand on a lu *Le Diamant du rajah* ou quand on a vu du Gustave Moreau, on recherche les diamants et les pierreries comme des choses qui sont aussi belles, et quand on a vu Gustave Moreau, après avoir cru que les choses n'étaient belles que dans leur spontanéité et les fleurs dans les champs et les bêtes dans leur vie, dédaignant toute espèce d'objets d'art et les laissant aux riches

sans imagination, quand on a vu les Gustave Moreau, on se prend de goût pour les toilettes somptueuses, pour les choses détournées de leur grâce naturelle et prises comme symboles, les tortues comme devant servir à faire des lyres, les fleurs enserrant un front comme des symboles de la mort et après avoir cru qu'une statue gâterait un champ, tant on voulait se plonger dans la vraie campagne, on sent, on désire la beauté d'une terre d'art où les statues se profilent sur les falaises (comme dans la Sapho de Moreau) et on se plaît à voir comme des formes intellectuelles les êtres à travers lesquels l'esprit du poète, qui les a seuls ainsi disposés, passe, s'élevant de l'un à l'autre, des fleurs qui entourent la statue à la statue, de la statue à la déesse qui passe non loin, des tortues à la lyre, tandis que les fleurs au corsage sont presque des bijoux et presque des étoffes (116-117).

While he looks at a tree, another passer-by stops to look at a carriage or look in a jeweler's display case. But the poet, who joyously perceives the beauty of all things as soon as the mysterious laws which he carries within him waken him to them, and who soon will make us all aware of their delight by showing them to us along with a small bit of the mysterious laws, the little aspect of the law that connects with them, reaching from their feet or radiating from their brow; the ecstatic poet feels and welcomes the beauty of all things, a glass of water as well as of diamonds, but diamonds as well as the glass of water, a field as well as a statue, but a statue as well as a field such that when they see a Chardin, not only do they see the beauty of a homecooked meal, but then they think that the rustic meal alone is poetic and they divert their eyes when they see fine jewelry. But when they have read *The Rajah's Diamond* or when they have seen a Gustave Moreau, they search diamonds and gems as things which are also beautiful, and when they have viewed enough Gustave Moreau paintings, they develop a taste for fine clothing and things deflected from their natural state and taken for symbols, tortoisises used to create lyres, flowers bedecking heads as emblems of death; and after having believed that a statue would spoil a field, so much so one has no use for lovely countryside, they suddenly feel they want to plunge into such countryside, they want it, craving the beauty of the earth as art, where statues stand out within the cliffs (as in the Moreau's Sappho) and they enjoy seeing natural objects as mental images by way of the poet's mind on whom they depend for their disposal, rising, one from another, from the flowers which encircle the statue to the statue, from the tortoise to the lyre, while flowers in a corsage are almost the nature of jewels and almost the nature of fine fabric (*Essays on Art and Literature* 308-309).

The law is one of unseen correspondences between interior states and physical

realities that form the neglected significance of everyday reality and that it is the responsibility of the writer to imbue his representations of reality with such transpositions between his inside and his outside, even though such events may seem impervious to being communicated in the non-associative linearity of prose. The essay distinguishes this level of awareness from habitual interactions within which an object normally motivates a seer. To stress this point, the essay juxtaposes the poet's disinterested ecstatic involvement with the tree with other subject-object relations that are temporally and spatially consistent, such as a libertine waiting for an available lover, a pedestrian checking out a cab, a shopper admiring a jewel in a window. Instead of writing about experience that involves such articulations of how subject and an object relate in normal time, Proust's poet addresses a rediscovered simultaneity of the human subject with the world's objects, and of artifice with nature. The detections are only *partially* experience-based. The writing act, both figuratively in the cogitating writer and literally as he finally gets to write, articulates an infinitesimal and a-temporal give-and-take between perceiver and perceived. The autobiographical language makes the ecstasy substantial by finding the words which were latently present in the encounter. So the seeming passivity of the solitary poet is, in fact, a hyper-vigilant discipline on behalf of a layer of reality hidden beneath daily life.

Proust's oblique law about how perception of an object reveals interior states and confuses the boundary between subjective consciousness and world resembles a law that Walter Pater posits in his imaginary self-portrait, "The Child in the House"

(1878). There Pater defines the ecstatic events in the life of the autobiographical self as “the gradual expansion of the soul which had come to be, there--of which, indeed through the law which makes material objects so large an element in children’s lives, it had actually become a part: inward and outward being woven through each other into one inextricable texture” (*Imaginary Portraits* 4). Pater’s law means that ahead of Florian’s consolidated knowledge of who he is, there exists a plane of reality missed in conventional autobiographical self-assessments. When the traditionally conceived autobiographical subject thinks of himself as a person with a past, he posits who he is by reflecting on particular units of time--a day, a week, a year and so on. Within such a calendrical positivism, the immediacies and incompletions of the subject in his anonymous contact with sense phenomena are ignored because they are considered irretrievable and because they are secondary matters compared to the proper subject of autobiography, namely what *actions* were taken and completed in calculable time. Therefore in order to revive the spatial immediacies that triggered extreme associations of self with sensory objects, the autobiographer recasts the lived life within the generally invisible cognitive non-action of perception.

Both Proust and Pater pinpoint the vestiges of an experiential self that is also always *apart* from the normal self as that normal self operates within daily life. Within the personality there is a condition of being in which *I* finds its identity outside normal consciousness. This *I* is a permeable vigor rather than a visible entity. Both authors voice a penetrability of the first-person subject by objects in the

world prevails before any given perception has been translated into a fixed judgment or memory. That penetrability resonates long after the processes of reflection and intellection have closed off the lived event and installed them within the history and knowledge of *I* as completed and *past*. Their recovery as ecstatic events rather than as units of a remembered past are the very purpose of writing.

This recovery involves two phases. There is the factual, initial apprehension of the inner self's uncanny correlation to the foreign object, epitomized by the initial shock of recognition that Proust's poet experiences when he first sees the blossoming tree and mistakenly thinks it is fringed with snowflakes in springtime. The randomness and ephemeral astonishment within the act of seeing is esteemed rather than dismissed as anomalous. From this valuation there is the linguistic, autobiographical recovery, a *writing* of the experience that allows the experience to accord with the ecstatic paradox. Proust's essay stresses that the visual occurrence defies an immediate processing in language and that defiance is precisely the motivating agency to write. An ecstasy of personal identity can only be articulated by an autobiographical language that undoes habit's familiarizations, normalizations, reflections, rehearsals and repetitions of the self's relations to objects in the past. The recovery and expression of is tenuous because it is an entirely separate form of knowledge, apart from the cognitive processes of *I* that arrange experiences, after any given fact, into linear arrangements for a biographical structuring of daily life that yields a relatively stable personality and a coherent history, even if the latter are modified on occasion.

Samuel Beckett's study of Proust and the refutation of habit addresses the difficulties the author faces in autobiography when trying to recapture the comingling between subject and object within actual lived experiences. In following these problems as they are overcome by Proust, Beckett further elucidates the Proustian "law" by referring to the naïve contact of the subject with the phenomenal world which *Recherche*, as a "reduplication" of experience (*Proust* 56). The original receptiveness of the human subject is what Beckett names the "imagination" paralyzed by the "limits of the real" (*Proust* 56). In Beckett's formulations, the "real" is the principle of rationally determined distinction drawn between the subject and the object that has persevered at least since Kant's time. Daily life depends on empiricism around a self that is remote from what it is not. According to Beckett, habit negates the imaginative correlation of subject to an object and the self suffers a privation of experience; genuine interpenetrative contact between a subject and an object in the spatial field of the lived life, apprehended primarily by "imagination" is, in memory, normalized by the reality-principle of the thinking subject. In the reflective and analytical turns from phenomena, the individual forgets the primary inter-corporeal flux between subject and object. Subject and object "are automatically separated by the subject's consciousness of perception" (*Proust* 56). An autobiographer such as Proust undoes this privation of experience through an associative text that is a "reduplication" of life, a work that is "at once imaginative and empirical, an evocation and a direct perception" (*Proust* 56). Evocation recovers the initial ambiguity or strangeness of any given event, retrieving the past event as

the advent it was and integrates it into the empirical and direct realism of the work.

That style revives the naivety, or the lived *style* of “imagination.” Within the

autobiographical reduplication that is *Recherche*:

the only reality is provided by the hieroglyphics traced by inspired perception (identification of subject and object). The conclusions of the intelligence are merely of arbitrary value, potentially valid. ‘An impression is for the writer what an experiment is for the scientist—with this difference that in the case of the scientist the action of the intelligence precedes the event and in the case of the writer follows it’. Consequently for the artist, the only possible hierarchy in the world of objective phenomena is represented by their respective coefficients of penetration” (*Proust* 64; parenthesis and quotation by Beckett).

Crucially Beckett points out this “mystical” reduplication of experience creates an “extra-temporal essence” (*Proust* 56). Retrieving this receptive stratum of the author’s life does for autobiography what Merleau-Ponty seeks for scientific discourse in returning knowledge to its origins within the foundational knowledge of the body’s intercommunication with the worlds of things. Merleau-Ponty opens up his study *Eye and Mind* (1964) declaring that “science manipulates things and gives up living in them” (9). Similarly, autobiography manipulates time into an extra-human objective entity and disregards how subjective identity is constantly and reciprocally constituted by the world of things in incalculable durations. Just as Proust aims in the *lois* essay to advance an autobiographical model that could accommodate the emergent and instantaneous meanings within moments of sensuous experience, so too Merleau-Ponty seeks to correct the scientific reduction of the subject-self and the object-world to separable categories of being. To that end, Merleau-Ponty espouses a strikingly Proustian law when he theorizes that “if the

qualities [of a perceived object] radiate around them a certain mode of existence, if they have a power to cast a spell...this is because the sentient subject does not posit them as objects, but enters into a sympathetic relation with them, makes them his own and finds in them his momentary *law* [italics mine] (*The Visible and the Invisible* 248).

The I-subject is fundamentally a seer in the quale of any given sensation unable to register distance and difference from the seen. In the ecstatic instant of sensation, the configuration of time and reflection have not yet intruded on the seer's consciousness to impose a reflective distancing on the body and the phenomenal event "outside." This primal extemporal level is what Merleau-Ponty names an innate "openness upon the world," a primordial daily moment-to-moment condition of being within which the seeing subject is a pre-self amalgamated by sense data he or she encounters. The human subject is a collaborative and unceasing happening before the mind ever comes to conceive itself as a thing separate from outside things, a separation that metaphysics and science adopt not only to separate a perception from the phenomenal world but the mind from the body, alienating the body from the thought. To illustrate this forgotten ecstatic ontology, Merleau-Ponty tests the simplest of declarations about experience such as, "I see the blue sky," noting how the necessary withdrawal from sense phenomenon and the practical declaration of difference (I/blue/sky) falsifies the immediate nature of the experience in order to retain it as a closed event. Essentially the statement "I see the blue sky," turns an ecstatic fact into a narrated one as soon as

the seeing and thinking *I* steps back from its sensation. As soon as the *I* avows the action, through the verb “see,” the event is already a completion and consequence named, “blue.” Thought and language convert experience from a primal simultaneity between the individual body and the palpable sky into a state of meaningful and practical difference. Despite this reflective turn and the constant grounding of an event within time, the foundational co-existence between *I* and *not-I* permeates every moment of existence. It is what Merleau-Ponty, in explicitly Proustian language names, “a communion” between the subject and the world in which “sensation is neither a thinker who takes note of a quality, nor an inert setting which is affected or changed by it, it is a power which is born into, and simultaneously with, a certain existential environment, or is synchronized with [the environment]” (*Perception* 245).

Merleau-Ponty re-explains the sighting of the blue sky as an experience in which, “I abandon myself to it [the blue] and plunge into this mystery.” Paraphrasing Paul Valéry’s poem “Le Cimetière marin,” Merleau-Ponty recasts the experience of the blue sky ecstatically: “it [the sky] thinks itself within me” (*Perception* 249). Addressing the temporal immeasurability of a human sensation, he writes that, “Each sensation, being strictly speaking, the first, last and only one of its kind, is a birth and a death. The subject who experiences it begins and ends with it” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 249-250). He explains both the meaningful ephemerality and ecstatic origins of all perception through references to Proust’s use of Vinteuil’s sonata, the “little phrase,” and its enigmatic association with inner

states such as Swann's inexplicable association of the musical line with his jealousy of Odette.

In referencing Proust's thematic interest in the aesthetics of the ordinary and the interior-exterior overlap of apprehension, Merleau-Ponty describes this human capacity to sustain and know such invisible correspondences between oneself and that which is outside oneself as a knowledge formed within the *aesthesiological body* a useful construct to name the pre-reflective self that is recovered in works around autobiographical ecstasy:

One can say that we perceive the things themselves, that we are the world that thinks itself—or that the world is at the heart of our flesh...there is a ramification of my body and a ramification of the world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside, between my inside and its outside the flesh of the world is...a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself...when starting from the body, I ask myself how it makes itself a seer...[within] the aesthesiological body, everything comes to pass as though the visible body remained incomplete, gaping open; as though the physiology of vision did not succeed in closing the nervous functioning in upon itself, since the movements of fixation, of convergence, are suspended upon the advent to the body of the visible world for which they were supposed to furnish the explanation (*Invisible* 146-47).

This *aesthesiological body* is a philosophical metaphor to name the disremembered strata of lived identity that is always mutable due to the sensations of lived materiality. It is this autobiographical dimension of sensation as an advent that these authors seek to sustain against how experience is turned into an event by the closed judgments of perception and the confidence of memory. As in the encounter of Proust's poet and the blossoming tree, the ecstatic autobiographer acknowledges a sudden otherness to his being, knowing himself as an

aesthesiological body rather than a representable self. He writes autobiographically to recover the abstruse formations and reformations of who she or he is and does so by foregrounding the resonating and open-ended properties of sensation and cognition. The text records, recovers and extends the reciprocal intercourse between self and world that memory retained only as aberrant. The *aesthesiological body* is an immeasurable locus of contact between inside and outside, rather than a particular facet of the physical body or an abstract interiority. The very tools of artistic representation, such as words and painting, contain within them these pre-rational articulations of the aesthesiological body's apprehensions even when language or expression seems to conform to causality and representation in its usual senses. The aesthesiological plane recovered within these autobiographies is an "opening that cannot again be closed" turned into literary language wherein the lived "movement, touch, vision, apply themselves to the other and to themselves [and] return to their source and, in patient and silent labor of desire, [to] begin the paradox of expression" (*Invisible* 144, 151).

Turning from a philosophical explication of art, the question that arises is exactly how does such an aesthesiological form of being manifest itself within a prose autobiography? Expanding the notion of the self to take in how perception itself constitutes identity, literary critic Leo Bersani builds on phenomenology. Questioning the pathologizing diction of psychoanalysis which categorizes the human subject's ways of relating to the world as either in balance or imbalance through such terms as "identification, projection and introjection," Bersani seeks a

new critical perspective on what he calls “the human subject’s aptitude for exceeding its own subjectivity” that might address such states in terms that are not negative reductions (*Essays* 139). To do so, he proposes an affirmative definition of the self that answers the psychoanalytical reduction of disproportionate states of the self as “adaptive failures” with respect to the world. Echoing Merleau-Ponty’s critique of science, Bersani negates a flawed worldview that falsely “assumes [that there is] a secure and fundamentally antagonistic distinction between subject and object” (*Essays* 142). The self is not secure, static and consistent before the world. Although the subject has been conceived of as an entity that stands at a remove before the world’s objects and vice versa, the dynamic contact between subject-object can be articulated and interpreted as mutually constitutive rather than destructively negating even in cases of apparent opposition.

To inaugurate this new conception of what a non-pathologically described ecstatic individuality might be, Bersani examines the corporeal and visionary fantasies of the narrator of Pierre Michon’s novel *La Grande Beaune* (2006). He proposes that the narrator’s sexual fantasies and sometimes sado-masochistic visions about other people and about talismanic objects and animals in the rural village of Castlenau represent dimensions of an unusual selfhood more opened upon the world and protean than Freudian or Lacanian reductions could permit. Without using the descriptor *ecstatic*, Bersani reinterprets the narrator’s projective presence in the world as precisely that when he speaks of how the narrator’s “interiority, far from fashioning the world into the structure of a psychic obsession, is actually

produced by the world. The narrator's subjectivity is an effect of external reality" (*Essays* 145). Through his explication of Michon's narrator, Bersani reads the creative misidentifications and erotic misrecognitions of objects and others as a distillation of how human selfhood is constantly transformed by spatial figurations wherein "the subject's presence [is] everywhere, not as an invasive projection or incorporation designed to eliminate otherness, but rather as an ontological truth about both the absolute distinctness and the innumerable similitudes that at once guarantee the objective reality of the world and the connectedness between the world and the subject" (*Essays* 146-147). Bersani settles on the notion of "an aesthetic subject" as that facet of individuality that "eschews psychologically motivated communication and replaces such communication with families of form" (*Essays* 146-147).

The nearly synonymous redefinitions of the individual as an *aesthesiological body* or an *aesthetic subject* require a shift from thinking of the self *as such* to conceiving it as a presence in motion. Being in the world means being made and remade by that world: autobiographical presence emerges as integral within the forms of the concrete world more than in *I* alone. The autobiographical works examined here seek to comprehend and to communicate the experiences of the Bersanian aesthetic subject, recovering from the lived past those exceptional instants in which personality was formed or re-formed, or shaped and misshaped, by its being the world of *not-I* and in communicating that awareness, even as both the living subject and the objects of the world retain their true distinctiveness.

Bersani writes of this mutual subject-object making and remaking as justified by the fact that, “there is neither a subject-object dualism nor a fusion of subject and object; there is rather a kind of looping movement between the two. The world finds itself in the subject and the subject finds itself in the world. What the world finds in the subject, in addition to physical correspondences, is a certain activity of consciousness, which partially reinvents the world as it repeats it” (*Essays* 147).

The reinvention and repetition of the world happens in the site of autobiography. Once again, Proust’s autobiographical work on childhood provides useful models for how such an aesthetic subjectivity, which Bersani applies to a fiction, can materialize in autobiography and how that presence differs from the ordinary self of traditional autobiography. In a personal essay entitled “Épines Blanches, Épines Roses,” (1912) published in *Figaro* just ahead of the first volume of *Recherche*, Proust recaptures the fluidity between his youthful self and the physical world that seems lost to adult memory.² In doing so his personal essay exemplifies this concept of an aesthetic subject that co-exists within the established aging self, yet also defies, or steps *outside*, the limits of that self. From the adult perspective, Proust records the surprising, early blooming of the hawthorn trees in February, and then he describes his first sightings of those flowers: “Ajourd’hui encore je retrouve pour les regarder, l’âge et le coeur que j’avais quand je les vis pour la première fois” (*Chroniques* 92) [Today when I look at the hawthorns, I feel as I did

² *Figaro’s* editors added an additional title without Proust’s consent, “Au Seuil du Printemps”(see Proust’s letter from May 1912 to Jean-Louis Vaudoyer) The essay consists of faithful composites of scenes as they appear in *Du côté de chez Swann* published the next year. cf Pléiade’s *Recherche I* 112-113 & 136-138 and Combray *Esquisse LXIII & LXIV* 851-871.

the first day I saw them]. The essay then draws sharp attention to the differences in temporal and spatial perspectives between his younger self and his parents.

Pleasurably disoriented by the father's circuitous and unexpected route back home, the younger Proust finds that, off of the familiar path, the randomness of the route represses sequence and incites in him an awareness of moments in their separateness from narrative time. The sensations and observations of the physical world alter his sense of the line between the real and the unreal, and, in doing so, these experiences show his body to be the site where the fixed objects of the world are newly constituted. The light on the telegraph office transforms its facade into a classical edifice, the smell of the lime trees seems to infuse itself within him and inebriate him, and he hears an intensifying and fading music through the silence:

Sur le silence qui n'en absorbait rien, se détachaient par moments, sans bavure, des bruits qui venaient des très loin, imperceptibles mais détaillées avec un tel 'fini' qu'ils semblaient ne devoir cet effet de lointain qu'à leur *pianissimo*: -- comme ces morceaux en sourdine, si bien exécutés par l'orchestre du Conservatoire, que, sans en perdre cependant une note, on croyait les entendre bien loin de la salle de concert, et que les vieux abonnés, ravis, tendaient l'oreille comme s'ils avaient écouté les progrès lointains d'une armée marche qui n'aurait pas encore tourné la rue de Trévisé (*Chroniques* 94).

There was nothing to the silence, yet sound punctuated the air in instants, perfectly and clearly, coming from far off, barely audible, yet each detail so sharp and so finished, as if from the far-off effects of their *pianissimo* -- like those muted passages played so well by the Conservatory's orchestra, without a single note being lost, and which, as the audience listens, seem to be coming from far beyond the concert hall, and the aged subscribers, ravished by the notes, strain to hear it, as though what they are listening to is a parade which has not turned the corner of Rue Trévisé .

The vanishing yet still-audible music is set between simultaneous visual and

olfactory perceptions, all of which restore, autobiographically, what memory and familiarity tend to lose: both the alterations in what an object is when encountered by a subject who is correspondingly unsure about his place in the world, and, within that concentration, the passing away of the present moment within a series of *Nows* in which past, present and future simultaneously evaporate. The nearby parade-like music is compared to an orchestra's interludes and his own aural apprehension is compared to concert goers who hear a performance from outside the hall. Within the narrator's consciousness, the muted notes are barely heard and the music sounds most audibly at the point at which it seems passing from earshot to die off, sounding as if they come not from out there but *within*. In tracing that opacity, the text expresses a past solidarity between the boy and the world within the palpations of an otherwise negligible event. Though the subject, Marcel, and the sensed objects do not totally merge, within the moments of the walk, there is no appreciable autobiographical space created between the hearer and the heard, the seer and the seen. Yet even in the metamorphic revisions of one by the other, both the boy and the world retain their integral difference. The distant music is neither an hallucination of the young boy nor a verifiable actuality wholly out there in the world. Instead of a personal story around events that could create a logical chain of causes and effects grounded in subject-object differentiation, Proust's essay puts forth, just as his forthcoming novel was about to, a young Marcel as an *aesthesiological body* and an *aesthetic subject*, an inside that is constantly outside, and an outside constantly inside, within a style of language attuned to how despite

the self-stabilization of memory, sense experience proves that identity at every moment of being exceeds the enclosed limits of categories and names.

Within the account of the diverse walk, the narrator knows himself as kinesthetic mutability. Time's passage is attenuated by the olfactory permutations of lime trees, the visual strangeness of falling light on the post office, and in the distant yet nearby parade-like music with its invisible sources and equally incomprehensible meanings arising within its notes. All of these spontaneous impressions dislodge a stable self from the narrative thread to refocus the maximum attention on the invisible or hermetic content of the visible and palpable sense objects of that experiential past. The world's opaque allure corresponds to something correspondingly inscrutable within himself, to who "he" is within the instantaneity of his body before its objects, quite apart from a chronological account of the actions within the life he lived. Forgoing introspective analysis of who he "is" in relation to all that has come before in his life, or all that was to come, Proust reconstitutes the autobiographical Marcel by exploiting the naïve immersion of the child to reveal a forgotten ecstatic strata of the self, where the textures and appearances of the world constructs and redesigns *I* at the same time that the *I* constructs and redesigns it. The intrusive voice of Proust's father displaces the narrator's reveries with his question, "Où sommes nous?" a question which in this context amounts to an epistemological cue for the young boy to revert to a style of being that objectifies or depersonalizes time, to know himself as an ordinary subject in a particular time and place. The intervention of double layered habit--his

parents' lively voices and the familiar sight of their approaching house--transforms Marcel, represses Marcel-as-*aesthetic subject* by reminding him of his fixed personal or historical persona, and, correspondingly, the essay abandons its lyrical scattering of the boy's presence within sensory objects for a more straightforward approach: "l'Habitude venait de me prendre dans ses bras et me portait jusqu'à mon lit comme un petit enfant" (*Chroniques* 95).

Throughout the essay, Proust focuses frequently on these tensions between the two often incompatible means for interpreting subjectivity. On the one hand is the daily pace arranged by his parent's well-developed structuring of daily life—lunch dates, particular routes towards home, appointments with photographers, country-city arrivals and returns. Against this official or objective time, the text attends to arbitrary sensuous encounters that define childhood time differently. Because these transports are solitary interludes in childhood, they would seem to be, especially in the self-dramatizing context of a traditional autobiography, non-events. Yet the action takes place in the ecstasies of a perceptive body rather than in the busyness of the visible self. Proust refuses to separate the things of the world fully from the estimation of personal identity. Marcel wanders from an outdoor picnic to be captivated by a bower of hawthorn trees, within which, as in the double cherry tree's revelation of mysterious *lois*, the boy's interiority emanates from and periodically merges with the constantly arriving datum of a sensuous exteriority. The hawthorn trees conversely expand his consciousness, and that intermingling becomes the pivotal concern of the autobiographical essay:

Mais j'avais beau rester devant les aubépines à respirer, à porter devant ma pensée, qui ne savait ce qu'elle devait en faire, à perdre, à retrouver leur invisible et fixe odeur à m'unir au rythme qui jetait leurs fleurs, ici et là, avec une allégresse juvénile et à des intervalles inattendus comme certains intervalles musicaux, elles m'offraient indéfiniment le même charme avec une profusion inépuisable, mais sans me le laisser approfondir davantage que ces mélodies qu'on rejoue cent fois de suite sans descendre plus avant dans leur secret (*Chroniques* 96).

Though I stood before the hawthorn trees, breathing in their scent, I struggled to concentrate, not knowing what to make of the experience, losing and recovering their invisible yet unrelenting scent, trying to make myself one with the rhythm of their branches which swayed here and there as unexpectedly as certain musical intervals, producing within me an inexhaustible profusion of those same charms. But I could no more fathom their meanings than I could those melodies one hears a hundred times without ever unlocking their secret.

Like the untraceable source of music's audibility earlier in the essay, the trees' latencies--*une profusion inépuisable*--exist upon the surface even as those communications defy the subject's full comprehension. That natural defiance permits the autobiographer to recognize the self's own otherness to itself. As the young boy grapples with the object's tangible imperviousness, he apprehends his own incompleteness as a self and the language of the autobiography attends to those deficits. The absence of an articulable meaning suspends the progress of the boy's time and the associative method revives experience as an unrepeatable instant, a moment that the narrator realizes (*now*) that, as a boy, he was once captivated (*then*) by the hawthorn trees because he had intuited in the object's baffling effect on him that it could never be wholly integrated into experiential events or relations before or after this particular spring day before these particular trees. In writing about these arbitrary childhood encounters as an adult, Proust

emphasizes not their transparent and finished status as past but their obscure, open-ended resonances that cannot be forgotten but which have not ever been integrated into memory's narrative around his past. Because memory relies on a stasis and singular self-presence, only writing can release the full force and meanings. In writing the ecstasy, that maximum intensity is communicated. The text enacts a lived symbiosis with an object in the world, what Bersani names the "non-appropriative" "solidarity" between the living person and the confounding otherness of that which the autobiographer encounters in the given world.

Within the final passages in the essay about springtime, the family's calendar year reclaims Marcel to history and custom. Through the pathos of the unwanted return to Paris, Proust highlights how the essay itself had temporarily rescued Marcel as an aesthetic subject from a personal memory that barely retains the facts of the ecstatic condition. For the duration of the work's moments, a past self is rejuvenated by, synchronized with and even reconstituted within agitated perceptions of the physical world. Those once forgotten stages of perceptions are actualized into concentric patterns of lyrical exposition which paradigmatically convey how exceptional moments consume the past, present and future within the fictive Marcel's ongoing series of perceptual *Nows* from Proust's real past. The author is not drawn to past events and past appearances as such but only because he finds in them an ecstatic awareness of self and of the concrete world by a form of writing that describes the invisible properties within the visible and in the quales, annunciations and advents of exterior objects. Proust's personal meditation

concludes with the image of the younger Proust fleeing from his appointment with a family photographer and escaping to the field of hawthorn trees, clinging to a tree trunk, and the abrupt poignancy is a gently ironic statement by its author about how difficult it was in the lived life to maintain the ecstatic properties proper to autobiographical self-knowledge. Marcel, the aesthetic subject, clings to the trees, the objects within which he had fleetingly found an identity of himself as another. The socially circumscribed boy must yield to the enclosures of that *I* who is about to return to the city with his parents.

Childhood features so prominently in these autobiographies not because authors like Pater, Proust or Joyce valorize childhood as an idyllic period.³ The autobiographical strategy of invoking the unscripted spatial daily realities of childhood permits the author to maintain that ecstatic feature in the literary reenactments of his more mature years. “The history of childhood is not psychically dated,” Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Reverie*, “dates are put back in afterwards; they come from other people, from elsewhere, from another time than the time lived” (106). The state of being either ignorant about or indifferent to chronology is most abiding in childhood, before the practices and repetitions of memory, routine and socio-cultural engagement with the world of other people and

³ Baudelaire explicates how childhood stances toward the real provide valuable *styles* of being and of writing when he claims “genius is nothing more nor less than *childhood recovered* at will—a childhood now equipped for self-expression with manhood’s capacities and a power of analysis which enables it to order the mass of raw material which it has involuntarily accumulated. It is by this deep and joyful curiosity that we may explain the fixed and animally ecstatic gaze of a child confronted by a landscape, gilding, colours, shimmering stuffs, or the magic of physical beauty assisted by cosmetic art. *The Painter of Modern Life*. trans. Jonathan Payne (Da Capo: New York, 1964), p.8.

institutions solidify a personality. As Pater puts it in *Studies in the Renaissance*, the maturation seals the subject off from moments of being in the “thick walls of personality.” In the authorial need for a form of autobiographical discourse and a way of temporizing reality that can articulate the ecstatic dimension of being, the childhood sense of eternity or non-time becomes the quintessential condition of the entire represented life.

In Walter Pater’s “The Child in the House” the transformations of the autobiographical and solitary Florian by his timeless, unconstrained contacts with the physical environment of the house of his childhood are so inexorable that the story’s title could be reversed to “the house in the child,” to denote, as the story does, that the house and its myriad architectural and tactile features are “in” the child who is now the adult narrator. Proust’s *Figaro* essay demonstrates how the discontinuous spatial dimensions of childhood make noticeable two distinct realms of time: the lyricism of the seemingly passive aesthetic subject in the figure of the awe-struck wandering child and the linearity and narrative sequence of active selfhood, embodied by the narrator’s parents. In the *Recherche*, Marcel’s communion with the hawthorns is a far more convoluted and dilated presentation of experience, appearing as it does within a dense series of similarly rhapsodic occurrences, culminating with Marcel’s first face-to-face encounter with Gilberte. In the juxtaposed sightings of the hawthorns and then of Gilberte, the work rearranges who Marcel is based on how the autobiographical passages trace those encounters. Each of the variations in immediate sensation and resultant perceptions have the

effect of being secularized annunciations that convey further sensory details which themselves herald further interlacing between seer and seen. Proust's secular appropriation of religious tropes, especially the annunciation and holy communion, provide the autobiographical novel with generative metaphors for the interplay between the narrator's interiority and his exteriority, underscored by numerous allusions to sacramental spaces: the apse of the Catholic church, May as the month of Mary, the ekiphraasis about flowers resembling Communion gowns.

Tout à coup, je m'arrêtai, je ne pus plus bouger, comme il arrive quand une vision ne s'adresse pas seulement à nos regards, mais requiert des perceptions plus profondes et dispose de notre être tout entier. Une fillette d'un blond roux qui avait l'air de rentrer de promenade et tenait à la main une bêche de jardinage, nous regardait, levant son visage semé de taches roses. Ses yeux noirs brillaient et comme je ne savais pas alors, ni ne l'ai appris depuis, réduire en ses éléments objectifs une impression forte, comme je n'avais pas, ainsi qu'on dit, assez «d'esprit d'observation» pour dégager la notion de leur couleur, pendant longtemps, chaque fois que je repensai à elle, le souvenir de leur éclat se présentait aussitôt à moi comme celui d'un vif azur, puisqu'elle était blonde: de sorte que, peut-être si elle n'avait pas eu des yeux aussi noirs,— ce qui frappait tant la première fois qu'on la voyait — je n'aurais pas été, comme je le fus, plus particulièrement amoureux, en elle, de ses yeux bleus. (*Recherche I*: 139).

Suddenly I stood still, unable to move, as happens when something appears that requires not only our eyes to take it in, but involves a deeper kind of perception and takes possession of the whole of our being. A little girl, with fair, reddish hair, who appeared to be returning from a walk, and held a trowel in her hand, was looking at us, raising towards us a face powdered with pinkish freckles. Her black eyes gleamed, and as I did not at that time know, and indeed have never since learned how to reduce to its objective elements any strong impression, since I had not, as they say, enough 'power of observation' to isolate the sense of their colour, for a long time afterwards, whenever I thought of her, the memory of those bright eyes would at once present itself to me as a vivid azure, since her complexion was fair; so much so that, perhaps, if her eyes had not been quite so black — which was what struck one most forcibly on first meeting her — I should not have been, as I was, especially enamoured of their imagined blue (*Swann's Way* 197).

Marcel is represented as an aesthetic subject affirmed in the deeper kind of perception that defies memory's reliance on sequence and narrative ordering of actions in their completed state. The professed experiential lack in the powers of observation inserts itself into the account as an ironic repudiation of mimetic autobiographical realism, those forms of literary representation of the real that suppresses the role of the observer in creating the observed. The misrecognition of the eye color testifies to the primacy of sensation. Everyday empiricism, nominative and categorical repetitions and constantly rehearsed memories filter such ecstatic facts from a given encounter and deprive the subject of that first ontological involvement in constituting that which he sees. The autobiography recovers that inter-subjective proximity through a discourse around how perception precedes the self's reflection on it, and, in that re-created contiguity, the autobiographical figure retraces the suspension of time and detects the invisibly real within the visibly real, the fact of Gilberte's azure and blue eyes even within the fact of their blackness, and it is the effect of the blackness of Gilberte's eyes on his cognition that induces the narrator's misapprehension. In the ecstatic figurations of the lived life, the Marcel becomes who he is within how he sees Gilberte and in that seeing exceeds who he was in the previous moment. In turn Gilberte is foregrounded as an object whose identity is inseparable from how she is created within the alert gaze of the narrator. In recovering the phenomenological plane of displaced, ecstatic identity, Marcel is taken up by Gilberte and in his apprehension of her eyes Marcel remakes Gilberte. Throughout the dilated creative collaboration between subject and object, each

retains their respective distinctiveness; the seeing subject remains Marcel; the seen object remains Gilberte. These appearances within “Combray” mark Marcel as an intersection rather than as a culmination, and the narrator and his younger self personify Merleau-Ponty’s foundational crisscrossing, *recroisement*, between the inside and the outside.

These facts of the aesthetic subject’s recovered life require unsettling of normal time that permit the displacement of the autobiographical presence beyond its stable configuration. In “Combray,” the mother’s missing good-night kiss, the suspension of a nightly habit, exacerbates the displacements between the narrator and the world. The kiss symbolizes a reassuring affirmation of being in a fixed time and space. It is a ritualized symbol of chronological ordering, sustaining Marcel as a protected son within a familial structure. As a benediction that marks the transition from day to night, waking to sleep, the ritual temporizes him. In its absence, and in Marcel’s insistence on its duplication even after the receipt of the kiss, experience becomes the agitations of sleeplessness and reveries. The expectation of the mother’s kiss is also configured as a heightened awareness about the obscure fact that time always dissolves the past, present and future within any given *Now*. As he awaits his mother’s arrival for the kiss, the expectant joy that she will be coming is a simultaneous mourning for her eventual absence from his room, so that the imminent moment passes from narrative logic into the real manner in which an experiential *Now* always dissolves the three categories of time, a truth repeatedly invoked by the aesthetic subject, Marcel:

Ce bonsoir durait si peu de temps, elle redescendait si vite, que le moment où je l'entendais monter, puis où passait dans le couloir à double porte le bruit léger de sa robe de jardin en mousseline bleue, à laquelle pendaient de petits cordons de paille tressée, était pour moi un moment douloureux. Il annonçait celui qui allait le suivre, où elle m'aurait quitté, où elle serait redescendue (*Recherche* 13).

This good night lasted for so short a time, she went downstairs again so soon, that the moment in which I heard her climb the stairs, and then caught the sound of tassels of plaited straw, rustling along the double-doored corridor, was for me a moment of the utmost pain; for it heralded the moment which was to follow it, when she would have left me and gone downstairs again (*Swann's Way* 15).

Within her arrival Marcel foresees how his mother would return downstairs after kissing him, and the evaporation of time past and time future within a moment is realized. This meditation evokes what memory and sequential narration censors and suppresses an elicitation especially palpable within autobiographically prolonged subject-object encounters with the other, whether in the form of a mother's corporal presence in his room, or in the chromatic patterns of Golo in the bedroom's lamp. In the account of how Marcel's mother reads from George Sand, the narrator as an aesthetic subject is drawn less to the representational content of the recited texts and their narrative ordering of a distant reality and distant objects, than he is to the intimate other-ness of the immediately uttered name *Champi*, to a bafflement at the amorous fluctuations within characters' lives due the his mother's omission of the episodic love scenes, and to the aural properties of his mother's cadence that captures a living texture within the written words, a warmth that seems to pre-exist and eclipse the symbolic and mimetic functions of the enunciated words from the Sand novel. No sooner has the sentence of George Sand which his

mother is reading started then it elides into the coming sentence, expressing,

la mélancolie qu'il y a dans la tendresse, dirigeait la phrase qui finissait vers celle qui allait commencer, tantôt pressant, tantôt ralentissant la marche des syllabes pour les faire entrer, quoique leurs quantités fussent différentes, dans un rythme uniforme, elle insufflait à cette prose si commune une sorte de vie sentimentale et continue (*Recherche* I: 42).

all the melancholy to be found in love, guiding the sentence that was drawing to a close towards the one that was about to begin, now hastening, now slackening the pace of the syllables so as to bring them, despite their differences of quantity, into a uniform rhythm, and breathing into this quite ordinary prose a kind of emotional life and continuity (*Swann's Way* 56)

Marcel as the aesthetic subject whose identity is constructed by the phenomenal world that he reciprocally creates is severely foregrounded in the competing autobiographical texts about the Martinville steeples. An ecstatic Marcel is contrasted with a static Marcel. This latter manifestation of normal awareness is depicted in how Marcel writes a clear-cut sequential description about the steeples, a juvenilia inserted into the larger narrative by Proust to set up an implicit contrast between *Recherche's* ambulatory version of the sighting of the steeples. The inserted account that he writes delineates a safe distance between the seer and the seen and accords with a normal progression of narrative sequence and an everyday stasis of self within the physical world. But viewed against the ecstatic reality of the lived interchange between Marcel and the steeples traced by the larger narrative, Marcel's ironic self-congratulation at the close of the sketch underscores a difference between a form of writing that simply mirrors the world and a form which affirms the world in a complicated exchange with the aesthesiological self. The static iteration of Marcel's presence relative to the steeples is followed by a

second passage that records the more prevalent ecstatic situation of Marcel relative to the steeples:

Seuls, s'élevant du niveau de la plaine et comme perdus en rase campagne, montaient vers le ciel les deux clochers de Martinville. Bientôt nous en vîmes trois: venant se placer en face d'eux par une volte hardie, un clocher retardataire, celui de Vieuxvicq, les avait rejoints. Les minutes passaient, nous allions vite et pourtant les trois clochers étaient toujours au loin devant nous, comme trois oiseaux posés sur la plaine, immobiles et qu'on distingue au soleil. Puis le clocher de Vieuxvicq s'écarta, prit ses distances, et les clochers de Martinville restèrent seuls, éclairés par la lumière du couchant.... Nous avons été si longs à nous rapprocher d'eux, que je pensais au temps qu'il faudrait encore pour les atteindre quand, tout d'un coup, la voiture ayant tourné, elle nous déposa à leurs pieds; et ils s'étaient jetés si rudement au-devant d'elle, qu'on n'eut que le temps d'arrêter pour ne pas se heurter au porche. Nous poursuivîmes notre route (*Recherche I* : 179)

Alone, rising from the level of the plain, and seemingly lost in that expanse of open country, climbed to the sky the twin steeples of Martinville. Presently we saw three: springing into position confronting them by a daring volt, a third, a dilatory steeple, that of Vieuxvicq, was come to join them. The minutes passed, we were moving rapidly, and yet the three steeples were always a long way ahead of us... Then the steeple of Vieuxvicq withdrew, took its proper distance, and the steeples of Martinville remained alone, gilded by the light of the setting sun,... We had been so long in approaching them that I was thinking of the time that must still elapse before we could reach them when, of a sudden, the carriage, having turned a corner, set us down at their feet; and they had flung themselves so abruptly in our path that we had barely time to stop before being dashed against the porch of the church. (*Swann's Way* 255-256)

Je ne savais pas la raison du plaisir que j'avais eu à les apercevoir à l'horizon et l'obligation de chercher à découvrir cette raison me semblait bien pénible; j'avais envie de garder en réserve dans ma tête ces lignes remuantes au soleil et de n'y plus penser maintenant... rejoindre tant d'arbres, de toits, de parfums, de sons, que j'avais distingués des autres à cause de ce plaisir obscur qu'ils m'avaient procuré et que je n'ai jamais approfondi. Bientôt leurs lignes et leurs surfaces ensoleillées, comme si elles avaient été une sorte d'écorce, se déchirèrent, un peu de ce qui m'était caché en elles m'apparut, j'eus une pensée qui n'existait pas pour moi l'instant avant, qui se formula en mots dans ma tête, et le plaisir que m'avait fait tout à l'heure éprouver

leur vue s'en trouva tellement accru que, pris d'une sorte d'ivresse, je ne pus plus penser à autre chose (*Recherche* I: 178)

I did not know what the reason was for the pleasure which I had found in seeing them upon the horizon, and the business of trying to find out what that reason was seemed to me irksome; I wished only to keep in reserve in my brain those converging lines, moving in the sunshine...a great medley of trees and roofs and scents and sounds... without ever exploring them more fully... their outlines and their sunlit surface, as though they had been a sort of rind, were stripped apart; a little of what they had concealed from me became apparent; an idea came into my mind which had not existed for me a moment earlier, framed itself in words in my head; and the pleasure with which the first sight of them, just now, had filled me was so much enhanced that, overpowered by a sort of intoxication, I could no longer think of anything but them (*Swann's Way*, 245-255).

The larger narrative of *Recherche* records how Marcel takes up his existence within an instability and in the volatile and kaleidoscopic sightings of the steeples, as he moves closer and farther from them and they seem to move farther and closer to him. The ever-shifting perspectives exacerbate and accelerate a collaborative flux between subject, Marcel, and object, the steeples, and in detecting the seer in the seen and vice versa the latter passage corrects the less truthful form of writing which turns sensation into settled perception, reflection and memory and in doing so also depersonalizes the experience of time. This autobiographical theme of writing the self from willful memory and then rewriting the self as a decentered aesthetic subject whose being pervades the spatial and physical properties of the world courses throughout the "Combray" section of *Recherche*, as Marcel's aesthetic subjectivity constantly questions and unravels a prior, remembered scene and revise it to rescue nerve-racking subject-object alliances that defined them as a-

temporal moments, such as the apprehension of the swaying poppy flower amidst the cornflowers in Tansonville, recorded in all its dilated pre-narrative brute impact on him, and its chain of associations culminating with the ejaculatory metaphor “La Mer!” The text records a writing and rewriting of the sight, after the rainfall, of the tiled roof of the gardener’s shed reflected in the Mountjouvain pond (“Zut zut zut zut!”), and the writing and rewriting of erogenous scenes near woodland ponds filled by the water of the Vivonne: “j’ai vu d’un bleu clair et cru, tirant sur le violet, d’apparence cloisonnée et de goût japonais” (*Recherche* I: 167) [I have seen in its depths a clear, crude blue verging on violet suggesting a floor of Japanese cloisonné (*Swann’s Way* 239)]. He loses himself in the future writing that he knows will flow from him through the camaraderie of Princesse de Guermites, when, on a future afternoon of fishing, she will teach him the names of the flowers around them as she sympathetically extracts from him the unwritten poems within: “Elle me faisait lui dire le sujet des poèmes que j’avais l’intention de composer...je voulais un jour être un écrivain, il était temps de savoir ce que je comptais écrire” (*Recherche* I: 170) [“She would make me tell her, too, all about the poems that I intended to compose...I wished some day to be a writer [so] it was high time to decide what sort of books I was going to write. (*Swann’s Way* 243)]. The Tansonville walk coincides with a gesture of duplicative internal writing that seeks to shore up the ecstasy in the encounters that the adult narrator knows are perishable in memory. “Combray” thematizes the autobiographical thesis about writing in obedience to the mysterious laws from his earlier essay. The narrator compares Marcel’s heightened awareness

of a particular sense perception in Tansonville and the subsequent ambition to realize it as a writing about it once at home to catching a fish and sustaining the catch's freshness within the creel's damp grass:

Alors je ne m'occupais plus de cette chose inconnue qui s'enveloppait d'une forme ou d'un parfum, bien tranquille puisque je la ramenaï à la maison, protégée par le revêtement d'images sous lesquelles je la trouverais vivante, comme les poissons que les jours où on m'avait laissé aller à la pêche, je rapportais dans mon panier couverts par une couche d'herbe qui préservait leur fraîcheur. (*Recherche I*: 177).

And so I concerned myself no longer with the mystery that lay hidden in a form or a perfume, quite at ease in my mind, since I was taking it home with me, protected by its visible and tangible covering, beneath which I should find it still alive, like the fish which, on days when I had been allowed to go out fishing, I used to carry back in my basket, buried in a couch of grass which kept them cool and fresh (*Swann's Way* 253).

Walking in Tansonville, he hears a birdsong resounding from the height of a tree. As a novelistic feature, the detail punctuates his various thoughts about the absence of Gilberte at the Swann estate and the ongoing interpolations by his father and grandfather. However, as an autobiographical figure, the birdsong typifies what occurs to the experience of time when the aesthetic subject is extant in a natural object that retains its sovereignty as an object even after the narrator has refigured it as an essence of who he is. Halting the progress of the walk, the birdsong produces an instant as a convergence of time past, time present and time future:

Divisant la hauteur d'un arbre incertain, un invisible oiseau s'ingéniait à faire trouver la journée courte, explorait d'une note prolongée la solitude environnante, mais il recevait d'elle une réplique si unanime, un choc en retour si redoublé de silence et d'immobilité qu'on aurait dit qu'il venait d'arrêter pour toujours l'instant qu'il avait cherché à faire passer plus vite (*Recherche I*:135)

Quartering the topmost branches of one of the tall trees, an invisible bird was striving to make the day seem shorter, exploring with a long-drawn note the solitude that pressed it on every side, but it received at once so unanimous an answer, so powerful a repercussion of silence and of immobility, that one felt it had arrested for all eternity the moment which it had been trying to make pass more quickly (*Swann's Way* 193).

The narrator disappears into the minutely documented alterations in his auditory sense; the autobiographical language accrues qualifications and analogies that intensify and prolong that past *Now*, rendering it as a moment *qua* moment. The passage extends the narrator's self-consciousness from recesses *within* to a recess *without*. The clearly audible song by a permanently invisible bird is an archetype of the essential opacity in sensation. The birdsong concretizes and personalizes time and makes apparent the invisible ecstatic force of time. The narrator hears in the birdsong an attempt to hurry the past into the present and rush the present into the future, and that consequent grasp of eternity in personal time—*toujours*--informs *Recherche's* numerous other autobiographical sensuous concentrations on Marcel-as-the world, the world-as-Marcel. In contrasting the continuous or drawn out note with the surrounding silence, the autobiography materializes reversals of subject and object, object as subject, nature-as-music and music-as-nature.

Examining this autobiographical transformation of ordinary time in Proust, Walter Benjamin posits that the novel recalibrates and reawakens this non-time of childhood as a "human eternity" such that "time reveals a new and hitherto unknown kind of eternity to anyone who becomes engrossed in its passing" (*Reflections* 210). As Benjamin explains it, this autobiographical *eternity* which

Proust evokes is a human, “space-bound form” of time, not Platonic or “boundless” infinity (*Reflections* 211). Past moments are resurrected with a “rejuvenating force which is a match for the inexorable process of aging...[as] the past is reflected in the dewy fresh instant [and] a painful shock of rejuvenation pulls it together once more” (*Reflections* 211). In the paradoxical *lois* of an internally and externally sourced identity and in the scene with the parallel narratives about the Martinville steeples, Proust confronts how an engrossment in the passing-away of a moment is complicated by the prevailing construct of time as sequential and measurable, an outlook ossified both by the time-based designs of adulthood and generically by the autobiographical naturalizing of narrative time, summed up in what critic Frank Kermode refers to as the artificiality behind the human expressions of “tick” and “tock,” that preserve the illusion that narrative time exists as an extra-human force (Carr 19). Against this human propensity for humanizing the artifice of sequence, the ecstatic autobiography locates time as immediate and bodily phenomena. The work expresses the spatial reality of the aesthetic subject who finds out who he is within contacts with objects that he is supposedly *not*. Through this shift, the work suspends the fiction of linearity and replaces time as a recognizable sequence with time as an almost unnoticeable but real dissolution of past into present into future as apprehended in sensation.

James Joyce shares Proust’s autobiographical ambition to resurrect authorial presence as an aesthetic subjectivity that had been imperiled or misplaced by the *I* that was consolidated by memory and historical imperatives in the lived life. Like

Proust James Joyce commences *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914) with the biographical habit of the mother's good night kiss to draw attention to the personal nature of time. In an early overlooked abandoned fiction entitled "Portrait of the Artist" (1904), Joyce outlines how time ought to be represented in autobiographical works as a "fluid succession of presents" that can be most obviously retained in depictions of childhood that can apply to the experience of time within adulthood:

The features of infancy are not commonly reproduced in the adolescent portrait for, so capricious are we [adults], that we cannot or will not conceive the past in any other than its iron memorial aspect. Yet the past assuredly implies a fluid succession of presents, the development of an entity of which our actual present state is a phase only. Our world...is, for the most part, estranged from those of its members who seek through some art, by some process of the mind as yet untabulated, to liberate from the personalized lumps of matter that which is their individuating rhythm, the first or formal relation of their parts. But for such as these a portrait is not an identificative paper but the curve of an emotion (*Workshop of Dedalus* 60).

Here Joyce argues for foregrounding past moments spatially. Such an autobiographical text would express the evanescence of daily life discarded by the steadying "caprice" of mature perspectives on the past as a foreclosed domain, and by the "caprice" of received literary forms that rely on the arrangements of experiences as categorically past, present or future. Joyce's figuration of autobiographical time as a "curve of an emotion," emphasizes the kinesthetic *I* that would extend beyond measurable units of time. He emphasizes how in infancy moments are more real than they turn out to be in the temporizing adumbrations of the "iron memorial" self of adulthood. Rather than such an "identificative paper," Joyce suggests a representation of experience within which the subject--the

aesthetic subject--is, like an infant, always unfinished, a "phase only," a presence that knows the world by an "individualizing rhythm," which is the motion of language through which personal identity is both internally and externally created. This autobiographical fluidity derives from the *true* lack of demarcations in time in early childhood against the falsifying approach to time as separate units which Joyce derisively attributes to the chronometric style of biographies or novels. "By thinking about things," Stephen says early in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, "you could understand them" (*Portrait* 37). Yet the knowledge he claims is an a-temporal immediacy not a reflective analysis. That inherently open-ended event is expressed in spontaneous language and not through a retrospectively imposed finality or time-based verdict on what has been seen or encountered in the past. Joyce focuses on the immediate transformations of the subject as he faces a given object. The image of the white badge in a school math tournament doubles as a rose. That doubling is not mere literary extravagance. The badge-rose association is an experiential fact relevant to pre-reflective knowledge more significant than practical differentiations that in this autobiographical context are exposed as mere fictions of adult logic:

Lavender and cream and pink roses were beautiful to think of. Perhaps a wild rose might be like those colours and he remembered the song about the wild rose blossoms on the little green place. But you could not have a green rose. But perhaps somewhere in the world you could (*Portrait* 24).

Joyce's "somewhere in the world" is not the imaginary space of fiction. That realm is the linguistic space within which Stephen articulates the effects of objects on his deepening consciousness. Instead of constructing a self that fits the normal

uses of language and narrative soundness, Joyce's autobiographical discourse adapts itself to the renewed permeability of Stephen as an aesthetic subject never conscious of historical restrictions on who he is. As one perception bleeds into another, the discourse of *Portrait* yields to the law of interchangeability between seeing subject and seen object. Then, the Proust-like correspondences that that awareness brings with it applies to other identities besides the self so the work traces the truthful misrecognitions of reality within pre-rational sensation, and revives the correspondences between like and unlike censored by memory and by its rational deductions about experience. The rose-shaped badges of the math tournament affirm the presence of a rose despite its obvious absence. The natural-seeming properties of the artificial and the artifice of nature show Stephen less as "I" than as a force in an active co-identification with his external stimuli. His apprehension of the fake rose as a real one parallels that of love-struck Swann's vision of Odette's orchids in *Recherche*: "aux catleyas surtout, qui étaient, avec les chrysanthèmes, ses fleurs préférées, parce qu'ils avaient le grand mérite de ne pas ressembler à des fleurs, mais d'être en soie, en satin" (*Du côté de Chez Swann, II*: 218).

The overture of *Portrait* that ushers in what Benjamin calls *human eternity* contains pivotal moments for Stephen's emergence out of historical time and into ecstatic selfhood. In the opening scene Stephen's mother plays piano to replicate a pipe-tune while the boy instinctively and simultaneously dances. Yet the rift between Stephen and others, between Stephen and his materiality develops when

he goes to school even though it is at school that he reasserts that ecstatic condition. Ridiculed by schoolmates, the young Stephen Dedalus, under duress, admits to his peers that he kisses his mother good night: "O, I say, here's a fellow says he kisses his mother every night before he goes to bed" (*Portrait* 12). The narrator then backtracks and renounces the embarrassing confession, and the denial causes more ridicule to be showered on him: "O I say here's a fellow says he doesn't kiss his mother before he goes to bed" (*Portrait* 12). The avowal and disavowal around the good-night kiss culminates with the aquatically named classmate Wells shoving Stephen into a wet ditch that affirms the narrator as an *aesthesiological body*, a presence evoked in the rhetoric of Stephen's thin-skinned co-identification with the elemental world of sense: "the cold slime of the ditch covered his whole body...he felt the cold air of the corridor and the staircase inside his clothes" (*Portrait* 12). Though the trauma produces physiological suffering and Stephen ends up confined to the school infirmary, Joyce, the young author as former medical student, suggests through this primal scene that the child-artist's severe fever coincides with an active and solitary engagement with sensory life, uprooting Stephen from normal time, much like Proust's opening pages in "Combray," rehearse the book's over-arching unraveling of objective time through the reveries of Marcel.

Stephen's fever detaches him from linear, calendrical responsibility. The sojourn in the sick ward unfolds not as an episode within a causal chain of other school events or within a clear-cut chronology about childhood, but as a hyper-extended moment of being: "As he passed the door he remembered with a vague

fear the warm *turfcoloured bogwater*, the warm moist air, the noise of plunges, the *smell of the towels, like medicine*" (*Portrait* 19). In yet another Proustian parallel, Stephen's time in the infirmary culminates with an originating writing gesture as he imagines composing a note to his mother which he pictures giving to the priest to deliver to her: "Dear mother, I am sick. I want to go home. I am in the infirmary. Your fond son, Stephen (*Portrait* 20) ⁴ When the enamored Catholic Stephen is touched by his beloved Eileen's Protestant hands, the moment is a positive inversion of the contact between his skin and the cold slime of the ditch: "Eileen had long white hands. One evening playing tig she had put her hands over his eyes: long and white and then and cold and soft....a cold white thing" (*Portrait* 31). Hands and touching remind Stephen of this constant correlation to exteriority. Interpersonal encounters involve the laying-on of hands, reinforced by how the narrator is frequently required to recite Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, that originating text in Western autobiography which, as Michel Beaujour points out, freed creative autobiographers to abandon thinking about their lives as sequential arrangements and instead to invent, reorder experience in nonlinear terms.⁵

Portrait defines Stephen as a secular saint undergoing mortifications of the flesh. Punished by the prefect, Stephen, "closed his eyes and held out in the air his

⁴ Joyce's seemingly Proustian allusion to the good-night kiss and the note to the mother symbolic phases in ecstatic autobiography is coincidental. Though Joyce's biographers suggest he might have read Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann* appeared in France in November 1913 while Joyce's *Portrait* was serialized in the London-based *Egoist* starting in the February 1914 issue.

⁵ For a thorough examination of the formal and generic developments in poetic autobiography and its origination within memoirists' secular adulterations of Christian spiritual meditations from Augustine and Loyola to Rousseau and Barrès, see "The Evolution of Meditation" pages 37-71 in Beaujour's *The Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait*. Beaujour focuses on French authors but Joyce's coopting of Catholic spiritual mediations is a significant structural component throughout *Portrait*.

trembling hand with his palm upwards. He felt the prefect of studies touch it for a moment at the fingers...the tears scalded his eyes and his limbs quivered" (*Portrait* 44), a moment of interior-exterior contact so cataclysmic that Joyce reiterates it: "he felt the touch of the prefect's fingers as they had steadied his hand" (*Portrait* 45). Called into the rector's office, fearing chastisement over his missing, broken glasses, "Stephen felt the tears wetting his eyes," paralleling his father's tears after the family's Christmas dinner argument over Irish nationalism: "Stephen raising his terrorstricken face, saw that his father's eyes were full of tears" (*Portrait* 34). Later, in an epiphanic moment on a road as he reflects on a romantic novel he feels a painful receptivity, like "fruit divested of her soft ripe peel" (*Portrait* 77). After he sees Emma in the school theater, he replays the moment of interaction between his hand and hers which produces a sublimated masturbatory bliss: the subject is enveloped within another object and yet she retains her difference even as he seems to merge with her: "in the dark and unseen...[Stephen] rested the tips of his fingers of one hand upon the palm of the other hand....But the pressure of her fingers had been lighter and steadier: and suddenly the memory of her touch traversed his brain and body like an invisible *wave*" (*Portrait* 72).

Joyce creates a self-portrait of the artist in which the divide between interiority and exteriority constantly collapses. Reality re-emerges from how the novel cultivates the artist as a collaborative artwork with that which is "outside" him, even in the conditions that seem least conducive to such understanding. Driving the "milkcar" to Carrickmines with his friend Aubrey Mills induces an

eschatological carnality that Stephen both abhors but cannot avoid evoking and attending to through the creation of a language that affirms it: “the filthy cowyard at Stradbrook with its foul green puddles and clots of liquid dung and steaming brantroughs...he could not even look at the milk they yielded” (*Portrait* 55). Such responsiveness to decay is as anxiety-producing as it is alternately comforting and mordant, a corporal knowledge of a shared, universal decrepitude that draws the perceiver into an embittered awareness of his co-extension into a profane otherness, an identification of Stephen and his world that Joyce frequently exploits for comic effect: “That is horse piss and rotted straw, he thought. It is a good odor to breath it will calm my heart” (*Portrait* 76). The aggressive interrogation by Wells which precedes his being shoved into the ditch, like his grade school’s catechism quizzes and, later, the university dialogues about theology, philosophy and art theory, represent public and civic discourses which inculcate Stephen into being a coherent readable persona within the mostly masculine, unchanging prerogatives of institutional religious and intellectual sects of Dublin around 1900. By starting the novel with Stephen’s being thrown into the ditch, Joyce not only situates Stephen as outcast but he places him into an antagonistic relation to the expedient and fictive avowals of an Irish male selfhood, a friction ushered in within the novels’ opening pages in the “yes I kiss my mother/no I don’t kiss my mother” fiasco. The fall is an ascension into a messier, anonymous carnality apart from the ideology of a remembered *I*. Though Proust’s Marcel is bereft by the absence of his mother’s kiss and is upbraided for his neediness by his father and grandmother, Stephen’s

discomforts are compounded by an insecure cultural environment that is itself hardly aware of how its vehement assertions of stable selfhood mask a basic blankness about Irish-ness. In contrast, Joyce, unlike Stephen's overconfident peers at schools, "began with the courageous admission that there is no such thing as Irish identity, ready-made and fixed, to be carried as a passport into eternity" (Kilberd 13).

In the school infirmary, the child cultivates a poetic language to describe and understand how who he is comes to be in a language that attests to interior and exterior exchange: "How beautiful the words were where they said *Bury me in the old churchyard!* A tremor passed over his body...He wanted to cry but not for himself: for the words, so beautiful and sad, like music. The bell! The bell! Farewell! O farewell!" (*Portrait* 21).

Chapter Three: James Joyce, Autobiographer as Ecstatic Child

I: *Stephen Dedalus, Exceptional Dubliner*

The questions about the genre of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and the degree to which Joyce's work justifies being read as an autobiographical text remain largely unsettled.⁶ Hugh Kenner, one of the earliest and most influential of Joyce scholars, confronts Joyce's relationship to autobiography directly by refuting the interpretation of *Portrait* as corresponding to an actual Joyce. Although Kenner sides with the reading of *Portrait* as an integral fiction, his distancing of Joyce from autobiographical intentions contains important qualifications. His verdict on the non-equivalency between the lived life (James Joyce) and Joyce's literary figures (Gabriel Conroy, Stephen Dedalus, Leopold Bloom) does not entirely rule out reading Joyce's *Portrait* in autobiographical terms. As Kenner himself points out, Joyce views life and art as nearly synonymous:

Joyce was...so nearly the Mr. Duffy of "A Painful Case" and...Gabriel Conroy with his pince-nez and his wife from the west country, and nearly Bloom...that he might nearly have become any one of them. It is only by a long series of small accidents that anyone becomes what he does become,

⁶ One of the most recent formulations of the debate about *Portrait's* problematic generic status is put forth by Max Saunter in *Self-Impression* (Oxford University Press, 2011) that lays out autofictional possibilities Joyce might have considered: *Portrait* as a transparent autobiography structured as a novel in which the real Joyce is taken to be the narrator, the text as a fake memoir about an imaginary person in which the narrator is the real Joyce, or as a fake memoir about an imaginary person in which the narrator is equally fictive. See also Michael Kenneally "Joyce, O'Casey and the Genre of Autobiography" in *James Joyce and his Contemporaries*. Ben-Merre, Diana A. and Maureen Murphy (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1989).

and though he can only be what he is, he can look back along the way he has come at branching points now cancelled. If the differences between Stephen and Joyce are small, all differences are small, and it is always small differences that are decisive. One has only to refuse a casual opportunity and the curve of one's life commences a long slow bending away from what it would have been. Such an argument is...obvious to a man brought up like Joyce in a climate of clerical exhortation...hearing human hundreds of homilies, ruminations, admonitions, declaring how the little sins prepare the habit great sins will later gratify, or how the soul's destiny is prepared in early youth, so that there is nothing that does not matter. (Kenner 273).

Though Kenner stresses that Joyce cloaks who he *could have become* within his fictional alter-egos, this interpretative paradigm does not foreclose a reading of the *Portrait* as autobiographical. In fact, his Aristotelian perspective suggests that Joyce deliberately wrote his fictions in order to experiment with self-portraits any one of which could conceivably represent a reasonable facsimile of who he was at a given turning point. Kenner's determinism that one "can only be what he is" overlooks the open-ended form of being that informs Joyce's *Portrait*. Eschewing chronology and mimetic narration, the work shows Stephen is a motion of disconnected and discontinuous self-creating acts of writing. In those linguistic acts, he *is*. Even when alluded to or only implied within its scenes, language creation and writing and re-writing occupies all of Stephen's time, setting the novel apart from the non-literary activity of Joyce's *Dubliners*. In contrast to the identities in those stories, *Portrait* shows there is a creative epistemology of selfhood being exemplified and mastered by the protagonist mainly through imminences rather than facts. In *Portrait*, character is inseparable from the language which Joyce deploys to animate Stephen as a presence. This ontological stature for language

differs markedly from the representational discourse of *Dubliners*. In “A Painful Case,” the story’s meanings hinge on its reader distinguishing the descriptive backdrops of the story’s material world from the tragic figure of Duffy. By contrast, there is no Stephen outside the deployment of words in *Portrait*. If character is fate then Stephen’s fate would seem to be static in the extreme, for his only action seems to be a constant engagement with words that shape and reshape who he is. Yet that engagement is kinetic because who he is emerges strictly from the formulations of language. Linguistic invention recuses him from the consolidated fates of Joyce’s other characters whose access to language is far more limited than is the narratorial voice that relates their stories to the reader. Implicitly rivaled by the eloquence and mastery of language in the narrating third-person voice of *Dubliners*, the characters’ lives and self-reflective uses of language are depicted as confined within temporal and spatial realities that they did not create and within which they cannot cope. Unlike Joyce’s other characters, Stephen’s daily realities, his time and his space, are inseparable from the language he uses to know that time and space, and from his varying degrees of acceptance or rejection of prearranged language systems which he is offered or coerced into adopting.

Unlike *Dubliners*’ naturalistic accounts of lives that draw on characters’ memories in relation to their present and future, *Portrait* presents a character vulnerable to imminences and accidents from outside that he linguistically incorporates into who he is at any given instant of their happening, so that Stephen’s time unfolds in *Portrait* as a constantly renewed present. As Proust does for Marcel

in *Recherche*, so in *Portrait*, Stephen's memories and expectations are so constantly altered by the happenstance of each autobiographical *Now*, that the past and future as fixed points in time disappear, and an elliptical presentation of time, through constantly invented metaphors, specific analogies, original neologisms and the recitation of poems recover an ongoing displacement of Stephen outside any fully coalesced self-awareness.

This chapter's autobiographical approach toward Joyce's *Portrait*, therefore, derives from that very overlap between life and language exemplified in Stephen Dedalus' concentration on the contact with his surroundings, those spatial relations that find their actualization in writing itself and which constitute the overriding predicament of the entire novel. Events preserve their immanent condition because the language Joyce attributes to his narrator speaks neither wholly to subject-self nor entirely to the object-other but to their convergences in images that, taken together, form a collage-like series of portraits.

The work's prevailing and unifying pressure develops from how normalizing familial, clerical, civic, academic categories and definitions of the self, those "exhortations and admonitions" referenced by Kenner, coerce Stephen to portray himself within pre-established configurations of time, as a son, as a student, as a seminarian or as a medical student. Each rejected alternative language carries with it autobiographical choices that could lend him a consistent and transparent identity. As he ages, Stephen contends with these competing autobiographical options while simultaneously trying to preserve the spontaneous and carnal poetics

of his younger stages of life. Joyce presents a succession of Stephens, portraits which are more variable and multiple than the titular duration and wholeness suggested by the phrase *young man*. Stephen *Dedalus*, the labyrinth builder and artisan-as-innovator, reconstitutes lived time not as coherently linked units or as stored memories but as a sensory and cognitive flux manifest in language, and a constancy of being other than who others think he is within a private language.

Joyce's text denies the reader an overarching sense of how much time has transpired because Stephen's durations fold indiscernibly one into the other. The contacts between Stephen's interiority and exteriority are presented in strictly spatial terminologies. This fluency unites him to the world of objects and lends to Stephen's epiphanies repeatedly metamorphic effects, as each such apprehension transforms who he is into another. The kaleidoscopic nature of his epiphanies is the inverse of the paralyzing realizations experienced by characters such as Eveline and Gabriel Conroy in *Dubliners*. Stephen draws meaning of who he is at all times from a language-based intercommunication with the world. Joyce contrasts Stephen's autobiographical complexity with other characters' relative unawareness about this kinetic, aesthetic layer of the self and its primitive alliance with the concrete world. Being a writer even before he picks up a pen, Stephen, apprehends transience in which his internalized writing reveals commonalities between the world outside himself and his own consciousness.

In contrast, the characters in *Dubliners* lack this linguistic mastery over their situations and endure a present that is oppressive precisely because their lives are

interpreted by them within an exclusively sequence-based framework. Their arrested present circumstances are compared to, or contrasted with, an ossified past or a diminished future; these foregrounded pasts and possible futures hypostatize the characters and mark the absence of a meaningful present life. These characters experience silent immobility unknown to Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait*. The disenfranchised quasi-orphan figure in "Araby," hemmed indoors for hours by unreliable guardians, leaves home to face a futile romantic destiny in the form of gift he never gets to purchase at a shuttered-up street fair. Eveline clings to her dead mother's imagined presence and to the fantastic future proposed by the departing sailor Frank. Little Chandler laments a miserable past day of work as a clerk while he dwells on the future journalistic career he will never have in London or on the Continent. Critics rely on varied vocabularies to explain Joyce's depiction of these relations to representations of static time and non being in *Dubliners* including phantasmal "boredom," (Deane), "spiritual desuetude" (Brown), and puerility and snobbishness (Sultan). Each critic's verdict highlights the complexity of causes behind *Dubliners'* variations on non-being; but no matter the cause of the insight, the characters all realize that who they were in the past they are no longer while who they might have become tomorrow is already passing them by. Their concluding epiphanies are stalemates of an immobilized presence in the world delineated throughout the narratives in patterned descriptions of the character's absent past and equally absent aspirational future and brought to its culmination in insights that provide no productive wisdom. The present is measured against either

a past or a future and, in either case, found to be desultory, characterized by gradual if unspoken acknowledgements that an existence in its etymological sense, *ex-istere* as “standing-out,” has vanished within a permanent sameness.

In contrast to *Dubliners* treatment of time, Joyce's *Portrait* centers on Stephen's heroism rooted in how he develops a creative language that is inseparable from who he is. This language allows him to be in the real etymological sense of the word *exist*, as exceeding or standing out from the everyday. By using language spontaneously and independently from conventional meaning, the young Stephen resists the homogeneity of routine and the separation between the human subject and materiality of that subject's world. No such linguistic dynamism operates in the static domain of Joyce's *Dubliners* because there experience is routinely neglected and replaced by an unreal idealized past or deferred towards an equally unreal and idealized subsequence, compounded by impoverished language in the form of Irish clichés. “It was a hard life,” Eveline tells herself in typically platitudinous rhetoric, “but now that she was about to leave it she did not find it a wholly undesirable life. She was about to explore another life with Frank” (31). In “The Dead,” Gabriel Conroy, learns that the love of his wife's life is a long-dead boy. In casting a secondhand glance on his wife's romantic past, he foresees a marital future denied by his unchanging role as the impossible stand-in for the late Michael Furey. Again Conroy's deadpan sentimentality solidifies and deepens the existential inertia: “So she had that romance in her life: a man had died for her sake. It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, had played [*and will still play*] in her life”

(*Dubliners* 223).

Avoiding this stalemate, in which one chooses to measure experience by one's absent past and one's absent future, Joyce, in the persona of Stephen, concentrates a maximum attention on the present moment of the lived past and liberates from the memorial, ordinary experience of time a "fluid succession of presents," the very construct he formulated in the 1904 draft of the novel. Through a text concerned with bodily sensations, intense perceptions and a language that affirms corporeal links between him and the physical world, Stephen Dedalus remains an open-ended entity. The earlier "Portrait" essay by Joyce asserts that the facticity of moments, known pre-rationally by infants or children, can be accommodated by a literary style around subject-object orientations rather than introspective reflections on personality or naturalistic mirroring of the exterior world. The text can *voice* perceptive immediacy while also inventing a language for that contact with the world and the template for Joyce's portrait of Stephen is the hyper-vigilance of infants and children.

In assessments of *Portrait*, critics tend to downplay the significance of the child-artist and tend to interpret the project as a cumulative biographical fiction, emphasizing in their assessments the textual material around Parts III-V, older Stephen who becomes a writer.⁷ Yet the child artist fathers the young man who,

⁷ See "Dionysus in a *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*" in *Journal of Irish Studies* 24 (2009): 66-74 and Tobias Boes' "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and the Individuating Rhythm of Modernity," in *English Literary History* 75. Winter 2008 (Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 767-785 for two such recent examples of how critics tends to value the latter sections of *Portrait* over the earlier in assessing who Stephen "is"

institutionalized and civilized into what Joyce names “public life,” represents an impaired artist rather than a perfected one. This debilitation is apparent in how the visceral language of the infantile, childhood and early adolescence periods of Stephen’s life resonate incongruously with the terminologies and thought systems in his protracted Jesuitical indoctrinations in church and school. The mature language enforces an *absolute* internalization of the self, undoing those projective glimpses of real relations to surrounding space and elemental world that he had been reconnoitering in the younger poetic autobiographical language. The contemplations and prospections on eternity, or the fictive time of the hereafter, displaces the evanescence of *Nows*, what Benjamin describes as the “human eternity” known to the Proustian child. The novel is a *Künstlerroman* in which the artist’s childhood virtuosity with an ecstatic understanding of identity is severely compromised rather than perfected as he ages. Like Proust’s depictions of Marcel’s childhood, Joyce’s accounts of young Stephen prove him to be an artist simply by birth, exemplified by a childhood facility for relying on immediate perception to find its articulation in forms of language. Whether read as a fiction or in autobiographical terms, the predicament is that the older self-conscious artist must preserve the poetic virtuosity of the child if he is to write in any meaningful way, a preservation of the aesthetic subject made hazardous by systematic epistemologies and symbolic tools for organizing and speaking of the self and for constructing a linear logic to his life story. *Portrait* shows Stephen’s poetic self-knowledge, in the form of the

language with which he expresses who he is from sense-based awareness, is consumed within increasingly abstract *irreality* effects as the older Stephen is drawn into language-systems that impose a stasis on personal identity. The “snares of the world” which the older and pious Stephen cautions himself turn out not to be immoral or corrupting diversions but rather linguistic “snares” and a rational and philosophical neurosis: “He had been *forewarned* of the dangers of spiritual exaltation and did not allow himself to desist from even the least or lowliest devotion, *striving* also by constant mortification to undo the *sinful past* rather than to achieve a saintliness fraught with peril” (*Portrait* 131; italics mine).

Stephen’s culminating avowal of the writing vocation involves a redirection of language away from the theological and philosophical precepts and back to the renewed, spontaneous diction that articulates *Stephen* as a junction between his body and the outside world, an ecstatic form of knowledge which he had mastered unconsciously as a child.

The Irish Child as a Vichean Poetic Man

Joyce's investment in Giambattista Vico's views on time, modernity and human development informs this cyclical autobiographical pattern in the *Portrait*. Having explored Vico's philosophies of history while living in Trieste, Italy, in the period of 1909-1912 while writing *Stephen Hero* and *Portrait*, Joyce parallels the younger period of Stephen's life with Vico's account of the poetic-divine phase of human society, before modernity, wherein language is invented linking man to man and man to natural phenomena. Samuel Beckett's famous explication of Vico's relevance to *Finnegans Wake* emphasizes how the cyclical theory of history also contains within it an inherent phenomenological perspective about language, poetry and objects, as Beckett explains the child's inability, "to abstract the general from the particular" which leads the child to "extend the names of the first familiar objects to other strange objects" (Beckett 11). In this view of history, Vico theorizes that language was invented from the first man's basic understanding of and attentiveness to the concrete details around him in a world without science. In this first stage, like Stephen in his childhood, the pre-civilized human invents language because he knows reality from, "the immediacy of sense-experience, pure feeling, curiosity, wonder, fear, superstition, and the child-like capacity of human beings to

imitate and anthropomorphize the world around them.” (*Stanford*).⁸ In the primal and pre-scientific phase, before systems of reflective analysis separate the perceiver from what he perceives and before such analysis inserts markers of time and cause and effect into accounts of phenomena, words are created to articulate the interconnectedness of man to those appearances. These linguistically generated personal co-identifications with natural objects and environmental phenomena persist in words even as ever-more sophisticated vocabularies interpret reality through metaphysics and science:

the first men....children of nascent mankind....know things...in their robust ignorance...by virtue of their wholly corporeal imagination. And because [this imagination] was quite corporeal, they did it [things] with marvelous sublimity; a sublimity...so great that it excessively perturbed the very persons who by imagining did the creating, for which they were called *poets*, the Greek word for *creators* (Vico 296).

Primitive language is not yet a symbolic or representational tool but a precipitous expression of the subject’s immediate grasp, or extension of himself into the world through speech. Examining Joyce’s *Wake*, Beckett writes of this Vichean theory of the first men that, “When language consisted of gesture, the spoken and the written were identical...Vico asserts the spontaneity of language and denies the dualism of poetry and language...Convenience only begins to assert itself at a far more

⁸ The biographical evidence that Joyce read Vico while writing *Portrait* is extensive. See *Vico and Joyce* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987) edited by Donald Phillip Verene; James Fairhill’s *James Joyce and the Question of History* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Niny Rocco-Bergera’s “James Joyce and Trieste” in *James Joyce Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Joyce & Trieste Issue (Spring, 1972), pp. 342-349, and Richard Ellman’s biography, *James Joyce* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983)

advanced stage in the form of alphabetism...Vico distinguishes between writing and direct expression. In such direct expression, form and content are inseparable...myth...is cast as a statement of fact" (Beckett 11-12).⁹ Joyce's Stephen creates language before he can write, and his writing alternately conforms to and disregards metaphysical and civic discourses as it works at a reversion to this direct expression.

Civilization begins with this poetic wisdom manifested by the atavistic construction of language and ritual to respond to and express the human subject's immersion within sensuous appearances when it is unaware of scientific causes. Though in his larger paradigm on the historical nature of human experience, Vico maps out human temporality in linear terms, in first man's immediate responsiveness to phenomenon and the consequent language he invents, time in its abstract representations past, present and future do not exist. "When a man does not understand," Vico writes, "he makes things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them," and, "In the world's childhood men were by nature sublime poets" (Vico 117). Through the imaginative faculty and the contrivances of original words, events in the world are attributed to divinities and to animating forces ("Zoraster," "Jove" "winged Hymen"). This Vichean synthesis of ignorance and artifice is inscribed by *Portrait's* epigraph from Ovid: "Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes: *And he sets his mind to work upon unknown arts.*"

⁹ The act of writing as physiognomic gesture figures prominently in Chapter Four's discussion of Colette's *La Vagabonde* in which the autobiographical narrator is a pantomime performer who through that stage vocation discovers an ecstatic property in autobiographical words.

Following Vico's theory, Joyce situates poetry as a first foundational language and epistemology. "Dante gave a cachou every time he brought her a piece of tissue paper...Dante...taught him where the Mozambique Channel was and what was the longest river in America and what was the name of the highest mountain on the moon" (*Portrait* 5, 9). Words bring forth a Stephen *as* the materiality of his world, an intimate simultaneity with object-world triggered by the fleshliness and substantiality of words that are invented, borrowed or recited (*cachou, Mozambique, moon*). Breaking with the rationalist premise that the language-making ability arises from man's natural capacity for symbolic thought, Vico and Joyce originate language neither entirely within the mind of the user nor entirely in a system of signs external to the mind. Instead language happens in collusive instants and interpenetrations between Stephen and the world's objects. Those contacts trigger the production of words and phrases which *are* themselves the given moment's portents. Stephen's words do not represent experiences as finished or interpreted. In the first section and for much of the second section of *Portrait*, Stephen's language *is* Stephen's experience. That first Vichean mute man in the pre-civilized era of the gods has no abstract categories to apply to time, and there is no consciousness of chronology. Through verbal expression, Stephen is prehistorically immersed in a pan-concretized reality. Lacking the metaphysics of subject-object differentiation, the first man's only conceivable reality is the passing moment, or moments, in all their somatic and physiological sublimity and terror. "Logic comes from *logos*," Vico writes, "whose first and proper meaning was *fabula*, 'fable' carried over into Italian

as *favela*, 'speech.' In Greek the fable was also called *mythos*, 'myth' whence comes the Latin *mutus*, mute" (Vico 299). Attributing animistic and transportable properties to inorganic and immobile objects, creating words for pre-scientific relations established in words between divine invisible forces and instantaneous visible particulars, language is firstly *fabula*, plausible impossibilities that nevertheless verify man's sensuous envelopment in the world. Vico compares the imaginative receptivity of this brute phase to the concentrated wonder of a child in a passage which closely parallels Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist" (1904) with its association of infancy and a fluid succession of moments:

[Wonder]...persists in the vulgar, who when they see a comet or sundog...at once turn curious and anxiously inquire what it means. When they wonder at the prodigious effects of magnet on iron...they come out with this: that the magnet has an occult sympathy for the iron: and they make of all nature a vast animate body which feels passions and effects. But the nature of our civilized minds is so detached from the senses...by abstractions corresponding to the abstract terms our languages abound in, and so refined by the art of writing, and as it were spiritualized by the use of numbers...that is naturally beyond our power to form the vast image of this Sympathetic Nature....it is...beyond our power to enter into the vast imagination of those first men, whose minds were not in the least abstract or refined because they were entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body (Vico 118).

The passage underscores how advanced systems of measurements and the subject-object dualism ushered in by metaphysics yields reason which displaces the concretizing and therefore ecstatic content of words' meanings with sophisticated concepts. Not surprisingly, Merleau-Ponty's examination of the expressive genesis of art examine how before a painting is a representation of anything, it depicts a phenomenological interdependence between the painting-subject and the painted-

object. The images and appearances that constitute paintings or poems are neither products of a purely independent human subject's mind nor exclusively the imitated content of an independent world-text. In a Vichean mood that has direct applicability to *Portrait*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

A cultured animal takes up art from its inception and finds it anew: he speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before...what he expresses therefore cannot be the translation of a clearly defined thought...Before expression there is nothing but a vague fever...because he [the artist] has returned to the course of the silent and solitary experience on which culture and the exchange of ideas have been built in order to take cognizance of it, the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether or it will flow of individual life in which it was born (*Aesthetics Reader* 69).

The younger Stephen's reactions show language as hyper-individualized expressions of how the body is implicated in the world and how the world is implicated in his embodied consciousness; in the early portions of the work, words do not produce sequential, reflective tendencies or world-self disassociations. As both Vico and Merleau-Ponty stress, language and artworks originate from a particularized awareness that is eventually forgotten or supplanted by subsequently generalizing procedures, namely philosophy and science, and those abstracting tools are then used to interpret the world, including the aboriginal knowledge of reality contained in language and in artworks. Aesthetic apprehension and expression is innate, not a taught or trained activity, and arise from the contact between the body and the world, expressed in ignorance of any casual difference between the two, as Joyce demonstrates: "He [Stephen] crept about from point to point on the fringe of his line...He was caught in the whirl of the scrimmage, and

fearful" (*Portrait* 7). Linguistic expression develops from a metaphysical blindness. Stephen does not *see* both literally in the playing fields and figuratively in that he does not see the self as separate from its materiality, the apparatuses and surfaces within which it moves. The concurrent tactility of self and world forms the very genesis of Stephen's first writing act, as "the lines of the letters were like fine invisible threads and it was only by closing his right eye tight tight and staring out of the left eye that he could make out the curve of the capital" (*Portrait* 40). Joyce vigilantly shows how the subject-object intertwining is expressed by an original language that makes that ecstatic transport real and visible, "Soon all would be dark and sleeping," the very young Stephen observes, and his seemingly simple personification of the earth as a sleeper has the more complicated double effect of making Stephen seem part of the earth that sleeps.

Without any habit-induced detachment of himself from the world, Stephen knows time as incipience and not as a progression. Frequently he conflates an emotional state with a random perception: "There was a cold night air in the chapel and the marbles were the colour the sea was at night. The sea was cold day and night: but it was colder at night. It was cold and dark under the seawall behind his father's house" (*Portrait* 15). The superficially *outside* world, summed up by the cold of the chapel, is empirically also an inside, as the word "cold" captures the somatic continuity of his body and the elemental world and also registers the implied fear and vulnerability of the narrating body, preempting a vocabulary that would relegate the sensation of "cold" within a causal chronology. The scene reveals

Stephen Dedalus as a fluctuation. The chapel marble and the sea's surface conjure the narrator's skin. Joyce's associative linking of the sea to coldness and coldness to the chapel and the chapel to the body creates a corporal synchronicity of world, self and word.

Stephen's youthful visualizations are more than just random acts of sight; those visualizations constantly produce language to accommodate them. This invention of language is a consequence of Stephen's five senses. That language doubles back on the expressive body and affirms that his identity exists strictly within that primal contact with things. The word "marble" is an assertion of identity, not a representational detail within which a biographical self will be inserted; in the context of the apprehension's impact on Stephen's frailty, the word reverberates with the dense weightiness of marble.

The child's life endures in an atavistic language shaped by bodily rhythms, rhythms and forms produced by ceaseless contacts with his surroundings:

Once upon a time ..there was a moocow coming down along the road...his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face....Suck was a queer word...the white look of the lavatory made him feel cold and hot....He wondered whether the scullion's apron was damp too or whether all white things were cold and damp...The fellows in poetry and rhetoric... had big voices and big boots and they studied trigonometry...[at] holy communion he had smelt a faint winy smell off the rector's breath after the wine of the mass: the word was beautiful: wine. It made you think of dark purple because the grapes were dark purple that grew in Greece outside houses like white temples (*Portrait* 8-9; 14; 19; 41).

Stephen's aural, tactile, olfactory awareness do not precede their expression in language. The vigilance and naivety at the site of the aesthesiological body is

actualized by the language. The imaginative word “moocow” corresponds to the child’s conjoining the animal’s imagined sound with the equally imagined animal’s name, both of which could have come from any actual event or an episode in a children’s book read to the boy by his parents who themselves create the name “moocow” to communicate to the child its primal involvement with bodily sounds, natural immediacies and physical forms. The creative freedoms he takes with phraseology such as “white look” liberates Stephen from a passive consciousness that relies on other people’s words for expressing the real.

As he emerges beyond the silence and linguistic limitations of infancy and early childhood, he produces language as if he himself embodied the very objects he realizes in words, reflecting Merleau-Ponty’s theory that all forms of human expression are pre-cultural in nature, with their source in the “architectonics of the human body, its ontological framework” (*Visible* 155). The corporal setting from which every expression derives provides sufficient evidence that the mute world to which the expressive body responds “contains [in it] all the possibilities of language” (*Visible* 155). *Portrait* shows how Stephen’s spontaneous expressions about the mutually responsive self-and-world are extensions of the expressive labor of the body’s senses. His vision and the accompanying language for that vision place who he is at all times at least in part in the exterior objects that inspire words, and in turn, those exterior elements occupy who Stephen Dedalus is. Frequently objects *objectify* his human subjectivity: “the fellows seemed to him smaller and farther away and the goalposts so thin and far and the soft grey sky so far up” (*Portrait* 36).

The rhythmic and lyrical diction is caused by an instantaneous exposure, before the cognitive work of contemplative translation separates seer from seen through the rational divorce of *I* from *it*. Language emerges from a traffic with things, producing an autobiography in which expression comes from a literary style that is ontologically grounded because, as Merleau-Ponty states the “the whole landscape [of being] is overrun with words as with an invasion..[language] is henceforth but a variant of speech before our eyes and to speak of ‘style’ is in our view to form a metaphor...language is everything, since it is voice of no one, since it is the voice of things, the waves and the forest” (*Visible* 155). Voice, expression, and words themselves emanate from Stephen’s grounding in concrete world inseparable from subjectivity:

How pale the light was at the window!..The fire rose and fell on the wall. It was like the waves. Someone had put coal on and he heard voices. They were talking. It was the noise of the waves. Or the waves were talking among themselves as they rose and fell. He saw the sea of waves, long dark waves rising and falling dark under a moonless night. A tiny light twinkled at the pierhead where the ship was entering (*Portrait* 23)

The fire-like light in the window becomes water-like while the coals yield voices and the voices the wave-like fire which morph into the sea at the pier. The description is disconnected from action or event and becomes Stephen’s presence itself, a self of language tracing how the variations in the environments and surrounding appearances have formative impacts on his interiority. Joyce exploits locomotion as a generative metaphor for the merging of Stephen’s mobile self within the equally mobile sensate world, as a train ride home from school place identity in

a space of accelerating correspondences: “The train was full of fellows: a long long chocolate train with cream facings. The guards went to and fro opening, closing locking unlocking the doors. They were men in dark blue and silver: they had silver whistles and their keys make a quick music: click click: click click. And the train raced over the flat lands and as the Hill of Allen. The telegraphpoles were passing passing. The train went on and on. It knew” (*Portrait* 17).

Nothing is granted an abstract dimension; the language of this first poetic man finds that appearances are rooted in the speaker’s relations to the phenomena and that relatedness and gives rise to a materiality of words bodied forth from Stephen. The stylistic animism in the novel’s treatment of objects reinforces how the child-artist grants the train’s colors a substantial source, in chocolate and in cream. He attributes to the whistles and keys not the mechanical functions of which he is ignorant but a quick music he hears as such. He is an inchoate palpation of the senses—vision, touch, taste, sight and sound—and his language constitutes those real palpations. For the Joycean child, this aesthetic understanding of facts is presented as a physiological impulse and not a product of retrospection or reflection. The aesthesiological body extends into those apparitions and sounds on the train. The difference between inside and outside has not coalesced into a reflection on what has passed and what is to come. The train passage encapsulates the transience of time, as the train leaves where it has been (the past) by arriving into a present point only as it propels itself towards what is yet to come: the future made present.

Stephen's faculty for generating ecstatic language is charged with an implicit cognizance that language, more than reflecting the real, *is* reality: "He wondered from which window Hamilton Rowan had thrown his hat on the haha" (*Portrait* 7), and, "Boyle had said that an elephant had two tuskers instead of two tusks and that was why he was called Tusker Boyle but some fellows called him Lady Boyle because he was always at his nails" (*Portrait* 37); and, "Stephen felt his heart filled with Fleming's words" (*Portrait* 46). Reality is unveiled by language rather than by mental processes: "Pock. That was a sound to hear but if you were hit then you would feel a pain. The pandybat made a sound too but not like that. The fellows said it was made of whalebone and leather with lead inside: and he wondered what was that pain like...A long thin cane would have a high whistling sound and he wondered what was that pain like" (39). The bat's kinetic aura is perceived as if it were a stage prop swung by a finely trained stage actor or the physical flourish of a masterful dancer. The contact with the body and its aftereffect come about at once, in an imaginative stance that evokes the act of being whipped and the subsequent pain such that Stephen's language can make even the potential or hypothetical real and present. Echoing the brutal classroom beatings meted out by teachers, and hinting at the competitive physical violence of the boys' school, the scene also prefigures how *Portrait* depicts a gradual eclipse of Stephen's aesthetic subjectivity. That original, spatially oriented dimension vouchsafed by his private language is encroached by conventional sets of discourse that are oriented to narrative-time (past, present, future), such as his father's financial woes, the tedium

of household routines, the imagination paralyzed by ideologies and competing national memories, and the alienation of the human body by religious injunctions.

The Maturing Artist's Civilized Discontent

Schooling figures prominently in a gradual privation of Stephen. Joyce's caricatures of pedagogical techniques are more than comic effects. As the taxonomies of institutions infiltrate Stephen's primal, poetic language, they resituate Stephen within abstract hierarchies. Joyce imbues Stephen's scholastic writing with an ominous humor. Such exercises, largely mechanical and rote, eclipse his heterogeneous and random identity and replace it with an homogenous chain. In geography class he writes:

*Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe (13).*

The personal list of place-names parodies the pedantry of an institution. But it serves a more ominous autobiographical point. It underscores the difference between Stephen's formative language that has been developing from a pre-nominative contact with the concrete world, and the new advanced topographical taxonomy that partitions self and world through the national and institutional designations. Stephen's enumeration disrupts the ecstatic style of his being and that form of autobiography highlights a fixation of the self through the incremental

alienation between his body and the world's features. The exercise instills in him a sense of his vast difference from the world; there is pathos and irony in the list. Thus far *Portrait* had shown the exterior world to be constituting him as much as he constitutes it. This forced autobiographical gesture avowing an absolute world-self partition provides the first of many counterpoints to the associative autobiographical writing within which Stephen had been articulating a shape-shifting self.¹⁰

Similarly, the codes for self-world delineations in prayer books are parodied in order to dramatize their dissociative consequences. In an overtly Vichean touch, Stephen's poetic attention is distracted from the monotheistic notion of *God* to the multiple names for God in other languages: "God was God's name just as his name was Stephen. *Dieu* was French for God and that was God's name too; and when anyone prayed to God and said *Dieu* then God knew at once it was a French person" (*Portrait* 13). Stephen's questioning of these pedagogic and devotional points of reference, such as responsorial psalms, spiritual exercises, or textbook formulae, dramatizes the developing division between the poetic phase and the phase of heroes who identify with and desire the power of rulers: these religiously sanctioned words shift Stephen from spontaneous and metaphorical evocation of a conscious presence within the things of the world outside of himself into a recognition of difference with spheres of power that he never fully assimilates.

¹⁰ Colette's subversive and comparably "silent" autobiographical gestures around childhood affirm ecstasies against official educational discourses in *Claudine en ménage*, discussed in the next chapter of this dissertation.

Sidelined from the heroic playing field of other boys, Stephen's apparent isolation segues into a poetic, private participation. Though he is sidelined from the activity in part because of his physical frailties, he attends to and identifies with that physical space with an ecstatic intensity than he could have had he been involved in the actual match, demonstrating that his ability to deploy language brings with it a knowledge of his own correspondence to surfaces and appearances. His apparent passivity is a poetic receptivity and associative form of knowledge that exceeds even the players' interrelationships on the field of action: "In the soft grey silence he could hear the bump of the balls: and from here and there through the quiet air the sound of the cricket bats: pock, puck: like drops of water in a fountain falling softly in the brimming bowl" (*Portrait* 52).

Similarly, his mostly voyeuristic infatuation with Eileen which looks like an apparently passive affective state occasions a dynamic epiphany. What he sees in her features and what he feels within unite in ecstatic language, "His heart danced upon her movements like a cork upon a tide. He heard what her eyes said to him from beneath their cowl" (*Portrait* 60). These particulars of the outside world materialize in metaphors and descriptive details about the self that exceed representation because they course through the text as the predominant evidence of Stephen's interiority. The pock and puck noises, the fountain dripping in a brimming bowl, the cork bobbing upon the water, the girl's speaking eyes, all unfold as both outside his skin and within it, showing that Stephen is not a consistently static personality within a backdrop of a delineated urban space, but is an aesthetic

subject who exceeds the sociocultural definitions about where self ends and world begins.

When young Stephen improvises random word pairings, tries out atavistic repetitions, and meditates on words' strange aural and graphic peculiarities, these expressive manipulations are focused on how objects impress their realities on his consciousness to such a degree that those pressures substantiate who he is. In his youth, the idiosyncratic linguistic devices are consistently ecstatic in nature, and never refer to something wholly outside him or entirely within him. Even in the gazing on his classmate Heron, Stephen's sensuous permutations negotiate an impossible boundary between things and names, giving equal weight to Heron as a material object irrefutably extant outside of Stephen and to Heron as a series of deeply personal impressions shaping who Stephen himself is: "He had often thought it strange that Vincent Heron had a bird's face as well as bird's name. A shock of pale hair lay on the forehead like a ruffled crest: the forehead was narrow and bony and a thin hooked nose stood out between the close-set prominent eyes which were light and expressive" (*Portrait 67*).

According to Vico, the associative and ecstatic charge of language is diluted by the civilized man's sophisticated formation of and intellectual confidence in freedom and institutions, first through the regulatory effects of monotheism on love by way of shame, and later through the installation of complex laws and civil codes for debating, discussing and legislating the real. Vico describes this process as starting when "the act of human love was performed under cover, in hiding, that is

to say, in shame; and they began to feel that sense of shame which Socrates described as the color of virtue. And this, after religion, is the second bond that keeps nations united, even as shamelessness and impiety destroy them" (Vico 171). Correspondingly, Joyce stresses how Stephen's erotic desire is simultaneous with poetic, three-dimensional daily life until those desires become subjected to linear narratives around venial and mortal sin, and the need for purgation, penance, redemption, and salvation.

In Stephen's poetic phase, his erotic desire manifests itself only in spatial vocabularies, as all the objects surrounding the object of his desire are imbued with a libidinous aura that correspond to how Stephen's interior affective state is itself constituted by those charged objects, and both who *he* is and what the *world* is retain a distinctive sovereignty: "He saw her urge her vanities, her fine dress and sash and black stockings....he and Eileen...stood looking into the hotel grounds watching the waiters running up a trail of bunting on the flagstaff and the foxterrier scampering to and fro on the sunny lawn, and...all of a sudden, she [broke] into a peal of laughter" (*Portrait* 60-61). The elements of her ensemble and the pitch of her voice articulate Stephen's inner state: even the seemingly arbitrary objects such as the flagstaff and the foxterrier comprise the Joycean *curve* of Stephen's yearning for the near yet distant Eileen. In another encounter with Eileen, Stephen's poetic understanding again expresses the interlacing between inside and outside in the form of her "touch [that] traversed his brain and body like an invisible warm wave" (*Portrait* 72)

Increasingly Stephen's erotic sensibility is subjected to the self-scrutiny demanded by a mortification of the human body. The heteronomous selfhood of the poetic phase expressed is a perpetual *outside-ness* in a sense-based language trained on ecstatic relationality with the physical world. That layer of reality fades and is gradually eclipsed by a diction built around a more consistent and conventional selfhood separable from the world of things, namely the discourse of the introspective Catholic penitent whose autobiography is expressed in rote-like repetitions of the received catechetical language of sin, penance, redemption: "he was in mortal sin...he bore cynically the shameful details of his secret riots in which he exulted to defile with patience whatever image had attracted his eyes" (*Portrait* 86). Stephen's internalization of this secondary discourse about his body in the world microcosmically parallels Vico's macrocosmic theory of civilization's inauguration through monotheism. In advancing from the first ignorance within the senses and the sensate and its coincidental language of sensuous particulars, mankind moves to the next phase to know reality through theologically derived reason (*relfessione*).

Stephen as the regretful teenager utters speech acts that acknowledge the static self through its institutional bonds with the church, a stability that supplants the spur-of-the-moment fevered production of identity and language wherein his bonds were affirmed as carnal, immediate and changeable. In the temporalizing recriminations, regrets and prospects for salvation, these shifts in Stephen's autobiographical language symbolize an institutionally ordained disengagement

between the body and the world. "It is impossible for anyone to be at the same time a sublime poet and a sublime metaphysician," Vico writes, "for metaphysics abstracts the mind from the senses, and the poetic faculty must submerge the whole mind in the senses; metaphysics soars up to the universals, and the poetic faculty must plunge deep into the particulars" (Vico 116). Metaphysical language extracts from reality an irrevocable difference between the mind and its world, originating knowledge internally. Through that rational humanism, religious and scientific methods elaborate further refined differentiations, alienating the individual subject from its own sensations, and mitigating if not completely bracketing the role of the body and the brute senses in knowledge formation as language starts to ignore the body-and-world correspondence that survives within words since they were invented in the poetic phase of history. The older Stephen gets, the more he inevitably participates in exactly such social, civic and political institutions, a development paralleling Vico's theory that after the invention of language by the divinely inspired brutes, human society proceeds into the age of civilizing wisdom.

Mindful of the cyclical nature of knowledge, Joyce's depiction of Stephen in his education and his acculturation subliminally preserves the rhythmical inventiveness of childhood under the teenager's repetition of imposed forms of a clarifying, metaphysical discourse. When corporally punished by Father Dolan for his missing broken eyeglasses, Stephen is encouraged by his peers to confront the school authorities. The novelistic treatment of the injustice and the social adjudication of it by the boys (who try to persuade Stephen by echoing injunctions

of the Roman Senate) poignantly and humorously represent the public debating societies that Vico locates as the bedrock of civilization. Yet that public arena gives way to Stephen's solitary contemplations on the predicament of injustice, a concept that eludes rational understanding. The free play of his senses draws him into a private language that reenacts the particular physicality of the unjust punishment, Father Dolan's "whitegrey face and the nocoloured eyes behind the steelrimmed spectacles were cruel looking because he had steadied the hand first with his firm soft fingers and that was to hit it better and louder" (46). This purely sense-based responsiveness to the incident permit Stephen to redefine the injustice as a basic propinquity between his injured body and the somatic manifestations of the authorities rather than through the authority's abstract power named by the legalistic values and ideals that were propounded by his peers based on their absorption of classical history lessons. The decision to seek redress from the rector does not come about primarily from that civic pressure or the philosophical principle of serving justice. The spur to act comes from a series of fleeting but very real solitary epiphanies, or flashes, in which the sheer physicality of his own being and its interlink with the world in moments through spontaneous language motivates Stephen to set aside the Lenten meal, declaring "he would not eat the blackish fish fritters...one of his potatoes had the mark of the spade in it" (*Portrait* 46). To facilitate this corporeal courage he visualizes the concrete features of his iconographic textbook on world history: "History was...Peter Parley himself...on the first page in a picture. There was a road over a heath with grass at the side and little

bushes: and Peter Parley had a broad hat like a protestant minister and a big stick and he was walking fast along the road to Greece and Rome" (*Portrait* 47).

Stephen's decision to confront the rector happens within these rapid apprehensions of himself within a sensible, tactile world, turning Stephen from the language of intangibles such as justice and unfairness. The burnt blackfish, the soiled potatoes of the Lenten meal and the visualized heath and bushes along a road to Rome and Greece induce a physiological revulsion to the school's force over him, and the heroic projection of himself conjures for Stephen the reality that he exceeds the limitations of self-consciousness; a jumble of sensations in language and not a logical idealization embolden him to act.

Yet this poetic wisdom gradually recedes as a guiding principle. After the family's decline forces a move to a leaner neighborhood, Stephen wanders the streets and absorbs the language of the public square:

Trudging along the road or...in some grimy wayside public house his elders spoke constantly...of Irish politics, of Munster and of the legends of their own family...Words...he did not understand he said over and over...till he had learnt them by heart: and through them he had glimpses of the real world...The hour when he too would take part in the life of that world seemed drawing near and...he [prepared] for the great part....the nature of which he only dimly apprehended. Dublin was a new and complex sensation. In the beginning he contented himself with circling timidly round the neighbouring square or, at most, going half way down one of the side streets but when he had made a skeleton map of the city in his mind he followed boldly one of its central lines until he reached the customhouse. He passed unchallenged among the docks and along the quays wondering....at the crowds of quay porters and the rumbling carts and the ill-dressed bearded policeman....bales of merchandise stocked along the walls or swung aloft out of the holds of steamers wakened... in him the unrest which had sent him wandering in the evening from garden to garden in search of Mercedes. And... he might have fancied himself in another Marseille but that he missed the bright sky and the sun-warmed trellises of the wineshops (57-58).

In Vichean fashion, Stephen's life involves forgetting the reality of his own present so that he can narrate a life history. The languages of the town square interpret the present in terms of an absent past--in references to Irish legends, and to rural Munster and the Gaeltacht--or in terms of the future-oriented commercialism of the modern city--the bustling traffic, the tradesmen, industrial development. These discourses of modern urban civilization express an historical sensibility which thus far has been largely absent from Stephen's consciousness, lending touching irony to his naming them, "words...of the real world." Vestiges of the heroic Vichean state are symbolized by his imaginative reveries around the concrete particulars in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The imagistic evocations of Dumas' heroine Mercedes indicate a persistent if diminishing artificer of language within the emergent socially conditioned self. Stephen never entirely breaks with this "heroic" Vichean first phase. When he recalls his father's braggadocio about a track coach's exceptional record of producing student athletes, he replaces that propagandizing with the palpable reality of a visual language: "Stephen glanced with mistrust at his trainer's stubblecovered face, as it bent over the long stained fingers through which he rolled his cigarette and with pity at the mild lusterless blue eyes which would look up suddenly from the task and gaze vaguely into the bluer distance while the long swollen fingers ceased their rolling and grains and fibres of tobacco fell back into the pouch" (53). Here, even as Stephen nears mid-adolescence and veers towards the finishing schools, he draws on a creative orientation to space

and to words to uncover reality -- *stubblecovered, lusterless blue, bluer distance, tobacco fibres*. These realities replace the mendacity of the father's secondhand account of Flynn's heroic greatness.

Stephen's growth parallels Vichean phases of civilization: he starts out as an ecstatic *I* in the poetic phase's imaginative collusion with physical phenomena, then passes into the heroic phase--what Uncle Charles names Stephen's age of "athletics and politics" (53) wherein images and lines from Elizabethan poetry and French novels supply heroic memes that supplement his poetic language, and then into the phase of human jurisprudence of abstract language of laws and "genera." In this ultimate phase, individuality is not sanctioned by the self-created language that expresses mystical affinities with the physical world or by the archetypes of heroic figurations. Instead a *free* individuality is affirmed through religious, civic and political institutions which mediate that freedom on behalf of citizens within the nation-state. This civilizing compromise with institutional mandates diminishes the role of language in affirming subjective presence within the world outside the self. Abstract, symbolic and objective systems for public speech take precedence over the wisdom of divinely inspired language of the poetic phase and the creative blazons of the heroic phase.

For Stephen, this advancement into the third phase involves a prioritizing of public speech over private writing. His secondhand recitations of received ideas come to dominate the autobiographical novel, censoring the heterogeneity of moments through utterances and avowals acts that declare an internalization of

pious monotheism. These speech acts include responsorial participation in sacraments that remove the soul from the body, and internally directed recriminations about the past, based on acknowledgment of his having transgressed laws, as well as repeated pledges to seek repentance and forgiveness. Joyce depicts Stephen cooperating with this civilizing process and suffering by that cooperation. Seeking relief from the poetic intensities and awareness of how his senses and his physicality predominate and concentrate his being as sensations and discrete moments, the adolescent Stephen deliberately renounces this ecstatic awareness to make confession. Joyce ironically dramatizes Stephen's near-hysteria as triggered by a desired, yet impossible escape from substantiality:

Consciousness of place came ebbing back to him slowly over a vast tract of time unlit, unfelt, unlive. The squalid scene composed itself around him; the common accents, the burning gasjets in the shops, odours of fish and spirits and wet sawdust, moving men and women. An old woman was about to cross the street, an oilcan in her hand. He bent down and asked her was there a chapel near (*Portrait* 123).

As Joyce himself was well-aware, this ultimately modernized civilized phase in which institutionally sanctioned freedom from commonality inevitably leads to what Vico names a "barbarism of reflection" as citizen-selves contend with other citizen-selves and society disintegrates into the disunion of strife caused by selfishness. Vico's account of how civilized societies atomize due to a pervasive self-absorption of its divided citizenry parallels Stephen's own internal and self-preoccupied strife:

For such [civilized] peoples like so many beasts, have fallen into the custom of each man thinking only of his own private interests and have reached the

extreme of delicacy, or better of pride, in which like wild animals they bristle or lash out at the slightest displeasure (Vico 480)

Joyce plots Stephen's ascent into civilized knowledge as a problematic and conflicted development. His selfhood separated from the material world as he has graduated from the poetic phase of childhood gradually turns back in on itself. The self becomes an internalized and static object of contemplation, causing a spiral of introspective paralysis in a language, containing his presence ever more deeper within what Pater calls the "thick wall of personality," walls constructed by a mature and educated acquiescence to cultural forms of knowledge.

Stephen's aesthetic subjectivity is substituted by a consciousness contained in endless contemplation of itself as a disembodied soul facing the specter of an timeless afterlife in hell. The remaining traces of Stephen's boyhood ecstasies and his proclivity to identify with the objects and things in his world become toxic once he has trained his attention on the authoritative concepts of sin and eternity. As a would-be penitent he apprehends that the ecstatic involvement of himself in the world which he has affirmed everyday in language reduces him, in light of religion, to being in league with a kind of Manichean materialization of evil, shown in his premonitions and hysteria about hell and his dream about satanic "goatish creatures" who pursue him through a field of "weeds and thistles...and tufts of rank stuff growth...clasping about his ribs a torn flannel waistcoat" (*Portrait* 120).

Father Arnall's fire-and-brimstone sermons and Stephen's consequent visions of a self at odds with the physical world accelerate this intimidation and

shaming process, the Vichean “care for piety and attachment to religion [that] brought the people to civil sovereignty”(Vico 479). The Capuchin priest’s interrogation of Stephen’s possible interest in joining the priesthood further projects Stephen’s pious self-consciousness into the unreal space of eternity.¹¹

Dread about eternity provides a foundation for spiritual self-examination and exiles him from a linguistically based immersion in things and other bodies.

For much of the second half of *Portrait*, Stephen vacillates between being and knowing himself through the sensuous epiphanies, or writing, and his growing disdain for corporeality and attraction to ascetic models of worldly detachment, rigid scholasticism and uninterrupted introspection. These eternal prospects which obsess Stephen are concepts rather than realities and they lay the groundwork for his shift in university from theological self-knowledge to philosophical self-knowledge, from what Vico calls “religious sentiments” that produce “virtuous actions” to the philosophical “understanding of virtue through the ‘idea’ ” (479). This new consciousness is constructed around the promise of a blessed or damned eternity, that non-time that has neither a beginning nor an end, as in Boethius’ definition of it as *interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta* (‘the total, simultaneous and absolute possession of unlimited life’). Stephen broods over this hypothesis about an afterlife. It produces an unremitting stasis and a ceaseless and monotonous awareness of *I*. The lack of any ecstatic escape from thinking of *I-as-I* parallels the punishment in hell. Hell is presented to Stephen as the anguished

¹¹ “Eternal” and “eternity” reappear thirty or more times in Parts III-V of the *Portrait*.

privation of an immobilized “I” who is, “never to behold the shining raiment of the blessed spirits; ever to cry out of the abyss of fire to God for an instant; a single instant, of respite from such awful agony, never to receive, even for an instant, God’s pardon...An eternity of endless agony, of endless bodily and spiritual torment...that sustains eternally that which it eternally devours...an eternity every instant of which is itself and eternity and that eternity an eternity of woe” (*Portrait* 116).

The replacement of an ecstatic existential engagement in the world with a meditative fixation on eternity in the after-world plunges Stephen into an alienated disgust with objects and with the solid particularity of language. As the novel progresses, Stephen seems to be enduring the hypostatic fate of Joyce’s other characters in *Dubliners*, reduced to a paralyzed and pathetic helplessness: “Why was he kneeling there like a child saying his evening prayers?...Could it be that he, Stephen Dedalus, had done those things?” (*Portrait* 127). The insinuations of theological and philosophical measures suspend his formerly fluid correlation of himself with the world of things, a contrast Joyce often highlights: “There were so many flagstones on the footpath of the street and so many streets in the city and so many cities in the world. Yet eternity had no end” (*Portrait* 121). These coercive lessons in eternity consolidate a personality, deepen his consciousness of himself as “I,” leading to a centered consciousness separate from the world that nevertheless despises itself for its self-contained magnification and its investment in the fictive spaces of eternity and heaven: “His life seemed to have drawn near to eternity,” wherein “every instance of consciousness could be made to revibrate radiantly in

heaven: and at times his sense of such immediate repercussion was so lively that he seemed to feel his soul in devotion pressing like fingers the keyboard of a great cash register and to see the amount of his purchase start forth immediately in heaven not as a number but as a frail column of incense or as slender as a flower" (*Portrait* 129).

Here Stephen appears to be individualized and made into a character distinct both from his original corporeality in poetic language and sensuous cognition. Yet the ecstatic layer of reality haunts his autobiographical discourse even as it purports to attain divine states of grace. The autobiographical rhetoric around a static self supposedly saved by redemptive ideals ironically underscores the enduing poetic, aesthetic subjectivity in which he identifies with a physical otherness of the world, a world of things as much as it is a hieroglyphic space of language as a moment of grace is described carnally: fingers, keyboard, cash register, incense, slender flower. The purported spiritual conversion nevertheless reveals an identity co-extensive with this elemental world of things even as Stephen claims to have vanquished that fallen world: "Life became a divine gift for every moment and sensation of which, were it the sight of a single leaf hanging on the twig of a tree, his soul should praise and thank the Giver. The world for all its solid substance and complexity no longer existed for his soul save as a theorem of divine power and love and universality" (*Portrait* 130). Joycean irony consistently undercuts Stephen's piety. The would-be ascetic believer's sensuous being is superficially "brought under a rigorous discipline" through a mortification that defeats its civilizing purpose because it

triggers further carnal epiphanies and an interplay of the perceiver within the perceived to the point of comic pathos:

To mortify his smell was more difficult...he found...no instinctive repugnance to bad odours, whether they were the odours of the outdoor world such as those of dung and tar or the odours of his own person among which he had made many curious comparisons and experiments...the only odour which his sense of smell revolted was a certain stale fishy stink like that of longstanding urine: and whenever it was possible he subjected himself to this unpleasant odour (*Portrait* 131).

The cumulative effects of Arnall's sermon about hell, Stephen's wrenching first confession, and the intimidations he endures in the spiritual retreat never completely arrest his poetic spontaneity. However, in marked contrast to the autobiographical childhood's "fluid succession of moments," Stephen's language in these later phases of his life construct a linear perspective on lived time that differ from the open, spatial orientations of the poetic phase. As he matures, he contemplates a posthumous fate in hell or dwells morbidly and repeatedly on past sins, as in his disgust about the "sootcoated packet of [pornographic] pictures" he has hidden in the chimney flue, as well as his recently past procurement of "orgies" and "harlots," rife with misogynistic conclusions he draws about the once idealized figure of Emma. Stephen's mature internalization of shame parallels Vico's theory that societies turn from a brute creativity, what the older Stephen calls "vegetable life" with its language-based knowledge to a philosophically inclined systematic, law-based nation, and his compulsive repetition of the word "spiritual," indicates he has embraced abstraction, analysis and detachment as method for asserting who he is.

Yet Joyce's frequent insertion of the word "spiritual" and disembodied diction into Stephen's vernacular is more ambiguous and ironic than it seems. In *Portrait's* earlier iteration as *Stephen Hero*, the protagonist shares a sketch of an encounter called the "Villanelle of the Temptress," the self-declared "triviality" of which leads him to consider a book into which he records exceptional moments of being, "epiphanies" which he defines as earthbound transports of his awareness beyond normal time rather than as mystical disembodied realizations of a higher truth, visions "in the vulgarity of speech or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself...they [epiphanies] are the most delicate and evanescent of moments" (*Stephen Hero* 211). The phraseology in this definition reveals an internal tension. On the one hand, Stephen embraces the everyday and the carnal aspects of experience, as indicated by how epiphanies in *Stephen Hero* are prescriptively defined as focusing on the here-and-now ("triviality" "temptress", "vulgarity" or a "memorable phrase"). Yet this *secular* epiphany provides strong evidence of the destructive effects of philosophical knowledge systems on the poetic power of language. In *Portrait's* indirect definition of epiphanies, Stephen's exegesis of Aquinian thought indirectly leads him to conceive of the writing of moments as an "instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony in the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure, a spiritual state very like that cardiac condition which the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani, using a phrase almost as beautiful as Shelly's [*fading coal*] called the enchantment of the heart"

(*Portrait* 187-88).

While critical discussion of Joyce's aesthetic theories draw on these specifications in the novel, Joyce gives every indication that this ascetic tenor in Stephen's concept of the epiphany is gradually abandoned when he rejects devotional and idealistic terms and re-acclimates to the innate linguistic spontaneity that characterized ecstatic moments in childhood.¹² Despite its severe modulation within philosophical ideals like "beauty," "image," "esthetic," "mind" and "stasis," Stephen's analogy of an epiphany to the biological insights of Galvani not only befits a premed student but also indicates how an epiphany, that central autobiographical text around moments of being, has a neurological or physiological orientation. Despite Stephen's puritanical insistence that art "keeps away good and evil which excite desire and loathing" and that it "produces stasis rather than kinesis" (182), Joyce undercuts this ascetic determination by having the characters constantly remind Stephen of the world of things that surround their academic banter: the cab accident in London in which a girl's heart was pierced with shattered window glass, the sexual banter about the French derivation of the name for the clerical robe ("jupe"), and Stephen's poeticized perceptions of himself in a world that includes "a plump woollengloved hand", "a pallid bloated face...fatencircled eyes...wheezing laughter....fat young man wearing silk neckcloth" (185), and "a long dray laden with old iron... a harsh roar and jangled and rattling metal" (184) as well as repeated

¹² For an investigation of how Joyce/"Stephen" recalibrates Aquinas' aesthetic theories, see Umberto Eco's *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce* trans Ellen Esrock. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989

references to “turnips”, to “curry” and to “pigs” to “piking teeth with a sharpened match” (190) and to “a basket which a butcher’s boy had slung inverted on his head” (186). Set among abstract conversations around artistic process, these unexpected autobiographical insights into bodies and things countervail Stephen’s spoken preference for representational forms beyond bodily involvement. These tangible and sensate imageries underscore a resurgence of Stephen as an aesthetic subject against his character as an aspiring academic, the latter choice dismissed when he rejects such a career by referring to it as, “an eternity of bliss in the company of the dean of studies” (*Portrait* 212).¹³

Ultimately, he is rejecting cultural systems of self-knowledge predicated on theological restraint and rationalist. Despite his mature internalization of shame and piety, Stephen eventually re-enters an immediate, spatial relationship to the world of things. The climactic epiphany of the bird-girl on the strand at Howth pointedly violates the very Thomistic aesthetic purities that Stephen will go on to advocate:

She was...gazing out to sea...she felt his presence and the worship of his eyes [and] her eyes turned to him...without shame or wantonness. Long, long she suffered his gaze and then quietly withdrew her eyes from his and bent them towards the stream, gently stirring the water with her foot hither and thither.....Her image had passed into his soul for ever...no word had broken the holy silence of his *ecstasy*....his soul had leaped...To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared... angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant of *ecstasy* the gates of all the *ways of error and glory*.

¹³ Joyce’s animus towards Catholicism is more muted in *Portrait* than it is in *Stephen Hero*, where Stephen vents his rage against religion more vociferously and frankly: “he cursed the farce of Irish Catholicism: an island[wherof] the inhabitants...entrust their wills and minds to others that they may ensure of themselves a life of spiritual paralysis (*Stephen Hero* 146).

(italics mine)¹⁴ (*Portrait* 150)

Stephen's evolution into civilized socially consistent self coincides with his theories about the disembodied and static effects of an artwork. Against that civilizing process the beachfront encounter revives alternative spaces of knowing, laid out within the context of an urban margin and remote from the underpinnings of language and thought within which Stephen had been solidifying an undeviating presence in the world. The premonitory disruptions of the visual encounter signal a sudden collapse of that civilized persona. The ambiguities of the bird-girl commence with the unexpectedness of her wading in solitude. That isolation combines with the problem in discerning her identity *in toto* and has an inverse effect on Stephen's own self-awareness by suspending it within the advent of what he carnally senses. The autobiographical figurations focus on how Stephen's presence emanates from the outside world embodied by the stranger wading in the water and from the language he applies to that emanation. The secluded moment dissolves the presumed civic knowingness and temporal consistency of the public, ecclesiastical Stephen.

¹⁴ Joyce's rendition of the bird-girl may have been inspired by Synge's markedly Vichean account of the "brute" peoples of the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland, in his "Girls Wreathed with Seaweed; Trembling and Exultation" from *The Aran Islands*: "I came upon a number of people gathering the seaweed...carried up to brow of the cliff by a party of young girls In their ordinary clothing these girls wore a raw sheepskin on their shoulders, to catch the oozing sea-water, and they looked strangely wild and seal-like with salt caked upon their lips and wreaths of seaweed in their hair...The suggestion from this world of inarticulate power was immense, and now, at midnight, when the wind is abating, I am still trembling and flushed with exultation (272)

Throughout the description Joyce makes apparent how the humanizing function of embarrassment compromises an innate aesthetic pleasure. In his earlier years, epiphanies that are composites between interiority and exteriority like the bird-girl episode in *Howth* are not qualified by religious espousals or theoretical diction that in the birdgirl moment buffer its ecstatic force. Self-reflective allusions to “withdrew,” “shame or wantonness,” “holy,” “glory,” and “advent” reach for a conscious separateness from the brute force of the things he sees in the girl. In contrast to the *Howth* moment, the youthful epiphanies are less skeptical, more purely profane, even the simple apprehensions of music before the Whitsuntide play in Belvedere College:

A sudden burst of music...the prelude of a waltz: and when the side door closed again the listener could hear the faint rhythm of the music. The sentiment of the opening bars, their languor and supple movement, evoked the incommunicable emotion which had been the cause of all his day's unrest and of his impatient movement of a moment before. His unrest issued from him like a wave of sound: and on the tide of flowing music the ark was journeying, trailing her cables of lanterns in her wake (*Portrait* 65).

This ecstatic vigor returns to Stephen. The perfected, civilized totality dissolves within *Portrait's* final pages. A protean first-person presence expresses itself through a new first-person form of diary writing. The accidental and haphazard series of written events contrast with the journal's punctilious calendrical headings. This juxtaposition of chronological time with the prose poetic naming of physical presences that do not distinguish Stephen from objects all indicate that personality is yielding to ecstasy, reflective thought is yielding to immediate language, and narrative sequence is yielding to intensified and discrete

instants. Stephen formulates and commits to the moment as a non-linear reality and an evanescent awareness of being, in which, “the past is consumed in the present and the present is living only because it brings forth the future” (*Portrait* 222). Though Stephen’s rhetoric seems to conform to the mature, temporizing notation of each day’s entry, the concluding private journal is replete with ad-hoc items, collages and snippets of disjointed yet poetic phrases of other people, showing the lived life to be what is had been all along, beneath the veneer of theological and scholastic order, namely disparate accidental moments within which the self knows itself best through a linguistic duplication of a primary crisscrossing between interior and exterior summed up by the incantatory phrase “a soft liquid joy like the noise of many waters” (199). As the Joycean narrator shifts to this first-person format, the autobiographical text indicates the start of a Vichean cyclical return of socialized man to a sensate creativity. The *Portrait* closes with a proximity between the body and its responsive language that had ushered in the novel’s opening lines. The closing reference to a visualization of bogwater concretizes a renewed interconnection of the living subject and the world of things. The bog imagery bookends the autobiographical baptism of his being shoved into the ditch as boy at Clongowes: “5 April: Wild spring. Scudding clouds. O life! Dark streams of swirling bogwater on which appletrees have cast down their delicate flowers. Eyes of girls among the leaves” (*Portrait* 222).

The “uncreated conscience” of the “race” which Stephen grandly proposes to create suggests that with an exhaustion of the civilized self new languages for being

within the world of things require discovery. The ironic arrogance of Stephen's claim is foregrounded by Joyce's depiction of his ennui and relative inactivity showing that the capacity to express the ecstatic dimensions of his *being-as-the world* has largely been diminished by processes of civilized, educated *I* that cannot easily be undone.

In Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen as artificer appears far less robustly receptive than in the affirmative resurrecting ecstatic presence that he is in final lines of *Portrait*. The Stephen of *Ulysses* broods and is bored, a lapsed seminarian and static idealist. In the face of Stephen's ecstatic failure, *Ulysses* transfers both the aesthetic remaking of ordinary reality and the reciprocity between self and world to the figures of Leopold and Molly Bloom. *Finnegans Wake* surrenders mimesis entirely as character and language merge. In the *Wake*, Joyce brooks uncountable moments within which every utterance transports human identity outside nominative and linguistic constancy. All the while, the *Wake's* narrating voice or voices suggest that presence is guided by an autonomous and possibly universal awareness of the real that is itself authorized by the substantiality of language: the book is conceived as a new form of universal subjectivity and an authorial presence that is everywhere at once: author, world, and word.

Chapter Four: Colette's Living Word of Autobiography

In 1895, Sidonie Gabrielle Gauthier-Villars, "Colette," replied to an admiring letter from one of her husband's readers, the twenty-four year old, Marcel Proust.¹⁵ At the time, Colette had begun to write sketches about her provincial upbringing, biographical material that would soon be mined for *Claudine à l'école* (1900) and its best-selling sequels, which Colette authored but which was published, like all of her work until *La Vagabonde* (1910), under both the names of Colette and her husband, Henry Gauthier-Villars' ("Willy"). In her reply to Proust, Colette expresses gratitude for his having pointed out an effect in Willy's prose that exceeds the word's limited function as an instrument of representation: "vous [Proust] êtes le seul, je crois...qui avez si nettement vu que, pour lui, le mot n'est pas une représentation, mais une chose vivante, et beaucoup moins un signe mnémonique qu'une traduction picturale" (*Lettres* 34). She agrees with Proust's idealism that the written word does more than describe or signify a reality, and that it can translate an inner or concealed meaning into a visual image. This statement indicates that Colette strives to push her work beyond its prevalent mimetic style and social realism, to make

¹⁵ Proust's letter about Willy's fiction might have been motivated in part by a desire to ingratiate himself to Willy as an influential Parisian editor as much or more than it was motivated by genuine admiration.

visible and living [*une chose vivante*] some meaning that is opaque and ossified within experience.

The note to Proust provides an entry point for reexamining two of Colette's most autobiographical texts, *La Vagabonde* (1910) and *La Naissance du jour* (1928), the former being an autobiographical novel and the latter an imaginative memoir. In both works, a tension between the representational, signifying autobiographical word and the figurative, living autobiographical word raises the question of which style produces the truer portrait of Colette? Is Colette the capricious paramour and social climber Renée or is Colette the Renée who rejects love as a redundant fiction and emerges in the words of private journal writing, in discrete spots of time on stage as a pantomime performer and in the prose poetic meditations of her letters? Similarly, *La Naissance du jour* offers a Colette invested in story, in sequence, and in intrigue, who manipulates and alienates her male lover by involving him in the troubled life of a young painter while the poetic memoir also unfolds a non-social Colette who ignores the stories of other people and the story of her own life in order to concentrate her being in the world through a non-linear form of writing so focused on the experience of the present moment that she adopts her mother's example of extreme solitude to concentrate on the dissolution of time within the titular event of the break of day.

Colette's expressed preference for a figurative form of prose instead of a merely representational one as spelled out in cryptic response to Proust's letter in 1895 is precisely the style which she adopts for this paradoxical autobiography of

ecstasy. The Proustian connection remained formative. Decades after responding to Proust, Colette's affinity for her peer's associative autobiographical style lead her to use a passage from *Recherche* as the epigraph for *La Naissance du jour*.¹⁶

This chapter focuses on how Colette's autobiographical texts produce an alternative autobiographical presence that emerges separately and in contrast to the readily visible Colette in the social and amatory narratives within those same works. Colette draws on privileged moments that defy a linear mode of expression to affirm an autobiographical consciousness, traced through imagistic and sense-based language to convert real inner states of being into corresponding sensuous imageries. This ecstatic selfhood prevails in both *La Vagabonde* and *La Naissance du jour*.¹⁷ Significantly, Colette situates herself in exchange with the material world apart from the stable version of herself that appears in the straightforward plotlines of those works. In both *La Vagabonde* and *La Naissance* Colette's lyrical silences mark a withdrawal from the social and cultural sphere much like the program of Joyce's resilient trinity, "silence, exile and cunning." In these silences the autobiographical word takes on properties of figuration and association well beyond the word's representational use. Colette exploits the displacements and erasures of awareness that occur in the act of writing and applies those conditions

¹⁶ The manuscript edition of *La Naissance du jour* contained this epigraph from Proust's *Recherche*: "Ce 'je' qui est moi et qui n'est peut-être pas moi"

¹⁷ I will argue that these two texts, published nearly two decades apart, are companion self-portraits by Colette. In January 1927, while she was writing *La Naissance du jour*, Colette performed as Renée Nere, her alter ego of *La Vagabonde* (1923). Autobiography was surely on her mind. In 1927 Jean Larnac published the first biography of Colette, and in this context, *La Naissance du jour* was completed, also, in 1927 and published in January 1928. See *Oeuvres Tome III: xli-xlii*, and Thurman's *Secrets of the Flesh* 318-319, 357, 359.

of self-dispersion into the autobiographical depiction of non-writing activities and everyday happenings. Even when her autobiographical personae are not literally writing, their interiorities are presented as in constant flux with the materiality of their surroundings. In these ecstatic moments where narrative time drops away, “writing is posited...as unexpectedly welcome alternative to speech” (Stewart 40), creating, in the words of another critic, a Colettean “sacred cult of silence,” built around “secret pockets of writing” and a prevailing “veneration of the unspoken” (Bezier 156-157).¹⁸

This autobiographical shift involves Colette’s break with a reliable depiction of a personal self who has a clearly delineated relationship to an outside world, in sequential and episodic deliberations over marriage proposals, sexual liaisons, and prospective domestic arrangements. Against these forms of autobiographical presence Colette introduces silent and destabilized self-figurations that revolve around discrete durations, figurative language and a pronounced lyrical style as the first-person “I” works out who she is through language-based interactions with the corporeal world. The artist-narrators in *La Vagabonde* and *La Naissance* suffer most severely when the usual narrative-based conception of the self prevents the autobiographer’s enthrallment in and interactions with language and artistic production. An internal incompatibility arises that is both thematic and stylistic. On

¹⁸ Ecstasy means an evacuation of self-presence, transport beyond time and identity. Recent critics of Colette’s autobiographical project focus on her texts’ more static knowledge, their consolidating, rehabilitative and restorative tendencies, such as how she interrogates and reframes assumptions about literary genre (Michineau), deconstructs engendered identity (Peebles, Lucey, Huffer), and sheds light, *avant la lettre*, on post-feminist discourses on autonomy between mothers and daughters (Corbin and Beizer). Such views only tangentially examine Colette’s extreme aesthetically inclined perspective on selfhood.

the one hand, the autobiographical self surfaces within readymade amatory narratives around paramours and courtesans, lovers and losers, secrets and lies, the young and the old, and, on the other hand, a protean and fluid Colettean self experiences drastic expansions in her consciousness in an itinerant, sense-based relationship to the concrete world and to nature.

The tensions and contradictions between these two Colette's, the sophisticated and pessimistic courtesan of straight-forward stories and the hermetic, dynamic writer of separate moments stem from Colette's pragmatic and versatile investment in love stories. This commitment to writing about romantic sociality and to using the accepted logic of narrative time poses formal problems in terms of how she might shape an autobiography around ecstatic knowledge. Critic Julia Kristeva notes how Colette's rhetorical investments in the love story paradigms clash with the figurative impulses of what she herself named the word as a "living thing." "What remains of love," Kristeva asks about Colette, "when she detaches herself from the 'object' of love, from any other, whatever its sex, in order to merge, alone and exclusively, with the rhythm of the world?...The psychic and corporeal alchemy comes about gradually and hesitantly, since she would produce many facile pages in which searing epiphanies stand beside tiresome variations on ménage à trois." (Kristeva 76). Addressing this in-built antagonism toward the unfolding love story Colette's surrogate, Renée Néré, in *La Vagabonde*, complains that her lover imagines that she is participating in an amorous discourse when she is not: "et m'écoute lui dire 'Je t'aime quand je ne parle plus'" (I: 1182) [*and he hears me say I*

love you when I say nothing]. Similarly conflicted, Colette as narrator of her memoir *La Naissance du jour* critiques the very romantic arrangements that she willingly immerses herself in as forms of self-mummification by calling love, “une carrière, parfois une bureaucratie” (III: 294) [*a career, possibly a bureaucratic one*]. Colette, in “Bella-Vista,” repudiates the presumption that a woman must leave aside more liberated, disinterested means of understanding who she is in order to author a self in amatory involvements protesting “les relégua l’impudique devoir de parler de l’amour en mon nom personnel” (III: 1097) [the impudent rule that demands I speak of love in my own name]. The turn to realizing herself as an aesthetic subject and away from the temporizing pseudo-selves in love stories develops early in Colette’s autobiographical work. Several exemplary passages in these works clarify the difference between the visible realist self-image and the figural, ecstatic presence that is central to *La Vagabonde* and *La Naissance du jour*.

In *Claudine en ménage* (1902), the newlywed narrator and her husband Renaud arrive by train in Montigny where Colette’s alter-ego Claudine attended school: “Dans le train omnibus qui flânoche, indécis, à travers ce pays vert et ondulé, je tressaille aux noms connus des petites stations désertes” (*Œuvres I*, 390). The train’s arrival is deceptively simple, a straightforward description within the episodic stages of Claudine’s unfolding post-honeymoon life. Then the arrival is retold, focalized around Claudine’s creative cogitation as she recognizes herself not only in the landscape but *as* the landscape, as a presence within that materiality, an alliance which in her young adulthood in Paris had been neglected and forgone. This

speechless counter-writing is a return to the disorientations in the native home of the senses, and it synchronizes Claudine with the motion of the slowing train and the speedy encroachment of the approaching scenery, as the things out there converge with and magnify her inner presence. That presence overflows her body, producing living words that exceed their mimetic function: “Exaltée, les mollets travaillés de piqûres nerveuses...Le doigt tendu, je montre la tour, sa pierre rousse effritée que drape le lierre, et le village qui dévale en dessous, qui a l’air de glisser d’elle. ..Sa vue m’a blessée, si fort et si doucement...Cime brisée de la tour, foule des arbres à têtes rondes, comment vous ai-je quittés?” (I, 390) [I was so excited that my calves prickled with nerves...with my outstretched finger, I pointed to the tower, its crumbling red-brown stone draped with ivy, and to the village that cascades below it and looks as if it were pouring out of it. The sight gave me such a fierce, sweet pain..Broken summit of the tower, mass of round-headed trees, how could I ever have left you ? (*Claudine Married*, 378)].

Walking in the Fredonnes woods with Renaud during that same episode, Claudine again divorces lived experience from its visibility in narrated time and through a sympathetic vision with the natural world right before her, she cooperates with its sensuous advent by writing of it as an unfolding artwork with which she is united. This time she views the landscape as if it were a two- and three-dimensional collage, part nature and part artifice. As it assembles itself before her eyes she moves within it, a process from which the narrator’s perceiving body is inseparable. The outside is inside and vice versa. Colette-“Claudine” becomes that

reciprocal motion:

Sa peau râpée est maintenant visible et toute nue...Joie, joie de revoir la montagne aux Cailles, bleue et nébuleuse, qui se vêt de gaze irisée les jours de soleil, et se rapproche, nette, lorsque le temps tourne à la pluie. Elle est pleine de coquilles fossiles, de chardons violâtres, de fleurs dures et sans sève, fréquentée de papillons menus, aux ailes de nacre bleue, d'Apollo tachés de lunules oranges comme des orchidées, de lourds morios en velours sombre et doré (I : 391).

Joy joy to see Quail Mountain again, blue and misty : on sunny days it was clothed in a rainbow haze but you can see it close and clear when it's going to rain. Now you could see its rough skin, all bare...full of fossil shells and purple thistles and harsh, sapless flowers and haunted by little butterflies with pearly blue wings, heavy Camberwell beauties in dark, gilded velvet (CM, 379).

Within the language there is no appreciable difference between Claudine and the flora and shards of nature. The text breaks with representation to enfold Claudine within the motion of senses, translating the apprehensions into an ecstatic event. This coalescence of perceiver and perceived requires a style of language that takes responsibility for the open-ended and timeless process of the body at large in the phenomenal world, quite different from the overall narrative scheme that records an unswerving Claudine with Renaud. Here ordinary seeing is concentrated on reality as a moment rather than as a detour within the pragmatic narrative arc of the hike. The prose that records her alterable presence in the Burgundy woods emphasizes how seen objects *appear* relative to her bodily motion, and in that emergence, body and world constitute each other. Colette, in the persona of Claudine, is fleetingly unmoored as a young wife en route to a school reunion in her provincial village. The pictorial translation of an inner state represents the

otherwise unseen points of contact between herself and the world, an ecstasy made real in an otherwise naturalistic autobiographical novel. “The visible world and the world of [her] motor projects are both total parts of the same Being...Immersed in the visible by [her] body, itself visible. The seer does not appropriate what [she] sees; [she] merely approaches it by looking at it, [she] opens onto the world” (*Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics* 124). In autobiographical terms, this permeability to the world terminates the instant that Renaud’s voice calls her back, displacing her from, as it were, the “soil of the sensible” back to social reality: “ ‘Claudine! Ne crois-tu pas que nous devrions finir par grimper dans cette patache un jour ou l’autre?’ (I: 391) [Claudine! Don’t you think sooner or later we’ll have to face climbing into this bone-shaking contraption?’ (CS 379)].

In another such example of self-displacement, Claudine is listening to the competing voices of Hélène and Mlle. Sergent in her former school’s dining hall. The narrator recedes as a protagonist within her story as she focuses on the corporeal environment, and she disengages entirely from the petty, public recitation of her past: “Elle parle de moi, et baisse la voix parfois à cause des oreilles de lièvre que tendent vers nous les deux petites Jousserand. Fatiguée, j’écoute et je sourcis” (I: 404). By training her optical sensibilities on a spatial reality outside of the internal logic of the story of Claudine as delineated in Mlle. Sergent’s retrospection, Claudine becomes indistinguishable from the transient moment as such, and the prose depicts her as if she were enwrapped in the dusk: “Le dîner au réfectoire amuse prodigieusement Renaud et m’ennuie un peu. L’heure vague, le crépuscule violet

que je sens peser et descendre sur le bois” (I: 403) [Dinner in the refractory amused Renaud prodigiously but I was slightly bored by it. The uncertain hour, the purple twilight I could feel thickening and falling on the woods...I escaped, in spite of myself! (CM 391)]. The girls’ chatter, Mademoiselle’s chitchat and Renaud’s chuckles are counterpoints to the ephemeral moment of Claudine’s ecstasy in “l’heure vague,” where the prose shows her contiguous with the colors and natural elements within a transition from day to night.

Advancing this interior-exterior reversal much further, Colette’s sketch about private epiphanies, “Le Miroir,” (1908) draws the reader into intimate proximities with a narrator named *Colette*, a writer and an actress, in a private room, in evening, notable for its nebulosity, “Aux heures troubles du crepuscule” [in the disorderly twilight], in “la demi-obscurité” (I:1030) [*the semi-darkness*], not unlike the school scene in *Claudine*, a transitional period of the day when the artist is freed from those compulsions which consolidate subjectivity.¹⁹ Within this creative space, the narrator’s concentration is trained entirely on a prolonged moment of visualization and unspoken observations that trace in a private language the indefiniteness of those apparitions. As Colette gazes into the mirror and sees Claudine in her reflection, staring back at her, the seeing subject and the seen object become confusedly singular: “Il m’arrive souvent de reconstruire Claudine. Où? vous n’en

¹⁹ Both Joyce and Genet were, like Colette, recurrently drawn to depicting in their autobiographical projects how transitional moments of the day evoke an ever-present ecstasy. In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, after his ecstasy at the bird-girl sighting on the beach in Howth, Joyce writes, “Evening had fallen when he woke and the sand and arid grasses of his bed glowed no longer,” while Genet, in *Un Captif amoureux*, writes frequently of nightfall in the plains of the Palestinian territories, referencing the French phrase for designating dusk as neither entirely day nor entirely evening but pure manifestation of existential transience, “entre chien et loup”

saurez rien...ce *double* qui me regarde, d'un visage voilé par le crépuscule" (I: 1030-1031). These hallucinatory properties of perception are articulated rather than ignored. The *she* whom she sees is not completely "Colette" and not completely other than Colette. In this unstructured space of drawn-out confusion, a form of knowledge is distilled without regard for producing an hermeneutically discernible singular narrator, within an ecstatic "forteresse de solitude." Her fictive-other, Claudine, draws Colette's attention to the reciprocity in seeing and being seen. The real author, Colette, recognizes that she extends beyond her own real biography to her imaginary persona, Claudine, whose popularity with the public makes her in certain respects more authentic than Colette. The alternating perceptions and reactions of both Colette and Claudine establish an autobiographical knowledge that draws the two versions of herself as interconnected. Claudine emerges as a proponent of exalted moments over the logic of narration, remonstrating with Colette for masking her genuine grief over her failed marriage to Willy and retreating into this fortress where the writer devours herself. Mixing reality and fiction, Claudine also confronts Colette about causing the death of Renaud [in *La retraite sentimentale* (1907)]. In response, Colette attributes the popular novels to their titular main character: "Vous avez, Claudine, écrit l'histoire d'une partie de votre vie, avec une franchise rusée qui passionna, pour un temps, vos amis et vos ennemis" (1031). Wondering whether Claudine feels stultified having to "live up" to the popularized image of the French girl which Colette invented, she inquires whether Claudine ever feels like shattering the encasement of the archetype: "Mais

n'avez-vous jamais, continué-je tout haut, souhaité avec véhémence de porter une robe longue et les cheveux en bandeaux plats?" (1031). As Claudine prepares to launch into a recitation of her past, Colette silences her, and by denying Claudine permission to reiterate the "official" Colettean past, monumentalized in the *Claudine* novels, Colette opts to rewrite the Claudine novels, first by identifying with the muse, Calliope, and then confessing how her pre-adolescent vitality was ruined by her eventual involvement with men and, by extension, with forms of social participation which differentiated her body from the world and implicitly delegitimized the ecstatic condition: "J'ai grandi, mais je n'ai pas été petite. Je n'ai jamais changé. Je me souviens de moi avec une netteté, une mélancolie qui ne m'abusent point. Le même cœur obscur et pudique, le même goût passionné pour tout ce qui respire à l'air libre et loin de l'homme – arbre, fleur, animal peureux et doux, eau furtive des sources inutiles –, la même gravité vite muée en exaltation sans cause" (1032). [I grew up but I have never been small. I have never changed. I recall myself with such clarity, with a melancholy that does not deceive me. The same dark heart and chaste, passionate love for everything that breathes fresh air and exists far away from men— the tree, the flower, the fearful, gentle animal, water flowing from untapped sources—the same gravity grew into an exaltation without a cause].

By complicating rather than resolving impasses between fact and fiction, authenticity and inauthenticity, sincerity and role-play, memory and imagination, personal genealogy and cultural self-fashioning, Colette prompts the reader to view

any self-portraiture as inevitably multifarious, as if who she is always an other-ness conjured by fictive writings of actual memories and by memory's own inventions of actuality so that being *beyond* or *outside* herself is the only legitimate truth of who Colette is. That knowledge uneasily situates the real Colette between epistemologies of fiction and non-fiction and defies narrative logic, as "Le Miroir," is a plotless non-story, an extended moment during a particular nightfall. Colette is the transactional flux between realms: the process of seeing and the formation of the seen image and the process of writing real experience into readable fiction. The aesthetic subject Colette is irreducible to either a biographical personality or a fictive persona. As the evening light graduates into darkness, while sustaining the prolonged crepuscular moment with which the story begins, that change in light erases the seer's reflection of herself in the window glass and the sketch culminates in a visually dynamic moment, an ascension and twinning of bodies:

Je me tais, et Claudine ne semble pas attendre de réponse. Une fois encore, je sens que la pensée de mon cher Sosie a rejoint ma pensée, qu'elle l'épouse avec passion, en silence... Jointes, ailées, vertigineuses, elles s'élèvent comme les doux hiboux veloutés de ce crépuscule verdissant. Jusqu'à quelle heure suspendront-elles leur vol sans se disjoindre, au-dessus de ces deux corps immobiles et pareils, dont la nuit lentement dévore les visages? (1033).

Portrait of the Artiste in Pantomime

La Vagabonde is a more openly autobiographical performance than the Claudine books.²⁰ When it was serialized *La vie parisienne* in twenty installments, Colette was already well-known from the best-selling *Claudine* novels. The celebrity marriage between Colette and Willy had deteriorated and then ended in public view (starting as early as 1907) leading to publicity exploited by Colette and Willy alike. Allegorizing the relationship's end through the death of Willy's doppelganger, Renaud, Colette ghost-wrote and produced a final Claudine book, *La Retraite sentimentale* (1907), and as their marriage ended, Willy wrote and commissioned stage-plays and arranged for Colette to perform in productions, including *Une Rêve d'Égypte* which caused a scandal at the Moulin-Rouge in 1907 when it featured an onstage embrace between Colette and "Missy," (Sophie-Mathilde-Adèle-Denise de Morny, also known as the Marquise de Belbœuf) who was by then Colette's lesbian lover. *La Vagabonde* confronts the opprobrium of Colette's peers regarding her move from a popular, esteemed *femme de lettres* to a music-hall performer, and the novel addresses the financial fallout from Colette's divorce. *La Vagabonde* uses Colette's contemporaries in Parisian cultural life (the real Willy as "Taillandy," Georges Brague as "George Wague," Léon Hamel as "Hamond," Maurice Chevalier as

²⁰ This historical context is culled from Colette *Oeuvres* I: xcii-cxv; Thurman 190-198; Francis & Gontier 269-308.

“Cavaillon”; Auguste Hériot as “Maxime”) and Colette in the alter-ego of “Renée Néré.”

Colette’s autobiographical novel operates representationally and poetically. The static presentation of Renée Néré” occurs in the voluble social drama propelled almost entirely by dialogue. In the poetic subtext to this main narrative, Colette shows Renée Néré as an ecstatic presence who translates her being into correspondences with the material and natural world through forms of writing that are elliptical and often hermetic, namely her backstage diary and her unstructured farewell letters to her lover from the tour. Renée Néré’s copious diary and her letters orient her to the fragmentation and disorientation of time which she first experiences in the music-hall life and which she soon accepts as the reality of how time is meant to be experienced. The diary and letters are written from the solitary margins of the public and social sphere. Their words do not represent the protagonist Renée Néré but instead guarantee an alternative space within which Colette’s autobiographical persona appears in thematized contrast to the narrowly publicly oriented woman she is represented as in the novel’s main love story. Like the enigmatic asides in the *Claudine* books and the silent interactive spaces in “Le Miroir,” Renée Néré’s improvisational diary and her letters from the road are the autobiographically expressive text for Colette’s ecstatic states, the word as *une chose vivante* which abandons the stability of nominative and descriptive ends. Colette deploys a style that conjures in language the otherwise invisible points of contact between inside and outside, words that endow moments with an awareness that

Merleau-Ponty describes as how language “delivers us from language by delivering us [our bodies] to things” such that words can “tear speech out of history” and stand as “the double of being.” (*Prose of the World* 4-5). The language in the diary and letters parallels the corporeal language of her music-hall pantomime spectacles, as both writing and pantomime become a double of being, conveying Colette’s persona beyond the Parisian milieu that fixes her within the role of thirty-three year old divorcée.

Colette knew well this connection between ecstatic dimensions of being and its evocations in the art of music-hall pantomime. Pantomime was systematized and promoted by Colette’s famous teacher, George Wague (“Brague” in *La Vagabonde*). Mime was valued by Wague and Colette for liberating the artist from the compromising mediation built into language as a symbolic contrivance, and Wague theorized that pantomime as an art form reconciled the Symbolists’ spiritualization of the word, “la vie interieure,” to Third Republic’s new promulgation of a robust community-oriented “culture physique.” As Colette’s teacher, the real-life Wague views mime as an art which “did not wish to ‘ape human language but to represent the movements of thought, struggles of conscience and secret sensations” even more accurately than words, a view shared by the real-life Colette, who reiterates Wague’s conviction about modern pantomime as “an unrivalled expression of one’s interior life...a means of expressing feelings by successful gestures, with all the resources of an expressive physiognomy” (Tilburg 169). Both Colette and Wague underscore pantomime as a non-mediating art, predicated on moments and making obsolete the

interior-exterior opposition of the artist and her medium as well the supposed gap between the artist (flesh, interiority, subject) and the world (the concrete, exteriority, objects). In their statements, Wague and Colette privilege mime as an affective and intellectual yet unvoiced communication which mitigates two polarized modern views on art--art as sacred and impenetrable object, as in Symbolism, or art as populist, accessible, hyper-real, as in Naturalism. Beyond its compelling negotiation of aesthetic styles, read in phenomenological terms, mime makes indistinguishable the performer's "inner" self and her "outer" world, rendering the experience of time more *real* by conveying its passage within the transitory, metamorphic actions of the performer's body.

In *La Vagabonde*, Colette refers to mime's uncanny reconfiguration of body-as-time and interior-as-exterior as its "discipline mystérieuse" (1070) in which, "il n'y a de réel que rythmer sa pensée, la traduire de beaux gestes" (1099). Through gestures and poses on stage, and in her off-stage meditations about the physiological resonances of mime performances, the performer loses her objective perspective on time past, present, future within the pulsating motion of dance and writing. Colette's focus on rehearsal--intermittent practice, perpetual preparation--defines being in those terms. Renée's immersion in exercise, posture and body-building ahead of her performances, as well as the adaptive adjustments made during performances, parallel how her writing around moments of being prepare her to accept a life of vagabondage over habit or domesticity. In one exemplary scene, after Renée begins her liaison with Maxime, she temporarily forgets that love

story as she works on her music-hall routine under the watchful eye of Brague, finishing a grueling rehearsal session while captivated by the sublimity of the trapeze artists overhead. Her desire to emulate their virtuosity parallels the narrator's desire to emulate the nightingale's song in Colette's famous parable about expression in "Les Vrilles de la Vigne." In both that fable about artistic self-sufficiency and in *La Vagabonde's* rehearsal scenes, an autobiographical narrator watches virtuosic performers achieve a seemingly timeless concord between the expressive body and that expressive body's environment. Like the narrating witness of the nightingale's song in "Les Vrilles," Renée is demoralized because she wishes to remain within that exclusively artistic economy:

L'éclair nickelé des trapèzes de métal, le grincement, sur les barres polies, des mains colophanées, toute cette dépense, autour de moi de force élégante et souple, ce mépris méthodique du danger m'exaltent, m'échauffent, à la fin, d'une contagieuse émulation... Et c'est alors qu'on nous déloge, quand je commençais à sentir sur moi, comme une parure soudain revêtue, la beauté de mon geste achevé, la justesse d'une expression d'épouvante ou de désir (*Œuvres I* : 1112).

The glittering nickel of the metal trapezes, the squeak of rosined hands on the polished bars, all that expenditure of elegant and supple strength going on around me, that methodical contempt of danger, finally exalt me and fire me with the desire to emulate them. And.. they turn us out, just when I was beginning to be conscious of an expression of horror or desire (VG 64-65).

She identifies with the trapeze artists for how they personify the space in which they move and how that space reciprocally comes to incorporate them. In this sphere of unfettered rehearsal-practice, time is a subjective, carnal event and her expulsion from such euphoric engagement means a return to spheres of onerous social restrictions and responsibilities. Dislodged from the arena where knowledge

derives from gestures of the performative body, she resumes a transparent personality subject to normal experiences of time less meaningful than the rehearsal space in which her aesthetic subjectivity, symbolized by the trapeze artists who soared over her head, was affirmed by the twinned materiality of life and language. On the street, she meets Hamond, who is the image of the frail and faded artist, “un peintre déjà démodé” (1095) *an out-of-fashion painter*] and Maxime, her lover, the “Grand-Serin.” [*The Big Noodle*]. While Hamond speaks excitedly about how he and Maxim have discovered that Hamond attended the latter’s First Communion, she is alienated by the men’s literalisms. In interior monologue, she observes that her music-hall costume remains partly visible, at least to herself: “Je cache sous ma jupe mes bottines de répétition, des bottines lacées, avachies, dont le chevreau écorché montre le bleu, mais qui collent bien à la cheville et dont la semelle amincie est aussi souple que celle d’un chausson de danse. D’autant que le Grand-Serin m’épluche comme s’il ne m’avait jamais vue” (1113) [I hide my shapeless, laced rehearsal boots under my skirt. The kid is so rubbed that it shows the blue, but they grip my ankles well and their worn soles are as supple as those of dancing slippers. Especially as the Big Noodle is looking me over as if he has never seen me before (VG 66).] The theater boots hidden under her dress symbolize how the metamorphic silent presence which she enjoys in her disreputable theatrical labor contrasts with the mundane realism of sidewalk conversation. Her lover’s failure to recognize her in the cold light of day further indicates how the real Renée is visible only within her private writing or in pantomime, gestures of the aesthetic subject. “C’est bizarre,”

Maxime tells her, “quand on ne vous a vue que le soir, on ne croirait jamais que vous avez les yeux gris” (1113) [It’s odd..when one has only seen you in the evening one would never believe you have grey eyes. (VG 66)]. The remarks introduce a theme that recurs throughout the text, in which her lover misjudges who she is, seeing, as it were, two different Renées, one with grey eyes and one with brown. He tells her “Ils [her eyes] paraissent bruns, á la scene ” (1113) [They look brown on stage (66)].

Alone in her dressing room in the novel’s early scenes, Renée is divorced from her former husband’s story and from the stories and narrating voices of other people, especially the writing profession and the popular marriage that anchored her in time and structured her relationship to spaces. Now she faces an uncanny and quiet present-ness, as she is “prête trop tôt” [ready too soon] within “l’heure lucide et dangereuse ” [dangerous and lucid hour of the day](I : 1067-68). Pantomime maintains her in this exalted present. She need not speak her presence in the world from within the configurations of past, present and future. As she secretly writes backstage, she concedes to spontaneity and to chance--“les génies de son désordonné royaume.” She considers reading a book or the racing forum to secure a foothold:

Si je n’ouvre ce livre, lu et relu, qui traîne sur la tablette à fards, ou le *Paris-Sport* que l’habilleuse pointait du bout de mon crayon à sourcils, je vais me trouver seule avec moi-même, en face de cette conseillère maquillée qui me regarde, de l’autre côté de la glace, avec de profonds yeux aux paupières frottées d’une pâte grasse et violâtre (I: 1067).

I’d better open that book lying on the make-up shelf, even though I’ve read it over and over again, or the copy of Paris-Sport the dresser was marking just

now with my eyebrow pencil ; otherwise I'll find myself all alone face to face with that painted mentor who gazes at me from the other side of the looking-glass, with deep-set eyes under lids smeared with purplish greenish paint (VG 5).

But she turns away from the potential of recovering order represented by a book or the racing dailies. She rejects the temporizing assurances of her most recently published book on the shelf which cannot console her for the desultory state of being "toute seule" and so "le charme du livre ne me détournera pas de moi," [the pleasure of a book no longer moves me (1072)].

Colette replaces the writer's pen with the actress' make-up pencil that remakes the flesh as a blank page on which to metaphorically *write* a myriad of selves who exist as changeable substance, in the tracings and erasures formed by greasepaint. The *I* that stares back at her, "cette conseillère maquillée," [this adviser with a painted face] is not a consolatory image or a Lacanian fantasy of wholeness and separation from the world around which an *I* can live. The mirrored self, discolored by greasepaint, is the antithesis of any psychical fantasy about wholeness. The substantive world outside the skin symbolized by the theatrical trappings has a force equal to her own thinking in shaping identity. The new ecstatic condition fascinates and frightens her. Staring at her quixotically dissolving and coalescing face, she acknowledges the specter of a mediating agency: "quel visage s'interposera entre moi et la conseillère fardée?" (I:1068) [what face will come between me and my painted adviser?]. The bleeding, colored maquillage prevents her face from coalescing into a stable visage ("moi"), and "la conseillère

“fardée” is the aesthetic worker aware of her unabated transience, and how her theatrical work requires a dual inhabitation of both within and without:

Moi..En pensant ce mot-là, j’ai regardé involontairement le miroir. C’est pourtant bien moi qui suis là, masquée de rouge-mauve, les yeux cernés d’un halo de bleu gras qui commence à foudre...Vais-je attendre que le reste du visage aussi se délaie? S’il n’allait demeurer, de tout mon reflet, qu’une coulure teintée, collée à la glace comme une longue larme boueuse? (1068-69).

Me. As that word came into my head, I involuntarily looked in the mirror. There’s no getting away from it, it really is me behind that mask of purplish rouge, my eyes ringer with a halo of blue greasepaint beginning to melt. Can the rest of my face be going to melt also? What if nothing was to remain from my whole reflection but a streak of dyed colour stuck to the glass like a long muddy tear? (VG7).

Whatever facts or reality about who she is issue only from the intense imminence and indeterminate sensations that can never be resolved into either a complete inner state or a firm fact of something outside herself. The “conseillère fardée,” like the Colette-Claudine confusion in “Le Miroir,” brings the perceiving body and perceived world into a constant conjunction. The accouterments and movements in pantomime foreground the exchanges between inner consciousness and emotional states and the sensuous self within objects and people in her surroundings. In pantomime, transformation is the defining characteristic of being; Renée’s backstage formulations around the practice and benefits of writing address this self-changeability accessible within aesthetic instants:

Écrire! Pouvoir écrire! cela signifie la longue rêverie devant la feuille blanche, le griffonnage inconscient, les jeux de la plume qui tourne en rond autour d’une tache d’encre, qui mordille le mot imparfait, le griffe, le hérissé de fléchettes, l’orne d’antennes, de pattes, jusqu’à ce qu’il perde sa figure lisible de mot, mué en insecte fantastique, envolé de papillon-fée...C’est le

regard accroché, hypnotisé par le reflet de la fenêtre dans l'encrier d'argent, la fièvre divine qui monte au joues, au front, tandis qu'une bienheureuse mort glace sur le papier la main qui écrit. Cela veut dire aussi l'oubli de l'heure, la paresse au creux du divan, la débauche d'invention d'où l'on sort courbatu, abêti, mais déjà récompensé, et porteur de trésors qu'on décharge lentement sur la feuille vierge... Écrire! verser avec rage toute la sincérité de soi sur le papier tentateur, si vite, si vite que parfois la main lutte et renâcle, surmenée par le dieu impatient qui la guide...et retrouver, le lendemain, à la place du rameau d'or, miraculeusement éclos en une heure flamboyante, une ronce sèche, une fleur avortée (1074)

To write, to be able to write, what does it mean ? It means scribbling for long hours dreaming before a white page, scribbling unconsciously, letting your pen play round a blot of ink and nibble at half formed word, scratching at it, making it bristle with darts and adorning it with antennae and paws until it loses all resemblance to a legible word and turns into a fantastic insect or a fluttering creature half butterfly half fairy..it is to sit hypnotized at the reflection of the window in the silver ink stand, to feel the divine fever mounting to one's cheeks and forehead while the hand that writes grows blissfully numb upon the paper. It also means idle hours curled up in the hollow of the divan, and then the orgy of inspiration form which one merges stupefied and aching all over, but already recompensed and laden with treasures that one unloads slowly on to the virgin page...To write is to pour one's innermost self passionately upon the tempting paper, at such frantic speed that sometimes one's hand struggles and rebels over driven by the impatient god who guides it—and to find, next day, in place of the golden bough that bloomed miraculously in that dazzling hour, a withered bramble and a stunted flower (VG 14).

In writing, as in mime, the autobiographer finds a morphological art form through the pen's unpredictable materializations of the world-as-word. Each inscribed figure is eclipsed by another before it fully materializes. The notebook reveries parallel Renée's mutability in the dressing-room mirror ("le griffonnage inconscient, l'oubli de l'heure, la débauche d'invention"). This literary performance produces presences ("mué en insecte fantastique," "envolée de papillon-fée" "porteur de trésors") while provoking absences ("qu'une bienheureuse mort glace

sur le papier la main,” “une ronce sèche,” “une fleur avortée”). Writing as “les jeux de la plume,” parallels mime and dance performances which involve Colette/Renée in a constant state of “being beyond herself” within the staged manipulations of her body. Conversely, onstage, she resembles the writer backstage who was taken over by “le dieu impatient.” That otherness that is the self, like the name “conseillère maquillée,” is another indication that the individual as an aesthetic subject is realized when the body moves from a monotonous stability in ordinary perception into the concentrated recognition of the internal within the external and the external within the internal through dance, a Colettian ecstasy described in prose that serves as a self-portrait: “Un bref prélude éveille et tord la chrysalide bleuâtre que je figure, délie lentement mes membres. Peu à peu le voile se desserre, s’enfle, vole et retombe, me révélant aux yeux de ceux qui sont là ” (I : 1097-98) [The blue chrysalis which I represent awakens at the sound of a short prelude, and begins to writhe as my limbs slowly loosen. Little by little the veil unwinds fills, billows out and falls revealing me to the eyes of the beholders (VG 45).] The prelude and aural attentiveness are simultaneous, signaling a harmonization with the real vanishing of sequence distilled in music. The mime’s dance concentrates on the otherwise invisible transformations that occur at every moment in time. Identity is literally, never *present* (“s’enfle, vole”) because the dance, like her diary writing, translates the psychical content into the physical gesture, which includes the materiality of the stage and costumes as well as the eyes of the audience on her skin: “aux yeux de ceux qui sont là. ” In turn all of that physicality of the mime’s gestures alter the

mental content, so in mime, like in solitary writing, exteriority and interiority no longer function as meaningful categories for experience. In the performance, she morphs into a serpent and then a sphinx, gestures which are prefigured in the prose poetics of her journal and which further eradicate boundaries between her body and the exterior world, the latter foregrounded her in the form of the theater's spectators:

Un beau serpent s'enroule sur le tapis de Perse, une amphore d'Egypte se penche, versant un flot de cheveux parfumés, un nuage s'élève et s'envole, orange et bleu, une bête féline s'élançait, se replie, un sphinx, couleur de sable blond, allongé, s'accoude les reins creusés et les seins tendus... Je n'oublie rien, je me suis ressaisie. Allons, allons ! Ces gens-là existent-ils ?...Non, non il n'y a de réel que la danse, la lumière, la liberté, la musique... (I : 1099)

A beautiful serpent coils itself along the Persian carpet, an Egyptian amphora tilts forward, pouring a cascade of perfumed hair, a blue and stormy cloud rises and floats away, a feline beast springs forwards, then recoils, a sphinx, the colour of pale sand, reclines at full length, propped its elbows with hollowed back and straining breasts. I have recovered myself and forgot nothing. Do these people really exist, I ask myself. No, they don't (VG 47).

As in the account of the chrysalis, Colette frames the serpentine dance as ecstatic spectacle of language, *une chose vivante*, rather than as a representation of one of Renée's past performances. The narrator seems already to be outside herself as the dance concentrates the passage of time within a privileged aesthetic moment, art making visible what cannot be seen in the everyday, how the aesthetic subject is constituted by the world and the world by it, and how the present at all instances becomes the past in the instant at which the future is absorbed into the present-- these spatial and temporal ecstasies are executed by Colette's text as much as it is by the dance gestures that are presented as inseparable from that text.

Autobiographical writing and music-hall dance are one: “Il n’y a réel que rythmer sa pensée, la traduire en beaux gestes” (1099).

By ignoring the way speech inculcates her into the public and the social realms, Colette’s narrator finds intervals of attentive silence in which her consciousness of time and space drop off such that even the tactile availability of the theater, its materiality, becomes an extension of her: “En haut de l’escalier de fer qui monte au plateau, la bonne chaleur sèche, poussiéreuses, m’enveloppe comme un manteau confortable et sale ” (1069) [At the top of the iron staircase leading to the stage, the good dry dusty warmth wraps me round like a comfortable dirty cloak (VG 70)]. After leaving the theater, exempt from a monogamous routine around a domestic schedule, her building seems to arrange itself before by the agency of the narrator’s eyes’, like a Surrealist painting of a dessert plate: “Sous le gaz verdâtre, ma rue, à cette heure, est un gâchis crémeux, praliné, marron moka et jaune caramel, un dessert éboulé, fondu, où surnage le nougat des moellons...Ma maison, elle-même, toute seule dans la rue a ‘ l’air que ce n’est pas vrai’ ” (I :1071) [My street under the greenish gas at this hour, is a morass of toffee-like, creamy mud—coffee-coloured, maroon and caramel yellow—a sort of crumbling, slushy trifle in which the floating bits of meringue are lumps of concrete. Even my house, the only one in the street, has a sort of ‘it can’t be true’ look” (VG 10)]. Even Néré’s dog, Fossette is a talisman of a reborn, primal involvement with the impersonal world of things; walking Fossette in the Bois de Bologone, the narrator’s elation elicits the sensation of being absorbed timelessly into the substantiality of an environment of natural

light, colored mist, and pungent plant life: “Le fin brouillard rose filtre le soleil, un soleil dépoli qu’on peut admirer en face...Des pelouses découvertes monte un encens tremblant et argenté, qui fleure le champignon. La voilette colle à mon nez, et tout mon corps réchauffé par la course, cinglé par le froid s’élance...En vérité, qu’y a-t-il de changé en moi depuis ma vingtième année?” (1088-89). [One can gaze full at the tarnished sun because its light is filtered by a fine rosy mist. A quivering silvery incense, smelling faintly of mushrooms, rises from the open stretch of grass. My veil clings to my nose as I rush along, my whole body glowing with running and tingling with the cold. Am I in truth any different from what I was at twenty? (VG 33)].

Besides these features of nature, fellow actors appear as instantaneous outsiders in which she frequently sees herself. The narration eschews detailed or abstract recitations of the characters’ pasts or speculations about their futures. Renée knows others as she knows objects, as palpating realities which occupy her as she occupies them within the exceptional moments of sensuous cooperation in the theater, including its masquerade of costumes, bodily ornamentations, *tableaux vivant* and the panoramic bustle of Parisian streets. Her colleague Bouty appears ecstatically, “Nettoyé de son masque vermillon et blanc, il a une chétive et douce figure, délicate, intelligente, de beaux yeux tendres, et un coeur de chien sans maître” (1077) [“when he removes that white and vermilion mask he reveals a gentle sickly face, and the heart of an ownerless dog” (18) while Brague “s’étire devant une glace, devenu, sous son masque blanc, dans sa flottante.” (1096) [under his white mask, stands stretching in front of the looking-glass] while Jadin’s face,

like the narrator's own, resembles a fox, and, dressed in layers of gifts given to her by her lover, her skin is described as fur, the hair described "sans peroxyde" as she bends forward, "Avec son cou tendu en *gargouille*, noué d'un chiffon rouge" [With the tense neck of a gargoyle, wrapped in red chiffon] and, in a later scene Jadin appears as an limbic extension of the iron staircase, "ses talons, son fichu Marie-Antoinette, jauni par la fumée de la salle" (1103) [her heels, her Marie-Antoinette fichu, yellowed by the smoke of the auditorium (VG52)]. Frequently, the narrator sees the audience without being seen by them, an effacement she cultivates even while onstage when she is not involved in a particular scene:

Le pompier somnolent me prête, en effet, son tabouret de paille et sa logette. Assise, le nez au grillage qui sertit un carré de lumière chaude et rougeâtre, je puis, invisible, jouir de la vue de deux demi-rangs d'orchestre et de trois baignoires découvertes, plus une avant-scène (I : 1134)

The sleepy fireman does in fact lend me his straw-bottomed stool and his little box. Sitting there, with my nose to the grating which frames a square of warm red-dish light, I can see, without myself being seen, half of two rows of the stalls and three uncurtained boxes, as well as a stage-box (VG 94).

The diary transforms the distant heterogeneity of city life into an intimate phenomenon. Onlookers at a popular café become "la chienne pleine, les gamines éreintées, la servante campagnarde et le gérant à moustaches cirées" (I : 1131 [the pregnant bitch, the exhausted street-girls, the waitress from the country and the manager with his waxed moustache (VG 91)]. By shifting towards an aesthetic presence in the world, she becomes less concerned about how the career is viewed by peers' value systems. Though detaching from those measurements ["Je ne

convoite pas, je ne regrette rien” (1110) (I covet nothing, I want nothing)] she confronts how the social gaze and prescribed amatory narratives are not easily rebuked. At soirées, escaping the reductive scrutiny of others in the glare of stage lights or through a private writing is impossible, so she guards herself in language that deflects attempts to reduce her to “Madame Renée,” leading the narrator to equate conventional male-female relations as complicit with a debased mode of autobiography: “*Eux, que j'ai quittés violemment, ceux qui m'appelaient 'Madame Renée,' autrefois, avec cette affectation de ne me donner jamais le nom de mon mari... Eux, — et elles !* which she, “quittes violemment...Eux, --et *elles!*” (1095). To see them again...them whom I left so abruptly those who once upon a time called me ‘Madame Renée, because it was their affectation never to give me my husband’s name. Those men—and the women! The women who betrayed me with my husband, and the men who knew I was betrayed (VG 42)].

'Cet envahisseur'

Colette's interest in depicting the vicissitudes of amorous and erotic life problematizes *La Vagabonde's* generative principle about the autobiographical word as *une chose vivante*. The romantic narrative that forms the organization and temporal structure of the work impedes the autobiographical exploration of the asocial, rootless aestheticism and the simultaneity between the writing body and the world affirmed by the act of writing. Yet this internal discord between two types of writing, one socially transparent, plotted and mnemonic and the other privately specular, cyclical and figurative, simply lays bare the problems of autobiographical discourse with which Colette had contended in *Claudine* and the shorter texts that laid the groundwork for *La Vagabonde*.

Colette's Renée fends off the solicitations of men deriding the admiring letters from male audience members for their unmoving obviousness: "leurs lettres pressées, brutales et gauches, traduisent leur envie, non leurs pensées" (I: 1080). [their letters are urgent brutal and awkward betraying their desires, not their thoughts]. These repeated criticisms of the letters shows the degree to which Colette's Renée parses the distinction between an aesthetic understanding of time in artistic activity and an social script set in motion by male suitors and a woman's willing conscription of herself into that storyline. The male spectators' crude notes and their claims on her attention are compared to the oppression from mechanistic

systems: “Le conte fragile que j’édifie s’émiette quand le fournisseur sonne, quand le bottier présente sa facture, quand l’avoué téléphone, et l’avocat, quand l’agent théâtral me mande à son bureau pour ‘un cachet en ville chez des gens tout ce qu’il y a de bien, mais qui n’ont pas pour habitude de payer les prix forts” (I: 1074) [the fragile story which I am constructing crumbles away when the contractor rings, or the shoe-maker sends in his bill, when the solicitor, or one’s lawyer, telephones, or when the theatrical agent summons me to his office for a ‘social engagement at the house of some people of very good position but not in the habit of paying large fees (VG 34)].

Significantly, one letter defies the clumsy straightforwardness of the others and temporarily charms Renée because of its voluptuous ambition: “des douze pages Durant, un amour bavard et humilie” [twelve pages with his abashed and garrulous love]. The naive admirer, who never appears is “le petit amoureux...[capable of] rêver à quelqu’un, sous ses palais bleus et ses forêts enchantées (1081) [the little admirer lost in his azure palaces and enchanted forest could dream of someone] .

Given Renée’s incredulity at the other solicitations from male members of the audience—“cette rouerie un peu catin des hommes”—her regular engagement of Maxime seems incongruous with Colette’s ecstatic aspirations in *La Vagabonde*. On first meeting, “cet envahisseur” with “des yeux de charbonnier triste,” (1079), she excoriates him as “cette imbecile” and “ce grand serin d’homme.”

Why, then, does she cast her fate within the banal worldview of a stranger

whose initial message so obviously reduces her to a sexual object? [“votre talent de mime m’invite à croire que vous en possédez d’autres, plus spéciaux et plus captivants encore” (1070) (your gifts as a mime incline me to think that you must possess others, more special and still more captivating)]. Through Maxime, Colette situates the self-portraiture in direct opposition to action-driven narratives around economic security and peer respectability epitomized by the voluble courtier.

Naive and pathetic, Maxime is an alternative masculinity that otherwise offers up seedy pimps and leering gigolos, and the misogyny of her landlord who views unmarried women as “la bête noire, la terreur et le paria des propriéétaires” (1071) [the landlord’s abomination, outcast and pariah]. Romantic courtship, a ritualized, sequenced progression through engagement, marriage and cohabitation diminishes the importance of the spontaneous moments that music-hall offers, and so the proposal is an undesirable antidote to her protagonist’s artistic alertness toward and coalition with the immediate spectacle of the given world. Thus, Maxime’s solicitations revive Renée Néré’s flat memories of a routinized and stratified existence in marriage, calculated as a mere accumulation of time: “Depuis trois ans, voilà de quelle sorte sont mes conquêtes amoureuses,” and “Huit ans de mariage, trois ans de séparation: voilà qui remplit le tiers de mon existence ” (1080, 1081) [for the last three years my amorous conquests have all been like this....eight years of marriage and three of separation]. Further associating married life as having a numbing effect on her innate imaginative faculties, Colette describes the devoted wife as “ma soumission habituelle” (1085), and she reimagines the marital

home with Adolphe Taillandy as a jumble of shattered fragments, a puzzle, that cannot be restored into a cohesive picture. Instead the diary pictorially sketches the rustic setting, converting a unit of foreclosed time into a dissolving present through a prose poetic suspension of the narration:

Ce qui reste de ma vie fait songer à un de ces *puzzles* en deux cent cinquante morceaux de bois biscornus et multicolores. S'agit-il pour moi d'en reconstituer, bûchette à bûchette, le décor primitif: une maison paisible au milieu des bois? Non, non, quelqu'un a brouillé toutes les lignes du doux paysage; je ne retrouverais même plus les débris du toit bleu brodé de lichens jaunes, ni la vigne vierge, ni la profonde forêt sans oiseaux (1081)

what remains of my life reminds me of pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Have I got to try and reconstruct, piece by piece, the original scene of it : a quiet house in the middle of the wood ? No no I can't, someone has jumbled together all the outlines of that sweet landscape ; I should never even be able to find again the bits of virginia creeper, nor the deep forest without birds (VG 24).

The ex-husband Taillandy, a physically abusive liar and adulterer co-opted her own self-portraiture: "Taillandy a fait mon portrait aussi" (1082), and, as if preemptively undermining future promise regarding Maxime, the ruins of the last relationship with Taillandy, "le pastelliste," defines romantic involvement with men as cooperation with fraud:

Il fleurissait en mensonges avec une force, une variété, une prodigalité, que l'âge n'a point épuisées. En même temps qu'il ciselait l'ingénieuse traîtrise, agencée avec mille soins, parée de toutes les recherches d'une fourberie magistrale, je lui voyais gaspiller sa fougue astucieuse en impostures grossières, superflues, goujates, en contes enfantins et presque imbéciles (1082)

He luxuriated in lies, with a strength and prodigality that was undiminished by the passing years. And while he was busy elaborating some ingenious piece of perfidy, designed with infinite care and embellished with all the studied refinements at the command of this arch deceiver, I would see him squandering his passion for cunning in crude and vulgar deceptions that

were quite unnecessary, and stories that were childish to the point of imbecility (VG 25).

Taillandy's derivative painting, products of "un l'artiste' de roman mondain" were designed to seduce women, to appropriate them for his desire: "Depuis vingt ans, il fait le même portrait de femme: sur fond brumeux et doré emprunté à Levy-Dhurmer...La chair, aux tempes, dans l'ombre du cou, sur la rondeur des seins, s'irise du même velouté impalpable bleu comme celui des beaux raisins" (1081) [He has been doing the same portrait of a woman for the last twenty years. She is always in evening dress, posed against a misty gold background borrowed from Levy-Dhurmer...the flesh on her temples, in the shadow of her neck, and between the swelling curves of her breasts, glows with the same impalpable bloom, the dusky blue of luscious grapes (VG 24)]. This causal relation between wretched love histories and counterfeit art extends to the disavowal of her first novel *Le Lierre sur le mur* written and published while married, inherently false precisely because of its convincingly phony depiction of marriage and love, described in the same dismissive terms applied to the new lover Maxime, as, "Un chaste petit roman d'amour et de mariage, un peu serin, très gentil" notable for its being, "souriant, plat et clair" (1084) [A chaste little novel of love and marriage, slightly insipid and very agreeable...clear and undisturbed]. That stultified work is contrasted with, *A côté de l'Amour*, which sold poorly but initiated the more physiologically directed text, "la volupté d'écrire, la lutte patiente contre la phrase qui s'assouplit, s'assoit en rond comme une bête apprivoisée" (1084) [the voluptuous pleasure of writing it, the

patent struggle with a phrase until it becomes supple and finally settles down, curled up like a tamed animal], a fecund self-estrangement through ecstatic literary style that culminates in the “chef d’oeuvre innconu” *La Foret sans oiseux* which failed commercially, dismissed by readers as “diffus et confus, et incompréhensible, et long” (1084) [diffuse and confusing, unreadable and long]). The last novel’s opacity arises from the inherently unfinished activity of self-portraiture, underscored by the allusion to Balzac’s novel, its Verlaine-like imagery that produces, “sa chaude obscurité s’éclaire; pour moi, tel mot suffit à recréer l’odeur, la couleur des heures vécues, il est sonore et plein de mystérieux comme une coquille où chante la mer” (1084) [a warm obscurity as clear as day ; for me a single word is enough to create again the smell and colour of hours I have lived through. It is as sonorous and full of msytery as a shell in which the sea sings].

Against this private poetics built on moments that carry her beyond herself, Maxime’s social promises of erotic satisfaction and financial security recasts the narrator into the role of the sexualized female, and though she enjoys his companionship, she sees that the supposed knowledge claimed by lovers is dubious: “Comment se fait il que lui, épris de moi, ne se trouble point de me si peu connaître?” (1122) [How is it that he, who is in love with me, is not at all disturbed that he knows me so little?]. The fallacy that the lover knows the beloved problematizes the unfolding history with Maxime, and against its pull, Colette punctuates the aesthetic alternative of rehearsal-practice. With that cyclical rhythm, Colette supplements the rehearsal-practice moments with a parallel writing of those

moments: phantasmal mirror-play, protean self-erasures on stage, and purely figurative notations in the diary. Writing around moments instead of writing a story itself then becomes a rehearsal without the need for a performance.

In addition to Taillandy as past and Maxime as future, the aged Hamond, a pseudo-father figure, tries to coax Renée to accept the marriage proposal. Importantly, Hamond is described as aged and withered—a failing artist, a poor exemplar of an aesthetic figure. During initial meetings with Maxime, in the company of Hamond, Renée remains detached, observing the bachelor closely while unpacking him for the reader, as if she were transported beyond herself by the simple poetic re-creation of the scene, and by deflecting the lover’s speech by addressing to Hamond responses that ought to be addressed to Maxime: “Quoi qu’il essaie, je lui réponds brièvement, ou bien j’adresse à Hamond la réponse destinée à mon amoureux...Ce mode de conversation indirecte donne à nos entretiens une lenteur, une fausse gaieté inexprimables ” (1123) [Whatever subject he tries, I answer him briefly, or else I address to Hamond the reply destined for my admirer. This type of indirect conversation gives out meetings a slowness and a false gaiety that are quite indescribable (VG 79)]. Hamond, the former genre painter, can only direct Renée toward a prearranged lifestyle built around his genre’s propaganda about the domestic hearth: “Imprudent Hamond! A-t-il cédé à son instinct d’ex-peintre de genre ? Ce petit tableau de ma vie future, entre un amant fidèle et un bel enfant, produit sur moi le plus inexplicable, le plus désastreux effet ” (1179) [Rash Hamond ! Is he yielding to his impulse as an ex-genre painter ? This little picture of

my future life, between a faithful lover and a beautiful child, produces in me the most disastrous effect (VG151)].

The blindness to the ecstatic potential of art plagues all the characters. When Maxime visits he does not notice her writing tools: “Ah! ah! il n’a vu ni l’encrier poudreux, ni la plume sèche, ni le livre non coupé sur la boîte vide de papier à lettres ” (1120) [*Ah but he hasn’t noticed the dusty inkpot, the dry pen and the uncut book on the empty box of stationery!*]. To dramatize the divide between daily time and aesthetic space, and between narrative progress and amplified moments of being, Colette highlights the chasm between the platitudes of amorous discourse and the hermetic silent language of exhilaration: “J’hésite entre mon langage à moi, un peu brusque, qui ne daigne pas toujours finir les phrases...À force d’hésiter, je choisis le silence” (1126) [*I hesitate between my own persona language, which is rather brusque, does not always condescend to finish its sentences,...Unable to decide I chose silence (VG 83)*]. His capacity for love exceeds her own desire for stability, and she interprets in him a fatalism and domesticity that diverges from her heady uprootedness: “vous devriez vous marier...Vous avez l’air déjà marié” (1145) [*you seem suited to marriage...you seem already married*].

The creative distortions of identity caused by mirrors repeat itself so often that the trope develops into a commentary on the autobiographical project itself. After Brague upbraids her for not saving her affective energies for her mime performances, when, gazing in the mirror, she pinpoints the lost flame of a prior provisional state, she seeks herself a provisional selfhood rather the enclosed role as

a pursued lover, “Le miroir, le même qui refléta, l’autre soir, ma glorieuse figure de défaite, encadre un visage effilé, au sourire défiant de renard aimable. Je ne sais quelle flamme, pourtant y passe et repasse, le fardant, si je puis dire, d’une jeunesse harassée” (1164) [The same mirror which the other evening reflected a countenance glorying in its defeat, now frames a pointed face with the defiant smile of a friendly fox. Yet an indefinable flame keeps flickering over it, painting it, as it were, with a kind of tormented youthfulness (VG 132)].

Colette indicates how writings around moments of being bolster further ambitions for that expansive form of participation in the world. Maxime’s sexuality is contrasted with the non-appropriating male artists and performers: “C’est que....ce garçon [Maxime] est *un homme*. Malgré moi, je me souviens qu’il est *un homme*. Hamond, ce n’est pas un homme, c’est un ami. Et Brague, c’est un camarade; Bouty aussi. Les sveltes et musclés acrobates qui révèlent, sous maillot nacré, les particularités les plus flatteuses de leur anatomie...eh bien ! ce sont des acrobates!” (I: 1125) [It is because...this fellow is a man. In spite of myself I cannot forget that he is a man. Hamond is not a man, he is a friend. And Brague is a comrade; so is Bouty. The slender, muscular acrobats who reveal, beneath their shimmering tights, the most flattering details of their anatomy, well, they are just acrobats! (VG 81)].

These fellow male actors, beyond the enclosures of gender, confirm Colette’s valuation of experience. Faced with confinement in an amatory history that places her present and future in the hands of a wealthy lover, Colette shows Renée realizing how meaning and truth emerge from spontaneity and chance—preparative

and transitory feelings of ecstasy in acting and in dance. This realization develops incrementally but it is foreshadowed when outside the theater prior to a performance, Brague reminds Renée of the impending tour contract and inquires whether in spite of Maxime, she will accept. Brague's inquiry provokes the reverie that prefigures the ultimate decision :

Mon camarade [Brague] se souvient de Dufferein-Chautel et croit que...Mon rire brusque, au lieu de le détromper, l'égare davantage, mais je me sens, ce soir, si taquine et si gaie, légère, déjà presque en voyage...Oh! oui partir, repartir, oublier qui je suis et le nom de la ville qui m'abrita hier, penser à peine, ne refléter et retenir que le beau paysage qui tourne et change au flanc du train, l'étang plombé où le ciel bleu se mire vert, la flèche ajourée d'un clocher cerné d'hirondelles...(1132)

My comrade remembers Dufferin-Chautel and thinks that...My sudden laugh, instead of undeceiving him, bewilders him still further, but this evening I feel in a gay and teasing mood, and as lighthearted as if we had set off already. Oh, how lovely to go away, to move from one place to another, to forget who I am and the name of the town which sheltered me the day before, scarcely to think, to receive and retain no impressions but the beautiful landscape which unfolds and changes as the train runs past, of lead-coloured pool in which the blue sky is reflected green, and the open work spire of a belfry encircled with swallows (VG 91).

Maxime foresees her untethered self, her vagabondage, ahead of his rejection. During a performance in *l'Emprise* he fails to sketch a likeness of her face on his program, suggesting that who she is eludes him.²¹ Watching her in the throes of a role as the scheming wife in that same play, he recognizes, "une minute où tu m'emplissais d'une joie insupportable," [a minute wherein you filled me with an unbearable joy] that her seminude body, veiled in the visible clothing of the

²¹ The show's title is itself Colette's commentary on the already established dominance of a mobile art over stationary completed "reality."

theater, was inspirited by an intangible reversibility conveyed through gesticulations that surpass the verisimilitude of her role-playing: “Tu faisais le geste robustement, en jeune poissarde, mais ton visage brûlait d’une méchanceté si aiguë en si fine, si supérieure à ton corps accessible...Tu te rappelles?” (1172). Colette positions Renée’s truth in the ephemeral anonymous *she* which he glimpses on stage. When she sees her face reflected in a shop window, she notices a disparity between unrestricted ecstatic moments and the contained deportment of her civic face, as if spying an actress cast in an ill-suited role. She frames a connection between chance and the ecstatic, a non-cooperation with daily history:

Je la connais, cette-figure-là! Elle se masque d’austérité, de renoncement, pour mieux attendre le petit miracle, le signe de mon maître le hasard, le mot phosphorescent qu’il écrira sur le mur noir, quand j’aurai, cette nuit, éteint ma lampe (1153)

I know that face. It puts on a mask of austerity, of renunciation, the better to wait for the little miracle, the sign of my master, Chance, the phosphorescent word that he will write on the back wall when I turn out my light tonight (VG 118)].

Here Colette confronts these two modes of being directly: the austere and compliant subject against the unscripted sanctifications of chance. Having seen the public self as a mask of false consistency, Renée reverts to a self-authorship invested in incompleteness and in actualization through moments of being in which she intersects with the physical world beyond herself. Wandering Paris alone she apprehends realities that subsist between her apprehensions of them and their fugitive meanings. The cognitive pleasures of sight and smell find pre-intellectual immediacies as she writes them. An arbitrary encounter with a flower seller is a

culminating epiphany:

Comme l'air sent bon, autour ces voituresses pleines de violettes mouillées et de jonquilles blanches. Un vieil homme tout moussu de barbe vend des perce-neige en pied, avec leur bulbe gangué de terre, et leur fleur en pendeloque qui a la forme d'une abeille. Leur parfum imite celui de l'oranger, mais si faible, presque insaisissable...(1153).

How good the air smells round these little barrows full of wet violets and white jonquils ! An old man all mossy with beard is seeling up-rooted snowdrops with their bulbs clotted with earth and their pendant flowers shaped like a bee. Their scent resembles that of the orange-flower, but so faint as to be almost imperceptible (VG 118).

Colettian self-portraiture defines how the artistic body needs the phenomenal world of smell and sight to flesh out, revise, and further alter who she is. The flowers have residual soil on them, the bulbs are bee-shaped, and its indefiniteness ("presque insaisissable") produces a precipitous self-awareness in which the body and the world (the jonquils) coexist in reciprocal *efflorescence*. In an intimate moment after the epiphany in the store window, Renée dresses for a carriage ride into the Bois as if she were backstage before a music hall performance:

Je le quitte pour refaire à mes yeux le cerne bleuâtre qui les veloute et les moire, pour mettre un manteau, pour épingler sur ma tête un de ces profonds chapeaux dont la forme, les nuances bien choisies rappellent à Max les 'Fleurs animées' de Champfleury, ces petites fées-fleurs coiffées d'un pavot retourné, d'une cloche de muguet, d'un grand iris aux pétales retombants (1185)

I leave him and go encircle my eyes again with the blue outline which makes them velvety and shining, to put on a coat and to pin on my head one of those bell-shaped hats whose form and whose colors remind Max of Champfleury's 'Animated Flowers' those little flower fairies who wear on their heads a poppy inside-out, the cup of a lily-of-the-valley, or a big iris with dropping petals (VG 159).

Although Maxime interprets her as stock character from a popular picture

book, Renée's donning of the floral headdress reiterates the novel's opening dressing-room ecstasies ("refaire à mes yeux le cerne bleuâtre"), only now the moments produce a solitary exhilaration rather than an isolated vertigo, and the simple ride through the Bois becomes a quintessence of the moment, "un pays inconnu où je n'aurais pas de passé, pas de nom, où je renaîtrais avec un visage nouveau et un coeur ignorant" (1185) [an unknown country where I shall have no past and no name, and where I shall be born again with a new face and an untired heart].

Colette's proliferating floral imagery in the finale of *La Vagabonde* coincides with the narrator's renewed sovereignty. The botanical imagery parallels the autobiographical presence that Colette accrues through her protagonist's involvement in isolated concentrations of dance and writing. Within these spaces, time seems suspended, and in that autonomy and distance from the responsibility to social presence and to personal biography, Renée concentrates on the movements of her pen in the diary, in her letters and in interior monologues that double as a form of writing, and in the configurations of her body during pantomime and from these motions she articulates herself as a constant reversal of inside and outside.

The floral imagery in her letters signals how Colette situates the autobiography as a metaphorical *dehiscence*. Poetic language and figurations of the body disperse the inner self outwardly, just as the pods from a flower's anther autonomously scatters their seeds into the environment, an ecstatic state of being in which the flower's dissemination of itself is inseparable from those landscapes into

which it extends its being-in-the-world. Similarly, Renée moves from being a social self fixed within a love story and a public predicament over midlife, career and marriage, to being an individual who through language and expression finds a *pollination* and penetration of herself by objects and people with whom she comes into constant non-appropriating contact. Those penetrations eventually lead to a implosion of *I*, the pronominal *pod* of social containment. The botanical figures in Renée's letters to Maxime connote this personal *dehiscence*. The letters pay perfunctory attention to the tour itself and to the pending decision about whether she will marry him. Her epistolary poetics are an indirect but also absolute repudiation of the entire urban historicism that circumscribed her in Paris. Consistently distancing his words from Paris with moment-by-moment encounters with the world, she eventually detaches entirely from static dialogue and reads his words not as referential signifiers but as palpable objects in themselves, *une chose vivante*, comparing his script to, "mes taillis de chênes, de ronces, d'alisiers."

Beyond merely deferring an answer to his proposal, Colette's identification of the epistolary language with nonhuman yet organic life of flowers reveals a conversion to an understanding of the world strictly in a stance of detached aesthetic vigilance that is decisively completed years later in *La Naissance du jour*. Instead of writing letters to mediate or to rectify experience, the improvisational and indirect letters steer Maxime towards his own biography and pushes him away from her anti-narrative space of slowed instants, visible transience, and prolonged durations. The letters' very surfaces exhibit a concreteness and a propinquity more

important than any semantic content, let alone historical import: “Votre belle écriture est grasse et ronde, et pourtant élancée élégante et frisée comme cette plante qu’on nomme chez nous ‘l’osier fleuri’; elle remplit quatre pages, huit pages, de quelques ‘je t’adore,’; de malédictions amoureuses, de grands regrets tout brûlants ” (1198) [You have a beautiful writing, bold and round, and at the same time slender, elegant and curly like the plant that in my part of the world we call ‘flowering osier’ ; it fills four or even eight pages with loving maledictions and the most burning regrets and a few ‘I love you’s’]. Seeing the flowering osier of Dijon in Maxime’s handwriting instigates meditations on moments around names (anemones, violets, dog-roses, pines, terenbinths, cypresses, spindle trees, Judas trees, palm trees, mimosas, watercress, yew trees and blossoming cherries, corollaries to the metamorphic role which she plays in *The Dryad*).

Colette shifts from habits of erotic relationality in which self-authorship means an ongoing appropriation of the other to a wandering solidarity with a world of constant difference in which actualization means, as it does in the floral, nonhuman, nonlinguistic botanical world, a porous subjectivity in constantly renewed exchanges with that which is immediately around it. In her endeavors to dissuade him from desiring her, she portrays herself first in full make-up and then figuratively paints her self entirely stripped of maquillage, as if describing the gradations of floral appearance: “je comparaisais devant vous, coiffée de mes lourds cheveux plats, avec mes cils blonds lavés de leur mascara, avec les yeux enfin que ma mère m’a faits sommes d’un bref sourcil prompt à se froncer, étroits,

horizontaux, au fond desquels brille un dur et rapide regard” (1198) [if I were to appear before you with my heavy, straight hair, with my fair lashes cleansed of their mascara, in short with brief eyebrows quick to frown]. The stripping away of make up alienates Maxime’s desire while the poetics of the letter provide another opportunity to erase and then to re-image herself. Though she writes about fatigue from performing, and bemoans her failure to have written, the letter indicates that the physical toll of the theater has generated physiological resonances that attune her to the present. The lyrical accounts of the changing light show how the labor of performing that now defines her also facilitates constant states of being beyond time:

Le soleil a tourné; un lac de ciel, tout à l’heure d’azur entre deux fuseaux de nuages immobiles, pâlit suavement, passe de la turquoise au citron vert. Mes bras accoudés, mes genoux pliés se sont engourdis. L’infructueuse journée va finir, et je n’ai rien, décidé, rien écrit, je n’ai pas arraché à mon cœur un de ces mouvements irrépressibles dont j’acceptais autrefois sans contrôle et prête à la nommer ‘divine,’—l’orageuse impulsion (1212)

The sun has started to sink ; a lake of sky, azure a moment ago between two spindles of motionless cloud, now pales serenely, passing from turquoise to lemon-green. My arms, propped on their elbows, and my bent knees, have gone to sleep. The unprofitable day is drawing to a close and I have decided on nothing and written nothing, nor have I torn from my heart one of those irresistible impulses whose wild guidance I once upon a time accepted, without further thought, ready to call it ‘divine’ (VG 195)].

Concentrated within her body’s senses, opening out to the world by the words which speak to that chiasm, the text notes the world as variation perceivable only within vanishing moments. The sky is a lake and its color changes from jewel-like to fruit-like; her weary limbs harmonize into that twilight transience. Despite

the claim that the past day was not put to productive use and no decisions had been made regarding her future, her letter testifies to being within present-ness as such, and executes the very writing--writing being an acceptance of ecstasy--that the letter, ironically, claims has yet to be done. Underscoring the transformational moments, another letter places a question mark after the signed name, suggesting that the "she" whom he thinks she has chosen is indeterminate, transported.

Prospects of a South American leg of the tour trigger cause her to imagine that place as an ecstatic paradise: "L'Amérique du Sud! J'ai eu à ces trios mots-là, un éboulissement d'illettrée qui Nouveau Monde à travers une féerie d'étoiles en pluie, de fleurs géantes, de pierres précieuses et d'oiseux-mouches" (1223) [South America ! At the sound of those two words I felt the dazzlement of an illiterate person who sees the New World through an enchanted web of falling stars, giant flowers, precious stones and humming birds (VG 210)].

As Colette's self-portraiture in *La Vagabonde* closes, the mediating societal connections vanish into an incantatory and assonant poetics. The once exclusively inner *I* is now fully extant in exteriority, as in this ecstasy experienced on a moving train in Brittany:

Des moulins tournent à l'horizon. Dans les petites gares que le train traverse, les coiffes bretonnes, les premières coiffes blanches, fleurissent comme des marguerites...Voici que j'entre, éblouie, dans le jaune royaume des genêts et des ajoncs! L'or, le cuivre, le vermeil aussi, --car le colza pâle s'y mêle--enflamment ces landes pauvres d'une insoutenable lumière (1226)

Windmills revolve on the horizon. In the little stations through which the train passes, Breton head-dresses, the first white head-dresses, blossom like daisies. Dazzled, I enter into the yellow kingdom of the brooms and the gorses. Gold, copper, and vermilion too—for the pale rape seed is there as

well—set these poor heathlands ablaze with an unendurable light (VG 215).

This addressed *you* --“cher intrus, que j’ai voulu aimer”-- reflectively refer to the self as an other, and a form of being in the balance, within gradations and transitions of language focused on discrete moments. The formerly angst-inducing unscripted moment-to-moment existence in the music-hall is finally affirmed as the exclusive mode of being in the world. *I* is beside itself in a world inseparable from the expressive language of the letter: “Je traverse mon abri furtivement, sans enlever les housses blanches, sans écrire un nom sur le velours de poussière, sans laisser d’autre trace, sur mon passage, que cette lettre inachevée”(1231) [I pass furtively through this refuge of mine without taking off the white dust sheets, without writing a name on the bloom of dust, without leaving any other trace of my passage than that letter, unfinished (VG 222)].

Time as Aesthetic Care: *La Naissance du jour*

Care has two contextual meanings central to understand the ecstatic condition that Colette advances in her fictive memoir *La Naissance du Jour*. In the ordinary, psychological sense *care* has an ethical implication, referring to how an individual first considers, reflects on and possibly acts to assist the well-being of an *other*. Care has a corresponding applicability to the self as well, for in looking after our selves we indirectly acknowledge the importance of soundness and well-being as universal needs. This everyday use of the word *care* indicates a psychological and physical engagement in and ongoing, internalized respect for the preservation of the world that is other than *I*. This psychological stance of caring-for runs throughout *La Naissance du jour*, in the narrator's acute concentration and involvement in the environment within which she writes, including attending to the well-being of her estranged lover, Vial and the tribulations of the young painter Hélène, as well as the robustness of animals and flora within her purview in the south of France.

The other plane of meaning with related applicability to the ecstatic condition in *La Naissance du jour* is the existential definition, espoused by Heidegger. A certain future-oriented emphasis in Being is in Heidegger's view a manifestation of existence as intrinsically bound up with care (*Sorge*).²² In this ontological facet, care means that to be in the world means to be at all moments aware of one's mortality and due to that inescapable awareness of a future defined

²² Heidegger characterizes existence as "care" [*Sorge*] relevant to the condition of being (time's ex-stase and a being-towards-death) in *Being and Time*: 310-333.

by finitude, to be at all moments oriented towards something *other*. The throw-ness of being in the world frequently leads to anxiety that itself deepens or exacerbates one's awareness that one is in the world through no choice of one's own, and that, given that throw-ness, one must face the myriad possibilities of choices or else endure the malaise of acting without willful choice (inauthenticity) or feeling in a constant state of fearful dislocation (anxiety). But the anxiety of being in the world has a positive outcome in that it reinforces the very fact that one is already in the world so that there is within Being a protention that existing means being already *ahead of oneself* in the world:

Dasein's thrownness (exemplified in its openness to states-of-mind) shows it to *be* already in a world; its projectiveness (exemplified in its capacity for understanding) shows it to be at the same time ahead of itself, aiming to realize some existential possibility; and its fallenness shows it to be preoccupied with the world... The formally existential totality of *Dasein's* ontological structural whole must...be grasped in the following structure: the Being of *Dasein* means ahead-of-itself-Being-already-in (-the-world) as Being-alongside ...This Being fills in the signification of the term 'care' (Mulhall 110).

Combining Heidegger's ontological notion of being as care with the psychological and social functionality of care yields a definition of it that intersects with the autobiographical ecstatic condition realized in moments and with the phenomenological and Bersanian notions of the self as an aesthetic being always *out there* in the world. Care names the self's awareness of its projective being in the world and names how that already *being-beyond-oneseif* in the world is simultaneous with an awareness of the vulnerable *being-ness* of others in that same world. Colette's *La Naissance du jour* shows by its study of and adaptation to the

absent mother's letters that care is a way of being in the world. Through the meditations on care that constitute the bulk of the fictive memoir, the narrator, as an aesthetic subject, escapes the paralyses that occur when the self locates and relocates itself as fixed point in the past, present and future and instead turns to face her experiential moments as utterly *other* and *out there*. Through this care, the self is located in an ecstatic *Now*.

These conditions have generative force for the type of self-portraiture in *La Naissance du jour*. In *La Naissance's* unguarded, direct repudiations of the *Claudine* and *Chèri* books, Colette as memoirist writes outside the usual constraints of biographical representation to register *existence* within the writing act itself. Just as the exemplary art of pantomime provides a guiding art form for writing the ecstatic self-portraiture of *La Vagabonde*, in *La Naissance* the arts of painting and visual décor serve as models of care through which the memoir concentrates on the processes of physical and sensuous sensibilities and intimate acts of solidarity with the corporeal world. The memoir's pictorial style allows Colette to investigate care as the interpenetration of the sensing body with the sensing world, to know, as Merleau-Ponty claims painting knows, "the secret and feverish genesis of things in our body" (*Aesthetics Reader* 128). The pictorial style reveals human subjects in a common state of care, existing in the world, collaboratively as the world's surfaces, textures and topographies. Merleau-Ponty's account of how seeing and painting correspond to knowledge of such being parallels the orientation of the narrator in Colette's memoir:

The painter's world is a visible world, nothing but visible: a world almost mad, because it carries to its highest pitch a delirium which is vision itself, for to see is to have at a distance ; painting extends this strange possession to all aspects of Being which must somehow become visible in order to enter the work of art. (*Eye and Mind* 127).

Colette cultivates a visually oriented style characterized by dispassionate distance *from* and pre-possessive urgency *towards* others. This primordial alertness is epitomized by the mother's painterly invocations of the nearly flowering cactus, "une promesse de fleur" (III: 278), and by the memoir's timeframe as consisting of an arriving dawn sustained as perpetual advent: " L'aube rouge sur les tamaris mouillés de rosée saline," "La mûrissante couleur de la pénombre," "son éternel crépuscule du matin," and "la faim du moment qui enfante le jour" (III : 279, 283, 292, 371) [Red dawn on wet tamarisks wet with saline dew...the ripening color of the half-light...the hunger for the moment that gives birth to the day].

As Colette paraphrases and quotes her mother's letters and incorporates them into her nonlinear narrative, she is trying out how her words can embody time's passage itself rather than stand in for or describe already lived realities. The openness and watchfulness documented in the mother's letters render Colette's recently deceased mother a living presence consubstantial within the narrator's presence and words. The mother is a co-author who teaches the narrator to experience time as an undesiring state of becoming that is suppressed by daily habit and by erotic desire for others; the mother is an ideal ecstatic figure, "une telle femme qui ne cessa elle-même d'éclorre"(III: 278) [a woman who never ceased to flower]. Colette is drawn to the mother's constant availability to others because it

preserved and upheld the free autonomy of those others. She opened her doors to strangers, “aux chats errants, aux chemineaux et aux servantes enceintes” [to stray cats, tramps and servant girls]. One note shows the mother considering her son-in-law’s invitation to come visit; she emphasizes that her presence would be non-invasive, “*au-près de ma fille.*” (italics mine). Arising as an implicit contrast with the mother’s desire to stay home and watch the flowering cactus plant, her emphasis on being near rather than with her daughter marks a relationship built around care reinforced by the frequent allusions to how plants and flowers, unlike human beings, flourish among one another without impeding or appropriating the other. The sting of the mother’s past refusals to visit is offset by how the narrator interprets her mother’s desire to be near the flowering plant as a culturally resistant choice that favors experience as solitary evanescence instead of as the time-controlling arrangements of family and sociability. Afraid that she might die before she sees the rare cactus flower bloom again, the mother teaches Colette the existential lesson that both watchfulness in the face of incipience and a stoic acceptance of organic transience are fundamental requisites for answering anxiety and for achieving authenticity.

The mother is constantly situated as an a-historical figure, respected for her dignified solitude that allowed a patient heedfulness of being: “elle attendit, respectueuse, l’heure..Pureté de ceux qui n’ont pas commis d’effraction!” (290) [*she respectfully awaited the moment. How pure are those who have never forced anything open!*]. This exemplary stance allows the narrator to appreciate how the mother’s

choice was a synchronization of her own body with the outside world, against the everyday pressures of spousal dominance, parental authority, and their concomitant imposition of narratives that obscure moments as such: “Confinée dans son village entre deux maris successifs et quatre enfants, elle rencontrait partout, imprévus, suscités pour elle, des apogées, des éclosions, des métamorphoses, des explosions de miracles” (290) Confined to her village by her two successive husbands and four children, she had the power of conjuring up everywhere unexpected crises, burgeonings, metamorphoses, and dramatic miracles (*BD 22*).

The maternal discipline towards maintaining an intense awareness of time’s passing, combined with her prevailing availability to others informs Colette’s aspiration in writing the memoir. The mother’s symbiosis with the world is imitatively honored in how Colette executes forms of care in her own life. In formal terms, the narrator does not draw clear distinctions between her mother’s thoughts and her own, implicitly rejecting the assumption that a memoir must speak for its first-person narrating agent and that person’s lived-through experiences, a repudiation summarized in the text’s crucial epigraph on anonymity: “Imaginez-vous, à me lire, que je fais mon portrait ? Patience : c'est seulement mon modèle” (275) [Is anyone imagining as he reads me, that I’m portraying myself? Have patience: this is merely my model (*BD 33*)].²³

In response to the mother’s example, the narrator declares an end of her

²³ Before writing her own epigraph, Colette very nearly used this epigraph for a first proof of *La Naissance* from Proust: “ce ‘je’ est moi et qui n’est peut-être pas moi.” Colette *Oeuvres III* Notes p. 1378 & 1394

amorous social exertions that pursued and often defined Renée Néré, “fini de cette vie de militante,” (281) [end of this militant life]. The memoir rebukes the gravity of erotic desire, “une des grandes banalities de l’existence,” choosing instead to strive after, “l’amour nettoyé de ces plaisirs brefs et localisés” (281) [loved purged of its brief and localised pleasures]. Frequently, as the Colettean narrator adapts to being an uncompromised presence outside the anchorage of conventional relationships, the memoir metaphorically adopts the motif of the climactic orgasm to describe how language allows the writer to express experiences of her body as if that body were the same as its surroundings: “la troisième heure du matin...incline vers l’indulgence ceux qui la goûtent aux champs et ne donnent rendez-vous, sous la fenêtre bleissante, qu’à eux-mêmes”(286) [The third hour of the morning...[an] indulgence in those that enjoy it in the open and have an assignation with no one but themselves beneath the deepening blue of their windows (*BD* 18)].

Self-authorship means harmonizing with a pan-sexual circadian world and writing reveals, in its patient attendance to that world’s ahistorical durations, how the transitory hours of the day are procreative even when time seems immobile: “le vide cristallin du ciel, le sommeil déjà conscient des bêtes, la frigide contraction qui reclôt les calices, autant d’antidotes contre la passion et l’iniquité” (286) [the crystalline emptiness of the sky, the already conscious sleep of animals, the chilly contraction that closes the calyxes up again, are so many antidotes to passion and iniquity (*BD* 18)], and the unseen sunrise is analogically evoked like an orgasm, “l’instant où le lait bleu commence à sourdre de la mer, gagne le ciel, s’y répand et

s'arrête à une incision rouge au ras de l'horizon" (287) [the moment when the milky blueness begins to rise up from the sea, reaches the sky and flows over it until it stops at a red rift flush with the horizon (*BD* 19)]. The memoir's diurnal configuration of experience means that light itself has the *causal* function of revealing the world's aesthetic nature, as the sunlight reveals the surge of colors, forms, shapes that are a primary pre-human reality, and in how light changes and reveals time as momentous, liminal, and transitional.

In her frequent comparisons of sunlight with an artist gesture, Colette's writing borrows the visual language of the local painters: "La puissante lumière de l'été s'empare, pour de tels jeux, du moindre objet, l'exhume, le glorifie ou le dissout. Le soleil de midi noircit les géraniums rouges et précipite verticalement sur nous une cendre triste. Il arrive qu'à midi les courtes ombres, que résorbent les murs et le pied des arbres, soient le seul azur pur du paysage " (321) [The powerful summer light seizes the slightest object, brings it into the open and either glorifies it or reduces it to nothing. The noonday sun turns the red geraniums black and casts vertically down on us a sad, ashen light. At noon the only pure azure in the landscape is that of the short shadows huddled close to the foot of walls and trees (*BD* 69)].

The love triangle around Hector Vial, an interior designer, and Héléne Clement, the young painter and the narrator, evolves into a parable about care between women. In contrast to *La Vagabonde*, romantic entanglement in *La Naissance* is actively instigated by Colette herself, in Prospero-like orchestrations of

reality. As Colette reflects on H el ene’s interest in Vial and Vial’s interest in H el ene, she views the emotional tug-of-war with dispassionate care rather than with an invested jealousy, viewing the situation as if the entanglements were themselves a work of art without direct moral or personal consequences. During conversations about Colette’s possibility marrying Vial, she teases him about his affair with H el ene, “– Tu n’aimes pas que je l’appelle ta petite amie, je vois?” (299) [*you don’t like my calling her your little friend, I see?*] while later, alone, she turns that potentially restrictive amatory narrative into an occasion for an open-ended poetic writing: “L’attachement amoureux de Vial, – le d epit, non moins amoureux, de la petite Cl ement : je prends place entre ces deux fluides, malgr e moi. Je les interroge et je les commente en signes d’encre, en  criture rapide” (318) [The amorous attachment of Vial and the no less amorous resentment of the little Cl ement girl—however little I like it I am placed between those two streams of emotion. I’m trying to understand them and quickly jotting down my comments (*BD 64*)]. She adds the crucial reminder, drawn from the mother’s discourse, that vigilance rather than love, and latency rather than expectancy, define existence, “  mon  ge, il n’y a plus qu’une vertu : ne faire de mal   personne ” (318) [At my age there is only one virtue left: not to hurt anyone (*BD 64*)]. Concentrated watchfulness rather than appropriative desire transforms erotic life into moments unencumbered by personal consequences or introspective or intellectual deduced significances. Story, in the form of memories, recriminations, retrospections or anticipations, is preempted by vigilance. Colette’s lover, Vial, “Monsieur l’ameublementir,” is harmoniously

incorporated or “painted” into the prevailing exteriorities. His musculature is compared to Greek sculpture and his flesh to the colors of Moroccan rugs: “Il pencha son torse nu, lustré de soleil et de sel, dont la peau mire le jour. Selon qu’il bougeait, il était vert autour des reins, bleu sur les épaules, à l’image des teinturiers de Fez” (298) [He bent his bare body polished by sun and salt. His skin caught the light, so that he was green round the loins and blue on the shoulders, according as he moved, like the dyers of Fez (*BD* 35)] and, “Il fit un geste d’ignorance, son épaule enrichie de muscles montait et descendait comme un sein qui respire” (299) [He shrugged to show he didn’t know, his beautiful muscled shoulders rising and falling like a bosom breathing (*BD* 36)].

The changeability intrinsic to moments is alluded to through the proliferation of names which the narrator uses for Vial. Like Maxime is to Renée, Vial’s precise career is at first uncertain and he appears pejoratively in the guise of a business card, “Monsieur l’ameublementier, tu attiges,” (301)[*Vial, Decorator*], and though Vial informs her that his Christian name is “Hector,” she adheres to “Valère,” whimsically calling him “Valère Vial,” and elsewhere naming him, “Le garçon presque nu qui me versait l’huile” [The almost naked youth who poured the oil for me]. The proximity of Vial’s house to hers is described as if their homes were adjacent sculptures, “la lampe de Vial, dans sa maison en forme de dé, regarde la mienne” (309) [Vial’s lamp, in his thimble-shaped house, looks at mine].

Vial frequently confronts Colette about her unwillingness to plan ahead or to commit to their relationship, interrogating her for her provocations, particularly her

suggestions that he has both upset Hélène and that he ought to become the young girl's lover. Colette engages his legitimate complaints in much the same way as the autobiographical narrator in her story, "Sémiramis-bar" (1913) does when upbraided by the lover, Valentine, for frequenting a known lesbian nightclub. She repudiates concerns about public responsibility and answers her lover's aggressive recriminations with literary re-conceptualizations of those charges, resorting to art to contravene and dispel social paradigms. She figuratively paints Vial in word-pictures intermittently throughout their dispute: "Il étendit un bras de bronze, une main aux doigts délicats que le soleil a teints. Il y avait un contraste sensible entre la vigueur du bras et la main aux longs doigts, et je haussai les épaules, en dédaignant le secours de cette main. (327) [He stretched out a bronze arm and a hand whose fingers were browned from the sun. There was an appreciable contrast between the strength of the arm, the hand with its long fingers and I shrugged my shoulders, disdaining the help of that hand (BD 79)].

When Vial declares that he has uncovered the narrator's true amatory self as well as her philosophical pessimism about love from reading her books' obsessive dramatizations of entangled romance, he expresses nothing that the narrator has not already acknowledged about herself, "du mépris de l'amour qu'on devine toujours un peu, en vous lisant, dans votre amour de l'amour"²⁴ (341) [that contempt for love that in reading you one is always slightly aware of in your love for love]. His concise exegesis about how her books' handling of erotic love merely re-

²⁴ Colette *Oeuvres* III, Notes, 1417

formulates Renée's own confessional and cautionary final words to Maxime in her last letter, as she references an inquisitiveness about love's literary dimensions rather than in its existential actualities. The predictive conceits about personal freedom that Renée uses in *La Vagabonde* in the note to break the body's bonds in amatory narrative takes on a far more convincing reality in *La Naissance*, as Colette tells Vial, "qu'il va falloir vivre—ou même mourir—sans que ma vie ou ma mort dépendent d'un amour." (349) [I'm going to have to live—or even die—without my life or death depending on love (BD 110)].

Attempting to defuse their quarrel by evoking the climate of Provence, she chooses the diurnal and natural over the historical and erotic, to convey that she lives through and measures time by the ineffability of its moments rather than by the measurement of days, months, years, tabulations required from romantic commitment associated with the gloom of denatured cities: "Vial, as-tu vu les raisins de la vigne ? As-tu vu que les grappes sont déjà massives et teintes en bleu, si serrées qu'une guêpe n'y entrerait pas ?.. Il pleut à Paris, Vial. Il pleut aussi à Biarritz et à Deauville. La Bretagne moisit et le Dauphiné se couvre de champignons. La Provence seule" (337). [Have you seen the grapes on the vine, Vial? Have you noticed the clusters already huge and turning blue, so close set that a wasp couldn't squeeze between them...It's raining in Paris, Vial. It's raining in Biarritz and Deauville too. It's mildewy in Biarritz and Deauville too. Only Provence (93)]. This discourse eventually wears down his resistance. Sarcastic yet defeated, Vial tells her, "– Je serais sans excuse, madame, de retarder la suite du joli couplet sur la belle

saison" (341) [*It would be rude of me, Madame, to stop you from rhapsodizing on the beauties of summer* (BD 97)].

When she passively rejects Vial by confessing that she informed Hélène that he remains available to be the young woman's lover, the gesture conveys concern for both parties rather than an impassioned rebuff: "Ce que j'ai affirmé à Hélène Clément, c'est seulement, – d'une manière assez mal déterminée, d'ailleurs – c'est que je n'étais pas un obstacle entre toi et elle, et que je n'en serais jamais un" (343) [It's very necessary to speak of them, Vial. What I made plain to Hélène Clément, was only—and in any case very vaguely—that I wasn't an obstacle between you and her, and that I should never be one (100)]. Having alienated Vial through this emotionally detached yet artistically motivated rebuff, she justifies their estrangement by comparing her lover's insistent rush towards love to an impatient seed that needs an immediate witness to its flowering and in that need and that rush violates its growth, stunting itself before it can bloom. She detects in Vial's neediness, "le supplice du germe sous la terre, le tourment de la plante que sa hâte, son devoir de fleurir vont jusqu'à déchirer... Je les ai connus, puis perdus, les êtres qui juraient – ainsi ils attestaient ma force – de périr si je ne les délivrais d'eux-mêmes, de n'éclorre jamais si je leur refusais leur seul climat : ma présence... Mais celui-ci a déjà fleuri et défleuri plus d'une fois...(348) [the torture of the seed below the soil, the torment of the plant in such a hurry to flower, since that is its duty, that it lacerates itself in the process. I've known, then lost, beings who swore—it was their way of testifying to my power—that they would perish if I did not release them

from themselves, that they would never blossom if I refused them their only climate: my presence...but this one had already flowered and lost its flowers, more than once (BD 107)].

The virtual, less literal eroticism that flows between Colette and Hélène hovers ambiguously between care and desire. The conversations between the experienced artist and the naive, less experienced painter parallel the reciprocal discourse between the ever-present deceased mother and Colette the daughter. When she first meets Hélène she paints her with words, affectionately and condescendingly:

Les yeux de cette jeune fille, dans la pénombre que j'organise et soigne, chaque après-midi, avec *autant de soin* que je ferais d'un bouquet, devenaient d'un vert sombre, et j'admirais, sous des cheveux qui cessaient d'être blonds, un cou de parfaite et vivante argile rouge, un fût dru, mouvant, long comme on voit aux êtres d'intelligence médiocre, mais en même temps épais, proclamant la force, l'envie de parvenir, la confiance en soi... (italics mine; 320-321)

the eyes of the young girl became dark green, and I admired, below her hair that was no longer blonde, the perfect, glowing, red earthenware of her neck, a sturdy and supple column ; long like those of people of limited intelligence, but at the same time thick, revealing strength, the desire to succeed and self-confidence (BD 68-69)].

In other scenes, their reciprocal attentiveness replicates the mother's anticipation of the flowering cactus, and Hélène seeks in Colette the directional love of a mentor, a dependence which Colette deflects by drawing attention to their work as artists. When Hélène gives Colette one of her paintings and says, "C'est difficile de peindre," Colette responds, "C'est difficile d'écrire" (320).

Vial's eventual absence concentrates Colette's self-portraits around a purely

artistic being and community. Constant sensation and self-effacement replaces eroticized narrative of expectation and happenings, and ecstasy informs the text's open-endedness, from the narrator's evocation of the amorphous blue of Provence and her encounter with seaside gypsy dancers, to her private early morning absorption within the invading blue light of her room. Dialogue disappears within the memoir's conclusion, replaced by successive epiphanies that occur from an arrangement of words. The prose foregrounds temporariness and motion. It dispenses with nominative and spatial moorings and resists the urge toward home or a retreat to habit:

La petite tzigane Villebœuf tournoya à son tour comme une corolle. Nous nous gardions de parler, étourdis de tournoiement et de déplaisante lumière. Le vent de la danse collait au plafond un voile de fumée qui essayait, à chaque pause, de redescendre, et je me souviens que j'étais contente de ne presque pas penser, d'acquiescer à la musique concassée, au petit vin blanc de l'année qui tiédissait sitôt versé, à la chaleur grandissante, qui s'enrichissait d'odeurs... Le gros tabac triomphait, puis reculait devant la menthe verte, qui s'effaçait sous un rugueux relent de vêtements trempés dans la saumure ; mais au passage un torse brun, gainé d'un petit justaucorps de tricot sans manches, fleurait le copeau de santal, et la porte battante de la cave libérait la vapeur du vin égoutté sur le sable... Une bonne épaule d'ami m'était, et j'attendais que la satiété me rendît la force et l'envie de me lever, de retourner vers mon royaume exigu, vers les chats anxieux, la vigne, les noirs mûriers... Je n'attendais que cela... encore une minute, et je m'en vais... que cela, vraiment...(358-359)

The little gypsy Villeboeuf spun around in her turn like the corolla of a flower. We refrained from speaking, dazed by the whirling and the unpleasant light. The draught of the dance drove against the ceiling a veil of smoke that tried, at every pause, to come down again, and I remember that I was content hardly to think, to accept the battered music, that year's little white wine that became tepid as soon as it was poured out and the increasing heat with the smells. Coarse tobacco triumphed, then gave way to green mint, which was effaced by a rough, musty smell of clothes soaked in brine ; but a brown body, sheathed in a little knitted sleeveless jerkin, smelt as it passed of sandalwood, and the swing door of the cellar gave out fumes of wine dripping on sand.

The good shoulder of a friend propped me up and I was waiting until satiety should give me the strength and desire to get up and return to my tiny kingdom, to the anxious cats, the vines, the black mulberry trees. I was waiting for that...a minute more and I'll go..only that truly.(*BD* 122-123)].

The aspiration to return to her “kingdom” is ironic; the gypsy dance, the dancer as dance, the observers as participants (“étourdis de tournoiement”) along with the unanalyzed successive sensory data comprise the “kingdom” which Colette has been revealing the truths of who she is. That more stable domestic domain of cats, vines and mulberry trees that she suggests she wishes to return to turns out to be the same ecstatic space as the scene of the gypsy dance. By writing within a pre-narrative understanding of what she apprehends Colette as a narrator of her own memoir disappears into the “dance” of the phenomenal world, and “she” is indistinguishable from the green mint, the musty odors, the brine, wine-fumes.

The “birthing” dawn approaches with the same cyclic, incantatory notes struck by Colette-as-Renée Néré [Écrire! pouvoir écrire! (I: 1074)]: “L’aube vient, le vent tombe...L’aube vient (III;370) and “Attendre, attendre” (III: 370). The contractions of childbirth suggested metaphorically by the final refrains (as in Renée Néré’s name) amounts to an autobiographical incarnation in which knowledge reveals itself in the interrelationships produced through care by language, by the writer’s body, and by the concrete world.

Colette interprets and writes experience as a primal actuality of such moments and in the interlacing between her flesh and the flesh of the world that language accommodates. When the narrator takes up her mother’s letters in

memoir's finale, the text affirms the instant as such, presence concurrent with absence, provisional self-presence and its obliteration, *ex-static* being:

Mais j'ai scrupule cette fois de réclamer pour moi seule un mot si brûlant. Il tient sa place parmi des traits, des entrelacs d'hirondelle, des volutes végétales, parmi les messages d'une main qui tentait de me transmettre un alphabet nouveau, ou le croquis d'un site entrevu à l'aurore sous des rais qui n'atteindraient jamais le morne zénith. J'y lis un de ces paysages hantés où par jeu l'on cache un visage dans les feuilles, un bras entre deux branches, un torse sous des nœuds de rochers (371)

But I feel a scruple in claiming for myself so burning a word. It has a place among strokes, swallow-like interweavings, plant-like convolutions—all messages from a hand that was trying to transmit to me a plan for a new alphabet or the sketch of some ground-plan envisaged at dawn under rays that would never attend the sad zenith. So that instead of a confused delirium, I see in that letter one of those haunted landscapes where to puzzle you, a face lies hidden among the leaves, an arm in the fork of a tree, a body under a cluster of a rock (140).

This burning word [*si brûlant*] of self-portraiture realizes the living word [*une chose vivante*] of her 1895 letter to Proust. The memoir shows its author's capacity to know human time as an autobiographical sphere of care. In the closing refrains, as she rereads her mother's letter, the act of reading has a compositional arc, as if she were writing what she reads, an immersion in the mother's observant writing about the flowering cactus moment with which *La Naissance* commences. Near its close, Colette can no longer discern a self from that maternal and aesthetic receptivity to the world of things conjured by the letters' words. Care has displaced all other styles of being towards others. The autobiographical words, defined as hers as much as they are her mothers, manifest that intertwining of flesh [*des entrelacs, des volutes*]. The avian and botanical qualities of her mother's script [*d'hirondelle,*

végétales] speak to her example of caring as a focus on spontaneity with the concrete world of insemination, gestation, birth and growth. In the pure autobiographical moment, the past is present just as the present is future.

The memoir becomes a portrait of herself as her mother and both of them within a language that conveys how the mother incorporates her self into natural elements and features of the sensuous world. Colette compares the emerging portrait to puzzles that dare viewers to discern a distinctive face from its compositional background elements. The maternal face and the autobiographer's face appear in a linguistic landscape that is neither wholly human or wholly earth: "l'on cacha un visage dans les feuilles, un bras entre deux branches, un torse sous des nœuds de rochers" (371) [one of those haunted landscapes where, to puzzle you, a face lies hidden among leaves, an arm in the fork of a tree, a body under a cluster of rock].

The dawn that comes but does not arrive fully in the final lines materializes the ecstatic autobiographical moment within language, being not wholly night (past), nor yet morning (present), nor is it the day itself (future). The presence of Colette as autobiographer is distilled into final words on care as the pure form of being, "la faim profonde du moment qui enfante le jour" (371) [The deep hunger for the moment that gives birth to the day].

Chapter Four: Jean Genet, Ecstatic Prisoner

les entrelacs d'une vie

In a revealing interview with the late German playwright Hubert Fichte, Jean Genet describes his first genuine writing experience in 1939, while in prison. Intending to send a Christmas note to a friend, he instead writes to his correspondent about how the peculiar texture of the postcard suggests snow: “Le dos de la carte, la partie réservée à la correspondance était grenue. Et ce grain m’avait beaucoup touché. Et au lieu de parler de la fête de Noël, j’ai parlé du grenu de la carte postale, et de la neige que ça évoquait” (*L’Ennemi* 165) [The back of the card, the part for writing a note, was grainy. And instead of writing a Christmas salutation, I wrote about how the grainy texture suggested snow.] Is the anecdote true? According to biographies, Genet was in prison in Brest in late 1939. As an army deserter turned thief and sometime prostitute on the lam across Europe and North Africa in the 1930s, he likely had (as he also told Fichte) a correspondent in Czechoslovakia. Whether or not Genet only imagined writing about the card’s snow-like texture instead of the Christmas salutation or whether he did so hardly affects its value. The anecdote encapsulates Genet’s unorthodox view that experiential truth resides in the sympathetic body and its hyper-receptive stance toward the world’s physicality, and toward moments of brute contact not amenable to narration.

Autobiographical discourse arises from a self-differentiating ambition, and to

correct, modify and otherwise revise the distinctions between the self and the world that is not that self. Genet's autobiographies confront the impossibility of such individuation. Personal identity is an amalgamation between "Jean Genet" and "not-Jean Genet." Facts of the lived life are limited to discontinuous sensory recollections, accounts of arbitrary encounters and aphoristic ruminations on these recollections and encounters. Genet seeks to release the latent potentials of mixed identity that are contained within remembered incidents that depend on writing about body fluids and fluid bodies, a ceaseless intercourse, what Merleau-Ponty designates the pre-reflective "primitive alliance with the [premade] world," and what Genet himself refers to as "les entrelacs d'une vie" (*Journal* 89) [*the interlacings of a life*]. These are intersections which memory has forgotten but which persevere in the found language within the autobiographical act. The granular whiteness of Genet's prison notecard and how as he touched it the tactile exchange suggests snow, amount to an existential fact more real and more significant to Genet than epistolary communication. In miniscule form, the anecdote articulates the profounder exterior-interior enlacement, life and experience as instants of contact and ineffable transactions with the other.

As a result, Genet's adherence to the facts of memory is secondary to the poetic quest within the space of the autobiographical writing act to voice those ecstatic states of the first-person that have been lost or muted within that memory. The bookended project of *Journal du voleur* (1949) and *Un Captif amoureux* (1986) consciously charts Genet's symbiosis with the underestimated blending of inside

with outside which Merleau-Ponty defines as the non-articulated genesis of embodied knowledge culled in every moment:

I can address myself only to...that blending with the world that recommences for me each morning as soon as I open my eyes to that flux of perceptual life between it and myself which beats unceasingly from morning to night, and which makes my own secret thoughts change the aspect of faces and landscapes for me, as conversely, the faces and landscapes bring me the help sometimes and the menace sometimes of a manner of being a man which they infuse into my life (*Visible and Invisible* 35).

Genet's project uses a metaphorical and poetic prose style to this capture this intertwining of body with world and conflates mirage-like visions, erotic fantasies and megalomaniacal proclamations with unembroidered, factual accounts and mundane historical data. Experience subsists in a reciprocal making and remaking of body and world, not in the explicated division of the self from heterogeneous things. Given the comprehensive immediacy he seeks in his self-representations, there is no autobiographical hierarchy of moments that yield a narrative sequence or a cogent chronology. The rhetorical extravagances cause disequilibrium because the text enacts the decentering of the narrating self in the throes of an experience, and foreground the indeterminable identity of the acting agent that had been stored within his random encounter. The aesthetic act of writing a memoir is the ideal means for making such displacements visible and fully real. The ambition of such an art pervades all activities and all existential endeavors. The thief steals for the same reason the sculptor sculpts. The transactions between artist-body and artist's material parallel the thief at work with the environment and objects of the crime: "Je comprends ce qui lie le sculpteur à sa terre, la peinture à ses couleurs,

chaque ouvrier à la matière qu'il travaille, et la docilité, l'acquiescement de la matière aux gestes de celui qui l'anime, je sais quel amour des doigts passé ces plis, ces trous, ces bosses" (*Journal* 168) [I understand what binds the sculptor to his clay, the painter to his paints, each workman to the matter he works with, and the docility and acquiescence of the matter to the movements of the one who animates it ; I know the love that passes from the fingers into the folds, the holes, the swellings (*TJ* 159). "Le talent" proclaims Genet, (and by "talent" he means both "being" and "autobiography") "'c'est la politesse à l'égard de la matière, il consiste à donner un chant à ce qui était muet" (*Journal* 117) [Talent is courtesy with respect to matter; it consists of giving song to what was dumb (*TJ* 110)]. So palpable is this reversibility and interrelatedness between inside and outside that Genet often defines the objects of the world as elements within him ["en moi-même, ces objets, ces sentiments" (*Journal* 115)]. The memoir narrates the "coloration de son épiderme," an epidermis affected by and also affecting the world as flesh (*Journal* 253). Genet amplifies rather than buffers this within-and without-simultaneity ignored by memory, writing in a style that poet Pablo Neruda calls, "the contacts of man with the earth, a text for troubled lyricists. The used surfaces of things, the wear that hands give to things...the confused impurity of the human condition...the use and disuse of substances, footprints and fingerprints, the abiding presence of the human engulfing all artifacts, inside and out... smelling of lilies and urine."²⁵

²⁵ "Sobre una Poesía sin Pureza" (1935) was an essay Neruda wrote as a defense of his poetry's carnality, a carnality which more established figures in Spanish literature thought to be vulgar. The

Genet's project rescues that never-ending intercourse between inside and outside from forgetfulness: "*Sur-le-champ*, au moment que j'écrivais peut-être ai-je voulu magnifier des sentiments, des attitudes ou des objets " (*Journal* 115; italics mine), a memoir decreed, "par la gravité des moyens, par la magnificence des matériaux" (*Journal* 219) [by the gravity of my means, by the magnificence of the materials]. Submersed in absolute receptivity to the external ["tant de réceptive douceur " (96)] the memoirs fail to extract a fully-surfaced and consistent authorial image settling for "un beauté profonde—une beauté en creux" (*Journal* 117).

Journal du voleur eschews any enumeration of his jail sentences, and never measures transitional days, weeks or months, eschewing any before-and-after links within the thief's improvisations and itinerancy. Extended periods spent in other countries are never summed up in consistent calendared units or as fully explicated episodes with beginnings, middles and ends. Occasionally Genet's rhetoric betrays anxiety about his asynchronous methods and suddenly conforms with a responsibility to be linear:

Je suis né à Paris le 19 décembre 1910. Pupille de l'assistance publique, il me fut impossible de connaître autre chose de mon état civil. Quand j'eus vingt et un ans j'obtins un acte de naissance. Ma mère s'appelait Gabrielle Genet. Mon père reste inconnu. J'étais venu au monde au 22 de la rue d'Assas (*Journal* 46)

I was born in Paris on December 19, 1910. As a ward of the Assistance Publique, it was impossible for me to know anything about my background. When I was twenty-one, I obtained a birth certificate. My mother's name was Gabrielle Genet. My father remains unknown. I came into the world at 22 Rue d'Assas (*Thief's Journal* 44).

This documentary *Jean Genet* parodies both the artifice of bureaucracy and shows how easily willful memory imitates this bureaucratic flattening of existence, and in doing so Genet highlights the nihilism within serialized data. The delineated, commemorated past marked by absence, or ignorance [*impossible de connaître*], this brief concession to an orderly history, disappears into the word “genêt.” The name of the broom flower displaces the false name, the useless pretext, “Genet,” and unleashes a plethora of hermetic truths that define his childhood. The “genêt” flower, unlike the officially sanctioned citizen “Genet,” proliferates in multiple places at once. The broom flower resides in and out of the skin of the earth. Its surplus associations with this childhood atomize *I*, disseminate who *he* is in an associative being that locates the narrator in the soil of Genet’s native Cevennes, the air at nightfall, the stony ruins of Château de Tiffauges, the infamous terrors of the serial killers Gilles de Rais and Joseph Vacher, and the palpable ghosts of their eviscerated victims which haunted him in youth. The polysemous “Genet-genêt” inversion operates as a fact. It is not a poetic diversion from the memoir’s enunciation of a real non-metaphorical *Jean Genet*. The broom flower symbolizes Genet’s interpenetrations of and by objects and those topographies, moments of being beyond himself as he lived them: “Je rejoins aux domaines inférieurs—mais c’est aux fougères arborescentes et a leurs marécages, aux algues, que je voudrais descendre” and, ultimately, the “genêt ailé” [*wing-broom*] (47) [I rejoin the nether realms—though it is to the bracken and their marshes, to the algae, that I should like to

descend (45)].

The search for words equivalent to how the lived self always exceeded its presumed boundaries of “I” involves the quest for, “la charge émotionnelle des mots.” This quest is a necessity rather than a choice ; it is “besoin des mots aux sens incertains, tremblés” (*Captif* 257) [*The need for words whose meanings are uncertain, trembling*]. In *Un Captif amoureux*, as in the *Journal*, Genet as an historical persona does not surface within representational descriptions of himself. As in the *Journal*, *Un Captif* avoids prearranged, official timeframes. The renunciation is particularly forceful given the cultural material available to Genet. After a prolific writing career across genres of poetry, fiction and playwriting, having redrawn the boundaries between art, obscenity, political advocacy, art criticism, and personal confession, and having been spared a life sentence by the legal intervention of Jean Cocteau and other leading French intellectuals, canonized by the two most influential philosophers in the world, Jean Paul Sartre and Jacques Derrida, Genet never discusses these circumstances. Nor does the text reflect retrospectively on the trajectory of that public image. Instead of offering the semblance of concession to static biography, *Un Captif* is an anti-memoir prose poem around checkered, disconnected facts. These disparate souvenirs portray a fragmentary and inconsistent Genet who knows himself, to the extent that he can, only within the porousness of borders. These borders take various forms. They include borders between his skin and the skin of other people and the unstable referential and contradictory elements in words and in names. He is drawn to the secularization

and profanation of religious rituals and mysticism, to the ambiguous border between *performing* one's life and *living* it and to the paradoxical successes achieved by anarchism and political failure.

The reciprocal envelopment of self by world and world by self, what Genet meditates on behind the reflexive verb *s'éclipser* means the autobiographical text only *seems* to be engaging with the phantasmal selves he evokes in the writing. Genet's work demonstrates how language is the double of being. Both being and language, the life and the words used to speak the life, mire the body in a nonhuman concreteness as Genet spells out in one of the *ars poetica* in *Journal du voleur*:

Pour obtenir ici la poésie, c'est-à-dire communiquer au lecteur une émotion que j'ignorais alors - que j'ignore encore - mes mots en appellent à la somptuosité charnelle, à l'apparat des cérémonies d'ici bas, hélas non à l'ordonnance, qu'on voudrait rationnelle, de la nôtre, mais à la beauté des époques mortes et moribondes. J'ai cru, en l'exprimant, la débarrasser de ce pouvoir qu'exercent les objets, les organes, les matières, les métaux, les humeurs, auxquels longtemps un culte fut rendu (diamants, pourpre, sang, sperme, fleurs, oriflammes, yeux, ongles, or, couronnes, colliers, armes, larmes, automne, vent, chimères, marins, pluie, crêpe), et me défaire du monde qu'ils signifient (non de celui qu'ils nomment mais de celui qu'ils évoquent et dans quoi je m'embourbe), ma tentative reste veine. C'est toujours à eux que j'ai recours. Ils prolifèrent et me happent. Par leur faute je traverse les couches généalogiques, la Renaissance, le Moyen Age, les époques carolingienne, mérovingienne, byzantine, romaine, les épopées, les invasions, afin de parvenir à la Fable où toute création est possible (Journal 178; italics Genet's).

In order to achieve poetry here, that is, to communicate to the reader an emotion of which I was ignorant at the time—of which I am still ignorant— my words make appeal to the carnal sumptuousness, the pomp, of the ceremonies of the here-below, not, alas, to the supposedly rational disposition of our epoch, but to the beauty of those that are dead or dying.. I had hoped, by expressing it, to rid it of the power exercised by objects, organs, substances, metals and humors which were for long the object of a cult (diamonds, purple, bloody sperm, flowers, oriflammes, eyes, fingernails, gold, crowns, necklaces, weapons, tears, autumn, wind, chimeras, seamen, rain, crape) and to free myself of the world which they signify (not the one which they name, but the one which they

evoke and in which I am mired); my attempt remains futile. I always have recourse to them (Thief's Journal 168)]

Genet questions memory's necessary differentiation between I and world and believes that central to the truth of the remembered past is an absence and ignorance ["j'ignorais alors - que j'ignore encore"] in what was experienced. Because of memory's habit of distinguished self from world and its tendency to fill in gaps, the autobiographer is amnesiac about his past self in its ecstatic condition until he writes about the past moment. Genet's prevalent metaphor for writing as "pompe," suggests its verb form, "pomper," soaking up or swilling down, the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world as reciprocal imbibing that is best actualized in language. The imaginary characteristics of language [*afin de parvenir à la Fable où toute création est possible*] provide the space for articulating the porous body's contact with thingness, "cet univers luxuriant, foisonnant, envahissant" (*Fragments* 49). This replaces the arrangements of life experience in narrative time. Language exaggerates an ordinary experience so that the movement of the self beyond itself is unlocked from the description in a manner resembling the climaxes that occur within ceremonies or rituals. In a ceremony, everyday time, sequence as such, is suspended. Instead, each moment, gesture and utterance within the ceremony prefigures that ceremony's crowning point. Each gesture within the ritual is synchronized with and encoded with the cumulative point of the whole, and a ceremony's apogee is always a symbolic intersection of outside and inside that defies normal subject-object separateness, such as when a wedding orients its

gestures, words and witnessing bodies around the merging of two into one articulated by the vow; in knighting ceremonies all words and gestures prefigure the transfiguration when the sword taps the warrior's shoulder and transforms him into a king's cavalier; the green glass of the champagne bottle shatters against the side of the departing ship; a Catholic communicant receives the body of Christ into his body. For Genet autobiography composes experiences into literary iterations that replicate the ceremonious suspension of normal time, its metamorphic climaxes, and its coalescences of like and unlike that occur in the ritual.

For Genet, the privileged space and time in the artist's studio involves the creator in dilated durations that resemble ceremonies and lead to a renewed cognizance about how the artistic interaction with the medium reveal identity exceeds the limits of one's skin and extends into the world. That world in the forms of the molded medium correspondingly alters the artist's affect, thoughts and motions, so the artist is as much created by the artwork as he creates it. In making art, the artist's body blends visibly into the medium and responds to the medium as he shapes it. In this way the physicality of artistic process distills the interaction between world and body that always occurs unnoticed in daily existence. The artist replicates, *in extermis*, the living body's exposure to the world, and the artist works by "lend[ing] his body to the world" (*Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics* 125). The artwork turns into physical substance the invisible motion of vision and the interpenetration between seers and seen, subject and object in aesthetic production. The painting is a proxy for Cézanne's eye. The canvas documents the commerce of his eyesight with

what appears before it while the contours and terrain, or skin, of Mont Blanc finds its character within Cézanne as he paints. These hidden inter-corporeal contacts within any artwork answer the metaphysical misconception that the work is wholly its author's image *or* an image of the world. Maker and made exchange places in aesthetic production. His autobiographical works interrogate art such as Rembrandt's or Giacometti's to find analogous means for writing about the ecstatic reality of the self in non-aesthetic activities, a quest that informs Michel Leiris' analysis of the writer-as-matador, and in Colette's stories of the pantomime artiste-as-writer. Genet compares the experience of the self to the ecstasy of the operatic aria [*Un Chant d'amour* (1950)], the death-in-life space of high-wire acrobatics [*Le Funambule* (1958-63)], and the a-historical creations of the sculptor [*L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti* (1954)].

Confronting writer's block in the wake of Sartre's prominent hagiography *Saint Genet: comédien et martyr* (1952), Genet, in an aborted text published in 1954 in *Le Temps modernes*, called "Fragments," compares his precipitous silence as akin to, "sculpter une pierre en forme de pierre" (77) [carving a stone in the form of a stone]. The text as a metaphorical block of stone remains unformed by the writer-as-sculptor because his memory retains past experience as immobilized facts and the artist and his text cannot bring the figures to life. The medium, "retiennent prisonnière la confuse nostalgie d'une action que des hommes accomplirent" (82). In "L'Atelier de Alberto Giacometti," (1958), Genet turns to the Swiss sculptor's procedures, touching the work and being touched by the objects. In that

ceremonious space of the studio Genet is reminded of time as a non-historical ceremony, “l’immemorial nuit” and “d’éternité qui passe” (*Oeuvres V*: 43; italics G.’s) [and immemorial night, *an eternity that passes*]. Decades later, in *Un captif amoureux* he studies the merging that transpires between a Palestinian mother and Hamza [“chacun étant la cuirasse de l’autre”], and, as he attempts to describe their conjoining, he envies how Western sculptors [“depuis...les Carolingiens jusqu’à Michel-Ange”] have efficaciously carved the trope of the *mater dolorosa* [“furent sculptées dans un bois noueux et dur, supposé imputrescible....taillèrent dans les blocs de marbre...le corps très maigre et nu d’un cadavre aux pieds et aux mains percés, le torse et la tête posés sur les genoux d’une femme” (*Captif* 289) [from the Carolingian age to the age of Michelangelo carved out of hard, knotty wood...hewn out of blocks of marble: a gaunt naked corpse with pierced hands and feet and its head and chest resting on the knees of a woman].

In his autobiographical works, he paradigmatically references sculptural processes because that art concretizes the hidden ecstatic nature of identities and bodies. Within his own texts, references to relief and to hewing, to eruption and to discharge abound, and *Jean Genet* surfaces in the materiality of words and names that study this inter-corporal contact, and, in that surfacing, the autobiographical figures seem to *be* and also to *be beyond* themselves, like Michelangelo’s unfinished statues, *Prisoners* (or *Slaves*), that depict writhing human forms straining to emerge, as if perpetually, from their respective marble blocks, surfacing in the present, inchoately. So too Genet’s texts select discrete moments without arranging them

into causal chains and then he traces from random factual moments their innate (latent and invisible in memory) changeability and incipience, irruptions and eruptions between inside and outside, a discourse around breaking out and of collapsing within, exaltation and abjection, a never-ending succession of experiences of being “outside” himself. Like the viewer before Michelangelo’s emergent *Prisoners*, and like Genet before Giacometti’s solitary figures, Genet’s reader is recused from narrative time and history and implicated into the ontology of aesthetic being and autobiography-as-process. The text is a ceremony of instantaneous spectacles. The reader must apprehend and discern Genet’s indeterminate figurations of himself; these figures concretize how his interiority and exteriority blend and they concretize time as a transience that defies the logical markers of past, present and future. This engagement with the materiality of language and hermeneutical playfulness led Roland Barthes to name Genet an exemplar of a modern autobiographer who inscribes his body’s erogenous, tenuous presence rather than mimetically represents a biographical wholeness.²⁶

The *Journal*, centering on his youthful métiers as an army deserter, gay prostitute and prolific thief, and *Un Captif*, ruminating on life living among refugees and revolutionaries, delineate those experiences as random aesthetic undertakings not amenable to linearity. Implored by interviewer Hubert Fichte to speak about his

²⁶ “Figuration is the way in which the erotic body appears ...in the profile of the text. For example: the author may appear in the text (Genet, Proust) but not in the guise of a direct biography (which would exceed the body, give a meaning to life, forge a destiny)...the (figurative) text itself, a diagrammatic and not an imitative structure, can reveal itself in the form of a body, split into fetish objects, into erotic sites. All these movements attest to a figure of the text” (*Pleasures of the Text* 56).

radical political views in non-artistic terms, Genet declares a revealing fundamentalism when he answers, “Je ne peux dire la vérité qu’en art” (163) [*I can only speak the truth in art*]. The reply is doubly revealing.

Genet’s aesthetic fundamentalism is that even seemingly worthless or arbitrary life experiences must be encrypted with the subject-object interplay that are associated with ceremonies or in artistic production. In contrast, the straightforward linear methods of journalism, biography and history those loci of the world’s knowledge are fictitious. For Genet these non-fictional modes are fictions not because facts do not exist, and certainly not because the effects of power and violence which they record do not exist, but because such texts’ draw their conclusions and their representations of the real by ignoring the fluidity of any singular identity, that ambiguous reciprocity between seer and seen, body and world which the processes of art make visible. In recalibrating autobiographical time as ceremonious rather than chronometric intervals, Genet spells out this structure using a trinity of sometimes overlapping categories that he repeats throughout *Journal* and *Un Captif* and in his art criticism: *prétexte*, *acte* and *oscillation*, a trinity that provides the means for understanding how ecstasy operates in and gives formal shape to Genet’s memoirs. These terms can only be explained through examples from those works but a brief overview of what each construct means is necessary before proceeding to an account of how each pertain to ecstatic moments in *Journal du voleur* and *Un Capitf amoureux*.

The term *pretext* is a comprehensive category that sums up Genet’s basic

belief that all his lived experiences are equally worthless in and of themselves. The texts present no proportional perspectives and no comparative measurements for the reader to know how the narrator weighs the significance of any one experience over another. This nihilism about experience derives from what I have labeled Genet's aesthetic fundamentalism, the autobiographical premise and moral outlook that the only manner in which lived experience can produce meaning is if it is restaged within a text that subtly yet methodically allegorizes the incident to disclose it as if it were a ceremony or an artistic production. This reconfiguration of the lived experience is the main meaning of the words *act* and *pompe* which Genet uses in reference to how writing (the *act*) embellishes and makes the past more real and ecstatic than it is in the consolidating work of memory or history. The autobiographical descriptors, metaphors and lyrical associations come about from this transference of a negligible, random experience, the existential *pretext*, into its literary stylization within a ceremonious suspension of normal chronology, and this stylization is the *act* to which Genet constantly refers. The autobiographical act, or figuration, causes a spontaneous dissonance for the narrator and, by implication, for Genet as his own author. This fertile discord within the writer as he writes, which he names an *oscillation*, manifests itself in the multiple and contradictory meanings and competing affective states induced by the poetic rendering of an experience and that instability and opacity positions the autobiographical "I" outside the limits of a singular presence in the world or in the memoir. In this manner, the otherwise useless experience actualizes meanings only latent in the life.

Once such example which demonstrates how the trinity of pretext-act-oscillation is related to Genet's autobiographical and ecstatic mission is in the *Journal's* capsule opening chapter, which functions as a stylistic overture to the memoir. The narrator equates the brutality of Santé's inmates, whom the state has dressed in pink inmate uniforms, with the fragility of flowers: "*un étroit rapport entre les fleurs et les bagnards. La fragilité, la délicatesse des premières sont de même nature que la brutale insensibilité des autres*" (9; italics, Genet's.) [*There is a close relationship between flowers and convicts. The fragility and delicacy of the former are of the same nature as the brutal insensitivity of the latter (Thief's Journal 9)*]. This anomalous, counter-intuitive realization that both fragility and brutality arise from the same nature is not framed as a sentiment or a conclusion which the narrator formulated or realized prior to the writing act. The analogy and insights appear in the motion of writing. Although the erotic attraction to the inmates exists somewhere in the inmate's former life and in his memory that past arousal functions as a static fact, or pretext, a blankness from which the memoirist now spells out the complicated rhapsodic *rapport*. Written into a memoir which views sexuality and incarceration as opportunities for personal expression and self-experimentation rather than as psychological or cultural-historical predicaments, the factual *pretext* becomes an aesthetic *act* and is now real beyond a representational obligation to memory or to coherence of the narrated life. The cryptic coupling of flowers and prisoners, brutality and fragility, moves the pretext-fact (the past erotic desire in Santé) beyond a single deducible meaning, seemingly

beyond interpretation. In the crucial footnote, Genet elaborates on and adds to this literary act by further exploring how this peculiar prisoner-flower rapport affects him *now* and causes further destabilizing swerves in his present desire: “mon émoi *c’est l’oscillation des unes aux autres*” (*Journal* 9; italics mine) [My excitement is the oscillation from one to the other (*TJ* 9)]. The oscillation is comprised of the cognitive dissonance and contradictory insights caused by the competing perspectives on the inmates, realizations that the improvisations of the memoir’s associative style and its focus on the discontinuous past moment bring to autobiographical awareness. The flower-prisoner *rapport* encapsulates the alternating and competing emotions and affiliations in one moment and their incompatible presence in him undermine rather than consolidate *Jean Genet*. The metaphorically described floral-colored stripes of the prison garb become experience itself; the prisoners are brutal and capable of brutality that paradoxically enhances an underlying fragility, their wide-ranging capacity for variable contact, (rough, gentle, and non-appropriating) resonates in ways that eclipse the imperative to narrate the prisoner’s life. This semantic vortex arises from an act of writing that focuses on the synergy between the narrator and fellow prisoners, the outside and the inside, the eyes and seen objects, skin and clothes, color and content.

The three autobiographical categories of pretext, act and oscillation overlap in his memoirs. An oscillation can provide a pretext for further figurations. The oscillation within the flower-prisoner conflation leads to more extravagant allusions to a flower within him and to a floral-like dehiscence in the self-scattering act of

writing: “Et chaque fleur en moi dépose une si grave tristesse que toutes doivent signifier le chagrin, la mort” (*Journal* 11) [And each flower within me leaves behind so solemn a sadness that all of them must signify sorrow (*TJ* 10-11)].²⁷

The recruitment of his addressed reader into the autobiographical ceremony is also part of the memoir’s content. Like the perplexed viewer before Michelangelo’s unfinished *Prisoners*, the reader bears witness to an identity that *emerges* rather than coalesces within a present characterized by ecstasy. In writing on Giacometti’s work, Genet describes sitting for his portrait for so long that he loses hold on an awareness of duration. He imagines dialogues between Mozart and Frederic II, he records actual dialogues on art between himself and the sculptor, he sees himself seeing the painter, and he reveals cryptic details about Giacometti’s nocturnal schedule, describing the artist as if he were a quasi-criminal performer whose body evaporates into his sculpting in a time-suspending activity, like an elated version of Kafka’s caged hunger artist.

As Giacometti’s witness, Genet defines himself as an active, integral portion of the studio’s ceremony. He touches the sculptures, “Mes doigts refont donc ce qu’ont fait ceux de Giacometti” declaring “ma main vit, ma main voit” (*Œuvre* V: 53) [*My fingers remake what Giacometti’s made...my hand lives, my hand sees*]. Through visual concentration on the statues and tactile intercommunication with the surfaces, the essay studies how the artworks empty Giacometti’s objects of a

²⁷ As an “act,” the *Journal* subsumes the ethical responsibility of rhetoric into its theatrically phantasmal effects, as Jacques Derrida notes: Genet’s “fleurs qui sont à la fois des fleurs de rhétorique et des mises en scène—et en question—de la rhétorique” (*Glas* 146).

contextualizing temporal relevance, and the sculptures are no longer, like memory and history, pretexts, but experiences of a pure solitude that make visible the otherwise invisible space where viewer and object, the toucher and the touched, merge:

Cette capacité d'isoler un objet et de faire affluer en lui ses propres, ses seules significations n'est possible que par l'abolition historique de celui regarde. Il faut qu'il fasse un effort exceptionnel pour se déprendre de toute histoire, de sorte qu'il ne devient pas une sorte de présent éternel mais plutôt *une course vertigineuse et ininterrompue d'un passé vers un futur, une oscillation d'un extrême à l'autre, empêchant le repos*" (V: 58, it., mine)

This capacity to isolate an object and make its own, its unique significations flow into it is possible only through the historical abolition of the one who is looking. He must make an exceptional effort to divest himself of all history so that he becomes not a sort of eternal present, but rather a vertiginous an uninterrupted passage from a past to a future, an oscillation of one extreme to another, preventing rest (*Fragments of the Artwork* 113).

The eradication of historical consciousness [*l'abolition historique*] derives from the viewer's attention as much as from the sculptor's figures. Like Genet's competing meanings and multifarious effects of autobiographical self-figuration, these *oscillations* in Giacometti's works are caused by Giacometti's *act*, summed up in how his statues concretize an absolute solitude and in that solitude invite an equally solitary viewer into a prolonged moment of a-historical transcendence.

The applicability of Genet's theory about creative, mobile perception even towards non-art objects and situations is central to interpreting his own autobiographical project because the particular style of seeing he espouses detaches experience from chronological or historical frameworks: "mon regard le fait échapper à tout ce qui l'entoure, si mon regard (mon attention) empêche que ce

visage se confonde avec le reste du monde.....cette solitude est obtenue, par laquelle mon regard le coupe du monde, c'est sa seule signification qui va affluer et s'entasser dans ce visage...si elle veut être esthétique doit refuser d'être historique (V: 58) [my gaze makes it [a face] escape everything that surrounds it, if my gaze (my attention) prevents this face from being confused with everything that surrounds it....if it is supposed to be aesthetic it must refuse to be historical. The viewer shapes the seen face with his creative gaze and suspends the passage of time. That concentration produces the insight into the absolute uniqueness and exceptionalism of the object and the seer and seen commune in a timeless experience. That style collapses the usual temporally based differentiations between Genet as seeing subject and what he sees, the Genet who touches and the world that is touched. The artwork's ecstatic influence on both the artist and viewer, also produces multiple meanings and conflicting, incompatible correspondences, irreducible to rational discourse. Although histories, autobiographies, and personal identities can accommodate competing interpretations of events in the record of a lived life, such cultural forms of knowledge prohibit the presentation of the self as incoherent. Genet's autobiographical *oscillations* within his narrator's thought and affect amount to an erasure of subjectivity as self presence dissolves into the text's radiating correspondences. Such a text unseats the authority of memory and other structured forms of identity, causing what Nietzsche defines in *The Birth of Tragedy* as the drastic breakdown of the *principium individuationis*:

[T]he tremendous dread that grips man when he suddenly loses his way amidst the cognitive forms of appearance, because the principle of sufficient

reason, in one of its forms, seems suspended. If we add to this dread the blissful ecstasy which, prompted by the same fragmentation of the *principum individuationis*, rises up from man's core, indeed from nature, we are vouchsafed a glimpse into the nature of the Dionysian....His gestures express his enchantment...Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: the artistic power of the whole of nature reveals itself to the supreme gratification of the primal Oneness amidst the paroxysms of intoxication (17-18).

In the *Journal*, Genet continuously articulates precisely the fact of this enigmatic dissolution of wholeness. In poetically describing the properties of an otherwise unexceptional crime with his accomplice Guy, the narrator realizes how this hollow fact of memory makes the pickpocketing fact a mere *pretext* that leads to the current, unplanned gesture of writing about it; as the pretext is written and stylized it (and not the lived event itself) causes the narrator an emotional fragmentation compared to both a bomb igniting and to a rupturing anther and the scattering of that flower's seeds in auto-reproduction:

Mais en moi-même cette présence totale qui se transforme en une bombe d'une puissance que je crois terrible, donne à l'acte une gravité, une unicité terminale—le cambriolage au moment qu'on le fait est toujours le dernier, non que l'on pense n'en plus faire après celui-là, on ne pense pas, mais qu'un tel rassemblement de soi ne peut avoir lieu (non dans la vie, il nous conduirait, poussé davantage, hors d'elle)—et cette unicité d'un acte qui se développe (la rose sa corolle) en gestes conscients, sûrs de leur efficacité, de leur fragilité et pourtant de la violence qu'ils donnent à cet acte, lui accorde encore ici la valeur d'un rite religieux (*Journal* 31-32)

But within myself, this total presence, which is transformed into a bomb of what seems to me terrific power imparts to the act a gravity, a terminal oneness—the burglary, while being performed, is always the last, not that you think you are not going to perform another after that one—you don't think—but because such a gathering of self cannot take place (not in life, for to push it further would be to pass out of life); and this oneness of an act which develops (as the rose puts forth its corolla) into conscious gestures sure of their efficacy, of their fragility and yet of the violence which they give

to the act, here too confers upon it the value of a religious rite (*TJ* 30).

Genet's autobiographical "unicité terminale" parallels a mystic's self-erasure and Nietzsche's Dionysian dissolution of the *principum individuationis* in tragic art. Jean-Francois Lyotard advocates a form of criticism that focuses on art's kinetic impact in terms that apply to reading Genet's memoirs and to understanding ecstatic moments in art. Art or any sig does not produce meaning or resist meaning. Like sensation and perception, art is a ceremony around intersubjective resonances and contacts that create an impetus towards *being beyond oneself*. Genet's pretexts, the lived fact, bring about such meaning through the act, the writing moments of his memoir. In terms that are useful for understanding Genet's performative style of autobiography, Lyotard argues, an act of art or language "sets us in motion" rather than coalesces into meaning(s):

Marcel's father climbs the stairs with his lamp: you hear in the agitation of his son the effect of the Oedipal structure, but we seek to continue this agitation in the fabrication of other things, texts, images, sounds...we do not suppose to begin with, that the signs in Proust's text...are the vehicle for messages that are in principle communicable. We don't start off by saying to ourselves: someone or something is speaking to us here, so I must try to understand. To understand, to be intelligent, is not our overriding passion. We strive instead to be set in motion. This is why our passion would be more like the dance that Nietzsche wanted, and that Cage and Cunningham continue to look for (*Lyotard Reader* 9).²⁸

Lyotard's theory posits that aesthetics involves what he describes as affective

²⁸Genet cites his reading of *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* as a mobilizing experience ["La première phrase était si dense, si belle que cette aventure était une première grande flamme qui annonçait un grand brasier"(166). Writing about reading, Proust situates texts as incitements, "incitations": "Nous sentons très bien que notre sagesse commence où celle de l'auteur finit, et nous voudrions qu'il nous donnât des réponses, quand tout ce qu'il peut faire est de nous donner des désirs" (Sur la Lecture in *Essais*).

“intensities” between bodies, or between subjects and objects. In a tone similar to Bersani’s critique of psychoanalytical reductions, Lyotard critiques how these intensities are viewed as negative transferences within enclosed sign-systems (semiotics) or from a compensatory impulse towards substitution in response to a missing object (psychoanalysis). In Genet’s work, such influences are produced beyond narrative exposition and happen within the imperious and ceremonious reenactment of an experience (in the trinity of pretext-act-oscillation), so that his memoirs are “unbounded excitations of force which are characterized by their displaceability; their instantaneity and their resistance to the temporal syntheses of memory” (*Lyotard Reader* 11). From these intercorporeal effects, the work offers up neither personal subjects nor world-objects but momentary “encounters,” in what Lyotard names as “tuchè.” Artistic acts, “initiatives” and “events,” cause a pre-biographical, anonymous sense-based interlinking, such that the body of artist, viewer and that world of objects and language form a heterogeneous libidinal field and the artist’s physical “laxity” “lower[s] the barriers that in theory separate exterior from interior reality,” creating through the work (and thus through the chosen medium) an awareness of, “a single libidinal surface without thickness of limits, which does not exist prior to what might be produced there by pen, brush, noise or voice, but is produced by the operations that transform affective intensities into colours, sounds, sentences. The artistic body extends beyond the body of the artist and beyond any body that might be closed in on itself in its supposed three dimensional identity” (*Lyotard Reader* 164). Genet’s memoirs reveal and exploit this

laxity both formally and thematically in his selection of facts that become the raw material for his autobiography. Ordinary experiences are chosen for their ecstatic nature, such as the recurring images of clasping of hands, of a hand surreptitiously invading another's pocket, of pilfered goods clenched in the thief's flesh, and of innumerable oral and genital ablutions lover-to-lover: "Me sentais-je alors bien en exil, et ma nervosité m'allait rendre perméable à ce que—a défaut d'autres mots—nommerai la poésie" (56). Permeability rather than selfhood is Genet's autobiographical aim, insitigtaing what Lyotard calls art's mobilizing "affinity," between subject and object: "[B]etween the artistic object, the displacement potential of libidinal energy, of unexpected forms, and finally the ephemeral and unique character of the emotional power produced by this encounter" (*Lyotard Reader* 165).

Prétexte à mon irisation

Genet's narrator grasps that what he lived is a *pretext* in the moment at which he is acting by writing about the occasion. Writing reminds Genet of the aesthetic destiny of an experience because the autobiographical act alone releases its premonitory potential. The memoirs privilege the present conversion in the writing moment, and the realization of the fact's latency through expressive language. Genet empties lived acts and even memory itself of any pre-literary significations that would make the autobiography accord with or represent content outside of its own discourse. In this sense the work *de-realizes* a past fact, and negates any presumptive meanings that might endure extra-literarily in its author's life. Like shapeless clay slapped by a potter on to the mound on the spinning wheel, a past fact is deliquesced into the memoir's present mobile *act*, and that experiential clay, or *pretext* has no further reality apart from how it forms an *act* in the presently accruing text. Since daily experience is premised around a conscious subjectivity at a distance from objects in the world, reality is only real (ecstatic) when it is processed into art that collapses that distance. Once the past is converted into the rhetorical and poetic act, it produces affective and cognitive oscillations as it is written and those changes and permutations become the work's sole meanings. In a long footnote to *Journal du voleur*, Genet informs his reader that

fidelity to accurate remembrance of the lost past, or anamnesis, is not his

autobiography's purview:

Avec des mots si j'essaie de recomposer mon attitude d'alors, le lecteur ne sera pas dupe plus que moi. Nous savons que notre langage est incapable de rappeler même le reflet de ces états défunts, étrangers. Il en serait de même pour tout ce journal s'il devait être la notation de qui je fus. Je préciserai donc qu'il doit renseigner sur qui je suis, aujourd'hui que je l'écris. Il n'est pas une recherche du temps passé, mais une œuvre d'art dont la matière-prétexte est ma vie d'autrefois. Il sera un présent fixé à l'aide du passé, non l'inverse (75-76).

If I attempt to recompose with words what my attitude was at the time, the reader will be no more taken in than I. We know that our language is incapable of recalling even the pale reflection of bygone, foreign states... It [the Thief's Journal] is meant to indicate what I am today, as I write it. It is not a quest of time gone by, but a work of art whose pretext-subject is my former life. It will be a present fixed with the help of the past, and not vice versa (*TJ* 71).

Elusive vanished states -- "états défunts" -- concern him not solidly recalled realities ["la notation de qui je fus"]. The emphasis on *states* of being implies that ephemerality and impermanence define experience. In reality, *I* is temporarily in question, existing within the reciprocal sensory interaction between the body and the objects and others who populate that past situation. Recreating that flux in a present language is Genet's priority. Part of that project means remaining indifferent to whether the present poeticizing complies with how national, official records or personal memory normally conceive a past event as static, finished and interpretable. In shifting the semantic emphasis from the lived facts to the charge of such ecstasies in their present writing, otherwise valueless experiences are vitalized into a creative present that is then indistinguishable from the past. The

work retraces the ecstatic nature of an original encounter and it then induces a further disorientation, or oscillation, in the author and narrator and potentially in a receptive reader. The *Journal* evokes heroic lovers while simultaneously declaring that the heroism attributed to the past is imaginary:

Le lecteur est prévenue—c'est bien son tour—que ce rapport sur ma vie intime ou ce qu'elle suggère ne sera qu'un chant d'amour. Exactement, ma vie fut la préparation d'aventures (non de jeux) érotiques, dont veux maintenant découvrir le sens. Hélas, c'est l'héroïsme qui m'apparait le plus chargé de vertu amoureuse, et puisqu'il n'est de héros qu'en notre esprit il faudra donc les créer. Alors j'ai recours aux mots...Ceux que j'écris fut-il vrai? Faux? Seul ce livre d'amour sera réel. *Les faits qui lui servirent de prétexte?* Je dois en être le dépositaire. Ce n'est pas eux que je restitue (106-107; italics mine).

The reader is informed that this report on my inner life or what it suggests will be only a song of love. To be exact, my life was the preparation for erotic adventures (not play) whose meanings I now wish to discover. Alas, heroism is what seems most charged with amorous properties, and since there are no heroes except in our minds, they will therefore have to be created. So I have recourse to words...Was what I wrote true? False? Only this book of love will be real. *What of the facts which served as its pretext?* I must be their repository. It is not they that I am restoring (*TJ* 100).

Genet cautions the reader against applying the epistemological game of true or false, of asking of the memoir with *did he or didn't he?* The narrative inclines toward *truths* produced within the unfolding action of the current text, and in its ceremonious conversion of the empty past, the *pretexts*, into words. To Genet, memory's fictions about value and heroism in an experience underscore the myth-making stasis with which memory imbues and falsifies the past.

In *Un Captif* Genet notes that life is nothing without the act of writing, “ma vie ...n'était qu'une feuille de papier blanc” (*Un Captif*, 246-247) [my life was nothing but a blank sheet of paper]. Even the purportedly dramatic transgressions such as

unrepentant crimes, extreme sexual promiscuity and subversive political actions are vacuous until reinstalled as memoir. In the *Journal* the thief confesses, “Mais il est peu important que je sache voler admirablement pour mon profit terrestre: ce que j’air recherché surtout c’est d’être la conscience du vol dont j’écris le poème” (100) [But the fact that I know how to steal admirably for earthly profit is not important; what I have sought most of all has been to be the consciousness of the theft whose poem I am writing (*TJ* 94)]. This echoes a similar claim about crime as raw material for art which Genet makes in *Miracle de la rose* (1946), “J’aime l’acte de dérober parce que je le vois, en lui-même, élégant” (344). [I love the act of stealing because I find it elegant in itself].

The two predominant activities described in *Journal*, prostitution, the pretense of desiring someone, and thievery, the bliss in taking another’s property, underscore the absence of a practical investment in either love or profit that courses through those lived events. Compared to the legendary accomplishments of famous criminals, Genet’s thievery seems a ruse that lays the groundwork for a future memoir or novel that will record it. The thief’s past serves a predestined subsequent literary act that finally affirms it as valuable because its representation uncovers hidden ecstatic conditions of the self: “Le but de ce récit, c’est d’embellir mes aventures révolues, c’est-a-dire obtenir d’elles la beauté, découvrir en elles ce qui aujourd’hui suscitera le chant, seule preuve de cette beauté” (215) [The aim of this account is to embellish my earlier adventures, in other words, to extract beauty from them, to find in them the element of beauty which today will elicit song,

the only proof of this beauty (TJ 203)]. The past needs embellishing [*d'embellir*] because in and of itself it lacks significance. Experience prior to a writing gesture means nothing. Only as the narrator writes the past experiences do they reveal that they contained within them an embryonic stimulus about how “Jean Genet” is inside and outside that self, as the toucher and the touched, through transactions with objects and others, transactions which their present literary expression, the rite, or act, of embellishment, *actualizes*. The thief’s holding and hoarding of prized objects which blur the distinction between his skin and that world magnifies the ecstasy of subjects and objects which are hidden under the torpor of daily habit. He steals to provide material for the aesthetic ceremony: “Ce n’est qu’après le vol, et grâce à la littérature, que le voleur chante son geste” (232) [It is only after a theft, thanks to literature, that the thief sings his act]. Finding semantic equivalences in shiftless past experiences induces a ravishing sense of beauty, pleasurable atomizations of the narrator, and cogitative *oscillations* which those pretexts were destined to grant the living author once he wrote off them: “j’ai recherché surtout c’est d’être la conscience du vol dont j’écris le poème”(100) [I have sought most of all to be the consciousness of the theft whose poem I am writing].

The interpretation of his motives and undertakings as literary pretexts defines *Un Captif amoureux* as well. Pressed by Fichte to clarify the political commitment that informs *Un Capif*, Genet disavows investment in revolutionary outcomes and claims that it is a quest for poetic motion, rather than the freedom of the oppressed, which motivate his sympathies with radicals: “Non, parce que je ne

tiens pas tellement à ce qu'il y ait révolution. Si je suis sincère, je n'y tiens pas. La situation actuelle, les régimes actuels me permettent la révolte, mais la révolution ne me permettrait probablement pas la révolte, c'est-à-dire, la révolte individuelle" (*L'Ennemi* 156).

Interpreting memorable figures as those people who understood autobiography requires the projection of an ecstatic presence from the backdrop of an otherwise blank life, Genet describes them as artistic geniuses rather than as moral or spiritual leaders to be interpreted:

Quand l'homme compose un image qu'il veut propager, qu'il veut même substituer à lui-même, il cherche, il se trompe, il esquisse des aberrations ...du Socrate, du Christ, de Saladin, de Saint-Just...ont réussi la prouesse de projeter autour d'eux et dans la futur, une image—correspondant ou non à ce qu'ils furent mais cela n'a pas d'importance puisqu'ils en surent arracher cette image vigoureuse (*Un Captif* 429-430)

When a man invents an image that he wants to propagate, that he may even want to substitute for himself, he starts by experimenting, making mistakes...Socrates, Christ, Saladin, Saint-Just...succeeded in projecting an image around themselves and into the future. It doesn't matter whether or not the image corresponds to what they were really like: they managed to wrest a powerful image from that reality (*Prisoner of Love* 302).

According to Genet, these martyrs of philosophy, religion and revolution knew that their experiences and ideals would not exceed their lives if their examples are fossilized into stable narrations and reiterations. He defines these icons as performers who knew that the mobilizing effects of a gesture or a speech-event outlasts its rational content or its reflective retention by others. These famous men built their existences around gestures of language or the body in which who they were seemed to be both contained by their identity and surpassing that identity.

Socratic dialogues worked their auditors into mute epiphanies and acute quandaries. The paradoxical endings of Christ's parables spellbound their listeners and resonate through the centuries. His miracles around touching instantaneously converted the Other to his teachings. Saint-Just's rhetorical flourishes penetrated the consciousness of the insurrection and brought the axe down on the monarch's neck. The drinking of the hemlock, the nailing to the cross, and the head lowered onto the guillotine's wood gruesomely symbolize the crossing-over of inside into outside and vice versa. These sacrificial and emblematic moments have more force than do the inherited systems of thought or the incorporation of their lives into narratives to fit in to wider narratives of knowledge in the form of cogent philosophical treatises, interpretive biographies and hagiographies, religious treaties and centuries of exegesis, or annals of the French Revolution.

In this light, the thief's past acts of preparation in *Journal* gain curious prominence disproportionate to the heist itself because in reconfiguring them as *literary* acts the criminal's lengthy arrangements make discernible the anticipatory body of the thief immersed and conveyed through an equally charged landscape of words and things in which the criminal is his environment and the environment is the thief. "J'éprouve le sentiment que d'ici peu de temps tout doit lâcher (218) [I have the feeling that in a little while everything is going to break wide open]. In recounting his crimes, Genet revives the existential gambles which the thief's memory encloses as done, like how the slightest error in a burglary could rain on the thief's body the worst catastrophe. The foreboding and aftereffect of a crime

matter more to Genet because the resonances defy a clear separation of the body from its surroundings and the preparatory and epilogic dimensions of the thief's past crimes occasion literary gestures about them which in turn intensify their affective and intellectual consequences, *now*, in writing. Arrested prior to a planned burglary of a museum somewhere in France, the narrator tells of how the police tore up preliminary drawings he had made of the coveted rare books locked in showcases. Though his renditions of the rare books were destroyed by the police, the graphic act, the drawings, which were originally only pretexts to the aborted museum heist made him aware of books as objects worthy of stealing and the memoir depicts the thief caressing their covers, admiring the spines, merging with their aura, and then taking up that specialty (book thievery) at which he becomes so deft that he would steal from right under a shopkeeper's nose. These successive insights emerge from a ceremonious style that transforms the subterfuge of the drawings into an evocative gesture. The narrator spares no extravagance in his exposition of the crimes, not matter how petty, because he feels a moral obligation to articulate their ecstatic nature. He draws connections between the drawings as productive of the subsequent career of book stealing, and comes to life through the congenial interpenetration of himself and the art-book as object once he dares to describe the drawings in the *Journal*.

Every random and discrete past experience contains such an embryonic purpose for the present such that in its literary conversion the experience is irreducible to one outcome: "J'eus recours à la magie...une sorte de *prédisposition*

voulue, une intuitive complicité avec la nature ” (75, italics Genet’s) [I had recourse to a kind of magic, that is, to a kind of deliberate *predisposition*, an intuitive complicity with nature *TJ* 71]]. The transmutation of the crime into autobiographical language has a moral weight different from the legal system that measures the crime as intrinsically immoral. The writing thief emerges as the preeminent artist among his fellow convicts and thieves not because of an innate talent with words but because he understands the concealed aesthetic intentionality of the lived life. With this knowledge, his narrators gauge how effectively a given incident is put to use towards either a fine or a debased autobiographical gesture. In his autobiographical *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (1948), the narrator describes the killer, Ernestine, clutching a revolver, “pregnant” with her soon-to-be-victim, Culafroy [“grosse du meurtre, enceinte d’un mort”]. The narrator observes, by writing, how her premeditation reveals the otherwise invisible meanings of the moment [“surhuman ou extra-lucide”]. Ernestine is delineated as a tragic failure by Genet because she proves herself incapable of a ceremonious transformation of the act in its ecstatic truth. So Genet’s narrator induces that alteration himself by writing about her not from a perverse desire to glorify the homicide but to develop multiple significances from a single, dreadful killing:

Le geste final d’Ernestine aurait pu s’accomplir vite, mais, comme Culafroy d’ailleurs, elle sert un texte qu’elle ignore, que j’inscris, et dont le dénouement doit arriver en son heure. Ernestine sait tout ce que son acte comporte de misérablement littéraire, mais qu’elle doive se soumettre à une mauvaise littérature la rend plus touchante encore à ses yeux et aux nôtres. Dans le drame comme dans toute la vie, elle échappe à l’orgueilleuse beauté. (*Notre Dame* 30)

Ernestine's gesture might have been performed quickly, but, like Culafroy in fact, she is serving a text whose dénouement will occur when the time is ripe. Ernestine is perfectly aware of how ridiculously literary her act is, but that she has to submit to cheap literature makes her even more touching in her own eyes and ours. In drama as in all of life she escapes vainglorious beauty (66).

This literary rendition of the murder carries the implied message that *his* text exceeds in complexity the trite manner in which Ernestine conceives her murderous act, and positions her like a pitiable Emma Bovary consumed by cheap literary tropes in contrast to the writer's vision. He reads and interprets the act's premeditation as a pregnancy, the actual shooting as a gruesome birth, the gun as a continuation of her arm. But her own violent act is one-dimensional because of her narrow-minded approach to it. Before the act, she cowed in advance before its possible outcomes: "Ernestine n'acceptait de tuer qu'à la condition d'éviter l'horreur que l'ici-bas ne manquerait pas de lui susciter (convulsions, reproches des yeux consternés de l'enfant, sang et cervelle qui giclent) et l'horreur d'un au-delà angélique" (*Miracle* 28). [Ernestine agreed to kill only on condition that she avoid the horror that the here below would not fail to inspire in her (convulsions, squirting blood and brain, reproaches in the child's dismayed eyes), and the horror of an angelic beyond, or perhaps to make the moment more stately (*Miracle of the Rose* 64)]. To Genet, this cowardice is an aesthetic blindness of her character that comes from an unwillingness to pay maximum attention and to expose oneself to a moment's plethora of significations. It is a shortcoming in Ernestine that is more despicable to Genet than the murder itself.

In the *Journal*, the emptiness of experience induces in the narrator a need to poetically excavate it and experience the fluctuations of the self that result from the writing. Often Genet borrows the lives of others to find suitable material to fulfill the ecstatic determination of his writing. The lives of the ideal and virile older thieves often serve this function. Paralleling the evocation of the floral-colored prison garb in the memoir's overture, Armand's sailor costumes and poses are interpreted as attempts to be a, "figure lui-même de l'érotisme le plus irritant, il le voulait encore exprimer par le langage et de la geste" (144) [himself a figure of the most provocative eroticism, he wished to express it by language and gesture]. Besides detecting the implied expressive gestures of Stilitano and valorizing him, the narrator himself is a beneficiary of the description's erotic effect on him so that his process of writing both takes in the experience and creates an immediate experience as he writes. When he names himself their *pretext*, he is referring both to his experiences as a junior member of their gang and to how they seem to him as he writes to have been all along providing material for the writing that was to come from Genet: "Habitué à la pudeur de Stilitano et, dans les bars des dockers a leur grossièreté, j'étais le témoin, souvent le prétexte des plus audacieuses précisions" (144) [Accustomed to Stilitano's modesty and to the crudeness of the dockers in their bars, I was the witness of, and often the pretext for, proceedings which were the height of audacity (135)].

When the ex-legionnaire, Stilitano, considers becoming a spy for Germany, Genet shuns the option for himself. But he does so not because he finds duplicity

morally reprehensible. As a proponent of exile and betrayal as transformative acts, Genet distances himself from Stilitano's ambition because the latter bases his choice of espionage on the empty, reductive and narrow expectation that the outcome will be monetary profit and criminal prestige, neither of which appeals to the narrator. For Genet the masquerade of the spy is interesting because it reflects on an aesthetic feature of existence. In espionage, behavior is vacated of any overt motive. The spy lacks decidable origins. His convincing sincerity marks the excellence of his deception. The crossing of national borders, which appears in *Journal* almost as often as crime, makes the narrator feel like he is a spy in a disinterested, uncommitted sense, quite distinct from the programmatic and institutional purposes of a literal spy as Stilitano conceives of it. By alienating him from French identity and historical transparency, border-crossing causes him to consider an aesthetic ontology, "j'étais prêt à agir non selon les règles de la morale mais selon certaines lois d'une esthétique romanesque"(52) [I was ready to act, not in accordance with the rules of morality but in accordance with certain laws of a fictional aesthetic (49-50)]. Here "les règles de la morale" refers to value systems in which the doer must answer for his behavior as an avowed, verifiable self. In the novelistic aesthetic, exemplified by espionage and the thief's border-crossing, and in the ecstatic memoir, the narrator does not appear as a fixed citizen named and tracked by his native nation-state. An original and avowable genealogy or reality does not exist when he enters a foreign country. Crossing borders illegally, the thief feels his existence coalesce around the exalted anonymity of transient moments,

moments of pure interaction between body and world, and in the nameless exchange between within and without. Describing himself as the French criminal who crisscrossed from Czechoslovakia into Poland, France to Spain, Cadiz to Tangier, he realizes, by writing of these infiltrations, that the illicit motivation to inhabit the foreign country is a creative space for his use, namely vanishing from bureaucratic accounts and into the surroundings, enjoyments felt most powerfully in the present autobiographical art about them, being beyond *Jean Genet*: “La peur, et la sorte d’émotion que j’éprouve toujours quand je passé une frontière...sous un soleil plomb la première féerie” (50-51) [Fear and a kind of emotion I always feel when I cross a border...beneath a leaden sun, the first fairyland (*TJ* 48)].

Similarly, Genet’s later border-defying sojourns, recorded in *Un Captif*, living with The Black Panthers in the United States and with Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and Gaza develop in that memoir as espionage-like pretexts for the writing he does some fifteen years after those visits. In *Un Captif*, he is pleased that The Panthers and Palestinians barely know his body of work and do not know his secret, spy-like ambivalence about the fatal flaws of their movements. The crossing of a border, which seems a pragmatic and ordinary act, materializes an intersection of self and topography. It is described as creative choice with a consequence that requires writing to fully appreciate it, so that reason for border-crossing is motivated by the desire for a literary performance of it. The breakdown of the metaphysical divide between subject and object, and the dismantling of the socio-psychological divide between *I* and other is exacerbated in border-crossing. The

crossing over is an existential capacity that exceeds the literal national border. It universalizes the ecstatic condition:

Finalement la marche—ou la marge frontalière—est l'endroit ou la totalité d'une personne humaine, en accord et en contradiction avec elle-même s'exprime le plus amplement. Dans le très difficile choix me permettant d'autre que moi-même, c'est Alsace-Lorrain que j'aurais choisi. Allemand et Français équivalent à ni l'un ni l'autre. Cessant d'être jacobine, quoi qu'elle en dise, toute personne s'approchant de la frontière devient Machiavel, sans oser affirmer que la marge demeure cet endroit territorial où la totalité est possible, il serait peut-être humain d'étendre territorialement les marges, sans bien sur détruire les centres puisque ce sont eux qui permettent les marges (*Un Captif* 244).

A border is where human personality expresses itself most fully, whether in harmony or in contradiction with itself. If I'd had to be someone other than myself - a difficult choice - I'd have been a native of Alsace-Lorraine. It's quite different from being German or French. Whatever they may say, anyone approaching a frontier stops being a Jacobin and becomes a Machiavelli. It might be a good thing to extend border areas indefinitely - without of course, destroying the centres, since it's they that make the borders possible (*Prisoner of Love* 170).

Centers negate the ecstatic condition by homogenizing and naming each individual as socially and legally contained. In classifying selfhood nationally, the state imposes a narrative on its citizen, a concatenation of facts, national narratives and geographical origins superimposed on the individual who *belongs* to that state. These national centers, whose dominion falls away at a border, attempt to control the transnational fluidity between any *I* and any other. By crossing between national, ethnic and racial borders so often, Genet documents how he surpasses off false individuations superimposed by those centers (Paris, Washington DC, Tokyo and Jerusalem, but also the centers of the minorities, Oakland and New York City of

the Black Panthers and the PLO's encampments).²⁹ In contrast to the idealist Jacobin intending toward a metanarrative of universal republicanism, Genet is an itinerant Machiavelli of moments in *Un Captif* who knows the value of disengaging from ideologies that advocate historical progress so that he can view arbitrary moments aesthetically, interpreting what he witnesses as valueless except as raw material for its poetic expression. The narrator personifies and embodies this shape-shifting expediency.

Despite being crammed with data and facts, *Un Captif* mounts an assault on the supposedly superior status of evidence and documentation over mystery and speculation, and on the supposed meaningfulness of biographical, globalized, mass-mediated annals. He describes historical records as poorly executed artworks that fail because they insert into their form the very content the record claims only to represent, and he singles out David's iconographic paintings of Napoleon which he finds morally suspect because, as the painting represents actual events, it fails to work into its representation the emptiness that is an element within any given experience, an emptiness that Genet believes can be productively addressed as his text does in its elliptical accounts of the political failures that he witnesses. He admits that his travels brought him face to face with an accidental self-transcendence within the appearances and engagements of revolutionaries and

²⁹ In "Violence et brutalité" (1977) Genet offers a political indictment of how the physical force of power centers exhibits itself often as an aesthetic ceremony, as in the "gestures" implied by the dehumanizing architecture of housing projects for the poor, the gestural force of the Rolls-Royce, the condescending cadence the white policeman's voice takes on when addressing a non-white. In another such deconstruction of the historical stasis produced by such crude "aesthetic" gestures by "centers", Genet studies a Moroccan's *Fiche d'Identité* for the catalogue of 1983 exhibition on the light of French immigrant workers, "La Rupture" at Centre d'action culturelle de Montébeliard.

acknowledges how these journeys and studies were carried out as pretexts for a later writing about their ecstatic properties. He claims for his memoir a higher moral ground than traditional reportage which ignores the disorderliness, the fissures and the silences in events and represents them in a unified and fixed image. Genet argues that such work conceals the *valuable* meaninglessness behind human endeavors:

quel maréchal et non L'Empereur organisa la victoire d'Austerlitz? David peignant au sacre de son fils une Mère absente de Paris ce jour-là; le sacre par lui-même lui fut-il imposé par un pape indompté? Qu'y a-t-il de creux devenu relief dans le mémorial de Sainte-Hélène? Mais, tirée par les premières cette pensée devait suivre: ce que nous savons des hommes, illustres ou non, fut peut-être imaginé afin de dissimuler les gouffres composant la vie (*Un Captif* 249).

What marshal was it who was really behind the victory at Austerlitz? I saw David painting Napoleon's mother at his coronation though she wasn't there. And wasn't he forced to crown himself because the Pope wouldn't knuckle under? Aren't the memoirs written on St. Helena one great hollow portrayed as a relief? (*Prisoner of Love* 173).

Un Captif exemplifies the conviction that the memoirist must resist the cultural pressure to situate the past as if it were an originary agency or a *true* source which underwrites the veracity of the life. The ultimate responsibility of the autobiographer is to confront past facts or memories as at least in part hollow of genuine meaning. In writing those lived experiences, the memoirist ought not mask the emptiness but integrate it into his account:

Alors qu'une gêne vague me tracassait depuis longtemps ma stupeur fut très grande je compris que ma vie—je veux dire les accidents de ma vie, bien dépliés, mis à plat sous mes yeux—n'était qu'une feuille de papier blanc que j'avais, à force de pliures, pu transformer en un objet nouveau que j'étais peut-être le seul à voir trois dimensions, ayant l'apparence d'une montagne,

d'un précipice, d'un crime ou d'accident mortel. Ce qui aurait semblé un acte héroïque était son simulacre, bien imité quelquefois, ou mal, mais que des yeux peu attentifs confondaient avec l'acte lui-même...Ma vie était ainsi composée de gestes sans conséquence subtilement boursoufflés en actes d'audace. Or quand je compris cela, que ma vie s'inscrivait en creux, ce creux devint aussi terrible qu'un gouffre. ..Ma jeunesse de voleur et de prostitué ressemblait aux autres jeunes gens qui volent, se prostituent en acte ou en rêve; ma vie visible ne fut que feintes bien masquées (*Captif* 247)

For a long time I'd been vaguely uneasy, but I was amazed when I realized that my life—I mean the events of my life, spread out flat in front of me—was nothing but a blank sheet of paper which I'd managed to fold into something different. Perhaps I was the only one who could see it in three dimensions, as a mountain, a precipice, a murder or a fatal accident...My whole life was made up of unimportant trifles cleverly blown up into acts of daring...When I saw that my life was a sort of intaglio or relief in reverse, its hollows became as terrible as abysses...My youth as a thief and prostitute was like that of all who steal or prostitute themselves, either in fact or in dream. My visible life was nothing but carefully masked pretences (*Prisoner of Love* 171-172).

In turn, this perspective on his past actions as pretenses for potential art allows experience and knowledge to be distilled a-historically, through the nonlinear style that Genet prefers: the ceremonious arc of *pretext*, or experience, *act*, the writing, and *oscillation*, the scattering and decentering of self that occurs from the writing. In his survey of the motives and strategies of The Black Panthers, he implicitly criticizes their naïve belief that they are writing their own history:

Les quelques mois passés aux États-Unis avec les Panthères Noires seront aussi la preuve de la mauvaise interprétation de ma vie et de mes livres, les Panthères me voyant en révolté à moins qu'il n'y eût, entre eux et moi, une complicité qu'ils ne soupçonnaient pas eux-mêmes car leur mouvement plus révolte poétique et jouée que volonté d'un changement radical, était un rêve flottant sur l'activité des Blancs. Une fois ces pensées admises celles-ci découlaient d'elles: si toute ma vie fut en creux alors qu'on la vit en relief, si le Mouvement noir fut surtout simulacre pour l'Amérique et pour moi, si j'y vins avec le naturel, la candeur que j'ai dits, si j'y fus accepté promptement, c'est que les Palestiniens me demandassent d'accepter un séjour en Palestine, c'est-à-dire à l'intérieur d'une fiction, avaient-ils plus ou moins clairement reconnu le spontané simulateur?...L'Amérique et Israël ne risquaient rien

d'un simulacre, de défaites présentées comme des victoires, des reculs comme autant d'avances, bref d'un rêve flottant au-dessus du monde arabe, capable de tuer les passagers d'un avion, donc rien qui ne soit qu'un peu maladroit (*Captif*, 248)

The few months I spent in the United States with the Black Panthers are another example of how my life and my books have been misinterpreted. The Panthers saw me as a rebel—unless there was a parallel between us that none of us suspected, For their movement was a shifting dream about the doings of the Whites, a poetical revolt, an 'act,' rather than a real attempt at radical change. Once these thoughts were admitted, others followed. If my life was really a hollow although it was seen in relief; if the Black Movement was regarded as a sort of impersonation both by America and by me; and if I entered it simply and naively as I've described and accepted without demur—then it was because I was recognized as a natural sham. And when the Palestinians invited me to go and stay in Palestine, in other words in a fiction, weren't they too more or less openly recognizing me as a natural sham?...America and Israel were in no danger from a sham, from defeats presented as victories, withdrawals as advances—in short from a shifting dream floating over the Arab world, capable only of such unsubtle acts as killing a plane-load of passengers (*Prisoner of Love* 172).

These accounts of the self-defeating revolution contains parallels with Genet's theatre work, particularly *Le Balcon* wherein the bishop, police, general and judge take turns as masochists playing out roles supervised by the more authentic whore in the brothel. Genet's pessimism in *Un Captif* frames world history as a poorly performed yet profoundly consequential farce, in which terrorist organizations and paramilitaries are forced to join in with the meta-scripts written by the power centers. They then put on heroic masks, in the form of repeated party lines and overheated rhetoric to conceal their abjection even as they invite sympathetic others, like Genet, to witness what is ultimately only a theatrical effect. Yet in taking action against the stable centers the movements tragically signify and underscore their collusion with an image as stable as the ones from which they

attempt to emerge. Genet notes that the blackness of African-Americans, which the Panthers uphold as preeminent, depends on its antithesis, the whiteness, what Genet calls the “white page” of America. The movement’s intentions are stillborn because they are defined and therefore controlled by a larger context authored by others. Occasionally Genet openly worries that his capacity to transform experience into original autobiography might be negatively effected by the autobiographical failures of leaders in the Panthers and PLO, whose “art” and whose “acts” never extricate them from the discourses of other people (white America, Israeli policy, the United Nations, etc.). Genet’s aggressive faith in art leaves open the question of whether this nihilism about the Black Power movement and the Palestinian reflects his verdict on his own lifework or on the human condition at large.

The negative spaces of the past have redeeming functions because by exploring this semantic void that infiltrates the past and acknowledging it in memoir unleashes the latent force of an experience once it is converted into art. Such an aesthetic production, as Genet claims in his Giacometti essay, concentrates on the irremediable isolation and inherent desolation in the life-source. In the process of paying attention to that barrenness, the artist is able to filter out from the artwork any signifying any references that would temporize and infuse the created work with historical function. Whether the resultant work is a statue or a figuration within memoir, it can then transport the viewer or reader beyond time by its absolute concentration on what happens to “I” in one’s contact with the other, transporting one, as Joyce, put it, beyond or outside the nightmare of history, a

nightmare Genet confronts in the failures of blacks in the US and Palestinians of the West Bank, and, movingly, unflinchingly, in his eyewitness essay about the carnage in the aftermath of the Lebanese troops' massacre at the Shatila camp.³⁰

The autobiographical act articulates an anonymous envelopment within the world and concentrates on meaning contained in the unnoticed transactions of moments. This extreme attentiveness prevents Genet from allowing the truth of who he is to be orchestrated by history, the fictive pretext of "I."

³⁰ Genet was one of the first Westerners to enter the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut in 1982 immediately after the Christian Lebanese Phalangist troop's massacre of at least 500 Palestinian and Lebanese refugees. Genet's essay about the experience, "Quatre heures à Chatila" originally published in *Revue d'Etudes Palestiniennes*, develops as both a witness to the bloodshed and an ontological meditation of moments and implicitly contrasts it with the pragmatic barbarism of the political "act" against the defenseless refugees, many of them women and children. The essay's focus on suffering and carnage is relevant to the evolution of Genet's autobiographical method from the aesthetic-eroticism of the *Journal* to the aesthetic-ethical register of *Un Captif* which I revisit in the closing pages of this chapter.

Pretexts Converted to Acts: 'la beauté d'un acte moral'

To act within this autobiographical program around pretext, act, oscillation, requires an implicit acknowledgement that an experiential fact or memory of an incident both leaves out a desertedness that pervaded its factuality and censors the indeterminacies and confusions between subject and object that defined the lived event. In recalling a fact as if it were lived by a stable, consistent *I*, memory imposes a wall between the author and the world and fills in the original *blankness*. These propagandizing maneuvers of memory and history make the self static and distort the past as completed and whole and ignores the ever-present collaboration between body and world in emergent exchanges. That recovery is the reason for Genet's investment in autobiography.

Frequently, the erotic *Journal* calls on the most banal or aberrant facts from experience as if to prove, through memoir, that not only can his text bear witness to ecstasies invisible in memory but that the act of writing itself re-enacts the precarious and intricate exchange between Genet's body and the other. In one such perverse and sustained *act*, the narrator meditates on how a tube of vaseline, ["ce ridicule ustensile"] confiscated during an arrest in Barcelona in 1932, takes on astonishing importance in the act of writing about it. Through the bizarre meditation on the moment, he recounts the enthusiastic, elaborate ridicule showered on him by the police ["l'ironie méchante des formules espagnoles,

éclatantes ou empoisonnées” (*Journal* 20-21) [the malicious irony of the vivid and venomous Spanish phrases]. The tube of vaseline, one of the most meager experiential facts conceivable, transforms the pretext into a literary “act,” and, in doing so, the text yields numerous semantic correspondences, a precipitous rush of “truths”, that shatter the object’s singular utilitarianism and the singularity of “Jean Genet” himself:

Ce chétif objet si humble leur tiendrait tête, par sa seule présence il saurait mettre dans tous ses états toute la police du monde, il attirerait sur soi les mépris, les haines, les rages blanches et muettes, un peu narquois peut-être—comme un héros de tragédie amusé d’attiser la colère des dieux—comme lui indestructible, fidèle à mon bonheur et fier. Je voudrais retrouver les mots le plus neufs de la langue française afin de le chanter. Mais j’eusse voulu aussi me battre pour lui, organiser des massacres en son honneur et pavoiser de rouge une campagne au crépuscule (*Journal* 23)

This puny and most humble object would hold its own against them; by its mere presence it would draw down upon itself contempt, hatred, white and dumb rages. It would perhaps be slightly bantering—like a tragic hero amused at stirring up the wrath of the gods—indestructible, like him, faithful to my happiness, and proud. I would like to hymn it with the newest words on the French language...I would have also liked to fight for it, to organize massacres in its honor and bedeck a countryside at twilight with red bunting (*TJ* 22).

The pretext-experience is his remembered arrest by the Spanish police, and the confiscation of the vaseline. Now as it is finally written, it is converted into an act. The poetic treatment of it magnifies the narrator’s awareness of himself well beyond the normal limits of how he thinks of himself and spontaneously unleashes latencies and correspondences from the experience of the arrest and the tube of vaseline. The past, present and future are so confused within this spatially oriented passage that it seems the narrator is outside of time. He interjects an account of a

street encounter with a woman whom the narrator realizes, within the improvisatory swerve of the writing act, could have possibly been his birth mother. Encouraged to retrieve the tactile body-world interplay made actual in the account of the confiscated vaseline, the narrator profligately imagines how he could have bedecked that prostitute-mother figure [she of “les yeux de ce poisson-lune”/eyes of the moonfish] with flowers (“j’irais couvrir de fleurs, de glaïeuls et de roses, et de baisers !”/cover her with flowers, with gladioluses and roses, and with kisses!), and shed tears on her face (“j’aurais pleurer de tendresse sur les yeux”) and, in a ghastly turn, slobbered and vomited on her (“De baver sur ses cheveux ou de vomir dans ses mains”). These sadistic fantasies do not simply denote past fancies or delineate them confessionally as misguided daydreams. The accidental images such as the abrupt appearance of the prostitute-mother are occasioned by the present-oriented upheavals of the memoir’s figurations that produce in the narrator the decentering ecstasies intergral to but forgotten from the past. The account of the arrest triggers a poetics of moments and underscores the Genetian principle that reveries on such facts have a more authenticity than does the meager pretext (the tube). Though they are fraught, fantastic and aberrant, the autobiographical images amount to real *truths* about his mother that surpass the banalities about her that are parodied in the *Journal’s* preceding rote-like exposition on dates, birthplaces and chronological mundanity. The memoir realizes a passionate and sick bond between his anonymous mother and himself. The insight derives from the precipitous *act*, the discourse on the confiscated vaseline and the vaseline itself becomes a symbol of the

dual hollowness and substantiality of the past. The vaseline has crucial ecstatic connotation as well, as a lubricant in several senses, emblematic of anal penetration and promiscuous, renegade homosexuality, and as a talisman of Genet's outlook that the material world and the artist make one another. For this reason, the vaseline's materiality warrants Genet's meditation on it. The grease signals how autobiographical identity is a commutable substance as it parallels ink and the sculptor's substrate, allowing artist and material to work as one. The otherwise banal and vacant fact (the Barcelona arrest) unleashes its destined crescendos, correspondences and insights as he (dares to) write the episode, rescuing it from the fictive stasis of a trivial fact *even when the Journal's prose seems most invested in the imaginary*. In this autobiographical conjuration, to paraphrase Faulkner, the past is not even the past, for the force of the recitations matter as present affective realities.

Whether the insights and conclusions he draws now actually occurred to him in Barcelona is a question secondary to the present affirmation that the confiscated vaseline enables a consciousness and participation in the world far beyond the boundaries of an ordinary self. He may or may not have realized, back then, that the Spanish police had, in their own ridicule and mania over the tube, been venerating the trivial item even as they mocked the young, jailed Genet. He may or may not, in actual experience, have met a woman who could have been his mother, let alone have imagined, back then, exercising those sublime and degrading benedictions on the stranger's body. The memoir's moments are presently real, unstable and three-

dimensional; by comparison, the memorial past is a dream-like series of hollow façades.

The ruminations conclude by affirming the sticky mentholated substance as both a vessel that contains all of the narrator's polymorphic sexual appetites for the other, and as analogous to a medium used for producing art. The extended moment draws parallels between the sex act and artistic contact with materiality. Genet imagines coating his lover's penis with it and he compares it to a sculptor's clay:

Maintenant que j'écris je songe à mes amants. Je les voudrais enduits de ma vaseline, de cette douce matière, un peu menthée; je voudrais que baignent leurs muscles dans cette délicate transparence sans quoi leurs plus chers attributs sont moins beaux (*Journal* 24)

Now as I write I muse on my lovers. I would like them to be smeared with my vaseline, with that soft, slightly mentholated substance; I would like their muscles to bathe in that delicate transparence without which the tool of handsomest is less lovely (23).

Writing is defined as a moral act insofar as it articulates such convoluted and contradictory outcomes--emotive wavering, intellectual vacillations--from the remembered past: "Il faut poursuivre les actes jusqu'à leur achèvement. Quel que soit leur point de départ la fin sera belle. C'est parce qu'elle n'est pas achevée qu'une action est infâme" (*Journal* 243) [Acts must be carried through to their completion. Whatever their point of departure, the end will be beautiful. It is because an action has not been completed that it is vile (*TJ* 214)]. Here Genet provides his own version of Existentialism's notion of authentic living against the malaise of bad faith. He adds the mandate to view moments as more important than coherence:

De la beauté de son expression dépend la beauté d'une acte moral. Dire qu'il

est beau décide déjà qu'il sera. Reste à le prouver. S'en chargent les images, c'est à dire les correspondances avec les magnifiques du monde physique. L'acte est beau s'il provoque, et dans notre gorge fait découvrir, le chant. Quelquefois la conscience avec laquelle nous aurons pensé un acte réputé vil, la puissance d'expression qui doit signifier, nous forcent au chant. (23)

The beauty of a moral act depends on the beauty of its expression. To say that it is beautiful is to decide that it will be so. This is the task of images, that is, of the correspondences with the splendors of the physical world. The act is beautiful if it provokes, and in our throats reveals, song. Sometimes the consciousness with which we have pondered a reputedly vile act, the power of expression of which must signify it, impel us to song (*TJ* 22)].

The memoirist's obligation is to apotheosize reality so that remembrances manifest themselves as *present* moments. In another such exemplary moment, Genet describes a sexual rendezvous with a coast guard officer during which the officer after an orgasm is startled by a sound and asks the narrator whether he heard something out in the water. Within his *present* elegiac rendition of this meaningless tryst, he irrevocably hears his unvoiced response to the *past* question and as he writes about it he apprehends the uncanny cadence of the guard's question which *now* intensifies a nervous, receptive state, a rapture which reaches its self-extinguishing peaks only as he writes of it. The writing gesture reclaims the pretext as a state of aural and oral exchange and the evacuation of any single meaning:

Le murmure d'une voix la nuit, et sur la mer le bruit d'invisibles avirons, dans ma singulière situation m'avaient bouleversé. Je demeurai attentif à saisir ces instants qui, errants, me paraissaient à la recherche, comme l'est d'un corps une âme en peine, d'une conscience qui les enregistre et les éprouve. L'ayant trouvée ils cessent: le poète épuise le monde (*Journal* 181)

The murmur of a voice at night and the sound of invisible oars on the sea had excited me. I remained on the alert to seize those vagrant moments which seemed to me in quest, as a lost soul is in quest of a body, a consciousness to register and feel them. Having found it, they cease: the poet drains the world

dry (*TJ* 171).

The passage actualizes inter-corporal motion between body and body and between body and voice so that “Jean Genet” and the officer blur in the lovers’ groping, their vocal intonations, the slap of the water, sounding both close by and near the shore. The past’s reality is only in the lived moment of writing because it recreates the misrecognitions and interplay of the past, and in those realizations, makes for an affective continuum between the past and the present embodied in Genet’s language, which, in this scene, binds the half-heard, half-imagined chatter of the smugglers at the water’s edge to the vigilant and perturbed officer whose alluring tone as he asks a question about that sound only further excites the *present*. The morphological scene triggers a transport of its living author beyond himself based on how he captures the ecstatic elements in the past event, an event that is never finished until written. Genet describes the officer with gun drawn, and how he nearly betrayed fellow criminals (*des fraudeurs*) by pointing out where they were at the water’s edge: each human figure links to another, and the narrator attributes that rare instance of non-betrayal to an overheated desire to continue the tryst, which is itself an orgiastic convergence of elements beyond just the lover’s bodies. The officer, the narrator, the bodies of smugglers, the oars, the sea, move together symphonically within Genet’s libidinal “laxity” that the text itself constitutes. In the act of writing, “le poète épuse le monde,” and that world reciprocally exhausts him. That present fluidity felt within the narrator as he writes is the previously dormant significance to the banal encounter.

In another such act that draws complex meanings within a dilated moment based on an otherwise vacuous pretext, Genet describes taking Communion in church during a rest inside an Andalusian church [“L’ordre moral ayant son origine dans les préceptes chrétiens, je désirai me familiariser avec l’idée de Dieu: en état de péché mortel, je communiais” (*Journal* 182)]. The origin of the moral order is in Christian precepts, I wished to familiarize myself with the idea of God: in state of mortal sin, I would take communion at morning mass (*TJ* 172)]. The narrator invents a desire to know God as an *ipso facto* rationale, elevating what had been a whim. As he describes taking communion he charts the transformations caused by the sacrament implicitly summoning at once the same religious resonances of having received as a boy. In the pictorial and lyrical style of the memoir, Genet links inside and outside in ways the temporal logic of memory and prose storytelling cannot accommodate. *Jean Genet* the individual seems dissolved within the digested host, and incorporated into the palpable structure of the church as he sits in the pew [“l’ombre des chapelles où veillent des vierges et des cierges habillés pour le bal, le chant des morts ou le simple éteignoir des cierges” (*Journal* 183)/the shadow of the chapels where Virgins and tapers dressed for a ball keep vigil, by the hymn for the dead or the simple candle-snuffer (*TJ* 173)].

This blasphemous betrayal of Catholicism is a treachery that occurs in the extravagant autobiographical act which then induces a blissful awareness of being beyond the time of the incident and beyond the time of the writing. The literary articulation of an otherwise pointless gesture of a vagrant French thief taking rest in

a church in Spain fulfills what was true yet unnoticed within the lived experience's obvious triviality, so that the text becomes an ecstatic tool, enacting his body's immersion in the church's sacred materiality. He knows a feeling of infinity glowing from within, and feels outside or beyond himself: "établissent en moi la même sensation de dégoût et de crainte qui me font penser que l'idée de Dieu je la nourris dans mes boyaux" (*Journal* 183) [leads me to think that the idea of God is something I harbor in my bowels (*TJ* 173)].

Writing the ex-Catholic homosexual-thief's reverse Eucharist and poeticizing its rapturous sacrilege helps the narrator clarify the mystical purpose of the sacrament while rescuing a random, solitary moment of being in the Spanish church as more meaningful than it would be as part of an episode serving a interconnected biographical story about *Jean Genet*. Other such intensely rendered reciprocities between flesh and object involve the serrated cans he cuts with stone in Linea, near Gibraltar, and then uses to collect leftovers and to beg alms from handsome English soldiers, the description of the dust in Spanish alleys where eroticized gamblers squat and play dice, the torn and dirty scraps of what Genet calls "anthropometric" identity cards unfolded at the borders and pressed into the palms and fingers of French guards, the intricately studied architecture of wooden sheds where he takes refuge along the Spanish coast, and flowers stolen from graves in Montparnasse cemetery in order to deck the funeral hearth of their slain peer, Maurice B.

The transformative role of talismanic objects for understanding the ecstatic dimension of being pervades in *Un Captif* as well wherein the bushy afros and

leather jackets of the Black Panthers draw more absorbed scrutiny from Genet than does the Party's ideological statements. Fountains which he observes in an Ajloun mosque, fed with water from the Jordan River, serve young praying fedayeen as miniature "Ganges." The water's proximity to the bodies of Islamic worshippers suggests world-transcending rituals of Hinduism and paganism, the sacred water signaling a profane "primitive alliance" between skin and world as it leaves, "Humidité qui laisse la trace d'un pied d'homme" (*Captif* 170) [the dampness that leaves behind it the print of a human foot].

Betrayal as Ecstasy

Treachery, deceit, and lying to another person flout the precept of interpersonal trust that underwrites the entire social contract. In suggesting that no single act is as purely ecstatic as betrayal, his memoirs suggest that anarchy then, must be casually related to revealing the ecstatic condition, a prospect that constantly and understandably confounds even Genet's critics including Michael Sherringham and Leo Bersani.

Genet valorizes betrayal because it renders ecstasies of being otherwise invisible in memory patently visible in the writing act around the treachery:

J'ai dit plus haut que son élégance est le seul critère d'un acte. Je ne me contredis pas en affirmant mon choix de la trahison. Trahir peut être un geste beau, élégant, composé de force nerveuse et de grâce. J'abandonne décidément l'idée de noblesse qui distrait au profit d'une forme harmonieuse, une beauté plus cachée, presque invisible (*Journal* 257)

I said earlier that the only criterion of an act is its elegance. I am not contradicting myself in asserting my choice of betrayal. Betrayal may be a handsome, elegant gesture, compounded of nervous force and grace. I definitely reject the notion of nobility which favors a harmonious form and ignores a more hidden, almost invisible beauty (*TJ* 242).

Genet repeats the formulation, almost word for word, in *Un Captif*:

Dans la tentation de trahison on ne verra qu'une richesse, peut-être comparable à la griserie érotique : Qui n'a connu celle de trahir ne connaît rien de l'extase. Le traître n'est pas dehors mais en chacun (101)

in the temptation to betray as something desirable, comparable perhaps to erotic exhilaration. Anyone who hasn't experienced the ecstasy of betrayal knows nothing about ecstasy at all (*Prisoner of Love* 70).

He adds, “Qui n’a pas connu celle de la trahison ne sait rien de la volupté (444)

An interpretation of this perverse formulation needs to be contextualized within Genet’s twin concern with moments of being and with the ceremonious suspension of normal time, and how intervals of being, pockets of time, crystalize the aesthetic process (of pretext, act and oscillation). When Genet plots to betray Armand by robbing him, when the lover considers betraying smugglers to the officer whom he is fellating, when he fantasizes about flogging his absent lover, Lucien, or when the outcast sin-filled Catholic thief takes Communion as a profane inversion of the sacrament, all these gestures are meaningful past *Now*’s because of their present iteration that makes *real* the hidden reciprocal relations between the acting subject and acted-upon object. As lived facts outside the discourse of the text are not particularly worthy, mere flotsam and jetsam of retention, mental fragments, lame pretexts. In fact, the pathos of their pre-literary nothingness is unmistakable to Genet, and further elucidates his dogmatic requirement that the past be viewed as pretext and converted into act.

Viewed from the subtle differences between a pretext and an act, *betrayal*, even if carried out in reality against others (like the banality of airplane terrorism to which Genet alludes in *Un Captif*) is like any other pretext intrinsically meaningless despite its violent aftereffects on other bodies. The particular act must ripen within the actor’s expansive concentration on the body’s freedom by an attention to moments instead of the authoritarianism of an external agent’s historical dictates or

to predictive heroic consequences about action (i.e., acts purely derivative from an other's pretexts and acts).

If an actor and his act remain conscious of the gesture as being willfully *memorable*, the act will have a reducible, quantifiable, *singular* effect that would be conformable to premade arrangements and links making it a static fact among a string of other such pretexts. Such memorial ambitions for life or writing are directed at history rather than art, and at mythic heroism rather than moral truth. Within the contrarian and *aesthetic* means for measuring an act's worthiness, Genet's infamous veneration of betrayal should not be read as a moral prescription for behavior or as flamboyant posturing, as critics often approach it.³¹

Genet esteems betrayal for how its resonances and its pleasures of self-alienation accord with a special destiny for exceptional moments. The act of writing, *art*, concentrates the body around non-historicizing instants. As explored in the Giacometti essay, Genet is drawn to disorienting blendings between his body and the world, or his body and another body, or his body and objects. Therefore any other forms of relationality which normalize and regulate personal identity and which situate the real strictly in either a subject or an object impede awareness about and cultivation of the ecstatic condition. Relationships that would *most* anchor or stabilize the body within a protective encasing called *identity* or *I* are those habitats built by the durable bricks of intimacy, loyalty, and fidelity. Even as

³¹ See Sherringham's reading of *Un Journal du voleur* as mainly a pseudo-autobiography that operates mainly as a series of complex provocations of its reader in *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires* (Oxford University Press) p 146.

such trusting relations afford the parties deeply passionate affective states, these forms of extreme proximity bind two parties tightly to their individual identities within the lodging of loyalty, fidelity, friendship, etc. Acts of betrayal explode the carapaces of those sheltered proximities. In doing so, these pernicious betrayals have, from Genet's phenomenological and pleasure-seeking mutuality between the depersonalized, (but not dehumanized), body and world, liberating consequences because they shatter the *I*, the name, the centered personality that had been housed, normalized and regulated within the hallowed, consistent kinship (of intimacy, loyalty, fidelity).

Betrayal is morally destructive, single mindedly malicious and is, as Leo Bersani points out in his reading of Genet, productive of an extreme asocial solitude for the betrayer. Bersani connects Genet's pervasive advocacy of betrayal to his notion (which Genet himself propounds directly in the concluding passages of *Journal*) that, for society, the ultimate evil is not wrongdoing as such; the ultimate evil that society dreads is an antisocial, amoral solitude. Yet Bersani overlooks how solitude is not the only end Genet has in mind, for that would mean he was invested in a stable, isolated subjectivity in the usual sense and/or invested in the satanic status which evil would earn him (another fixed identity).

By neither seeking out nor joining intimate relationships, Genet avoids being individualized by another person. He preserves spaces of attentiveness and writing where he can affirm how his identity exceeds the consciousness of himself as a static first-person presence. Without being answerable to another as "Jean Genet" the

friend or “Jean Genet” the lover, or even “Jean Genet,” the sympathizer, the narrator can explore his selfhood within ecstatic extremes. Once freed of relationships which he destroys by the act of betrayal, the renewed aesthetic subject rejoins those immediacies of being, through unfettered transactions with a sensory, material, carnal ecology. The frequent equations of betrayal with ecstasy are oriented towards the evocation and magnification of betrayal within the act of writing. Even if acted out in real experience, betrayal is valueless and empty. Its meaning resides in the still-to-be-accomplished act that will convert it to the beautiful and the meaningful. Past betrayals have negligible worth before the redemptive act of an art that makes use of them. Suppose, for example, that Jean Genet, in “real” life, actually had anal sex with a figure like the character Riton, the Nazi, on a rooftop in occupied Paris, as Bersani believes and as Genet describes it so elaborately and extensively in *Pompes Funèbres*. As disquieting such a biographical act would be in Genet’s ontology, it is still a hollow fact because Genet’s interest is in ceremonious time rather than arrange his life into an historical progression or coherent narrative. Therefore the lived fact, of *actually* having public intercourse with a Nazi during the Occupation, provides far less meaning in that historical or memorial context than it will for Genet-the-autobiographer, as a writeable moment of betrayal (a betrayal of occupied France, and of all the millions of victims of Nazi atrocity). The hollow event is *acted* within the text of *Pompes Funèbres*, where, as Genet was mindful, his European readers would be mortified and alienated on encountering the scene. The literary act of betrayal within the art act is the *ecstasy* of betrayal to which he refers

in *Journal* and *Un Captif*, because *that* betrayal, read, reread, witnessed, poured over, as it were, *up-close* in an alternately poetic and pornographic mode that dilates and foregrounds the literary conversion of the fact into an autobiographical moment liberates Genet from a myriad number of static relationships. Through the literary performance of the otherwise banal sex act, Genet is liberated from French identity, from cultural respectability, from national allegiance and from an entire system of morality.

Ceremonious betrayals are literary treason against a stable identity and emerge as the prevalent anarchical impulse in his autobiography. Genet confides that the very label of “thief” inspired him less to embrace the role than to betray and destroy it. More than simply a memoir about crime, *Journal* itself is in part a series of catalogued betrayals of the identity known as “thief,” because in taking up literary production its narrator turns his back on the static stature and informs on the criminal he was. This turning away from distinctiveness before it ossifies the self may be part of the reason for Genet’s successive “betrayals” of any given genre: leaving poetry for fiction, fiction for art criticism, art criticism for playwriting, the theater for political writing.

The *Journal* contains countless spectacles about double-dealing done to fellow thieves, of delaying or subverting group burglaries, and of mugging and picking the pockets of various johns and lovers. These are acts which, in actual betrayals that may or may not have occurred, and if they did, amount to little other than squalid turpitude, like the banality of a twenty-two year old crook’s tube of

confiscated vaseline in Barcelona. In the memoir's act of writing of the past triviality, those encounters outmaneuver the compromised stasis of their memory and become gestures that shatter Genet's circumscription as thief, prostitute, partner, or for that matter as any *one*. The former prostitute who describes stealing a john's wallet sheds his everyday identity as a prostitute and suddenly becomes a thief. The former thief who writes an account of turning in a fellow thief thereby eclipses that emerging role as thief; after that betrayal, the clever thief transforms into a petty traitor.

Similarly, *Un Captif* deconstructs poetically the innumerable blind spots of the Panther and Palestinian engagements which he ostensibly supports ["un Dieu [Allah] cognait du front le front bombé de Marx qui le niait" (105)]. These acts of metamorphic betrayal or quasi-betrayals matter as *literary* gestures because they are purely *moments*. Being moments that shatter a past identity and negate a potential one, betrayals outflank the authority of a cogent narrative and insert the feeling of "timeless time" in the teller. Literary forms of selfhood that would come about through party loyalty, ideological commitment, abiding friendship or romantic fidelity are all anathema to Genet as they would preempt his writing about himself as a lived presence that actualizes in the memoir's documentation of the missing qualities, the incipience and the uncertain sensations and perceptions within the past, the intensities of which produce an ecstatic autobiographical Genet more true to who Genet is than any memorial or biographical specter of himself could ever be. In the *Journal*, this carnal availability to the equally available and

carnal world of things is the very reason he uses language: “Quand à la Santé, je me pris à écrire ce ne fut jamais afin de revivre mes émois ou de les communiquer mais afin, de l’expression d’eux imposée par eux, que je compose un ordre (moral) inconnu de (moi-même d’abord).” (181) [When in the Santé Prison I began to write, it was never because I wanted to relive my emotions or to communicate them, but rather because I hoped, by expressing them in a form that they themselves imposed, to construct an order (a moral order) that was unknown (above all to me) (*TJ* 171-172)].

Oscillations

Genet views the autobiographical art as this instigation. He contrasts the self-concentrating action of being present among political causes against the deliberate reframing of that engagement wherein he would exceed that lived selfhood and emerge in the work as perception itself: “Je perds de plus en plus le sentiment d’être ‘moi’ le sentiment du ‘je’ pour n’être que la perception de l’œuvre d’art ” (*L’Ennemi* 147). [I lose more and more the sense of being ‘myself,’ the sense of being ‘I’ and become nothing but the perception of the artwork (*Declared Enemy* 123)]. This concentration indicates that Genet’s indefinite self-portraiture invites the reader into a corresponding state. The reader metaphorically *watches* the narrator lose sight of himself, reaching contradictory conclusions within the recording of a given episode and passing beyond himself into the plenitude of language and materiality of the encounters recorded in the memoir. The artwork’s vigilance about spectators bearing witness to its moments implicates the reader to discern Genet from his obtuse literary gestures and associative figurations of his life, much like the viewer before Michelangelo’s emergent *Prisoners* finds himself abruptly aware of how the ecstatic moment is a prevailing if unnoticed condition of being in time, an insight gained by actively discerning that ecstatic revelation in the work. “En face de l’œuvre d’art,” Genet tells Fichte, “aussi il faut agir. L’attention qu’on porte à l’œuvre d’art c’est une action; si je ne compose pas avec mes moyens, modestement, les

vêpres de la Beata Virginie en même temps que l'écoute, je ne fais rien, je n'entends rien, et si je n'écris pas *Les Frères Karamazov* en même temps que je les lis, je ne fais rien." (*L'Ennemi* 147) [Confronted with an artwork, you have to act, as well. The attention you give to the artwork is an act ; if I listen to the vespers of the Beata Virginie without at the same time composing it with my own modest means, I'm not doing anything, I don't hear anything ; and if I'm not writing *The brothers Karamazov* while I read it, I'm not doing anything (*Declared Enemy* 123)].

The presence of another links the physical gesture of the art to the very genesis of the artwork. In *Un Captif*, closely observing suicidal fedayeen, Genet pinpoints their acts' dependence on the specular bodies of others, comparing the paramilitaries to Hamlet: "Les jeunes feddayin riaient...aucun d'eux ne connaissait le français, mais leurs yeux disaient tout. Aurait-il connu ce bonheur d'un vertige suicidaire si Hamlet n'avait eu ni public ni réplique?" (*Captif* 93) [The young fedayeen laughed...none of them knew any French, but their eyes told me everything. Would Hamlet have felt the delicious fascination of suicide if he hadn't had an audience, and lines to speak? (*Prisoner of Love* 63)]. Hamlet's prognostications about suicide themselves produce that play's elaborate monologues and metaphors that arise from the title character's awareness of an audience. Hamlet's non-active "actions" depend on the audience. Genet as enabling auditor is part of the pre-suicidal preparations of the Palestinians. Similarly observing members of Fatah before their planned operations, he compares them to Nijinsky's dancers, "La pièce—une annexe du bureau de Fatah—me faisait penser

aux coulisses d'un théâtre où parmi cinq accessoiristes parisiens des Ballets russes de 1913, plusieurs Nijinski en costumes tigrés et tachés de feuilles mortes ou de mousse, attendaient, prêts à bondir pour le *Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune*" (*Captif* 232) [The room—an annex of the Fatah office—made me think of the 1913 Russian Ballet: with five Parisian stage-hands standing by, several Nijinskys in striped costumes flecked with moss and dead leaves waiting to leap on stage in *Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune* (*Prisoner of Love* 162)]. The comparison of the soldiers to ballet dancers reflects back on a philosophical outlook on how such random experiences become the material for art. The Mallarmé poem on which Nijinsky based the ballet was originally supposed to be a prelude to the never-written larger work. Yet the prelude becomes the act. In parallel fashion attention to the guerilla soldiers suicidal preparations before their main act stands as the act itself through his attention to it, so that what seemed tangential and preliminary becomes the material for the memoir's figuration. The description of the soldiers' preparatory intensities so affects the narrator that he resorts to the incongruous metaphor of the ballet dancers waiting in the wings in order to underscore its force on him. The figurations have the double effect of reminding the reader that Genet is aware that even suicidal soldiers conceive of their straightforward duties as performance art. Within their preparations they are aware of the aesthetic nature of their roles, as they know that their terror is a violent gesture whose emotive and irrational effects exceed the practical historical consequences, the latter being the largely static historical script over which they have no say.

To further study the ecstatic effects of art that redefine time and identity, Genet worked on and off on a study of Rembrandt's self-portraiture. In the surviving essays, he is interested in how Rembrandt's work pays scrupulous and lavish attention to the *fact* of decrepitude [décrépitude] of human flesh, such that the otherwise invisible degeneration is rendered visible, and each body is painted, "comme une tornade pendant une seconde tenue en respect" (33). According to Genet, Rembrandt renders the interpenetration of the human body by the outside world, accentuated by an invisible "wound." This wound is the lesion-like texture of normal skin that Rembrandt makes visible, as if all skin might reveal how it at all times exposed to the world, as is a cut, a scab, even the flow of pus ["coude...croûte...les filaments de pus" (*Œuvres V*: 32)]. According to him, the "skin" of these faces, a locus of vulnerability and transience, draws Rembrandt and his portrait's viewers into an unrivalled empathy with the other which amounts to both an affective *action* and an affective solidarity with *all* objects and *all* bodies. The susceptibility to ageing in Rembrandt's faces demonstrate how all bodies within the world and all things in the world are intrinsically equal because they share that vulnerability. This insight into a common flesh and a common decrepitude that he deduces from Rembrandt's paintings reveals that despite hierarchies of value placed on various objects and despite narratives of grandeur built around certain people, all objects and bodies in the world are inextricably accessible to one another and even reversible and simultaneous due to their common vulnerability to decay and dissolution. Genet celebrates a foundational anomie in the infinite particularities of

Rembrandt's art:

Cet effort l'amène à se défaire de tout ce qui, en lui, pourrait le ramener à une vision différenciée, discontinue, hiérarchisée du monde: une main vaut un visage, un visage un coin de table, un coin de table un bâton, un bâton une main, une main une manche...et tout cela, qui est peut-être vrai chez d'autres peintres—mais lequel, à ce point, a fait perdre à la matière son identité pour mieux l'exalter?—tout cela. Dis-je renvoie d'abord à la main, à la manche, puis à la peinture, sans doute, mais à partie de cet instant, sans cesse de l'une à l'autre, et dans une poursuite vertigineuse, vers rien. (*Œuvres V*: 37).

This effort brings him to rid himself of all that could lead him back to a differentiated, discontinuous, hierarchic vision of the world: a hand has the same value as a face, a stick as a hand, a hand as a sleeve...and all that, which is perhaps true with other painters—but what painter, up to now, has made something lose it's identity in order to exalt it more?—all that, I say, relates back to first the hand, the sleeve, then to painting, of course, but starting from that instant, endlessly from one to the other, and in a dizzying pursuit, toward nothing (*Fragments* 89).

The artist's task is to concentrate on expressing the dissolution of wholeness and identity ("vers rien") in the particularity of the painter's figurations. Within the Rembrandt studies in a parallel text, Genet describes a cataclysmic autobiographical epiphany on a moving train. While gazing at an old man who gazes back at him, he realizes within that instant that every body and very object the world share that potential reciprocity of identity within a flash of perception that negates difference, rendering everyone and everything equally worthy: "Son regard n'était pas d'un autre: c'était le mien que je rencontrais dans une glace, par inadvertance et dans la solitude et "oubli de moi. Ce que j'éprouvais je ne pus le traduire que sous cette forme: je m'écoulais de mon corps, et par les yeux, dans celui du *voyageur en même temps que le voyageur s'écoulait dans le mien.*" (*Œuvres IV*: 22-23) [His gaze was not that of another person : it was my own met in a mirror, by accident and in solitude

forgetting myself. What I experienced I could convey only in this form: I flowed out of my body, through my eyes, into the traveler's, at the same time that the traveler flowed into my own (*Fragments* 93)]. Likewise, in studying court photographs of a younger Jean Genet in the *Journal*, he deduces the same reciprocal "disappearing." He realizes, within the autobiographical act, that, the old photographs reveal a Jean beyond the boundaries of his photographed skin. "Je parlais avec bonté d'un autre Jean que moi-même...Mais un crépuscule, quand j'étais là ma tête s'inclinait, et je sentais mon regard s'appesantir sur le monde et s'y confondre" (90) [I was speaking kindly of another Jean who was not myself...But at twilight when I was weary, my head would sink, and I would feel my gaze lingering on the world and merging with it (85)]. The archival photographs summon him and the reader, to see oneself as an exteriority, as if in the contemplative gesture of the photography the seer becomes a God-like creative force over his own *corps*, "Envisageant le monde hors de moi, son indéfini, sa confusion plus parfait encore la nuit, je l'érigerais en divinité dont j'étais non seulement le prétexte chéri, objet de tant de soin et de précaution" (*Journal* 91) [Envisaging the external world, its indefiniteness, its confusion, which is even more perfect at night, I set up as a divinity of which I was not only the cherished pretext, an object of great care and caution (*TJ* 85)].

In the *Journal*, recounting a journey after being expelled from Czechoslovakia, he references *The Lady with the Unicorn* tapestry which fascinates him ["pour des raisons que je n'entreprendrai pas ici d'énumérer" (*Journal* 50)]. Within the account of the Polish flight, the "language" of the medieval tapestry, itself

a moment rather than a narrative or “story,” interweaves into the thief’s autobiographical text, as Genet describes losing sight of a fellow exile after crossing the border, and imagines hares hidden in the grass, and, then, in the field of yellow rye, surrounded by birches and firs, the imagery directly links the ecstasy of entering Poland with the tableaux of the *The Lady and the Unicorn*:

La peur, et la sorte d’émotion que j’éprouve toujours quand je passe une frontière suscitaient a midi, sous un soleil de plomb la première féerie. Je me hasardai dans cette mer dorée comme on entre dans l’eau. Debout je traversai les seigles. Je m’avançai lentement, sûrement, avec la certitude d’être le personnage héraldique pour qui s’est formé un blason naturel: azur, champ d’or, soleil, forets” (*Journal* 50-51)

Fear, and the kind of emotion I always feel when I cross a border, conjured up at noon, beneath a leaden sun, the first fairyland. I ventured forth into the golden sea as one enters the water. I went through the rye standing up. I advanced slowly, surely, with the certainty of being the heraldic character for whom a natural blazon has been formed: azure, field of gold, sun, forests (48)].

The transformational instant is the narrator’s pursuit of being beyond himself. Leaving Czechoslovakia means not just leaving one country for another one, or adopting one subterfuge for another, but the passage into an unknown sphere means an absence of identity beyond the immediate contact or exposure to the world so that when Genet crosses over, he is indistinguishable from his uncharted environment, and there is no longer a single narrator but a narrator in fluctuation with the spatial and sensuous properties of the field, “ ‘Dans ce ciel de midi doit planer, invisible, l’aigle blanc!’ ” (51) [*In this noonday sky the eagle should soar invisible!* (48)]. The Polish landscape concretizes myriad corporal relations between

the memoirist and the surrounding world that the text revives from the banal fact of a thief's border crossing. Genet uses the non-linear simultaneity of the tapestry's graphic style to capture his own ecstatic relation to the blue sky, the gold field, the forest, the unicorn, the Virgin, wondering whether "Genet" is the Virgin, or the unicorn, or the field itself.

States of severe solitude and privation afford a secret understanding of ecstasy, as evidence in the solitary entrance into Poland, in the secret and fleeting train encounter with the old man, and in the vulnerable, lonely faces in Rembrandt's work, and in the totemic apartness he sees in Giacometti's statuary. In *Journal*, immediately after his lover Stilitano confesses the remorseless murder of a legionnaire, the narrator, now alone, has an epiphany on first sighting of the palm trees in Spain, in which the shock of Stilitano's news resonates within him. Rather than initiating an introspective moral quandary, that vulnerability carries over into a bewildering sensory openness between the green leaves and the sensate body:

Les palmes! Un soleil matinal les dorait. La lumière frissonnait, non les palmes...Elles bordaient la mer Méditerranée. Le givre sur les vitres, l'hiver, avait plus de diversité mais comme lui les palmiers me précipitaient—mieux que lui peut-être—à l'intérieur d'une image de Noël née paradoxalement du verset sur la fête précédant la mort de Dieu, sur l'entrée à Jérusalem, sur les palmes jetées sous les pieds de Jésus. Mon enfance avait rêvé de palmiers. Me voici auprès d'eux. On m'avait dit que la neige ne tombe pas Bethleem, Entrouvert, le nom d'Alicante me révélait L'Orient. J'étais au cœur de mon enfance à son instant le plus précieusement conserve. A un détour de route allais découvrir sous trois palmiers cette crèche de Noël ou je venais, enfant, assister à ma nativité entre le bœuf et l'âne. J'étais le pauvre du monde le plus humble, misérable je marchais dans la poussière et la fatigue, méritant enfin la palme, mur pour le baigneur, pour les chapeaux de paille et les palmiers (*Journal* 82)

The palms! They were gilded by a morning sun. The light quivered, not the

palms. I came upon the first of them. They lined the Mediterranean. Frost on the windowpanes in winter had more variety, but the palms swept me in like manner—better perhaps—into a Christmas scene born paradoxically of the verse about the holy day preceding the death of God, about the entrance into Jerusalem, about the palms strewn beneath the feet of Jesus. My childhood had dreamed of palm trees. Now I was actually seeing them. I had been told that snow does not fall on Bethlehem. The name Alicante gave me a glimpse of the Orient. I was in the heart of my childhood, at its most precious preserved moment. At a turn in the road I was about to discover, beneath the palm trees the Christmas manger where as a child, I used to be present at my nativity between the ox and the ass. I was the humblest of the world's poor. Wretchedly I walked in the dust and fatigue, at last deserving the palm, ripe for the penal colony, for the straw hats and the palm trees (*TJ* 77).

The encounter is the most aurally elaborate and visually complex in the Genet's autobiographical project. It shatters any semblance of time in its usual sense. The swaying of the palms and their concrete distinctiveness exceeds their interpretation as a narcissist's mirrors or fetish objects.³² Genet emphasizes their appearance as containing within them latent sensory meanings that call out to him even in their opacity as he now attempts to speak to the encounter and overcome that inexpressibility. He emphasizes that he had not ever seen such trees but that he knew of them. Seeing them in the past is memorable because their actuality blends into the initial imaginary conception. Further tracing the timelessness of the

³² Derrida frequently interprets the wavering of meaning in Genet's texts as indicative of how the works displace transparency with opacity, as Genet produces the autobiography as (what Derrida refers to in his reading of Rousseau in *Grammatologie*) the *dangerous supplement* to nature, and with it, the text as fetish object resists a single meaning, "La constance, la résistance du fétiche est a la mesure de son lien indécidable a des contraires. Il (Genet's *Journal*) oscille comme le battant d'une vérité qui cloche" (*Glas* 253-254). The flaw in Derrida's otherwise insightful readings of Genet is that fetish objects routinely "staticize" into rational interpretations through the psychoanalytical/hermeneutical apparatus. Derrida's crucial point is that whether or not Genet's auto-figurations are interpretable, the purpose of the gesture is to produce vacillations, swerves, swings, and contradictory effects which defy any singular one, the latter of which would then repose the text's ceremonious aesthetic gesture within the readable/time-bound: stasis.

sighting, the prior imagining and the past sight of the palms dissolve into the present writing about the trees, preserving the perception as open-ended, an annunciation (“son instant le plus précieusement conserve”) wherein the sunlight on the leaves seems to tremble as if the light itself was resonating within. The sharp angle of the palm leaves conjure the protrusive radii of frost patterns on a window in winter and so disorder time, and the palms manifest assorted Biblical scenes as moments, the manger and the infant, the adoration and the convergence of men and beasts (“ma nativité entre le bœuf et l’âne”), birth as a constant happening, further collapsing space and time (Bethlehem, where it never snows, Alicante, Spain, where he is and yet is beyond) and, like many such encountered objects in the *Journal*, the palms affirm the world and body as inverse and co-extensive flesh, the sight of the palms foregrounds the forgotten envelopment of body with world in moments. The weariness of the feet and soles on dusty earth (“dans le poussière”) evoke Christ’s footpath strewn with palms on his entering Jerusalem, and evoke Genet himself as travels through Spain. The work forces the reader to find meaning strictly within the ekphrasis of the moment rather than to expect meaning to come through in a sequential explanation as a reader might normally expect in a crime memoir.

The palm tree epiphany scene shows Genet’s ceremonious conversion of reality at work. The incidental facts about Stilitano’s confession and his separation from the ex-con are the backdrops, or pretexts, from which the narrator re-creates the solitary Spanish moment and in that re-creation, the narrator actualizes an ecstatic consciousness that was only latent in the original encounter. The resultant

text deepens that sense of timelessness of being outside himself within the physical world when it opens up a chain of further associations that also displace Genet in time and space, ranging from frosted windows in wintertime, New Testament readings, Christmas *tableaux* and the weaving of straw hats as a prisoner in Santé. The reader bears witness to the narrator's upheaval within these time-defying correspondences. In an otherwise ordinary explanation of how he survives while plying his trade in port towns, Genet describes a typical routine at daybreak near the wharfs. Like the topographical immersions of the Polish rye and the Alicante palms, the memoir subtly underscores the flesh's vulnerability, the living body as a Rembrandtian "sore" opened upon the world. The self-portrait facilitates knowledge about that real exchange between itself and that world, culminating, in its crescendo, with a flux that takes into its ecstasies the body of the temporarily vanished lover, Stilitano:

Le soleil se levait quand mes poissons étaient cuits. Presque toujours sans pain ni sel, je le mangeais. Debout, ou couché dans les rochers, ou assis sur eux, à l'est extrême de l'île, face à la terre, j'étais le premier homme qu'éclairait et que réchauffait le premier rayon. Il était lui-même la première manifestation de vie. C'est dans les ténèbres, sur les quais d'accostage, que j'avais ramassé les poissons. C'est encore dans les ténèbres que j'avais regagné mes rochers. L'arrivée du soleil me terrassait. Je lui rendais un culte. Une sorte d'intimité malicieuse s'établissait entre lui et moi. Je l'honorais certes sans rituel compliqué, je n'eusse pas eu l'idée de singer les primitifs mais je sais que cet astre devint mon dieu. C'est dans mon corps qu'il se levait, qu'il continuait sa courbe et l'achevait. Si je le voyais au ciel des astronomes c'est qu'il y était la projection hardie que je conservais en moi. Peut-être même le confondais-je obscurément avec Stilitano disparu (74-75).

The sun would be rising when my fish were cooked. I almost always ate them without bread or salt. Standing up, or lying among the rocks, or sitting on them, at the easternmost point of the island, facing the mainland, I was the first man lit up and warmed by the first ray, which was itself the first

manifestation of life. I had gathered the fish on the wharves in the darkness. It was still dark when I reached my rocks. The coming of the sun overwhelmed me. I worshipped it. A kind of sly intimacy developed between us. I honored it, though without, to be sure, any complicated ritual; it would not have occurred to me to ape the primitives, but I know that this star became my god. It was within my body it rose, continued its curve and completed it. If I saw in the sky of the astronomers, I did so because it was the bold projection there of the one I preserved within myself. Perhaps I even confused it in some obscure way with the vanished Stilitano (*TJ* 70).

The moment is a liminal stage existing between night and day. The narrator's wakeful weariness as the "first man" on earth coincides with the astronomical benediction of that body by the sun, followed by the sudden reversion to night and a renewed recitation of the sunrise ritual. The sun's emergent presence embodies and replaces the absent Stilitano. The solar imagery and the flesh are rendered as if co-substantial, an intertwining that enraptures the narrator, and in the writing scene that materializes the force of that lived moment, the narrator is depicted as beside himself. The hallucinatory appearance of Stilitano is not distinguishable from the real Stilitano who conveys Genet into nomadic infernal and paradisiacal spaces, Europe, North Africa, Guiana:

Sous un ciel tragique, les plus beaux paysages du monde je les aurai parcourus quand Stilitano la nuit prenait man main. De quelle sorte était ce fluide qui de lui passait en moi, me donnait une décharge? J'ai marché au bord de rivages dangereux, débouché sur des plaines lugubres, entendu la mer. A peine l'avais-je touché, l'escalier changeait: il était le maitre du monde. Le souvenir de ces brefs instants me permettrait de vous décrire des promenades, des fruites haletantes, des poursuites dans les contrées du monde où je n'irai jamais (44)

Beneath a tragic sky, I was to cross the loveliest landscapes in the world when Stilitano took my hand at night. What was the nature of that fluid which passed with a shock from him to me? I walked along dangerous shores, emerged into dismal plains, heard the sea. Hardly had I touched him, when

the stairway changed : he was master of the world. With the memory of those brief moments, I could describe to you walks, breathless flights, pursuits in countries of the world where I shall never go (*TJ* 40).

Autobiography as Self-Requiem: Un Captif amoureux.

More than any conceivable experiences, death's termination of consciousness would seem to preclude the ecstatic experience. Even if at the moment of dying the self finds itself temporarily conscious of itself leaving itself, there is no recourse to an expression or a writing that would capture that ecstasy. Frequently Genet invokes death when he speaks of not being able to write, as if writing itself and awareness of ecstatic being were mutually dependent. He declares in the *Journal* that, "Ainsi ne veux-je plus écrire, je meurs à la Lettre" (116) [*Thus I no longer want to write; I am dead to Letters*]. Subsequently, in "Le Prétex-te," he considers suicide in the face of writers' block and severe depression, fearing an unspeakable life bereft of aesthetic acts ("les pouvoirs du chant") lacking will or ability to write, he contemplates life as one long moment until death ("Ou m'épuiser en un long moment –jusq'à ma mort naturelle" (*Fragments* 77) [Or exhaust myself in a long moment—until my natural death]).

The specter of death looms over *Un Captif amoureux* whenever the narrator finds the effort to trace the ecstatic condition from the past whether the past too exhausting, and when he loses the capacity to process lived facts into the aesthetic ceremony. Hell amounts to finding himself stultified within normal chronometric time. When a sustained writing falters, he relates the autobiographical mutedness to revolutionary movements that try to *live* even as they kill and die--Algerians, the

Irish in Ulster, the Belgian Flemings--“un people tue pour son territoire” (*Captif* 108) [people who kill for their territory]. The insurgents personify a style of being and writing that has the intention of being *memorable*. He contrasts that with writing as *ecstasy*, realizing the self in a decentered state. He pinpoints how the urge to be memorable concedes to a singularity of being, and how it is inferior to the transports that shatter authorial singularity:

Chaque acte se veut fastueux. Son idée se charge d'apparat. L'essence des moyens, c'est la misère. Toute minuscule gloire achevant chaque acte bourré de misères, moi de mots est une mort. Se voulant écrit, mémorable, tout acte est historique—qu'il veuille s'inscrire dans une seule et courte mémoire ou dans une plus nombreuse. Le geste qui brise la loi a un pouvoir d'écriture. (83)

Each act wants to be sumptuous. Its idea is loaded with pomp. The essence of the means is misery. Each minute glory completing each act full of misery, the self of words is a death. Wanting to be written, memorable each act is historic—whether it wants to be inscribed in one single, short memory or many. The deed that breaks the law has a power of writing (*Fragments* 27).

In “Fragments” Genet laments being trapped in the stasis, the nightmare, of that default mode of *memorable* history. *Un Captif amoureux* is a belated remedy to three decades of writer's block, as the memoir plunges directly into the already well-narrated chaos of late 20th century history, inspired by trips to the United States, first to cover the 1968 Democratic convention in 1968 for *Esquire*, and then, in 1970, by invitation of the Black Panthers in New York and Oakland, a pilgrimage extended more radically and further afield through an extended stay in the Palestinian territories from mid-1970 through 1971 with return visits in the mid-1980s at the start of the intifada. Yet as an art of self portraiture *Un Captif* subverts

its own involvement with those who seek memorable political change. In *Un Captif*, the author assiduously avoids creating a final memoir about travels that would be inscribable within a larger geo-political memory and become then a mere pretext among other pretexts in the accumulating collective discourses on the Palestinian crisis. The text unfolds in Genet's words as a "mirror-memoir" in which the incipience and displaced potential of revolution revitalizes an awareness of his own ecstatic condition. The intrinsic homelessness of Palestinians and the hollowness of its failed politics correspond to an awareness of a preponderant absence within the real whenever reality is situated and interpreted in a normal, causal view of time. The fervor and ritual of the Palestinian revolutionaries, however, embody a pure present because they appear to be *outside* the torpor of history: they are unformed, contradictory, ambiguous, inchoate, and a polyvocal contrast to the self-regarding literalism that pervades in Europe and the United States:

Le présent est toujours dur. L'avenir est supposé l'être davantage. Le passé, ou plutôt l'absent, sont adorables et nous vivons au présent. Dans ce monde vécu au présent la révolution palestinienne apportait une douceur qui semblait appartenir au passé, au lointain et peut-être à l'absence, car les adjectifs qui essaient de la décrire sont ceux-ci: chevaleresque, fragile, courageuse, héroïque, romanesque, grave, retorse, ficelle. En Europe on ne parle que par chiffres. Le journal *Le Monde* dans son numéro du 31 octobre 1985 compte trois pages d'informations financières. Les feddayin ne comptaient même pas leurs mots (*Captif* 337)

The present is always grim, and the future is supposed to be worse. The past and that which is absent are wonderful. But we live in the present and into the world lived in the present the Palestinian revolution brought a sweetness that seemed to belong to the past, to that which is far and perhaps also to that which is absent. For the adjectives that describe it are these: quixotic, fragile, brave, heroic, romantic, serious, wily, smart. In Europe people only talk in figures. In *Le Monde* on 31 October 1985 there are three pages of financial news. The fedayeen didn't even count their dead (*Prisoner* 358).

The past of the Palestinians resonate into a perpetual present while the West calculates the present and creates a past akin to a ledger and a future that seems constantly apocalyptic. For the Palestinians, death so permeates living that it is inseparable from it. To memorialize death, to count the dead, would be to try to arrest being itself, to render it quantifiable and static. The daily tallies of capitalistic tabulation are framed as an entombment of the present.

The multifarious and contradictory qualities of the Palestinian Revolution on the margins of the West Bank are concentrated into a perpetually renewed Now that is described as always on the brink of vanishing and this evanescence allows Genet to trace their movement as material, a pretext, through which he detects similarly self-dissolving feelings in himself, states of being that he implies are impossible in historical discourses of *Le Monde* or the United Nations. The narrator bristles at the Palestinian revolution whenever they fail to live up to an ecstatic *Now*, and when they have flattened into a univocal posture, such as the self-aggrandizement of a young soldier bragging to his wiser superior about having beheaded Bedouin mercenaries. The temporal dilations and anticipations that become apparent in the revolution's urgencies provide Genet with evidence that every human existence is a parallel to revolution, an absolute, ongoing artwork, complete with "certitudes, hésitations, désespoirs" informed by the "real" of "activités mentales" (*Captif* 377) and by the unrestricted interactions between close-knit bodies and between bodies and the earth itself, such as deserts, rivers, streams, stones, and bodies and objects

made especially tangible by the crowded, uprooted and provisional refugee settlements, the dream within the dream.

The revolution's ceremonious tendencies and complicated incipience parallel Genet's belief that meaning is extant only in moments and a corresponding style of writing within that "l'heure des métamorphoses":

L'heure que la nuit s'approche aussi inexorable que le sommeil, le périodique et l'éternel, en ville l'heure qui allume les lampadaires, que les enfants veulent faire durer ou seulement traîner pour jouer alors que leurs yeux, brusquement actifs, se ferment, l'heure...plus un espace qu'un temps—, où n'importe quelle être devient sa propre ombre donc autre chose que lui-même (*Un Captif* 362)

The hour when street lamps are lit in the city, and which children try to drag out so that they can go on playing, though their eyes, suddenly active, are closing in spite of themselves. The hour in which—and it's a space rather than a time—every being becomes his own shadow, and thus something other than himself (*Prisoner* 254).

As he reflects on the death of Mubarak, the Stilitano-like young man whom he befriended in 1970 and who is dead when Genet returns in 1980s, Genet is reacquainted with the collapse of temporal categories that burn within moments, especially when those moments are recalled as such: "Chaque souvenir, moins qu'une goutte de parfum peut-être, fait revivre l'instant défunt non selon sa fraîcheur vivante de cette époque, mais autrement, je veux dire revivant d'une autre vie" (*Un Captif* 491). [Though perhaps not as powerfully as a drop of perfume, every memory nevertheless brings back a dead moment; not in the living freshness of then, but throbbing with another kind of life (*Prisoner* 345)].

This *autre vie* is revived in autobiographical instants that render the pre-

narrated transactions between self and world. Aged and stricken with cancer, Genet senses the interpenetration of his body and an unfathomable *other* that nevertheless has a name and is the fate of everyone. *Un Captif's* sublimated awareness that due to advanced age and cancer its narrator is already on his way to being a corpse becomes a generative subtext that lends an elegiac form and confirms how real experience involves the self as *outside itself*, encapsulated in his extended meditation on the verb *s'eclipser* as if to write about one's self is to always eclipse one self, to slip away, to escape, to disappear under light of an other *I* in words that affirm that ecstasy as what being in the world ultimately is. This vanishing explains why the nocturnal language of lovers is the constant model for an autobiographical discourse that Genet names in the opening of *Journal* ["le langage nocturne des amants "] and repeats at the close of *Un Captif* ["ce langage nocturne entre deux amants "] (539). That type of language develops from intervals and contacts wherein the lover's body remains incomplete and open to the other lover's shaping of it. This language of lovers has applicability to bodies opened to the others and to objects even in non-erotic encounters. That spontaneous and associative diction rescues the empty experience or past reality and propels the narrator outside his own awareness as he truly was in the objects and bodies of the world. The lover's nocturnal discourse allows him to circumvent the personal, cultural or national identities that censor the ecstatic potentialities.

In addition to lover's discourse, music is another dominant metaphor for the autobiographical style of *Un Captif*. Genet meditates on the Palestinian's songs, and

on Vivaldi, Mozart, and Stravinsky, and concludes that the merging that happens between one body and another, or one body with objects in the world has its corollary in how the composer's body merges with the listener's body. His account of the musical communion between composer and listener is compared to the manner in which the sculptor cuts into material to release the figure, the realization of within and without: "toute musique, même la plus nouvelle, plutôt que découverte me semble réapparaître alors qu'elle était déjà, enfouie dans la mémoire où elle reposait—la mélodie surtout—encore inaudible reposait—la mélodie surtout—encore inaudible mais comme creusée dans un sillon de chair, et le compositeur nouveau me fait entendre le chant qui était depuis toujours enfermé en moi mais silencieux "(*Captif* 70) [all music, even the newest, is not so much something discovered as something that re-emerges from where it lay buried in the memory, inaudible a melody cut in a disc of flesh. A composer lets me hear a song that has always been shut up silent within me (*Prisoner of Love* 47)].

Song is only one model for the structuring of experience for such a self-portrait. In a passage about the witnessing of the carnage in Shatila, Genet compares how when past externalities are absorbed by the living writer they incrementally over the years alter him from within, and then these transformative objects and people from the past produce a present act of writing, such that the past event contains within it an aesthetic destiny that arrives in the *Now* of memoir. Into this metaphorical analysis of time as a single moment, Genet finally alludes to his own illness near the end of the autobiography:

En septembre 1982, les massacres de Chatila ne furent peut-être pas déterminants; ils eurent lieu; j'en fus affecté; j'en parlai, mais si l'acte d'écrire vint plus tard, le temps d'incubation, l'instant ou les instants qu'une cellule, une seule, bifurquant de son habituel métabolisme, commençât la première maille d'une dentelle ou cancer, dont personne ne soupçonne ce qu'il sera, ou même qu'il sera, je décidai d'écrire ce livre (*Un Captif* 609)

Perhaps the massacres at Chatila in September 1982 were not a tuning point. They happened. I was affected by them. I talked about them. But while the act of writing came later, after a period of incubation, nevertheless in a moment like that or those when a single cell departs from its usual metabolism and the original link is created of a future, unsuspected cancer, or a piece of lace, so I decided to write this book (*Prisoner of Love* 429).

Dying of throat cancer, Genet watches himself slip away within the elegiac poetry of *Un Captif*.³³ Without ever naming the terminal illness directly until the passage above, the memoir's discourse articulates how as he approaches death he is already passing beyond himself into the features of the Middle Eastern desert and the night sky which in turn seem to take residency with him. Genet's memoir attempts to express an ecstasy at its farthest limits, such that the living body feels itself impossibly enfolded into the *otherness* of death through an absorption into the sonic materiality of Mozart's *Requiem* on a Walkman:

Les jours de colère, les tubas, le tremblement des rois, cela n'était pas une messe mais le récit chante d'un opéra qui se jouait en mais d'une heure, *le temps d'une agonie* vécue et jouée dans l'effroi de perdre le monde pour se trouver sans lequel? Sous quelle forme?" (*Un Captif* 90; italics G.'s)

The days of wrath, the tubas, the trembling of the kings—it wasn't a mass but an opera lasting less than an hour, the time it might take someone to die, performed and heard in dread of losing this world and finding oneself in what other? And in what form? (*Prisoner of Love* 61)

³³ In a 1983 interview with the BBC, when asked about his current work, Genet quoted Augustine: "I am waiting for death." (cf White's biography *Genet: A Life*)

Un Captif's metaphorical internment of its implied author within the exigencies and materials of the places he visits parallels how as he listens to Mozart's *Requiem* the work replicates the unthinkable experience of death, of becoming an *other* or *outside time* in the fullest sense of the word.

Genet's actual internment, in Morocco, months before he had finished proofing the manuscript of *Un Captif* is itself an autobiographical gesture that extends his memoir's cross-cultural affiliations into a non-literary domain. Interred in a Catholic cemetery in an impoverished former Spanish colonial resort town near the ocean in Islamic North Africa, where Genet wrote much of *Un Captif*, he is buried in a plot near a large mosque's minaret and overlooking the Atlantic. The white headstone is inscribed with his own autograph. The displacements and incongruities of the gravesite are numerous: an atheist buried in a Christian cemetery in an Islamic milieu with a headstone deliberately pointed away from his northern birthplace in France, pointing instead east to Mecca, in the opposite direction of the other graves in the cemetery. This centrifugal scattering of *Jean Genet* into a range of spaces and temporal points, combined with the equivocal notation about the exact date of this death "April 14-15, 1986," looms as a final statement of an autobiographical presence beyond biographic coherence.

Conclusion

In his reading of Rousseau, Derrida inaugurates the renewed question of whether writing, and in particular autobiographical writing as exemplified by *Confessions*, is haunted by the knowledge that the text is “a recourse to literature as a reappropriation of presence” (*Grammatology* 144). In the deconstructionist view, speech promises and refuses presence, and writing, “the dangerous supplement” further haunts the writing subject by further transforming life into what it is not: “Writing is dangerous from the moment that representation there claims to be presence and the sign of the thing itself” (*Grammatology* 144). Yet this notion of presence and significance requires an interrogation in light of its presumption that *presence* is the strict provenance of a human realm. The subject is presumed to be primary to the nonhuman and to language. The ecstatic autobiography conceives presence as equally operative in self and non-self through language. The writers examined here position autobiographical work as a physical manifestation of themselves in the world, not as substitutions for or representations of either speech or the actual life. Language is the means by which these works claim a simultaneity with the world, a reciprocal motion that exists at the core of the everyday but which is closed off by forms of language use that limit experience to spatial and temporal categorizations. The authors examined here display a propensity for resistance to

received forms of language for the self, an aversion to the habitual flattening of sensation and perception by everyday routine and the distortions of memory, and a radical disengagement from personal relationships within which the self coalesces into a recognizably temporized entity. The concealments and superficialities manifest within reality mean that the real, Being itself, is accessible only through a writing that can overturn the lived stasis of the subject and find for him or her how his being exceeds its given boundaries. This demanding negotiation, or discernment, and the undertaking of the autobiographical reclamation of lived ecstasies are alluded to in Marcel's ultimate realization at the end of *Recherche*, in an epiphany in the library of Guermantes near the conclusion of *Le Temps Retrouvé*:

Ce travail de l'artiste, de chercher à apercevoir sous de la matière, sous de l'expérience, sous des mots quelque chose de différent, c'est exactement le travail inverse de celui que, à chaque minute, quand nous vivons détourné de nous-même l'amour-propre, la passion, l'intelligence et l'habitude aussi accomplissent en nous, quand elles amassent au-dessus de nos impressions vraies, pour nous les cacher maintenant, les nomenclatures, les buts pratiques que nous appelons faussement la vie. En somme cet art si compliqué est justement le seul art vivant. Seul il exprime pour les autres et nous fait voir à nous-même notre propre vie, cette vie qui ne peut pas s'"observer", dont les apparences qu'on observe ont besoin d'être traduites et souvent lues à rebours et péniblement déchiffrées. Ce travail qu'avaient fait notre amour-propre, notre passion, notre esprit d'imitation, notre intelligence abstraite, nos habitudes, c'est ce travail que l'art défera, c'est la marche en sens contraire, le retour aux profondeurs, où ce qui a existé réellement gît inconnu de nous qu'il nous fera suivre [IV: 474-475].

This labour of the artist to discover a means of apprehending beneath matter and experience, beneath words, something different from their appearance, is of an exactly contrary nature to the operation in which pride, passion, intelligence and habit are constantly engaged within us when we spend our lives without self-communion, accumulating as though to hide our true impressions, the terminology for practical ends which we falsely call life. In short, this complex art is precisely the only living art. It alone expresses for others and makes us see, our own life, that life which cannot observe itself,

the outer forms of which, when observed, need to be interpreted and often read upside down, in order to be laboriously deciphered. The work of our pride, our passion, our spirit of imitation, our abstract intelligence, our habits must be undone by art which takes the opposite course and returning to the depths where the real has its unknown being, makes us pursue it (*Time Regained* 298).

Proust positions *Recherche's* mandate as an undoing of the apparent existential self, and to vacate from the remembered realities those socio-psychological names that conventionally and mistakenly designate what is real. Given that the everyday and voluntary memory demand a constant rehearsal and biographical representation of individuality, those operations inevitably produce life remembered as a sequential survey; memory's rehearsals of the past induce imitations of a newly imitated self, or lead to what Woolf calls the preponderance of long stretches of experiential "non-being." An autobiographical discourse on the ecstatic condition exposes the fictive stability of a past fact and answers the inevitable non-being of the everyday through a use of language built around sensation and perception that is ontologically expansive. Imitation, abstraction, pride, and habit are before all else linguistic methods for ignoring how the Now of being always contains within it the dissolution of those categories, categories that only seem to be distinct because they go under different names: past, present and future. In accessing the autobiographical depths of the pre-imitative, pre-habitual, pre-rational self within the sensations and perceptions and the constant encountering of the self *as* the world, the ecstatic text lifts subjectivity from its commonsensical imprisonment within temporal categories, so that instead of representing a past present or

describing how the future once looked from a particular past, the subject is affirmed spatially, within a textual *Now* that does not conform to categorization because I finds itself once again in the incompleteness and incipience of past facts that were never as closed as they seemed.

In *L'Âge d'Homme*, memoirist Michel Leiris lays out a program that brings together language and presence this way and revels in the dangerous supplement of life writing as an exalted necessity. He outlines a mode of writing about hyper-idiosyncratic, discrete, non-chronological facts of experience. In concentrating experience as a constant mutability between what his body apprehends and the objects of the world, language and words confuse the perceiver with what he perceives; instead of providing the means for drawing distinctions and clarifying the inexplicable, ordinary language and words promote a heterogeneous link between the writing subject and the world he inhabits, and autobiography develops into an ecstatic transactional form of being such that the named and described objects of the world *out there* and their affective power on the author liquidate the former self, producing a more truthful self within the associative vertigo that occurs as he mediates on language and objects, and in so doing, *I* is constantly *another*. In seeking to know his porous exposure to otherness in language and in things, Leiris' enterprise strives to surpass Rousseau's vow to uninhibited personal confession [*J'ai dit le bien et le mal avec la même franchise*] by voicing the author's eroticized and psychical presence within the concrete world, and no experience is ever more particularized than the evanescence of an individual's *moments* when they are

divorced from the cultural and habitual dictionaries that would spell out for the self how he is different from the world. Leiris recovers the spaces and words within which he knows he is absorbed and lost. Presence comes about through extremes of individuation by way of complicated affinities for certain words and objects and the associative and uncertain meanings those contacts produce for the author so that, “par le maximum de subjectivite qu'on touche à l'objectivite” (*L'Âge d'homme* 15).

Leiris systematizes a rhetoric in which the subject-body's transactional encounters with the textures of words, numinous objects, and mythic personages undermine the historical fiction of a continuous subjectivity, as the texts become “les truchements,” revealing a utilitarian yet naturalized role in constituting and reconstituting “I.” Leiris privileges and cultivates the fundamental estrangement of the self thrown into the world. He pits a purportedly contained and whole self-presence against the poeticized sensuous terror, what he calls the autobiographical “bull's horns” of language and objects.

Unlike Proust's novelistic synthesis of the extremely personal dimension and the social sphere, Leiris turns autobiography from human relationships per se to focus on the solitary and irrational conjunction between the shifting nature of *I* as the project deepens rather than reverses the interplay between inside and outside. Leiris describes his earliest sexual arousal as having come to him from the momentary sight of the bare feet of poor children climbing a tree, and he gleans the concept of the infinite from an epiphany around an image on a tin of Dutch cocoa, and he gains an insight into what the *soul* is from watching bird feed being placed

through the bars of a cage. Throughout the eclectic meditations on time and being, Leiris' operative metaphor is the work of the bullfighter: "The degree to which the man exposes himself to the beast" (of the other, of that which is not *I*) is the criterion for judging the merits of an autobiography, and this dangerous proposition defines his aesthetic understanding of the being: "Just as in bullfighting the magic of the pass has to do with that quasi-tangency, that almost contact of the man with the exterior danger concentrated in the horns, so the overwhelming value of the act of love comes from its being the way a thinking subject...can feel materially joined to the world whose sum and summit is one single living creature" ("Bullfight as Mirror" 32).

If presence is problematic in terms of its expression, it is because language denies presence its ecstatic condition: "This incapacity to join utterly [with the other], except in death's fusion, is equivalent to the presence of a flaw, an inner margin between the curve that would lead to the point of ideal tangency and the slightly skewed curve that human lovers follow" ("Bullfight" 32). As critic Michel Beaujour shows in *Miroirs d'encre*, the modern fragmenting, self-effacing autobiography is more properly called an "autoportrait" [self-portrait] because of its implicit tentativeness, its impermanence and its eventual substitution by yet another self-portrait, and in how narrative time is displaced as the work's organizational principle:

The absence of a continuous narrative in the self-portrait distinguishes it from autobiography. So does its subordination of narration to a logical deployment, a collation or patching together of elements...[that are] thematic...self-portrait realizes from its outset what Lejeune calls 'the secret

project of every autobiography' belatedly achieved by Leiris for whom 'thematic order ranks first and chronology second, thus diminishing chronology's traditional explanatory function' (Beaujour 2).

In examining the autobiographical use of archaic and classical objects in Michel Leiris, Beaujour re-emphasizes how the mystifying of subjectivity has always been one of the appeals of autobiography against the prevailing humanistic culture in which the work is written:

It is no longer a question of standardizing the individual's memory to fit a cultural model but, on the contrary, of working with fragments that do not conform to the stereotype and out of which the subject can fashion an idiosyncratic ensemble of metaphors where he will find himself (again) or get lost (Beaujour 197).

Central to this genealogical thesis on the long experimental literary self-portraiture is Beaujour's emphasis on the modern autobiographer's willful self-theatricality as revealed in the autobiography's variable patterns of self-disorientation and self-recuperation, its fetishizing of the hermetic detail, its modern liberties with genre and form. Still this copious study rules out the existential urgency that marks the projects of Joyce, Colette and Genet. The aesthetic process of being is not only a matter of style. The world of objects and other people and the self coexist as fluid facts and constantly unfolding contacts that themselves demand of each individual a style of being irreducible to past, present or future. Even a former surrealist quite conscious of experimentation as Leiris indicates that ecstatic autobiography answers an ontological gap in how reality is constructed. In describing a childhood illness in *L'Âge d'homme*, Leiris focuses his

account on how illness recalibrates his awareness of time. Awakened in the middle of the night by a violent cough, Leiris recalls attending to his body's sporadic spasms, re-concentrating on lived time physiologically instead of in its normal static parameters as a social or psychological condition. "J'étais confusément heureux que quelque chose me rendit intéressant" (*L'Âge d'Homme* 64) [*I was confusedly happy that something has made me interesting*]. The palpations of symptoms awaken him to himself *as another, outside* the enclosed selfhood of habit; he sees himself in the outside his own existence as it disrupts the progress of night and brings his mother's ministrations. Leiris confesses that he enjoys the irresponsibility [*le sentiment d'irresponsabilité*] that he relives when writing about the moment. But to what onerous state does Leiris feel responsible to in the first place and from which illness temporarily liberates him? In writing about it, the openness and availability of the sick body to the world takes him out of time and restores a former ecstatic awareness denied by the obligation to *I*.

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