

**SEX WITH WITTGENSTEIN:  
LANGUAGE, NARRATIVE AND REPETITION IN DURAS, SARTRE AND GENET**

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This project argues for the usefulness of Ludwig Wittgenstein's view of language as a lens through which to study literature in its use of the blurred-edged concept of "sex". I examine this concept in relation to Marguerite Duras, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jean Genet, in whose works sex and sexuality are prevalent, and play an essential role in narrative characterization and construction of self. Wittgenstein permits a reading of Duras that places her incestuous relationship with her brother at the center of her trilogy, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, *L'Amant*, and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. The portrayal of incest asks us to reconsider the caring and salvific nature of an act that is often seen as repulsive. In Sartre's *Les Chemins de la liberté*, Wittgenstein again permits us to shift focus and raise a previously under-appreciated aspect of the narrative to the limelight – the character of Daniel. This project brings Daniel to the level of unrecognized protagonist, arguing that his narrative is unique in making him the only character who can act in good faith in relation to sex. Lastly, a Wittgensteinian lens allows us to look at the abject sex that permeates the Genetian narratives *Miracle de la Rose*, *Pompes funèbres*, and *Journal du voleur*, to see a character, Jean Genet, that is concerned with

knowledge of the world, and that encourages the reader to use his character as a mirror for seeing the world anew.

“Self,” then, becomes the ultimate *telos* of the exploration of sex in the narratives of Duras, Sartre, and Genet. This is not surprising, since for these authors, sex is an activity that offers unique insight into their characters, and so explorations of sex cannot help but end up at questions of self-understanding. But more than just to the abstract relationship between self and sex that is expressed, the self is tied tightly to narrative, episodic encounters realized entirely on a linguistic surface. In this sense, then, talk of sexual practices leads to talk of self, and reveals self to be as blurred-edged a concept as sex.

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## PREFACE

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To Jamie Staples, whose eye for detail was almost as invaluable to finishing this project as was his love and support. I doubt very much that this dissertation would have been finished in such a timely manner, and with my sanity intact, were it not for him.

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## 1.0 WITTGENSTEIN, KNOWLEDGE AND LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP

As to those for whom to work hard, to begin and begin again, to attempt and to be mistaken, to go back and rework everything from top to bottom, and still find reason to hesitate from one step to the next—as to those, in short, for whom to work in the midst of uncertainty and apprehension is tantamount to failure, all I can say is that clearly we are not from the same planet.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This is a dissertation that is about sex, and also not about sex. At its center, this is a dissertation about literature that also deals with specific literary works. That is to say, this dissertation is doing two things, though not at the same time. In this introduction chapter, I will argue for the usefulness of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s view of language as a lens through which to study literature in its continued, repeated creation of what he would have called blurred-edge concepts. Among those concepts, I have chosen “sex” as its recurrence in literature is unavoidable and its definition always extremely problematic. The following three chapters will operate as almost stand-alone essays, each using a Wittgensteinian framework to explore the concept of sex as it appears in the oeuvres of three canonical French authors. I will admit that the choice of both concept (sex) and authors (Marguerite Duras, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jean Genet) is, of course,

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1990) 7.

also somewhat dependent on taste. There are certainly other concepts that illustrate the usefulness of Wittgenstein's perspective on language to the study of literature; further, there are other canonical French authors than the three I have chosen who could have figured in this study. A study of the concept of politics, or love, or hate, or peace, or redemption, or forgiveness, or disgust, and so on could all have equally been chosen, resulting in interesting and informative projects. Too, the trio Proust, Camus, and Beckett, for example, would have been a choice equally as canonical and maybe just as relevant to the issues at hand. For what is choosing canonical authors, I will say that it is a pragmatic choice: I hope that through dealing with authors that are frequently the subject of French literary study, my application of Wittgenstein will show its ability to open up new avenues of thought even on works that have already been central objects of scholarship. My choice of these three authors specifically is motivated by the prevalence of sex and sexuality in their works and the essential role it plays in narrative characterization and in the construction of a compelling notion of selfhood and self-awareness. Not only that, but the complexity and creativity they use in the description and use of sex has made them essential references for scholars interested in this issue from different perspectives, as we will see in the chapters that I devote to the particular authors.

This majority of this introduction will be spent outlining the view of language that Wittgenstein presents in his later work, *The Philosophical Investigations*, and pertinent remarks relating to its application to literary study. I will show how a Wittgensteinian view of language makes of literature an indispensable source, and expression, of knowledge and understanding when it comes to concepts at the heart of the Humanities. After the discussion of Wittgenstein, I will proceed to outline how I will be using some general terms revolving around sex – namely, sex, sexuality, and, more controversially, heterosexuality, and homosexuality. The purpose of

this discussion is not to present new uses of these terms, nor to propose clearer definitions of them; my goal will be to place myself *outside* of analytic discussions of what these terms currently mean or have meant in the past. Indeed, my reading of Wittgenstein will require me to do so. Lastly, I will steer the discussion towards the term self, and once again place my project outside analytic discussions of what the term currently means or has meant in several disciplinary discourses.

Though, as I have said above, the following three chapters operate more like three separate essays on the same concept rather than three parts of a single argument, the end of this project will find the push for the appearance of a concept of self as the common thread in all that has been discussed up to this point. In the conclusion, I will briefly comment on the ways in which a Wittgensteinian perspective, through helping us to place importance on literature as a form of exploring and expressing the world, simultaneously highlights the literary nature of the very concept of our self. I will argue that our self is a narrative construction, and that the exploration of self is not unlike the exploration of the characters I discuss in Duras, Sartre, and Genet. This is not a highly original argument; however, the road that Wittgenstein leads us on in order to reach this conclusion introduces an important difference in the way we understand the import and the consequences of what might appear a rather banal, commonsensical contention.

Since, as I have already said, sex is one concept among many that could serve as the topic of a project relying on Wittgenstein, there is no *necessary* connection between what his view of language does to our understanding of literary narratives, and the ways in which Wittgenstein's thought may fit with gender, queer and masculinity theories. There are ways in which Wittgenstein could be read in light of these theories, in the same way that, were this project dealing with the concept of the political, there would be lenses of political theories through

which Wittgenstein could be viewed.<sup>2</sup> Suffice it to say, I have not chosen sex as the concept over and above other concepts *because* of any way in which Wittgenstein’s view of language coincides with theories touching the realm of the sexual better than theories surrounding any other concept – politics, hatred, and so on. Yet, I will indeed conclude the project by following the lead of queer theorist Eve Sedgwick, who warns about the danger and destruction caused by irresponsible histories of homosexuality. I will warn that, if Sedgwick is correct, then literary studies must too be warned about the danger and destruction caused by irresponsible theories of language.

## 1.2 A REFERENTIAL UNDERSTANDING OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Wolfgang Iser in his introduction to *The Literary Wittgenstein*<sup>3</sup> writes that much philosophy of the early twentieth century was influenced by Bertrand Russell’s philosophy of language: this meant trying to understand language via “truth” and “reference”. Wittgenstein was, of course, influenced by Russell’s philosophy as well, being that he was one of Russell’s students at Cambridge before the First World War and that at the beginning of his career he remained quite close to his master’s approach, although differences might have emerged very early on. Iser warns that there is a conflict between the stuff of literature and a philosophy of language like Russell’s:

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of recent scholarship on Wittgenstein and political theory, see Christopher C. Robinson, *Wittgenstein and Political Theory: The View from Somewhere* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009), Robin Holt, *Wittgenstein, Politics and Human Rights* (Florence: Routledge, 1997), Gavin Kitching and Nigel Pleasants, ed., *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> John Gibson and Wolfgang Iser, ed., *The Literary Wittgenstein* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Both aspects of this referential picture of language [truth and reference], however, are not particularly apt to approach literature; unlike scientific ones, literary texts do not seem to deliver veridical descriptions of the world, but rather to describe fictional scenarios. Moreover, they typically do not refer to objects or events that exist in the actual world.<sup>4</sup>

For Russell, statements with definite descriptions and proper names are true only if there exists one thing to which they refer, thus everything in *Hamlet*, to use Russell's well known illustration, is false because Hamlet is a fiction.<sup>5</sup> This stance obviously puts literature in an awkward position: if its statements are false, then it has no "cognitive value"; but then why does humankind read and write?<sup>6</sup>

Huemer notes that other philosophers haven't been so drastic, and have held a referential theory of language while bracketing certain requirements for literature, or making literature true for other possible worlds, and so on. Thus, one is not forced to draw conclusions as severe as Russell's in order to hold fast to the notions of "truth" and "reference". Still, in view of the contentions raised by the first analytic philosophers, something might in fact need to be done philosophically to make room for literature.<sup>7</sup>

A logic-based theory of language has to *pretend* that literature uses words in the same way as everyday language, thus literature becomes a "niche" use of language, isolated from the rest, and therefore can be left out of an account of what language – on an everyday, functioning

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<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Huemer, introduction, *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Huemer (New York: Routledge, 2004) 3.

<sup>5</sup> Bertrand Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (London: Allen 1962) 277.

<sup>6</sup> Huemer 3.

<sup>7</sup> Huemer 4.

level – is.<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein’s view of language, however, avoids the pitfalls of reference theories of language, while also making room for literature as a valuable means of expressing knowledge and understanding.

### 1.3 WITTGENSTEIN

Giving a concise overview of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy is extremely difficult, due to its many intricacies and nuances. For the purpose of this project, I’m going to restrict my comments mostly to what Wittgenstein has to say about meaning – especially his talk of fixity of meaning, which is mainly contained in §§65-88 of his *Philosophical Investigations*.<sup>9</sup> I need, though, to delineate briefly its previous intellectual trajectory, because the issue of language is essential to the entirety of Wittgenstein’s philosophical endeavor.

Wittgenstein only published one *systematic philosophical* work during his lifetime, his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which was already finished soon after the end of the war but only found a publisher in 1922.<sup>10</sup> We should remark, though, that this was not due to issues of scarce productivity. At the time of Wittgenstein’s death in 1951, there were almost 30 000 pages of manuscript left unpublished. The most polished parts of these manuscripts constitute what has become Part I of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and thus this is considered the most reliable example of Wittgenstein’s later thought. This later work is important but remains somewhat

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<sup>8</sup> Huemer 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> The edition I am quoting is the following: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* trans. C.K. Ogden (Mineola: Dover, 1999).

controversial, because of the general way in which it seemingly contrasts his work in the *Tractatus*.

In many ways the philosophy presented in the *Tractatus* falls under the general category of a reference view of language not too far from Russell's own, so much so that the latter agreed to write a preface for it (Wittgenstein, however, thought that Russell had not understood his book at all). However, it is not quite true to say that the *Investigations* are contradicting the work of the *Tractatus*, but instead that the latter work has as *its goal* something different from the one of the earlier book. One should keep in mind, nonetheless, that while the *Tractatus* is a work of logic, even at that point Wittgenstein states at its outset its connection to the world in general, and introduces some fundamental issues that will come back in later works but from a different perspective. This is why I will quote some passages from this work that have an important role in our understanding of Wittgenstein's later positions. The incipit of the book is famously concise:

1. The world is everything that is the case.
  - 1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.
    - 1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by these being *all* the facts.
      - 1.12 For the totality of facts determines both what is the case, and also all that is not the case.<sup>11</sup>

The way in which this work of logic fits into Wittgenstein's initial concern with the world and what can be said about it is made clear later in the work, when Wittgenstein actually affirms that science – and the logical discourse that founds it – might still leave untouched anything that matters in life:

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<sup>11</sup> *Tractatus* §§1-1.12.

6.51 Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but palpably senseless, if it would doubt where a question cannot be asked.

For doubt can only exist where there is a question; a question only where there is an answer, and this only where something *can* be *said*.

6.52 We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer.<sup>12</sup>

The logical approach of the *Tractatus* is not *intended* to answer all the questions, but simply to provide an approach to questions that are actual questions, that is questions which are in relation to things about which we can talk. Logic as foundation for mathematics and other scientific endeavors is one such thing. As for the rest, Wittgenstein concludes with the ominous final line of the *Tractatus*,

7. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.<sup>13</sup>

This could be thought of as saying, whereof one cannot speak logically, thereof one must be silent. After much personal strife and a second World War, The *Investigations* will take up where logic leaves off, trying to say things about the “problems of life” previously condemned to silence, although not at all in the same way as the *Tractatus*. Indeed, Wittgenstein himself writes in the preface to the *Investigations*: “the latter [his new thought contained in the *Investigations*] could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my old ways of thinking.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Tractatus* §§6.51-6.52.

<sup>13</sup> *Tractatus* §7.

<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein, preface, *Investigations* x.

As mentioned above, even giving an outline of what Wittgenstein is doing in the *Investigations* is no easy task, but a certain familiarity with the general layout of the main sections of the project are necessary in order to adequately grasp what I want to bring to light when focusing on his discussion of the fixity of meaning. I'm going to begin this part of the chapter by offering a very short selection of sections – enough simply to prime the pump. My main theoretical support will be Warren Goldfarb's commentary, because it does bring out aspects of Wittgenstein's later philosophy in nuanced ways that are germane to my project. Goldfarb argues, and I agree with him, that Wittgenstein is often understood to be doing something simpler than is actually the case. Goldfarb's close readings of the *Investigations* will help us present a general notion of the picture of language that Wittgenstein was sketching out, and most importantly its relation to meaning.

This section on the *Investigations* will be followed by an outline of ways in which some have already used Wittgenstein's notion of language to influence literary criticism. It is after this section of how a Wittgensteinian view of language may be extended to influence literary theory that I will end the chapter by offering some thoughts about what this might mean for literary scholarship today.

#### **1.4 THE *PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS***

In the *Investigations*, Part I of which was already complete by 1945 and Part II was written between 1947 and 1949, Wittgenstein is mainly reacting against a reference picture of language that was dominant in analytic philosophical circles most notably through the works of Bertrand Russell and his followers. He does so by saying that to assume that what words do is to

reference their unique meaning, is to underestimate the variety of ways in which we use language:

Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. – The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.)

Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy!<sup>15</sup>

Because words are all alike in how they appear to us, we tend to think that language has to operate in a single way. But this is not the case. Though both a glue-pot and a hammer can be referred to as tools, the latter is far better suited to driving pieces of steel into planks of wood than the former. Besides the tools already mentioned in the previous quote, Wittgenstein offers an additional illustration, the handles in a locomotive:

It is like looking into the cabin of a locomotive. We see handles all looking more or less alike. (Naturally, since they are all supposed to be handled.) But one is the handle of a crank which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only two effective positions, it is either off or on; a third is the handle of a brake-lever, the harder one pulls on it, the harder it breaks; a fourth, the handle of a pump: it has an effect only so long as it is moved to and fro.<sup>16</sup>

It is important to point out that what Wittgenstein is *not* doing is presenting a systematic theory of language. Rather than trying to examine what underlies language, Wittgenstein is

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<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §11.

<sup>16</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §12.

concerned with what lies on the surface. This notion is supported by Goldfarb, as will be seen below, but has also been explored by other scholars, for instance by Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey in their article “Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy: A Prophylaxis Against Theory”<sup>17</sup> and Austin E. Quigley in his article “Wittgenstein’s Philosophizing and Literary Theorizing”.<sup>18</sup> I will go back to Allen and Turvey a bit later, but for the time being I will say that Quigley argues convincingly for calling what Wittgenstein is doing as offering a “picture” (a relatively literal, although semantically limited translation of Wittgenstein’s use of the German word “Bild”) of language, citing Wittgenstein’s description of the *Investigations* in its preface as an “album”<sup>19</sup> which gives a “picture of the landscape.”<sup>20</sup> Quigley comments:

We should, of course, be alert to the implications of the image of an album...His earlier attempts [in the *Tractatus*] to establish for every proposition a definitive picture are superseded by later attempts to sketch out “tolerable” pictures whose application extends beyond the sentence and whose value depends on neither their singularity nor their singleness. His declining interest in establishing definitive scenes is accompanied by a growing interest in sketching emerging landscapes, whose complicated contours require repeated journeys from one imprecise locale to another.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey, “Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy: A Prophylaxis Against Theory,” *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts*, ed. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Austin E. Quigley, “Wittgenstein’s Philosophizing and Literary Theorizing,” *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein*, ed. Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost (Evanston : Northwestern UP, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein, preface, *Investigations* ix.

<sup>20</sup> Wittgenstein, preface, *Investigations* ix.

<sup>21</sup> Quigley 4.

It is with this in mind that I refer often to Wittgenstein's pictorial understanding of language, not meaning a singular, all-encompassing picture, but meaning to highlight his desire to treat snapshots, transient occurrences of language in use as the means of understanding how it works.

## 1.5 THE BEGINNING OF THE *INVESTIGATIONS*

The fact that Wittgenstein is not aiming to present a theory of language, but instead an album of pictures is clear in the opening sections of the *Investigations*. Warren Goldfarb ends his article "I Want You to Bring Me a Slab: Remarks on the Opening Sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*",<sup>22</sup> with the suggestion that we should not read the opening pages of the *Investigations* as purporting what he labels a naïve mentalism. This would propound the belief that meaning is grounded in mental phenomena – that is, the meaning of a word is an essence that we grasp in order to use it. But in fact, Wittgenstein does just the opposite, because in the course of the *Philosophical Investigations*, he defeats naïve mentalism (a reference based understanding of language) by showing that meaning is *not* correlated with mental phenomena at all.<sup>23</sup>

And indeed, the *Investigations* start with what Wittgenstein calls an Augustinian image of language, which is in fact a referential one:

When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shown by their

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<sup>22</sup> Warren D. Goldfarb, "I Want You to Bring Me a Slab: Remarks on the Opening Sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*," *Synthese* 56 (1983): 265-282.

<sup>23</sup> Goldfarb, "Slab" 265.

bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.<sup>24</sup>

However, as Goldfarb says, the passage from Augustine doesn't seem to *necessarily* be saying anything about the essence of language at all. In fact, at face value, the Augustinian passages seem to be a simple commentary on how children learn the names of things in their daily interactions. This is to say nothing of the fact that such a naïve mentalism is a straw man in the first place: no one actually adheres to such a view of language – at least not those philosophers that Wittgenstein takes himself to be in conversation with, namely Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein's own earlier view of language contained in the *Tractatus*.<sup>25</sup> That being the case, Goldfarb suggests that Wittgenstein's comment that this might be an existent understanding of language should come as a shock – and, furthermore, that Wittgenstein intended it as such. Through this, argues Goldfarb, Wittgenstein is suggesting that “innocent notions”<sup>26</sup> like the ones we see in Augustine's account are what sparks our philosophical curiosity, however once they are put under the light of philosophical debate, they morph – we make them fit the structure of philosophical inquiry.

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<sup>24</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §1.

<sup>25</sup> Goldfarb, “Slab” 265.

<sup>26</sup> Goldfarb, “Slab” 268.

In fact, Wittgenstein uses what Goldfarb calls a “forced naiveté”<sup>27</sup> in some of his anecdotic examples just to bring this philosophical morphing to light. Most often this forced naiveté is exhibited through the somewhat bullying comments directed towards an imaginary interlocutor, who frequently seems to challenge the commonplace, and who stubbornly comes back presenting a change in approach from the *Tractatus*. Goldfarb says that this unrelenting pressure is meant to keep us at the clearest level of description.<sup>28</sup> But of course, as Wittgenstein says in §23, even description isn’t a clear concept, and there’s more to it than that: whether or not something is a description will depend on the context in which it’s used. Thus, not only does this forced naivety make us describe the words we’re using, but it also makes us realize that these descriptions change depending on the context.<sup>29</sup>

This is seen in action in Wittgenstein’s grocer example of §1 that directly follows his outline of the Augustinian view of language. Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a man going into a grocery store, handing the clerk a piece of paper with the words “five red apples”, at which point the clerk matches the writing “apple” with a label marked “apple” on a drawer, uses a color chart to match the word “red” to a color swatch, and takes out an apple of that color for each number until he reaches the number five. This is a provocation of course, meant at telling us precisely how language does *not* work. The genius of Wittgenstein, in my opinion, is the way in which this example brings to light issues with the seemingly innocuous Augustinian example. The grocer example is offered as a simple mirror to what is apparently going on *in a referential understanding of language*, but the difference between the two is brought out by the exacting questions asked by the stubborn interlocutor.

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<sup>27</sup> Goldfarb, “Slab” 269.

<sup>28</sup> Goldfarb, “Slab” 269.

<sup>29</sup> Goldfarb, “Slab” 269.

The first question, "But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'?" brings to light exactly a problem of the Augustinian picture that often goes unseen: when we take the reference notion of how language means and take it *out of* the mind we immediately see the issue - there's more involved than just matching the word "apple" to writing on a drawer. One has to *have known* that the slip was *meant* to act as a standard - there is, that is to say, an entire context at play that now becomes evident that we didn't notice when this referencing was supposedly going on in our head.

Wittgenstein's answer to the interlocutor's first question is interesting: "Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described". This seems like a response better suited for the question "But how do *I* know he knows where and how he is to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'?" Wittgenstein is saying that the grocer knows how to do these things in the same way that *I would know he knows* how to do these things: he acts accordingly.

The interlocutor follows with a second question, "But what is the meaning of the word 'five'?", to which Wittgenstein offers the response: "No such thing was in question here, only how the word 'five' is used". The interlocutor's second question seems to pick up on the fact that Wittgenstein's first answer wasn't what he wanted or expected - the interlocutor was looking for a response that talked about meaning that would tie the notion of knowing to an essence, and thus meaning to an essence. Wittgenstein, however, is telling him that the *meaning* was not what was in question when the interlocutor posed his question about knowledge; instead the question of how the grocer knew what to do was, contrary to what the interlocutor might have thought, a question about use.

Wittgenstein is trying “not so much to propose an alternative to such and such a philosophical theory, but to pull the rug out from under the theory.”<sup>30</sup> in this way Wittgenstein’s method is one of *depiction*, rather than *argument*.<sup>31</sup> Unmasking referential temptations operates at a more fundamental level than the specific premises of this or that philosophy of language:

For in these sections [the opening sections of PI] Wittgenstein is examining what it is to *begin* looking for a philosophical account of language and meaning. The “decisive moves in the conjuring trick” (as he puts it in another context, §308) do not amount to specific theses held by this or that philosopher; they are made without notice at a point in the course of philosophizing far earlier than the development of a particular position.<sup>32</sup>

This is what the beginning of the *Investigations* is trying to get at – this is the weight that the opening sections possess, far greater than a simple refutation of a straw man version of a reference view of language.

## 1.6 FIXITY OF MEANING

At this point, the critic may want to ask a pointed question: what Wittgenstein is doing may be all fine and good, but then, how do terms mean? To use Wittgenstein’s example of the concept “game”, which plays an essential role in §66, how are we able to ascribe it to various instances of games if not that there is something in common between all those instances that *is* the essence of what a game is? This is the issue that Goldfarb takes up in another article, “Wittgenstein on

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<sup>30</sup> Goldfarb, “Slab” 266.

<sup>31</sup> Goldfarb, “Slab” 266.

<sup>32</sup> Goldfarb, “Slab” 266-67.

Fixity of Meaning”.<sup>33</sup> In fact, a pressure of the same sort as the interlocutor was applying in the opening sections of the *Investigations* is also exerted when he approaches meaning from a referential understanding of language. Looking closely at Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance and, thus, of how we understand the view the passage wants to discredit, Goldfarb will see three ways in which the passage can be understood, each carrying progressively more philosophical weight.

For the time being, let’s examine the passage in questions it appears in the *Investigations*:

Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games”. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don’t say: “There *must* be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’” – but *look* and *see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!...

And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.<sup>34</sup>

This broad notion, against which Wittgenstein places himself, of what it means for a common essence to underlie all uses of a term, can be understood in different ways. Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblances will take on greater or lesser philosophical weight depending on how robust the notion is that family resemblance is responding to. At first blush, writes Goldfarb,

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<sup>33</sup> Warren D. Goldfarb, “Wittgenstein on Fixity of Meaning,” *Early Analytic Philosophy: Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein – Essays in Honor of Leonard Linsky*, ed. William W. Tait (Chicago: Open Court, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §66.

there is a relatively simple reading: that Wittgenstein is arguing there are certain general terms for which we can't find an essence underlying all the objects to which they are ascribed, such as his example 'game'. But the only position against which such a conclusion is going to matter is the similarly simple position that *all* general terms are able to be defined by terms that are more basic, and this is a relatively small target. Granted, this is obviously a position that Wittgenstein wants to contradict, but if that's *all* he wants to contradict, then the purview of the *Investigations* is going to be rather limited. Goldfarb thinks the target is bigger – that there is at least a second blush to the talk of family resemblances.

The second blush goes beyond the notion of mere definition, and takes as Wittgenstein's contradictory aim the opposite position, which says that an underlying essence *does* grant us insight into the specific object the general term is being applied to:

The common property, attribute, etc., thus figures both in our knowledge when we understand the general term and as the standard of correctness for ascription of the term, the basis for distinguishing correct ascriptions from incorrect ones.<sup>35</sup>

This view that an underlying essence gives insight into the nature of an object is the rudimentary first step that allows for the development of full-fledged philosophies, each developing as they do depending on the different stances they take on the essences in question. It is fundamental to understand that none of the specific philosophies are Wittgenstein's target; instead, he is concerned with what Goldfarb calls the "proto-philosophical" level,

The way of looking at things that we tend to adopt at the start, without noticing that a step has been taken, which then functions to establish what questions are to be asked and answered by philosophical theorizing.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Goldfarb, "Fixity" 77.

Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance helps deal with this more robust understanding of how the desire for an essence underlies the ascription of general terms by exposing a disconnect between what essences are supposed to do and how we *actually* use language: starting with the general term, we have trouble finding an essential property present in each specific application of the term that would explain its ascription. Starting with the specific application, on the other hand, (for example, saying baseball is a "game") we *can* give detailed explanations about why we apply the general term (it requires teams, you keep score, some people find it enjoyable) that don't have to be explanations that hold to all the other applications (we wouldn't apply these explanations to, say, Monopoly, though we would still call it a game). And this is the point:

The emphasis here is not on indefinability, but rather on the wealth of considerations we bring to bear in individual cases...Indeed, the content of what can be said generally seems to be entirely parasitic on what we say in particular cases; no content is added at the general level.<sup>37</sup>

This is already a significant philosophical proposition, but Goldfarb wants to draw our attention to a final understanding of the passage – the weightiest of the three. This view argues that our understanding of essence in the second blush is still too simplistic. There is a sort of essence underlying the ascription of general terms, but it's more complicated than we've suggested:

Grasping such a general term is not a single, simple feat, but rather a multitudinous and multilayered one, involving all sorts of explicit and tacit knowledge. There is, nonetheless, *something* to be grasped that underlies our use

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<sup>36</sup> Goldfarb, "Fixity" 78.

<sup>37</sup> Goldfarb, "Fixity" 78.

of the general term; it is a complex thing, which comprehends or is a summation of all the particular cases.<sup>38</sup>

In this case, it is indeed the “family resemblance” between the specific objects under the general term takes the place of the common essence. What is left is just the idea that there *is something* that must underlie our use of general terms if we’re going to be able to use them at all. Goldfarb sees Wittgenstein as voicing his problems with this view as beginning in §68:

For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No. You can *draw* once; for none has so far been drawn. (But that never troubled you before when you used the word “game”.)

“But then the use of the word is unregulated, the ‘game’ we play with it is unregulated.”—It is not everywhere circumscribed by rules; but no more are there any rules for how high one throws the ball in tennis, or how hard; yet tennis is a game for all that and has rules too.<sup>39</sup>

The consequences of this stubbornly reaffirmed need for fixity becomes clear in the interlocutor’s presenting further objections to the narrative philosophical subject in §70:

“But if the concept ‘game’ is uncircumscribed like that, you don’t really know what you mean by ‘game’.”—When I give the description: “The ground was quite covered with plants” – do you want to say I don’t know what I am talking about until I can give a definition of a plant?

My meaning would be explained by, say, a drawing and the words “The ground looked roughly like this”. Perhaps I even say “It looked *exactly* like this.”

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<sup>38</sup> Goldfarb, “Fixity” 79.

<sup>39</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §68.

– Then were just *this* grass and *these* leaves there, arranged just like this? No, that is not what it means. And I should not accept any picture as exact in *this* sense.

The interlocutor, Goldfarb warns, is not merely raising an issue of *vagueness* here, but that this is the issue of fixity once again – that a term must be “completely regulated”<sup>40</sup> before it is able to mean. This is what Goldfarb argues is the fullest and weightiest understanding of what these passages, with the notion of family resemblance among them, are accomplishing: to create a subject for whom that essential fixity is not necessary for meaning.

The issue with fixity – and what, thus, makes Wittgenstein suggest the notion of blurred-edged concepts – is that when pushed about how such an underlying level is meant to be understood, the response is that it’s meant to be understood as a signpost or as a sample – i.e. a standard to which the object in question either fits or does not, and this fitting or not fitting is what would allow us to ascribe the general term to it correctly or not. The issue here is that standards need context in order to operate as standards – just like signposts and samples need context in order to operate as signposts and standards.<sup>41</sup> But the absolute determination required by the underlying level *must* be separate from context, otherwise it isn’t *absolutely* determined. The meaning of the term “game” is now back to being dependent on context, and not some complicated essence that the learner surmises, consciously or unconsciously, from a bevy of examples.

But once again, if the meaning of a term is not found in an essence, how do I know what the term means? As Wittgenstein writes:

What does it mean to know what a game is? What does it mean, to know it and not be able to say it? Is this knowledge somehow equivalent to an unformulated

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<sup>40</sup> Goldfarb, “Fixity” 80.

<sup>41</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §§85-6.

definition? So that if it were formulated I should be able to recognize it as the expression of my knowledge? Isn't my knowledge, my concept of a game, completely expressed in my explanations that I could give? That is, in my describing examples of various kinds of game; showing how all sorts of other games can be constructed on the analogy of these; saying that I should scarcely include this or this among games; and so on.<sup>42</sup>

Goldfarb notes that we may balk at the notion "completely expressed" above, but that Wittgenstein does, indeed, mean what he says. The interlocutor is going to have to realize that he has to change his understanding of what it means to have knowledge of something:

For it is only given facts about us – that anyone who understands my explanations will take the examples in a particular way, that anyone who uses the same explanations as I do in fact will have the same concept of game – that knowledge of the meaning of "game" can be claimed to be fully contained in those explanations.<sup>43</sup>

The absolute determinism that an underlying essence requires to unite all the ascriptions of a general term relies on a context where underlying essences are *understood as* standards.

All this is to say that Wittgenstein is arguing that we must take the context of human practices into consideration in order to account for how language works. There is, however, a more fundamental notion that Goldfarb sees Wittgenstein as aiming at, namely that *we have to take the context of how the world works into consideration when understanding how language works*.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §75.

<sup>43</sup> Goldfarb, "Fixity" 82.

<sup>44</sup> Goldfarb, "Fixity" 83.

The vital importance for language of the context of how the world works is illustrated in

§79:

But when I make a statement about Moses, - am I always ready to substitute some *one* of these descriptions for "Moses"? I shall perhaps say: By "Moses" I understand the man who did what the Bible relates of Moses, or at any rate a good deal of it. But how much? Have I decided how much must be proved false for me to give up my proposition as false? Has the name "Moses" got a fixed and unequivocal use for me in all possible cases? ...Consider another case. When I say "N is dead", then something like the following may hold for the meaning of the name "N": I believe that a human being has lived, who I (1) have seen in such-and-such places, who (2) looked like this (pictures), (3) has done such-and-such things, and (4) bore the name "N" in social life. - Asked what I understand by "N", I should enumerate all or some of these points, and different ones on different occasions...

And this may be expressed like this: I use the name "N" without a *fixed* meaning. (But that detracts as little from its usefulness, as it detracts from that of a table that it stands on four legs instead of three and so sometimes wobbles.)

Should it be said that I am using a word whose meaning I don't know, and so am talking nonsense? - Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing the facts. (And when you see them there is a good deal that you will not say.)<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §79.

This passage is not, in Goldfarb's opinion, a basic criticism of theories of description.

Philosophers who adhere to a theory of description – that our use of proper names is based on a single description we associate with that name – agree that in everyday language we may associate more than one description with a proper name, as in the Moses passage above. For these philosophers, however, this is only evidence of the ambiguity of everyday language. What the passage *does* do is to push one to question the nature of descriptions at a much more fundamental level.

It is true that one offers descriptions – at least in cases where ostensive definition is not possible – to clear up misconceptions and explain why one has used a certain name in a certain situation. This justifies knowing what one is referring to when one has used the name.<sup>46</sup> The problem arises when one moves from the obvious fact that sometimes one is required to give a description that fits the name one is using, namely when there is confusion about what the name picks out, to the *general* requirement that fixed descriptions are required if names are going to mean at all. Wittgenstein's target, then, is the unrecognized move that *allows* for the existence of theories of description in the first place:

The commonplace that we have to be responsible for our words in the face of challenges that actually arise becomes the demand that it has to be given, in advance of any particularities or information which would tell us what the actual challenges might be, what counts as meeting any possible challenge. The picture is that language must operate no matter how the world is, in a vacuum of fact. It must be presuppositionless.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Goldfarb, "Fixity" 84.

<sup>47</sup> Goldfarb, "Fixity" 85.

Goldfarb notes that this view – that I pull on different descriptions in different situations to justify my ascription of names when clarification is needed – is not much of a theory, but that’s exactly the point: the most important result for language of this reliance on the context of how the world works is to show, as mentioned above, that language is not presuppositionless. Wittgenstein talks about this in greater detail in §80:

I say “There is a chair”. What if I go up to it, meaning to fetch it, and it suddenly disappears from sight? – “So it wasn’t a chair, but some kind of illusion”.—But in a few moments we see it again and are able to touch it and so on.—“So the chair was there after all and its disappearance was some kind of illusion”.—But suppose that after a time it disappears again – or seems to disappear. What are we to say now? Have you rules ready for such cases – rules saying whether one may use the word “chair” to include this kind of thing? But do we miss them when we use the word “chair”; and are we to say that we do not really attach any meaning to this word, because we are not equipped with rules for every possible application of it?<sup>48</sup>

The point, says Goldfarb, is that if the world were not as it was, our words would break down: if the world were different enough (as in Wittgenstein’s example above) it becomes difficult to know how to use a word as quotidian as “chair”. This, of course, is contrary to what the notion of the presuppositionlessness of language would have us believe.

If, as Goldfarb argues, Wittgenstein is at pains to react against a reference picture of language by showing that language is not presuppositionless, then it is fair to ask how it is that

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<sup>48</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §80.

Wittgenstein thinks we can explain what concepts mean, since he's left us without the ability to appeal to some underlying essence. Wittgenstein discusses this in §69:

How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe *games* to him, and we might add: "This *and similar things* are called 'games.'" And do we know any more about it ourselves? Is it only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is? – But this is not ignorance. We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary – for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (Except for that special purpose.) No more than it took the definition: 1 pace = 75 cm. to make the measure of length "one-pace" usable. And if you want to say "But still, before that it wasn't an exact measure," then I reply: very well, it was an inexact one. – Though you still owe me a definition of exactness.<sup>49</sup>

But then, aren't we left with a poorly defined concept?

One might say that the concept "game" is a concept with blurred edges. – "But is a blurred concept a concept at all?" – Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need?<sup>50</sup>

Poorly defined is a judgment that can only be made if what one is waiting for a clear definition. Wittgenstein is asking us to change our paradigm completely, and let go of this requirement for clear definition for concepts to give knowledge.

Wittgenstein is using the introductory sections and the fixity of meaning block of the *Investigations* to show how philosophy gets into trouble by a slide it makes before it even begins

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<sup>49</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §69.

<sup>50</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §71.

– the slide of letting their desire for explanation leads them to postulate mental phenomena that underlie language even though our use of everyday language indicates otherwise, and the slide of letting the same desire for explanation lead them to postulate that language must be presuppositionless in order to mean, though once again our everyday use of language indicates otherwise.

## 1.7 ON WITTGENSTEIN’S REJECTION OF THEORIES OF LANGUAGE

In the above mentioned “Wittgenstein’s Later philosophy: A Prophylaxis Against Theory”, Allen and Turvey argued that though Wittgenstein himself did not express the application of his thoughts to the Humanities, there is the potential for great import regarding the philosophical issues that the humanities are interested with, and more importantly with *how* the humanities can be studied.<sup>51</sup>

This potential is based on Wittgenstein’s rejection of the need for a unified theory of things as an insufficient means for philosophical (versus scientific) investigation.<sup>52</sup> The first reason for this insufficiency is due to the difference between the natural sciences and philosophy. Philosophy is fundamentally different from the natural sciences because it isn’t empirical in nature: the natural sciences are in the business of exploring empirical phenomena, while philosophy is focused on sense and meaning – which can be separated from and antecede the empirical phenomena with which the natural sciences are concerned.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Allen and Turvey 1.

<sup>52</sup> Allen and Turvey 2.

<sup>53</sup> Allen and Turvey 4.

To construe questions of meaning – philosophical questions – as empirical would be to imply that language is an insufficient source of meaning; meaning, instead, would stand in need of empirical discovery. But, as Allen and Turvey argue that Wittgenstein points out, when one uses language correctly, then it goes without saying that one’s words have meaning: “Meaning is therefore not something that awaits approximation via an hypothesis, at least for those who can already use a language correctly. Rather, it awaits perspicuous characterization.”<sup>54</sup> This, then, is what philosophy focuses on:

Philosophy is concerned with ‘the workings of our language’, with what is already in place, not something unknown. The questions it asks are about sense and meaning, not about what is true and false; its problems result from the transgression of sense into nonsense, not from a deficit of empirical information; and its solutions consists of showing when and how such transgressions take place, not discovering new facts.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, Wittgenstein rejects unified theories as an acceptable route for philosophical inquiry because meaning doesn’t stand in need of empirical discovery.<sup>56</sup>

The other reason for Wittgenstein’s rejection of systematic theory is found in his rejection of the referential understanding of language.<sup>57</sup> Theories, for Allen and Turvey, have two defining characteristics: one, “they unify a range of apparently disparate, unconnected phenomena by postulating an underlying principle that these phenomena putatively have in common and that can explain their nature or behaviour;”<sup>58</sup> second, “the common, underlying

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<sup>54</sup> Allen and Turvey 5.

<sup>55</sup> Allen and Turvey 6.

<sup>56</sup> Allen and Turvey 6.

<sup>57</sup> Allen and Turvey 7.

<sup>58</sup> Allen and Turvey 2.

principle postulated by the theory – whether it takes the form of any entity, process, force, concept, or something else – is at least initially hidden from view.”<sup>59</sup> First, as we’ve seen above in the discussion by Goldfarb, Wittgenstein rejects the applicability of the first characteristic of a theory to language. Second, the requirement of the underlying principle as hidden, was rejected by Wittgenstein in his later philosophy for the reason that its hidden nature would preclude its use. Allen and Turvey call this the normative dimension of language:<sup>60</sup> “the meaning of a linguistic expression must be what is invoked by the language users themselves in justifying or explaining the expression’s correct use.”<sup>61</sup>

Even more compellingly, Quigley argues that Wittgenstein does not offer some sort of anti-theory, but instead classifies what Wittgenstein offers as “a philosophical procedure displayed in action, a philosophical technique variously exemplified, a philosophical process that refuses to become a reified product.”<sup>62</sup> What Wittgenstein is aiming for is not a general encompassing theory, but instead, “his aim is not to substitute the particular for the general but to locate a relationship between the two that prevents them or us from coming to a final and definitive resting point. Such refusal of final resting points is not, however, a refusal of all resting points.”<sup>63</sup>

In fact, Quigley tells us that to talk of whether or not Wittgenstein has a theory or not is to be at cross-purposes with him:

To ask whether Wittgenstein has a philosophy or not, or whether he has a theory of language or not, is to register presuppositions about the possibilities of

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<sup>59</sup> Allen and Turvey 2.

<sup>60</sup> Allen and Turvey 8.

<sup>61</sup> Allen and Turvey 8.

<sup>62</sup> Quigley 5.

<sup>63</sup> Quigley 5.

philosophy and theory that he does not share. Wittgenstein's aim is to reconceive the nature of philosophy of theory.<sup>64</sup>

## 1.8 MAKING ROOM FOR LITERATURE

While Allen and Turvey see the application of Wittgenstein's philosophy as having import for the Humanities as a whole, Wolfgang Huemer in the article that I cited earlier, argues that if a referential notion of language provides serious issues for literary scholars, then two aspects of Wittgenstein's pictorial views of language especially help us in making room for literature. First of all, Wittgenstein does not focus on references (word to world), but on use in diverse contexts. Secondly, Wittgenstein doesn't focus solely on assertive statements (statements with truth-value), but sees language as having various goals in various situations.<sup>65</sup> That is to say that "truth" and "reference" haven't disappeared, but are only relevant in appropriate situations (when referencing objects/events and when making (some) assertive statements).<sup>66</sup>

When we take these aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy seriously, literature is no longer an isolated language game apart from everyday language; instead, it is a valid form of linguistic expression, grounded in our world. Furthermore, this shows literature's central role within language: literary texts put emphasis on *how* things are said, rather than *what* things are said. In this sense, language itself is the topic of literary works, and they, thus, bring to light the rules of language (grammar): meaning of words in context and how they can be combined.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Quigley 11.

<sup>65</sup> Huemer 5.

<sup>66</sup> Huemer 5.

<sup>67</sup> Huemer 5.

In fact, what Huemer argues, via Wittgenstein, is that literature is a legitimate form of linguistic expression rather than an isolated language game. Similarly, Bernard Harrison in his article, “Imagined Worlds and the Real One: Plato, Wittgenstein, and Mimesis,”<sup>68</sup> wants to further argue that literature has a connection to reality.

Harrison sees Wittgenstein’s undercutting of a reference picture of language as being important for literature’s bearing on reality just because it’s the notion of a logically perspicuous language that led to the notion of literature as a self-referential tissue of signs in the first place. But Wittgenstein’s later philosophy connects language to reality in two ways, argues Harrison: first, true sentences in natural language describe reality (this is a trivial connection),<sup>69</sup> second, the web of practices in reality are what allow for the formulation of those true sentences.<sup>70</sup> A natural language does not, that is, encounter reality only by way of the relationship between a referring expression and its referendum: it is *already* multifariously connected to reality at the level of the practices which are what alone enable us to make the relationship between referring expression, referendum, proposition and truth-value, determinate in the first place.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Bernard Harrison, “Imagined Worlds and the Real One: Plato, Wittgenstein, and Mimesis,” *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>69</sup> Harrison 101.

<sup>70</sup> Harrison 102.

<sup>71</sup> Harrison 102. Harrison’s understanding of how Wittgenstein’s philosophy connects literature to reality also has interesting repercussions for our understanding of human nature. Harrison says humanists have traditionally argued that literature is in the business of the study of human nature – human nature as something outside language like rocks, trees, birds, and bees (102). But Wittgenstein’s philosophy makes us question such a view of human nature: if we view the mind (i.e. “man” or “human nature”) as an “independent counterpart” (102) of nature, we’re committing to a Cartesianism (102), which is what Part I of the *Investigations* is arguing against (102).

Wittgenstein is arguing for an *embodied* mind, not an independent one: “An ‘inner process’ stands in need of outward criteria” (*PI* §580). Wittgenstein’s thought here is not, as has often been supposed, that there are no mental states, but that if we treat the mind as an essentially separate realm, in principle disconnectable from the physical world and the body, the

## 1.9 LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP

After this long philosophical excursus, the question remains to be asked what impact such a view of language has on literary scholarship, for literary scholarship (though I use this term in a wide sense) has been in the background of this project from the beginning.

The influence of what has been said about the Wittgensteinian perspective on language can be important when thinking about several fundamental literary issues. The first one is the role of author: the narratives that an author provides serve as case studies of concepts that are out of the realm of other disciplines that depend on clearly and univocally defined concepts to complete their work, such as mathematics or physics, for instance. John Gibson argues convincingly that, in this way, literature serves as an archive for blurred-edge concepts.<sup>72</sup> Gibson will be discussed in greater detail in the conclusion, as will the need to take his project even further. As an example of a critic dealing with case studies, Stanley Cavell in his book *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*<sup>73</sup> uses the term, “study”, to describe his work on these plays and the issue of skepticism:

...the burden of my story in spinning the interplay of philosophy with literature is not that of applying philosophy to literature, where so-called literary works would become kinds of illustrations of matters already independently known. It would better express my refrain to say that I take the works I am drawn to read out in

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possibilities of reference to, and description of, mental states which we ordinarily enjoy as *embodied* minds collapse into vacuity (103).

<sup>72</sup> John Gibson, “Reading for Life,” *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>73</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1987).

public (beginning with those I have listed of Shakespeare) as studies of matters your philosophy has (has unassessably, left to itself) intellectualized as skepticism, whether in Descartes's or Hume's or Kant's pictures of that inescapably, essentially, human possibility.<sup>74</sup>

This is not to say, of course, that the author is providing some philosophical stance thinly veiled (or thickly, for that matter) by a narrative; instead the narrative *is* the philosophical outlook, and no amount of analysis can make it clearer than it is. Cavell speaks of this in terms of ordering the relation between philosophy and literature:

The misunderstanding of my attitude that most concerned me was to take my project as the application of some philosophically independent problematic of skepticism to a fragmentary parade of Shakespearean texts, impressing those texts into the service of illustrating philosophical conclusions known in advance. Sympathy with my project depends, on the contrary, on unsettling the matter of priority (as between philosophy and literature, say) implied in the concepts of illustration and application. The plays I take up form respective interpretations of skepticism as they yield to interpretation by skepticism.<sup>75</sup>

Cavell's approach to this selection of Shakespearean plays is certainly of use for this project, although the expression he gives to his framework of *how* he approaches this method relies on an Emersonian notion of intuition,<sup>76</sup> whereas I ground my approach to literary scholarship strictly in terms of a Wittgensteinian image of language.

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<sup>74</sup> Cavell 179.

<sup>75</sup> Cavell 1.

<sup>76</sup> Cavell 4-5.

Of course, there are a variety of other reasons to appreciate and to offer narrative than as a study of certain concepts, however this is surely one of them if we understand language in the way that Wittgenstein proposes: that narratives serve as examples, definitions of blurred-edged concepts and, thus, as one of the primary means of seeking to understand them while also contributing to their very creation. Not only does this seem as a *possible* role of narrative literature, but indeed it appears to be a role of narrative that was of essential concern to some contemporaries of Wittgenstein as well of Duras, Sartre and Genet, who were reflecting on the topic. I am thinking here of those French authors, especially Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, who were fundamental in establishing both a thought and a practice of the novelistic genre in the mid-twentieth century, under the guise of the so-called *nouveau roman*.

Both of these writers discuss the necessity of change in the form of the novel as a means of allowing it to remain vital as artistic expression. The very notion of *malleability* finds a reference in Wittgenstein, not in the notion of form *per se*, but in the notion that certain concepts have to remain flexible in order to accommodate change within various contexts and over time. Nathalie Sarraute, for instance, writes about the focus of the new author towards an increased interest in the psychology of man, but that this desire to change focus has resulted in a suspicion towards the reader: a suspicion that the reader is too entrenched in a way of reading that relies on traditional forms of the novel – character, chronology, and so on.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, to shake the readers out of their stupor, the author must make the character only a shadow of what it once was – even something as foundational as names are left out or played with in order to prevent the reader from too easily slipping into distraction.

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<sup>77</sup> Nathalie Saurraute, *L'Ère du soupçon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956) 70-72, 74-75.

Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, in his article “Nouveau roman, homme nouveau”<sup>78</sup> written in 1961, is attempting to straighten out misconceptions about what those associated with the name “nouveau roman” are trying to accomplish. The characteristics that he raises about the nouveau roman fit strikingly well with what a Wittgensteinian approach to literary scholarship would amount to. Robbe-Grillet, for instance, says that the nouveau roman is not a theory, but a research;<sup>79</sup> that it is simply continuing the historical progression of the form of the novel;<sup>80</sup> that its interest is nothing other than humankind’s situation in the world;<sup>81</sup> that it is totally subjective;<sup>82</sup> that it is written in common language, about common subjects;<sup>83</sup> and that its use of signification is partial, provisional, and contested.<sup>84</sup>

When I say above that such a view of language does not at all make of the author someone who is explicitly trying to present illustrations of concepts in his or her narratives, this is to say that the fact that we can understand narrative as definitions of such concepts is not to say something about the purpose of the author, but instead something about how language works. Using a narrative as a definition of a concept is not an act that presupposes of the author anything different in his or her writing than is supposed (or not) in any other situation. In fact, I’m tempted to say that the degree to which the author of the narrative turns his or her attention to using the narrative as a means of defining a concept, is the degree to which such a narrative fails to do so, and enters instead into the realm of the trite. This, however, is still just a hypothesis on my part.

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<sup>78</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Minuit, 1961) 113-21.

<sup>79</sup> Robbe-Grillet 114-15.

<sup>80</sup> Robbe-Grillet 115-16.

<sup>81</sup> Robbe-Grillet 117.

<sup>82</sup> Robbe-Grillet 118.

<sup>83</sup> Robbe-Grillet 118-19.

<sup>84</sup> Robbe-Grillet 120.

And in fact, this is the point at which the literary scholar comes in: how does one, taking Wittgenstein seriously, *seek* to gain understanding from the examples that narrative literature provides? Quigley writes that the inability to establish a Wittgensteinian set of theoretical premises or something of the sort are the result, as I have brought out above, of the fact that Wittgenstein does not present a theory of language:

His constant wanderings from point to point, from paragraph to paragraph, and from image to image have led many to question whether Wittgenstein actually has a philosophical position to offer us, whether he has indeed a summarizable set of philosophical beliefs, and whether there is or could be a Wittgensteinian approach to things in general.<sup>85</sup>

And this is exactly the point at which literary studies (or philosophical studies for that matter) balks: without a clearly defined theory there is no clearly characteristic form of analysis to carry out in the name of Wittgenstein.<sup>86</sup>

In one sense, then, the Wittgensteinian literary scholar places him or herself at odds with the criticism that takes as its motivation views of language that contradict a Wittgensteinian view; including all “theories” of language properly called – reminding ourselves, of course, that Wittgenstein is presenting a view, and not a theory of language. Beyond this defensive role, the literary scholar has what I would term a two-pronged offensive role: first, to garner understanding from the examples in a vast literary canon; second, to express this archive to his or her own public. One will readily realize that these offensive roles need explanation.

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<sup>85</sup> Quigley 4.

<sup>86</sup> Quigley 4.

literary scholarship can tease out from the narratives in a way that is, somehow, clearer, more explicit, or more complete than what the narrative accomplishes itself. This would pose a problem for a kind of literary scholarship that would seek to provide *the* reading for a narrative, in an attempt to show in philosophical terms what the narrative is illustrating. There is a nuance here that begs to be mentioned, namely that Wittgenstein poses a problem for *those who give* narrative a role *alongside* philosophical readings – such views see narrative as the side-kick to philosophy, as providing an object lesson to the philosophical views more clearly espoused elsewhere. But if we want to give Wittgenstein the full force of what he says about language, we have to be true to the fact that the narrative *is* the best explanation of the concept – there are not any holes for philosophy to fill; in fact, by translating the narrative into clearly defined concepts, much is lost. As Severin Schroeder writes, “We cannot *paraphrase* the work’s message, but it is there for the appreciative reader to understand. Nor is it ineffable, for the author has succeeded in expressing it.”<sup>87</sup> In fact, Schroeder argues that Wittgenstein serves as a critique of any aesthetics that seeks to undergird art with something, the search for which makes the artwork itself dispensable, whether this be the arousal of emotions (the purpose of the symphony is to make you *feel* a certain way), a certain political message, or even structuralism’s discussion of the meaning of unseen patterns and codes of language. Schroeder calls this Wittgenstein’s anti-instrumentalism.

Literary criticism that uses narrative as fleshing out of theory has a place, but that place is in greater proximity to the study of the theory, rather than the study of the narrative. That is to say, narrative can be offered as fleshing out a theory, but inasmuch as a theory (due to its reliance on clearly defined concepts) engages only a part (that which falls under the definition)

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<sup>87</sup> Severin Schroeder, “The Coded-Message Model of Literature,” *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts*, ed. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey (New York: Routledge, 2001) 226.

of the concept as we use it in real life, so the richness of the narrative and concept is lost, or at the very least reduced. This is an understandable use of narrative, though not what one is interested in when spelling out the influence of a Wittgensteinian lens on literary scholarship.

The Wittgensteinian literary scholar can, however, do what the person does who is charged with explaining what a “game” is: the scholar can pick examples that they would consider games, and pick those that they would not to serve as a counterexample. This holds not only for the concepts/words/actions that recur in the oeuvre of any single author, but also among authors of a period, and among disparate periods and genres. In this work of bringing together examples of concepts in narrative, the scholar is also able to speak of family resemblances that she sees as present in the various narratives. This is no problem for Wittgenstein – we have no issue in finding various resemblances that hold between a group of sub-concepts under a concept, and in this the literary scholar is a prime resource. The scholar is able to bring out and discuss family resemblances that seem to be part of certain concepts in certain periods and not others; that seem to be common between certain authors and not others; or that seem to be present, but overlooked, even though the benefit of such resemblances (such aspects of certain concepts, though not essences) enrich discussions in fields outside of literary studies such as philosophy. A Wittgensteinian lens justifies its perspective by basing it in the way language works. It remains only to make sure that they see the full extent of their work – that they are defining concepts via narrative – and that they aren’t limiting it by trying to attain some false sense of progress by falling into the trap of feeling they need clear definitions for the concepts that they identify.

As Huemer and others point out, not much of Wittgenstein’s views has reached literary studies; however, their anthology, published in 2004, as well as another which came out at nearly

the same time, *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein*,<sup>88</sup> have recently breached the subject and brought it into the current debate on literary studies. This latter anthology takes its lead most notably from a perspective inherited from Stanley Cavell's view of Wittgenstein and in fact already names such an approach under the category of "Ordinary Language Criticism", a term that is slowly breaching the literary field. There are many things to be taken from this approach, but also some that I wish to leave behind.

Even the editors of *Ordinary Language Criticism* are careful to point out that, even within their anthology, the views of any scholars who claim to be doing Ordinary Language Criticism are disparate and far-reaching.<sup>89</sup> I am not entirely opposed to placing my project under the heading of Ordinary Language Criticism; however, being that there is a penchant for pigeon-holing criticism under headings in current literary scholarship, and being also that I do not take as my lead a particularly Cavellian reading of Wittgenstein,<sup>90</sup> I will not use it. In their introduction, however, Dauber and Jost do provide insight into what an approach to literature through a Wittgensteinian lens could look like, and in ways that I am sympathetic to. They take not only as their starting point a relation to Wittgenstein, but also a polemical approach to a certain understanding of literary scholarship that I roughly align myself with, if not with the OLC label that they wish to attach to it:

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<sup>88</sup> Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost, ed., *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2003).

<sup>89</sup> Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost, introduction, *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein*, eds. Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2003) xi.

<sup>90</sup> For insight into potential problems with Cavellian readings of Wittgenstein for literary studies, especially in relation to Cavell's influence by Emerson, see Charles Altieri, "Cavell's Imperfect Perfectionism" *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein* ed. Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2003) 199-229.

First, we mean OLC [Ordinary Language Criticism] to take as its point of departure the so-called ordinary language philosophy deriving from Ludwig Wittgenstein in the early twentieth century. More important, we mean to register by it a departure from what we take to be the dead end of contemporary critical theory, much of which, in condemning the ordinary and familiar, proceeds in the direction of what is almost programmatically abstract and remote.<sup>91</sup>

While, as mentioned above, I am in favor of a critical position that aligns itself with Wittgenstein, however it is in what follows the “More important” that begins the second sentence in the quotation that I differ from Dauber and Jost. I take as my approach to literature the picture of language presented by Wittgenstein and it is *that* which, in turn, argues for a certain way of doing literary criticism. To reason backwards, from a general condemnation of a supposedly current way of doing literary criticism, is in my mind to put the cart before the horse and to create another straw man, no more real than what we discussed earlier with regard to Wittgenstein’s rhetorical strategies in the Investigations.

Furthermore, this kind of approach tends to make of Wittgenstein a pragmatist, while I am in complete agreement with Marjorie Perloff who, in her article “The Poetics of Description: Wittgenstein on the Aesthetic”,<sup>92</sup> argues that this is a misunderstanding, and that instead Wittgenstein should be seen as an “inverted pragmatist”:

For Wittgenstein, pragmatism fails because it posits that if a proposition is judged to be “valid” in its production of desired results, it is then taken to apply in all instances—a conclusion he could not accept...One begins by examining *use*—

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<sup>91</sup> Dauber and Jost, introduction xi.

<sup>92</sup> Marjorie Perloff, “The Poetics of Description: Wittgenstein on the Aesthetic,” *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2003).

what is actually said and done by a given person or persons—and only then does one try to understand what this particular usage, this practice might mean in this instance. For Wittgenstein, ideas can never be justified by their instrumentality, because “use” is something that cannot be prescribed, that indeed is neither good nor bad. It merely is.<sup>93</sup>

It is just because Wittgenstein’s picture of language offers a more successful response than those predominant in literary scholarship today to the problems caused by a referential understanding of language that we might want to bring him to bear on literary criticism. It is not, then, that I depart from Dauber and Jost in thinking that an approach could be taken up and considered as beneficial, no matter under what title, because it registers “a departure from what we take to be the dead end of contemporary critical theory”;<sup>94</sup> instead, this *particular* departure registers because of the power with which a Wittgensteinian view of language rings true.

This difference, though seemingly small, is a vitally important one: to keep oneself closely in step with a Wittgensteinian lens is to walk the straight and narrow. Having stated my worries about the view Dauber and Jost present of the relation between Wittgenstein and literary criticism, it is fair to say that I agree with their general view of what a literary scholarship in line with a Wittgensteinian framework will look like, under the abbreviation of OLC:

For in OLC [Ordinary Language Criticism] the aim is to see rather than to know, or rather to see what, in some senses, we know already. It is to see what we *do* say, for this enables us to determine what we are willing to keep on saying about

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<sup>93</sup> Perloff 240.

<sup>94</sup> Dauber and Jost, introduction xi.

the lives we live and therefore how they might or ought to be changed in words and deeds.<sup>95</sup>

This is, of course, a very general sketch of what literary scholarship is supposed to look like; however, it not only highlights the importance of seeing what *is*, rather than what is (supposedly) *underneath*, but it brings to light the necessary relation between understanding and action that is present in a Wittgensteinian view of language. This term, “action”, however is not to be read with any political motivations – this is action in the sense of use in everyday life (the “ordinary language” of ordinary language criticism and philosophy). It is this connection that Dauber and Jost see as having been disconnected through criticism in some of its currently predominant forms:

This is not merely an academic issue, though it has wide implications for the academy, in which an ersatz sophistication of too many professors has shorted the circuit between literary works and the real lives of those reading and teaching them... We may make them labor to master a certain skeptical technique. But such mastery does not take even skepticism seriously, because, once learned, it obviates skepticism’s very significance, its ethical imperative patiently to choose what you say and to keep on choosing in every word you speak. It is labor *with* words, but not a labor *for* or *of* words. For words do not serve theory. They are the language of theory themselves. They are not *techne*. They are the world. And it is in this world of words that the ordinary language critic would live.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Dauber and Jost, introduction xiii-xiv.

<sup>96</sup> Dauber and Jost, introduction xiv-xv.

To a certain extent, then, the Wittgensteinian literary scholar would help others see that narrative can function in ways that other forms of expression and thought cannot. There is, however, an even more interesting role for this kind of scholar that I think finds expression in the passages in Wittgenstein about teaching the use of a word: “How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe *games* to him, and we might add: ‘This *and similar things* are called ‘games’’. And do we know any more about it ourselves?”<sup>97</sup> If narrative is the way in which we express knowledge of certain, vital concepts, then part of the purview of the literary scholar is to not only show that narrative *can* serve as a means to knowledge, but also to show *how* one is to react to this knowledge – either in accepting it or rejecting it. This is to say, to show how the narrative as knowledge is to affect the reader in an ethical manner. This is what Dauber and Jost are gesturing towards in the quote above, and in fact we see that a further exploration of the Wittgensteinian scholar’s ethical imperative would indeed be possible. This is still outside the purview of this study, though closely related to it.

In such a view of scholarship, Quigley argues that literary theorizing and literary interpretation become tandem activities, not sequential ones.<sup>98</sup>

The function of interpretation of literary interpretation is not to provide paraphrases, nor to abstract messages, nor even to summarize meaning (though it may make use of any of these); its function is to provide access to an experience that is always more than and other than the interpretation can incorporate. The function of interpretation is to provide us with an orientation, a point of departure, a means of access, a set of signposts for a journey we must make on our own. To have read a successful interpretation is to have learned principles of access, not to

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<sup>97</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §68.

<sup>98</sup> Quigley 23.

have received the final results of such access; the appropriate feeling is not that we have arrived but that we have learned how to go on by ourselves.<sup>99</sup>

Though I am not in complete agreement with Quigley about the terms he uses – theorizing and interpretation – I am, indeed, in-line with what he says about departure rather than arrival. I am not convinced that this necessarily involves theory in the way he argues it does (or at least as often), nor am I sure that interpretation is what is offered; however, there is promise here.

There are roles for the literary scholar outside of those discussed in relation to a Wittgensteinian lens. When using narratives as definitions of concepts, the literary scholar does not proceed as the philosopher. However, the literary scholar does, indeed, concern herself with philosophy insofar as philosophy adds to questions that interest the literary scholar, and insofar as what the literary scholar brings to light can inform philosophical discussions. Furthermore, there is also the separate point to make that there is room to think of the literary scholar *as* theorist – this is a role apart from how she approaches a given narrative: theorists deal with topics that don't interest the philosopher, but she deals with them in a similar manner as the philosopher – through clear definitions and (logical) reasoning. The difference being that, after Wittgenstein, the theorist admits the limiting nature of clear definitions and accepts such theorizing for what it is.

Quigley writes that a Wittgensteinian lens need not require one to drop traditional modes of literary investigation, but that we do so with caution:

It remains important for us to characterize as best we can literary conventions, genres, and periods, for these are some of our major instruments of investigation.

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<sup>99</sup> Quigley 24.

It also remains important that we remember the difference between characterizing such things and rigidly defining them. We must overcome our tendency to forget that conventions, genres, and periods are irreducibly multiple and also our competing tendency to dismiss these instruments as unwieldy once we remember their multiplicity... What we must bear in mind in describing these investigative instruments is that our descriptions of them are always tentative and approximate and that appropriate use of such descriptions always involves treating them as provisional points of departure rather than as necessary destinations.<sup>100</sup>

What Quigley says sounds good, but how does it pan out? How do we get someone to “go on”? What about when that someone is ourselves? How does an author get us to “go on”? How do we get ourselves to “go on”? Go on by giving examples. Go on by pointing at resemblances. These are not the same things: giving examples is to engage with the concept; outlining resemblances is to engage in the process of scholarship. So, the scholar says, I would include this and this example under this concept because of these family resemblances, and shows their existence – “See, there are these common strains within this set of narratives!” I am not paraphrasing, I am not using something as an object lesson, I am trying to point to it, to guide one to it, as the definition it is in itself. I am trying to point one to an aspect of the concept as illustrated in these contextual examples of its use, of how we play the language game with this word. I do that, and then I show how I would go on. I add more examples, or I find more resemblances in like things.

The dynamic nature of Wittgensteinian literary scholarship is that by illuminating the relationship between meaning and use, the connection between, first, any such concept and our

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<sup>100</sup> Quigley 22.

actions is made explicit, as is secondly, the connection between a *change* in understanding and a *change* in action. Faith without works is dead. Thus, by bringing out unnoticed and new family resemblances, our use (our actions) and those of others are changed, though this change cannot be forced. The *making* of the change is not Wittgenstein's point: the point is *how* the change *can* come about. That is to say, the changing is not Wittgenstein's focus, but instead laying the groundwork for change.

This bringing to light can force change in realms that require clear definition, such as legislation for example. When new characteristics (family resemblances) are revealed, legislation is forced to reconsider the implicit and explicit ways it has included and/or excluded such characteristics in the past. This is to say two things: first, this is why the telling of narratives in either literature or life serves as a catalyst for change in realms such as legislation; second, that realms such as legislation *are not seeking* (inasmuch as they *cannot*) to clarify, explain, or establish concepts. They serve only to establish the use of a concept *in a very specific circumstance*, as in Wittgenstein's example of bounding the concept of "number" by a clear definition. This is what keeps us based in the literature – that it is there that one finds the understanding of the concepts that interest us. The literature scholars are tied, and always tied, to literature.

## 1.10      **LOOKING AHEAD**

In a project that is going to use the concept of sex as a means to illustrate the value of doing literary studies through a Wittgensteinian lens, it must be explained what is meant by the term "sex," and also why it is a suitable issue for the perspective in question. Obviously, following

what I have said about Wittgenstein's view of language above, explaining what is meant by "sex" cannot be accomplished by fashioning a clearly defined definition. Carving out an analytically secure space for the use of the term "sex" in this project would simply be un-Wittgensteinian. The definition of the term sex is the ways in which the term sex is used. Still, Eve Sedgwick in one of the foundational texts of queer theory, *Epistemology of the Closet*,<sup>101</sup> offers a description of the ways in which sex is used that will serve to illustrate the expansive breadth of examples that I have in mind: "'sex' – the array of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity-formations, and knowledges, in both women and men, that tends to cluster most densely around certain genital sensations but is not adequately defined by them..."<sup>102</sup> Sedgwick's description fails inasmuch as a clear definition of sex is concerned, but illustrates well that the realm of sex is not restricted to acts alone, but includes acts, desires, attractions, and many things besides. Thus, when I say that this project explores the concept of sex as a means of putting a Wittgensteinian view of language to work in the context of literary studies, I am not restricting the project to talk of sex acts. This clarification is necessary especially to head off at the pass problems that may arise regarding my talk of sex, often referring to acts, in some texts, and my talk of sexuality, not necessarily referring to acts, in others. For example, the chapter of Duras focuses more on the specific act of sexual intercourse than does the chapter on Sartre, and my work on Genet tends to call on both acts and non-acts. I am tempted to call my project a project about "the sexual," but I find that has a somewhat annoying tone, considering that the use I am making of the terms sex and sexuality occur more spontaneously in the context I use them. This is not to say, of course, that other scholars have not *made* distinctions between the meaning of

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<sup>101</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, updated ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 2008).

<sup>102</sup> Sedgwick 29.

the terms sex and sexuality, it is simply to say that this project is engaging the concept of sex in a large enough way that it encompasses enough common language uses of the terms that the project can proceed without damaging its goal. To restrict my usage to a single term seems artificial. Indeed, I find support again in Sedgwick for the fact that these terms are sometimes interchangeable:

To note that...*something* legitimately called **sex or sexuality** is all over the experiential and conceptual map is to record a problem less resolvable than a necessary choice of analytic paradigms or a determinate slippage of semantic meaning; it is rather, I would say, true to quite a range of contemporary worldviews and intuitions to find that **sex/sexuality** *does* tend to represent the full spectrum of positions between the most intimate and the most social, the most predetermined and the most aleatory, the most physically rooted and the most symbolically infused, the most innate and the most learned, the most autonomous and the most relational traits of being.<sup>103</sup>

This complexity of terms echoes what David Halperin says in his book, *How to do the History of Homosexuality*,<sup>104</sup> an important work on sexuality and historicity:

There is an irony in sex. I refer to a different irony from the familiar ones produced by all the tragicomic disproportions between love and its objects, between feeling and expression, between desire and demand. The irony I have in mind is etymological. For the word “sex” itself may derive from the Latin *secare*, “to cut or divide”: it originally signified the sharpness and cleanness of the division between the natural categories of male and female. And yet “sex” has

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<sup>103</sup> Sedgwick 29, bolding mine.

<sup>104</sup> David M. Halperin, *How to do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002).

had the fine edge of its meaning so blunted by historical shifts and rearrangements in the concepts and form of sexual life that it now represents what is most resistant to clear classification, discrimination, and division.<sup>105</sup>

Here Halperin emphasizes the same general idea that Sedgwick does in the quotes above, but his wording of sex being “resistant to clear classification, discrimination, and division” serve to illustrate how well this concept is suited to a project on Wittgenstein and literature. Being a blurred-edged concept, according to Sedgwick and Halperin, sex will be a complex and fruitful concept to explore in the oeuvres of Duras, Sartre, and Genet. The examples of sex that these three authors provide will allow us to explore their understandings of sex. We will see that this exploration of the concept sex for these authors is inextricably linked to matters of self understanding. And of course this is only natural if we recognize that for the modern subject, sexual practices have been tied to one’s own image. Certainly fruitful conversations are to be had about various genres’ and chronological periods’ use of example in literature, and further their examples of sex and self. But those conversations are of a different kind because they center around the ways in which other linguistic contexts used these concepts. For the purpose of this dissertation, we take the works of authors contemporary to Wittgenstein, and this allows us to assume a general linguistic context that is shared both by the philosopher and the writers in question.

If my use of the term sex/sexuality needed to be discussed, so too does my use of the terms “homosexual” and “homosexuality”. In this project, homosexual is meant to denote, as in its current use, manifestations of sex/sexuality between members of the same sex. Once again, my wide use of this term is not meant to discount or to ignore criticism that has been done about

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<sup>105</sup> Halperin 136.

specific ways in which this term might mean beyond, or in a way far more restricted than, the way I use it here. Simply, my use of the term homosexual is not meant to engage this criticism at all. I am not discounting it, inasmuch as I am not engaging with it, and I am not ignoring it, inasmuch as I realize it exists, but simply think it is of a different concern than what is at the heart of this project.

Sedgwick also talks of trying to make a distinction between the terms gay and homosexual:

A note on terminology. There is, I believe, no satisfactory rule for choosing between the usages of “homosexual” and “gay,” outside of a post-Stonewall context where “gay” must be preferable since it is the explicit choice of a large number of the people to whom it refers.<sup>106</sup>

I am not, per se, concerned with the use of the term gay over that of the term homosexual, however, I have used the term homosexual throughout this project because it is consistent with my criticism on Sartre and Genet specifically, since they still use the term quite a lot given that this was the main term that was available to them when they wrote the novels that I am considering in this study. The use of the term is not what is at issue in this project, and so for the time I will stick with what has been used before. To take issue with that usage is a separate project.

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<sup>106</sup> Sedgwick 16.

## 1.11 GESTURING TO THE AUTHORS

The works that constitute the corpus for this study have a definite commonality: there is a clear tie between the main characters' self image and their sexual practices. These characters come into existence as sexual subjects. As we will point out in the conclusion, there are certainly other works in the French canon that also feature protagonists for whom sexual acts inform their general characterization. However, our choice is not an exclusive one; we can easily imagine pursuing similar inquiries in other works. It is clear, though, that the family resemblances constituting the general outline of this project would have shifted. I look forward to embarking on projects with a similar framework, but that address different works.

As a gesture towards what is to follow, I will say that this Wittgensteinian approach will allow us to take Duras's trilogy and, instead of seeing sex as an attempt to recapture a lost wholeness, find sex as a location of self-complexity and compassion. We will see that the sexual practice that needed to be addressed repeatedly, was the physical consummation of incest. Wittgenstein's emphasis on example permits a reading of Duras that places her incestuous relationship with her brother at the center of the three novels, and that asks us to reconsider the caring and salvific nature of an act that is often seen as repulsive and located outside the domain of human civilization. Incest is seen in its linguistic context in a way that does not separate it from other inter-relational concepts, such as compassion, care and affection.

In Sartre's *Les Chemins de la liberté*, Wittgenstein again permits us to shift focus and raise a previously under-appreciated aspect of the narrative to the limelight. This time, instead of an act as in Duras, this project brings the character of Daniel, who's referred to as a "pédéraste", to the level of unrecognized protagonist, arguing that his narrative is unique in making him the only character who can act in good faith in relation to sex. Once again we will follow the

contextual appearance of a certain linguistic concept, but instead of incest, this time we follow the use of the word “pederast,” and the closely related “homosexual.”

Lastly, a Wittgensteinian lens allows us to look at the abject sex scenes that permeate the Genetian narratives to see a character, Jean Genet, that is concerned with knowledge of the world. The language that Jean Genet uses in order to illustrate a certain state of affairs will immediately give the reader a different perspective on the world, with Genet the character serving as the reader’s mirror. In this way, Genet’s narratives are not so much creating a mythology of sodomy or the abject, but a complex web of self-construction that makes room for self – both Jean Genet’s and our own.

2.0 “THEN YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH, AND THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU  
FREE”:<sup>107</sup>  
DURAS AND SEX AS A PAINFUL DELIVERANCE

God lets four people recount the life of his incarnate Son, in each case differently and with contradictions—but couldn’t one say: It is important, that this story have no more than average historical plausibility precisely *so that* it not be taken as something essential and incontrovertible. So that the *letter* would not find greater faith than it deserves and the *spirit* would retain its due.<sup>108</sup>

2.1 REPEATING LOVE

The writing career of Marguerite Duras spans five decades, and while there are many themes that she often repeats, the repetition of narrative is never so clear as in her trilogy of novels, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950),<sup>109</sup> *L’Amant* (1984),<sup>110</sup> and *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991).<sup>111</sup> The repetition of these Durassian narratives acts as the record of a pilgrimage of self-realization and understanding. It is a *Bildungsroman*, but a *Bildungsroman* based on repetition. These novels look at the repetition of three individual narratives as a search for self-knowledge on the part of the girl around whom they turn, culminating in a realization of the salvific power

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<sup>107</sup> John 8:32, *NIV/The Message Parallel Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2008).

<sup>108</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright, trans. Peter Winch, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Blackwell 1998) 36e.

<sup>109</sup> Marguerite Duras, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (Paris: Gallimard 1978).

<sup>110</sup> Marguerite Duras, *L’Amant* (Paris: Gallimard 1984).

<sup>111</sup> Marguerite Duras, *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord* (Paris: Gallimard 1993).

and horrendous pain that can be part of the sexual experience. Wittgenstein will be called into our discussion when we will look at the specific ways in which the narratives avoid, to the very end, to assign fixed meanings and identities to the characters in the novels, while at the same time contributing to our understanding of them.

As we will see, the specific repetitions from novel to novel vary slightly – some narrative aspects being present in all three, while others are shared between two of the three, with some aspects being nearly identical, while others are similar, operating almost as variations on a theme. From the moment Suzanne, as the girl is called in the first narrative, chooses at the end of the novel to leave a relationship with a boy her own age because she “cannot do otherwise,”<sup>112</sup> she has taken a turn that the following two narratives will continue to develop. This choice signals an end to a girl character who has, up until this point, concerned herself with non-transgressive sex, with non-transgressive love, with a kind of sexual relationship that fits the expectations of those around her. However, this project’s analysis of the repetition of the Durasian narrative allows us to see Suzanne’s choice as the beginning of a writing process whose trajectory will explore the power and contextual necessity of transgressive sex both in this trilogy of narratives, and in much of Duras’s oeuvre besides.

*Un barrage contre le Pacifique* centers on the characters of 16-year-old Suzanne, her 20-year-old brother, Joseph, their mother, and a wealthy Chinese man known only as M. Jo. The mother is a character surrounded by misfortune – her debts and lack of wealth are the result of the government having sold her a plantation that is uncultivable. The government refuses to acknowledge their wrongdoing, and the mother, having sunk her entire savings into the purchase, is now left with nothing. The book is divided into two parts, the first dealing with the

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<sup>112</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 365.

development of M. Jo's obsession for Suzanne and his daily visits to her family's bungalow, which culminate in him giving her a diamond ring as a token of his affection. Her mother and brother decide that M. Jo is no longer permitted to visit and must either end all ties with Suzanne or marry her. M. Jo, knowing that his father would never permit such a marriage, has no choice but to leave the object of his desire behind, telling her to keep the diamond as a gift. The second part of the book focuses on the mother's persistent attempt to pay off her debts by selling the diamond for the price M. Jo had told them it was worth. This proves a more difficult task than she had anticipated, as no one thinks the diamond is worth what she is demanding for it. The book ends with Joseph finding a buyer, who turns out to be the woman, Lina, for whom he will desert his family. In the end, after the death of her mother, Suzanne, too, leaves the failed plantation behind.

*L'Amant* is a far less chronological novel than the one that precedes it by more than three decades. It tells the story of a girl, unnamed, and her affair with an older Chinese man, also nameless. The story of their meeting and love affair are told out of order, and combined with memories of her mother and two brothers; her brothers each having specific characteristics that were previously combined in the character of Joseph. The young girl and the Chinese man meet on a boat while the girl is returning to a school in Saigon. The man offers her a ride from the harbor to her boarding house, and the affair continues from there, ending with her and her family returning to France. This narrative would be turned into a film of the same title,<sup>113</sup> whose release coincided with the publication of the third novel.

The third novel, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, follows very closely the narrative of the second, recounting the affair between a similarly described young girl and an older Chinese lover

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<sup>113</sup> *L'Amant*, dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud, perf. Jane March and Tony Leung Ka Fai, Pathé, 1991.

who meet aboard a boat crossing the Mékong under the same circumstances as the meeting in *L'Amant*. This novel, however, has a more chronological form and seems to give a historical account of the events, while also making suggestions of how the book could be turned into a film.

While each version brings its own contributions to the story repeated in the trilogy, there are numerous similarities that hold between them. In *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* the girl is very young, the lover older and Chinese, they meet on a boat crossing the Mékong, they get into a routine of her spending the nights with him at his apartment. In the end the family ends up returning to France thanks to his monetary backing. If there were only these aspects of the narrative to focus on then it would seem difficult to argue for the inclusion of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* in the group. However, though the narrative of the love affair is strikingly similar between the second and third novels, this is not the only thing that we see repeated. The relation between the young girl and the Chinese man is especially similar in *Amant* and *Chine* and is also present in *Barrage*. But there are, beside this specific relationship, many others that we see scattered throughout the novels: the powerful relationship between the young girl and her mother, and at least as importantly the foundational relationship between the young girl and her brother(s), between the brothers themselves, and finally between the Chinese lover and the young girl's family. In some novels these relations are dealt with in detail, in others with greater succinctness; in some certain aspects are highlighted rather than others, while in others Duras even says that she wishes to correct descriptions she has given of them in previous works. In this way, Duras *is* repeating a story in these three novels: not only the story of the love affair between a young girl and a Chinese man, but the story of the relation among this group of characters. This project will focus on the repetition of the sexual relationships in the novel – namely that between the girl and her lover, and more importantly, that between the girl and her brother, Paulo.

In fact, I will argue that it is the appearance of the sexual encounter with Paulo that pushed Duras to repeat her narrative three times. Through a Wittgensteinian lens, then, each novel brings to light certain aspects of sex that are important to Duras, and combining these examples together in the trilogy, the understanding of sex at the end is more complex than any one narrative alone would have allowed.

Returning to the notion of *Bildungsroman*, the process of self-realization for the girl culminates in an incestuous act with her younger brother, Paulo, which proves so meaningful for him, that he finds through it a “deliverance” of sorts, a more complete acceptance of his own humanity. Paulo, being one part split off from Joseph, the ideal model of the brother in the first novel, remains until this act of incest a character that hovers between ideal and human. Paulo is not ideal, in that the narratives present his physical and emotional weaknesses in a shameful light, but he is not human either, inasmuch as these faults engender in his sister a devotion that raises him almost to the status of a saint. Her adoration gives him some trace of the ideal, while his shortcomings clearly prevent the reader from seeing him as perfect. His having sex with his sister is a sort of “soleil noir”, as Julia Kristeva says: a void that serves to highlight what it is that is absent.<sup>114</sup> Through the selfless and compassionate act of his sister, who offers herself up to him as a sacrifice, emptying herself like a Christ figure, Paulo is afforded the chance to see reflected in her momentary emptiness, the emptiness within himself. In this sense, Paulo undergoes a process of self-realization as well.

While this selfless act brings life and humanity back to Paulo, the repercussions for the girl are severe. Instead of sex creating an unending unity with Paulo, a sort of life everlasting, or even creating a profound sense of joy, the brother dies young, his body is never found (according

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<sup>114</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Une étrangère,” *La Nouvelle revue française* 542 (1998): 5.

to the third narrative), and no funeral rites are performed for him. The girl comes to realize the importance of their love by seeing the vastness of the void that is created by his death: sex had been important because she had given of herself to him, which signals not only that she had attained selfhood, but that Paulo's lack of self was the necessary location that allowed her to exercise, and thus to prove the existence of her own selfhood. She, unknowingly, had acted as savior to Paulo, through whose death her original sacrifice is unveiled to her. And yet, even the salvation that comes through sex is unable to stave off death, and herein lies the gravity of Paulo's sacrifice and its repercussions. The girl is forced to confront the mortality of Paulo, her own mortality, and thus the mortality of all people. Despite the pain, loss, and lack of relief that relationship with others brings, she has to admit her need for relationship and, with that, accept the fact that it binds her inevitably to death and pain.

The fleeting nature of sex – an act of communion, reciprocity, compassion, sacrifice, and giving over – serves to highlight, for Duras, the slow plodding of the pain of life. Sex is a “soleil noir” itself. Too, it is a baptism: a making public the pain of life through the visceral pleasure of sex. The engaging in pleasure marks a change from pain: sex, through its pleasure, is a respite from the pain of life; sex is a location that has meaning thanks to its potential as hospice. It is horrendous enough for the girl to realize the dependence she has on others, being as it is a location of admitting one's weaknesses and insufficiencies, but such pain is the cost of meaningful sex. The truth will set you free, but freedom is often a mixed blessing: sex can bring about the deliverance of another, but in that case will carry with it the horrendous gravity of the truth of our mortality and need.

## 2.2 THE DURASSIAN WORLD

### 2.2.1 Bodies of Water

A useful starting point for reading the repetition in these novels as an exemplification of the complexity and power of sex, is oddly enough not a human body, but a plethora of environmental bodies, and in particular of bodies of water. In fact, it is water that signals and illustrates a transitional space that draws our attention to the transitional nature of the roles the characters take on as they engage in sex. The importance of landscape in Duras is evident from the beginning of each narrative in this trilogy, and in others besides.<sup>115</sup> The mere fact that so many of her narratives are tied to, and thus associated strongly with, the location of their settings is telling: the India cycle<sup>116</sup>, for example, as well as the trilogy I discuss explicitly here. Beyond this, one leaves a Durassian narrative with traces of geography left in one's mind – the beauty and power of the Mekong, the hustle and bustle of Ram, the void that is the plain, the heat of Calcutta, and the vast, swallowing expanse of the oceans. Elements of landscape even make their way into two of the three titles, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the former highlighting the plight of the family against the cruelty of the landscape surrounding them; the latter noting the difference of the lover's place of origin from that of the

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<sup>115</sup> For example, the importance of the vast and ominous atmosphere of T. Beach in Marguerite Duras, *Le ravisement de Lol V. Stein* (Paris: Gallimard 1964), and of the haunting presence of the courtyard at the French Embassy in Marguerite Duras, *Le Vice-consul* (Paris: Gallimard 1966).

<sup>116</sup> "India Cycle" is often the term used to refer to Duras's three novels *Le Vice-consul*, *Le ravisement de Lol V. Stein*, and *L'amour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). The following films are sometimes included as well: *La femme du Gange*, dir. Marguerite Duras, perf. Catherine Sellers, Christian Baltauss, and Gérard Depardieu, Albina, 1974; *India Song*, dir. Marguerite Duras, perf. Delphine Seyrig, Michael Lonsdale, and Mathieu Carrière, Armorial, 1975; and *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert*, dir. Marguerite Duras, perf. Nicole Hiss, Michael Lonsdale, and Sylvie Nuytten, FRAVIDIS, 1976.

girl, and again of the setting in which the lover and the girl find themselves. The importance of setting is also highlighted by Duras when she offers twenty-three images of landscape to be inserted into the film that she suggests could be made of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*.<sup>117</sup> These images are included after the end of the narrative, and provide a spatial setting for the film: “Je vois ces images comme un dehors qu’aurait le film, un « pays », celui de ces gens du livre, la contrée du film.”<sup>118</sup>

That landscape figures so prominently in Duras is, perhaps, no surprise given the role that it played in her upbringing and sense of identity, as she grew up in Indo-China as a French citizen, which had no small effect on her view of herself and others: Even the characters in the novel find themselves in an odd relation to their situation as members of this exotic society and yet still outsiders:

... nous n’avions pas faim, nous étions des enfants blancs, nous avions honte, nous vendions nos meubles, mais nous n’avions pas faim, nous avions un boy et nous mangions, parfois, il est vrai, des saloperies, des échassiers, des petits caïmans, mais ces saloperies étaient cuites par un boy et servies par lui et parfois aussi nous les refusions, nous nous permettions ce luxe de ne pas vouloir manger.<sup>119</sup>

Still, the family never quite fits into the class of colonizers either. First, the family is clearly taken advantage of by this class, evidenced by their having been sold an unfarmable concession. Second, the central character of the girl stands out against the other French girls her age – both

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<sup>117</sup> Duras, *Chine* 243-46.

<sup>118</sup> Duras, *Chine* 243.

<sup>119</sup> Duras, *Amant* 13.

evidenced by how she's seen as a pariah after news of her affair with the lover becomes public,<sup>120</sup> and at her feeling ill at ease in the *haut quartier* in Ram:

On la regardait. On se retournait, on souriait. Aucune jeune fille blanche de son âge ne marchait seule dans les rues du haut quartier...Elles se retournaient. On se retournait. En se retournant, on souriait. « D'où sort-elle cette malheureuse égarée sur nos trottoirs ? »<sup>121</sup>

The landscape in and of itself would be an ample topic of discussion for a project on Duras, being that the landscapes are vibrant and influential parts of these three narratives. Water specifically, however, is part and parcel of the process of self-discovery that occupies an all-important place in this trilogy. As Mireille Rosello, writing about the place of water in Duras's oeuvre, says, "De toute évidence, c'est la mer que l'on remarque en priorité dans les textes : elle est inévitable, partout omniprésente. Elle hante les titres, les paysages, les thèmes, les textes critiques..."<sup>122</sup> And although Rosello wrote those lines before the publication of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, her words seem equally applicable to this later narrative as to the ones in the same cycle that precede it. The narratives of concern in this chapter are, each of them, told within the shadow of the Mekong and the Pacific ocean. They each take as their starting point, albeit not always an explicitly narrated one, the economic trials and emotional tribulations of the family of Suzanne, or the Child, and each of these are the result of the failure of the plantation. The importance of water is only highlighted by the fact that the title of the first narrative states the family's adversarial relation to it: *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*.

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<sup>120</sup> Duras, *Chine* 115.

<sup>121</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 185-86.

<sup>122</sup> Mireille Rosello, "Amertume: l'eau chez Marguerite Duras," *Romanic Review* 78 (1987): 516.

The appearance of bodies of water assumes other characteristics in Duras, which Rosello herself comments on. Water is not only omnipresent, and the main source of the family's struggles, but outright maleficent:

Pourtant, cette proximité n'est pas sans risque car la mer n'est pas seulement l'inévitable origine, celle qui est toujours là, celle qui a toujours été là, celle qui se répète et se recommence inlassablement comme le dit Paul Valéry. La mer est avant tout mortelle et dangereuse.<sup>123</sup>

Rather than being the source of life, water is a source of death and destruction. The sea unrelentingly floods the plain each year, making a harvest impossible. It sweeps over the plain, destroying any chance of material gain, preventing a change of station for the mother or her children, and leaving them with a property that, being neither good for them nor for anyone else, serves no material purpose but as an impotent marker of space:

Elle [la concession] était annuellement envahie par la mer. Il est vrai que la mer ne montait pas à la même hauteur chaque année. Mais elle montait toujours suffisamment pour brûler tout, directement ou par infiltration.<sup>124</sup>

Yet this maliciousness attributed to water is not the result of some theory of water that Duras is presenting. It is rather, in a Wittgensteinian way, brought to light via the repetition of how water works in the narratives, of the events that it helps to delineate. The destructive potential of water appears in the compilation of scenes of destruction that have water at their source.

Still, destruction is a form of change, and if these narratives are written under the shadow of a maleficent Pacific, it is this same water that, time and again, also proves to be the catalyst for positive change. For change to occur, what is present must first be done away with in

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<sup>123</sup> Rosello 516.

<sup>124</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 25. See also the preface to *Barrage*.

preparation for the new. Change has, thus, both destructive and creative aspects. As Rosello remarks, “la présence de la mer transforme même les éléments solides en constructions fragiles, incapables de protéger quiconque et susceptibles d’ensevelir les autres voix”.<sup>125</sup>

Once water steps in, what we are left with afterwards can be seen as a blank canvass, as a neutrality from which this change, begun by the destructive power of the water, can proceed: “La mer qui enfouit tout dans l’homogénéité de l’oubli, dans l’indifférence, avale la terre d’origine et ne laisse que des traces défuntes, les marques d’un dépeuplement.”<sup>126</sup> In the same way that a doorway serves simultaneously as an exit to one space and an entrance to another, so Duras’s use of water dovetails its destructive and creative aspects:

Ma mère, ça la prend tout à coup, vers la fin de l’après-midi, surtout à la saison sèche, elle fait laver la maison de fond en comble, pour nettoyer elle dit, pour assainir, rafraîchir... Tout le monde est pieds nus, la mère aussi. La mère rit. La mère n’a rien à dire contre rien... Et chacun pense et elle aussi la mère que l’on peut être heureux dans cette maison défigurée qui devient soudain un étang, un champ au bord d’une rivière, un gué, une plage.<sup>127</sup>

These two simultaneous, and yet seemingly opposed, characteristics of water are further highlighted by the presence of the Mekong River, which often serves as a threshold in the narratives. This river is the place of the Child’s meeting with the lover.<sup>128</sup> The Child, in her attempt to escape the suffocating atmosphere of her family, finds in the Mekong both her exit

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<sup>125</sup> Rosello 519.

<sup>126</sup> Pierre Saint-Amand, “L’abîme et le secret,” *Duras, Dieu et l’écrit – colloque international*, ed. Alain Vircondelet (Monaco: Rocher, 1998) 228.

<sup>127</sup> Duras, *Amant* 76-77.

<sup>128</sup> See Duras, *Barrage* 35-36 and *Amant* 35, 36, 42-44.

from this community and her entrance into another – that of her sexual relationship with the Chinese man:

Il faut donc quitter cette maison-tombeau, cette famille mortifère, s'éloigner, grandir, entrer dans le domaine du désir et de l'amour, quitter les cieux nocturnes pour la lumière. Et pour cela passer d'abord symboliquement le fleuve, passer vers l'au-delà. Mais voilà que ce grand fleuve, seuil initiatique et figure de vie, se révèle aussi menace, figure de mort ; recueillant la mort d'une part...<sup>129</sup>

It is no small point that this life-changing love affair begins aboard the Mekong in the second and third versions of this narrative, since inasmuch as water serves as a mark of transition in Duras, so too does love. As Olympia Alberti writes, love wields the two-fold power of destructor and creator that is also attributed to water: "Aimer devient [chez Duras] l'acte par excellence, ce qui brûle nos barrières, nos oripeaux, nos défenses illusoires – le dernier acte avant la rencontre ultime, l'autre visage."<sup>130</sup> And so the role of water in relation to the land is paralleled with that of love in the lives of the characters. Love is a source of change in the lives of the characters – in all three narratives, the love of the Chinese man changes the life of the girl and of her family due to the influence of his wealth; so too does the love of a brother figure act as a motivating force in the life of the central girl character; and in the final narrative, the love of the sister brings about salvific change in the life of the youngest brother.

Beyond this change, however, love also serves to throw the stability of familial and social roles into question. The sexual affection that is hinted at during the first narrative when M. Jo laments to the girl, "Ce que vous aimez c'est les types du genre de...Du genre d'Agosti...de

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<sup>129</sup> Alain Goulet, "La mort dans *L'Amant*," *Marguerite Duras: Rencontres de Cerisy*, ed. Alain Vircondelet (Paris: Ecriture, 1994) 32.

<sup>130</sup> Olympia Alberti, "L'intime, et sa profération, comme parole sacrée chez Marguerite Duras," *Duras, Dieu et l'écrit: Colloque international*, ed. Alain Vircondelet (Monaco: Rocher, 1998) 54.

Joseph,”<sup>131</sup> is made more explicit in the second narrative, where the girl refers to Paulo as her child<sup>132</sup> and to herself as her Chinese lover’s child: “J’étais devenue son enfant. C’était avec son enfant qu’il faisait l’amour chaque soir...Il la prend comme il prendrait son enfant.”<sup>133</sup> This problematizing of personal roles is even more apparent in the last narrative, where Paulo is likened to both her child and her fiancé: “C’est comme mon fiancé, Paulo, mon enfant, c’est le plus grand trésor pour moi.”<sup>134</sup> As well in this final narrative, she is likened to the lover’s sister and his child: “Il la regarde. Il regarde celle qui est arrivée chez lui, cette visite tombée des mains de Dieu, cette enfant blanche de l’Asie. Sa sœur de sang. Son enfant. Son amour. Déjà il le sait.”<sup>135</sup> A Wittgensteinian perspective is useful yet again, when we try to understand the extent of Duras’s alterations to fixed designations of family roles: Duras has no idea of what a brother, fiancé, or a lover is. There are only iterations of these words, in a contextual manner that can be disturbing but is truthful nonetheless.

This ambiguity itself is important in the Durassian narratives. These characters do not transition from one role to another, but instead transition from one role to the very *instability* of “role”. This is not an exchange of one place for another, but an arrival that calls into question place itself, much like the water has the power to erase boundaries previously thought to be solid: “La mer a annulé la différence entre le mot “plaine” et le mot “pacifique”, elle empêche toute reconversion : elle ne laisse pas la mère devenir différente, se faire fermière sédentaire, indépendante de la mer, tirant sa subsistance d’un milieu solide distinct.”<sup>136</sup> Thus, the prevalence of water in the novels focuses our attention also on the fluidity of the roles with

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<sup>131</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 77.

<sup>132</sup> Duras, *Amant* 13.

<sup>133</sup> Duras, *Amant* 122-23.

<sup>134</sup> Duras, *Chine* 30. See also Duras, *Chine* 32.

<sup>135</sup> Duras, *Chine* 84. See also Duras, *Chine* 80, 114.

<sup>136</sup> Rosello 517.

which these characters attempt to label themselves – not only roles of brother, sister, child, parent, lover, but also that of savior, which will be discussed later. Like the water that destroys the distinction between plain and ocean, so the use of labels highlights the ways in which specific roles, and the stability of roles, are being questioned and complicated by an accumulation of appearances. Any unitary concept is impossible to attain, we can only see a series of snapshots.

### 2.2.2 The Waters of Baptism

As the threshold from seemingly well-defined role to the instability of role – a location of creation *in* destruction – water in Duras also becomes the medium for a baptism of sorts. It is important to understand, however, the nature of this baptism. The Catholic faith believes that baptism is an actual means of salvation, whereas many Protestant denominations view it as symbolic of a change that has already taken place in the life of the believer, a making public of a decision, an announcement of sorts. This is called a “believer’s baptism,” and it is in this way that I argue one must understand the role of water in Duras’s trilogy.

As Nancy Huston notes, the spiritual nature of Duras’s writings proves a rich source of insight:

Et la littérature qu’a produite cette voix [de Duras] est à bien des égards une littérature religieuse, touchant aux arcanes de la sexualité et de la mort, invoquant et décrivant sans cesse des absolus (le Tout, le Rien, la souffrance et al jouissance paroxystiques), laissant de côté ce qui est spécifiquement humain (la société, la diversité, l’ennui).<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Nancy Huston, “Les limites de l’absolu,” *La Nouvelle revue française* 542 (1998): 10.

Foundational scenes of water in the Durassian trilogy, then, tend to direct the reader's attention to changes that have already occurred. In this sense, the threshold is not performative: the crossing of the threshold is not what causes the change; instead, the change is a *pre-requisite* for the crossing.

From this point of view, we can recognize four foundational scenes of water in the narratives: the destruction of the sea wall, the periodic washing of the house, the crossing of the Mekong, and the return to France. The story of the broken sea wall announces a change that has already occurred, in that the mother's fate has been sealed, even before the sea wall is overtaken by the ocean. She is too naïve, too simple to know the inner workings of how one assures oneself of receiving a farmable plantation – had she known this, she would not have exchanged her life savings for one that was not going to yield crops. As the narrator in *Barrage* says, “Le malheur venait de son incroyable naïveté.”<sup>138</sup> It is not the ocean that seals her fate and that of her family, but instead she herself that is at fault. Her lack of savvy has brought the family to ruin, albeit through an act of injustice on the part of the government agents. This change from a loving bride, from a well-respected teacher in Indo-China, to someone ripe for victimization has occurred long before the tides wash over the fields of her new plantation, and later through the crab-infested walls of the barrier she has built to protect them.

The scene in which the characters, minus the older brother, wash the house is a scene of joy and happiness – one of few such scenes in the novels. The two youngest siblings, along with some native children, splash about the house while the mother plays the piano, and the smell of *savon de Marseille* dominates.<sup>139</sup> When one reflects on the nature of cleaning, what it shares with the making public of a change that has already occurred becomes clear: one does not need

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<sup>138</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 25. See also Duras, *Amant* 69-70, and *Chine* 100.

<sup>139</sup> Duras, *Amant* 76-77, and *Chine* 13-14.

to clean where there is not filth. In this sense, this joyous scene, this baptism by water, announces the filth that pervades the family; an announcement that is highlighted in the third narrative by the older brother's dramatic and violent arrival into the scene:

Il [le frère aîné] se poste à quelques mètres de la fête et il la regarde.

Longtemps il regarde la fête.

Et puis il le fait : il écarte les petits boys qui se sauvent épouvantés. Il avance. Il atteint le couple du petit frère et de la sœur.

Et puis il le fait : il prend le petit frère par les épaules, il le pousse jusqu'à la fenêtre ouverte de l'entresol. Et, comme s'il y était tenu par un devoir cruel, il le jette dehors comme il ferait d'un chien.<sup>140</sup>

The older brother bursts into this scene of happiness and contentment between the youngest two children and their mother, and re-introduces terror. The cleanliness of the house, and by extension that of the family, and the jubilation that accompanies it, quickly find in the older brother their antithesis. The cleansing would not be necessary were it not for some intrusion of filth, and we see that the presence of the older brother soils the otherwise joyful situation.

The third scene of baptism is the crossing of the Mekong, during which the young girl meets, in the second two novels at least, the Chinese lover with whom she will have her first love affair. While it is true that the meeting between the two takes place on this crossing, such a meeting, and such an affair are only made possible by the fact that the girl feels herself to be different from other and that she is sexual beyond her years, and that she realizes the sexual gaze of men is frequently upon her, and has been for some time. This meeting is merely a making

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<sup>140</sup> Duras, *Chine* 14.

public, an announcement of the sexuality that she has sensed in herself; it is not the moment of the change.

Lastly, we see this making public of an already-occurred change in the return of the family to France – the crossing of the ocean. This point in the narrative, present only in the second and third versions, signals the changed nature of the family's mindset. Duras writes in the second narrative of the way in which the boats signal the presence of France, even though they are in exotic waters: "Du moment que les bateaux étaient à quai, la France était là."<sup>141</sup> The symbolic nature of such a voyage is again highlighted in the third narrative:

Alors, même ceux qui sont seuls, qui n'accompagnent personne, partagent l'étrange tragédie de « quitter », de « laisser » pour toujours, d'avoir trahi la destinée qu'ils découvrent être la leur au moment de la perdre, et qu'ils ont trahie de même, eux seuls.<sup>142</sup>

Being on the boat is not itself the betrayal – they have already betrayed their destiny and themselves. The voyage itself is not the crossroads of the change from colonizer (French citizen in Indochina) to native (French citizen in France), this change has already occurred and is what necessitates the voyage across the sea and back to France.

But why bother making these baptismal announcements? What is it about the announcement of a situation, the making public that concerns Duras and simultaneously the girl? It is, I suggest, the relationship of announcement to truth. Echoing Wittgenstein, there is a truth that comes with revealing what is the case, the way the world is, and in so doing, revealing

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<sup>141</sup> Duras, *Amant* 131.

<sup>142</sup> Duras, *Chine* 226.

oneself to others: “The world is everything that is the case.”<sup>143</sup> It is this process of revelation that finds voice in the repetition of the narratives, and makes the sum of the narratives a baptism in itself. These narratives announce to the reader the change wrought in the life of Marguerite Duras, and at the same time make explicit these changes to Duras herself:

Isn't my knowledge, my concept of a game, completely expressed in the explanations that I could give? That is, in my describing examples of various kinds of game; shewing how all sorts of other games can be constructed on the analogy of these; saying that I should scarcely include this or this among games; and so on.<sup>144</sup>

### 2.2.3 Writing and Repetition

Duras's rewriting is directly related to the notion of baptism that her use of water illuminates: the baptismal experience offered by these texts makes public the narrator's deliverance to a new life by each instance of writing. The narrator is reborn. The characters are also born again, through this repeated act of writing. Still, Duras cannot stave off either pain or death for her brother and, neither can she do so, inevitably, for herself. Thus the pain of writing becomes evident. If by writing, the narrator had granted immortality to any of her beloved characters, she could have stopped. Something wasn't right yet, and may *still* not be right.

The character of the girl in her early teens holds up writing as a performative act, saying that she wishes to write the story of her mother so that the government agents who treated the

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<sup>143</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* trans. C.K. Ogden (Mineola: Dover, 1999) §1.

<sup>144</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2001) §75.

mother unjustly would die from reading it.<sup>145</sup> However, the repetition of the narrative betrays the more mature Duras's discovery: that writing is not performative in such cases; it is, instead, a *performance*. The girl may be attracted to writing with the false hope that it will *create* truth (the truth of someone's death), but the mature writer has found that writing – the performance of examples – is the only way *to get to a truth*. And this is no small point, for Duras is illustrating that repetition gets us *to* truth, and not away from it.

If this repetition of writing signals an understanding about the impossibility of clearly-defined truth in regards to certain concepts, it furthermore signals the value Duras instills in truth itself. Duras is convinced that she has a truth about love and sex that she wants to share, and she keeps at this writing because the richness of repetition is the only means available to present and to receive knowledge of such complex concepts. This writing, then, has gone full swing from a performative act to an act of performance, and this performance is lived as martyrdom. Through her rewriting, Duras lays out for all to see the experiences the girl has had, increasing the complexity with each new repetition, so that the truth to which she has been given access might be made public. She had thought that writing would bring about death, but in reality, death comes of its own accord, and nothing can save her from it. Thus she, Paulo, the lover, and the rest are delivered up to art as martyrs for truth.

It is this unwavering commitment to truth and knowledge that motivates her to write about Pierre – a choice that is not at all obvious. If Pierre, the bad brother, is a constant source of pain and of sadness, and if writing immortalizes, in a sense, the existence of another, why not write Pierre out of the narratives? The non-writing of Pierre would reduce him to nothingness. In the second narrative, the girl says that while her family was living, she had only written

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<sup>145</sup> Duras, *Chine* 102.

around certain events from their lives.<sup>146</sup> She now strives to write *about* them – to write in truth. While one could say that to write about Pierre in as harsh a fashion, as she does in the second and third novels gives him the type of immortality that could serve as revenge, I argue that this is watering down the force of Duras’s narrative. The motivation for including the character of the older brother is found in the girl’s search for, and commitment to, truth. The presence of the older brother is required under the demand for truth, it is a part of the narrative that must be included, and without which the rest loses the sheen of truth, knowledge, and thus of value to her process of self-realization. Having thus laid the groundwork for the importance of truth in the trilogy, let us now turn to the nature of these truths that Duras wants to share.

## 2.3 DURAS’S TRUTHS ABOUT SEX AND LOVE

### 2.3.1 Incest: Reciprocity Instead of Unity

When thinking about the change in the brother from a single character in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* to two characters, often juxtaposed, in the following two narratives, one often views Joseph as an ideal sibling for Suzanne, and the dividing of Joseph presents the reader with a picture of the two halves of the character – the part she adores and the part she does not. Certainly this does seem to follow in the two later narratives, inasmuch as the Child sets herself up as the guardian of Paulo, while maintaining a distance from the older brother. Some critics, for example both Danielle Bajomée<sup>147</sup> and Kevin C. O’Neill,<sup>148</sup> take this idea a step further and

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<sup>146</sup> Duras, *Amant* 14.

<sup>147</sup> Danielle Bajomée, *Duras ou la douleur*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Duculot, 1999) 38.

<sup>148</sup> Kevin C. O’Neill, “Structures of Power in Duras’s *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*,” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 45 (1991): 56.

suggest that Joseph is Suzanne's ideal lover. In the end, however, such a designation is based on incest being seen as a search for unity, and this is a reading that I will try in fact try to dismantle.

There are many critics who have commented on the meaning of incest in the trilogy, citing as its main motivation and role in the Durassian oeuvre as fulfilling "[une] volonté poétique d'unité originelle enfin retrouvée."<sup>149</sup> Similarly, Danielle Bajomée, in her oft cited book *Duras, ou, La Douleur*, sees a search for unity at the foundation of what Duras illustrates with instances of incest in her oeuvre:

En un certain sens, le discours et l'éprouvé de la tentation incestueuse désignent ou surdésignent cette volonté, déjà signalée, d'abolir toute distance [entre frère et sœur]. Dans l'amour du frère et de la sœur, il s'agit essentiellement de différence effacée...<sup>150</sup>

Talking specifically of Suzanne and Joseph, Bajomée says that Suzanne makes of him "son homologue, son double enfoui et – peu – refoulé, un autre moi surgi de sa propre profondeur et dont la ressemblance légitime son besoin de non-différenciation."<sup>151</sup> At the foundation of this search for unity, Bajomée sees the brother/sister combination as forming a complete whole – that their separation leaves each lacking, in a certain sense. This unity of brother and sister is a reunion of two parts, separated to the detriment of each:

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<sup>149</sup> Béatrice Bonhomme, "L'Écriture de Duras ou La réécriture du livre: *L'Amant de la Chine du nord* ou « *L'Amant recommencé* »,» *Le Nouveau roman en questions*, ed. Roger-Michel Allemand, vol. 2 (Paris: Minard, 1993) 132.

<sup>150</sup> Bajomée 39.

<sup>151</sup> Bajomée 39.

Frère et sœur peuvent donc renvoyer, dans la dérive imaginaire, à la conjonction réalisée du féminin et du masculin, à une célébration du plein, du clos, du [de la] lisse, à une exaltation du remembrement, de la réunion des contraires.<sup>152</sup>

What Bajomée finds here is an illustration of the mythical, bisexual beings in Plato's *Banquet*, who are not "marqués par la scission sexuelle."<sup>153</sup> This recalls the Platonic idea of the bisexual beings, cut in two, and consequently always searching for their missing halves.

Although interesting, I believe that such readings based on unity are ultimately misleading. Such approaches, simply, do not give enough credence to the reciprocal nature of the instance of incest in the third narrative, where the stakes are both higher and clearer. The compassionate nature of the girl's act of giving herself to her brother is completely overlooked when a search for unity is posited. Furthermore, Duras is not a Platonic thinker, nostalgic for the loss of an ideal essence. Nowhere in her oeuvre is she harkening back to some ideal state, to some ideal whole. Indeed, the opposite is almost always the case.<sup>154</sup>

Still, there is a way in which readings based on unity could be seen as supporting reciprocity, namely that in an act of reunification both parties gain by being restored to an original, and preferable state. However, this is an odd understanding of reciprocity, inasmuch as reciprocity, by its nature, requires more than one party. One cannot share, one cannot reciprocate if there is not a party outside of oneself. To collapse this distinction between oneself and an Other is to do away with reciprocity in any important sense. That is to say, to do away

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<sup>152</sup> Bajomée 40.

<sup>153</sup> Bajomée 40.

<sup>154</sup> For example, the central characters of Lol V. Stein in *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, Anne-Marie Stretter in *Le Vice-Consul*, and the story of Duras awaiting the return of her husband from a concentration camp in Marguerite Duras, *La Douleur* (Paris: POL, 1985).

with reciprocity in any sense that captures the sacrificial and salvific meaning that the instance of incest has for Paulo, at least in the young girl's mind.

Further, if incest is supposed to signal a reunification and a "différence effacée" for these critics, the end result of sex with Paulo certainly does not live up to expectations. The identities of Paulo and the Child are still ambiguous one to the other, in fact perhaps even more so. Now that their relationship has encompassed intercourse, it becomes even more difficult to distinguish the role of Paulo from that of the lover, and in the same way the role of the lover from that of being a brother. Yet, the identity of the girl remains distinct from that of Paulo.

### **2.3.2 Set-Apart: Sex and Knowledge of Self**

Still, if the reciprocity of the incestuous act in the third narrative is opposed to a reading based on unity, it is nonetheless not surprising to find the uniting act of sex at the center of such reciprocity in Duras, since she presents sex as an instance of emotional and spiritual transparency – a transparency of identity: "Lorsque le corps s'approche du don, de l'abandon d'amour, de la dépossession extrême, il semble que la chair elle-même suggère cette perte du charnel, cette enveloppe que l'on quitte pour plus de transparence."<sup>155</sup> The potential of epistemic power that Duras places at the heart of the sexual encounter finds its base in the transparency that it creates. The rawness of the sexual encounter leaves the character open to revelation about oneself, and this because the self is open to the vulnerability of being known by the other. There is pain present in the transparency of sexual encounter, while the pain of persistent separation is what, in part, the sexual encounter is meant to suture.

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<sup>155</sup> Alberti 53.

If Joseph is the ideal brother, then the splitting of Joseph can provide the Child with access to what is *not* ideal. The character of Joseph embodies characteristics found in both the characters of Paulo and Pierre, thus by splitting Joseph in two, and thereby assigning the characteristics that call for sympathy and care for Paulo, and those that inspire fear of Pierre, the Child puts herself in a different position regarding her sisterhood than Suzanne in the first novel. But even the understanding of Joseph as ideal is not without its problems. Joseph is not Paulo. Joseph is both a selfish and caring character. He allows the mother to continue beating Suzanne,<sup>156</sup> but remains in order to make sure it does not go too far,<sup>157</sup> even threatening to leave with his sister if the beating continues after the mother admits she knows Suzanne has not slept with M. Jo;<sup>158</sup> he shares moments of camaraderie with Suzanne while swimming<sup>159</sup> or travelling to forest villages,<sup>160</sup> but also is constantly threatening to leave the family, and does so both while they are in Ram<sup>161</sup> and again at the end of the novel;<sup>162</sup> he seems concerned to protect her from sleeping with M. Jo, whom Joseph feels is an unsuitable partner,<sup>163</sup> but seems uninterested in her upbringing in most other ways.

If this vacillation between guarded concern and indifference characterizes Joseph's feelings towards Suzanne, it far from describes what Suzanne feels for Joseph. Not only does Suzanne seem to crave time with her older brother – swimming with him,<sup>164</sup> trekking with him

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<sup>156</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 136.

<sup>157</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 138.

<sup>158</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 141.

<sup>159</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 30.

<sup>160</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 156-59.

<sup>161</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 181.

<sup>162</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 302.

<sup>163</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 145.

<sup>164</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 19-20.

through the forest,<sup>165</sup> sleeping in his room once he has left<sup>166</sup> – but she also compares all of her suitors to him, and, though all pale in comparison to Joseph, she is drawn to the ones that resemble him most closely. She finds M. Jo’s advances annoying specifically because they keep her from time with Joseph.<sup>167</sup> In contrast, she sees multiple similarities between Joseph and the man she ends up sleeping with, Agosti’s son: his facial expressions,<sup>168</sup> his laugh,<sup>169</sup> and his voice.<sup>170</sup>

The splitting of this character in the later novels is essential, as it allows for a different relationship to Paulo than is possible with Joseph, and similarly with Pierre. Joseph is, in a way, a Frankenstein: the combination of parts of others coming together in an attempt to make an ideal individual – some parts that are admirable, some not, some that are desired, others that highlight a lack of reliability on his part. And, also like Frankenstein, the experiment is a failure for Duras and must be destroyed. Joseph does not work, and so is replaced by Pierre and Paulo. If Joseph is the ideal and his destruction is necessary, then his status as ideal would appear to be the issue. The girl needs access to what is not ideal, since what is ideal does not know pain and has no need of deliverance. These narratives culminate in the deliverance of Paulo via incest with the girl, and with this in mind, we see the previous two narratives as repetitions working towards the acknowledgement of this sexual act.

The first brother must be “revised” and even destroyed in subsequent examples of the narrative so that other aspects can come to light. The chance of an acceptable sexual relationship with Agosti, whom she leaves on the last page of the novel to go with her brother instead,

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<sup>165</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 156-59.

<sup>166</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 355.

<sup>167</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 125.

<sup>168</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 324.

<sup>169</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 338.

<sup>170</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 341.

because she “cannot do otherwise,”<sup>171</sup> points to a lack of self-awareness, much like the comments she makes about her knowing she is different, knowing that she is set apart from the other girls, knowing that something has happened to her, but not knowing how to describe it. This is not, however, a lack of self-awareness. Had she no understanding of herself, Suzanne would not be able to make the decision to leave Agosti and go with Joseph at the end of *Barrage*, nor to agree to the ride from the lover aboard the Mekong, nor to follow this sense that she is set-apart.

The central character of the girl seems to be pushed onwards by her sense that she is set apart for something, that there is a purpose for her in life: there is something towards which she is moving, a selfhood for which she is ordained. The seeds of this are already planted in the first narrative, and find more explicit expression in the second and third. In the first narrative we see the girl, coming into a sense of herself as a sexual being, not only through her early interactions with M. Jo, where he asks her to let him watch her dress after she’s showered,<sup>172</sup> but more so when she meets him serendipitously for the last time in Ram.<sup>173</sup> She is in his limo, and during the kissing and groping that ensues, finds an awakening of sorts after M. Jo comments on her breasts:

- Tu as de beaux seins.

La chose avait été dite tout bas. Mais elle avait été dite. Pour la première fois. Et pendant que la main était à nu sur le sein nu. Et au-dessus de la ville terrifiante,

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<sup>171</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 365. My translation.

<sup>172</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 72-74.

<sup>173</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 221-28.

Suzanne vit ses seins, elle vit l'érection de ses seins plus haut que tout ce qui se dressait dans la ville, dont c'était eux qui auraient raison.<sup>174</sup>

She finds here a value, a worth in her breasts, and by extension, in herself as a sexual being. The use of the conditional form of the verb “avoir,” makes us look towards the future – the breast would be in the right. What they represent would be in the right, will turn out to motivate and to validate what is to come. The use of those words by Mr. Jo opens up an entirely different world for the girl.

At the end of *Barrage*, we see the girl take a stance that moves her away from the realm of a love accepted by society and, instead, towards what ends up being in the remaining two narratives, a step towards transgressive love. Having slept with Agosti, a boy her age in the region, who is destined to remain there on the plantation of his father, Suzanne has the chance to stay with him and take on the mantle of a life that is all too common for those in her position. Yet, instead of choosing this, she opts to leave:

- On va partir, dit Joseph
- Ça n'a pas d'importance qu'elle soit avec moi ou un autre, pour le moment, dit brusquement Agosti.
- Je crois que ça n'a pas tellement d'importance, dit Joseph, elle n'a qu'à décider.

Agosti s'était mis à fumer, il avait un peu pâli.

- Je pars, lui dit Suzanne, je ne peux pas faire autrement.
- Je ne peux pas t'empêcher, dit enfin Agosti, à ta place, je ferai comme toi.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 226.

<sup>175</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 365.

The motivation to leave is not found in any cajoling on the part of Joseph – in fact, he seems clearly indifferent as to whether Suzanne leaves with him and Lina or not. The same can be said of Agosti – he doesn't seem to try and influence Suzanne one way or another. Instead, Suzanne makes the decision for herself, choosing to leave, and this not for any logical reason, or any reason at all, but because she feels that she cannot do otherwise. This decision to leave is drastic, indeed she's leaving behind everything she has ever known; yet, this sense that she must leave, that she cannot stay, as unnamed as it is, is strong enough that she courageously steps out and follows it. As if we needed more confirmation that Duras is holding up this decision as important, it comes only ten lines before the end of the novel, and is given the blessing of her suitor, Agosti – “à ta place, je ferais comme toi”. And yet, by this phrase, we realize that Agosti is not in her place; indeed, she is unique in her position at this point in the narrative. Joseph is indifferent and clearly going to leave regardless of what anyone else decides. Agosti, in contrast, is staying regardless of what the others do. The girl alone is left with the weight of having to make a choice, and this she makes not knowing exactly why, but knowing that she must.

The second narrative sets up the character of the girl within the first twenty pages, most explicitly as she describes what she's wearing during the pivotal scene where she meets her lover aboard the Mekong. She highlights four articles of clothing she's wearing: her dress, her belt, her shoes, and her hat. The descriptions combine to give the girl a sexual quality beyond her years. The dress is so worn that it is basically transparent and which she thinks suits her.<sup>176</sup> The belt is a simple belt of leather, but she attributes it to her brothers.<sup>177</sup> This is interesting in comparison to the dress, which is a hand-me-down from her mother. She has described, up to this point, the clothes in which her family has dressed her – the aspects of her ensemble that

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<sup>176</sup> Duras, *Amant* 18.

<sup>177</sup> Duras, *Amant* 18.

reflect their influence. The shoes and hat, however, are distinctly hers, and while the transparent dress signals a sexual allure, the shoes signal a definite movement from childhood to adulthood: “ces talons hauts sont les premiers de ma vie, ils sont beaux, ils ont éclipsé toutes les chaussures qui les ont précédés, celles pour courir et jouer, plates, de toile blanche.”<sup>178</sup> The child is moving from running and playing, the activities of a child, to the activities of a woman – those that require the sexual allure of high heels, and that no longer are defined by white, that is to say, purity.

It is the hat, however, that truly sets the girl apart. For although her clothes that signal the sexuality of a woman, it must be remembered that in this narrative, the central female character is 15 years old – far from the age of sexual maturity, and the age of consent. The hat, then, emphasizes the ambiguity that the girl embodies: “L’ambiguïté déterminante de l’image, elle est dans ce chapeau.”<sup>179</sup> In this ambiguity is the richness of choice, of her free will. Neither women nor girls, be they white or indigenous are wearing such hats at this time,<sup>180</sup> and the effect is to set the girl apart, and this being set apart is the source of her as desired object:

Elle a cessé d’être une donnée brutale, fatale, de la nature. Elle est devenue, tout à l’opposé, un choix contrariant de celle-ci, un choix de l’esprit. Soudain, voilà qu’on l’a voulue. Soudain je me vois comme une autre, comme une autre serait vue, au-dehors, mise à la disposition de tous, mise à la disposition de tous les regards, mise dans la circulation des villes, des routes, du désir.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Duras, *Amant* 19.

<sup>179</sup> Duras, *Amant* 19.

<sup>180</sup> Duras, *Amant* 19-20.

<sup>181</sup> Duras, *Amant* 20.

This desire emanates from her very self, and is evident to others. The lover says that she knew she would enjoy making love as soon as he saw her.<sup>182</sup> The mother, talking with the director of the boarding house, and trying to excuse her daughter's habit of spending the night at the apartment of the lover, says, "Tous, dit la mère, ils tournent autour d'elle, tous les hommes du poste, mariés ou non, ils tournent autour de ça, ils veulent de cette petite, de cette chose-là, pas tellement définie encore, regardez, encore une enfant."<sup>183</sup>

But the unique nature of the girl is not evident only through the gaze of others, nor is it a shallow coquettishness. Instead, it is indicative of a strong inner self, in the case of the girl – a strength of which she is aware. The sexual relationship with the lover is not merely an experiment, but instead a leap of faith. She realizes that the lover is at her mercy, but that with this comes a certain responsibility: "Elle sait aussi quelque chose d'autre, que dorénavant le temps est sans doute arrivé où elle ne peut plus échapper à certaines obligations qu'elle a envers elle-même."<sup>184</sup> She has been set apart, and she must accept the responsibility that awaits her. And this act of taking up the mantle of her selfhood reveals an inner strength that she did not know she had: "Je me demande comment j'ai eu la force d'aller à l'encontre de l'interdit posé par ma mère. Avec ce clame, cette détermination. Comment je suis arrivée à aller « jusqu'au bout de l'idée »."<sup>185</sup> Whatever the pain and risk that it involves, the girl has to push forward, and has to follow through in taking on this new identity via sex: "Je dis que je devais le faire, que c'en était comme d'une obligation."<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Duras, *Amant* 54.

<sup>183</sup> Duras, *Amant* 113.

<sup>184</sup> Duras, *Amant* 46.

<sup>185</sup> Duras, *Amant* 50-51.

<sup>186</sup> Duras, *Amant* 51.

### 2.3.3 Courage: Compassion and Salvation in Sex

Julia Kristeva is insightful in her comment about the gravity of Duras's portrayal of passion: "Les durassiennes sont des endeuillées de la passion."<sup>187</sup> As I have said previously, Duras both illustrates the enormous power of sex to render one transparent and, thus, to put one in a position to present oneself honestly to another. And yes, this transparency is encumbered with pain, which shrouds love, sex, and the passion that drives us towards them, in mourning. In Duras's world, love, sex, and passion are not for the faint of heart, nor for those who wish to toe the status quo; instead, love explodes what is tranquil, love shifts what seems stable, and questions what appears foundational. The mourning is a mourning of a shallow passion, which Duras replaces with a more mature, albeit more painful, version. Duras's view of love and sex is not, ultimately, depressing. It is grounded in truth, and the power of this truth is what motivates the girl to continue, to fight, and to persevere. This, though such perseverance does not end with an escape from pain, is done in the name of the search for self, and this self-realization is a good to be sought. Again, it must be reiterated that this search for self in Duras is not a search in the unconscious realm. Instead, it is the repeated collection of examples, the collection of facts, in a Wittgensteinian vein that allows for a greater knowledge of the person united under these facts.

Kristeva, however, argues that this is more a wallowing than a measured acceptance. Writing of Duras in *Soeil noir* (1987), she says, "Sans catharsis, cette littérature rencontre, reconnaît, mais aussi propage le mal qui la mobilise."<sup>188</sup> I cannot agree with Kristeva's further point here. Duras is not attempting to propagate evil or pain at all: there is a *description* of the pain that has occurred in her life, but this is not tantamount to propagation. There is a type of

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<sup>187</sup> Kristeva, "Une étrangère" 5.

<sup>188</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Soleil noir: dépression et mélancolie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987) 237.

catharsis in Duras, the catharsis of truth – the truth is arrived at and aired; however, without the emotional sedation of a happy ending. As Kristeva points out, “la femme durassienne est une femme-tristesse,”<sup>189</sup> but this sadness and mourning is not an indulging or delighting in pain; instead it is a courageous confrontation with it.

Neither is this sadness a source of frigidity in the girl, as Kristeva would have one understand it:

Cette douleur exprime un plaisir impossible, elle est le signe déchirant de la frigidity. Retenant une passion qui ne saurait s’écouler, la douleur est cependant et plus profondément la prison où s’enferme le deuil impossible d’un amour ancien fait tout entier de sensations et d’auto-sensations, inséparable et, pour cela même, innommable. Le deuil inaccompli du pré-objet auto-sensuel fixe la frigidity féminine.<sup>190</sup>

The girls is not frigid, nor are many other female characters in the Durassian oeuvre – most notably Anne-Marie Stretter and Lol. V. Stein. Kristeva has confused courage and self-possession with frigidity. There is a determination in these women to push towards truth, in regards to desire and love. Duras speaks about this female strength in her movies, and it seems equally applicable to the strong female characters in her writings, during an interview in 1975: “I mean, what appears in my films is the language of women, the action of women. The men are forced to follow. They do it the best they can, but they lag behind.”<sup>191</sup> The women push towards a truth about the pain and ultimate respite-quality of love and sex, and this comes off as frigid because they are not buying into the same view of sex and love as the men. They do think that

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<sup>189</sup> Kristeva, “Une étrangère” 7.

<sup>190</sup> Julia Kristeva, “La femme tristesse,” *Infini* 17 (1987): 6.

<sup>191</sup> Marguerite Duras, “An Interview with Marguerite Duras,” trans. Susan Husserl-Kapit, *Signs* 1 (1975): 426.

love is worthwhile, and in this way they are sexual beings, but the value of love and, thus, sex does not constitute a cure, but a hospice of sort, a place where death and pain can be alleviated for a while. This understanding prevents in them the wish for resolution that the men exhibit; however, resolution ends up being a chimera – even for the men. There is no sense that, even if the women were to love them forever, things would turn out better for the men. Further, there is no sense that even when the girl does fall in love with the Chinese man, that there is anything more to be done; i.e. that this would end better, could end better. If they were to marry, this would, like Paulo, eventually end in death and separation. The same mourning that takes place for Paulo, and that takes place when the girl is separated from the lover on the trip back to France, would evidence itself eventually, and perhaps to a greater degree, as it would be backed by even more years of coexistence, friendship, and love.

This strength of character only serves to highlight, against the backdrop of the rest of the narrative, the compassion and selflessness of her act in delivering her brother. There are other caring characters – indeed, Joseph is concerned for his sister’s well being, but not enough to stay with the family, or to encourage her to leave and join Lina and himself. M. Jo is a pitiful character, rather than compassionate – he is a victim and has little selfhood from which to give anything of value or content. He has money, and this is his contribution, but the act of prostrating himself, humiliating himself even, before Suzanne is not an act that carries with it great sacrifice, inasmuch as the selfhood that he is sacrificing is greatly wanting in character. The lover in the later two narratives is a more beneficent character, taking as he does the girl’s sexual education under his wing, but he himself proves to be under the spell of the girl, rather than consciously giving himself to her. His desire and love for her prods him on, but as if controlled by fate, by a movement void of the concerted will of a martyr. Indeed, in the end, the

lover cannot make the decision to leave the woman he is engaged to – a decision that falls short in comparison to the courageous choices of the girl to follow her inner prodding towards self-realization. The mother, too, is more of a pathetic character than one of courage or compassion. It is true that she loves her children, but it is an abusive love – at best neglectful. She lacks the psychological balance to consciously offer herself up in a compassionate act; instead, she rises and falls with the manic and depressive episodes brought about by her strained existential and psychological condition. And then there is Paulo. And while he serves as savior to his sister, this is a martyrdom different from her own. Paulo's is not a martyrdom, located in a selfless, compassionate act of emptying himself out, but instead he's a saint because he is being sacrificed as an innocent. Like a lamb on the altar, Paulo is an appropriate sacrifice because of his mental weakness, a weakness that presents him almost as spotless in comparison to those around him. He does not possess the same selfishness as the brother or the mother, but neither is he strong enough to act as savior in the same way the girl does. He, instead, is the passive sacrifice.

In a sense, the comfort that is sought via this compassionate act of incest is both denied and accomplished. It is denied because the suffering of the family cannot be effaced by it, on the other hand it is accomplished in the sense that the brother and sister are united in their awareness of their interdependence as saviors: one cannot bear the cross of the other without the other at the same time bearing the cross of the first. Thus, sex, for Duras, serves as a powerful location of spiritual awareness. By revealing the superficiality of boundaries and notions of identity that rely on them, sex can become the location of a resurrection into plurality. Sex is the location of both identity-making and identity-breaking.

Her act of deliverance is a compassionate act, an act born of love and concern for her brother. And it is this nature of the act that gives it its great strength. The pouring out of herself

in a Christ-like way, allows for Paulo to see reflected in her emptied self his own emptiness and, consequently his need: “Quand il avait crié elle s’était retournée vers son visage, elle avait pris sa bouche avec la sienne pour que la mère n’entende pas le cri de délivrance de son fils.”<sup>192</sup> Like a need that is not evident until someone draws our attention to it, so too the selfless giving of herself acts as a mirror that brings Paulo’s own emptiness to his attention. This mirroring is foreshadowed in the reflected image the girl sees of her brother before she beckons him into the bathroom,<sup>193</sup>: “La jouissance avait été celle que ne connaissait pas encore le petit frère. Des larmes avaient coulé de ses yeux fermés. Et ils avaient pleuré ensemble, sans un mot, comme depuis toujours.”<sup>194</sup> With this revelation he is forced to recognize his need for intimacy, and the awareness of this void is what allows for the creation of self. This is a moment of self-awareness for Paulo, and his resulting humanity is seen in his telling his first lie to his mother – an as yet unparalleled act of free will on his part.<sup>195</sup>

Too, there is a role for Paulo in salvation: the salvation of his sister. The death without a funeral, without a body, without rites, sets the character of Paulo up as a Christ-like figure, as a saint. In fact, if we focus solely on the deliverance that Paulo *receives* from the girl, an important function for this character could be easily forgotten. It is not enough to say that Paulo is a saint because of his mistreatment by his older brother; indeed, being mistreated is not sufficient for sainthood. To be a saint requires that one performs an extraordinary good deed, a miracle, and there is no good deed coming from the abuse that Pierre rains down on those below him. The miracle that Paulo performs, however, is that of his sister’s self-realization, which she perceives as her writing mission. Without himself as delivered, she cannot assume the

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<sup>192</sup> Duras, *Chine* 209.

<sup>193</sup> Duras, *Chine* 209.

<sup>194</sup> Duras, *Chine* 209.

<sup>195</sup> Duras, *Chine* 212.

mantle of deliverer, and it is through this role that the content of her own self is brought before her eyes. She had indeed developed a selfhood without realizing it through the narratives up to this point – in trying and ultimately rejecting the sexual relationship with Agosti, and symbolically any others of its kind; in the sexual and emotional education that she receives via her relationship with the lover, having paid heed to her uniqueness which set her apart for such a relationship; and in the melding of the roles between brother, child, sister, lover that progress through each novel, starting implicit in the first and explicit by the last.

Not only is it true that the ideal of Joseph must be split apart so that the girl can have access to the non-ideal inasmuch as the ideal has no need for deliverance, which would prevent her from fulfilling her role of deliverer, the ideal brother, too, is one that is not able to deliver her. This deliverance is reciprocal. The death of Paulo is traumatic for the character of the girl, and this because his death brings to the forefront *her own* need for deliverance. This deliverance of the girl, however, proves to be horrendous in its gravity. For in the end, the girl finds out that deliverance does not deliver us to peace, but instead to pain.

It is only through her tenacious drive that she has something, a self, to empty in order to provide the deliverance that Paulo so greatly needs. Without a self of her own, there would be nothing to void, and thus Paulo would never be the “soleil noir” that brings his own emptiness to light. The irony is that her accomplishment of self-discovery is only revealed to her after the fact. The fact that she has given herself in a selfless act to the brother requires that there have been a self to give, and it is the moment of giving herself over that is the revelation of her own self-realization.

The girl mentions that the death of Paulo signals the death of everything. As both Goulet and Saint-Amand have said, this can be taken as inaugurating the deaths of others. But a further

way of reading this is not that it says something strictly about the “others”, but instead about the subjectivity of the girl. The others become dead to her. Everything, everyone is dead for her because this identity, the self-realization towards which she has felt led “because she cannot do otherwise”, she now realizes, leads also towards death. This realization of self has led her to the realization that death is the end of all things, herself, others, even Paulo, and this fact shadows life itself and everything in it with death.

Pierre Saint-Amand makes use of Mark Taylor’s notion of the crypt as a non-place, and a non-place of the non-said:

Pour Taylor, ce non-lieu du non-dire est la crypte. En fait, écrit-il, « la mort de Dieu pointe vers la crypte du sacré. Cette crypte est la tombe vide [...] Dans l’espace de cette tombe, Dieu, dont le nom est présence, est maintenu vivant comme *mort* [...] Le vide de la crypte est la trace de la mort. »<sup>196</sup>

This notion has importance for Saint-Amand because of what it says about the power of words and the power of experience to be expressed by them:

Le scandale de ces morts sans sépulture renvoie à la fosse capitale, indescriptible, celle des morts d’Auschwitz ou de Treblinka. C’est bien cette souffrance-là, énorme, inimaginable qui ne peut pas s’écrire... Cette intensité du silence peut s’entendre comme Jean-François Lyotard analyse le silence des survivants des camps... L’écriture durassienne de la Shoah va aussi au plus près de ce que Lyotard appelle le *sentiment*, l’impossibilité de phraser ce qui a été vécu, dont les

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<sup>196</sup> Saint-Amand 223.

mots ne peuvent que faire défaut, et qui enferme les victimes dans le secret  
indépassable de l'horreur...<sup>197</sup>

There is no greater “mort sans sepulture” in Duras than that of Paulo. Paulo’s body is never found, and the reader is left with an empty crypt and with no funeral rites pronounced. This void is all the more pronounced in comparison to the overflowing crypt of the mother that holds not only her body, but that of her beloved oldest son, Pierre.<sup>198</sup> In the latter case, not only is there no sacred crypt, but there is a crypt all too quotidian, full of rotting flesh in double the normal amount. However, for Duras, words are absolutely necessary, and indeed they are connected with pain, because inasmuch as pain exists as a fact of the world, it exists in language.

When thinking through the relation between death and the sacred in Duras’s trilogy, it’s informative to look at the work Georges Bataille has done on eroticism. The Durassian narrative, of course, cannot be watered down to simply being prose-versions of what Bataille has said; however, a reverse and complementary relationship is indeed enlightening.

Central to Bataille’s notion of eroticism is the idea that our lives are lives of discontinuity – we are separate from the people around us, and we are constantly searching for a return to the continuity.

Les êtres qui se reproduisent sont distincts les uns des autres et les êtres reproduits  
sont distincts entre eux comme ils sont distincts de ceux dont ils sont issus.

Chaque être est distinct de tous les autres. Sa naissance, sa mort et les  
événements de sa vie peuvent avoir pour les autres un intérêt, mais il est seul

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<sup>197</sup> Saint-Amand 233-34.

<sup>198</sup> Duras, *Amant* 99.

intéressé directement. Lui seul naît. Lui seul meurt. Entre un être et un autre, il y a un abîme, il y a une discontinuité.<sup>199</sup>

But continuity is not to be found in life; in fact, the only source of complete continuity available to us is via death: the continuity that comes with exit from these discontinuous existences: “Le plus violent pour nous est la mort qui, précisément, nous arrache à l’obstination que nous avons de voir durer l’être discontinu que nous sommes.”<sup>200</sup>

It is this relation of death to the search for continuity that provides an entrance point for eroticism, according to Bataille:

Toute la mise en œuvre de l’érotisme a pour fin d’atteindre l’être au plus intime, au point où le cœur manque. Le passage de l’état normal à celui de désir érotique suppose en nous la dissolution relative de l’être consitué dans l’ordre discontinu.<sup>201</sup>

We find, then, a point of contact between Bataille and Duras: in Bataille eroticism is at the center of our search for continuity, and in Duras, the girl’s erotic experiences are, too, at the center of the development of her selfhood, and her sense of being. Her relationship with the lover, and her incest with Paulo are crossroads in her life that define who she is and influences who she will become. And this is not surprising, seeing how both Duras and Bataille view the importance of the beloved in relation to approaching truth about life. Bataille writes:

Rien au fond n’est illusoire dans la vérité de l’amour : l’être aimé équivaut pour l’amant, pour l’amant seul sans doute, mais n’importe, à la vérité de l’être. Le

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<sup>199</sup> Georges Bataille, *L’Érotisme*, illustrée ed. (Paris: Minuit, 1957) 19.

<sup>200</sup> Bataille, *Érotisme* 23.

<sup>201</sup> Bataille, *Érotisme* 24.

hasard veut qu'à travers lui, a complexité du monde ayant disparu, l'amant aperçoive le fond de l'être, la simplicité de l'être.<sup>202</sup>

It is here where the complexities and richness of narrative separate themselves from the desired clarity of theory. We are tempted to ask Duras which male character fulfills the role of Bataille's *beloved* – is it the lover or is it Paulo? Whom does she equate with the truth of existence? The Lover is the one who sets the stage for the girl's relationship to Paulo (without this relationship, the one with her brother would appear to be an impossibility), but the latter seems to have a deeper influence on her emotionally (it is the reflection of Paulo that she sees in the lover that seem to be the foundation of her attraction to him). The answer is that the narrative need not conform so neatly to the theory; in fact, the narrative is not conforming to the theory at all. The girl equates the truth of existence with the lover *and* with Paulo. This experience of the beloved is not exclusive. Both the lover and Paulo are locations where the girl is able to “aperçoive le fond de l'être, la simplicité de l'être.”<sup>203</sup>

#### **2.3.4 The Lover: Sex and Love as Transitional Space**

The Child's sexual relationship with her brother is not, however, the same as that with her lover. The sex with the lover is a being taken, albeit lovingly, a learning process, an education. This education culminates in her incestuous act with Paulo. One needs to ask at this point, why it is that the lover figures so centrally in these narratives if Paulo is at the center of her repetition and self-realization regarding her own mortality and the need of others that is ultimately a source of pain. First, it must be said that the relationship with the lover is an important and fundamental event in and of itself. The affair she has at a young age with this foreign man is clearly

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<sup>202</sup> Bataille, *Érotisme* 28.

<sup>203</sup> Bataille, *Érotisme* 28.

engrained in her memory, and a source of nostalgia, joy, and sorrow. Much has already been written about the importance and meaning of this relationship. Above and beyond the unique aspects of this couple, for the purposes of this project, with its focus on the relationship between the younger brother and sister, it is clear that the relationships the girl has with the Chinese lover and with her Paulo are interrelated.

The changes in the first and second narrative see the appearance of the lover, without a name, from the character of M. Jo, a far more pitiful version of the foreign seducer. The question can then be asked, what is it about her sexual relationship with the lover such that it can be revised between the first and second narratives, while the sexual act with her brother requires yet another narrative to emerge? The relationship she has with the lover provides her with a lens to view her newly-emerged relationship with Paulo that she didn't have before. In this sense, only after Joseph, the experimental Frankenstein, is done away with can the new version of the lover be introduced. This new lover is possible in relation to the *two* brothers. Only once this step has been taken can a third repetition take place that brings to light the sexual intimacy shared, ultimately, between Paulo and his sister.

As a momentary aside, it is interesting to notice the change in names from first to second narrative. Suzanne and M. Jo go from named to nameless – the girl/the child and the lover, while Joseph is split into two brothers – the eldest is never named, while the youngest gets the name of Paulo. Of all the characters in this second narrative, the only one with a name is Paulo, as if his identity, above and beyond his role/status as “brother” or “child”, is the only one solidified. He will remain. The repetition of the first narrative that one finds in the second gives the sense that nothing is above re-evaluation – there is hate in the family, not only love; the girl meets the Chinese man on the Mekong, not in the bar; the sexual relationship happens with the

foreigner, who is not as pathetic as one was lead to believe, not with the hunter-son of the bar owner; etc. – however, this fluidity is stopped cold in the character of Paulo, who is given a name. This naming stakes a claim of sorts to Paulo’s existence, to his reality. He is not to be moved. The mother, the older brother, the lover, even the child herself is open to change, but a line has been drawn in the sand in regards to Paulo’s place in this narrative. Frankenstein has died, and finally the meaningful part of him has been named.

There are two questions to be asked regarding the repetitions of the narratives and the evolution of the brother(s) and the lover: first, why focus on the lover and the splitting of Joseph into two brothers *before* dealing with the incestuous act? Second, what is it about the splitting of Joseph that would tie it to the lover, such that the one goes with the other? A simple answer to the first question is obvious enough: the revelations that come via the girl’s incestuous act are so severe and so grave, that their admittance takes time. Coming to grips with one’s own mortality and the absolute mortality of everyone else besides, along with the *need* for love, a need which ends in pain rather than relief, is no small task.

To respond to the second question, the splitting of the brothers is spoken to in the second narrative when Duras writes of the fundamental nature of the family narrative for herself/the girl:

Elle [l’histoire de la famille] est le lieu au seuil de quoi le silence commence. Ce qui s’y passe c’est justement le silence, ce lent travail pour toute ma vie. Je suis encore là, devant ces enfants possédés, à la même distance du mystère. Je n’ai jamais écrit, croyant le faire, je n’ai jamais aimé, croyant aimer, je n’ai jamais rien fait qu’attendre devant la porte fermée.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Duras, *Amant* 34-35.

The importance of the family to the motivation of this repetition is clear. I want to suggest, however, that one cannot have this family situation, this splitting of the brother without the lover. The existence of the lover is fundamental for the understanding of this family that the girl is so concerned to write about. If the act of incest with Paulo is a watershed moment in the life of the girl, a moment via which she comes to self-realization about her value, and her power to give of herself, and if this too is the crossroads at which she comes into contact with mortality and her deep, fundamental, need – bound for pain, though it is – for love, then this moment cannot come to be without the preceding sexual relationship with the lover. Sex with Agosti is not sufficient, it is lacking, but the relationship with the lover is the education that allows her the ability to recognize what it is that she can give, what it is that sex can give, and then to use it to fill the need she perceives at a specific moment with Paulo. Paulo's importance in her process of self-realization, and the lover's importance in this process are interdependent.

The role of the lover in the second and third narratives is one of transitional space. As I've mentioned before, the first narrative cannot change to one that fully embraces the existence of two brothers unless the role of the lover is introduced as well. M. Jo is not sufficient. The younger brother cannot exist without the lover existing as well. But the transitional space is one that allows the girl to make the act of giving herself to Paulo an act that is truly sacrificial. The lover is able to occupy this transitory space because he shares characteristics with the younger brother – that of fear and weakness – and also with the other men in the narratives – namely, the possession of the gaze that understands the girl's unique sexuality. This is something that is not present in Paulo – he does not seem to gaze at his sister with the same sexual yearning. The sexuality with his sister is different, and not a power that she wields over him in the same way that she wields it over other men.

Intercourse with any man would have been sufficient to introduce the girl to sex, but it is the unique location of the lover that allows her to come into contact with her selfhood via her sexual nature – the nature that sets her apart and allows her to transgress the world that surrounds her, thus rising above it. The lover is not a man like other men, who see her only as sexual object. We see the result of a relationship with such a man when Suzanne sleeps with Agosti, the result of which is a heightened self-awareness, but nothing of the depth that accompanies the relationship with the lover in the second and third narratives. No, the Chinese lover is required so that the girl can realize and take to its limit the sexual nature that sets her apart from others, but do so in a situation in which transgression cannot be denied. While sex at such a young age will be transgressive to a certain extent no matter with whom she engages in it, sex with the lover makes the transgressive aspect of the sex undeniable. Other girls may be having sex, but not with men outside of their race, class, age, and so different from all the other men in the narratives, save one – Paulo.

Once again, the importance of context and sex is emphasized: sex with the Chinese lover has the effect it does because of his position in relation to her, and hers in relation to him. Out of all the male characters in the narratives, only sex with the Chinese lover can provide the lens that focuses the sexual nature of the girl and the importance of transgression as a means of attaining selfhood. Having learned this by achieving her own selfhood through sex with the lover, she can then turn around and offer up this new selfhood as a sacrifice to Paulo, an act that would have been impossible otherwise.

### 2.3.5 Transgressive Love: The Relative Power of Sex

This notion of context impacts sex heavily, at least as Duras understands it. The picture of love that Duras paints is one of transgression. With the exception of Agosti, every instance of sex that the girl engages in the three narratives is transgressive of some social rule: her relationship with the lover goes against racial norms, cultural norms, and hierarchical norms of class; her relationship with Paulo is certainly transgressive thanks to it being incestuous. Besides all that, her age alone is enough to make any sexual relationship she would engage in unacceptable. Even her age becomes a location of transgression as she is continually getting younger with each successive narrative: in the first, Suzanne says she is 17,<sup>205</sup> in *L'Amant* the girl is 15 and a half,<sup>206</sup> and the girl in the final narrative, though she originally tells the lover she is 16,<sup>207</sup> later admits to having been 14 when they met.<sup>208</sup>

But why is transgression of social rules such a seemingly foundational element of the sexual relationships in which she engages? The girl is in a world of norms in which salvation for her family is not acceptable. It is not possible. It is not offered. For her to fulfill her role as the deliverer of her brother, she *must* transgress. In coming to grips with the salvific power of sex, she must transgress because salvation is counter to the very nature of her social and even legal universe. She is part of a world which thrives – the injustice of the government towards its people, the injustice of the on rules but condones injustice colonizer towards the colonized lands and peoples, the injustice of double standards she is judged against based on her age, race and gender. The girl is never so in her element as when she is transgressing the boundaries that need

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<sup>205</sup> Duras, *Barrage* 108.

<sup>206</sup> Duras, *Amant* 29.

<sup>207</sup> Duras, *Chine* 44.

<sup>208</sup> Duras, *Chine* 201.

to be transgressed in order for her to move closer to accepting her role of savior in the life of her younger brother. This role is unacceptable to her world inasmuch as deliverance goes against its very order. Not only is the world around her telling her that *she* is not capable of bestowing deliverance, but it would also say that there is no hope for salvation from anyone for any reason.

That the transgressive, erotic experience is somehow linked to sacred rites, is also something that we find in Bataille. For Bataille, the spiritual is more a matter of the breaking of taboos set-up by religion, than it is a question of keeping them:

Dans l'ensemble, en dépit de la complexité du mouvement, le sens en apparaît en pleine lumière : la religion commande essentiellement la transgression des interdits...Or cette vie spirituelle, qui se fonde sur le renforcement des interdits premiers, a cependant le sens de la fête, elle est la transgression, non l'observation de la loi.<sup>209</sup>

It is the very fact that the sex the girl engages in is transgressive that puts her experience of such love in the realm of the spiritual – her role as savior, as deliverer of her brother. The breaking of the taboos of age, class, and family ties are not at odds with the spiritual, are not a rebellion against the spiritual realms of life, but instead are a more full embracing of it. This connection that Duras makes between the spirituality of the girl and the erotic experience, especially the erotic experience with Paulo, is something too that Bataille seems to make room for. Just as the animal is offered up as a holy sacrifice, Paulo – who has a two-fold identity as both sacrifice and savior – find himself as fulfilling the role of sacrifice through the violence of his orgasm: “Ce que révélait la violence extérieure du sacrifice était la violence intérieure de l'être aperçue sous

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<sup>209</sup> Bataille, *Érotisme* 77-78.

le jour de l'effusion du sang et du jaillissement des organes."<sup>210</sup> When Paulo orgasms "like he has never done before in his life,"<sup>211</sup> we see the external evidence of the internal violence of this sacrifice – of the violence that the move from discontinuity to erotic, quasi-continuity with his sister has wrought in him.

The connection between eroticism and death connects Paulo's incestuous act with his sister, but also with his own pending death. Surely, this deliverance that he experiences – this deliverance from discontinuity to quasi-continuity – is deliverance unto death for both Duras and for Bataille. For Duras, we see this reflected in the death that befalls Paulo years later; for Bataille, this is the result of the intimacy that is accomplished in the subject's desperate search for a return to continuity. The other side of this coin, in turn, is the suffering that the girl character is left with. For if eroticism is related to death, it is also related to suffering:

Les chances de souffrir sont d'autant plus grandes que seule la souffrance révèle l'entière signification de l'être aimé. La possession de l'être aimé ne signifie pas la mort, au contraire, mais la mort est engagée dans sa recherche... Il semble à l'amant que seul l'être aimé – cela tient à des correspondances difficiles à définir, ajoutant à la possibilité d'union sensuelle celle de l'union des cœurs, - il semble à l'amant que seul l'être aimé peut en ce monde réaliser ce qu'interdisent nos limites, la pleine confusion de deux êtres, la continuité de deux êtres discontinus. La passion nous engage ainsi dans la souffrance, puisqu'elle est, au fond, la recherche d'un impossible et, superficiellement, toujours celle d'un accord dépendant de conditions aléatoires. Cependant, elle promet à la souffrance

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<sup>210</sup> Bataille, *Érotisme* 101.

<sup>211</sup> Duras, *Chine* 209. My translation.

fondamentale une issue. Nous souffrons de notre isolement dans l'individualité  
discontinue.<sup>212</sup>

In this we see that Bataille is of the same mind as Duras: that there is a legitimate benefit in the connection with the other, in the communion that the girl finds both with the lover and with her brother. There is a longing for connection, for a move towards continuity, and while this is good, it inevitably leads towards suffering and, in the case of Paulo death. But the result of this experience – of this appreciation of the suffering and pain that accompany eroticism, and of the spirituality that attends transgressive sex under certain circumstances – is the appreciation of certain truths of existence: not only that eroticism can be a doorway into spirituality linked to suffering and death, but also to our need for the other, for those moments where continuity is approached, and where the equally inevitable pain of our discontinuity is suspended.

### **2.3.6 Language and Truth**

Through the repetition of these narratives we see a girl come to self-realization via sex. Making love to Agosti, a relationship that is non-transgressive in its acceptability, and failing to find an experience that assuages her sense of being set apart, the girl follows an, as yet, unnamable sense of being set apart, and undertakes a sexual education, engaging in a transgressive relationship with the lover, a man who is Other to her socially, financially, racially. But this journey takes an inward turn, as it is her sexual relationship with the non-other, her brother, the incestuous relationship in which she, through giving of herself as sexual savior, both delivers her brother and allows her to see her own arrival into selfhood.

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<sup>212</sup> Bataille, *Érotisme* 27.

The girl has a sense of being different, of being set apart. And she finds *after* the death of Paulo that her difference allowed her to provide him with deliverance, which only emphasizes her importance in his life (she allowed him deliverance), and him in hers (as the location of the realization of her content, her selfhood, and of her being able to transgress in a selfless and compassionate way, unlike the others in her world). Thus, her sense of loss at Paulo's death is magnified, and even more so by the lack of a body, the lack of funeral rites, preventing any closure.

This realization that Paulo, too, served as savior – savior to herself – is overwhelming and horrendous in its reality. It both forces her to realize her own need – need in a world which seems cold, and whose coldness she alone had had the courage to transgress by such an act of compassion – and to mourn the martyrdom of Paulo – the brother whom she always felt so called to protect, but whose weakness she now realizes was the very location of her self-realization. In this way, Paulo is not a martyr to Pierre, but a martyr to the girl – he died, or rather lived in emptiness, so that she might have abundant life through a realized selfhood.

The last level of painful recognition is the fact that Paulo's deliverance ends in death, and a young death at that. The compassionate act of emptying herself for the good of her brother – and all the pain and courage inherent in it, and all the education that has led up to it – seems, in a sense, to amount to nothing. Paulo's deliverance is short lived. It provides him with no immortality. This fact only emphasizes her own mortality: the delivered, among whom she can count herself, are as finite as those lacking the courage of self-realization. Nor are they guaranteed any peace or joy, as her life attests. Where, then, is the benefit of the courage of self-realization? Where is the benefit of love, and of sex – the tool who's potential of self-transparency and interaction with truth has led her this far – and the pain that is attached to its

potential of self-realization? It is non-existent, except in its cold, non-comforting, non life-giving status as truth.

Kristeva discusses the motivation for Duras's writing, saying: "Le roman comme une folie en pleine raison? Non, étrangère à la littérature, cette apocalypse n'est certainement pas faite pour être aimée. Elle n'est là que pour empêcher de dormir, le temps qui reste."<sup>213</sup> There is a way in which Kristeva is right: the gravity of Duras's view of sex and love is uncomfortable enough that it most certainly impairs the sleep of those looking to be assuaged as to the ease of intimacy, selfhood, and existence. However, in another way, Duras writes so that she, and maybe even we, *can sleep*. Sex is an exploration of truth, and truth is worth seeking in its own right. It is the only thing that allows us to face with integrity the realities of life. Realities that are only swept under the table and avoided by those who continue to seek peace, joy, and relief in sex and love. Such an endeavor by these people is clearly going to result in a lack of sleep, inasmuch as they're seeking for a peace that is impossible, something that they will never find. Duras, however, is seeking what is there, is seeking what is real, is seeking truth. And here she has a valuable ally in Wittgenstein. Our language rests on the surface, and so our understanding of these words must rest on the surface. As Wittgenstein writes in the *Tractatus*, "Whereof one cannot speak, there must one be silent."<sup>214</sup> Duras can speak of the facts of the girl's life, the moments, the events, the characters, and this is what is real. To go beyond these facts is to overextend the reach of language. Though the end message is not one that gives peace or joy, it is one that is true, and in the end Duras seems to think that that is what matters. That is all that one can have.

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<sup>213</sup> Kristeva, "Une étrangère" 9.

<sup>214</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 7.

### 3.0 “ANGELS STAGGERING ON TENEMENT ROOFS ILLUMINATED”:<sup>215</sup> SEX, FREEDOM AND GOOD FAITH IN *LES CHEMINS DE LA LIBERTÉ*

The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy!  
The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand  
and asshole holy!  
Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is  
holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman's an  
angel!  
The bum's as holy as the seraphim! the madman is  
holy as you my soul are holy!<sup>216</sup>

Sex plays havoc with the existential notion of freedom. To act in good faith, according to Sartre, is to place emphasis on free action: “l'homme n'est rien d'autre que son projet, il n'existe que dans la mesure où il se réalise.”<sup>217</sup> But what does this do to the normative sex act? Can such an act be an act at all since it doesn't stand out from a norm that is nobody's project? And what about sexual desire? Can that be a choice at all, let alone a project?

The character of Daniel in Sartre's trilogy, *Les Chemins de la liberté*, highlights the power of the only sexually non-normative character in the novels, as the paradoxical and unrecognized source of sexual good faith. A Wittgensteinian perspective provides us a way to view Daniel as a character that is struggling to come to grips with the power of the blurred-edged concept of sex. Surrounded by the pressure to look at clearly defined concepts as the ideal, Wittgenstein allows us to see that Daniel is a character who is not only more insightful than the

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<sup>215</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956) 9.

<sup>216</sup> Ginsberg 27.

<sup>217</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, ed. Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre (Paris: Gallimard, 1996) 51.

others regarding the nature of sex, but who also gives insight into why Sartre is unable to do away with such a character.

*Les chemins de la liberté* is full of characters, some of which play lasting and central roles, such as Mathieu, Brunet, and Daniel, while others appear and disappear in order to highlight more effectively the personalities of those in the limelight. The first novel, *L'âge de raison* (1945),<sup>218</sup> presents the fewest characters, and serves to set up the narrative of the trilogy by setting in place the main players whose lives will be followed throughout. One such main character is Daniel Sereno. In a narrative that is intellectual and reflective in nature, and that at times privileges a sort of Cartesian dualism wherein the bodies of its characters appear to have value only insofar as they serve as vehicles for their minds, Daniel stands out as a character with a stake firmly both in the interior existence of man (as an introspective and insightful character) as well as in the physical one (as a character that is constantly at pains to come to grips with the strong sexual desire he feels for the men around him, and the anguish that results from the sexual acts he engages in with them). Mathieu, for example, *has* a sexual life, but this life does not define him, nor does it become a topic of reflection for him throughout the trilogy. Instead, Mathieu's reflective energies are entirely turned towards the notion of personal freedom. Brunet, in contrast, seems *not* to have a sexual life in the trilogy, though this lack of sexuality within his narrative never serves as a point of discussion or reflection for any of the characters.

Daniel appears less frequently, though in very important episodes, in the second and third novels. The second, *Le Sursis* (1945),<sup>219</sup> takes place between September 23rd and September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1939 – at the beginning of the period known as the *drôle de guerre*. Here Sartre adds to the characters of the first novel a plethora of others, whose narratives intertwine one with the others,

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<sup>218</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Âge de raison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

<sup>219</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Le Sursis* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

often shifting perspective mid-paragraph, making it difficult to discern where one begins and the other ends. Daniel's appearance in this novel is brief – mostly relegated to his interactions with his new wife, Marcelle, who is pregnant with Mathieu's love child, and whom he is marrying both out of spite for Mathieu and out of masochism:

- Daniel, dit-il [Mathieu], tu l'épouses pour te martyriser.

- Et puis après ? dit Daniel d'une voix blanche. Ça ne regarde que moi.<sup>220</sup>

The bulk of Daniel's influence on this narrative is contained in a long letter that he writes to Mathieu, and which illuminates his thoughts on his spirituality and self.

The last published novel, *La mort dans l'âme* (1949),<sup>221</sup> returns to a more classic prose form where characters' narratives are more clearly distinguished one from another, a form that mirrors a return to order in France after occupation, albeit an order forced upon them by the invading Nazis. Here we find Daniel wandering around the newly occupied Paris, pondering the role of the Germans and the new-found status of conquered France. It is in this novel, too, that Daniel saves a younger deserter, Philippe, from suicide, and begins the process of mentoring him, though Daniel's narrative disappears before the end result of this relationship is made clear.

It should be said that while *Les chemins de la liberté* is normally recognized as a trilogy, there is a fourth manuscript, the first part of which was published by Sartre in *Les Temps modernes*, and that is often found under the title *La Dernière chance*. However, this manuscript is not something whose publication was prevented due to the author's death. Sartre published only two chapters of the fourth installment in *Les Temps modernes* in 1949,<sup>222</sup> and simply chose not to have it published in book form. I take Sartre's decision not to have *La Dernière chance*

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<sup>220</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 366.

<sup>221</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Mort dans l'âme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

<sup>222</sup> "Jean-Paul Sartre," *Dictionnaire des écrivains de langue française*, ed. Jean-Pierre de Beaumarchais, Daniel Couty, and Alain Rey (Paris: Larousse, 2001).

included with the previous three novels as reason to see the trilogy stand as a complete whole. Furthermore, regarding the narrative of Daniel specifically, the fourth manuscript is void of any talk about Daniel, focusing exclusively on the narratives of Mathieu and Brunet. I am not arguing in this chapter that Daniel is *the only* central character in the trilogy, nor that the trilogy is *only*, if unwittingly, *concerned* with sex. However, the very fact that Daniel disappears from the narrative at exactly the point when Sartre stops publishing it, might point to the importance of Daniel's presence for its success. The narrative project is sunk once Daniel exits. Still, aside from this bold affirmation of Daniel's necessity for the narrative endeavor, and regardless of arguments for or against the need to include *La Dernière chance* in a study of *Les Chemins de la liberté* in general, its exclusion from a project focusing on the character of Daniel specifically is unproblematic. That being said, I will frequently refer to *Les chemins de la liberté* as a trilogy.

### 3.1 DANIEL'S SPECIFICITY

What makes Daniel stand out among the other characters in the trilogy is both his sexual attraction to men and the fact that he acts as a consequence of this attraction. He is the sole male character, besides perhaps the younger and more unsettled Philippe, who is sexually involved with members of the same sex. There is no ambiguity regarding whether or not Daniel is attracted to men already by the second time he appears in the first novel. He is cruising the bazaar, admiring the boys. His admiration, in fact, nearly turns to stalking, at least in the case of one boy in particular:

Daniel sentit qu'un frisson trop connu lui parcourait la nuque : « Il s'aime bien, pensa-t-il, il aime se toucher. » C'étaient ceux-là les plus attirants, les plus

romanesques : ceux dont le moindre mouvement révélait une inconsciente coquetterie, un amour de soi profond et feutré.<sup>223</sup>

No sex comes of this episode in the bazaar, but it establishes narratively the focus of Daniel's sexual desire. Similarly, Daniel's flirtatious interaction with Boris in the bookstore exhibits the same desire, albeit with a less predatory tone, though the sexualized use of power is still present. Daniel asks if Boris would be willing to give him philosophy lessons, both playing on the power relationship between teacher and student and reversing the expected age structure of the relationship:

- Je suis très paresseux, vous savez, dit Sereno [Daniel]. Il faudrait prendre de l'autorité sur moi.

Boris ne put s'empêcher de rire et il avoua franchement :

- Je crois que je ne saurais pas du tout...
- Mais si ! dit Sereno, je suis persuadé que si.<sup>224</sup>

While there are no words related to sex in this exchange, it is the sadomasochistic aspect of the power play that it imagines that betrays its sexual feel. The relation between sadomasochistic practices and same-sex sexual encounters is a recognized coupling in French literature of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, in Proust's character, Charlus, and his dealings with his younger lovers. The same sexual energy is evident in a post-sex scene between Daniel and a boy, Ralph, which, this time, leaves little to the imagination about where Daniel's sexual desire is focused:

« Il a une gueule d'assassin, pensa Daniel en frissonnant – tout compte fait, c'était presque un frisson de plaisir – il est humilié le petit mâle, il me hait. » Il s'attarda

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<sup>223</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 158-59.

<sup>224</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 181.

à nouer sa cravate. Ralph le regardait toujours et Daniel jouissait de cette haine qui les unissait, une haine recuite, qui semblait vieille de vingt ans, une possession ; ça le purifiait.<sup>225</sup>

If Daniel's sexual object choices and practices immediately make him stand out among the other characters, so too does the fact that, object-choice aside, no other character's narrative centers so thoroughly around sexuality at all.

Of course, in a way, Mathieu's narrative, too, centers around his sexual life. It is, after all, the unexpected pregnancy of Marcelle, Mathieu's girlfriend, that is the genesis of his action throughout the first novel, and it's Mathieu's sexuality – his desire to have sex with women – that causes him to have sex with Marcelle to begin with. However, the narrative that results as a repercussion of Mathieu's sexual relationship with Marcelle certainly does not contribute to Mathieu's self-understanding in the same way that Daniel's does. Indeed, it is Daniel's awareness of and reaction to his sexual desires that motivate his actions from *the beginning to the end of the trilogy*, whereas Mathieu's sexual acts or desires are not a subject of reflection and therefore don't enter the language that is used to define him. The results of those desires, yes – the pregnancy, or perhaps even how his attraction to the young Ivich complicates his other relationships – but never are the desires or acts themselves a source of pondering. His sexuality outside of its specific manifestations never comes into question. As a consequence, in fact, Mathieu's character is flattened out and denied an important source of knowledge, because his world is not expanded by his sexual activities, given that for him, sex happens but, to paraphrase Wittgenstein in a negative way, sex “is not the case” for him, that is, it is not expressed in self-reflective language about his world.

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<sup>225</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 323-28.

Mathieu is not alone in this respect. Sartre never takes up as a predominant theme in the trilogy the sexual acts or desires of his male characters who identify as heterosexual. The exception to this rule is perhaps Gomez, whose heterosexual sexual appetite is occasionally, especially in the third novel, the focus of Mathieu's thinking; however, here too, we see an important difference at play – Gomez is Spanish. I point this out, not to raise the issue of nationality, per se, but instead to highlight the fact that Gomez bears the mark of the non-normative in comparison to the male French characters that populate the bulk of Sartre's trilogy. Still, though Gomez's excessive and tasteless sexual appetite is a subject of interest for Mathieu, this interest remains on the surface. Thus, Gomez's sexual life may enter into the narrative more often than that of Mathieu or of the other central French male character, Brunet, Gomez's sexuality never becomes a subject in and of itself, and defines him much less than his political choices. It is those political choices that keep him much closer to the normative French subject, Mathieu, who shares at least the object of Gomez sexual interest, and is furthermore a "comrade" in arms. Gomez is non-normative with respect to French male heterosexual standards, but this explains only the non-normative manifestation of sexuality, and does not determine all the aspects of his characterizations in relation to the nationally unmarked male characters of Brunet and Mathieu.

It should be noted right away that the fact that Daniel is sexually marked does not make him an outcast in Sartre's eyes. As I will show, Daniel's connection with the sacred – he is alluded to as an archangel,<sup>226</sup> an angel,<sup>227</sup> and even at times implicitly to Christ<sup>228</sup> – shows that in fact Daniel's sexuality doesn't so much cast him out, but instead sets him apart, as for the girl in

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<sup>226</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 188, 193, 201, 291.

<sup>227</sup> Sartre, *Sursis* 50 and *Mort* 99, 102.

<sup>228</sup> Sartre, *Sursis* 457.

Duras' narratives. This is not, however, conceptualized by any narrator in clear and unequivocal terms: it appears through the language used to denote a sexual subject whose contours will always remain blurred.

Of course, even if Daniel is in a unique position in the trilogy, that fact alone does not necessarily mean he is an avowed protagonist. Mathieu is traditionally taken as the protagonist of the trilogy due in no small part to the dominant role he plays in driving the narrative of the first novel. Mathieu, of course, is present on 225 of the 370 pages of *L'Âge de raison*, while Daniel is present on only 78. As a caveat, though, it should be noted that even if Boris, for instance, is present on more pages than Daniel (93, to be explicit), that does not make Boris's role more essential than Daniel's, quite the contrary. Boris, a young student of Mathieu, is more often than not sitting in the shadows of the Master. Indeed the vast majority of appearances Boris makes in the first narrative are with Mathieu, and there are very few passages in which Boris is presented alone and not as part of an accepted, conventional couple – be that either himself and Mathieu as unproblematic student/ teacher duo, or himself with his sister Ivich and lover Lola. Of his 93 pages, roughly 10 are spent separately from Mathieu, Lola, and Ivich,<sup>229</sup> and in fairness, 5 of those pages are spent ruminating on Mathieu and his influence.<sup>230</sup> In other words, while Boris is an engaging character, it is doubtful that he is ever assigned the possibility of constituting himself either as a subject, either in terms of language – therefore according to a Wittgensteinian framework – or of Sartrean existence.

In contrast, the majority of passages concerning Daniel in *L'Âge de raison* do not coincide with Mathieu's appearance until the end of the novel, at which point Daniel and Mathieu have a very dramatic conversation where Daniel reveals on the one hand his intention to

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<sup>229</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 168-77, 181-82.

<sup>230</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 170-72, 174-75.

marry Marcelle, and on the other also identifies himself as “pédéraste.”<sup>231</sup> What a Wittgensteinian understanding of language allows us to see is that Daniel might in fact be a more significant character than Mathieu, because his thoughts and language do contribute to an understanding of the blurred-edge notion of sex infinitely more than Mathieu’s. To a certain extent, when it comes to sex, it is my contention that Mathieu is only a smokescreen protagonist. Nothing of what he does makes us understand anything about sex at all, or enlarges our knowledge of it.

To say that a character is significant is to say that the themes and issues the character deals with are fundamental to the text. The concept of sex is of great concern to Sartre, inasmuch as he returns to it again and again throughout the trilogy. Being that Sartre puts Daniel in a unique position to explore the concept of sex in the trilogy, then this privileged position makes of Daniel a protagonist even if Mathieu appears on three times as many pages. There are certain aspects of the first narrative that do not revolve around Mathieu, but instead are assigned to Daniel’s realm. In the second and third novels, Mathieu becomes an even less central part of the narratives, and yet Daniel is still given the main responsibility of dealing with sex in a way that creates meaning, which Sartre seems unable to beset on other characters.

### 3.2 WHAT IS DANIEL DOING AND HOW DO YOU SAY IT?

We already said that Daniel’s sexual practices *do signify* something in the trilogy. However, in an inevitable preliminary step, *they are first signified* themselves in a very unblurred and rather

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<sup>231</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 363.

dismissive manner. In this respect, the use of the term *pédéraste* needs to be clarified before advancing any further.

Jean-Claude Féray's *Grecques, les mœurs du hanneton?: Histoire du mot pédérastie et de ses dérives en langue française*, clearly illustrates the complicated use of the term – a favorite moniker that Daniel uses to refer to himself throughout the trilogy:

Retracer, à travers les siècles, les sens précis d'un mot aussi ambigu que *pédérastie* présente les mêmes difficultés que de tenter de dire, après l'audition d'une symphonie, dans quels mouvements tel ou tel instrument s'est exprimé.<sup>232</sup>

Féray outlines three main ways in which the word has been used over the centuries: as a reference to sodomy in general, whether that be between partners of the same sex or different sexes;<sup>233</sup> as a reference to adult male attraction to younger boys;<sup>234</sup> and as a reference to love between adult men.<sup>235</sup>

Keeping in mind the multiple uses of “pédérastie” and also the complicated relationship which Sartre had with the history of the term, I suggest that while Daniel's sexual attention does often focus on boys many years his juniors, that the label in this case is more a signifier of his attraction to males in general, than of an attraction to *young* men in particular. In other words, this term signals the sex of Daniel's object-choice, not the age. It is important to make this distinction because it differentiates our context from Sartre's. Sartre seems to conflate the issue of pederasty with that of homosexuality in general, which are two separate, though not unrelated issues today.

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<sup>232</sup> Jean-Claude Féray, *Grecques, les mœurs du hanneton? Histoire du mot pédérastie et de ses dérives en langue française* (Paris: Quintes-Feuilles, 2004) 37.

<sup>233</sup> Féray 38-52, 56.

<sup>234</sup> Féray 52-56.

<sup>235</sup> Féray 56-60.

The narrative of the trilogy itself supports the notion that Daniel is not exclusively interested in young boys. Though the first sexual scenario involving Daniel in the trilogy involves his interaction with boys in the bazaar,<sup>236</sup> Boris is in his late teens at the time Daniel flirts with him in the bookstore,<sup>237</sup> and Philippe even older by the time of the encounter in the final novel.<sup>238</sup> This is, however, only the least important objection to the ability of the term “pederast” to define Daniel once for all.

### 3.3 THE POWER OF THE NON-NORMATIVE

We have established then, at least provisionally, that Daniel is a character in *Les Chemins de la liberté* that is put in a unique position in relation to sex, and that this position should in fact cause us to see Daniel as a protagonist of the narrative, at least where sex is concerned. However, there is more to Sartre’s use of Daniel as sexual protagonist than simply the specifics of his narrative vicissitudes. What this position means, is that Sartre has in fact set apart the concept of sex as able to be explored solely by characters who are sexually non-normative. We can see this in his cumulative use of language, in the world that is constructed around Daniel through the thoughts that he formulates with respect to himself and his actions. This, of course, only appears if we adopt a Wittgensteinian approach to concepts, which sees them as being unbounded by unique and univocal definitions.

Quite unexpectedly, then, Sartre would be in line here with theorists who say that the unmarked category does not need to define itself, echoing the understanding of what it means to

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<sup>236</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 156-66.

<sup>237</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 177-81.

<sup>238</sup> Sartre, *Mort* 147ff.

be “masculine” described by Bryce Traister as a bounded concept that nonetheless has remained “hitherto invisible, not to say closeted.”<sup>239</sup> There are important issues that are solely the realm of a character whose interaction with the sexual is marked, and never the realm of the central male protagonists – Mathieu, Brunet -- that are unmarked. This space is not merely created in order to define the norm, but instead is a space *uniquely suited* to the exploration of sexuality for Sartre. The reason for this relegation of the concept of sex to sexually non-normative characters, as I will argue, is that they paradoxically – and unexpectedly – occupy a unique position of sexual “good faith” in existential terms.

That the homosexual character is somehow unique in Sartre’s oeuvre has not escaped notice. Most notably, the frequency and importance of the homosexual character in Sartre has been brought to our attention by Lawrence Schehr, particularly in his book, *Alcibiades at the Door: Gay Discourses in French Literature*.<sup>240</sup> Schehr observes that while Sartre makes frequent use of this figure, his relationship with homosexuality was still uncomfortable, *unheimlich*.<sup>241</sup>

The depiction of male homosexuality returns with great frequency as a subject in Sartre’s writing, yet each time the problem seems to resurface with the ends even looser than before. While I am not suggesting that Sartre might have ignored homosexuality, I am suggesting that if the matter were just another situation for him to describe, he might much more easily have dealt with it. And moreover, if it were just another situation for him, he would not have returned so obsessively

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<sup>239</sup> Bryce Traister, “Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies,” *American Quarterly* 52 (2000), 277. See also Todd W. Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1-16.

<sup>240</sup> Lawrence R. Schehr, *Alcibiades at the Door: Gay Discourses in French Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995).

<sup>241</sup> Schehr, *Alcibiades* 85.

to it. So it is not the subject itself that gives us pause; it is rather the frequency with which it occurs throughout the oeuvre that challenges the reader to rethink what “homosexuality” or “pederasty” might mean for Sartre.<sup>242</sup>

This simultaneous frequency and difficulty of the representation of homosexuality, furthermore, has been connected to the difficulties presented by male-female sexual relations. In other words, the *unheimlich* for Sartre might not only reside in homosexuality, but in eroticism in general. This problem has been brought to light by Larry Kritzman in the following terms, which perfectly reflect Sartrian existential doctrine:

In Sartre, one finds neither a celebration of sexuality nor a revelation of sexual satisfaction for most of the male figures. Conceived as the facticity of human consciousness, the body exists solely as the result of thinking. Sartre views the body negatively in its ability to undermine self-control.<sup>243</sup>

The account of Mathieu and Marcelle’s failed love-making in the first chapter of *L’âge de raison* is completely and notoriously void of the erotic. There is nothing in this scene that incites the reader to make love, nor that makes the reader believe that either Marcelle or Mathieu enjoy the process much themselves. Even though Mathieu is a character whose narrative starts with the unintended consequences of a sexual act, he is a character almost completely void of eroticism. His sexuality is a dull, bland, mostly mental experience, from which bodily desires are uncannily shut out:

Il l’attira contre lui : il n’avait pas exactement de désir pour elle en cet instant, c’était plutôt l’envie de voir cet esprit rétif et anguleux fondre comme un aiguille

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<sup>242</sup> Schehr, *Alcibiades* 71. See also Schehr, *Alcibiades* 83, 104.

<sup>243</sup> Lawrence D. Kritzman, “Hauntological *mater* and Sartre’s Family Romance,” *Entre Hommes: French and Francophone Masculinities in Culture and Theory*, ed. Todd W. Reeser and Lewis C. Seifert, (Newark: U of Delaware P, 2008) 183.

de glace au soleil. Marcelle laissa rouler sa tête sur l'épaule de Mathieu et il vit de près sa peau brune, ses cernes bleuâtres et grenus. Il pensa : « Bon Dieu ! ce qu'elle vieillit. » Et il pensa aussi qu'il était vieux. Il se pencha sur elle avec une sorte de malaise : il aurait voulu s'oublier et l'oublier. Mais il y avait beau temps qu'il ne s'oubliait plus quand il faisait l'amour avec elle. Il l'embrassa sur la bouche : elle avait une belle bouche juste et sévère. Elle glissa doucement en arrière et se renversa sur le lit, les yeux clos, pesante, défaite ; Mathieu se leva, ôta son pantalon et sa chemise, les déposa, pliés au pied du lit, puis il s'étendit contre elle. Mais il vit qu'elle avait les yeux grands ouverts et fixes, elle regardait le plafond, les mains croisées sous sa tête.<sup>244</sup>

As Mathieu is completely involved with his own mental dimension, his desire for Marcelle is non-existent – he doesn't exactly desire her, writes Sartre. What brings the lovers together on a bed is something other than desire. And indeed Mathieu's actions back up this non-desire – he notices the rings around her eyes, and how she's aged; he is not having sex to engage Marcelle, or even for the enjoyment of climax, but to try and dissolve Marcelle's closed individuality and at the same time forget his own. Sartre emphasizes even Marcelle's distance from the situation by having her eyes looking away from Mathieu, and up at the ceiling.

Even Mathieu's second (and only other) sexual encounter for which the reader is present is less than erotic. This encounter occurs in the *Le Sursis*, and is between him and Irene after they have brought back a drunk Philippe to Irene's apartment, though the reader is only given access to the moments directly before and after intercourse. When Irene asks if sex with her was

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<sup>244</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 20-21.

boring, Mathieu says he wasn't bored, and not that the sex wasn't boring. The lack of excitement is apparent, but it seems fully expected:

- Ça n'a pas été trop ennuyeux ? demanda-t-elle.
- Ennuyeux ?
- Il y en a qui me trouvent ennuyeuse parce que je ne suis pas très active. Une fois un type s'est tellement embêté avec moi qu'il est parti le matin et qu'il n'est plus jamais revenu.
- Je ne me suis pas embêté, dit Mathieu.

Elle lui passa un doigt léger sur le cou :

- Mais vous savez, il ne faudrait pas croire que je suis froide.
- Je sais, dit Mathieu. Taisez-vous.<sup>245</sup>

Kritzman argues that there is a lack of eroticism for the straight male characters in Sartre because of a relationship between men and women that Sartre sees as problematic. As Kritzman writes:

Sexual desire must be avoided at all costs because bodily contact with the object of one's desire risks resulting in emasculation. From a Sartrean perspective, it is essential for the male subject to transform the seductively viscous female body into a petrified object and thereby foreclose on the possibility of physical contact.<sup>246</sup>

According to this Freudian reading, the female body is a problem because it presents the perspective of annihilation to the male heterosexual:

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<sup>245</sup> Sartre, *Sursis* 435.

<sup>246</sup> Kritzman, "Hauntological" 182.

From *L'Être et le néant* to *L'Idiot de la famille (The Family Idiot)*, the feminine is described in terms of negative connotations...The phobic reaction to the vagina translates the fear of being consumed and sacrificed by the female and transformed into a being-in-itself. The hole therefore represents for the male subject a corporeal locus where it can fall prey to the absolute choice of the female.<sup>247</sup>

Ultimately, what is at issue in sex, in the “black hole” of the vagina, is the necessity of transcendence for the existential subject. By default, such a subject is a French male heterosexual, for whom sex has only a negative presence.

For Sartre, then, it is left to the homosexual to be involved in the nitty-gritty realities of sex, since the characteristic of being masculine hinges on the possibility of transcendence:

The Sartrean notion of transcendence reveals a desire to overcome contingency through heroic acts of totalization. Committed to the demands of sovereignty, a man can only be identified as masculine, according to Sartre, if he is able to transcend the imperfections of nature through the power of human consciousness. But to be able to achieve this requires an internal mandate to imagine and negate the infelicitous abjection found in reality.<sup>248</sup>

Indeed, ultimately this transcendence is an issue of self-protection and control for the masculine subject:

Without a doubt, Sartre works with codified gender norms whereby masculinity needs to invent femininity as its gendered other...The battle of the sexes must be waged in terms of the being-for-itself; masculinity can only be asserted through

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<sup>247</sup> Kritzman, “Hauntological” 180.

<sup>248</sup> Kritzman, “Hauntological” 179.

the power of consciousness... This infelicitous response undermines the construction of the male subject by subjugating the ontological to the demands of the physiological.<sup>249</sup>

For Sartre the male heterosexual norm, then, is closed off in terms of eroticism, which follows the line of a Bataillean understanding of the erotic, but inverts the value attributed to it: “Toute la mise en œuvre érotique a pour principe une destruction de la structure de l’être fermé qu’est à l’état normal un partenaire du jeu.”<sup>250</sup> What for Bataille is precisely the power of sex, for Sartre is the sign of the impotence that it causes in the subject of transcendence.

Sartre cannot delve deeply into the concept of sex with his sexually normative characters, lest they come too close to the emasculating power of the erotic. Sartre wants to maintain a separation between the masculine and the body, which mirrors closely the Cartesian split of mind and body. In this sense, the eroticism of sexuality (and for that part, much of sexuality) gets handed off to Daniel, a non-normative subject of same-sex erotic practices. Sartre tries to make of Daniel the “body” part of the mind/body split, and yet this doesn’t seem to work in his own narratives.

Paradoxically, the level of introspection required to make of Daniel a character that can be the pure embodiment of body proves to undercut the very possibility of making him “body” alone. Of course, it is not in a neat presentation of existential terms that this is brought to light, since in fact this is precisely what such thought cannot define. It is, however, the necessity to narrate in words what Daniel does that allows Sartre to destabilize his own philosophical oppositions. Just as the baby for which Mathieu is biologically responsible gets handed off to

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<sup>249</sup> Kritzman, “Hauntological” 182.

<sup>250</sup> George Bataille, *Érotisme*, illustrée ed. (Paris: Minuit, 1957) 24.

Daniel when Daniel agrees to marry Marcelle, so does the eroticism of sexuality. Mathieu's mind cannot acknowledge his own body, let alone any-body else.

The importance of Descartes in Sartre's philosophy is nothing new. In this respect, it is interesting that a Sartrean scholar quotes one of Wittgenstein's most influential mentors when talking about these issues:

If, as Alfred North Whitehead famously remarked, the history of western philosophy can be read as a footnote to Plato, then much the same can be said of modern French philosophy and René Descartes. The Cartesian subject founded on the certainty of the cogito is the main reference point and critical target for Sartrean and post-structuralist theorizations of the subject.<sup>251</sup>

Sartre himself places foundational importance on Descartes in *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* when he writes:

Notre point de départ est en effet la subjectivité de l'individu, et ceci pour des raisons strictement philosophiques. Non pas parce que nous somme bourgeois, mais parce que nous voulons une doctrine basée sur la vérité, et non un ensemble de belles théories, pleines d'espoir mais sans fondements réels. Il ne peut pas y avoir de vérité autre, au point de départ, que celle-ci : *je pense, donc je suis*, c'est là la vérité absolue de la conscience s'atteignant elle-même.<sup>252</sup>

Still, it is to be noted that at least one scholar has questioned the impermeability of Sartrean dualisms. Hazel Barnes offers an insightfully nuanced understanding of Sartre's reliance on

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<sup>251</sup> Nik Farrel Fox, *The New Sartre: Explorations in Postmodernism* (London: Continuum, 2003) 10.

<sup>252</sup> Sartre, *Existentialisme* 57.

Cartesian dualism in her article “Sartre’s Concept of the Self.”<sup>253</sup> She writes that while Sartre denies a strict Cartesian dualism, neither does he reduce consciousness to the body. Humans cannot be separated completely from the body, since “[i]t is in and through the body that consciousness is present to the world, that it is individualized, that it has facticity, that it has a past.”<sup>254</sup> Yet, Barnes cautions that in Sartre the body is not equivalent to consciousness; instead that consciousness is a nihilating process in Sartre, according to Barnes.<sup>255</sup> She illustrates this nihilation with an example of pain: “If my eyes pain me as I read, my reading consciousness is also a pain-consciousness, and I do not separate the two, except in reflection...”<sup>256</sup> Barnes, then, provides a way to read Sartre that nuances the dualism present in his writing: rather than being completely separate, the body becomes the “center of reference” for consciousness.<sup>257</sup>

### 3.4 DANIEL AS EVIL ANGEL

The full weight of the mind-body tension in Sartrean thought expresses itself, ultimately, through the constant presence of hatred in Daniel’s thoughts and actions. On the surface, this hatred is directed at others, but as we will see, it is more fundamentally a hatred directed at himself.

Indeed, it is difficult to find another character in the novels that is so intentionally bent on causing specific harm to other people or to have a negative impact on certain situations. While others may ignore the harm that their choices bring about, Daniel, in contrast, is clearly aware of the harm his choices can cause, and seems to choose some of his actions based on this very

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<sup>253</sup> Hazel E. Barnes, “Sartre’s Concept of Self,” *Critical Essays on Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Robert Wilcocks (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988).

<sup>254</sup> Barnes, “Self” 145.

<sup>255</sup> Barnes, “Self” 145.

<sup>256</sup> Barnes, “Self” 145.

<sup>257</sup> Barnes, “Self” 145.

criterion. Yet, we will also see that Daniel's character is not without moments of seeming redemption – or at least its possibility. I am referring here to the moment of openness with Boris in the first novel,<sup>258</sup> and the episode with Philippe in the third.<sup>259</sup> Regarding the latter, the result of the interaction between Daniel and Philippe is left to the reader's imagination; however, the intent on Daniel's part, while not entirely transparent, is arguably beneficent: he prevents Philippe from throwing himself into the Seine,<sup>260</sup> he sheds tears when Philippe expresses his frustration with life,<sup>261</sup> and he appears committed to a giving relationship with Philippe, referring to it as a "liaison sérieuse."<sup>262</sup> He has returned to a possible role of good angel. But the road has been arduous and contradictory.

In the first novel, and indeed well into the second, Daniels exhibits intense hatred, most notably before he begins to reveal himself as more of a "real homosexual individual."<sup>263</sup> I am referring here to his intense hatred towards Mathieu as he intervenes in the Mathieu and Marcelle relationship, trying to create as much havoc as possible between the two.<sup>264</sup> The renewed purpose he finds in what he perceives to be Boris's rejection,<sup>265</sup> and his dealings with the various boys he comes into contact with (Bobby, Ralph, Emile) show a powerful hatred as well.<sup>266</sup> Daniel reflects on this hatred while watching the boys at the bazaar: "Il avait envie de les battre."<sup>267</sup> Too, the episode in which he seems determined to drown his beloved cats,<sup>268</sup> and

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<sup>258</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 177-82.

<sup>259</sup> Sartre, *Mort* 145-64, 176-81.

<sup>260</sup> Sartre, *Mort* 150.

<sup>261</sup> Sartre, *Mort* 153.

<sup>262</sup> Sartre, *Mort* 181.

<sup>263</sup> Schehr, *Alcibiades* 72-73.

<sup>264</sup> Sartre, *Âge*, 121, 193, 334, 362-63.

<sup>265</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 184.

<sup>266</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 157, 163, 325.

<sup>267</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 157.

<sup>268</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 111-13.

even in the many times he reiterates his desire for the war to come and swiftly<sup>269</sup> show a fierce hatred. While going to drown his cats (an act which he is unable to follow through on), Daniel even directs his hatred towards a young girl on the bus, innocently asking to pet the kittens:

Écoute, ma petite chérie, dit Daniel d'une voix basse et rapide, je vais noyer mes chats, voilà ce que je vais faire et sais-tu pourquoi ? Parce que, pas plus tard que ce matin, ils ont déchiré tout le visage d'une belle petite fille comme toi, qui venait m'apporter des fleurs. On sera obligé de lui mettre un œil de verre.<sup>270</sup>

This story, of course, is not true – Daniel's cats did not attack a young girl earlier that day – and it is devised solely out of frustration towards the girl's question.

This hatred, however, is not only directed at others, but at Daniel himself. It is his belief that he is on the wrong side of the sexual situation that leads to the almost constant disgust and anger that he focuses on himself throughout the three novels. But, we might wonder, where does this notion that his sexual desire is wrong come from? And how do we know that Daniel himself thinks so? Daniel's comments to Mathieu at the end of the first novel are telling:

J'ai honte d'être pédéraste parce que je suis pédéraste. Je sais ce que tu vas me dire : « Si j'étais à ta place, je ne me laisserais pas faire, je réclamerais ma place au soleil, c'est un goût comme un autre, etc. » Seulement ça ne me touche pas. Je sais que tu me diras tout ça, précisément parce que tu n'es pas pédéraste. Tous les invertis sont honteux, c'est dans leur nature.<sup>271</sup>

This is an important passage, because it subtly evades the idea that there is a causal connection between the pressure Daniel feels to be ashamed of what he is, and the society that gives a

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<sup>269</sup> Sartre, *Sursis* 53.

<sup>270</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 110.

<sup>271</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 367.

specific name – *pédéraste* – to this supposed way of being. Since Mathieu is serving as society’s representative at this moment, it would appear that society is in fact perfectly accepting of his sexual desires, as long as they are objectified in a name. This is not to say, of course, that society is ultimately accepting of practices that they outwardly condone: one can imagine issues in society where something is explicitly deemed permissible, but still ultimately frowned upon. Still, Daniel’s shame at the sexual attraction he feels seems to be more of an internal, rather than external, issue. It is this internal judgment that drives him to hatred of others and to hatred of himself. He feels this hatred comes with being - or rather being called - a *pederast*.

Yet there is no small conflict in this situation. Daniel expresses a hopelessness about his sexual desire for men. This is found in the sense he has that he has been created this way, as he reproachfully says to God: “Me voilà, me voilà comme tu m’as fait, lâche, creux, pédéraste.”<sup>272</sup> In fully Biblical and Baudelerian terms, a few pages later, again in conversation with God, Daniel refers to himself as an accursed monster.<sup>273</sup> Though he doesn’t mention the word *pédéraste*, the above quote sets the stage in such a way that Daniel’s words imply that the monstrosity of his existence rests in the fact that he is attracted to men:

Tu m’as crée tel que je suis et tes desseins sont impénétrables ; je suis la plus honteuse de tes pensées, tu me vois et je te sers, je me dresse contre toi, je t’insulte et en t’insultant, je te sers. Je suis ta créature, tu t’aimes en moi, tu me portes, toi qui as crée les monstres.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Sartre, *Sursis* 223.

<sup>273</sup> This same vein of hopelessness in the eyes of God is evident in Sartre’s critical work on both Genet and Baudelaire: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard 1952); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

<sup>274</sup> Sartre, *Sursis* 236.

Here, in fact, the word *pédérastes* implicitly becomes synonymous with *monsters*, a further proof that no definition is available for Daniel that would not constantly be recontextualized depending on all sorts of judgment systems. A further example of Daniel's self-loathing and fears is seen in the internal struggle he experiences while watching a young man gardening:

Ce beau corps-là, il appelait des caresses de sculpteur, il faudrait le modeler.  
Daniel se dressa brusquement sur son fauteuil et tourna vers Marcelle des yeux étincelants. Pas de ça, surtout pas de ça, pas de ce vice distrait, je n'ai pas encore l'âge. Je bois un verre de marc, je parle gravement de la guerre qui vient, et pendant ce temps-là le regard effleure nonchalamment un jeune dos nu, une croupe un peu tendue, écornifle toutes les aubaines qu'offrent les après-midi d'été.<sup>275</sup>

This passage exemplifies well Daniel's continuous struggle throughout the first half of the trilogy to move, despite his returning desires, away from what he instinctively is drawn towards and focus his gaze on Marcelle. This movement appears often in the Daniel narrative as an almost Cartesian dualism.

However, given what has been said about Sartre's unappealing depiction of sex in general, there is irony here as well, for although it is Daniel who says "J'ai honte d'être pédéraste parce que je suis pédéraste,"<sup>276</sup> it would not be difficult to imagine Mathieu uttering the words, "J'ai honte d'être hétéro parce que je suis hétéro". But this common critical reading is in fact a gross understatement of the fact that it is only through Daniel's position as homosexual that we have an opportunity to understand the situation, whereas Mathieu's status within the French male

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<sup>275</sup> Sartre, *Sursis* 148.

<sup>276</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 367.

norm prevents him from seeing that indeed he has a conflicted relationship with sex, and the fact that the bulk of this struggle finds its root in his location within the standard.

So far, in our argument, we have tried to show how Daniel's character, especially regarding the Biblical and sacred words used to describe him, is a character whose identity is entirely surrounded by spiritual tensions. Daniel is, apparently, straddling both the status of devil and angel, without ever being identified as one or the other. Now, of course, we have to admit that in some sense this is not true. Sartre does not present Daniel as a character that is *actually* some kind of spiritual being; however, the fact that so many of the characters refer to him as such, and he himself often filters his self-perception through this notion is telling.

That Daniel often acts in a maleficent manner is already mentioned above, but there are moments, too, in which he extends grace to those around him, and, like the young girl in the Durassian narratives, seems genuinely concerned for their deliverance from suffering. One such instance, though perhaps small, is seen in his dealing with his cats. He cannot go through with their death, and instead returns home with them, only to treat their wounds and provide for them as he has always done.<sup>277</sup> A second such instance is that of agreeing to marry Marcelle, as he says when Mathieu asks why he's marrying her, "Pour amitié pour elle...Je ne veux pas qu'elle soit malheureuse."<sup>278</sup> In this case, Daniel seems genuinely concerned that Marcelle not miss her "last chance", as he calls it.<sup>279</sup> While this last decision is also made due to its ability to bring Mathieu pain, this does not completely negate the good that Daniel feels it accomplished for Marcelle. Nor, in a certain way, does it negate the good that, though misguided I would say, he

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<sup>277</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 113-15.

<sup>278</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 365.

<sup>279</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 197.

believes to be accomplishing in some grand way for himself.<sup>280</sup> Lastly, as I have alluded to above, we have his intervention in the life of Philippe. Not only is Daniel determined to prevent Philippe from taking his own life, he is concerned and invested in his education – though the exact nature of this education is left unclear: “Nous détruisons tout. Mais pas par des mots : par des actes. Tout ce que tu as emprunté s’évanouira en fumée. Ce qui restera, c’est toi.”<sup>281</sup>

This attempted dissection of Daniel’s doubly sacred role – as angel of both Evil and Good -- could be more vividly seen in the second novel, after Daniel, quite unexpectedly, writes an introspective letter to Mathieu. This letter spans an entire seven pages and clearly sets Daniel apart as one of the characters, if not *the character*, with the keenest eye for self-evaluation. But the placement of this letter in the second novel is informative: Daniel writes it on page 298 (a little more than halfway through the 500 page book), a fact told in the midst of two other narratives by the pithy sentence “Daniel écrivait.” At this point Daniel’s narrative disappears entirely from the novel, and is only picked up again on page 98 of the following novel.

But the letter acts in the trilogy for a much longer narrative time: while the writing is first mentioned on page 298 of the second novel, Mathieu receives the letter on 381, and he only reads its first pages on page 450. This space between the actual participation of Daniel’s character in the novel, the reappearance of the letter – the existence of which the reader has nearly forgotten about when Mathieu finally receives it almost a hundred pages later – and the reading of the letter, serve to give Daniel a slowly but surely dis-embodied voice. As thought, and not purely bodily motions, and although this letter expresses a profoundly intimate personal experience, its destiny is put entirely into the hands of Mathieu (both literally and figuratively). It is Mathieu, the very subject of transcendent dis-embodiment, who decides if this experience is

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<sup>280</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 366.

<sup>281</sup> Sartre, *Mort* 163.

shared with the reader, since it is Mathieu who decides when to begin, and when to end, reading it. Almost paradoxically, here we find a new iteration of the separation of body and mind. Daniel's mind has been kept in the form of the introspective, revealing, and honest letter. His body, however, has been safely discarded for a while. Indeed, the reader is not even permitted to read the letter over Daniel's shoulder, as it were. The letter remains firmly in the possession of Mathieu, and the reader is granted a glimpse at it only when Mathieu decides to read it. For that matter, Mathieu doesn't even finish reading the letter, but instead finds it long winded, and throws it out the window of the train: « Quelles vieilleries », pensa-t-il [Mathieu]. La glace était baissée. Il roula la lettre en boule et la jeta par la fenêtre, sans lire davantage.”<sup>282</sup> The reader will never get another look at it.

### 3.5 DANIEL ACCORDING TO WITTGENSTEIN

With the letter, the totality of Daniel's world has been suppressed to that of his language. The echo of Wittgenstein is present: “How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe *games* to him, and we might add: ‘This *and similar things* are called ‘games’’. And do we know any more about it ourselves?”<sup>283</sup> Meaning, has been made, in spite of Mathieu's blind acts of censorship. The narrative in fact literally exudes meaning, as Daniel explores the pain of his relationship to sexuality, the words that others and even he have to use to think about him, and the desire for community with others that he still is at pains to express. Such meaning can only be denied if one requires that meaning be clearly defined, and thus in an

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<sup>282</sup> Sartre, *Sursis* 458.

<sup>283</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2001) §69.

important sense, align itself with the clearly defined, value-based concepts that Daniel erroneously uses and seeks. The fact that these narratives do *mean* through Daniel's repeated travails, supports the importance of example in the explanation of blurred-edged concepts. In this way, Wittgenstein asks nothing less than we read Sartre against himself.

Sartre, focused as he is on the interior consciousness and questions of being and non-being, is at odds with Wittgenstein's desire to recognize that in order to understand meaning we need to remain on the surface of language: Sartre will ask that we sort through the linguistic tensions to find essential meaning, while Wittgenstein will ask that we look at the tensions and ask what we gain from the observation. In this way, Daniel's relationship with sex is one that is constantly breaking down the barriers set up by clearly defined notions of being that he has internalized due to the influence of the Other conceived of as such, even when it is internalized as self-deprecation. Sex is a location that forces Daniel to observe and recognize the complexity of being. Thus, we see in Sartre that sex not only breaks down barriers between multiple subjects and/or outside forces as in Duras, but also between the subject as process and the expectation of a projected Subject that one has internalized. Sex, then, is as much a tool of freedom for each individual subject against his or her own poisoning expectations, as it is for the subjects as a whole against an outside force.

The impotence of the body-mind separation as a means of defining self is clearly present in the scene towards the end of the first novel in which Daniel attempts to castrate himself, though he retreats at the last moment: "L'inertie du rasoir remonte dans sa main, dans son bras. Un corps vivant et chaud avec un bras de pierre. Un énorme bras de statue, inerte, glacé, avec un rasoir au bout. Il desserre les doigts. Le rasoir tombe sur la table."<sup>284</sup> This moment signals a

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<sup>284</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 331.

connection between Daniel's body – and his penis as the most outwardly sexual sign of it – and his sense of self. The body is tied to the self, to the mind, to the subject of thought, and these events in the first novel should foreshadow the dubious nature of self-understanding that is written about in the second. There is, certainly, a difference in Daniel in the third novel, but this is not a difference marked by the attainment of a securely-anchored sense of self. Daniel has attained a kind of self-consciousness in the third novel, but it is not founded in security; instead it is based on an ongoing contradiction. After his final conversation with Philippe, for example, Daniel returns to his own bedroom:

Il avait sommeil, il était calme, il se leva pour prendre ses effets, il constata qu'il était clame, il pensa : c'est curieux que je ne sois pas angoissé. A l'instant il y eut quelqu'un derrière son dos, il se retourna, ne vit personne et l'angoisse le fendit en deux. « Encore une fois ! Encore une fois ! » Tout recommençait...<sup>285</sup>

This is a self that is tied to the body, and it will have to be forever tied to the body if it is to avoid the pitfalls of the cleaving of mind and body that had brought Daniel to the point of castration and maybe death. Placing himself all in body as external pressures condition him to do by identifying completely as “homosexual” -- and thence “pederaste” and even “monster” – or reactively trying to restrict himself entirely to the mind when speaking of his spiritual experiences will both fail as means of self- understanding, since neither takes into account the necessary tension that is at the heart of blurred-edged concepts – concepts such as self and sex. These concepts have to be accepted in their appearance in certain linguistic contexts, all dependent on “language games” whose stakes are to be found in powerful judgment values.

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<sup>285</sup> Sartre, *Mort* 181.

### 3.6 GIDE, THE “PÉDÉRASTE PAR EXCELLENCE”

Through a comparison between a scene from Gide’s *Les Faux monnayeurs* where Edouard stalks and eventually meets the young Georges in a book stand, and a foundational scene from Daniels’s narrative – that in which he observes Boris trying to steal the argue that Sartre sets up this character in such a way that the homosexual perspective is *the only meaningful* perspective about sex in the trilogy. It is Gide’s powerful presence before Sartre that establishes the necessity of homosexual characters as *a necessary* sexual perspective among others, but I will argue that it will be the issues that Sartre sees for the heterosexual male (namely the issues of the female and of eroticism) that install the homosexual as the only perspective from which sexuality can be explored at all.

A comparison with Gide is telling and even necessary, because Gide’s unapologetic depiction of same-sex relations in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and his social and political role as a public intellectual, make him an inescapable reference for Sartre, whose work not only will have to stage characters involved in same-sex desire but also has the ambition of offering a new model of intellectual consciousness and engagement. And in fact, Sartre himself was ready to proclaim the importance of Gide’s multifaceted influence on him:

Sa clarté, sa lucidité, son rationalisme, son refus du pathétique donnaient permission à d’autres de risquer la pensée dans des tentatives plus troubles, plus incertaines : on savait que dans le même temps une intelligence lumineuse maintenait les droits de l’analyse, de la pureté, d’une certaine tradition ; eût-on sombré dans un voyage de découverte, on n’entraînait pas l’esprit dans le naufrage. Toute la pensée française de ces trente dernières années, qu’elle le

voulût ou non, quelles que fussent par ailleurs ses autres coordonnées, Marx, Hegel, Kierkegaard, devait se définir *aussi* par rapport à Gide.<sup>286</sup>

As a public intellectual, Gide's clarity, lucidity, rationalism and rejection of pathos "donnaient permission à d'autres de risquer la pensée dans des tentatives plus troubles, plus incertaines," but this influence goes beyond simple clarity, lucidity, rationalism and rejection of pathos when thinking about sexuality. Gide has inserted the homosexual into any intellectual discussion of sexuality, thus homosexuality now becomes a topic that must be broached, and that must be taken seriously, no matter how "murky" or "uncertain". Sartre must include the "homosexual" if he wishes to discuss sexuality, if only to show that he's not ignorant of the issue as raised by Gide, or that he's at least as forward-thinking as Gide, or no less evolved in his acceptance of people who fall outside of the accepted societal norms. Sartre seems to unwittingly up the ante, if it is true, as we contend, that Daniel's relationship to sex puts him in a unique position in Sartre's existential trilogy, but Daniel, in no small part, has Gide to thank for his presence in the trilogy at all.

The question, then, is what to make of the comparison between these similar scenes. Clearly, it's the framework of the scenes that serve to link them one to the other: an older, gay man interrupts a younger, attractive boy while in the midst of stealing a book. Besides the similarity of role between Edouard and Daniel, both are central characters in their respective novels, the specific choice of the book as the item being stolen unites the scene. Gide writes that Georges is 13 years old,<sup>287</sup> while Sartre never shares Boris's age, though he is nearing the end of his high school studies, so that would make him older than Georges, and maybe even a legal sexual partner for Daniel in contrast to Georges in relation to Edouard. Finally, as discussed

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<sup>286</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Gide vivant," *Portraits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 85-86.

<sup>287</sup> André Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, ed. Michel Domon (Paris: Gallimard, 1997) 100.

above, the admiration of Sartre for Gide is another reason to see a reflection of Gide's scene in the interaction between Daniel and Boris.

The most interesting aspect, however, of the scene of theft in Gide might not be directly the scene itself, but what follows the scene after a line-break. The narrator, who is of course also a character in the episode, as the adult stalking the adolescent, writes:

Je crois du reste qu'il y aurait intérêt à faire raconter tout cela par l'enfant ; son point de vue est plus significatif que le mien. Le petit est à la fois gêné et flatté de l'attention que je lui porte. Mais la pesée de mon regard fausse un peu sa direction. Une personnalité trop tendre et inconsciente encore se défend et dérobe derrière une attitude. Rien n'est plus difficile à observer que les êtres en formation. Il faudrait pouvoir ne les regarder que de biais, de profil.<sup>288</sup>

What Edouard says in the the first phrase of this quote, is exactly what Sartre does in *his* version of the scene: the encounter in *Le Sursis* it is told from the point of view of Boris – standing in for Gide's Georges – rather than that of Daniel. Rather than the theft being told from the point of view of the man witnessing it as in Gide's novel, Sartre tells it from the point of view of the young thief: "Une main se posa sur son épaule. « Je suis fait, pensa Boris, mai ils ont agi trop tôt, ils ne peuvent rien prouver contre moi. » Il se retourna lentement, avec sang-froid. C'était Daniel Sereno, un ami de Mathieu."<sup>289</sup> Thus, Sartre might believe that he is in fact completing the work of Gide, following the advice that Gide's narrator had given. However, the description of the personality "trop tendre et inconsciente" seems to fit better the character of Daniel, than that of Boris. Daniel is making a veiled pass at Boris, though Boris seems to be oblivious. Boris

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<sup>288</sup> Gide 103.

<sup>289</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 177.

steals the thesaurus, and though he shows, perhaps, a tender side of his character by worrying if he has hurt Daniel's feelings, this worry lasts only a split second:

« Est-ce que je l'ai blessé ? » pensa Boris mal à son aise. Il suivit d'un regard inquiet les larges épaules de Sereno qui remontait le boulevard Saint-Michel. Et puis, il pensa, tout à coup, qu'il n'avait pas plus une minute à perdre.<sup>290</sup>

From Daniel's perspective – a perspective that Sartre switches to after the line-break following the theft scene – there is much self-loathing in his interaction with Boris, which indicates the vulnerability that Daniel believes to have shown during his interaction with Boris in the bookstore, even if Boris was unaware of the sexual undertones. As it turns out, for Sartre, it is Daniel that is “trop tendre,” having believed himself to have tipped his hand to Boris (for having been -- he, an adult man -- “inconscient”):

C'est très bien, dit Daniel en riant d'aise, c'est une excellente leçon et à peu de frais, je suis content qu'il m'ait envoyé promener ; si j'avais eu la folie de m'intéresser un peu à lui de lui parler avec confiance, il serait allé rapporter ça tout bouillant à Mathieu et ils en auraient fait des gorgées chaudes.<sup>291</sup>

Here Sartre is revising Gide: by changing the point of view that Gide's narrator suggests, he has finished the project that Gide began.

With the change above – from Georges, the lycéen, who is thought too tender by Edouard, to the tender personality being that of the adult, Daniel – the phrase “Rien n'est plus difficile à observer que les êtres en formation” takes on a completely new meaning: it is Daniel who is “en formation.” In Gide's narrative, the young character of Georges is “en formation,” but after Sartre has changed perspectives and personality traits, it is now the adult character of Daniel who

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<sup>290</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 181-82.

<sup>291</sup> Sartre, *Âge* 182.

is growing and evolving. The traits of the dominant and subservient characters in the intertext are switched, and in fact they are completely flipped. Daniel has become Georges, and Boris has become Edouard.

To a certain extent, then, Sartre has given voice to the last phrase of Gide's postscript to the scene of theft: "Il faudrait pouvoir ne les regarder que de biais, de profil."<sup>292</sup> Gide has let this project fall by the wayside, saying that it would be useful, but maybe implying that it cannot be done. However, the lengthy changes that Sartre has made to this scene imply that he has taken on this very project: he has sought to examine his character – albeit the opposite one that Gide's narrator was interested in – via a psychological cross-section.

What is happening in this change of focus from the child character "en formation" to the adult character "en formation," is a shift in focus from the Gidean pederast – the lover of boys strictly – found in *Les Faux monnayeurs*, and *L'Immoraliste* to that of the adult homosexual. And in fact, as we have already said, even Boris is several years older than Georges, thereby enlarging the scope of same-sex desire that can appear in a novel. Sartre's repetition of same-sex desire has been influenced by Gide, but now it is adding to this pre-existing collection of examples an example of the homosexual as existential subject: a subject implicitly endowed with free choice, liberty, and accountability. This reading, in fact, confirms what Larry Schehr has written on the character of Daniel:

Daniel develops as a character and, dare we say, as a real homosexual individual, as opposed to a stereotype of such an individual, even despite some temptations on Sartre's part to create stereotypical situations and reactions. In *L'Age de raison*, Daniel seems to be both the continuation and the final chapter in Sartre's

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<sup>292</sup> Gide 103.

somewhat predictable depictions of the homosexual figure in the early works...As the trilogy and war progress, Daniel assumes responsibility beyond the cares and needs of his individual self defined by petit-bourgeois logic and ideology. Daniel embodies the existentialist belief in the individual's capacity to change radically...Daniel's homosexuality becomes part of him, part of a *pour soi*, and not the end-all *en soi* that Sartre seemed to imply in *L'Age de raison*.<sup>293</sup>

From a Wittgensteinian perspective we see that Sartre has achieved the expansion of his character by changing the way in which certain words appear and mean within his narrative – he has given more examples of what this character does, and thus has changed what this character is.

### 3.7 DANIEL'S LETTER

Having established that Sartre operates a multitude of linguistic shifts that allow Daniel to evolve in a non-traditional manner, I argue that his letter to Mathieu is the hinge upon which Daniel's evolution as a character turns: it is at once an attempt to insure that he has in fact a mind making him a subject not only of speech but also of writing, and an acknowledgement that the very process of maturing that Daniel undergoes in the trilogy is dependent on a sexed and sexual body. Once again, Sartre is both enlightened and blind in his way of dealing with Daniel. In an attempt to single out the mind, or the soul as the spiritual nature of the letter may make more explicit, the result is a greater affirmation of the central importance of Daniel's forms of embodiment. In this way, Daniel is resurrected from a bodiless character back into a terrestrial one.

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<sup>293</sup> Schehr, *Alcibiades* 72-73.

Resurrection symbolism is central to the rhetoric of Daniel's letter, who presents himself through a direct comparison with Christ. The last section of the letter that Mathieu reads, and thus the last part of the letter that the reader is privy to, recounts Daniel's quasi-spiritual experience wherein he has discovered that *he is*: "On me hait, on me méprise, on me supporte, une présence me soutient à l'être pour toujours. Je suis infini et infiniment coupable. Mais je suis, Mathieu, je suis. Devant Dieu et devant les hommes, je suis. *Ecce homo.*"<sup>294</sup> The repeated "je suis" echoes the "Je suis" of Exodus 3:14, when Moses asks God what God's name is, so that Moses can tell the Israelites: "Dieu dit à Moïse : Je suis celui qui suis. Et il ajouta : C'est ainsi que tu répondras aux enfants d'Israël : Celui qui s'appelle 'je suis' m'a envoyé vers vous."<sup>295</sup> Though at the beginning the reference is to a God-like image as absolute and infinite Being, the last Latin phrase – *Ecce Homo* – refers us to Jesus Christ: it is the phrase uttered by Pontius Pilatus when he presents the battered Christ to the Jewish crowd, saying that he finds no fault in him: *Behold the man!* The crowd, however, demands he be crucified.<sup>296</sup> The relation to Christ only serves to reinforce the importance of Daniel's body, for it was his martyrdom and resurrection in the body that he fulfilled his role as Messiah. In the same way that the disciples locked themselves away after the crucifixion, and wouldn't believe the accounts of Jesus' resurrection until they saw him with their own eyes, Daniel too says that it is the gaze of others that provide for his existence:

Ah ! Mathieu, quelle découverte : on me voyait, je m'agitais pour me connaître,  
je croyais m'écouler par tous les bouts, je réclamais ton intercession bienveillante

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<sup>294</sup> Sartre, *Mort* 457.

<sup>295</sup> Exod. 3:14, *La Sainte Bible: Qui comprend l'ancien et le nouveau testament traduits sur les texts originaux hébreu et grec, par Louis Segond*, Nouvelle ed. (Paris: n.p., 1923).

<sup>296</sup> John 19:5 *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments: Authorized King James Version* (Philadelphia: National Publishing, 2008).

et, pendant ce temps-là, on me voyait, le regard était là, inaltérable, un invisible acier... Je transforme à mon usage et pour ta plus grande indignation le mot imbécile et criminel de votre prophète, ce “je pense donc je suis” qui m’a tant fait souffrir – car plus je pensais, moins il me semblait être – et je dis : on me voit, donc je suis.<sup>297</sup>

Sartre gives Daniel existential subjectivity in this passage, since the gaze of the Other is what makes any of his characters come to self-consciousness. However, there is a further step: if Daniel is to be seen, he must have a body. His soul or his mind is not enough to be seen, and it is exactly this importance of being seen that is at the foundation of his new sense of self displayed in the letter.

Further, the importance of the body is emphasized by Daniel when he uses the resurrection symbolism yet again to describe his relationship with Mathieu, saying, “Je ne sais de quel nom tu appelles aujourd’hui nos rapports. Ce n’est pas l’amitié, ni tout à fait la haine. Disons qu’il y a un cadavre entre nous. Mon cadavre.”<sup>298</sup> Though Daniel has been disembodied, and contained within a letter for the greatest part of the second novel, his body lies at the center of his relationship with Mathieu, and at the center of his transition from the Daniel of the first novel to that of the third. For Mathieu, Daniel’s body can only exist if it annihilates itself, as a dejected dead body that needs to perish if he is to maintain a relationship with the soul inhabiting it.

From this point of view, it is important to remark that Mathieu stops reading directly after Daniel writes “J’ai compris que...”<sup>299</sup> There is a tension here as well: there is both separation –

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<sup>297</sup> Sartre, *Sursis* 456-57.

<sup>298</sup> Sartre, *Sursis* 454-55.

<sup>299</sup> Sartre, *Sursis* 458.

mind from body – and completion – Daniel finally seems to have understood something about himself, but Mathieu cannot read it. Or maybe, Sartre cannot write it.

Whether this still unexpressed self-understanding is going to be satisfying, coming as it does, at a moment in which Daniel has been separated along Cartesian lines, is not yet clear. The body/mind separation is, for Daniel, a way in which to attain the clearly defined category that he has so longed to attain and to find peace settling within it.

Instead, as Schehr alerts us, we see Daniel as real through his actions:

In the second and third volumes, moments of self-loathing are still present and from time to time the weight of freedom is soundly rejected. This burden of freedom is not easily shouldered by any Sartrean character of the era, be he or she homosexual or heterosexual...Daniel's illustrations of a renewed concept of *Mitsein* in his relations to the AWOL soldier Philippe in *La Mort dans l'âme* (1256-73; 1284-89) raise Daniel's homosexuality to a level of responsible action that exceeds any stereotyped behavior that Sartre may inflict on his character.<sup>300</sup>

### 3.8 MORE ON DANIEL AND THE SACRED: BATAILLE

We have already seen that Daniel, through his body and sexual practices, has also had strong sacred connotations in the trilogy, being presented alternatively as angel and demon. These connotations might be further illuminated if we consider Daniel from the perspective of Bataille, who sees the root of spirituality in the breaking of taboos and as such had an important role also

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<sup>300</sup> Schehr, *Alcibiades* 73.

in our discussion of Marguerite Duras' own trilogy.<sup>301</sup> The reader sees that, at times, the uncontrollable eroticism of Daniel is described in a distinctly spiritual tenor. In addition to a pervading eroticism being attached to his character, the fact that this eroticism is directed towards men only furthers the connection between Daniel and Bataille's notion of the sacred as expressed through transgressive, even sacrificial actions:

L'action érotique dissolvant les êtres qui s'y engagent en révèle la continuité, rappelant celle des eaux tumultueuses. Dans le sacrifice, il n'y a pas seulement mise à nu, il y a mise à mort de la victime (ou si l'objet du sacrifice n'est pas un être vivant, il y a, de quelque manière, destruction de cet objet). La victime meurt, alors les assistants participent d'un élément que révèle sa mort. Cet élément est ce qu'il est possible de nommer, avec les historiens des religions, le *sacré*. Le sacré est justement la continuité de l'être révélée à ceux qui fixent leur attention, dans un rite solennel, sur la mort d'un être discontinu. Il y a, du fait de la mort violente, rupture de la discontinuité d'un être : ce qui subsiste et que, dans le silence qui tombe, éprouvent des esprits anxieux est la *continuité* de l'être, à laquelle est rendue la victime. Seule une mise à mort spectaculaire, opérée dans des conditions que déterminent la gravité et la collectivité de la religion, est susceptible de révéler ce qui d'habitude échappe à l'attention.<sup>302</sup>

Daniel often thinks about sacrificing his own body through self-mutilation or suicide, and harbors violent desires toward many of the characters in the book, even the ones he loves the most. Not only does Daniel's self-expression follow a distinctively Bataillean approach to eroticism by connecting eroticism to the breaking of taboos, but it opens up a reading of the text

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<sup>301</sup> Bataille, *Érotisme* 77.

<sup>302</sup> Bataille, *Érotisme* 29.

that sees Daniel's travaux as a sort of spiritual sacrifice: a sacrifice through which Sartre is able to bring to light important nuances of human embodiment and sexuality, just as, in Bataille, the animal sacrifice is meant to remind the faithful onlookers of the fine line between life and death:

Le sacrifice substitue la convulsion aveugle des organes à la vie ordonnée de l'animal. Il en est de même de la convulsion érotique : elle libère des organes pléthoriques dont les jeux aveugles se poursuivent au delà de la volonté réfléchie des amants... Une violence, que ne contrôle plus la raison anime ces organes, elle les tend à l'éclatement et soudain c'est la joie des cœurs de céder au dépassement de cet orage. Le mouvement de *la chair* excède une limite en l'absence de la volonté. *La chair* est en nous cet excès qui s'oppose à la loi de la décence. La chair est l'ennemi né de ceux que hante l'interdit chrétien, mais si, comme je le crois, il existe un interdit vague et global, s'opposant sous des formes qui dépendent des temps et des lieux à la liberté sexuelle, *la chair* est l'expression d'un retour de cette liberté menaçante.<sup>303</sup>

Sartre's existential philosophy denies the sacred, being decisively secular. The sacred, in many ways, is more an issue for anthropology than for Sartre's philosophy. However, the trilogy is *not* Sartre's philosophy, and so things appear here that are unable to fit within his philosophical writings. He finds within his literature a shelter for the blurred-edged concepts that evade expression in rationalist form. For Wittgenstein, things are notoriously much more complicated: suffice it to say that as a believer in God, but finding difficulty with every established religion, he clearly delineated a space outside logic in which any expression could be

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<sup>303</sup> Bataille, *Érotisme* 102-03.

proffered, without regard to the issue of truth or precise referentiality. That space is, of course, the space not only of anthropology and religion, but also of literature.

### 3.9 DANIEL'S GOOD FAITH

There is something even more important to be said about the continued tension between mind and body discussed above. It is, in fact, exactly this tension that makes of Daniel a unique and privileged Sartrean character in terms of his potential as subject of freedom. As Sartre writes in *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*,

L'homme est non seulement tel qu'il se conçoit, mais tel qu'il se veut, et comme il se conçoit après l'existence, comme il se veut après cet élan vers l'existence, l'homme n'est rien d'autre que ce qu'il se fait. Tel est le premier principe de l'existentialisme.<sup>304</sup>

We see here the importance of action in the construction of the existential subject. However, in a certain sense, the possibility of action in the realm of sexuality on the part standard heterosexual subjects role is quite limited. This importance is brought to light if we think about action in terms of motion. If heterosexual relations are the norm, then acts of sex between a male and a female create no motion in relation to preexisting common places, just as vehicles moving at identical speeds are, in a sense, motionless in relation to one another.<sup>305</sup> In this way, it takes the relative motion of same-sex sexual acts to bring sexual practices to the status of action. This is not to say that sex between partners of opposite sexes might not be part of an action, but instead

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<sup>304</sup> Sartre, *Existentialisme* 30.

<sup>305</sup> For an interesting discussion of Sartre's use of motion as a source of the being-for-itself, see Hazel E. Barnes, "Sartre's ontology: The revealing and making of being," *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. Christina Howells (New York: Cambridge UP, 1992).

to say that standard sex – and, of course, in this case Sartre’s standard is the standard we’re referring to – cannot be action *qua* sexual action. For there to be action within the sexual realm, this action has to take the form of motion, and motion will only appear as such if it is a movement contrary to the movement of the standard – i.e. this action has to be marked. The standard, being unmarked, is in effect standing still. Thus to talk about sex alone, and not sex in relation to something else (sex in relation to murder, sex in relation to eating, etc.), there is only the potential of action in acts contrary to the standard, and in this sense, only those non-standard actions are eligible for the label of being in what Sartre would accept as “good faith”.

I am referring here, of course, only to Sartrean conceptions. This is not to say that an act of sex that falls within standard expectations *in real life* is unable to be in good faith in a more general sense. But in the trilogy that I am concerned with here it appears that the characters engaging in sex within the hegemonic standard are unable to do so in good faith. It takes an act of non-normative sex in Sartre to bring to light good faith within the realm of sex, inasmuch as the act of non-normative sex reveals the degree to which those fitting the norm are role-playing. This harkens back to the example of bad faith that Sartre gives in *L’Être et le néant* via his illustration of the waiter whose actions and gestures seem over-the-top:

Il joue, il s’amuse. Mais à quoi donc joue-t-il ? Il ne faut pas l’observer longtemps pour s’en rendre compte : il joue à être garçon de café. Il n’y a rien là qui puisse nous surprendre : le jeu est une sorte de repérage et d’investigation... le garçon de café joue avec sa condition pour la réaliser.<sup>306</sup>

The *garçon de café* is in bad faith because he is playing a role, and his actions serve to help him figure out how to better fit within this role. In the same way, the characters fitting the norm

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<sup>306</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’être et le néant: Essai d’ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943) 94.

cannot be in good faith since, thanks to their identification *as* the standard, their role is simply being played – in their actions, they are aiming to fit within the standard. This may be a more complicated issue with real people, however, in dealing with Sartre’s characters, we repeatedly see men who fit the standard sexual expectations and who do *not* change. They *do* play the role, and that being the case, there is no room for such characters to be in good faith regarding sex. I am arguing, then, that to be in sexual good faith in Sartre, is to be non-normative – to be queer.

This observation, however, according to Wittgenstein’s understanding of linguistic categories, has to be understood as *descriptive*, and not *prescriptive*: nowhere does Sartre extol the virtues of same-sex sexual practices, but through his characters, Sartre is placing in the hands of the homosexual characters the privilege of being in the position of good faith regarding sex. There are some characters – Gomez, and to a certain degree Philippe in his relationship with the prostitute, Flossie – who engage in heterosexual practices in less conventional manners, but as mentioned above, they are also marked. Gomez is Spanish, and Philippe is perhaps best referred to as bisexual, and moreover is a deserter. As far as he presents the characters upholding the male sexual standard – mostly Mathieu and Brunet -- they are unable to act in good faith, insofar as they are unable to act in any *meaningful* way. Although in a different context, Sartre is, in part, talking about this when he writes:

À partir du moment où les possibilités que je considère ne sont pas rigoureusement engagées par mon action, je dois m’en désintéresser, parce qu’aucun Dieu, aucun dessein ne peut adapter le monde et ses possibles à ma volonté.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Sartre, *Humanisme* 48.

The possibilities about which Sartre is concerned cannot be rigorously engaged by characters contained within sexual normativity. These possibilities are left to the homosexual characters. And indeed, homosexuality does appear in *L'Être et le néant*.

Recently, Joseph Catalano wrote about Sartre's discussion of homosexuality in his philosophical *magnum opus* in the following way:

Sartre's point is simply that in the real world – at least during his time – a homosexual cannot avoid the judgement of “good people” that he is guilty of perversity. This judgement exists, not only in this or that person, but as part of the fabric of our social order – the “practico-inert.” An individual denial of perversity leaves the structure whole. It would seem that, until the social structure is altered, Sartre would prefer the homosexual to respond with some kind of confrontation.<sup>308</sup>

The homosexual, then, can be in good faith regarding sex as long as he confronts the judgment of “good people,” and is not closeted in the first place. However, there is a further point of interest that Catalano does not address: where is the good faith opportunity of the “good people” themselves in regards to sex? It is unavailable, precisely due to their status as the “good people.” In the same way that the closeted homosexual is sexually invisible, since there is no difference to mark the object of his attraction, so the “good people” cannot be in good faith because there is no other standing in opposition to them, whose judgment they can confront. There is no marker of difference and therefore no marker either of attraction or of confrontation since the two opposing sides cannot be distinguished one from another.

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<sup>308</sup> Joseph S. Catalano, *Reading Sartre* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2010) 76.

Writing about the power of the homosexual to be in good faith regarding the very label “homosexual,” Sartre writes in *L'Être et le néant* in terms starkly similar to Daniel's own self-deprecating rants:

...il [the homosexual] a besoin de cette perpétuelle renaissance, de cette constante évasion pour vivre ; il faut qu'il se mette constamment hors d'atteinte pour éviter le terrible jugement de la collectivité. Aussi joue-t-il sur le mot d'*être*. Il aurait raison en effet s'il entendait cette phrase : « Je ne suis pas pédéraste » au sens de « Je ne suis pas ce que je suis ». C'est à dire, s'il déclarait : « Dans la mesure où une série de conduites sont définies conduites de pédéraste, et où j'ai tenu ces conduites, je suis un pédéraste. Dans la mesure où la réalité-humaine échappe à toute définition par les conduites, je n'en suis pas un. » Mais il glisse sournoisement vers une autre acception du mot « être ». Il entend « n'être pas » au sens de « n'être pas en soi ». Il déclare « n'être pas pédéraste » au sens où cette table *n'est pas* un encrier. Il est de mauvaise foi.<sup>309</sup>

However, Daniel does not accept this self-negation, and finally earns the right to existential subjectivity. We should be attentive to the fact that, if we accept the notion that Daniel is given a privileged space for freedom, this puts us in stark contrast to a Freudian reading of the presence of homosexuality in Sartre that is not without its followers. It is important to keep in mind the fact that Sartre thought the homosexual had the potential of acting in good faith. That is to say that Sartre attached to homosexuality the possibility of action. Thus traditionally Freudian readings of Daniel are problematic to the degree to which they undercut his ability to

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<sup>309</sup> Sartre, *Néant* 99.

evolve and attain self-consciousness. Andrew N. Leak's reading of Daniel in *The Perverted Consciousness: Sexuality and Sartre*<sup>310</sup> illustrates just this issue:

All of Daniel's behavior from this point onwards can be read as a reversal of what had been done to him: he had been possessed, now it is his turn to be the possessor; the father had ridden on his back, now he will slip into the saddle. The father is on all fours and the opportunity is too good to miss. The seduction of Philippe is prepared with sadistic forepleasure: 'je te possède à distance...je n'enfonce en toi et tu ne t'en doutes même pas.'<sup>311</sup>

Just as psychoanalysis operates through the blind reliving of traumas, so Daniel will re-enact in the flesh, as it were, the evil possession of Philippe by a homosexual 'parasite sacré'.<sup>312</sup> The interesting point about Leak's interpretation is that he is painting a character that is forever condemned to blindness and bad faith, at least according to Sartre's description. Leak's Daniel, thanks to his Freudian reading, has become a homosexual version of the pretend "champion of sincerity" that Sartre condemns:

Voilà pourtant ce que le censeur exige de sa victime : qu'elle se constitue elle-même comme chose, qu'elle lui remette sa liberté comme un fief, pour qu'il la lui rende ensuite comme un suzerain à son féal. Le champion de la sincérité, dans la mesure où il veut se rassurer, alors qu'il prétend juger, dans la mesure où il demande à une liberté de se constituer, en tant que liberté, comme chose, est de mauvaise foi.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Andrew N. Leak, *The Perverted Consciousness: Sexuality and Sartre* (London: MacMillan, 1989).

<sup>311</sup> Leak 116.

<sup>312</sup> Leak 116.

<sup>313</sup> Sartre, *Néant* 100.

A clear issue with such a reading as Leak's is that it draws on a supposed traumatic past that Sartre never alludes to in the narrative of Daniel. In fact, we know nothing at all about Daniel's father, no Oedipal trauma is ever alluded to by either Daniel or his friends. To make of Daniel a character in bad faith due to aspects of his narrative is one thing; to do so by projecting onto Daniel's narrative a traumatic and fully extra-diegetic back-story gives insight at the expense of assuming the conclusion in the premises. It is not surprising to have a reading that paints Daniel's actions in a negative hue, when one assumes the existence of unseen traumatic events that would, in a Freudian paradigm, make Daniel's actions malicious. Leak seems to have assumed that the actions themselves as presented by Sartre already have a negative quality, but the text does not support this reading, even if it is a popular reaction to Daniel's personality. Once again, the impulse to look beneath language in order to find an essential truth goes against the Wittgensteinian perspective that we are trying to adopt in our study: don't look for what is not said, but look at what is said, look at what is there because this is what is the case.

The issue with such a judgment as Leak's is that it fails to appreciate the importance of the narrated experiences in Daniel's story – that is, it reduces his narrative to a narrative of bad faith in which the unconscious is lying to the conscious about what it is doing. This reduction is problematic for any new understanding of sexual difference, since there is no room in such Freudian readings for narrative examples to stand on their own valor, while maybe presenting a view of sexuality that differs from what the Freudian scholar is expecting. Furthermore, such a view purports exactly the understanding of the unconscious that Sartre himself cannot except: to have an unconscious as the source of motivation for action, makes the subject no longer

responsible for his/her actions in the way that Sartre needs for the notion of “faith” – good or bad – to make any sense. Catalano illustrates Sartre’s position in the following way:

Although Sartre rejects the notion of the unconscious, he does [accept] Freud’s general description of a certain commonsense human experience, namely, that we frequently act for motives that we do not seem to be aware of. Sartre has not abandoned his phenomenological perspective – appearance is real on its own level. There is no a priori reason to assert that a person who appears not to know the reasons for an action knows the reasons. But may not this state of ignorance be itself induced in the person by the person? For Sartre, we gradually manufacture the very evidence to believe in our own lies to our self.<sup>314</sup>

We see, then, the degree to which a reading based on the importance of good or bad faith would want to distance itself from a strict Freudian reading of Sartre’s characters. Barnes puts it succinctly when she writes that by making the pre-reflective consciousness ego-less, Sartre undercuts the power of psychological determinism.<sup>315</sup> The result is to make of the self, of the “I am,” a subjective amalgamation of acts of consciousness from the past. There is no objective self, but a subjective amalgamation in its place.<sup>316</sup> Christina Howells says in support of this idea:

For Sartre there is no inner self of ego, source of action, feeling, thought, will, and emotion. The self is an imaginary construct, outside consciousness, object not subject or consciousness, a continuous creation held in being by belief. The self

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<sup>314</sup> Catalano, 102.

<sup>315</sup> Barnes, “Self” 138.

<sup>316</sup> Barnes, “Self” 139-40.

or ego, the “I” and the “me” are synthetic products of consciousness, unified not unifying, transcendent not immanent.<sup>317</sup>

Further, such a distancing from the role of the unconscious, and the requisite importance placed on the responsibility of the person for the induced ignorance of his or her actions, only emphasizes the power of a Wittgensteinian lens in viewing the repeated example of Daniel throughout the trilogy. The ebb and flow of Daniel’s self-identification with the label of *pédéraste* becomes more than an attempt to overcome a repressed truth that would make of him a thing; instead, it makes of these events examples of how Sartre sees Daniel’s continuous dealing with *the temptation of* bad faith when one’s sexual desire does not conform to standard expectations. There need be nothing teleological about Daniel’s narrative – that is to say, the scene with Philippe at the end of the third novel need not be read as providing a cure to a psychoanalytic problem. With this in mind, Daniel’s interaction with Philippe is not weighted with extra explanatory power, and becomes another example to be included in the group of examples, thus enriching our understanding of Daniel as a character over time, rather than seeing him as a “homosexual” neurotic who would search for relief from guilt and responsibility as an analysand.

In the 1940s, Maurice Blanchot had talked about Sartre’s trilogy as an example of the “roman à thèse”: “En somme, nous le voyons mieux maintenant : le roman n’a rien à craindre d’un thèse, à condition que la thèse accepte de n’être rien sans le roman.”<sup>318</sup> This is seen especially in the illustration of Daniel’s character, such as I have been at pains to illustrate in this

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<sup>317</sup> Christina Howells, “Conclusion: Sartre and the Deconstruction of the Subject,” *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. Christina Howells (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 327.

<sup>318</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “Les Romans de Sartre,” *Sartre*, ed. Michel Contat (Paris: Bayard, 2005) 27.

chapter. If we think that Sartre might be presenting a “thèse” about same-sex desire in *Les chemins de la liberté*, this is no other than the irreducible, novelistic complexity of Daniel’s growth from purported pederast and monster to an adult able to conceive his own bodily desires. This evidences the fact that Sartre’s *thèse* about the possibilities of the homosexual in relation to sex – if we can say that there is one – is nothing without his narrative. Indeed, if what I have extracted regarding the good faith of the homosexual from Sartre’s trilogy makes sense, it remains just that – an extraction from the whole. The *thèse* outlined in this chapter is nothing without the illustration offered to us by the character of Daniel.

4.0 “CE MONSTRE DÉLICAT, - HYPOCRITE LECTEUR, - MON SEMBLABLE, -  
MON FRÈRE !”<sup>319</sup>  
GENET AS THE READER’S LOOKING GLASS

Oh, Kitty, how nice it would be if we could  
only get through into Looking-glass House!  
I’m sure it’s got, oh! such beautiful things  
in it! Let’s pretend there’s a way of getting  
through into it somehow, Kitty.<sup>320</sup>

Today, Jean Genet is most often known for his theater, which is regularly performed in France and around the world. His novels are less easily accessible, being long and somewhat baroque in style, but they are at the same time challenging, unsettling, and beautiful. This chapter will not deal with all of his novels, but instead will focus on three: *Miracle de la rose*,<sup>321</sup> *Pompes funèbres*,<sup>322</sup> and *Le Journal du voleur*.<sup>323</sup> I have linked these novels together because of their common use of Jean Genet as a main character. In this way, there is a similarity between this trilogy of novels by Genet and the trilogy by Duras examined in chapter two: both are three attempts at establishing a similar character, strongly and explicitly related to the author of the books. Genet has said that these three novels were “parties d’un rêve ou d’une reverie,”<sup>324</sup> which

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<sup>319</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 6.

<sup>320</sup> Lewis Carroll, “Through the Looking Glass,” *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll* (New York: Modern-Random, 1936) 148.

<sup>321</sup> Jean Genet, *Miracle de la rose* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946).

<sup>322</sup> Jean Genet, *Pompes funèbres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953).

<sup>323</sup> Jean Genet, *Journal du voleur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

<sup>324</sup> Jean Genet, “Entretien avec Rüdiger Wischenbart et Layla Shahid Barrada,” *L’Ennemi déclaré: textes et entretiens*, ed. Albert Dichy (Paris: Gallimard, 1991) 272.

is one of the reasons for the exclusion from this project of Genet's later novel *Un Captif amoureux*. The novels that this project focuses on were written in close succession, while Genet was in his 30s. *Captif*, on the other hand, was written when Genet was already in his 70s and published only posthumously in 1986. Edmond White notes that the last novel is not explicitly erotic, which not only differentiates it from the novels this project is concerned with, but also makes it less relevant to my main argument.<sup>325</sup> But as Genet says,

mes livres précédents – j'ai cessé d'écrire depuis trente ans à peu près – faisaient partie d'un rêve ou d'une rêverie. Survivant à ce rêve et à cette rêverie, pour obtenir une espèce de plénitude de vie, je devais entrer dans l'action.<sup>326</sup>

*Captif*, born out of this focus on action (and purportedly commissioned by Yasser Arafat)<sup>327</sup> is of a different feel than the previous novels that contain Jean Genet as a character. I believe this project is complete by dealing solely with the works that Genet produced before he almost completely abandoned the form of the novel.

The three novels by Genet that are the focus of this chapter are not easily summarized. The flow of the prose often jumps from the point of view of one character to another, and even from one time period to another, leaving the reader wondering about the specific setting and players of a scene. *Miracle de la rose* illustrates this point well. Mairéad Hanrahan gives a good summary of the novel in his book *Lire Genet: une poétique de la différence*:

Sur le plan de l'histoire, il n'y a aucune progression logique, aucun développement téléologique tendant vers un dénouement final. En bref, le narrateur, qui s'appelle Genet, raconte son amour pour trois détenus, Harcamone,

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<sup>325</sup> Edmund White, introduction, *Prison of Love*, by Jean Genet, trans. Barbara Bray (Hanover: UP of New England, 1992) x.

<sup>326</sup> Genet, "Wischenbart" 272.

<sup>327</sup> White xi.

Bulkaen et Divers, à la Centrale de Fontevrault où il vient d'être emprisonné. Il ne s'agit pas de raconter *une* histoire d'amour, ni même une série d'histoires d'amour qui se seraient succédé dans le temps ; le narrateur aime les trois hommes simultanément.<sup>328</sup>

The novel, then, simply follows the *character* of Jean Genet as he, now a prisoner in the famed Fontevrault jail, recounts his days and loves at the Mettray penal colony for boys. Though it is well-documented that Jean Genet the author did spend time at Mettray,<sup>329</sup> and other prisons in France (Fresnes, for example),<sup>330</sup> his time at Fontevrault is difficult to establish, making it seem more like a creative addition to the character's life rather than the author's.

*Pompes funèbres* also centers on the character of Jean Genet, as he deals with the murder of his lover, Jean Decarnin, a fighter in the resistance during the Nazi occupation of Paris. This novel plays especially with point of view, using first-person narration to tell the story of the narrator/Jean Genet and his dead lover Jean Decarnin, the story of the Nazi soldier Erik and his French lover Riton, and even the story of a fictional version of Hitler. Sharon Cornford describes the shifts in perspective by saying,

In *Pompes funèbres* the narrator is homodiegetic in relation to the primary narrative – Jean D's funeral, his visit to Jean D's mother's house, his cinema visit, memories from his relationship with Jean D – but heterodiegetic when narrating the secondary narrative, the Erik-Riton story. Generally, then, the narrator is

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<sup>328</sup> Mairéad Hanrahan, *Lire Genet: Une poétique de la différence* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1997) 33.

<sup>329</sup> Albert Dichy, "Chronologie," *Le Magazine Littéraire* Dec. 2010: 51; Harry E. Stewart and Rob Roy McGregor, *Jean Genet: From Fascism to Nihilism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993) 13.

<sup>330</sup> "Jean Genet," *Guide to French Literature: 1789 to the Present*, ed. Anthony Levi (Chicago: St. James, 1998) 258.

homodiegetic when narrating what he presents as his real situation but heterodiegetic when constructing pure fantasy, although there is some slippage.<sup>331</sup>

The third novel is *Le Journal du voleur*. Again, this novel focuses on the character Jean Genet, as he makes his way across Europe as a vagabond, stealing and prostituting himself. This book is more self-reflective than the previous two, which may account for why many consider it to be the most autobiographic. Still, the reader is left unsure about what is meant to be a veridical account of Genet's life, and what is simply part of the continuing characterization of Jean Genet the fictional character.

The reader will note that dates are suspiciously absent from the three novels. This must be by design, since even the publication history of Genet's novels requires a separate discussion. Simply put, the content of Genet's novels was seen as so controversial that only *Miracle de la rose* was originally represented by an official publishing house.<sup>332</sup> *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* was privately printed in an edition of 350 copies probably around 1942, though establishing that date for certain is not easily done.<sup>333</sup> It was the publishing house L'Arbalète that printed 475 copies of *Miracle de la Rose* for subscribers only in 1946. The first edition of *Querelle de Brest*, with the famous, though unsigned, illustration by Jean Cocteau, appeared anonymously in a printing of 524 copies in 1947, while in the same year Gaston Gallimard illegally published the first edition of *Pompes funèbres* in 495 copies.<sup>334</sup> *Les Temps Modernes* had already printed extracts

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<sup>331</sup> Sharon Cornford, "Death, Murder and Narrative Form in *Pompes funèbres*," *Flowers and Revolution: A Collection of Writings on Jean Genet*, ed. Barbara Read (London: Middlesex UP, 1997) 94-95.

<sup>332</sup> Albert Dichy, "Aventures éditoriales," *Le Monde* 10 Sept. 2010, *Academic*, LexisNexis, U of Pittsburgh, Hillman Library, 4 Sept. 2012.

<sup>333</sup> "Jean Genet," *Guide* 258. For a slightly conflicting date, see Dichy, "Aventures" 198-99.

<sup>334</sup> Dichy, "Aventures" 199.

of *Pompes funèbres* and *Journal du voleur* in 1945 and 1946 respectively,<sup>335</sup> but it was not until around 1948 that the *Journal du voleur* appeared in its entirety in a 400 copy edition in Switzerland, giving no date or place of publication.<sup>336</sup> Gallimard would release a commercial version in 1949. The 1949 publication of *Journal du voleur* is interesting, since it would be the first Genet novel openly published by Gallimard, but the only of the five never to make it into Genet's *Oeuvres complètes* that Gallimard began producing two years later.

These details might appear superfluous, but they are not. The publication history of these novels had a precise effect on Genet's writing, as Albert Dichy notes in his perceptive discussion:

Le rappel de ces circonstances éditoriales n'a pas uniquement un intérêt historique. Elles eurent sur les livres mêmes de Genet une incidence capitale : marginalisée et exclue contre le gré de son auteur des circuits traditionnels de l'édition l'œuvre principale de Genet s'est en conséquence développée hors de toute régulation sans entraves d'aucune sorte sans souci même de sa réception (aucun article de presse n'a salué l'édition clandestine de ses ouvrages). Elle s'est déployée dans le champ de l'impubliable. Et l'on peut suivre ainsi de *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* à *Querelle de Brest* la montée en violence et en puissance de l'œuvre *Journal du voleur* dédié à Sartre et Simone de Beauvoir paraissant sur ce point déjà altéré et peut-être affaibli par une première reconnaissance sociale.<sup>337</sup>

We see here the impact of Genet's forced unconcern about the social reception of his work, since it was deemed too obscene to be published anyway. The fact that, as a writer, he did

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<sup>335</sup> "Jean Genet," *Guide* 258.

<sup>336</sup> Dichy, "Aventures".

<sup>337</sup> Dichy, "Aventures".

not have to worry about *literary* conventions allowed him to expand the domain of what can be said in *literature*. This is why, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, he was able to expand the literary world, by introducing words that were already out there, in another linguistic domain, but not in books. Duras, of course, did the same thing, but in reverse order: the literary fame she gained towards the end of her career allowed her the freedom to escape literary conventions once she was an established author.

#### 4.1 SAINT GENET ACCORDING TO SARTRE

Much earlier than when they posthumously lent their name as guarantors, to a certain degree, of *Journal du Voleur*, Sartre and Beauvoir also had a large role to play in the publishing of Genet's complete works in 1951. In fact, it is no small matter that Sartre's massive *Saint-Genet: Comédien et martyr*, should serve as the first tome of that collection. That is to say, any reader who, even today, approaches Genet's *Oeuvres complètes*, should, at least in theory, first wade through the almost 700 pages by Sartre that comprise the first volume before he or she can read at a single word that Genet has written. Thus, not only has the friendship and protection of Sartre influenced the way in which Genet approached his own prose, but also the way in which the prose was received:

Le passage presque sans médiation des publications confidentielles à celles des Œuvres complètes chez Gallimard en 1951 relève du coup d'Etat éditorial.

Fomenté par Sartre son préfacier mais aussi son intercesseur auprès de Gallimard il fit brusquement basculer le statut social et littéraire de Genet petit délinquant

promu grand écrivain alors qu'il avait à peine quarante ans qu'il n'écrivait que depuis neuf ans et que la plupart de ses livres étaient totalement inconnus.<sup>338</sup>

Sartre did become an influential power behind getting Genet to the full status of recognized French author, however, his role might not have been completely positive, as it obviously overdetermined Genet's reception. Genet himself, who had become acquainted with Sartre only in 1944,<sup>339</sup> even recognized the influence that Sartre's critical perspective had on his work. In fact, that influence was just short of paralyzing. When asked in an interview with Madeleine Gobeil for *Playboy* what kind of impression *Saint-Genet* had on him, Genet responded:

Une espèce de dégoût – parce que je me suis vu nu et dénudé par quelqu'un d'autre que moi. Dans tous mes livres, je me mets nu et en même temps je me travestis par des mots, des choix, des attitudes, par la féerie. Je m'arrange pour ne pas être trop endommagé. Par Sartre, j'étais mis à nu sans complaisance. Il parle de moi au présent de l'indicatif. Mon premier mouvement a été de vouloir brûler le livre. Sartre m'avait confié le manuscrit. Je toujours essayé d'être responsable de ce que je suscitais. Mais j'ai mis un certain temps à m'en remettre. J'ai été presque incapable de continuer d'écrire. J'aurais pu continuer à développer des formes romanesques mécaniques. J'aurais pu tenter d'écrire par automatisme des romans pornographiques. Le livre de Sartre a créé un vide qui a permis une espèce de détérioration psychologique. Cette détérioration a permis la méditation qui m'a conduit à mon théâtre.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> Dichy "Aventures".

<sup>339</sup> "Jean Genet," *Guide* 258.

<sup>340</sup> Jean Genet, "Entretien avec Madeleine Gobeil," *L'Ennemi déclaré: textes et entretiens*, ed. Albert Dichy (Paris: Gallimard, 1991) 22.

Ian Birchall writes, “among Sartre’s many talents that of writing to a required length was conspicuously absent,”<sup>341</sup> and maybe because of its self-complacent, unruly length, *Saint Genet* has clearly had a disproportionate impact on how Genet’s novels are received, due in no small part to its positioning as the first volume of Genet’s complete works.

Of course, this influence has weakened since the volume first appeared. First, certain details of Genet’s life that Sartre relied upon so heavily for his analysis have proven false. Genet did not become part of his adopted family, the Régniers in Alligny-en-Morvan, at the age of 7, but instead during the *first* year of his life, around the age of 7 months.<sup>342</sup> Neither was Genet sent to a reformatory for young boys at the age of 10 because he was caught stealing by his parents; instead, after the death of his foster mother, he was sent to live with her daughter, where he stayed until he was 14, shining as the best pupil in his school class.<sup>343</sup> It was at 14 that Genet was taken from the family of his foster sister in order to be apprenticed in a useful profession, as was the policy of the Assistance publique.<sup>344</sup> It is from there that he was sent to the reformatory for stealing. As Harry Stewart and Rob Roy McGregor point out, these facts change the force of *Saint Genet* severely:

Sartre’s premise that Genet became a thief because of wicked foster parents does not coincide with the facts of his life with the Régniers. Within Sartre’s existential construct, one becomes what others judge him to be at any given moment. However, his analysis of Genet’s moment-of-becoming places heavy emphasis on the belief that the young man’s negativistic reaction was directed

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<sup>341</sup> Ian Birchall, “The Politics of *Saint Genet*,” *Flowers and Revolution: A Collection of Writings on Jean Genet*, ed. Barbara Read (London: Middlesex UP, 1997) 177.

<sup>342</sup> Dichy, “Chronologie” 51; and Harry Stewart and Rob Roy McGregor, *Jean Genet: A Biography of Deceit 1910-1951* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) 12-13.

<sup>343</sup> Dichy, “Chronologie” 51.

<sup>344</sup> Stewart and McGregor 20.

against the traditional, bourgeois morality of his foster parents. Sartre's theory, as he applied it to Genet, no longer pertains if Genet stole years later while among approving, countercultural peers, a psychological circumstance markedly different from Sartre's condemnatory judgment by the conventional Other.<sup>345</sup>

Taking away that initial moment and experience of being caught stealing by his family, Sartre's analysis gets off on the wrong foot, and thus what it builds upon that moment is similarly askew. As to the reason for these factual errors, Stewart and McGregor fault Genet himself, saying that he fed Sartre the misleading facts in order to surround his life in myth: "[t]he 'myths' spawned by his imagination in fashioning his 'legend' veil wanted untruths, refashioned events, and self-serving motives."<sup>346</sup>

Still, another important critic, Patrice Bougon, places a good deal of the blame with Sartre, saying that the established author and philosopher might have indirectly forced Genet to construct a past able to respond to his own theoretical expectations, since he had a "tendance à appliquer une grille de lecture philosophique au texte de l'écrivain et à ne pas distinguer l'homme rencontré aux Deux Magots du narrateur des romans autobiographiques."<sup>347</sup>

Bougon's point is particularly important from the point of view of this study. Despite the now acknowledged factual weaknesses of Sartre's introduction, there is still a genre of readings that are in line with its general thrust. Abandoning what Genet actually wrote, the words he used, the characterizations that he faked, they hearken back to a hidden image of the writer that is supposed to account for them. Even when they are based on "true" facts, they are what I will call "limited readings". The issue I take with such readings is not that they are wrong, but instead

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<sup>345</sup> Stewart and McGregor 20.

<sup>346</sup> Stewart and McGregor 176.

<sup>347</sup> Bougon, Patrice, "Les grands apôtres de saint Genet," *Le Magazine Littéraire* Dec. 2010: 51.

that they try to see what is the exact relation between the Jean Genet in the novels and the one that has been writing them. This attitude has serious critical consequences that I will explore in more detail later. For now, I will however anticipate that these readings end up following the line Sartre illustrates when he writes, for instance, that the Evil Genet-the-writer is supposed to embody is created by those who see themselves as good:

La conclusion qui semble s'imposer, c'est qu'il n'y a pas de méchant : le seul qui fasse du mal sa constante préoccupation, c'est l'homme de Bien puisque le Mal est d'abord sa propre liberté, c'est-à-dire un ennemi sans cesse renaissant qu'il doit terrasser sans cesse.<sup>348</sup>

Sartre, in other words, ends up denying full subjectivity to Evil, rooted for him in Genet's real life situation as perceived by others, which I will question later on. In fact, we need to put the issues of Genet's biography aside, and focus instead on the literary character of Jean Genet, and the language that is created thanks to that recurrent protagonist and his fellow characters. Anyway, as the critic Elizabeth Stephens remarked, at that point even Genet the writer had become a full fiction: "Of all the strange and self-invented characters found in Jean Genet's fiction – the transsexual street hustlers and imitation gangsters and nationless vagrants – the most compelling is undoubtedly that of Genet himself."<sup>349</sup> As Stephens admits, Genet's inclusion of a character with the same name as himself encourages biographical criticism,<sup>350</sup> still this doesn't exclude the investigation of "Jean Genet" as a character is his own right. Indeed, I am sympathetic with Didier Eribon's view that it is a difficult, and perhaps impossible, task to

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<sup>348</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard 1952) 33.

<sup>349</sup> Elizabeth Stephens, *Queer Writing: Homoeroticism in Jean Genet's Fiction* (New York: Macmillan 2009) 1.

<sup>350</sup> Stephens 2.

stabilize the identity of Genet's narrators,<sup>351</sup> yet we see through Wittgenstein that a lack of stability should not prove overly problematic, quite the contrary: it is only through variation that we can expand the scope of our world. Thus, for the most part, this chapter will avoid the task of meticulously distinguishing between the realities of Genet the character and Genet the author, and will instead take Jean Genet the character as he is given to us in Genet's prose.

## 4.2 CONTRA SARTRE: JEAN GENET UNBOUND

Exploring how Sartre's thought relates to a Wittgensteinian reading of Genet will be an excellent point of departure as we begin to flesh out Genet's portrayal of sex and its relation to self creation. Not surprisingly, after what we said about Sartre's critical approach, we will argue that Sartre's view of self-consciousness and freedom is not sufficient for Genet's purposes, and that in fact it prevents us from receiving the full impact of Genet's prose.

One of the most important points that I will be making is that while both Genet and Sartre are concerned with seeing and its relation to self consciousness – Sartre places so much importance in the gaze of the other, after all – Genet takes seeing beyond the level of reflection and asks of his characters that *they slip through the gaze of the other, making impossible a defined image to be reified by that gaze*. Genet requires that the subject violate the plane of reflection, that he move behind the mirror of the Other's eyes. While this may sound fanciful, it is not for Genet. We will see that he is concerned very much with the realities of our world

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<sup>351</sup> Didier Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire: Variations sur un theme de Jean Genet* (Paris: Fayard, 2001) 30.

(which is his world, too)<sup>352</sup> and is not seeking to escape it through what have long been considered abject sexual practices, nor really does he want to glorify them as an end in themselves. To do so would be to contradict what we take to be a larger concern in his novels, namely that our static, conventional definitions of “self” and “identity” are untenable because they are unreal. No practice, sexual or otherwise, can construct such a definition that would then be thrown back at the subject as the Other’s unbreakable construction. I will come back to this in my textual analysis of several fundamental passages from the trilogy.

When trying to deconstruct Sartre’s approach to Genet’s prose through the issue of seeing, a pithy place to begin is his foreword to *Journal du voleur*. This is where Sartre discusses the importance of Genet’s looking at his own reflected image in what he perceives to be the author’s obsessive narcissism that would be justified by his own superior beauty:

N'est pas Narcisse qui veut. Combien se penchent sur l'eau qui n'y voient qu'une vague apparence d'homme. Genet se voit partout ; les surfaces les plus mates lui renvoient son image ; même chez les autres, il s'aperçoit et met au jour du même coup leur plus profond secret. Le thème inquiétant du double, image, sosie, frère ennemi, se retrouve en toutes ses œuvres.<sup>353</sup>

Here, Sartre makes a telling link between two concepts often thought to be in tension, namely beauty and disturbance. Beauty is linked to reflection via the comparison to the exceedingly fair Narcissus, and yet Genet’s theme of the double is characterized as “inquiétant”. Genet is enamored with his own beauty, and so much so that he need not have a distinctly reflective surface in order to appreciate it; any and all surfaces suffice to return him to thoughts of himself.

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<sup>352</sup> Contrary to the arguments of critics such as Mairéad Hanrahan, who would paint Genet as neither realist nor naturalist. See Hanrahan 13.

<sup>353</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, afterword, *Journal du voleur*, by Jean Genet (Paris: Gallimard, 1986) back cover.

What disturbs Sartre about this obsession, or at least so it seems from the reference to Narcissus, is that it will eventually lead to Genet's inevitable downfall. Of course, what amounts to a downfall for Genet (at least according to Sartre) is not exactly spelled out. Once again, returning to the myth of Narcissus, one assumes that it will be related to a narcissistic rejection of others by blocking out their reflective and self-creating input, resulting in anti-social solitude and ultimate self-drowning.

But *is* Genet's theme of the double "narcissistic" in the first place? By doing what Sartre did not do, that is to engage the narrative scenes where language associated with mirrors and self-reflection occupy a fundamental role in the novels' unfolding, I will argue that it is not. In fact, it is instead the manifestation of Genet's *selflessness*. Genet does make himself the reflection in the mirror, but he does not look at himself: it is the others who will be looking, recognizing *themselves* in Jean Genet. There is no narcissism here, since the person in front of the mirror and the person behind (the reflection) are not one and the same. The mirror for Genet is a relational medium, not one based on self obsession.

Beyond a narcissistic trajectory towards self-destruction, there is another level of disturbance that Sartre finds in Genet's use of the double, namely a disturbance of meaning. This, quite tellingly, is found in what Sartre sees as Genet's attributing to the sacred what the reader expects to be the terrestrial and the profane:

Ses histoires ne sont pas des histoires : elles vous passionnent et vous fascinent mais vous croyiez qu'il vous racontait des faits et vous vous apercevez soudain qu'il vous décrit des rites ; s'il parle des mendiants pouilleux du «Barrio Chino» c'est pour agiter somptueusement des questions de préséance et d'étiquette : il est le Saint-Simon de cette Cour des Miracles. Ses souvenirs ne sont pas des

souvenirs : ils sont exacts mais sacrés ; il parle de sa vie comme un évangéliste, en témoin émerveillé.<sup>354</sup>

This use of sacralized rituals – contextualized as a pre-modern and even medieval aesthetics-- in place of what the reader expects to be base facts, only has the effect, according to Sartre, of actively removing facts from the novels’ content:

Thus there comes into being that new object: a mythology of the myth (like the blues song that was called *The Birth of the Blues*); behind the first-degree myths – The Thief, Murder, the Beggar, the Homosexual – we discover the reflective myths: the Poet, the Saint, the Double, Art. Nothing but myths, then; a Genet with a Genet stuffing...<sup>355</sup>

Here we see in action the use of language that Gilles Deleuze is talking about when he writes: “Mais quand les substantifs et adjectifs se mettent à fondre, quand les noms d’arrêt et de repos sont entraînés par les verbes de pur devenir et glissent dans le langage des événements, toute identité se perd pour le moi, le monde et Dieu.”<sup>356</sup> And yet Deleuze, like Wittgenstein, has no problem with this use of language, *while Sartre finds it uncanny*. Deleuze talks about the loss of meaning in such a case as a means of showing how, even without *savoir*, labels should lose meaning, yet we have reason to doubt the stability of *savoir*, and labels still “mean”. Sartre, on the other hand, takes the stance that an unstable *savoir* in Genet’s work problematizes their relation to truth, as the quotation above shows: Genet is not a truth, but a problematic myth – “a Genet with a Genet stuffing.”

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<sup>354</sup> Sartre, *Journal* back cover.

<sup>355</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, foreword, *The Thief’s Journal*, by Jean Genet, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Bantam, 1964) 2.

<sup>356</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1969) 11.

Sartre does not think that all is lost for Genet and truth, however. When talking about *Journal du Voleur*, for instance, he thinks that this truth is found, not in the content, but in what supposedly hides behind the narration, that is, a “true” portrait not of the author, but of *homosexuality*:

If, however, you are able to see at the seam the thin line separating the enveloping myth from the enveloped myth, you will discover the truth, which is terrifying.

That is why I do not fear to call this book, the most beautiful that Genet has written, the *Dichtung und Wahrheit* of homosexuality.<sup>357</sup>

Sartre’s comparison here is complex. Clearly, he is comparing Genet’s novel to the work *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811-1813) by Goethe – an autobiographical work about the author’s life from childhood to his early 20s. Second, Goethe’s title has a literal relation to what Genet is doing, as far as Sartre understands it, but with an important modification: that Genet’s novel is both the literary (*Dichtung*) and truthful (*Wahrheit*) portrayal of homosexuality, which for Sartre is “terrifying”.

Is Sartre saying that Genet has written the coming of age story for homosexuality as a concept? This notion appears to have distinctly Wittgensteinian shadings (looking as it is for meaning outside of clear definitions) however it is born from a distinctly anti-Wittgensteinian understanding of language. Too, it certainly assumes a wide horizon for what Genet says about homosexuality, and various critics – for example, Lawrence Schehr – are doubtful that such a project was ever of concern to Genet.<sup>358</sup>

Sartre finds in Genet’s *Journal* specifically, and in his oeuvre generally, the disturbing association of beauty and the sacred. An obsession with the former leads to self-destruction,

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<sup>357</sup> Sartre, *Journal 2*.

<sup>358</sup> See Lawrence R. Schehr, *French Gay Modernism* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2004) 86.

according to Sartre, while the use of the latter in place of the terrestrial creates a work based on myths rather than facts. The truth found in Genet's narratives, according to Sartre, is not to be found in facts (since there are none), but instead in the seam between the layers of myth that make up the content. This invisible "seam" would be the place of something like homosexuality, nowhere to be found, of course, in the narration itself.

Look at the telling comparison with Goethe: Goethe's biographical work gives meaning to Goethe's constructed self by creating its narrative. In the case of Genet, Sartre says it is about creating a "self", or subjectivity, for homosexuality. Sartre is equating Genet's sexuality with his self. This sort of reading of Genet is exactly the kind this project is attempting to read past. Sartre was right to note the importance of beauty and myth in Genet, but he was wrong about its role. It is the prevalence of beauty for Genet amidst the ritualized sex of his novels that forces us to read past the idea that Genet is simply creating a myth of ritualized sex, and/or defining either himself or "homosexuality" via it.

### 4.3 JEAN GENET AND HIS MIRRORS

Contrary to the self-destructive finality that Sartre attributes to reflection, mirrors stand out Genet's narratives as a way in which *the characters* are seeing themselves, and in this way, reflection is closely tied to self-understanding. In order to clarify the functioning of reflected images in Genet, I will need to remind us briefly of the physics of reflection.

Mirrors, whether they be the plain mirrors that we find frequently in our everyday lives – bathrooms, hallways, make-up compacts, – or something more creative, a puddle, a window, the wax finish of a car – work because they are smooth surfaces that allow light rays to bounce off at

the same angle at which they hit the surface. The more light the smooth surface absorbs, the less clear the reflected image, which is why plate mirrors use a highly-polished metallic surface that absorbs hardly any light at all. The image produced by a mirror, the reflection, is what is known as a “virtual image” – that is to say, it is an image where the light rays *appear* to converge (twice the distance behind the mirror of the object in front of it). This virtual image is in contrast to a “real image” that is an image produced where light rays *actually* converge, such as a movie projector on a screen, or more quotidian still, the image produced on our retina that has been focused through the lens of the eye.

This is essential to Genet’s use of mirrors, which is importantly tied to the concepts of virtual and real images. We begin with Genet’s recounting of a dream made by the character of Jean Genet in *Pompes Funèbres* because, although indirectly, it offers the most compelling illustration of Genet’s understanding of the power of the mirror through its repeated use of words coming from the vocabulary related to reflection. This dream allows us to understand how reflective moments tend to relate to Genet’s understanding of self-awareness. The character recounts the dream as follows:

Je sors d’un rêve que je ne puis rapporter. Un rêve ne peut être *fixé*. Il s’écoule et chacune de ses images constamment se transforme *puisque’il n’existe que dans le temps et non dans l’espace*. Puis l’oubli, la confusion...mais ce que je peux dire, c’est *l’impression* qu’il m’a fait. A mon réveil, je savais que je sortais d’un rêve où j’avais commis le mal (je ne sais par quelle action : meurtre, vol ?) mais j’avais commis le mal, et j’éprouvais le sentiment de connaître *la profondeur* de la vie. Quelque chose comme si le monde avait *une surface sur laquelle nous glissons* (le bien) et *une épaisseur où l’on ne s’enfonce* que rarement, plus rarement qu’on ne

croit (je note tout de suite qu'il s'agissait ainsi en rêve d'un séjour en prison). Je crois que ce rejet du monde par le monde peut donner une humilité ou un orgueil, ou vous obliger à rechercher de nouvelles règles de vie, que ce *nouvel univers* vous permette de voir *l'autre monde*.<sup>359</sup>

The dream in which Jean Genet has committed an unnamed evil act also gives him insight into the depths of life, as if he had slipped below a surface of existence that only rarely allows us to do so. Since the evil act has happened in the depth below a surface, this surface has to be the one of “the good”, and the slipping below it amounts to a “rejection of the world by the world.” But the slipping below the surface of the good affords the character the entry into a new universe, and it is the viewpoint from this new universe that allows him to see “*the other world*”. While Genet does not specify further what that “other world” might be, I will argue that it can only be the world from which he has just departed, the world whose surface he has just slipped beneath. The rejection of the world by the world can result, Genet tells us, in three possible outcomes: first, humility, second pride, and third the search for a new set of rules by which to live, which were the ones that the character had encountered in the specular depths of the new universe. The conclusion is that we can only see our world, the “good” world, that is to say the world which we have just left behind, by sliding below its surface and turning back on it with a new, virtual set of rules.

In regards to this project, this conclusion is doubly applicable: first, Genet’s talk of a “rejection of the world by the world” has directly import for our study of self awareness; second, this slipping below the surface of the world gives the nature of the world more latitude than perhaps Sartre would like to give it.

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<sup>359</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 266.

I will deal with the second issue first. To say that Genet's depiction of our world has more latitude than Sartre's could acknowledge, serves to highlight the role that the gaze of the other plays in Sartre's understanding of the rules that determine the relation between the self and world, and to point out that Genet makes it *less* dependent on the gaze of the other – or, at least, not *necessarily* as uniquely dependent on it. For Sartre, we receive judgments about the world and our position in it through the gaze of the other, and so when striving to act in a specific situation, we do so by fitting it into the slots that others have provided for us.<sup>360</sup> However, for Genet, the ability to slip beneath the surface of the world and then turn back on it and in it, gives more autonomy to our relation with the world. We need not go through the gaze of the other; instead, we are free to become the other by entering another world. To understand the world as it is, we must slip below the surface of what it considers to be good and then turn back to face it. This is to say that there is something that is considered good, and that can be left behind and then examined after having been rejected. Genet's use of language commonly associated with reflective imagery deeply changes its meaning: what was a potentially narcissistic trap is now a slipping through a world of difference.

Returning to the first issue, that of a “rejection of the world by the world” and its importance in self-construction, a useful analogical example is found in the writing of Lewis Carroll. In *Through the Looking Glass*,<sup>361</sup> after Alice has managed to step through the mirror above the mantle and into the “Looking-glass house” on the other side, Carroll writes:

Then she began looking about, and noticed that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as

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<sup>360</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, ed. Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre (Paris: Gallimard, 1996) 66-68.

<sup>361</sup> Carroll 138-272.

possible. For instance, the pictures on the wall next the fire seemed to be alive, and the very clock on the chimney-piece (you know you can only see the back of it in the Looking-glass) had got the face of a little old man, and grinned at her.

“They don’t keep this room so tidy as the other,” Alice thought to herself, as she noticed several of the chessmen down in the hearth among the cinders...<sup>362</sup>

The important point to remember is that, both for Alice and for Genet the world in front and the world behind the looking glass are distinctly different worlds, but eventually become *one and the same* once they are looked at from behind “the looking glass”. The pictures on the wall next to the fire that seem to be alive, are the same pictures as *in the real world* even though Alice had never before seen them in the same way. There are the same chess pieces, but they are now covered in ashes. The clock, too, is in the real world, but Alice had not seen the grinning face in it. And the untidiness seen from the new world behind the smooth surface of the mirror is actually that of the real world, beforehand unseen.

How could this be? In fact, both Alice and Jean Genet are concerned about the real world, and use virtuality, at least in part, to look back on it. What Genet finds behind the mirror is brought back necessarily to the real world in front of it. And this is even true of Alice. She eventually realizes that the world behind the looking glass was a dream. The question for her, however, was whether it was she who dreamed it, or she who was dreamt by it:

Now, Kitty, let’s consider who it was that dreamed it all. This is a serious question, my dear, and you should *not* go on licking your paw like that – as if Dinah hadn’t washed you this morning! You see, Kitty, it *must* have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course – but then I was part of

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<sup>362</sup> Carroll 149.

his dream, too! *Was* it the Red King, Kitty? You were his wife, my dear, so you ought to know...<sup>363</sup>

Genet leaves no such ambiguity about which world is real: it is the one in which Jean Genet and the other characters live. Thus we know that what he sees, what he does in the virtual world, is directly related to the material world we live in. Those pictures, that clock, that untidiness are necessarily our own because there is no other world it could be a part of.

This notion of a “rejection of the world by the world” is essential to Genet’s notion of self-realization. This happens through a paradoxical process similar to the one by which Alice become larger while simultaneously becoming smaller. As Gilles Deleuze has said:

Quand je dis « Alice grandit », je veux dire qu’elle devient plus grande qu’elle n’était. Mais par là-même aussi, elle devient plus petite qu’elle n’est maintenant. Bien sûr, ce n’est pas en même temps qu’elle est plus grande et plus petite. Mais c’est en même temps qu’elle le devient. Elle est plus grande maintenant, elle était plus petite auparavant. Mais c’est en même temps, du même coup, qu’on devient plus grand qu’on n’était, et qu’on se fait plus petit qu’on ne devient.<sup>364</sup>

This, as Deleuze points out, is not simultaneity of *being*, but simultaneity of *becoming*. Through becoming larger than she was, Alice becomes smaller than she is. Similarly, in becoming the world that one is, one simultaneously rejects/*unbecomes* the world one was. The becoming is also a performative *unbecoming*. For this work to be a rejection of the world by the world, one must reject what one is.

This distinction between a simultaneity of becoming versus a simultaneity of being, is crucial because it calls into question a moralistic reading of Genet that uses Sartre to its own

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<sup>363</sup> Carroll 271.

<sup>364</sup> Deleuze 9.

ends: Jean Genet's being bad gives us, the spectators of his misdeeds, the opportunity to reinforce our sense of the good. It has been argued that, ultimately, this is the line that Sartre takes in his massive work *Saint Genet*. Franck Catalano summarizes Sartre's supposed position as follows: "Perhaps, it would help if we observed that Genet does not want anything of us, except the honesty to admit that we need evil to define our good and that he provides us with that evil."<sup>365</sup>

In other words, the entry in a new world would simply provide a smooth face on which the previous world could recognize itself, according to the Sartrian dialectics between the Self and the Other. This is, indeed, a relation that condemns the Self to a perennial narcissistic reflection. The difference between the position that Deleuze outlines in Alice's simultaneous becomings, and which we see in the "rejection of the world by the world" articulated by Genet, is that both rely on comparative processes, which ties them to becoming rather than being, which would then be a question of exchanging states. If object A is larger (comparative) than object B, object B is *necessarily* smaller than A. If object A is different from object B (due to a change over time, say), then A is *necessarily* not B. However, if object A is good, that *does not* make object B bad. If object A is *better* (comparative) than B, that *does* make B *worse*. But Sartre's reading is not talking about comparing (either a quality like size, or an identity like this world and that world); instead, Sartre is concerned with definition: one *knows* what good is by comparing it to what bad is.

How, then, do we take this simultaneity of becoming and get to talking of self-realizations? This is where going back to Wittgenstein proves enlightening. To say, with Deleuze, that meaning is found in a simultaneity of becoming, rather than of being, finally might

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<sup>365</sup> Joseph S. Catalano, *Reading Sartre* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2010) 28.

amount to subscribing to Wittgenstein's idea about the impossibility to clearly define blurred-edged concepts. Just as Alice is caught in this paradoxical status of becoming smaller and larger, in a world that is at the same time becoming itself and rejecting itself, so concepts are becoming via example (their use), with no necessarily exhaustive end in sight. *For Genet, this leads to crises of clearly defined identity: as we will see in the next section, self is only a crisis of becoming.*

#### 4.4 IDENTITY CRISES AND ROYAL SELVES

To examine the crisis of identity in Genet, I will turn to a passage in *Pompes* that gives insight into Genet's view of self and, ultimately, its interconnectedness with sex. In this passage, Jean Genet is involved in a cannibalistic feast, where the devoured body is the cadaver of Jean Decarnin:

Personne, rien n'empêcherait qu'eût lieu le soir même la fête, le festin délicat et intime où je m'attablerais seul *autour* du cadavre. L'arrière-salle d'une boutique pouvait suffire. Les glaces, les dorures, les stucs devenaient inutiles. Sur un autel de fortune s'offrent les sacrifices les mieux acceptés de Dieu. Du linge blanc et parfois sanglant qui l'entoure je déferai sans respect le corps posé sur la table du sapin. D'abord un drap, puis une longue chemise blanche, en toile. Corps et linge étaient glacés. Ils sortaient du frigidaire. La poitrine était trouée en trois endroits. Je ne le reconnus pas. Je défis les bras raides des manches. J'enlevai au bas de la chemise les épingles qui faisaient d'elle un sac. Les pieds nus, les jambes, les cuisses de Jean, son ventre apparurent glacés. Quelle paix m'apporte

ce festin. Dans mon souvenir sa queue, qui déchargeait si calmement, prend les proportions et parfois la sereine apparence d'un pommier d'avril sous ses fleurs blanches. Même pour manger ses amis, il faut les faire cuire.<sup>366</sup>

The first identity crisis that arises in this passage is implicit: the inevitable confusion between the character of Jean Genet and his dead lover, Jean. The fact that the object of Jean Genet's love in this novel is a character named Jean provides for no shortage of fodder when thinking about definitions of identity. Since Genet plays so heavily with first person narration in this novel, which is told through multiple narrators, so that we are constantly switching back and forth between Jean Genet as first person, Erik as first person, Jean's mother as first person, and so on – there is hardly any character that Genet does not narrate via the first person at one time or another – all talk of Jean, Genet's lover, easily gets conflated with talk of Jean Genet. While it is clear that the two positions are separate, and that Jean Genet is narrating, from his point of view, a banquet at which he is eating the corpse of Jean, the fact that this action is not actually taking place and is only a fantasy – and this we know because it happens directly after Genet has left the amphitheatre and the corpse has been placed in the refrigeration unit – makes the reader wonder whether this corpse could not also be an image of Jean Genet dreaming to eat his own dead body.

Additionally, aside from this conflation of Jean Decarnin with Jean Genet by the use of the first name, there is a clear desire for the melding of the two persons brought about by cannibalism: Genet is assimilating Jean by eating him. Much like the cat that Riton eats, and that then haunts him in his dreams,<sup>367</sup> Jean is sure to become a permanent part of Genet after the

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<sup>366</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 264-65.

<sup>367</sup> “Il sentait dans sa chair la présence d'un chat, à lui-même si bien assimilé qu'il craignait parfois qu'on entendît ses miaulements et son ronron. Il craignit encore que le chat qu'il sentait en lui ne sortît de lui, emportant par sa nouvelle forme (de chat ou de diable) une partie de sa chair.” Genet, *Pompes* 140.

ritualized feast. In fact, Jean Genet even makes the connection between the two events, “Ce fut long avant de m’attabler avec une fourchette, ainsi que Riton avec le chat.”<sup>368</sup>

This assimilation of Jean, and therefore of difference within loving and an expanded self, is carried even further by a scene where Jean Genet, before dreaming of eating Jean’s body, first places it in the garbage bin, where Jean’s body will become a garbage vessel:

Il faut que je me gante pour te mettre à la poubelle. Car tu fus aussi, pour quelques minutes, une poubelle sur le bord d’un trottoir, pleine d’un amas de débris, de tessons de bouteilles, de coquilles d’œufs, de croûtons de pain mouillés, de vin, de démêlures de cheveux, d’os prouvant les ripailles des étages supérieurs, de fanes de poireaux.<sup>369</sup>

Is this a body that Genet has placed in the garbage? Is he the receptacle itself? And how does this coincide with Genet’s account of eating Jean’s corpse? Is this the picked-over carcass that Jean Genet is now throwing out? None of this is clear in the passage, and all of it leads to a feeling of uncertainty regarding Jean’s identity: both in relation to Jean Genet – is he one with him, or a separate being? – and in relation to the physical world – is he man or garbage can? The fact that Genet continues on with talk of dreams is even more destabilizing, since Genet goes out of his way to mention that the dream he is referring to is *not* a dream about eating Jean’s corpse (which is the dream that the reader would expect him to be referencing), but instead a dream about being in jail, a statement on which he doesn’t elaborate.

All this combines to emphasize the impossibility of defining either Jean Decarnin or Jean Genet. Jean Decarnin’s identity outside of Jean Genet’s dreams is questioned along with his identity even as a body. Genet, meanwhile – the trusted author from whom the reader receives

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<sup>368</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 265.

<sup>369</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 265.

account of who Jean Decarnin was— throws into question exactly this identity as author by showing his account to be ridden with impossibilities: is he eating a corpse, or is he in jail?

In the same novel, another crisis of identity is brought about by the unsettling narrative identification between Jean Genet and the character of a maid standing in the jailhouse yard. After discussing his thoughts on dreams, Genet suddenly bleeds this talk into a scene involving a maid who could not possibly be present in the scene Genet is describing, according to what the reader knows from the previous narrative. Genet describes a procession in the prison courtyard – presumably the prison about which he was just dreaming:

Il serait difficile d'expliquer pourquoi dans la cour de cette prison passait le cortège funèbre de tous les rois de la Terre. Ce n'est pourtant pas l'instant d'être imprécis. En réalité chaque roi, chaque reine, chaque prince royal, vêtu d'un manteau de cour de velours noir à traîne et coiffé de la couronne d'or fermée, voilée de crêpe le plus souvent, menait le deuil de tous les autres rois. Déjà étaient passés devant elle presque tous les rois du monde – ce qui veut dire d'Europe, quand la bonne vit s'avancer un carrosse doré traîné par des chevaux blancs vêtus en deuil.<sup>370</sup>

While this key passage is long, it shows the seamlessness with which Genet combines a narrative that could only concern himself – that of being in a prison in his very own dream – and a narrative that clearly centers around another character who, according to the novel, is (or, at least, should be) currently witnessing the burial of her infant daughter and therefore participating in a funeral procession, but somewhere else. The references to mourning – these are, after all, the “pompes funèbres” of the title – in the passage are plentiful and lead the reader to assume the

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<sup>370</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 267.

maid must be in a graveyard, yet the stated setting is the prison yard. This is, of course, a familiar setting for Jean Genet, but not for the maid. In this melding of narratives we find the crisis of identity: is Genet the maid, or is the maid Genet, or neither, or both? This identity crisis is only compounded when the reader remembers the Jean Decarnin/Jean Genet conflation mentioned above.

Lastly, there is a theme that links all the crises of identity: the royal nature of its protagonists, or at least of their gestures. While I will get into deeper discussion of this last part later, for now I will limit myself to drawing out how Genet's use of royal images and characters helps us understand even more fully the degree to which identity is played with at this foundational moment in the Genet trilogy. This theme appears most clearly in the maid narrative, as kings and queens parade through the prison yard, seemingly grieving with the maid the death of her daughter. However, this reference also reaches forwards and backwards to the parts that precede and follow it. For one, this is reflected in the title, *Pompes funèbres*. Second, in the section where Genet is describing Jean *as* a garbage can, Genet says that he has *crowned* Jean:

De mes mains pieuses, j'étendis ma tendresse et ma vénération, les laissant reposer plutôt que les posant, comme un voile de blonde ou de brune, et pour que le vent ne les emporte pas, avec les gestes délicats et voletants d'une habilleuse d'étoile, je les maintins par *des couronnes* de fleurs et de lauriers.<sup>371</sup>

In the last paragraph of the section, finally, Jean Genet alludes *to himself* as royalty, noting that he passes his surroundings "en souverain."<sup>372</sup> All of this to say that the separation between Jean Decarnin and Jean Genet is in crisis, the separation between Jean Genet and the maid is in crisis, and the separation between Jean Decarnin as/or Jean Genet as mourner with, or *one* with, the

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<sup>371</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 265.

<sup>372</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 267-68.

maid is in crisis, and this crisis is a position that sets the individual apart as member of a class above all others – as royalty. The second level of Genet’s view of self becomes clear. Not only is self a crisis of identity, but *to live in a crisis of self is to be in a privileged position*.

We turn now to the final paragraph relative to the maid’s appearance in the courtyard, just before the section break. This paragraph relates to what comes before it, tying together Genet’s representations of selfhood and sex. In the end, we will find that sex is, itself, a crisis of selfhood, which is directly related to an understanding of the world.

To understand what the final paragraph is referencing, we will go back to the passage that we have already quoted, in which the maid is watching the royalty process before her as she mourns:

Et chacun [the royalty], dans ce cortège, était seul, pris, capturé dans un bloc de solitude d’où il ne pouvait rien voir que lui-même et l’exceptionnelle magnificence – non d’un destin – mais de la trace de ce destin qu’il continuait. Leur solitude enfin, et leur indifférence permettaient à la bonne d’être *maîtresse d’elle-même* en face de ces personnages hautains. Elle les regarda comme sa patronne regardait le samedi de son balcon passer les noces.<sup>373</sup>

We see here that Genet is presenting very unique notions of “alone” and “solitude”. These members of the royal families are certainly not alone in any physical sense, since they are part of an extremely large procession. Instead, this aloneness and solitude is of a different kind. They are *lonely*. They are emotionally separate. They see only themselves and the mere trace of a destiny that they are continuing. But it is the very solitude of the royals, coupled with their indifference, that allows the maid to attain a semblance of selfhood – in the presence of their

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<sup>373</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 267.

solitude, she finally becomes her own mistress: the royalty's separateness necessarily provides for the separateness of the maid. Notice, however, that while the maid becomes her own mistress and achieves autonomy, this only establishes her independence. Genet, in other words, is less concerned with mapping out the specifics of a character's identity than he is with providing a space for its existence. This, I argue, is all he can do. Being that examples of autonomous characterizations can be given by seeing them appear in different contextual spaces, and that none of these appearances will be exhaustive, the important work to be done is to establish that there is a space for these characterizations to occur— a space that the giving of examples can illuminate, though not clearly, nor exhaustively, nor concretely. Genet is pushing us towards a Wittgensteinian crisis of identity: our identity *is in fact a concept*, but not much more can be said of it.

Let us see how this pans out when we turn to the final paragraph before the break, to the identity crisis that sees as its protagonist Jean Genet alone. In this final paragraph, Genet takes the narrative from a description of visions – that of him eating Jean's body, of Jean's body becoming an exploding garbage can, of a maid watching a funeral procession in a prison courtyard – to a description of himself taken outside of these events.

The mood is radically altered, as Genet speaks as if to sum up all that he has just set down on paper, and ends on a rather obscene note:

Je suis soudain seul parce que le ciel est bleu, les arbres verts, la rue calme, et qu'un chien marche, aussi seul que moi, devant moi. J'avance lentement, mais fortement. Je crois qu'il fait nuit. Ces paysages que je découvre, ces maisons avec leurs réclames, les affiches, les vitrines au milieu de quoi je passe en souverain sont de la même substance que les personnages de ce livre, que les

visions que je découvre quand ma bouche et ma langue sont occupées dans les poils d'un œil de bronze où je crois reconnaître un rappel des goûts de mon enfance pour les tunnels. J'encule le monde.<sup>374</sup>

The reference to Genet being alone, and to his walking through the landscape as a sovereign serve to put him in the place of the procession of royalty that passes before the maid. Just as that procession plods through the prison/graveyard before the maid/Genet, so Genet processes through the landscape of his own life – the houses, the posters, the windows. But being that Genet says the characters and the visions that he has are of the same substance as this landscape, we see that he not only processes through the landscapes of his life, but also through the characters of his books. These are also, of course, the visions that occur to him while rimming a lover, and the passage ends with the graphic depiction of a sexual act.

First of all, we notice that in this passage, we the readers are now watching a character, that of Jean Genet constructing his narrative world of visions and engaging in explicit sexual acts. We are now the ones who are in the position of slipping below the surface, of penetrating the new world existing under the opaque book cover that will paradoxically be our own self-optical instrument. It appears that now, we the readers are receiving a renewed space of identity as we watch Jean Genet, also solitude-laden, process through the spaces of his own book – the landscapes, the characters, the visions of a virtual world. It is the solitude that Genet has achieved – his slipping below the surface of the world, his rejecting of the world while being the world – that provides a space for the same mechanism starting to work for the reader of his previously unspeakable words. This does, of course, set Genet up as a sort of Saint – just like Sartre had said – however, we now see that this occurs through a daring slipping below the

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<sup>374</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 267-68.

surface, not narcissistic self-glorification. That gesture is what we need in order to appreciate the existence of another world, the mere seeing of which provides an opportunity for us to follow in Genet's footsteps. Alphonso Lingis describes this experience well with regards to those who would write about Genet: "To dare to write about Genet...requires having accompanied him into one's own abjection, betrayals, and sacrifice..."<sup>375</sup> But regardless of whether or not we do that, a renewed space has been provided for us, and our identity will also be thrown into a crisis.

We now turn to the last sentence of the paragraph – "J'encule le monde." This sentence serves as an exclamation point to the notion of self that has preceded it, and highlights for the first time in this passage the importance of sex in the process of self-making. By the phrase "J'encule le monde," Genet indicates that all that has preceded it can be contained under the title of "enculer". All these visions that show us the importance and place-creating power for identity, are all examples of "enculer". Sex *is* an identity crisis for Genet. It is the rejection of the world by the world. The rejection of the self by a self that is both other and the same, be it corpse, maid, or lover. In the case of sexual penetration, in this case anal penetration, we also have a slipping below a surface in order to have access to another "world": what for Sartre remains a highly intellectualized Other, only able to passively reflect a pre-stabilized self, becomes in Genet a deep alterity, that will change both lovers' worlds and perspectives.

An issue arises here with the verb "enculer," which refers specifically to anal sex. Is Genet talking only of anal sex when he discusses the identity-making through identity-crisis power of sex? I argue that this is not necessarily the case, though such a case could be made. The fact that Genet uses the first person singular pronoun could simply be to refer to himself – *he* sodomizes the world, because that is the type of sex that he practices. Second, as shown above,

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<sup>375</sup> Alphonso Lingis, "Love Song," *Articulations of Difference: Gender Studies and Writing in French*, ed. Dominique D. Fisher and Lawrence R. Schehr (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 184.

the sex that Genet is concerned with is a sex that cannot be spoken of in public but is part of a world nonetheless. The fact that Genet here specifies that he is talking about anal sex does not make this specific sexual act stand out, as much as it simply brings to the fore a previously abjected sexual language. That is to say, this act of anal sex doesn't stand out because of its actual focus on anal penetration in contrast to vaginal or oral penetration, but instead it stands out as another norm-breaking sexual expression that pushes the reader to expand his or her archive of recognizable sexual acts.

Patrick Dubuis gives an enlightening account of the homophobic atmosphere that pervaded Europe up to the 1950s at least, citing high profile scandals that had at the center of them same-sex relationships.<sup>376</sup> This point is applied specifically to Genet by Ian Birchall who argues that part of the initially harsh reception of Sartre's *Saint Genet* was due to a pervading homophobia in French society and government. Not only Genet, but even Sartre were criticized for their explicit language, which was caught in a criminalizing juridical system:

This hostility to Sartre's study derived from a prevailing climate of homophobia. The legal obstacles to homosexuality in France had been tightened in the preceding years. The Vichy regime had introduced in 1942 a new law criminalising homosexual relations involving men under the age of twenty-one and in 1945 de Gaulle's government maintained these same laws.<sup>377</sup>

Thus, no matter the forward thinking that may be seen in Sartre's work on Genet, it is not indicative of the period as a whole.

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<sup>376</sup> Patrick Dubuis, *Émergence de l'homosexualité dans la littérature française: D'André Gide à Jean Genet* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011) 10-13.

<sup>377</sup> Birchall 178-79.

#### 4.5 WITTGENSTEIN, SEX AND SELF

Faced with the layered and complicated use of repeated narrative examples by Genet, it is wise to remind ourselves of the use that Wittgenstein makes of repetition and example when sketching out his understanding of language. As the reader will remember from my first chapter, the heart of Wittgenstein's view of language is that one cannot define certain concepts adequately to account for the wealth of ways in which we use them in our daily language. Thus, when one wishes to express knowledge of such a concept, instead of attempting to define it, one gives examples of things that one would include as instantiations of that concept. When one is wishing to learn about such a concept, one asks for examples of instantiations of the concept.

For Mairéad Hanrahan, in her book *Lire Genet: une poésie de la différence*, this avoidance of clear definitions in the work of Jean Genet has led her to conclude that “[I]’écriture de Genet résiste, au plus haut point, à la signification.”<sup>378</sup> While such a point of view is understandable, we do not need to accept it. Signification does not depend on clear definitions, or on a reference-based understanding of language. In fact, the essay by Genet that Hanrahan cites as support for this point is able to support a Wittgensteinian conception of meaning just as well:

Quand on est malin, on peut faire semblant de s’y retrouver, on peut faire semblant de croire que les mots ne bougent pas, que leur sens est fixe ou qu’il a bougé grâce à nous qui, volontairement, feint-on de croire, si l’on en modifie un peu l’apparence, devenons dieux. Moi, devant ce troupeau enragé, encagé dans le

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<sup>378</sup> Hanrahan 13.

dictionnaire, je sais que je n'ai rien dit et que je ne dirai jamais rien : et les mots s'en foutent.<sup>379</sup>

Here Genet is fully in line with Wittgenstein: given that language is what it is, to make it seem as if the meanings of words do not move is, indeed, no more than a cunning strategy, for they do move. It is only with respect to the people who are caged in the illusory mirage of a dictionary comprised uniquely of acceptable, clearly defined words that Genet has said nothing, that his narratives are meaningless. But Genet's words don't care: even if he has not said something immovable, clearly defined, he has surely *meant*, but this meaning is a vaster meaning than a clearly defined one. One is reminded here of Wittgenstein's comments on inexact explanations: "If I tell someone 'Stand roughly here' – may not this explanation work perfectly?...But isn't it an inexact explanation? – Yes; why shouldn't we call it 'inexact'? Only let us understand what 'inexact' means. For it does not mean 'unusable'."<sup>380</sup> If Hanrahan wants to mourn the lack of a clearly defined signification, she can use Genet to do so, but Genet has still signified in the only possible way – using words that simply do not care about the fact that they can only mean in a blurred-edged way. Genet is coherent. He is comprehensible. He means. And this meaning certainly moves, "bouge," but this is not to say it does not "mean".

In the case of Genet, there are two sorts of examples that are being repeated. Like with Duras and Sartre, there is a repetition of certain characters' experiences with sex – the central girl character for Duras, and Daniel for Sartre. As previously stated, many other things are being repeated for these characters in these narratives, and sex is being repeated for other characters within these novels as well. My choosing of this concept and these characters is not arbitrary,

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<sup>379</sup> Jean Genet, "L'étrange mot d'..." *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) 18.

<sup>380</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2001) §88.

however, since their narrative experiences are particularly interesting and instructive. For Genet, the character whose sexual experiences I'm focusing on is the character of himself – Jean Genet. One aspect of what happens to this character has not been studied in depth so far, but this might be what makes it particularly compelling. Scenes portraying Jean Genet's sexual encounters are often tied to vocabulary pertaining to the definition of what is "good". These two concepts – that of sex and that of the good – operate as two separate issues in the narratives, that is to say that they are not necessarily linked; however, I argue that once we tease them out, they inform each other to a large degree.

#### 4.6 THE PRESENCE OF ABJECT SEX IN GENET

First, we will deal with an apparent paradox: how can we say that Genet is concerned with what is "good", if in all his narratives he only gives examples of what is considered bad, unspeakable, abject? So, we need to look briefly at how abject behavior appears in these novels. Genet discusses abjection in both the first and third novels that I deal with in this project. In *Miracle* Genet writes about Bulkaen's abjection,<sup>381</sup> Divers's abjection,<sup>382</sup> and Jean Genet's own abjection in his dealings with Divers.<sup>383</sup> Genet even mentions that the impact that one other character, Harcamone has over the characters is, in essence, one of abjection: "L'influence d'Harcamone agissait vraiment selon sa parfaite destination : par lui, notre âme était ouverte à l'extrême abjection."<sup>384</sup> In *Journal*, the reader finds Genet comparing penal colonies to a perfect

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<sup>381</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 168.

<sup>382</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 341.

<sup>383</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 341.

<sup>384</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 341.

blossom of abjection,<sup>385</sup> and even offers up a tube of Vaseline as a glaring sign of the abjection pervading the facilities: “Au milieu des objets élégants retirés de la poche des hommes pris dans cette rafle, il [the tube of vaseline] était le signe de l’abjection même.”<sup>386</sup>

More interestingly, it is in this third novel that Genet discusses, albeit a bit mysteriously, the role of the abject for the task of the poet:

Par la gravité des moyens, par la magnificence des matériaux mis en œuvre pour qu’il se rapproche des hommes, je mesure à quel point le poète était loin d’eux. La profondeur de mon abjection l’a forcé à ce travail de bagnard. Or, mon abjection était mon désespoir. Et le désespoir la force même – et en même temps la matière pour l’abolir.

My point here is not to work with the notion of abjection per se, but instead to use it merely as a umbrella term under which we can discuss Genet’s portrayal of sex. To say that the sex Genet writes about is abject is obvious to the point of banality. Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* gives a pithy definition of the abject when she writes,

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me towards and separates me from them.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Genet, *Journal* 11.

<sup>386</sup> Genet, *Journal* 20.

<sup>387</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 2.

Using Kristeva's examples of abject feelings and situations as our guide, there are many aspects of the abject that appear throughout these three novels in relation to sex.<sup>388</sup> To name only a few, the reader finds that human waste, theft, violence, humiliation, and death weave their way in and out of the vast majority of the sexual encounters in the near one thousand pages that make up the novels I am concerned with in this project. As Sharon Cornford comments, "The themes of death and murder recur like an obsession throughout Genet's texts..."<sup>389</sup>

The reader finds human waste as a part of sexual exchange mostly in *Pompes funèbres*. However, the context in which this waste appears is not without surprises. In fact, this is an extremely caring sexual encounter, and the feelings described are far from abject. In the tender love scene between Genet and Jean, each tries to secretly clean the shit that has resulted from anal penetration:

Par un souci très grand de lui éviter, sous mes yeux, les moindres gestes d'une toilette intime, je passai ma main entre ses fesses, comme si je l'eusse caressé là, et lui, par une semblable pudeur, craignant que ma queue ne fût salie par sa merde, l'essuyait avec sa main libre.<sup>390</sup>

This scene clearly combines an abject substance – human feces – with tenderness and caring, in other instances, Genet uses human waste as a source of arousal:

Mes arcades sourcilières écrasées contre les fesses de Jean, une migraine momentanée, mais aiguë précisait ma vision, l'exaspérait...Ma langue fouillait

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<sup>388</sup> For an interesting discussion on Genet and the abject in relation to love, rather than strictly "sex", see Lingis 177-78.

<sup>389</sup> Cornford 94.

<sup>390</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 60.

plus profondément. Mes yeux étaient dévorés par des soleils, par les dents d'acier d'une scie circulaire. Mes tempes battaient.<sup>391</sup>

The closer the character Genet's tongue gets to feces, the more ecstatic his sexual experience.

Sex is also abjected by its connection with criminal behavior: for instance, theft is clearly connected to sexual encounters in the third novel. Jean Genet has sex with a customs officer, and then when the officer leaves the room to clean up, Genet steals his wool cape.<sup>392</sup> In fact, predatory theft and sex are routinely linked for this character by the end of the novel, when he takes to luring men with the promise of sex, only to tie them up and steal their belongings.<sup>393</sup> Once again, this is only further supported by the association of male-to-male sexual encounters and criminal behavior evidenced in the discourse of the time. In this respect, Genet's narratives are actually quite conventional, since the "abject" appears in an expected framework, while in the case of caring and tenderness between lovers that might not be the case.

The scenes in which sex combines with violence and/or humiliation are many in the three novels. In *Miracle*, sex and violence find explicit expression in the scene where Villeroy chooses a younger boy to be Jean Genet's "chicken": "Villeroy devinait ma honte à mes gestes gênés."<sup>394</sup> This tying of violence to sex is even clearer in the first novel, when Jean Genet finally acts on his desire to have sex with Bulkaen:

Ma main droite prit son visage, voulut le tourner, mais il résista. Je l'emprisonnai plus étroitement dans mes jambes. Je voulus l'embrasser sur la bouche, il se détourna ; sur les yeux, il y mit ses deux poings...Je le pressai un peu plus fort...puis brusquement, je fis le geste voyou de le plier en mettant une main sur

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<sup>391</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 134.

<sup>392</sup> Genet, *Journal* 34.

<sup>393</sup> Genet, *Journal* 187-88, 251-55.

<sup>394</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 263.

son ventre et l'autre sur sa nuque, violemment. Je le sentis vaincu. J'entendis sa respiration suffoquée, je soufflai moi-même un peu ; quand je l'eus lâché, nous étions honteux l'un et l'autre.

Je dis, les dents serrées, l'air toujours mauvais :

- J't'ai eu quand même.
- Malgré moi. T'as même rien eu du tout, j'avais mon froc.
- C'est la même chose. J'ai joui. Et puis je t'aurai quand j'voudrai.<sup>395</sup>

Violence and sex are common partners in *Pompes* as well. The foundational relationship between Erik and the executioner, which weaves its way throughout the narrative is often violent. Their first meeting shows this melding especially well:

Le slip d'Erik était déchiré. Son pantalon de drap kaki tombait, formant entre les jambes un tas de linge épais, laissant dans le brouillard s'écraser contre l'écorce rouge les fesses à la peau douce, ambrée, aussi précieuse à l'œil que la brouillard de lait dont la matière était orientée comme celle de la perle... Erik attirait la tête du mâle qui s'apercevait que la musculature du même était solide et sa violence terrible.<sup>396</sup>

Even the relationship between Jean Genet and Jean Decarnin, though often described in very tender terms in the narrative, has a moment of extreme violence, when Genet pulls a gun on Decarnin for having lied to him, and forces him to have oral sex with the loaded firearm:

- Fais ce que je te dis. Fais-le ou je tire. Là. Maintenant suce.
- Je posai le canon de mon revolver sur sa bouche entr'ouverte qu'il referma.
- Je te dis qu'il est chargé. Suce.

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<sup>395</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 280-81.

<sup>396</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 72.

Il ouvrit la bouche où j'introduisis l'extrémité de l'arme. Je chuchotais à l'oreille :

- Mais suce. Tu ne sucés pas. Suce-le, petite salope.<sup>397</sup>

The chorus of violent couples in this novel is continued in the persons of Hitler and Paulo. Hitler, who serves as first person narrator, has a lackey corral of young boys for him to have sex with and then kill. In this scene, Paulo has been lured in, and the violent nature of the sex that Hitler forces on him is terrifying:

Ses membres [Paulo's] acceptaient la domination, ils s'y reposaient. Le ventre étant comprimé par l'arête molle pourtant du lit, il fit pour se dégager un léger mouvement qui souleva sa croupe et je répondis à cet appel par une pression plus grande. Une nouvelle douleur força Paulo à renouveler son mouvement, soulager son ventre, et je m'enfonçai plus fort en lui. Il recommençai une deuxième fois et je le serrai plus près, puis les coups de reins plus nets, plus secs, déclenchèrent cette houle qu'un malentendu provoquait. Je recommençai dix fois et Paulo, bien qu'il eût le ventre écrasé, s'arrêta.<sup>398</sup>

Lastly, violence and sex come together in the scene where Erik watches his fellow German soldiers as they rape Riton, a French mercenary in the Nazi army:

Enfin sûr que le choc serait sans danger, quand le silence fut rétabli, cette haine s'effaça, aux bouches reflourit le sourire subtil, mais déjà le gosse assommé d'un coup de tête au menton où coulait du sang, le pantalon rabaissé, était allongé sur le lit, le visage écrasé sur les draps, le corps broyé par le corps solide du soldat qui sut avoir le sang-froid de poser son fardeau avec assez de délicatesse pour ne pas

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<sup>397</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 141-42.

<sup>398</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 160.

fair geindre le sommier...Le milicien sur le matelas ramena juste auprès d'Erik qui était resté assis, le poing fermé sur l'harmonica, ses pieds qui pendaient à terre. Les autres soldats regardaient.<sup>399</sup>

Even the sex between Riton and Erik at the end of the novel, although consensual, still has a violent air: "La verge le perforant lui faisant si mal qu'il [Riton] ne désira plus qu'un surcroît de douleur afin de se perdre en elle."<sup>400</sup> Sharon Cornford writes that the violent sex in *Pompes funèbres* is an attempt to give life to his mourning over Jean Decarnin's death, and one might actually say that the notion of using violence to give voice to an overwhelming emotion can be extended to the instances of violent sex in the other novels as well:

It is my contention that the narrator does not simply exorcise his grief by articulating it but exploits his relationship to his narrated world and its characters in an attempt to transform his relationship to his bereavement from unbearable passivity into activity.<sup>401</sup>

Furthermore, it is but a small step from violence to death in Genet, as Sharon Cornford also reminds us: "The themes of death and murder recur like an obsession throughout Genet's texts."<sup>402</sup> And in fact, death finds its way into the relationship between Jean Genet and Bulkaen in *Miracle* through the narrator's imagining of the sexual postures he would use with Bulkaen, and likens this imagining to the raping of Bulkaen's corpse since Bulkaen is dead at the time of Genet's daydreaming.<sup>403</sup> Riton and Erik's sexual encounter at the end of *Pompes*, which we have already mentioned, ends unceremoniously with Riton shooting Erik: "Dans un angle, Riton

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<sup>399</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 288.

<sup>400</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 303.

<sup>401</sup> Cornford 94.

<sup>402</sup> Cornford 94.

<sup>403</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 103.

boutonnait sa braguette, puis il saisit doucement la mitraillette. Il tira un coup. Erik s'abattit, roula sur la pente du toit et tomba."<sup>404</sup> We should remark that in French, « tirer un coup » also means to perform a sexual act. Finally, the relation between death and sex are most evident in *Journal* with the anecdote that Genet gives as an aside, telling the story of Albert and Dédé. Albert accidentally kills a German soldier in a bar, and rather than allowing them to be caught, they decide it is best for them as lovers to be united in death. Albert shoots Dédé and then himself.<sup>405</sup> But is the depiction of violence an assertion of its necessary role in over-determining same-sex relations? Does sodomy really signify evil and death in Genet's narratives?

#### 4.7     **OBJECT, OBJECT SEX, AND MIRRORS**

Some readings of Genet would respond affirmatively. We have already seen that according to Sartre Genet glorifies evil in order to offer to his readers a reactive, dialectical understanding of "good". This seems to have an immediate import to talk of sex: namely, Genet is either glorifying socially object sex, or using socially object sex to create a space for "good" sex. However, I am arguing that Genet's portrayal of sex is infinitely more nuanced and much less abstract. This is a variation of the idea that a concept is only knowable through the concepts that it is not. Note, however, that this is *not* a Wittgensteinian notion at all. We don't know by negation, but by an extensive expansion of unbounded, blurred-edge linguistic concepts.

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<sup>404</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 306.

<sup>405</sup> Genet, *Journal* 163.

More importantly, a further issue with this reading is that it takes sex – and sodomy in particular as an evil and violent practice – to be at issue, when in fact, I would argue, what is at issue in Genet is ultimately self understanding and human characterization.

In an important way, the abject serves as the supreme indicator of the central role of context in Genet for character construction, since it must be remembered that “abject” is itself a relative term, tied to taste and social mores. While the tube of Vaseline is abject to the police officers, arousing in them feelings of disgust,<sup>406</sup> it does not have the same effect on Jean who, in fact, associates the crumpled tube with sex and joy: “Il m’avait servi à la préparation de tant de joies secrètes, dans des lieux dignes de sa discrète banalité, qu’il était devenu la condition de mon bonheur, comme mon mouchoir taché en était la preuve.”<sup>407</sup> In this way, the abject in this situation is at best a secondary abject for Genet– he recognizes that *others* view the Vaseline as abject, even though the character charged with representing him by sharing his name doesn’t have the same reaction. To say, then, that same-sex sex acts are abject *in* Genet’s work is not to say they are abject *for* Genet. As Patrick Dubuis writes,

L’homosexualité pour Jean Genet, c’est encore le récit – romancé – de sa propre expérience dans le *Journal du voleur*. De Barcelone à Anvers, il évolue dans l’ombre de caïds pour lesquels ils vole, se prostitue avec, semble-t-il, une vraie jouissance.<sup>408</sup>

The acts are abject for those who are repulsed by such acts, but for Genet they are a joy.

What is, then, the abject for Genet? One could argue that it is what seems non–abject in the books – namely the societal norms that label as “abject” all of the actions in which Genet’s

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<sup>406</sup> Genet, *Journal* 22-23.

<sup>407</sup> Genet, *Journal* 22.

<sup>408</sup> Dubuis 143.

characters revel. This is not to say that the abject and non-abject are interdependent (i.e. that the good is defined by the bad), but instead that what is abject or not is dependent on context (i.e. the good in one context may not be good in another). For instance, it is absolutely clear that the fact that some characters engaged in same-sex acts are Nazis – with Hitler being the archetype for them – makes their sexual performances not only abject, but violent and “evil” acts of rape. But the reader will know how to make the appropriate distinctions because a plethora of archival images is offered in order to make any generalization about sodomy impossible.

This emphasis on contextuality in regards to the abject reminds the reader that Genet is using the good as a contextual term as well – good is not (as Sartre takes it to be in Genet) defined in relation to the bad, but instead good and bad (not necessarily being mutually exclusive, nor exhaustive) are defined (separately) in relation to the context at hand.

What we see in Genet is filtered through our good. Do we see abject sex? Do we see tender, beautiful sex? Of course this depends on the specific instantiation. In admitting what we see, we are brought face to face with a world whose surface we can slip beneath and to which we can relate. And when we suddenly begin to see as beautiful the sex that we would have previously denounced as abject, then we have found ourselves changed by Genet’s words amidst a contextual shift brought about thanks to narrative.

There is a definite way in which abject sex – whatever the form – serves to illustrate supremely this notion of the rejection of the world by the world. In general, we see it as a rejection of norms by those for whom and by whom the norms are created. Still, anal sex may go beyond this: one could say that the ejaculation of semen – a necessary component in the making of new life – into the anus – the place of excretion, abjection, and thereby in a symbolic sense, death – is in and by itself a clear representation of the rejection of the world (birth) by the

world (death). Leo Bersani, for one, takes this notion to an extreme degree, saying that in Genet, “...homosexuality is enlisted as the prototype of relations that break with humanity, that elevate infecundity, waste, and sameness to requirements for the production of pleasure.”<sup>409</sup> The crux of Genet’s use of “homo-ness,” as Bersani calls it, would then be a call to cultural anti-relationality: “...for Genet, they mythically emphasize the sterility of a relation from which the woman’s body is excluded and – to anticipate my next point – the anti-relationality inherent in all homo-ness.”<sup>410</sup> To make his point even more vivid, Bersani appeals to the sex scene between Riton and Erik at the end of the novel that we already commented on, using it as the quintessential example of the anti-relationality of same-sex sex:

This quickie on a Paris rooftop thus takes on the value of a break or seismic shift in a culture’s *episteme*: the injunction to find ourselves, and each other, in the sexual is silenced as, the Nazi and the traitor looking not at each other but in the same direction, the thrust of Erik’s penis propels him and Riton into the impersonal Paris night.<sup>411</sup>

For Bersani, Erik and Riton facing the same direction during anal intercourse is symbolic of the “antirelational thrust”<sup>412</sup> of anal sex. However, as we I will discuss shortly, this supposed antirelationality, even if we were to accept it, is not to be confused with anti-sociality. What Genet is presenting via Erik and Riton’s sexual encounter is *not* an anti-social notion, but one that breaks the relation between concepts that serve only to impede us socially.

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<sup>409</sup> Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995) 172.

<sup>410</sup> Bersani 164.

<sup>411</sup> Bersani 165.

<sup>412</sup> Bersani 169.

#### 4.8 REFLECTIVE SELF-CREATION IN GENET

The passage that better illustrates the importance of specular relations in relation to Jean Genet's self-understanding is found in *Miracle* where he discusses the way in which he resembled Divers, and that this is why Divers has become the mirror by which he has become familiar with his own face. Genet begins with an important general notion – that he is the “prolongement” of Divers: “...moi-même j'étais le prolongement de Divers.”<sup>413</sup> This being proclaimed, he launches into a description of what this means. This *prolongement* is all predicated on the fact that Genet is not familiar with his own face. Without knowing his face, he cannot know to what degree he resembles Divers. Thus he says that, at first, he was unaware of their resemblance. The first reason he gives for this is that, while at the colony, the colonists have no access to mirrors, save for a very small one that are loaned out to them on Sunday mornings so that they can shave.<sup>414</sup> There is simply no way for Genet to figure out in detail what he looks like: “Je ne savais donc rien de mon visage car ce que j'en pouvais distinguer du dehors dans les carreaux inférieurs des fenêtres était trop imprécis.”<sup>415</sup> The second reason that he gives for not being aware of their resemblance is that the inmates who first brought it up, didn't seem to give it a second thought after mentioning it.<sup>416</sup>

There are two things to gather about Genet's knowledge of his own appearance from these passages: namely that if Genet had had access to a larger mirror, and if the observation of his peers had been reinforced, he would have had a more precise knowledge of his own face. The important notion to take away from this is that, for Genet, the larger the reflective surface,

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<sup>413</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 339.

<sup>414</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 339.

<sup>415</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 339.

<sup>416</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 339.

and the greater the reinforcement of others, the more precisely one is able to understand one's own image. The implication of this, which I will deal with shortly, is that the principle applies not only to looking at one's image, but to constructing one's self. Genet is telling us what he was *in need of* in order to see himself, and in the end he will strive to provide these exact same tools, but *for us as readers*: Genet will offer himself up in these novels as the reflective surface and as the reinforcing testimony of what the world is, and thus what we ourselves can become.

In the case his relation with Divers, Jean Genet chooses to use the resemblance between Divers and himself as a way to construct his own characterization.<sup>417</sup> He gives us the steps he took in order to do so: "Sans qu'il le sut, je regardais son visage que je croyais être aussi le mien. J'essayais, sans y parvenir, de graver tous ses traits dans me mémoire. Je fermais les yeux pour essayer de l'y reconstituer. J'apprenais sur le sien mon visage."<sup>418</sup> The last part of this passage deals specifically with the *prolongement* mentioned above:

Si l'on veut, il me semblait que j'étais destiné à refaire pour le compte des années vingt-six et vingt-sept, les gestes éminents dont il avait paré les années vingt-quatre et vingt-cinq. Je le continuais. J'étais projeté par le même rayon, mais je devais me préciser sur l'écran, me rendre visible, deux ans après lui.<sup>419</sup>

The imagery here of the screen seems, at first to be contradictory, with that of the mirror. This is not reflection, but projection. What are we to make of this seemingly contradictory concept? The answer is that this isn't solely projection at all: this is *at the same time* a reflection, since what Genet has been at pains to communicate in the preceding lines is that when he sees Divers he sees *himself*.

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<sup>417</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 339.

<sup>418</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 339.

<sup>419</sup> Genet, *Miracle* 339-40.

In this play between projection and reflection, the reader sees a larger picture of what Genet hopes to accomplish with the world by his use of narrative language. In the same way that Genet, in the passage above, feels as if he is projected by the same ray of light as Divers appearing two years later upon the same screen, so will the reader enter in the larger picture of Genet's autobiographical novel trilogy. Genet suggests that the reader feels as if he or she is projected by the same rays of lights as Jean Genet, even if this can only happen years later, and that though the light rays project an image of Genet, they are reflected back to the reader as an image of herself. In the end, Genet becomes for the reader what Divers had been for Jean Genet— an expanded source of self-creation.

For Bersani's project, the Genetian influence I have outlined above takes on a distinctly social feel, since Bersani finds in his antirelational view of Genet a call to social revolt:

There may be only one reason to tolerate, even to welcome, *Funeral Rites's* rejection (at once exasperated and clownish) of relationality: without such a rejection, social revolt is doomed to repeat the oppressive conditions that provoked the revolt.<sup>420</sup>

He fleshes out this idea beautifully by saying "Revolt allows for new agents to fill the slots of master and slave, but it does not necessarily include a new imagining of how to structure human relations. Structures of oppression outlive agents of oppression."<sup>421</sup> We see then the social importance of socially abject sex:

This is Genet's ingenious solution to the problem of revolutionary beginnings condemned to repeat old orders: he dies so that repetition itself may become an

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<sup>420</sup> Bersani 172.

<sup>421</sup> Bersani 174.

initiating act. This can be accomplished only if dying is conceived, and experienced, as *jouissance*.<sup>422</sup>

This is antirelational, but social in the sense that the relations are the source of enslavement: the breaking of the relational bonds are the source of social freedom. For Bersani, this takes a political focus, but my project is suggesting an interpersonal focus between reader and author. Genet – while he may too be accomplishing Bersani’s political project – is at the same time accomplishing the interpersonal project for the reader, by freeing the reader from the relational conventions that enslave him/her.

Of course, a footnote to Bersani’s argument for Genet’s socially revolutionary narratives is the fact that Genet seemed to think he was not doing anything revolutionary through his writing. In the interview with Michèle Manceaux that we have already quoted, Genet expresses frustration at the idea of being forever connected to revolutionary art:

M.M. – Est-ce que vous auriez écrit *Les Nègres* de la même manière après avoir vécu ce que vous avez venez de connaître ?

G. – Si vous voulez bien, on ne parlera pas de mon théâtre.

M.M. – Vous ne voulez plus écrire ?

G. – Je crois que Brecht n’a rien fait pour le communisme, que la révolution n’a pas été provoquée par *Le Mariage de Figaro* de Beaumarchais. Que plus une œuvre est proche de la perfection, plus elle se renferme sur elle-même. Pis que ça, elle suscite la nostalgie !<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> Bersani 179.

<sup>423</sup> Jean Genet, “Entretien avec Michele Manceaux,” *L’Ennemi déclaré: Textes et entretiens*, ed. Albert Dichy (Paris: Gallimard, 1991) 61-62.

Genet undertakes, by inverting and prolonging himself on the narrative screen, to present to us a reliable reflection and extension of who we are, or rather who we could be if we looked at someone else as an image of ourselves. Divers was aloof and indifferent to his resemblance to Genet; Genet is neither aloof nor indifferent towards his resemblance to us. He has, in fact, set his life apart, by committing it to the search for knowledge about life and the world, as a true and complex picture of the human self, or of the infinite potentialities of self-incarnation.

Let us turn, now, to a passage that deals with the relation of mirrors to self for someone who is *not* willing nor able to move behind the surface of the mirror – i.e. someone who is not approaching life to understand it in the same way as Jean Genet. In *Pompes*, a prominent and important scene dealing with mirrors is where the Nazi soldier Erik arrives back at the chateau where he and five other German soldiers are staying in Loiret, and begins to shoot his image in the surrounding mirrors. This self-loathing virtual suicide becomes a routine for Erik and his five German comrades.

Genet begins narrating this scene by giving an account of what is looming over it: “Le portrait d’Hitler était dans le grand salon, collé sur une glace. Celui de Goering sur le mur d’en face, le regardait. Cette double présence gênait les amours et les exaspérait.”<sup>424</sup> The historical significance of these figures and also their placement on the walls are telling. Hermann Goering was, of course, the head of the Luftwaffe for Nazi Germany, and the appointed successor to Hitler until the very end of the Second World War. It is this hierarchical relationship that is important in relation to their placement – Hitler on the mirror, Goering on the wall. Since Hitler occupies the mirroring surface, it is as if Goering is standing in the room and seeing himself

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<sup>424</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 269.

reflected back as Hitler, much in the same way that Genet say Divers' face as his own. Hitler is playing the role of *the reflective and historical prolongement* of Goering.

Our reading also addresses another important issue, which might be misunderstood. Genet's use of Hitler, Goering, and Nazi characters in general is not at all an alignment with them or their cause. As Bersani writes, "...Genet's fascination with what he outrageously calls the beauty of Nazism is in no way a plea for the specific goals pursued by Nazi Germany..."<sup>425</sup> He expands on this comment by saying, "[t]he Nazism for which Genet professes admiration in his ceremony of treacherous mourning for Jean Decarnin is a myth of absolute betrayal – the betrayal of all human ties, the attempted murder of humanity itself."<sup>426</sup> Thus, for Genet, Nazism remains historical but also serves as a symbol: "[t]he Nazism of *Funeral Rites* is not a cause; it is the apocalyptic appearance in history of an impulse to erase history."<sup>427</sup> As for the use of Hitler specifically, Bersani reminds the reader that Genet's Hitler is portrayed as a means to undermine the goals of Nazism itself.<sup>428</sup>

Erik's destiny is telling in this respect. Thinking back to the scene from *Miracle* discussed above where Genet feels himself to be the *prolongement* of Divers, we see that Erik's scene provides a stark contrast to it. Where Genet sees Divers, but at the same time Divers' image is reflected back to Genet as the image of himself – thus making of the two men one man, in a sense – Erik is always left alone with his own image: for Erik, one man becomes two. Erik is, indeed, caught in the alienating mechanism of narcissistic self-contemplation and annihilation. But this is a Nazi, and while he is also engaged in sodomy, this character can't be conflated with either Jean Genet or even less with Jean Decarnin.

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<sup>425</sup> Bersani 171.

<sup>426</sup> Bersani 167.

<sup>427</sup> Bersani 169.

<sup>428</sup> Bersani 167-68.

Right away, Genet sets up an opposition within Erik, saying that Erik has returned to the chateau “ivre d’être en face de lui-même”.<sup>429</sup> Not only does this notion of being “en face de lui-même” paint a picture of a divided Erik, but this wording parallels what Genet has written only six lines above, saying that Goering’s portrait is “en face” of Hitler’s.<sup>430</sup> But further, Genet’s language describing Erik’s experience of seeing himself in the mirror, describes an interaction that is almost adversarial – pitting Erik *against* his own image:

Il [Erik] se recula un peu. Dans la glace son image s’écarta de lui. Il tendit le bras pour l’attirer à soi, mais sa main ne rencontra rien ; il sentait bien, malgré l’ivresse, qu’il lui suffirait d’avancer pour faire venir à sa rencontre son image renversée, mais il sentait aussi que n’étant qu’une image, elle devait obéir à ses désirs. Il s’impatienta. Dans la glace, son visage rouge devint tragique et d’une telle beauté qu’Erik douta que ce visage fût le sien. En même temps, il exigeait de soumettre un mâle pareil, aussi fort, aussi solide. Il s’obstina et recula d’un pas. L’image recula.<sup>431</sup>

The verbs of movement – *reculer*, *s’écarter* – are of movement away, of separation; the verbs of movement towards – *tendre*, *attirer*, *avancer*, *venir* – are all of actions that go unfulfilled. A separation is occurred or has occurred, and it has created subjects that are opposed to one another.

This opposition comes to a head later on in the paragraph:

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<sup>429</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 269.

<sup>430</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 269.

<sup>431</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 269.

...la main droite s'appuyant, se reposant sur l'étui à revolver de cuir jaune. Le geste commencé par Erik, l'image le continua les yeux fixes. Sa main gauche ouvrit l'étui et tire le revolver, le braqua contre Erik et fit feu.<sup>432</sup>

Yet, while Erik and his image are adversaries, this relationship is rendered more complex by the attraction that Erik feels for his own self: "L'ivresse l'aidant à sombrer, il était à deux pas de perdre sa raison dans sa propre beauté."<sup>433</sup> In an interesting turn of events, what Genet illustrates here is the narcissism that Sartre is at pains to attribute to Genet himself in his foreword to *Journal*. And this narcissism is in direct relation to the self-understanding that Genet is concerned with. Self-understanding for Genet is a process of becoming the image (the reflection, the child, the offspring) of the world. Why can't Erik (and others like him) do this? What is at risk in becoming the *prolongement*? It is dangerous endeavor exactly because it is an important move away from narcissism, a move that the character's own narcissism prevents them from making. Being the *prolongement* is a recognition of your dependence on, and debt towards, those that came before, and thus is an admission of one's limits. Erik's inability to overcome this narcissism is found in his death. He is not held captive – like Narcissus – by his own beauty (though there *is* certainly a vane streak in Erik), but instead by a sense of his complete self-sufficiency. One must reject the illusion that self is completely self-sufficient and independent in order to understand one's self. In this sense, there is a rejection of self (the independent, solitary self) by self (the formed, self that has attained selfhood); a rejection of the world *by* the world. In this way, attaining selfhood for Genet is a relinquishing of narcissism, not – as Sartre would have us believe – a reveling in it.

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<sup>432</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 269-70.

<sup>433</sup> Genet, *Pompes* 269.

#### 4.9 HOMOSEXUALITY AS IDENTITY: DANIEL'S FAILURE REVISITED

In the preceding chapter, we have seen in Sartre's characterization of Daniel the coming to self-acceptance on the part of a gay character through an authentic, good-faith choice of same-sex relations (though this ultimately falls apart as a revelation of identity). As I have already hinted at, the situation in Genet is not quite the same. The situation differs since Genet is not, I argue, foundationally concerned with gay sex as a potential provider for existential identity, except insofar as its position in society might allow the gay man to slip below the surface and see an otherwise invisible aspect of the world. That is to say that the power invested in homosexual sex and homosexual identity is a contextual power. Nikki Sullivan describes this contextuality well in her book, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*:

So, if there is no single correct account of sexuality, then contemporary views of particular relationships and practices are not necessarily any more enlightened or any less symptomatic of the times than those held by previous generations and this is important to keep in mind when we look at historical accounts of sexuality.<sup>434</sup>

Were our society one in which male-to-male sex and relations were prized above all others, than same-sex sexual acts and the identity of preferring same-sex relationships would no longer be the means by which Genet could explore life more deeply. Didier Eribon, in his book, *Insult and the*

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<sup>434</sup> Sullivan, 1.

*Making of the Gay Self*,<sup>435</sup> writes about the importance of existence and essence for the homosexual in strict adherence to Sartrean doctrine:

Authenticity is to be found in the decision to assume the burden of being what one is: to be gay not simply as it were *en soi* (which is to say according to the gaze of others, of society), but rather *pour soi* (that is, having assumed the identity for oneself as a project of freedom). That social gaze establishes for all gay people, even ones who are not out, the *en soi* of homosexuality: the image and the “role,” the “discreditable” identity, assigned to them. The gay man thus must *make* himself gay in order to escape from the violence that the society that makes him *be* gay also threatens him with.<sup>436</sup>

Eribon’s spin on the Sartrean approach goes immediately off course with regards to Genet when it talks of “being what one is,” and yet there is much Sartrean talk on the part of Genet when he talks about becoming what he has been told he is – a “homosexual” and a thief: “Abandonné par ma famille il me semblait déjà naturel d’aggraver cela par l’amour des garçons et cet amour par le vol, et le vol par le crime ou la complaisance au crime. Ainsi refusai-je décidément un monde qui m’avait refusé.”<sup>437</sup> Looking quickly at this passage from *Journal*, this seems a very truthful account, and yet is not. As we said before, the Genet that gives his name to the character in question was not abandoned by his family: the character is a textual iteration that has no relation to extra-textual truth.

I believe the reason that Eribon goes off course is that he fails to distinguish between self-performance and self-construction. Genet’s texts do not explore the notion of becoming via

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<sup>435</sup> Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, trans. Michael Lucey (Durham: Duke UP, 2004).

<sup>436</sup> Eribon, *Insult* 111.

<sup>437</sup> Genet, *Journal* 92.

performing, in the sense that Sartre thinks that Genet was becoming the thief by acting the thief; instead, they explore the understanding of self as a permanent process of self-imagination. And this qualification is important regardless of whether or not Sartre was right about the details of Genet's life – which he was not in any case. To say that Genet *becomes* the thief he is expected to become is not necessarily to say anything about self, except that he performed the role that others recognized as that of the thief.

But why the necessary connection between the performance and *becoming*? One can only *become* in a meaningful way the thief if one believes that the performance one gives encapsulates a univocal, definable identity. A Wittgensteinian position would be that such an identity is so complex in its iterations that ultimately any label will fail. Certainly, Genet (as anyone) can do things that we think a thief would do. But such actions are sufficient for society to call him a thief, not for Genet to believe this to be his univocal essence.

Indeed, Genet's project goes much beyond establishing self-identifications as if one were picking out ice cream flavors. As mentioned above, Genet makes room *for* self, that is, he gives it a fictional place to appear, but this seems to be as far as he is willing to go. This notion of "making room" is similar to how Bersani understands Genet as making space for a new conception of the "social": "*Funeral Rites* does nothing more – but I think it's a great deal – than propose the fantasmatic conditions of possibility for such a proceeding."<sup>438</sup> To this end, we find in Genet's novels an increasingly complex use of self-constructing scenes, which meld one into another without coalescing in an organic whole. While this is clearly seen in the second novel in Genet's playing with the first person perspective, it permeates all three by the use of his own name and events that one can and cannot attribute to his actual life – sometimes with great

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<sup>438</sup> Bersani 171.

authority, other times with little. And indeed, labeling Genet or his life is not what these texts are meant to accomplish. In the same interview that we have already quoted, he says:

“Comment voulez-vous que je me définisse moi-même ? Et puis les mots que l’on peut me coller sur le dos n’ont aucune importance : voleur, pédéraste...maintenant révolutionnaire.”<sup>439</sup>

Instead, they show that Jean Genet *is*, and that his life is bent on understanding and exploring existence as deeply as possible. To think that Genet must “*make* himself gay in order to escape from the violence that the society that makes him *be* gay also threatens him with”<sup>440</sup> is to miss the point. Genet is not concerned with what society thinks gay is, nor with whether or not he fits the description, except insofar as he can use them as a means to better understand his own form of life and that of those around him. As Genet says: “Qu’est-ce que des guérilleros ? Je ne peux pas me servir de mots qui ont servi à d’autres. Je peux dire : ils sont comme ça, ils font ça.”<sup>441</sup> Thus Genet arrives back at Wittgenstein: one cannot clearly define, one can but describe and show.

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<sup>439</sup> Genet, “Manceaux” 56.

<sup>440</sup> Eribon, *Insult* 111.

<sup>441</sup> Genet, “Manceaux” 61.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

Be reconciled, poet, with your world, it is  
the only truth!<sup>442</sup>

In this project, I have recast the understanding of the relation between narrative literature and knowledge through a philosophical analysis of its most fundamental component, that is, the use of language. Ultimately, I argue that an understanding of language based on the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, allows for an approach to repetition in literature that highlights its ability to make meaning and contribute to understanding. Furthermore, I have shown the power of the Wittgensteinian lens to contribute to understanding by applying it to the illustrative case study of the repetition of sex in the oeuvres of canonical French authors of the twentieth century, namely Marguerite Duras, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jean Genet. Consequently, this project serves not only to delineate a Wittgensteinian approach to literature, but also serves as a platform from which to reshape critical scholarship on these three foundational French authors of the past century.

Staying on the surface of words, as a Wittgensteinian picture of language prods us to do, we are forced to recognize the compassion motivating the incestuous act in Duras, and the privileged place it holds in the very creation of the trilogy. This reading provides a view that challenges critics who want to see sex in Duras, and especially the instance of incest, as an

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<sup>442</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 84.

attempt to return to an ideal self that the central girl character is, somehow, lacking. Instead, a Wittgensteinian approach allows for the sexual experiences of the character to be complex and unexpected, and not simply understood as a search for a univocal individual essence. This experience of sex, this view of sex, is uncomfortable exactly because it reveals the desperate measures that are sometimes required to be compassionate, to care for others, and the forms that sex can take in those cases, sometimes flying the face of normative expectations. The lack of comfort that comes from a sexuality whose compassionate nature challenges our understanding of incest, is told as an expression of truth, and in this way it serves both the narrator, as she strives to understand herself better, and the readers, as we try to understand the ways in which the concept of sex can be pushed and expanded beyond a normative and identitarian construction.

Wittgenstein's requirement that we keep on the surface of language also allows this project to present an alternative to readings of Sartre's trilogy that rely heavily on a predefined psychoanalytic unconscious when exploring the narrative of Daniel. The repetition in Daniel's narrative struggles with a predetermined sexual identification that should encompass his self-definition but repeatedly proves inadequate, should not be read as the blind attempt to overcome a repressed truth; instead, it shows the complete inadequacy of the label itself. Calling a character, or oneself, "homosexual" or "pederastic" does not say anything about one's sexual practices or behaviors. Yet this unresolved position allows Daniel to be in good faith regarding sex, while the normative characters in Sartre are denied that potential because they cannot see the position that they have to dismantle. Thus we see that the narrative provides a space for a character to be in good faith sexuality, which is a possibility that Sartre's philosophical stand does not allow for, since it is literature alone that allows for the expression of complexity

necessary for blurred-edged concepts. Since Sartre did not consider reflection about language an integral part of his philosophical universe, that possibility remained unthinkable for him.

But if Sartre's trilogy shows the power of narrative to be the space for a character to be in sexual good faith, then Genet shows the power of narrative to establish a location for self-construction and recognition. In his trilogy, Genet makes room, via the sexualized narrative of his vicissitudes, for the concept of "Jean Genet" to take shape. He is not focused on the use of terms, on changing the ways in which certain terms are used for political purposes, and in this sense, Genet is not focused on the content of the self that takes shape. For Genet to talk of content is beyond the realm of what he can do, and it seems that it is the very concreteness of an established content for self that is the problem. Genet can establish a space for a self to be constructed, but the nature of that construction is taboo. Still, the former is the yeoman's task, paving the way for each individual to concern him or herself with the ephemeral latter. Genet's exploration then is outward focused, and the reader is invited to join him in the exploration of the world, should she choose to allow Genet to operate as her guide through the looking glass.

As I have already said, this study is both about the authors and the novels figuring in it, and about the way in which Wittgenstein's conception of language allows us to formulate an approach to literature in general. John Gibson, one of the few critics who recently have looked at Wittgenstein's philosophy of language as a powerful instrument for literary criticism, gives an apt account of the way in which the power of literature is often stifled due to an understanding of how it relates, or rather *doesn't* relate, to the life of its readers. Gibson writes of the importance of appreciating the ability of literature to interact with our lives through linguistic and conceptual archival accumulation, saying that without this connection, we arrive at a position of literary isolationism:

Literature isolationism is not so much one theory among many we might endorse as it is a position we invite, by default as it were, when we find ourselves unable to say something sensible about how we might read literature for life. For it we cannot explain how a work of fiction can bring reality to view, we will be extremely hard-pressed to state exactly where in a novel we can find this life we want to read for. We will, that is, have invited a picture of literature, not as without any connection to reality (a claim that would likely be incoherent as well as mad), but as at least without a point of contact significant enough to make the idea of reading for life appear worthwhile.<sup>443</sup>

The table is now set for dismantling one of two traditional responses to literary isolationism, which, according to Gibson, present either an indirect or direct view of how literature interacts with life. We will see that only a Wittgensteinian approach allows us to choose between the two.

The indirect, inadequate, view is described by Gibson in the following way, as a *tangential* interaction with life:

It asks us to admit something few of us would deny: that literary works, while not speaking about reality, can at least invite modes of reflection, simulation, and imagination which can in turn lead us to a better understanding of our world. It is not that literature, speaking about fictions as it does, tells us how the world is. But it can suggest ways of regarding it, presenting us with possibilities of worldly understanding and involvement. Literature offers – to put it vaguely at first mention – conceptions, stances, and perspectives.<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> John Gibson, “Reading for Life,” *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (New York: Routledge, 2004) 110.

<sup>444</sup> Gibson 111.

And yet, while this approach may be widely popular – who hasn't heard it espoused in high school literature classes? – it remains for Gibson unacceptable as an understanding of the totality of literature's relation to real life, inasmuch as it is an engagement of life but not of literature:

while it may be true that through our imaginative engagement with literary content we can derive positions, perspectives, and stances that say something of significance about reality, when we examine these derivations we are no longer really talking about literature, and so no longer specifying ways in which we can read the literary work of art. We quickly find that these positions and perspectives are aesthetically impure, literarily heretical, for they in no way can stand in substitution for the proper object of literary experience: the text itself. To think otherwise is to fail to take seriously, we might say, the literature we find in literary works, which is a rather unpardonable sin if our intention is to say something about the nature of our engagement with a novel.<sup>445</sup>

Gibson, then, thinks we must take a *direct* approach to the problem of literary isolationism, but not the direct approach that is often proposed – that of saying that literature intersects with life at exactly and only the point where “what is said in a work of fiction also holds true in reality (consider the sundry accurate historical and geographical details we find in literary works).”<sup>446</sup> But this doesn't truly help us. We can accept that literature does intersect with life at such points, but not *only* that literature intersects with life at those points. Our interest in literature is a specific and declared interest in its *fictional* narratives:

the idea of reading for life requires us to look at literature just when it strikes us as fictional... We are asking a very precise question, one which concerns our actual

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<sup>445</sup> Gibson 113-14.

<sup>446</sup> Gibson 115.

literary heritage, specifically about all those works within it that are content to speak about fictions. We are asking why we give such status to – why we take so seriously – Medea’s madness, Othello’s jealousy, Baldwin’s depiction of a lynching (a fictional lynching, but, for all that, a horrible fiction).<sup>447</sup> (115)

What is at the heart of this problem for Gibson is a slide that is often made regarding language, which is characterized much like Goldfarb talks about in his discussion of Wittgenstein’s innovative depiction of language in this project’s first chapter. Gibson argues that an uncritical commitment to representation in language is what is at the heart of our difficulty in seeing how literature powerfully interacts with life: when we think the role of language is to represent (or reference, as I have used the term in chapter one), literature must either be mimetic or create an entirely new hyper-reality, which is not our reality.<sup>448</sup> This is exactly the error that Wittgenstein helps to dispel. According to Gibson, Wittgenstein’s discussion of the Paris archive in the *Investigations* presents the notion of how it is we come to talk of the standard meter:<sup>449</sup>

There is *one* thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the standard metre in Paris. – But this is, of course, not to ascribe any extraordinary property to it, but only to mark its peculiar role in the language-game of measuring with a metre-rule.<sup>450</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Gibson 115.

<sup>448</sup> Gibson 117.

<sup>449</sup> It should be noted for clarity that the standard metre Wittgenstein is speaking about is actually held by the Bureau International des Poids et Mesures, at the Pavillon de Breteuil, in Sèvres, near Paris.

<sup>450</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2001) §50.

And as Gibson points out, this is indeed an issue of standards, but not at all of representations.

Things become more complex when we deal with colors:

When Wittgenstein goes on to imagine a “standard sepia” in the Paris archive, we are not asked to see our practice of representing the world in colors as resting upon samples preserved in any one archive, of course. Wittgenstein here draws attention to the fact that he is describing an “intermediate case,” and we are expected to turn from it and see that explaining our representational practices generally can be carried out in a similar fashion. That is, we are expected to go on and consider our archives, or those features of our public world that amount to them. We are expected to look for the actual places in which we store our instruments of representation. We are not asked to consider some oddity such as a “color archive” but to recall, for example that a standard color chart can be found with ease in art supplies and hardware stores.<sup>451</sup>

This notion of the standard then comes full circle back to Gibson’s understanding of the role that literature plays in what he calls “reading for life”, although this is a life that is never lived as such, but imagined and actualized in language. Literature acts as an inexhaustible archive:

It is our culture’s possession of a textual tradition which documents the various stories we have to tell of ourselves that shows us how this could be. As soon as we recall what it means to have a literary heritage, we see that we have a culture full of “objects” we can use to archive these stories. We have, that is, novels, plays and poems. And we have places where we put them, public places, namely

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<sup>451</sup> Gibson 120.

libraries, bookstores, etc. Indeed, the idea of a novel is the clearest picture we have of how a culture can enjoy such refined, varied, and complex possibilities of perception and description.<sup>452</sup>

This position is clearly in line with Wittgenstein's depiction of language, and I will not try to undermine it. Yet, I want to take Gibson further and say that the explorations of Duras, Sartre, and Genet show that narrative does far more than archive past "possibilities of perception and description." We are still moving in a far too positivistic realm. The function is certainly part of the larger role that Wittgenstein gives to the repeated examples tied to the depiction of blurred-edged concepts, but it is not all the knowledge of past times. This role is certainly part of what Wittgenstein gives to the repeated example giving tied to blurred-edged concepts, but it is not all. Examples serve to express past conceptualizations, yes, but they also serve as a means to receive them, and Gibson's account of literature as archive is only the passive part of this two-pronged potential. Literature also serves to enrich and to expand our understanding of those very concepts, more than just as historical versions of concepts that we now understand differently.

Indeed, as we have already seen in the first chapter, Eve Sedgwick warns us of just such a move in relation to the blurred-edged concept of homosexuality. And while this dissertation is concerned with sex and sexuality mainly as a test case for a wider Wittgensteinian approach to literature in general, rather than positing his work as to unique foundations of queer theory alone, Sedgwick's warning rings true:

It seems that the topos of "homosexuality as we know it today," or even, to incorporate more fully the antipositivist finding of the Foucauldian shift, "homosexuality as we conceive of it today," has provided a rhetorically necessary

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<sup>452</sup> Gibson 121.

fulcrum point for the denaturalizing work on the past done by many historians. But an unfortunate side effect of this move has been implicitly to underwrite the notion that “homosexuality as we conceive of it today” itself comprises a coherent definitional field rather than a space of overlapping, contradictory, and conflictual definitional forces. Unfortunately, this presents more than a problem of oversimplification. To the degree that power relations involving modern homo/heterosexual definition have been structured by the very tacitness of the double-binding force fields of conflicting definition...to that degree these historical projects, for all their immense care, value, and potential, still risk reinforcing a dangerous consensus of knowingness about the genuine unknown, more than vestigially contradictory structurings of contemporary experience.<sup>453</sup>

If Sedgwick is right about homosexuality and other non-normative sexual identifications that might apply to Duras’s “incestuous” or “pedophilic” characters, then so much more so for other blurred-edged concepts. If we follow Gibson and see literature primarily as archive, we fall victim to creating categories that do more than oversimplify. Not only the category of “homosexuality as we conceive of it today” (or any other period), but categorizations of other blurred-edged concepts: “incest as we conceive it today” (or any other period), “politics as we conceive of it today” (or any other period), “race as we conceive of it” (or any other period) are inadequate, and the list goes on. We must avoid the temptation to accidentally express “knowingness about the genuinely unknown,” that is to say to clearly define the non-clearly-definable.

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<sup>453</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Updated ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 2008) 45.

Though, as I anticipated in the introduction, this dissertation has been about sex, and also not about sex, it is clear at the end that it is also about, and not about, self-construction and awareness. “Self” has become an important part, and maybe even the ultimate *telos*, of the exploration of sex in the narratives of Duras, Sartre, and Genet. This should not surprise us: for these authors, sex is an activity that offers a unique insight into their characters, and so explorations of sex cannot help but end up at questions of self-understanding. But more than just to the abstract relationship between self and sex that is expressed, for instance, in psychoanalytic doctrine, the self is tied tightly to narrative, episodic encounters realized entirely on a linguistic surface. Only in this sense talk of sexual practices leads to talk of self. Thus, in the end, self is as blurred-edged a concept as sex.

Garry L. Hagber, one of the critics engaged in the same path as mine, writes of the insight that a Wittgensteinian depiction of language has on our understanding of our self, saying that, compared to the traditional understanding of self as one of introspection,

Wittgenstein’s point is very different, it is...not only that the very idea of introspection as construed within this philosophical voice is mythological and that the self upon which we place our introspective gaze is a part of conceptual mythology as well but also that we do not in truth perceive or observe our own consciousness.<sup>454</sup>

The power of Hagber’s article is that it reminds us that our self is on the surface and not something inside, thus there is not some essence, there is only use. One should remark that, in a way, this is a Sartrean notion – existence precedes essence; however, it is also and more

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<sup>454</sup> Garry L. Hagber, “The Self, Reflected: Wittgenstein, Cavell, and the Autobiographical Situation,” *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein*, ed. Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2003) 176.

importantly distinctly non-Sartrean because it does not rely on the judgment of an Other. Instead, it relies non-theoretically on use alone. We have seen how our dismantling of Sartre's reading of Genet relied precisely on this all important point.

In conclusion, then, certainly there is a way in which the question "Who is Zach?" can be answered by reference to my body. But the more interesting question of "Who is Zach?" (in the sense of "What is he like?") cannot be answered by reference to my body because it is looking for a description of a blurred-edged kind, that requires blurred-edged concepts. In that case, all that can be done is to give examples of "Zach". One may respond to that question with a slew of adjectives "kind, nice" etc., but in fact adjectives themselves mean nothing at all, except that this person knows of examples of my actions that fall within the community's use of these words.

But when I turn away from the example of an Other *talking about* me, and instead propose that I focus on myself and try to understand who I am, there is the very real danger of being confused by my understanding of language. First, to say "I'm trying to understand who I am" makes it seem as if there is a me that can be understood apart from my questioning. This is precisely the fallacy that Hagberg is getting at by arguing against positing an omniscient narrator in regards to autobiography:

The narration is an action within the ongoing continuity of causation, freedom, and responsibility of the autobiographer, and thus it houses the complexities of meaning and of interpretation that are resident in any other verbal or written first person report; the model of the omniscient narrator is a false ideal.<sup>455</sup>

The same "complexities of meaning and of interpretation" that come into play when we express our understanding of blurred-edged concepts such as sex, love, games, etc. come into play when

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<sup>455</sup> Hagberg 188.

expressing my understanding of “Zach”. Even, and this is the important part, when voicing my understanding of “Zach” to myself, for it’s the act of voicing that understanding that must happen “within the ongoing continuity of causation, freedom, and responsibility” of my situation.

In the end, this tie between narrative and self, and the questions it raises about the ways in which any individual self is a blurred-edged concept like any other in the Wittgensteinian depiction of language, will have to remain promissory notes. These connections and concepts can be explored as further steps after a project such as this one. For example, though I have restricted myself to discussion of the characters of Duras and Genet, it would be a fruitful project to explore the ways in which these characters inform our understanding of the lives of the authors to whom they are related. As well, the question of how literary style influences the complexity of examples, and thus the complexity of the repeated concepts within these examples, would be informative within the oeuvres of authors who play with form as much as Duras, Sartre, and Genet, to say nothing of the other authors who do so – here, I am thinking specifically of the surrealism of Samuel Beckett, and the austerity of Albet Camus, for example. And so, this conclusion operates in a similar fashion as the final section of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, talking about concepts outside the purview of what has come before, but which are tantalizingly related: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”<sup>456</sup> We know, however, that the silence will not last forever, but will repeatedly find voice in narrative examples.

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<sup>456</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* trans. C.K. Ogden (Mineola: Dover, 1999) §7.

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