



# **TESIS DOCTORAL**

**2019-20**

## **POSTMODERN NIHILISM: A LITERATURE OF ABJECTION AND TRANSGRESSION**

**CARLOS SÁNCHEZ FERNÁNDEZ**

**PROGRAMA DE DOCTORADO EN FILOLOGÍA. ESTUDIOS  
LINGÜÍSTICOS Y LITERARIOS: TEORÍA Y APLICACIONES**

**DIRECTOR: DR. ANTONIO ANDRÉS BALLESTEROS GONZÁLEZ**



# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	12
<b>List of Abbreviations</b>	14
<b>General Introduction and Abstract</b>	17
<b>PART 1 - Modernity and Postmodernity</b>	21
<b>Chapter 1 - Introduction: Historical and Ideological Context. The Cold War</b>	23
<b>Chapter 2 - The Enlightenment’s Controversial Legacy: The Holocaust</b>	25
2.1 - Modernity and Violence: Instrumental Reason	25
2.2 – Modernity, Enlightenment and Difference	30
2.3 - The Western Passion for Death: Thanatopolitics	32
<b>Chapter 3 - Modernity and Suspicion: The Death of God</b>	35
3.1 - The School of Suspicion	35
3.2 - Nietzsche: The Advent of Nihilism	38
3.3 – France and Intellectual Negativity: Existentialism and the Linguistic Imperative	42

<b>Chapter 4 - The Western Self and Abjection: A Psychological Outline</b>	47
4.1 – Abjection as a Process	47
4.2 - Abjection as a State	49
4.3 – Maternal Abjection: The Temptation of the Chora	50
4.4 – The Semiotic, Jouissance and Catharsis	52
<b>Chapter 5 – Contemporary Literature as a Literature of Nihilism and Abjection</b>	57
<b>PART 2 - Samuel Beckett's <i>Three Novels</i></b>	60
<b>Chapter 1 - Introduction: Modernism and Postmodernism. <i>Three Novels, Crash, Headhunter</i></b>	62
<b>Chapter 2 – Samuel Beckett: Negativity and Aesthetics</b>	68
<b>Chapter 3 – Beckett's Problematic Nihilism</b>	72
3.1 – Beckett's Aesthetics and Nihilism. Form and Thematics: The Mess	73
3.2 – Historical Paradigms of Negativity: An Excursus	80
3.2.1 – Platonism	81
3.2.2 – Christianity and Gnosticism	82
3.2.3 – Cartesian Dualism	84
3.2.4 – The Dialectic	85

3.2.5 – Conclusions	88
3.3 – Beckett and Nothingness: The Interplay of Positivity and Negativity	88
3.4 – Beckett and Nihilism: Concept and Terminological Precisions. A Second Excursus	91
3.4.1 – Scepticism	91
3.4.2 – Pessimism	92
3.4.3 – Existentialism or Absurdism	93
3.4.4 – Conclusions	94
<b>Chapter 4 -Thematic Analysis: <i>Molloy</i> and <i>Malone Dies</i></b>	96
4.1 – Plot	96
4.2 – Reasons for the Separate Study of the <i>Three Novels: The Unnamable</i>	97
4.3 – Nihilism and the Oedipal in <i>Molloy</i> and <i>Malone Dies</i>	102
4.4 – <i>Molloy</i> : Abjection and Sex / Gender. The Primeval Mother: Darkness	104
4.5 – The Maternal and the Temptations of Self-Dissolution	110
4.6 – Literature: Fascination and Suffering	111
4.7 – Moran: The Superego, the Id, and the Pleasure Principle	112
4.8 – The Abject and Subversion: Feminisation, Violence and Murder	115
4.9 – Inner Metamorphoses, Universal Abjection	118
4.10 – <i>Malone Dies</i> and the Abject’s Allure: The Joys of Darkness	120
4.11 – Dark Holes and the World’s Night: A Third Excursus	122
4.12 – Art and Nihilism: Resistance and Overcoming	124
4.13 – Sex and Reproduction: The Temptation Not to Exist	128
4.14 – An Aesthetics of Waste: Perversion, Incest and Murder	131
4.15 – Perversions: Masturbation. Silence and the Inorganic	135

4.16 – Nihilism and Abjection: Universal Homelessness and Resentment	137
--	-----

## **Chapter 5 – Towards an Integrated Concept of Nihilism: Its Traces in *Molloy* and**

<b><i>Malone Dies</i></b>	140
---------------------------	-----

5.1 – Purposelessness, Meaninglessness, Existentialism	141
--	-----

5.2 – Religious Nihilism and the Death of God	152
---	-----

5.3 – Silenus’ Wisdom, European Buddhism, and Metaphysics: the ‘True World’	160
---	-----

5.4 – Platonism and Christianity	169
----------------------------------	-----

5.5 – Cosmic Order: The Great Chain of Being. Nature and Heideggerian ‘Guardianship’	170
--	-----

5.6 – The Death of Man: Antihumanisms, Modernity and Modernism	178
--	-----

## **Chapter 6 – Thematic Analysis: *The Unnamable***

6.1 – Textuality and Ontological Nightmare	191
--	-----

6.2 – Blanchot: The Worklessness of Language and the Aporia of the ‘I’	194
--	-----

6.3 – Metalinguisticity and Ontological Simulacrum	195
--	-----

6.4 – Subjectivity: Unnamability vs. the Cogito	197
---	-----

6.5 – Proto-Poststructuralism and Proto-Postmodernism	198
---	-----

6.6 – Inauthenticity, Abjection and Nihilism	200
--	-----

6.7 – Gnosticism, Silence and the Will to Nothingness	203
---	-----

6.8 – The Death Drive: Life as Abnormality	207
--	-----

6.9 – Fear, Speech, Writing, Inertia, and Heroism	209
---	-----

6.10 – Fear: The Abject Mother as the True Unnamable	212
--	-----

6.11 – Hatred of God and Mankind. Mahood	214
--	-----

6.12 – Worm: A Libel against Mankind. Bataille’s Heterology	217
6.13 – Absolute Nihilism: ‘The Unintelligible Terms of an Incomprehensible Damnation’	219
<b>PART 3 – J.G. Ballard’s <i>Crash</i></b>	222
<b>Chapter 1 - Introduction: Historical and Cultural Context</b>	224
<b>Chapter 2 – Plot Summary</b>	230
<b>Chapter 3 – Thematic Analysis: Soul-Searching. Postmodernism and Passive Nihilism</b>	232
3.1 – A ‘Cautionary Tale’	232
3.2 – Ethical Indifferentism and Reductive Neo-nihilism: A Theology of Capital	235
3.3 – Consumer Culture and Suburbanisation of the Soul: Lifestyles	238
3.4 – (Post-)History and Space: Postmodern Nihilism	240
3.5 – On Human Nature and Humanism: The Human Animal.	243
3.6 – Body over Soul: Abject Self-Transcendence	248
3.7 – Abject Jouissance: Limit-Experience and the Return of the Real	251
3.8 – Nihilistic Transcendence, Abject Sovereignty, and Inner Experience	253
3.9 – The Car and Sexual Deviance: Eros and Thanatos	256
3.10 – Sex as Everything: Transgression and Deliverance	260
3.11 – Sex: Dionysian Transgression, Dissolution and the Death Drive	263
3.12 – Techno-Thanatos: Rage against Being	264

3.13 – A New Dark Age: Irrationality and Superstition	267
3.14 – Postmodern Completion and Essence of Nihilism: A Psychopathic Hymn	269
3.15 – Perversion and Technology: Conceptualised Sex, Death of Experience	274
3.16 – Sexual Infantilism: Regression and Positive Abjection	281
3.17 – Abject Tradition and the Perverse Body: Post-/Abhumanity and Teratology	286
3.18 – Passivity and Sadomasochism	292
<b>Chapter 4 – A Few Theoretical Concepts</b>	<b>296</b>
4.1 – Existential Nihilism: Metaphysics of the Subject. ‘Ge-stell’ and the Human as (Sexual) ‘Bestand’	296
4.2 – Death of Affect: Hypermodernity and the Vision Machine	301
4.3 – Voyeurism and <i>Ge-stell</i> : Techno-Reason and Evil	303
4.4 – Postmodern Apocalypse: The Eclipse of the Other	306
4.5 – Information, the Media, Heideggerian ‘Chatter’, and Nihilism	307
4.6 – Figural Culture: Simulation and Dereferentialisation	308
4.7 – Death of Reality: Hyperreality. The Code	312
4.8 – Self-Alienation: Death of the Subject. Anthropological Pessimism	318
4.9 – Rebellion against the Symbolic: Postmodern Tribalism	322
4.10 – Dissensus: The Differend and Paralogy	323



<b>Chapter 5 – Violence, Sacredness and the Car</b>	328
5.1 – Dionysian Fate: Pessimism of Strength. The Will to Power and the Overcoming of Nihilism	328
5.2 – The Car as Agent of Transcendence	334
<b>Chapter 6 – Inner Space</b>	336
6.1 – Inner Space, Death of Community, and Wound Culture	336
6.2 – Mediascape: The Irrational Psyche	338
6.3 – Setting: Non-Places. Anomie and Uprootedness	339
6.4 – Contempt for the Biological: The Machinic Body	343
<b>Chapter 7 – J.G. Ballard and Speculative Fiction: Modernism or Postmodernism?</b>	348
<b>PART 4 – Timothy Findley’s <i>Headhunter</i></b>	355
<b>Chapter 1 - Introduction: Historical and Cultural Context</b>	357
<b>Chapter 2 – Plot Summary</b>	361
<b>Chapter 3 – Thematic Analysis: Postmodern Romance</b>	363
3.1 – Jameson’s Postmodernism (and Postmodernity)	363
3.2 – Depthlessness and Simulacrum	364
3.3 – Weakening of Historicity. Historiographic Metafiction	365
3.4 – Schizo-Intensities: A New Emotional Ground Tone	368

3.5 – The Postmodern’s Relations to Physicality	370
3.6 – Waning of Affect in Postmodernity	376
3.7 – Nostalgia for Modernism	380
3.8 – Nostalgia and Nihilism: Resentment for the Loss of Symbolic Authority	381
3.9 – Atheistic Humanism and Hero Cult: Alienation in a Desacralised World	389
<b>Chapter 4 – Irony, Parody and Paradox in <i>Headhunter</i></b>	<b>393</b>
4.1 – Medical Discipline and its Deviations	393
4.2 - The Elect vs. the Corrupt: Eschatological Reflections	398
4.3 – Postmodernism, or Art as an Illustration of Theory	400
4.4 – Irrelevance of Humanist Art in Postmodernism: The Postmodern Sublime and the Real	404
4.5 – Civilisation and Postmodernism	406
<b>Chapter 5 – The Controversial Role of Homosexuality in <i>Headhunter</i>: Postmodernity and the Powers of Horror</b>	<b>414</b>
<b>Chapter 6 – Findley’s Problematic Postmodernism</b>	<b>422</b>
<b>Chapter 7 – Has There Ever Been any Postmodernism at All?</b>	<b>426</b>
<b>PART 5 – Conclusions</b>	<b>440</b>
<b>PART 6 – Original Contributions and Suggestions</b>	<b>464</b>

<b>Bibliography</b>	476
<b>1- Primary Sources</b>	476
<b>2- Secondary Sources</b>	476

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Antonio A. Ballesteros, for his orientation, availability, unremitting support and commitment all through the time needed to write my thesis.



## List of Abbreviations

- BAN* Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, tr. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square, 1992)
- CUP* Cambridge University Press
- LM* Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California, 1999)
- OUP* Oxford University Press
- OVSI* Oxford Very Short Introductions
- OWC* Oxford World's Classics
- POH* Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, *European Perspectives* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982)
- SUNY* State University of New York
- TAE* J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Flamingo Modern Classics (London: Flamingo, 2001)
- TGS* Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, tr. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974)
- TN* Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove, 2009)
- TNCI* The New Critical Idiom
- TPC* Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, *Theory and History of Literature*, 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984)
- TWTP* Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann, tr. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968)

UP University Press

*WWR1* Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E.F.J. Payne, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1966), I (repr. 1969)

*WWR2* Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E.F.J. Payne, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1966), II





## General Introduction and Abstract

The object of my thesis is the study of three theoretical concepts, namely postmodernism, nihilism and abjection. All three will be studied in the historical, cultural and ideological context of postmodernity. This last concept will be contrasted with that of postmodernism on two accounts: first, the common confusion obtaining between both terms and what they stand for; second, my scepticism as to the coetaneous existence of literary postmodernism in the most significant literary traditions of the West. In any case, if it ever existed at all, postmodernism, along with nihilism and abjection, would be an essential constituent of contemporary literature as a literature of postmodernity and transgression.

I will analyse and illustrate these theoretical concepts through the study of three works of fiction published after 1945, which we could roughly take for the date of birth of postmodernity: Samuel Beckett's *Three Novels* (or, rather, his set of English versions of three novels published in French a few years earlier: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*), James Graham Ballard's *Crash*, and Timothy Findley's *Headhunter*.<sup>1</sup> These works were all published at significant moments in the history of postmodernity: Beckett's first trilogy, shortly after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear blasts; *Crash* in 1973, the year of the third Arab-Israeli War and the subsequent oil embargo, which put an end to continuous economic growth in the capitalist West and, even more importantly, to its optimistic discourse on continuous material progress; and finally *Headhunter* in 1991, the year that History died, once the USSR collapsed, having lost the never formally declared Third World War. All three novels illustrate distinct phases in the development of literary postmodernism, too: the transition from modernism to postmodernism, the beginning of its alleged major phase, and its international, globalised moment, just before starting to peter out.

---

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove, 2009).  
J.G. Ballard, *Crash* (London and New York: Harper Perennial, 2008)  
Timothy Findley, *Headhunter*, Harper Perennial Canada (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1999)

As to my eclectic methodology, I intend to focus on the thematic content of these novels, rather than on their form. I pretend my analysis to be an illustration and a development of the concepts of postmodernism, nihilism and abjection, whose potential as analytical tools in literary criticism I also intend to demonstrate. Because of the subject-matter angle I am choosing for my analysis, there will be long developments in domains such as history (postmodernism and postmodernity), philosophy (nihilism) and psychoanalysis (abjection). I will be skipping theoretical-critical schools and trends focused on language, such as poststructuralism and deconstruction, as much as I can, and I will be doing so on purpose. This is a study about the content of fiction and its context, not about its rhetorical strategies or the subsumption of everything under an ultimately unsurpassable linguistic horizon. To me, what literature *tells* matters.

\*\*\*\*\*

As to the state of the critical question concerning all three authors studied in my thesis, Beckett's criticism, up to 1969, the year he was awarded the Nobel Prize, was dominated by the study of philosophy's influence on the author's work. Much of this early criticism was written in French, privileging Descartes and French existentialism as prisms through which to explore the Beckettian universe. Later on, other philosophers were signalled as influences on Beckett, namely Kierkegaard or Schopenhauer. The first monographies about Beckett, such as Hugh Kenner's *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (1961), appeared at this period.

During the 1970s there was an escalation in the criticism written on Beckett, to the point of being referred to as the 'Beckett industry'. During this period, critical approaches based on language anticipated what was going to become the critical staple during the 1980s up to the mid 1990s, namely postmodernism, poststructuralism and deconstruction. This period culminated with the critical compilation edited by Raymond Federman and Lawrence Graver, *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* (1979).

\*\*\*

A remarkable feature of the secondary bibliography dedicated to J.G. Ballard is the fact that probably its most common component is the interview: he gave hundreds of them throughout his career. Many of the interviewers, especially before Ballard's fame by dint

of the cinematic adaptation of *Empire of the Sun* (directed by Steven Spielberg in 1987) were often people from the underground world of science fiction and the pop fanzine subculture. In 1984 there was a first attempt at a comprehensive compilation of critical materials on J.G. Ballard by David Pringle: *J.G. Ballard: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography*. Since then, there have been several monographies on the author, such as Michel Delville's (1998) and Andrzej Gasiorek's (2005). Following the maverick quality of Ballard's writing, they tend to be rather eclectic, although mostly focusing on sociological and surrealist readings of Ballard's oeuvre (the writer being a self-avowed Freudian and an admirer of the Surrealist painters, whom he acknowledges as his major inspiration). I except from this eclecticism works such as Gregory Stephenson's *Out of the Night and into the Dream*, which is a thematic study of Ballard's oeuvre from a Jungian psychoanalytic standpoint, and Samuel Francis' *The Psychological Fictions of J.G. Ballard*.

The surrealist in Ballard's work is dedicated a monography by Jeanette Baxter: *J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination* (2009). She is also the editor of an edited compilation of scholarly essays by various academics (*J.G. Ballard*, 2008), which has recently become a common format in Ballard's criticism.

\*\*\*

Most of the secondary literature on Timothy Findley is characterised by its being published in Canadian journals. This makes its access through UNED's library something rather complicated. The author, like Ballard, was also very fond of being interviewed, though yet again mostly by Canadian media, those conversations often straying from the literary to the writer's gay condition. His being mainly associated with his novel *The Wars* has finally made it very difficult for me to find any secondary literature at all on *Headhunter*. In this sense, I have had to work practically from scratch, following a very close reading of this novel.

\*\*\*\*\*

As for quotations and references, I will be using the MHRA system (3<sup>rd</sup> edn).



## **PART 1 - Modernity and Postmodernity**



## Chapter 1 - Introduction: Historical and Ideological Context. The Cold War

If Virginia Woolf quite characteristically stated that ‘on or about December 1910 human character changed’, by the 1950s it was evident that the human condition had undeniably done so to an extent hardly imaginable to the Bloomsbury novelist; Samuel Beckett would also allude to this phenomenon as ‘the new thing that has happened’.<sup>2</sup> The factors involved in this change were many: socio-economic, ideological, technological and even geostrategic. To begin with, as Paul Crosthwaite remarks, regarding Woolf’s comment on modernity, had she been alive, she might well ‘have recorded a similar shock in August of 1945’, when the first two atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>3</sup> The shock, in fact, can only be imagined as being more than merely ‘similar’: if in Büchner’s *Woyzeck*, one of the most remarkable dramas of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its eponymous hero, a private, is made to eat only peas for several months as part of an experiment designed and carried out by his unit’s doctor, during the 1940s and 1950s US soldiers were exposed to the dreadful effects of radioactivity on the occasion of the experimental atom- and H-bomb blasts in the American South West.<sup>4</sup> That was something slightly more serious and disturbing than the drone of Spitfires and Stukas above England’s pastures green during the Blitz. The nuke blasts, along with the name of a place where Hell ascended to Earth, namely Auschwitz, finally put an end to modernity, born in Italy sometime during the Renaissance and accelerated after the Enlightenment and its first two institutional embodiments: the American and French revolutions and the bourgeois republics they ushered in.

---

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* (London: Hogarth, 1924), p. 4.

Rónán McDonald, *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett*, Cambridge Introductions to Literature (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2006), p. 26. As for human nature and subjectivity after 1945, see Nicholas E. Johnson, ‘Language, Multiplicity, Void: The Radical Politics of the Beckettian Subject’, *Theatre Research International*, 37.1 (2012), 38-48 (pp. 40-41).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Crosthwaite, *Trauma, Postmodernism, and the Aftermath of World War II* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants. and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Georg Büchner, *Woyzeck*, in *Danton’s death, Leonce and Lena, Woyzeck*, trans. and intro. by Victor Price, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1988; repr. 1998), pp. 105-132 (pp. 8,7).

In this new scenario, Europe, torn apart by WWII, was divided. The most apparent sign of this division was Germany's partition into two different states, both founded in 1949. As S.E. Gontarski puts it: 'more than a war ended in 1945.'<sup>5</sup> After 'the age of Kafka and the death camps', after the destruction of European cities, Theodor Adorno would laconically say of Europe: 'the house is past.'<sup>6</sup> Europe had actually been overtaken by two rising superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, while in the Far East Japan was also recovering. This was a world split into two antagonistic blocs, capitalist and communist. Already during the 1950s, both would be subject to what the diplomatic jargon of the day named MAD: mutual assured destruction.<sup>7</sup> These were the times of the undeclared Third World War, the Cold War.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Stan E. Gontarski, 'A Sense of Unending: Samuel Beckett's Eschatological Turn', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 21 (*Where Never Before. Beckett's Poetics of Elsewhere / La poésie de l'ailleurs. In Honor of Marius Buning*) (2009), 135-50 (p. 136).

On how the war experience influenced, for example, Samuel Beckett's writing, as confided to writer Charles Juliet, see Linda Ben-Zvi, 'Beckett and Disgust: The Body as "Laughing Matter"', *Modernism / Modernity*, 18.4 (2011), 681-98 (p. 694). See also William Cloonan, 'Placing the Unplaceable: The Dilemmas of Samuel Beckett's Fiction', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 47.4 (2001), 1009-18 (p. 1017), where it is stated that Beckett creates 'a language that reflects, more powerfully than any other artist, the moral and social desolation of the immediate post-war period.'

<sup>6</sup> Gary Adelman, 'Beckett and Kafka', *Triquarterly*, 117 (2003), 77-106 (p. 81).

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott, Radical Thinkers (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 38. Adorno also described the post-war era as an 'age of incomprehensible horror': Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and tr. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Robert J. McMahon, *Cold War: A very Short Introduction*, OVSII (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2003), p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> In a conversation on his young alter ego as the protagonist of *Empire of the Sun*, J.G. Ballard, to whom we will dedicate the third part of this thesis, claims that he felt WWII had begun the very day the first atom bomb was dropped, despite the lack of a formal declaration of war: Solveig Nordlund, 'Future Now' (1986), in *Extreme Metaphors: Selected Interviews with J.G. Ballard, 1967-2008*, ed. by Simon Sellars and Dan O'Hara, Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, 47 (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), pp. 224-30 (p.226)



## Chapter 2 - The Enlightenment's Controversial Legacy: The Holocaust

### 2.1 - Modernity and Violence: Instrumental Reason

Though about to recover dramatically through American aid, enhanced by a process of economic and political integration initiated in 1950 by the signing of the treaty of Paris, post-war Europe's scars were still visible everywhere during the early 1950s (McMahon, pp. 1-3, 29, 32, 56, 96, 111-14).<sup>9</sup> During this decade, however, the trauma of the Holocaust was still only very slowly beginning to emerge as an object of public debate: even Primo Levi would be denied publication of *If This Is a Man* in 1946.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, if in the Germany of Ludwig Erhard's *Wohlstand für Alle* (*Welfare for Everyone*) and the wonder years of the 'Wirtschaftswunder' ('economic miracle'), or if in the France of 'les Trente Glorieuses' people were settling down to full employment, increasing wealth and new consumerist ways, European thinkers were already denouncing the subjacent nihilism that, according to them, had fuelled the Shoah.<sup>11</sup>

It was rather ironic, yet also tragic, that at this juncture, and even during the heyday of Hitlerism before the war, criticism of techno-science as the ultimate expression of contemporary nihilism was being developed by a committed, though *idealistic* Nazi such

---

<sup>9</sup> Georg Wagner, 'Erhard, Ludwig (1897–1977)', trans. by B. Cook, in *Europe since 1945: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Bernard A. Cook, 2 vols (New York and London: Garland, 2001), I, 569-72.

See also Adorno, as cited in David Pattie, *Samuel Beckett*, Routledge Guides to Literature (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 125.

For the ravages of the war in France, Beckett's country of residence before, during, and after WWII, see Fabrice Grenard, 'The French after 1945: Difficulties and Disappointments of an Immediate Post-War Period', in *The Legacies of Two World Wars: European Societies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Lothar Kettenacker and Torsten Riotte (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2011), pp. 204-224 (pp. 206-09).

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Druker, *Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz: Posthumanist Reflections*, Italian and Italian American Studies (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 7.

For the repression of memories of the Holocaust in France, a country whose cultural and political scene will be central to this study, see Grenard, pp. 208-09; for Britain, see Toby Haggith, 'Great Britain: Remembering a Just War (1945–1950)', in Kettenacker and Riotte (eds.), pp. 225-56 (pp. 229-30). It was only the Eichmann trial in 1960 that marked 'a wider return of the Holocaust trauma to Europe after a period of latency.' (Druker, p. 13). The Auschwitz trials, which took place in Frankfurt, starting in 1964, were also significant in this respect: Tyrus Miller, 'Dismantling Authenticity: Beckett, Adorno, and the "post-War"', *Textual Practice*, 8.1 (1994), 43-57 (p. 44).

<sup>11</sup> For the 'trente glorieuses' as a hyperbolic term, see Grenard, pp. 213-20.

as Martin Heidegger. He would define nihilism as the oblivion of Being, chasing after beings in the midst of its forgetfulness.<sup>12</sup> Over these years, many cultural and philosophical critics would accept and spread these views, above all in France, where Heidegger became ‘the main ‘French’ philosopher, the unacknowledged but omnipresent master thinker whose thought still today continues to determine the horizon of French philosophical thinking.’<sup>13</sup> In this way, even after Auschwitz, the ideological war between modernity and an authoritarian, charismatic tradition, so characteristic of the West since the Enlightenment, went on taking place. Tradition was thus defended by one of the most notorious thinkers of what western intellectuals would end up acknowledging as the postmodern.

One of the potential victims that managed to flee extermination by becoming an exile in the USA, Theodor Adorno, from a democratic, non-dogmatic Marxist perspective, would speak of ‘instrumental reason’ to refer to the same state of things, rejecting any possibility of conciliation between techno-scientific existence and human dignity. Adorno conceived the task of thinking in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as one aimed at resistance against the violence exerted on humanity by the rationalisation of social work.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, he would link the Holocaust, in an especially perturbing way, not to some residual, pre-industrial, conservative or even reactionary, ‘völkisch’ ideals, such as those that Heidegger held so dear and conceived of as opposed to ‘nihilism’, but to the up to then sacralised ideals of the European Enlightenment. Behind Nazism, the long, unexpected shadow of Kant and the

---

<sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, Yale Nota Bene (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 2000), p. 217. More on Heidegger’s Nazism later.

<sup>13</sup> Tom Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California, 1992), p. 2; *Heidegger and French Philosophy: Humanism, Antihumanism and Being* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. xi-xii.

<sup>14</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *El fin de la modernidad: nihilismo y hermenéutica en la cultura posmoderna*, trans. by Alberto L. Bixio, Mediaciones, 2nd edn (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1987), pp. 38-39, 44. Vattimo maintains the controversial thesis, because of Adorno’s radical negation of any cultural or civilisational positivities after WWII and the Holocaust, that Adorno’s critique of instrumental reason is basically humanist and in agreement with the traditional legacy of Western thought, always against ‘the ideal of a “technification” of existence that gives itself over to [...] the summons and the provocation of modern technology’ in its assault against ‘mankind’s humanity’ (my translation of the Spanish translation of the Italian original).

Reflecting on Adorno and Horkheimer’s stay in the USA during the Hitler years, Susan Neiman writes how they ‘made exile an emblem of modern life in general.’ *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2002), p. 309.

French ‘philosophes’ was projected.<sup>15</sup> For Adorno, they would be the proto-nihilists remotely traceable behind the Final Solution, those who developed an ethics of totalitarian, nihilistic reduction of reality to an overpowering sameness based on rationality as a way of dominating Nature.<sup>16</sup> As one of Adorno’s disciples, Fredric Jameson, puts it, behind the Enlightenment’s ‘scientific ethos’ there was ‘a misguided will to power and domination over nature,’ its ‘desacralizing program’ counting as ‘the first stage in the development of a sheerly instrumentalizing world-view which will lead straight to Auschwitz.’<sup>17</sup> The same indictment, extended to ‘language under the dominance of the modern metaphysics of subjectivity’, as it ‘surrenders itself to our mere willing and trafficking as an instrument of domination over beings’, comes from none other than Heidegger.<sup>18</sup>

For Giorgio Agamben, in his turn, the camps were the ‘biopolitical paradigm’ of Western modernity.<sup>19</sup> Their precursors would be the disciplinary institutions invented and developed during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as the asylum or the modern prison, themselves justified by scientific discourses that gave states and their governments ‘the obligation to manage their populations’ (Druker, p. 111). In a way, the Enlightenment not only discovered and fostered individual rights and public liberties, but also invented,

---

<sup>15</sup> Shane Weller, *Modernism and Nihilism*, Modernism and... Series (Houndmills, Basingstoke Hants. and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 3.

Tony Davies, *Humanism*, TNCI (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 51-52, 130.

If we are to follow this way of thinking, we may come to some unexpected discoveries; for instance, that during the period of the first major institutional embodiment of the ideas of the Enlightenment in Europe, the French Revolution, by the time the cult of the Supreme Being was declared state religion in June 1794, the French Convention had decided and taken measures to carry out the total extermination of the population of the rebellious district of Vendée in Western France. Among those measures, historian Reynald Secher mentions many which were amazingly similar to those applied to the Jews of Europe by the Nazis. See ‘La guerre de Vendée: guerre civile, génocide, mémoricide’, in *Le livre noir de la Révolution Française*, ed. by Renaud Escande (Paris: Cerf, 2008), pp. 227-48 (pp. 231-40).

<sup>16</sup> Will Slocombe, ‘Postmodern Nihilism: Theory and Literature’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2003), p. 78.

<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, in *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell, rev. edn (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1993), pp. 213-65 (p. 222-23).

<sup>19</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998), pp. 117, 134, 181.

through the public regulation of bodies, disciplines whereby modern states granted themselves power over human life (p. 10).<sup>20</sup>

In this respect and by way of example, according to Adorno and Horkheimer as paraphrased by Susan Neiman, ‘Kant’s moral law has no basis in the structure of reality.’ Thus, in their lacking any real connections to social praxis, the values of the Enlightenment offer ‘no arguments to persuade us to be moral’, while ‘the real task of reason is precisely to set ends’; anyone who would guide their moral choices out of ‘respect for the mere form of the law’ would be just a superstitious fool. The institutionalisation of techno-scientific progress brought about secularisation and disenchantment as dominant worldviews, with the result of the loss of their ability to guide moral action.<sup>21</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, morality was simply ‘replaced by the will to an end and hence by the will to the means toward that end’, which ultimately led to an orgy of ‘conflict and destruction’ (Neiman, p. 193; Slocombe, pp. 32-33)<sup>22</sup> An analogy could be drawn between the great totalitarian murderers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and de Sade’s characters: they would all have experienced ‘intellectual pleasure in regression, *amor intellectualis diaboli*, the joy of defeating civilization with its own weapons’, namely ‘systems and logic.’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 74)

Regarding this, Schopenhauer already remarked how ‘reasonable and vicious are quite consistent with each other, in fact, only through their union are great and far-reaching crimes possible.’ Beyond any particular instrumental uses thereof, for Schopenhauer

---

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York: Vintage, 1995), pp. 208-09.

<sup>21</sup> My English version of the Spanish translation of the German original: Jürgen Habermas, *Ciencia y técnica como ideología*, trans. by Manuel Jiménez Redondo (Madrid: Tecnos, 1986), p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, tr. by Edmund Jephcott, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2002), p. 67.

Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, Warwick Studies in European Philosophy (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 10

An anecdote illustrating this lack of moral motivation and grounding in everyday practice of instrumental reason is given us by Primo Levi, who on arrival in Auschwitz was told by a camp guard: ‘Hier ist kein Warum’, there is no why here. Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, trans. by Stuart Woolf, in *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, ed. by Ann Goldstein (New York and London: Liveright, 2015), pp. 43-239 (p. 63). What there was in Auschwitz, instead of a why, was a perfectly designed protocol or technological-administrative procedure whereby a person, alongside some two thousand others, could be turned into a handful of ashes in two hours flat since their arrival at the camp.

reason would be *intrinsically* instrumental.<sup>23</sup> As for systems, Emil Cioran is unequivocal: ‘the worst form of despotism is the *system*, in philosophy and in everything’; in accordance with this, he thinks of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Hegel as ‘three enslavers of the mind’.<sup>24</sup> Against this background, the Holocaust, which Adorno sees as ‘the epitome of nihilism’, marks a shift from the idea of nothing as the conceptual core of nihilism towards that of destruction, ‘making nothing’, thus passing from absence to the extermination of presence (Slocombe, pp. 37-38). In the end, as Neiman points out, ‘the central murders of the twentieth century were the fruit neither of passion nor of ignorance’, but rather the outcome of ‘civilization itself’ (Neiman, p. 259).

In itself, this is nothing new: one of the most renowned and iconic thinkers of the French Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, initiated this line of thought in his first published work: the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*. There, he sustains that ‘the advancement of the sciences and arts brings with it moral deterioration’ as the result of the ‘deleterious effects of the pursuit of wealth, [...] and the diversion of energy and esteem away from the achievement of real goods’ that it entails. If this were not enough, the ‘pseudo-excellences’ derived from competition after such advancements, in quite a pre-Heideggerian way, leave people’s reputations and self-esteem ‘at others’ disposal’, after leading them away from the right path of Nature.<sup>25</sup> From there to the troubles originating in the sway held by techno-science over society, technology and science being considered the ultimate achievement of enlightened civilisation in late modernity and postmodernity, there would be a straight line to follow.

---

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2002), p. 90 (my emphasis).

<sup>24</sup> ‘Aristóteles, Tomas de Aquino, Hegel: tres avasalladores del espíritu. La peor forma de despotismo es el *sistema*, en filosofía y en todo’: E.M. Cioran, *Del inconveniente de haber nacido*, trans. by Esther Seligson (Madrid: Taurus, 1981), p. 70 (original emphasis).

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Dent, *Rousseau*, Routledge Philosophers (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 51, 53-54. The issue is more complicated than that, though, as Rousseau himself avows: ‘There are a thousand sources of corruption among men and although the sciences may be most profuse and swiftest in their effect, they are far from being the only one.’ (cited in Dent, p. 56) Heidegger’s ideas of ‘they’ (‘man’ in German) and ‘chatter’ as agents of debasement of ‘Dasein’ (the existent, the Sartrean ‘for-itself’) will be discussed later.

## 2.2 – Modernity, Enlightenment and Difference

The ethics of the Enlightenment would also be accountable for cultivating an ideal of ‘man’ that would show no concern for the differences that constitute the real world of real men and women living in a certain cultural context with their own personal idiosyncrasies.<sup>26</sup> Based on a true idolatry of the individual, Leo Bersani also sees the Enlightenment’s ‘sacrosanct’ ethical ideal of selfhood as ‘a sanction for violence’; indeed, as Keji Nishitani remarks, ‘if nihilism is anything, it is first of all a problem of the self.’<sup>27</sup> Thus, Auschwitz would be the logical culmination of a process inherent in modernity (or even starting with Homer’s *Odyssey*, according to Adorno and Horkheimer) and a name for its paradigmatic failure, in which we would all be complicit, if not entirely responsible (Neiman, p. 305).<sup>28</sup>

In postmodernity, as WWII and the Lager come to an end, a ‘subjective mode of being’ based on the self is rejected in favour of an intrasubjective one, based on the Other (Slocombe, p. 78). A prominent example of this trend would be Levinas’ ‘ethics as first philosophy’, which posits an ethical obligation to the other that is prior even to self-preservation and ‘accepts the irreducible difference of the other that is beyond knowledge

---

<sup>26</sup> According to Michael Inwood, Heidegger coincides with Adorno in his deprecation of technology as instrumental reason, if not using this term explicitly. Thus, the former identifies the will to mastery over Nature as the ‘metaphysical essence of modernity’, itself related to ‘forgetfulness of Being’, that is to say, as we already saw, nihilism: Michael Inwood, *Heidegger: A very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1997, p. 6). Heidegger puts forward this idea in a 1938 lecture, five years into the horror of the Third Reich.

Tony Davies also alludes to the Shoah and the mass assassination of ‘other racial impurities’ by the Nazis as an example of ‘supremely modern rationality’ (p. 51). Here, we find united these two possible meanings of nihilism in the convulse interwar period: that of the fetishisation of technology and the primacy of the purposes it was instrumentally applied to, and that of utter scorn for human dignity regarding the Jews and the Roma of Europe, the Slavic peoples, etc.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin Thomas, *Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory: Essays on Abjection in Literature, Mass Culture, and Film* (New York, and Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 78.

Keji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. by Graham Parkes and Setsuko Aihara, SUNY Series in Modern Japanese Philosophy (Albany: SUNY, 1990), p.1.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *La posmodernidad (explicada a los niños)*, tr. by Enrique Lynch, Mediaciones (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1987; repr. 1990), p. 30. My English translation of the Spanish translation of the French original: “‘Auschwitz’ puede ser tomado como un nombre paradigmático para la “no realización” trágica de la modernidad’.

For contrast with Adorno’s interpretation of the Enlightenment as regards the Holocaust, as well as about the importance of Ulysses, the protagonist of Homer’s *Odyssey* and a prominent character in Dante’s *Comedia*, in the understanding of Western civilisation and the Holocaust by one of its victims, Primo Levi, see Druker, pp. 7-9, 41-49.

and assimilation.’ (Druker, pp. 10, 73). This would not be that far from Julia Kristeva’s contention that respect for alterity fosters ‘ethical action’, understood as ‘a negativizing of narcissism.’<sup>29</sup>

In the end, the Enlightenment would have been based on what Adorno calls ‘identity-thinking’, a principle that would render the thinking subject, isolated in its ever greater abstraction, unable to go beyond itself towards the object by dint of its endeavour to obtain mastery over it: the Enlightenment had ‘always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters.’ From the very beginning, its programme would have been ‘the disenchantment of the world.’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 1) This disenchantment, which Zygmunt Bauman defines as the ideology of the subordination of the world, would be the ultimate outcome of a ‘war against mystery and magic’ that amounted to no less than a ‘war of liberation leading to the declaration of reason’s independence.’<sup>30</sup>

Thus, if superstition was fought against, which involved the dethronement of a ‘tyrannical God’ until then believed in as the Lord of History, this God was immediately replaced by ‘an equally tyrannical Man.’ (Slocombe, p. 78) This would be an example of how the Enlightenment (or ‘reason’ *tout court*), despite the prevalence and widespread awareness of its contradictions, would be ‘an all-embracing ideology that fails to recognize itself as such.’ In other words, reason in the modern period was but the object of a dualistic faith whose coherence and completeness demanded what it refused to acknowledge from the start: a ‘deluded, illusory, and irredeemably irrational “unreason”’.<sup>31</sup> Its privileged method would have been one whereby the individual and the particular were subsumed under the general and universal, the one under the many. The way of reasoning it

---

<sup>29</sup> Going against the grain, Alain Finkielkraut thinks the opposite: thus, for instance, when reflecting on present-day cosmopolitan humanitarianism, such as that of some NGOs, he finds it individualistic and hedonistic. Being based on an aestheticisation of the other, it might well be a conduit for self-gratification: Alain Finkielkraut, as cited by Max Silverman, *Facing Postmodernity: Contemporary French Thought on Culture and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 155. As Gilles Lipovetsky puts it, we would be living in a ‘neo-narcissistic age’ in which the other may well have become just ‘a means of being oneself.’ (*El imperio de lo efímero: la moda y su destino en las sociedades modernas*, trans. by Felipe Hernández and Carmen López, Colección Argumentos, 5th edn (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1996), pp. 287-88). We will come back to the aestheticisation of the other when discussing more specifically the Holocaust.

Mark Currie, *Difference*, TNCI (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p.93.

<sup>30</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. x.

<sup>31</sup> David B. Clarke, *The Consumer Society and the Postmodern City* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 75-76.

preconised was therefore mathematic, totalising and ultimately totalitarian in its intolerance of difference, which it excluded as marginal and non-rational in a way as dogmatic ‘as only a *system* can be.’ In this way, thought was made into a tool, ‘purely an instrument of purposes’, restricted to ‘organization and administration,’ ‘aping the machine’ and becoming utterly reified in the process (Horkheimer and Adorno, pp. 18-19, 24, 28, my emphasis; Druker, p. 10).<sup>32</sup> Under the levelling domination of enlightened abstraction, the ultimate outcome would be the ‘deception of the masses’ and ‘pervasive *irrationality*’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 34).<sup>33</sup> No wonder, since, according to Adorno, ‘nothingness is the acme of abstraction, and the abstract is the abominable’.<sup>34</sup> In the end, ‘violence lurks in universality and instrumental reason.’ (Druker, p. 11) Jean-François Lyotard, the most influential European theorist of the postmodern, reacts to this state of things by proclaiming war on totality: ‘Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences’.<sup>35</sup>

### 2.3 - The Western Passion for Death: Thanatopolitics

‘The unfolding of the enlightenment project,’ even beyond the end of modernity and according to Kristeva, would have left us ‘further exposed to mortality in and through the very project of protection against the irrational’ (Beardsworth, p. 153). Giorgio Agamben’s theory of ‘bare life’, that is, life exposed to death, contributes to the explanation of this feature of both modern and postmodern politics. Bearing the mark of sovereign power as ‘power over life and death’, the only one capable of creating life that is always threatened by death (since ‘sovereign power is not the possession of the sovereign, or any individual,

---

<sup>32</sup> Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2002), p. 46.

<sup>33</sup> Sarah Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*, SUNY Series in Gender Theory (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2004), pp. 253-55, original emphasis.

<sup>34</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E.B. Ashton (New York and London: Continuum, 2007), p. 380.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?’, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, *Theory and History of Literature*, 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), pp. 71-82 (p. 82). It might be the case, as I see it, that in our globalised, postmodern culture the only full ‘activation of differences’ to have taken place would have been the one achieved by the calculations of industry and the media in their catering for a generalised demand for ‘individuating’, that is for customised lifestyles.



but a space of power in which bare life is produced'), bare life would be life's minimal expression as 'pure survival'.<sup>36</sup> As subject to power's 'thanatopolitics', the average human being in Western democracies would be bearing on their shoulders the heavy burden of 'the hell of the work of death in modern culture', living a living death in mass anonymity (Noys, pp. 11, 19, 21). Despite the high levels of welfare and quality of life existing in the world's most developed countries, people would still be subject to irrevocable death in nuclear apocalypse once the decision were taken and the codes activated by sovereign power. Until then, under the nihilistic expectation of the 'absolute reduction of everything to zero,' life would also be secretly threatened by a number of situations with which political power is at the very least related to, if not complicit in, by the mediation of industry, technology and consumption habits: pollution, high crime rates, firearm possession (in the USA and other countries), cancer, AIDS, ... (Slocombe, p. 181)

This being granted, Auschwitz and Hiroshima would have revealed, in Marguerite Duras' terms, how we are all suffering from a 'malady of death' consisting in being governed by the same 'passion for death' in the socio-political, economic and military domains. This 'explosion of death' would be related not only to 'the cataclysms of the twentieth century', but also to the poverty of symbolic means for taking up a relationship to death' in our time (Beardsworth, pp. 153-54)<sup>37</sup> Therefore, this overwhelming power of death would unprecedentedly have infiltrated the 'kingdom of the spirit.' To Kristeva, this would never have seemed 'as unquestionable and unavoidable as now, within and without society and the individual.' A more and more widespread 'shattering of psychic identity' would show in the form of a crisis in thought, speech and representation (Beardsworth, pp. 153-54).<sup>38</sup> Because of this, the claim that nihilism is 'arguably the key philosophical concept of the first half of the twentieth century' should not be waved aside thoughtlessly (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 12). According to yet another definition by Martin Heidegger, nihilism would be 'the world-historical movement of the peoples of the earth who have been drawn into the power realm of the modern age.' Its unfolding, given its 'great

---

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin Noys, *The Culture of Death* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), pp. 31, 33.

<sup>37</sup> As we will see later, this 'symbolic' has to do with mastery of language as the key factor to entry into subjectivity on the part of the infant, previously utterly dependent on the 'infinite' mother, whose body engulfs it.

<sup>38</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, *European Perspectives* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), pp. 221-22.

profundity’, could only have ‘world catastrophes’ as its natural consequence.<sup>39</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been ‘the defining factor of Western culture.’ (Slocombe, p. 31)<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘The Word of Nietzsche: "God Is Dead"’, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland, 1977), pp. 53-112 (pp. 62-63).

<sup>40</sup> In my opinion, and following the thought, among others, of Alain Finkielkraut, as will be explained later, there is a typically narcissistic note in this kind of defeatist appraisals of Western modernity. If we think, for instance, about genocide, the simplest outline of universal History would make us agree on the lack of a patent on the part of the West: about two centuries before the time Westerners were exploring and colonising the Americas, bringing about the demise of numerous cultures and the physical termination of a huge amount of natives, an obscure Oriental tribal chieftain called Genghis Khan had already exterminated millions of human beings on the most unbelievable pretexts (or none at all, for that matter). Brutality is not a natural preserve of the West, regardless of its acceleration and intensification by the application of Western administrative techniques and technology (which has furthermore been liberally adopted by countless Third World governments and groups for their own ethically unacceptable agendas: North Korea, Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge, the so-called Islamic State, etc.). See, e.g., Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton, NJ, and Woodstock, Oxon: Princeton UP, 2004), p. 307.

## Chapter 3 - Modernity and Suspicion: The Death of God

### 3.1 - The School of Suspicion

It is in the period immediately following that first European holocaust, WWI (the Armenian holocaust included therein), which sentenced millions of young Europeans to death, mutilation, or mental illness, that we can notice the dark seeds of nihilism slowly growing before scattering across the whole social fabric of Europe.<sup>41</sup> Especially after the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the interwar years, a morbid age of rising extremes, are embodied above all by two totalitarian political dystopias: fascism and dogmatic communism. Despite a (theoretically) humanist tradition being administered by the different churches of Europe and the most prestigious educational institutions catering for the European elites, alarming signs of cultural and institutional nihilism were noticed at this time by some of the finest critical and creative minds of the age. During these years, as Gottfried Benn remarks, nihilism was ‘the inevitable frame of mind of all those Europeans of the present age who have the courage to think’. Franz Kafka will go further than this, stating: ‘We are nihilistic thoughts, suicidal thoughts, that come into God’s head’ (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, pp. 105,111). These writers were in fact anticipated and led forward in their critical analysis by the work of the founders of the so-called School of Suspicion: Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Being deeply rooted in a 19<sup>th</sup> century worldview and ethos, they all reacted against their age by diagnosing its many impostures and impasses.<sup>42</sup> Their legacy would be one of loss of faith in the moral views dominant in their time, which would in turn entail a global suspicion of the axiological valuations then existing. This

---

<sup>41</sup> According to Walter Benjamin, this holocaust destroyed survivors, too, and left nothing unchanged for them, except the clouds: as cited in Umberto Rossi, ‘Mind is the Battlefield: Reading Ballard’s “Life Trilogy” as War Literature’, in *J.G. Ballard*, ed. by Jeanette Baxter, *Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), pp. 66-77 (p.72).

<sup>42</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1970), p. 32. I have taken the liberty of adding Darwin to Ricoeur’s original triad. We could even think of de Sade as another member of this distinguished club, as he would initiate ‘in literature an era of suspicion toward every power and toward every discourse’: Michel Delon, as cited in Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), p. 255.

would trigger an unstoppable process of moral erosion eventually resulting in social anomie and widespread personal angst.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, if Marx exposes the exploitation of labour and the appropriation of surplus-value as the cornerstone of bourgeois paradise, supposedly presided over, since Adam Smith, by an invisible, beneficent hand regulating the interests of both property and labour and now nowhere to be found, and if Darwin traces the biological origins of both bourgeois and proletarian back to the rather undignified order of primates, Nietzsche and Freud are of vital importance for understanding the nihilism governing this world, as it were, in the shadows.<sup>44</sup> With Freud, man (rather than ‘Man’, Enlightenment’s universal subject, or woman, a derivative, secondary focus of interest for Freud’s psychoanalytic theory) begins to be understood as a biological entity governed and motivated not by reason, but by some dark agency immediately inaccessible to consciousness or self-aware subjectivity. Hence, our ego would only be a small, socially constructed offshoot of an all-pervasive, fundamental constituent of the mind: the ‘id’. This ‘id’, primitive, unorganised and emotional, would be, in Freud’s own words, ‘the realm of the illogical’.<sup>45</sup> It would also be the seat of the fundamental drives, above all those constituting the life and death instincts, Eros and Thanatos, respectively.<sup>46</sup> In any case, the mythical nature of the subject

---

<sup>43</sup> Vlad Muresan, ‘Le nihilisme européen entre Platonisme et Christianisme’, *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Studia Europaea*, 1 (2009), 41-50 (p. 46). In the French original: ‘La perte de la foi dans une image morale du monde entraîne le soupçon global par rapport à toute attribution de sens, sur toute évaluation.’ My translation: ‘The loss of faith in a moral image of the world involves a global suspicion concerning any attribution of sense, any valuation.’

On anomie, see e.g. Raymond Boudon and François Bourricaud, *A Critical Dictionary of Sociology*, trans. by Peter Hamilton (London and Chicago: Routledge and the University of Chicago, 1989), pp. 34-37.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Norman, *On Humanism, Thinking in Action* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 24. Freud allows us to introduce a first link with the Anglo-American modernist literature written during these troubled times, as he was first published in English by Virginia and Leonard Woolf’s Hogarth Press to eventually become, among other things, a major influence on one of the canonical English modernists, namely D. H. Lawrence.

<sup>45</sup> As cited in Anthony Storr, *Freud: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSU (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2001), p. 57.

<sup>46</sup> For Eros and Thanatos in Freud, see Storr, pp. 67-68. For their necessary everyday ‘displacements’ and happiness, see John Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism* (New York: SUNY, 2003), p. 108.

For the ‘Man’, in masculine singular, of the humanistic tradition of the West, see Davies, pp. 31-32.

For the ego’s weakness, as if predicting Freud, Schopenhauer remarks: ‘The I or ego is the dark point in consciousness [...] the eye sees everything except itself’: Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E.F.J. Payne, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1966), II, 512. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the ego could be defined as ‘the sense of self that one tries to develop’ while still in childhood, notably through the Oedipus complex: Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (London and New

(subjectivity having been a category dominating and defining Western philosophical discourse since Descartes) and the inexistence of an essential, unchanging, dispassionate self can already be found in Nietzsche.<sup>47</sup>

As a matter of fact, Freud's insistence on the ultimately irrational structure of the human mind and the need for psychic repression and sublimation for individuals to become psychologically mature, functional adults and valuable members of society, as well as for civilisation to survive at all, will influence thought and art during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in rather the opposite direction than the one initially intended by the father of psychoanalysis (Davies, p. 60; Marmysz, p. 107).<sup>48</sup> Hence, if Freud's stress on culture and civilisation bespeaks his full alignment with the fundamental values of modernity, those of the French and American Revolutions and Western bourgeois order, another current of thought, now gaining adherents everywhere in Europe, will reject this heritage. In this way, if Freud's psychoanalytic theories had been put forward as self-confidently enlightened, rational, scientific and adamantly opposed to the rise of irrational phenomena in the Europe of his time (such as pseudo-scientific, biological racism and anti-Semitism, populist demagogy, and a cult of charismatic leadership in politics), the cultivators and defenders of such phenomena would call for a new, totally different culture and ethos. These would be founded on what Nietzsche, the 'prince of irrationalism,' already announced as the death of God: the exhaustion of the West's metaphysical tradition and the demise of belief in its certainties, 'our entire European morality' included, after the collapse of traditional Christian faith and teaching, despite their having been essential to the very definition of

---

York: Routledge, 2004), p. 31. As in Schopenhauer, Freud's ego is also 'weak', problematic and unstable, for it 'acts as an intermediary between the id and the external world', being 'uneasily poised between three agencies: the external world, the id, and the super-ego.' (Storr, pp. 62-63) More on this later.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Tanner, *Nietzsche: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2000), pp. 73-74.

Caroline Williams, *Contemporary French Philosophy: Modernity and the Persistence of the Subject* (London and New York: Athlone, 2001), p. 1.

Regarding Ricoeur's School of Suspicion, Freud himself remarked how in his opinion 'psychoanalysis had been the third insult that intrepid investigators had offered mankind's megalomania.' The other two ones would have been Copernicus' heliocentrism and Darwin's theory of evolution: *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gay (New York and London: Norton, 1989; repr. 1995), p. xvii.

<sup>48</sup> For Freud, 'reason is not master in its own house.' *The Freud Reader*, p. xvii. We would not even be able to recognise the hidden agenda of the unconscious, which would always remain perfectly unknown to us. As a result, the free individual of a centuries-long humanist tradition would no longer be 'either individual or free.' Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2002), p. 66.

European culture for almost two millennia (*TGS*, p. 199).<sup>49</sup> In any case, by this time modernisation would have ‘unmoored individuals from their communities and their beliefs, leaving them adrift in a world of perpetual change.’<sup>50</sup> The world that the thinkers of suspicion were witnesses to.

### 3.2 – Nietzsche: The Advent of Nihilism

On the threshold of catastrophe, Nietzsche calls for anti-humanism as a prerequisite not only for the burial of the decadent world he describes as his, that of the expiring 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also for facing the world to come. In a rather prophetic fashion, he foretells the advent of a nihilistic epoch: ‘What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism.’<sup>51</sup> In fact, with Nietzsche nihilism, which up to then had only been a marginalised philosophical question, becomes a ‘force of history’, as both a cause and a symptom of violent conflict projected well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Slocombe, p. 5; Marmysz, p. 62).<sup>52</sup> Not in vain does Nietzsche, ‘the outstanding incarnation of philosophical modernism,’ call the death of God such a ‘tremendous event’ that ‘there was never a greater deed’: it deserves comparison with ‘an eclipse of the sun the like of which has probably never before existed on earth’.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Peter R. Sedgwick, *Nietzsche: The Key Concepts*, Key Guides (Abingdon, Oxon. and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 31.

Chris Jenks, *Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Key Ideas (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 193.

<sup>50</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek, *A History of Modernist Literature*, Blackwell Histories of Literature (Chichester, W Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 3.

To my mind, we should take Nietzsche’s thought in *TWTP* with a pinch of salt, as this work would represent, according to Julian Young’s concise yet very convincing argumentation, “‘Heidegger’s Nietzsche” or “the Nietzsche that never was””. Its importance should be measured more in relation to its role as a major influence on French postmodern thought than as a true, later Nietzsche proper: Julian Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) pp. 97-98. See also Marmysz, pp. 176-77, n. 3, on *TWTP*’s editorial controversy, and on its containing Nietzsche’s more extended discussion of nihilism.

<sup>52</sup> See for example Nazism, its ‘ultimate weariness of this world’, and its creed of ‘action and *destruction*’ as ‘a historical symptom of the nihilistic forces at work in German culture.’ Marmysz, pp. 44-45 (my emphasis).

<sup>53</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With an Introduction in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. by Bernard Williams, tr. by Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian del Caro, Cambridge Texts on the History of Philosophy (Cambridge and New York: CUP: 2001; repr. 2008), pp. 120,199

Indeed, defined as the belief that the world as it is ought not to be, along with the awareness that the world as it ought to be does not exist, its immediate consequence would be no less than the meaninglessness of human existence, henceforth afflicted by a characteristic pathos: that of the ‘in vain’ (*TWTP*, p. 318). This belief is paradigmatically exemplified by Nietzsche’s main early philosophical influence, Arthur Schopenhauer, for whom

everything is always imperfect and deceptive, everything agreeable is mixed with something disagreeable, every enjoyment is always half an enjoyment, every gratification introduces its own disturbance, every relief new worries and troubles, every expedient for our daily and hourly needs leaves us in the lurch at every moment, and denies its service.

(*WWR2*, p. 577)

Schopenhauer’s conclusion comes across as self-evident: the non-existence of the universe ‘would be preferable to its existence’. The mere existence of all this evil would settle the question, regardless of the good that might still exist in the world (p. 576).

‘Far too great, too distant, too remote’, just as thunder needs time, the tidings of the death of God may not have ‘reached the ears of men’ yet (*TGS*, pp. 182, 279). Certainly, this awareness was only beginning to develop in Nietzsche’s contemporary intellectual and academic milieus, ‘stretched in the contradiction between today and tomorrow’, unable to grasp ‘*what* this event really means’ (p. 199, original emphasis).

This was the soil where the seeds of Nietzsche’s axiological postmodernism would germinate, eventually to flourish on both shores of the Atlantic after 1945.<sup>54</sup> This was the case, among other reasons, because of the widespread experience of welfare, high levels of consumption, lack of social unrest, and parliamentary democracy enjoyed by Westerners after the end of WWII. Had Nietzsche come to know about this state of affairs, he could only have called it passive nihilism, that of whom he termed ‘the last man’: someone well contented with full employment, a full fridge and a TV set where to watch sports and

---

<sup>54</sup> Chris Jenks, *Transgression, Key Ideas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 69.

sitcom comedies in full self-complacency; his motto might be, in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's formula, 'everything for the belly'.<sup>55</sup> This specimen, an observer and acceptor of the spectacle of his own spiritual demise, would thus be even smaller than the little Christians whose morality Nietzsche loathed so much (Tanner, p. 43).<sup>56</sup> Prepared to live in this world as one without values, the last man would rather fade away in a nothingness of will than harbour a will to nothingness, as the latter still posits a will, therefore a modicum of spiritual resolve and strength.<sup>57</sup>

Nietzsche's profile in the History of ideas is not just that of the discoverer or, rather, the announcer of the death of God, the voice pointing at the fatal and irrevocable nakedness of the Emperor of the Universe, but also the chief counsel for the prosecution in the case against European nihilism. This would be an ideology based on the inertia of an anthropomorphic morality made in the image and the interests of a certain idea of 'Man' and built upon prejudice (Tanner, p. 73).<sup>58</sup> Nihilism sees itself as engaged in the cause of human dignity, while Nietzsche understands it as being born out of *ressentiment* and deeply sick at heart.<sup>59</sup>

Nietzsche's use of the term 'nihilism' is ambivalent in that it can be either negative, 'passive' in his own terminology, or positive, 'active'. According to the first meaning, it would be synonymous with the decadent state of things we have cursorily described in the precedent paragraphs, where men do not break with their exhausted values despite their

---

<sup>55</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), p. 175

<sup>56</sup> Keith Ansell Pearson and Diane Morgan, 'Introduction: The Return of Monstrous Nihilism', in *Nihilism Now! Monsters of Energy*, ed. by Keith Ansell Pearson and Diane Morgan (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants. and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. viii-xxi (p. ix).

<sup>57</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann, tr. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. 13-198 (p. 163).

<sup>58</sup> About Nietzsche and his transcendence in the history of the theorisation of nihilism in Western thought, while citing other authors, we can read in Marmysz: 'After Nietzsche the concept of nihilism became respectable.' He 'wrote more explicitly about nihilism than any other nineteenth-century figure; his understanding of nihilism has been the decisive influence on twentieth-century usage.' (Marmysz, p. 20)

<sup>59</sup> For Nietzsche, the triumph of the Apollonian over the Dionysian, of the intellectual and cerebral over the bodily and passionate since Socrates and Plato would cause 'sickness, neurosis, and decline of the organism.' Thus, mankind is *sick* because of a 'lack of Dionysian fervor' and of 'spiritual depth.' Both the Apollonian and the Dionysian are viewed as 'opposite psychological tendencies' in all humans (Marmysz, pp. 25-27, my emphasis).



awareness of their valuelessness and interminable self-negation (Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 19).<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, there would also be an active nihilism, one that would take advantage of the pitiful state of Western civilisation as an occasion for a complete regeneration through what the German thinker calls a transvaluation of all values, considering it to be, in its endeavour to overcome the West's axiological deadlock, a more 'genuine' form of nihilism. Nietzsche himself could be thought to embody this active nihilism in his constant undermining of the moral and cultural underpinnings of the European culture of his time, thus deserving Bataille's appraisal of his work as 'the fiercest of solvents.'<sup>61</sup> Such a transvaluation, besides, must be constant, as 'metaphysical systems and ethical paradigms disguise assumptions and interests that are committed to the preservation of a weak stasis' leading to mediocrity and a stunted will (Jenks, *Culture*, p. 195). Together, passive and active nihilism would be 'the engine that drives history.' (*TWTP*, p. 69; Marmysz, p. 33)

Life as it really is would be the ultimate standard of value in this great transvaluation enterprise.<sup>62</sup> As the result of a sort of Wagnerian twilight of the gods, a new dawn could rise for those free spirits that would realise their potential to become overmen, beyond the merely human morality that made an old, valetudinarian world choke in its own ideological vomit.<sup>63</sup> The overman would welcome eventual self-sacrifice in a life-affirming gesture, in the birth pangs of a world where man could live his life to his creative full, neither fleeing nor denying suffering, nor wishing an afterlife in a hypothetically perfect, 'true' world. Nietzsche's overman, guided by desire and its longing after 'deep eternity', would rather

---

<sup>60</sup> Shane Weller, *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of Guests* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants., and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 19.

<sup>61</sup> Georges Bataille, 'On Nietzsche: The Will to Chance', in *The Bataille Reader*, ed. by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 330-42 (p. 334).

<sup>62</sup> To the point that in *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche states that 'for a philosopher to see a problem in the value of life is thus even an objection against him': Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. by Duncan Large, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1998). p. 12, original emphasis.

<sup>63</sup> The elitism of Nietzsche's axiological standards is apparent in the fact that he distinguishes between those who would be strong enough to give themselves new, naturalistic, life-affirming values enabling them to live 'a life of their own', and on the other hand the desirability of a 'strong and healthy consolidated mediocrity' for the 'broad base' that would be necessary for the existence of any 'high culture'. He does not disguise the fact that his philosophy 'aims at an ordering of rank'. He makes this very clear: 'The ideas of the herd should rule in the herd - but not reach out beyond it': *TWTP*, pp. 162, 462; Richard Schacht, 'Nietzsche and Nihilism', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 11.1 (1973), 65-90 (p. 89).

embrace the eternal recurrence of the same in this material universe, full of wonders and prodigies, that we are part of.<sup>64</sup> In its ‘affirmation of becoming in its purposelessness, its lack of unity, and its truthlessness’, this eternal recurrence, conceived as ‘existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness’, would manifest itself as the most extreme form of active nihilism, the passage to the limit of nihilism (*TWTP*, pp. 35-36; Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 20; Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 37). In fact, the overman’s would be a perfect nihilism, that of the anti-nihilist.<sup>65</sup> In his self-overcoming, the overman would be a living example of the will to power that, according to Nietzsche, this world would ultimately consist in (*TWTP*, p. 550; Tanner, p. 56).

### 3.3 – France And Intellectual Negativity: Existentialism and the Linguistic Imperative

Despite the spurious phagocytising of his ideas by right-wing extremists, and despite, or precisely because of the ambiguity concerning, for example, the role of violence in his thought, as well as regardless of his conscious and defying lack of systematicity, plus a constant, structural use of oxymoron and self-contradiction, Nietzsche’s influence was pervasive among several writers working in Paris during the interwar period. In a way, they were the continuers of a French tradition, dating back as far as de Sade, concerned with negativity in both literature and thought. They were therefore conversant with ideas such as nihilism, decadence, mauditsm, suffering, pain and (self-) destruction.<sup>66</sup> This literary milieu, comprising figures such as Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, could

---

<sup>64</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, ed. by Adrian del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, trans. by Adrian del Caro, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2006), p. 264.

<sup>65</sup> Bülent Diken, *Nihilism*, Key Ideas (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 32.

<sup>66</sup> *POH*, p. 137. Kristeva alludes only to Lautréamont and Artaud, but I would also include Baudelaire and Genet, at least, in this group of writers. See Philip Toynbee, ‘Philip Toynbee in “Observer”’ (1955), in Graver and Federman (eds.), *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, The Critical Heritage Series (London and New York: Routledge, 1979; repr. 1999), pp. 80-82 (p. 80)

See also Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 66.

be called ‘nihilistic’ because of both the subject-matter they usually cultivated and their perspectives on them.<sup>67</sup>

These authors were contemporary with the reception of existentialism in France. The main text in the French branch of this intellectual movement, which developed many of the themes first cultivated in Germany by Martin Heidegger, was *Being and Nothingness*, a text authored by the archetype of the engaged intellectual during the French post-war period, Jean-Paul Sartre. Marginally, some of these themes, such as absence and nothingness, could also be linked to the main preoccupations of the aforementioned Parisian school of nihilists; for instance, both schools shared an intense awareness of God’s absence in the human world, usually deriving from an atheistic conviction (although there were also Christian existentialists, in the wake of Kierkegaard) and the silence of the universe to man’s anguished questions concerning the human condition and transcendence (Slocombe, p. 1; Young, p. 163).

In Albert Camus’ work, these themes started to conglomerate around a dominant one, that of absurdity, which would later be explored with special intensity in the work of the playwrights that Martin Esslin controversially termed the ‘theatre of the absurd’ (McDonald, p. 117).<sup>68</sup> One of its most prominent practitioners, Eugène Ionesco, defines

---

<sup>67</sup> Although Maurice Blanchot, e.g., was of the conviction that nihilism proper was an utter impossibility:

nihilism is tied to being. Nihilism is the impossibility of being done with it and of finding a way out even in that end that is nothingness. It says the impotence of nothingness, the false brilliance of its victories; it tells us that when we think nothingness we are still thinking being. [...] Nihilism thus tells us its final and rather grim truth: it tells of the impossibility of nihilism.

(Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson, *Theory and History of Literature*, 82 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota. 1993; repr. 2003), p. 149, my emphasis).

See also Shane Weller, *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism*, Legenda (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2005), p. 17.

<sup>68</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (New York: Vintage, 2004).

Beckett himself expressed objections to the application of this concept to his work (McDonald, p. 25).

As for religious, and more specifically Christian existentialism, Camus believes it to make life’s absurdity even more absurd through ‘a consoling covering of nostalgia, romanticism, and associations with the divine.’ Robert Wicks, *Modern French Philosophy: From Existentialism to Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), p. 64.

this absurd as the state of being lost proper to a subject ‘cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots,’ with the result of feeling their actions to be ‘senseless’ and ‘useless’ (as cited in Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 22). The natural corollary of this development would be ‘ontological anxiety’, the feeling that one is ‘a pointless, superfluous being’ whose contingent existence has neither reason nor purpose, and is therefore dominated by an utterly ‘useless passion’.<sup>69</sup> In Sartre, absurdity will be related to the inevitable groundlessness of the subject’s axiological choices, which makes his existence meaningless: by realising the absurdity of such choices, one also realises the absurdity of one’s being (*BAN*, p. 480; Young, p. 168). Indeed, human consciousness, a prerequisite for such choices, is ‘by nature’ an unsurpassably ‘unhappy state.’ (*BAN*, p. 90) One of Sartre’s Parisian contemporaries, E.M. Cioran, also decries consciousness as ‘an open wound’ in life’s heart, the very locus of absurdity, knowledge being its plague. All of them, possibly inadvertently, would be glossing on one of Miguel de Unamuno’s dark intuitions: ‘consciousness is a disease’.<sup>70</sup>

This Parisian scene is not irrelevant to the domain of Anglo-American literature either, since, as is well known, Paris was a major hub of Anglo-American modernism during the interwar period. We only have to think of the Lost Generation and several other emblematic modernist authors such as Eliot, Pound, James Joyce, and Beckett, who lived then and there for shorter or longer stints.<sup>71</sup> Samuel Beckett, who personifies this international dimension of Anglo-American modernism in his split Anglo-Irish identity and his Parisian exile, will be of great importance for this thesis, as he also epitomises the transition from literary modernism to postmodernism, one of the main theoretical issues

---

<sup>69</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2007), p. 13.

Gary Cox, *How to Be an Existentialist or How to Get Real, Get a Grip and Stop Making Excuses* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 71.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, tr. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square, 1992), p. 615.

<sup>70</sup> E. M. Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, trans. by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1990), pp. 56, 76; Wicks, p. 79.

<sup>71</sup> For Paris as a / the literary world capital even after the end of WWII, see Christina Horvath, ‘The Cosmopolitan City’, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Cosmopolitanism*, ed. by Maria Rovisco and Magdalena Nowicka, pp. 87-105 (pp. 91-92). Among the many Parisian literary coteries of his time, Beckett would make a proud stand as ‘a one-man avant-garde’: Jürgen Siess, ‘Beckett’s Posture in the French Literary Field’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, no n. (*Beckett at 100: Revolving It All*) (2008), 177-89 (p. 178).

this study will deal with. His thematic involvement with negative concepts such as nothingness, impotence and ignorance, in addition to an increasingly negative concern for form as ideally minimalistic and ultimately silence-oriented, mark him as an ideal candidate to be studied from the angle of nihilism (McDonald, p. 105).<sup>72</sup> Within his oeuvre, I have chosen his so-called *Three Novels* or first trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*) to be studied in this thesis.

Apart from this, this period of Western intellectual history was marked, especially and originally in France (although later on in America and Britain too), by another kind of negativity: that of structural linguistics and its derivatives. These sprang from Saussure's work as encapsulated in the central tenet of his views on language: 'in language there are only differences *without positive terms*.'<sup>73</sup> An era was thus inaugurated to be presided over by a linguistic imperative: meaning itself would be cut off from the real, from material, spatiotemporal referentiality (Belsey, p. 8). The signified content of a sign would not be 'a thing in the world but a linguistic relation'; there would be 'no extralinguistic reality to guarantee the meaning of words.' Our concepts have the structure of 'a system of differences between signifiers' projected on them; hence, meaning is constituted by a system of differences. A previously dominant 'illusion of linguistic transparency', of reference, is over: 'the empirical idea that language can represent reality, that the world is accessible to us through language' is rejected. Not always but almost invariably, there is a widespread awareness in this period that, 'philosophical problems [...] are [...] problems about language.' (Currie, pp 8-9, 31-32)<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Harold Bloom calls Beckett 'the most astonishing of minimalists' in his 'Introduction' to *Samuel Beckett's 'Molloy', 'Malone Dies', 'The Unnamable'*, ed. by Harold Bloom, Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), pp. 1-12 (p. 5).

<sup>73</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. by Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), p. 120.

<sup>74</sup> Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 6. The linguistic imperative and the idea that language cannot transparently represent reality has been challenged by cognitive science and psychology. A significant theory in this respect is Steven Pinker's, who rejects the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic determinism, which is very similar to Saussure's main views on language. It posits that differences between languages are behind differences regarding our conceptual understanding of the world; thus, 'the foundational categories of reality' depend on one's culture, not on any 'objective' reality that would be equally accessible to everybody on the same terms. As opposed to this, which Pinker calls a 'conventional absurdity', scientific evidence would rather point to the existence (contrary to the beliefs of those such as Barthes who maintained that we humans can only think in language) of many kinds of abstract, nonverbal thought, which would be universal to the species. All people would speak 'a language of thought.' Thus, words would come only after the combination of the images and

---

abstract signs that represent concepts and which make up this common ‘mentalese’ language in order to make our thoughts available to others. Languages therefore would only translate this mentalese ‘into strings of words’ in any given natural language ‘and vice versa.’ Language, in the end, would be overrated, especially if thought of as independent from an external, objective reality. This implies a very heavy weight on the shoulders of the main philosophical and linguistic schools to be analysed in this thesis, schools which contributed in a very important way to the literature we will be studying in it: Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind* (London and New York: Penguin, 1995), pp. 57, 65, 67-68, 71, 78, 81-82; Butler, *Postmodernism*, p. 105.

## Chapter 4 - The Western Self and Abjection: A Psychological Outline

### 4.1 – Abjection as a Process

As already stated, this thesis will be informed by an interest in theme rather than by a theoretical concern with aesthetics or the formal structures of the works studied in it. My focus on nihilism, however, will be tempered by giving special consideration to a concept partaking of both the thematic and the formal: abjection. I intend to elaborate on abjection not only in regard to its literary expression through theme, but also through form.

According to Julia Kristeva, within a psychoanalytic frame originating in Lacan's anti-biological re-interpretation of Freud in the light of structuralist linguistics and anthropology (according to which the unconscious is structured like a language), abjection is a process whereby the self and subjectivity arise through the rejection of that which would constitute a threat to the self's separateness from others (McAfee, p. 43; Belsey, p. 57).<sup>75</sup> Through this rejection the child, originally one with the mother's body, will become a distinct self with discrete borders, thus eventually acquiring what psychoanalysis calls a clean and proper body and a sense of ego or 'I' (*POH*, pp. 10-11, 13, 72, 100). These two are intimately connected, for the ego is 'first and foremost a bodily ego', according to Freud: it is inextricably linked to perception and the sense of one's own body as a separate entity (Storr, p. 62). Hence, abjection marks an 'incandescent, unbearable limit between inside and outside, ego and other.' (*POH*, p. 140) In so doing, it aims at survival, both

---

<sup>75</sup> Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 2. According to Lacan, subjectivity would arise from the separation of two different 'fields of meaning': one corresponding to the unconscious and functioning according to its own 'strange and unfamiliar' syntactic and semantic operations, the other controlling the standard operation of language in the conscious mind. There is no neat division between these two fields of meaning, though: Joseph Bristow, *Sexuality*, TNCI (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 84, 88. As a result, not only in Lacan but also in Kristeva, abjection undermines the Freudian distinction between conscious and unconscious: Michael André Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992), p. 29. According to Kristeva, what is abjected would remain 'both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one's own clean and proper self.' (McAfee, p. 46)

According to Anthony Easthope, the full scope of Lacan's psychoanalytic project with regard to Freud would be to turn the latter's work from biology, as it was his ideal, towards 'the cultural references with which it is shot through': Anthony Easthope, *The Unconscious*, TNCI (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 102.

individual and collective, as the ego is the base of self-preservation and functional adaptation to society by way of the negotiation of the Oedipal conflict (p. 68; Storr, pp. 34, 62).<sup>76</sup>

Keeping this in mind, we can construe abjection as ‘a fragile defense [sic] of the emergent subject undergoing the impact of loss/emptiness [of the mother’s undifferentiated, engulfing body] where there are no symbolic means to negotiate the impact.’ This defence mechanism ‘against nondifferentiation’, the ‘response to a presymbolic *imperative* to separate,’ is ‘grounded in a necessary performative illusion,’ and implies that the still not fully formed ego struggles to set up a space for itself to come into being (Beardsworth, pp. 83-84, original emphasis).<sup>77</sup> In this struggle, it has to face what threatens to collapse that space: the mother’s body; or, in a different terminology, the ‘phallic mother’, a pre-Oedipal agency corresponding to the early, ‘omnipotent’ mother where no space is available for the ego to arise (pp. 83, 91). That would be the first fray of the still incomplete subject in ‘this struggle, which fashions the human being’ (*POH*, p. 13). The significance of the maternal body and the female in this conceptual structure implies ‘a counterweight to the phallogentrism of Freud’s and Lacan’s paradigms’ for the emergent subject (Bristow, p. 110).

Meanwhile, this process also ‘composes the *fearsome beginnings of otherness*,’ the boundary between this incipient otherness and the pre-symbolic subject in emergence being still very unstable (Beardsworth, pp. 83-84, original emphasis). This is so because the ‘I’ necessarily comes into being, temporality, and history ‘in the field of the other’, from fragmentary parts through a self-misrecognition which is guaranteed only by a hallucinatory image of self-completeness and coherence. This is what Lacan calls the ‘mirror stage’, whereby the ‘I’ dons ‘the armor of an alienating identity’ in defence of its

---

<sup>76</sup> Keith Reader, *The Abject Object: Avatars of the Phallus in Contemporary French Theory, Literature and Film*, Chiasma, 17 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), p. 51.

This explanation, as all other references to the Oedipal complex in this thesis, must be understood within the context of Freud’s theory of sexuality, unless a reference is made to Lacan’s essentially linguistic understanding of this structure: Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths & Modern Sexualities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 139.

<sup>77</sup> The ‘presymbolic order’ is Lacanian terminology meaning that which precedes language acquisition. More on this later on.



pretended autonomy (Bristow, pp. 84-86).<sup>78</sup> Although Kristeva acknowledges the importance of the mirror phase in the making of a self with its own borders, in her view abjection would take place earlier, with the child trying to separate itself from the mother by ‘jettisoning what seems to be part of oneself.’ (McAfee, p. 46) Hence, from its very beginning, before it becomes consolidated and stable enough, the subject is ‘divided against itself’, other than it is, ‘itself the location of a difference.’ (Belsey, p. 57). It is in this context that ‘a subject uncertain of its borders’ is placed before ‘a looming of the abject in a breakdown of not only the “other” but the world.’ (Beardsworth, p. 84) Accordingly, abjection ‘reveals the deepest collapse of selfhood, the “other,” and the world.’ (p. 82)

#### 4.2 - Abjection as a State

Another side of abjection, considered as a state or condition rather than a process, presents this concept as a negative one. Etymologically a cast-off, a thrown-away, the abject would thus correspond to that which is jettisoned, thrown up or driven out during the aforesaid process (*POH*, p. 6).<sup>79</sup> In this way, the abject is ‘what disturbs identity, system, order’, the ‘in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.’ (p. 4) It is an utterly ‘unnameable otherness,’ a non-object, it ‘falls out of object-relation.’ (Beardsworth, p. 92) As a result, ‘it is always elsewhere than desire,’ as desire is always desire of an object; hence, it ‘beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced.’ (ibid.; *POH*, p. 1) In conclusion, the abject is ‘always elsewhere than relationship to another, *literally* beside the subject’ (Beardsworth, p. 92, original emphasis). Thus, once the ego is formed, the abject, having fallen into an ‘abominable real’, posits an ontological blurring of borders beyond which the ‘I’ risks ‘sublime alienation’ and a ‘forfeited existence’: that of a deject, the one by whom the abject exists. The deject is possessed by something preceding subjectivity, an Other otherwise forgotten deep in the unconscious, a

---

<sup>78</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, tr. by Bruce Fink, Éloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York and London: Norton, 2002; repr. 2006), p. 78.

Kristeva conflates the mirror stage and Freudian castration in what she calls the ‘thetic’. It would be at this moment that subjectivity would emerge (Bristow, pp. 109-10)

<sup>79</sup> Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymologic Dictionary of Modern English*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London and New York: Routledge, 1966), p. 5.

relic of what the self was before becoming such, thus preserving ‘the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be’ (*POH*, pp. 8-10).<sup>80</sup> In the end, we are all inhabited by a stranger, a foreigner who ‘lives within us’. He represents an “improper” facet of our impossible “own and proper”; if we ‘flee from or struggle against’ it, it is our unconscious we are fighting against (Belsey, p. 64).<sup>81</sup>

### 4.3 – Maternal Abjection: The Temptations of the Chora

There is yet another side to the concept of the abject: the residue that has been cast off in the process of self-constitution as being ‘sickening’ and threatening to one’s sense of the ‘clean and proper’ self, which beckons to the subject ‘through loathing.’ (*POH*, p. 10) This residue, however, is also ‘irresistible’, alluring, as it embodies the promise of a restauration of unity with the pre-symbolic, the borderless, undifferentiated Everything: a complete communion with the ‘oceanic’ wholeness and plenitude represented by the mother’s body before language and subjectivity, a ‘field of non-meaning’, always uncanny, and a threat

---

<sup>80</sup> The real order, as defined by Jacques Lacan, is that which, resisting signification, is ‘the traumatic kernel at the core of subjectivity and the symbolic order.’ In other words, it is the child’s experience before entering the imaginary order through the mirror stage, in which it develops a first self-image and a sense of unity, even if hallucinatory and distorted, out of its still uncoordinated body and its specular image. Henceforth, the child will start recognising his ‘image as sign’ (*POH*, p. 14). Thus, the real is ‘both inside us and beyond, outside language and resisting signification’, totally inaccessible for consciousness, unimaginable, unspeakable and indistinct. For Jameson, it would be what ‘our narratives can only approximate in asymptotic fashion’ (as it is by definition ‘non-narrative and non-representational’) and which “resists symbolization absolutely”. (Homer, p. 31; Easthope, p. 90; Crosthwaite, p. 28). The real’s ‘murder’ would be the symbol, language (p. 35).

According to Lacan, we only come about as subjects or recognisable egos by the grace of the mirror phase, despite our own self-dispersal and our being ‘split between conscious and unconscious’ from that moment on (Easthope, p. 61). The subjectivity thus achieved or ideal ego is ‘an alienated, virtual unity, only perceived by the subject ‘from the outside,’ ‘in an anticipated manner.’ (Donald E. Hall, *Subjectivity*, TNCI (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 80) In the end, this would indirectly confirm Freud’s idea of the human as inevitably divided, always ‘decentred’, at the mercy of forces outside conscious control. (Weeks, *Discontents*, p. 131; Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality, Key Ideas*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London and New York: Routledge, 1983; repr. 2010), p. 70).

The Real, along with the Imaginary and the Symbolic, which we will see presently, are categories devised by Lacan in order to explain the forces in which the subject finds itself caught as it seeks its meaning within the field of the other. These categories bear a loose resemblance to Freud’s id, ego and superego, which also attempt an explanation of the self’s negotiation of its sense and place in the world (Bristow, p. 90). As a psychoanalytic concept, the real would be ‘of primary interest to Lacan only insofar as it threatens the structures of subjectivity.’ (Crosthwaite, p. 30)

<sup>81</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), pp. 1, 191.

that might end up ‘engulfing’ the subject (McAfee, p. 47; Bristow, p. 91).<sup>82</sup> That is why ‘maternal abjection’, Kristeva’s own term for Freud’s ‘return of the repressed’, would always lurk near our consciousness in the form of ‘a longing to fall back into the maternal chora’, thus evoking the fatal unhappiness whose ‘fundamental cause’ is separation (McAfee, p. 49).<sup>83</sup>

The mother certainly embodies these two aspects of the abject in that the child, the self-in-progress, will wage a ‘reluctant struggle’ against what was the mother and will now turn into in its growing out of the imaginary order, eventually into the symbolic order and full-blown subjectivity (*POH*, p. 13).<sup>84</sup> Once it gets there, the mother will stay ‘the absolute because primeval seat of the impossible—of the excluded, the outside-of-meaning, the abject.’ (p. 22) And yet, her ontological and signifying ambivalence will always remain within the ‘Oedipal triangle’ (whose third vortex would be the father) as the new subject’s first object, ‘both desirable and signifiable’, the one that guarantees its coming into being as such (p. 32). Indeed, always with regard to this Freudian structure, the mother will appear as ‘the prototype of the object’, whereas the father will function as ‘the mainstay of the law’ (*ibid.*). Besides, the mother’s authority is the ‘trustee’ of the ‘mapping of the self’s clean and proper body’, which, in its turn, is ‘the precondition of language’ and, by extension, of culture, the symbolic order and full subjectivity (p. 72; Belsey, p. 58). This order is described by Lacan as ‘the Other’: ‘the organisation of signifiers’ around us. Consisting of the ‘law, society and other people’, we internalise our identity by borrowing from it (Easthope, pp. 59-60). From that moment on, the ‘I’ will be ‘besieged, not by

---

<sup>82</sup> From a feminist point of view, Judith Butler criticises the concept of maternal abjection, which for her is ‘the way the dominant order excrementalizes its dispossessed’ by “constituting zones of uninhabitability” [...] and unintelligibility, [...] abject powerlessness, lifelessness, and meaninglessness to which it consigns its marginalized others.’ As cited in Calvin Thomas, p. xii.

Charles I. Armstrong, ‘Echo: Reading *The Unnamable* through Kant and Kristeva’, *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 1.1 (2002), 173-97 (p. 179).

<sup>83</sup> The semiotic chora, according to Kristeva, would be ‘a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated.’ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller, European Perspectives (New York and Guilford, Surrey: Columbia UP, 1984), p. 25.

In *Malone Dies*, its eponymous protagonist will evoke this Kristevan concept *avant la lettre*: ‘The ceiling rises and falls, rises and falls, *rhythmically, as when I was a foetus.*’ (*TN*, p. 276, my emphasis)

Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2006), p. 91.

<sup>84</sup> The symbolic order, according to Lacan, is shared by all subjects, can be identified with language and the law, and provides a social and intersubjective field of signification ‘where everyone has access to the pronoun “I”.’ (Bristow, p. 91)

impulses and instincts,’ unlike in Freud’s model, but by ‘signs and meanings.’ (Bristow, p. 84) This ‘big Other’, which was there before the self ever came to be, will never truly belong to us (Belsey, p. 58). We are but its transient creatures.

#### 4.4 – The Semiotic, Jouissance and Catharsis

From a formal angle, the vehicles for the abject being powerful images of disgust and revulsion, abjection is linked to what Julia Kristeva terms the semiotic: a mode of signification that, not being subject to the rules of grammar and syntax (in fact, it disrupts them), would ‘energise’ its complementary mode, the symbolic. The symbolic, in its turn, would be based on the objective and socially sanctioned rules of grammar and denotative semantics (McAfee, pp. 17-18; Armstrong, p. 181). By allowing the speaking subject, the subject that is constituted through the use and agency of language as a signifying system, to discharge and invest their bodily energy and drives into language, the semiotic would make the evocation of feeling and affect possible, adding a connotative, affective dimension to language in order to make it fully meaningful ((McAfee, pp. 14-16, 27). Thus, the imaginary-semiotic and the symbolic would ‘rise up against each other, creating friction between opposing agencies that compete for meaning, forever fending off the field of non-meaning marked by the Real.’ (Bristow, p. 91) The real would be impossible, as that which both precedes and succeeds the symbolic, appearing only as its failure or its void. Indeed, as a repressed, ‘organic being’ for which we have no signifiers in our ‘world of names’, it remains ‘outside signification’. Unable to express itself through language, it will do so via dreams, parapraxes, jokes or psychosomatic symptoms (Belsey, p. 58).

Thus, according to Kristeva, the speaking subject achieves ‘*signifiance*’: the ability to convey ‘what representative and communicative speech does not say.’<sup>85</sup> In other words, signifiance would be equivalent to ‘signification’ as ‘disrupted by more archaic impulses’, what is not mere denotation, which comes from the deepest recesses of one's self, redolent of the pre-Oedipal and pre-symbolic, and associated with the pre-Oedipal mother, both

---

<sup>85</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora, and others, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia UP, 1980), p. 18. Although ‘signifiance’ is a term used by Kristeva herself, its definition as registered here corresponds to Leon S. Roudiez in his introduction to this work.

‘maternal *and* phallic’. It is there that idiosyncratic meaning resides. In this, signifi-ance would bear testimony to the degree to which ‘signifying practices’ are invested with bodily drives, and therefore also to the indissolubility of the human body and mind. It would also bear witness to the fact that, contrary to what structuralism contends, we are always in progress as speaking subjects. (McAfee, pp. 39, 43; Beardsworth, p. 131; Easthope, p. 123, original emphasis). Indeed, the irruption of the pre-symbolic in our significations keeps us open to the other than the self-same, enriching our lives beyond our social roles and functions. In this respect, Kristeva believes that through the semiotic we can get access to the imaginary order, even if only in a fragmentary way, through its traces in that mode of signification (McAfee, p. 43).

It would be precisely this “poetic” unsettling of analytic utterance’, this ‘semiotization of the symbolic’ by art, that would invest language with a ‘flow of jouissance’, while bearing witness to its closeness to abjection (*POH*, p. 30; Kristeva, *Revol. In Poetic Lang.*, p. 79). Jouissance, in its turn, would be a type of radical experience, firmly based on the physical, organic, and rhythmic, that nevertheless would also evoke psychic pleasure (McAfee, p. 16). According to Lacan, whose thought Kristeva basically follows in this respect, jouissance, consisting in an uncontainable, ‘intensely pleasurable out-of-body state’, would put us ‘on the path of ex-istence’, whereby our limited, conscious self would be left behind in sheer ecstasy (Bristow, p. 97). As a matter of fact, the jouissance Lacan is thinking of here would be a purely feminine one, one that may go beyond phallic pleasure, ‘touching on the beyond’, closer to Theresa of Avila’s mystical ecstasies than to male orgasm (Easthope, p. 105).

This would be the sort of experience sought and achieved by the deject in his straying into what Kristeva calls the ‘land of oblivion’, which is nevertheless ‘constantly remembered’, whence the subject separates in its self-building process: a ‘deep well of memory’ that is ‘unapproachable and intimate’ (*POH*, p. 6). Those trips out of bounds for the self, announced by thunderous revelation, are the only gateway to the abject, the only way for it to exist as such (pp. 8-9).<sup>86</sup> Jouissance demands itself ‘an *abjection* from which identity becomes absent’, where the latter cuts loose from itself, where it regresses into the

---

<sup>86</sup> Historically, there was another way to abjection and its associated jouissance in our Judeo-Christian civilisation: self-abasement, the utter renunciation of the self, as among prophets and saints (*POH*, p. 5).

selfless and undifferentiated, being thus dissolved (p. 54). Leo Bersani also sees jouissance as ‘self-shattering’, a disruption of ‘the ego’s coherence’ and a dissolution of its boundaries, thus working ‘against the narcissism of a securely mapped ego.’<sup>87</sup>

A fascinating reflection on these issues, well ahead of French structuralism (Lacan) and poststructuralism (Kristeva), and linking up with Bersani’s self-shattering, can be found in Euripides’ *Bacchae*. Even rationalist Euripides has Pentheus, king of Thebes, justly punished by observing from afar the Maenads or Bacchae, believers and servants of Dionysus, thus not getting involved into the cult’s necessarily orgiastic loss and oblivion of personal identity. Moreover, he is banned to take part as a man, and a king too: first, the mysteries of Dionysus are reserved for the representatives of the primeval, undifferentiated, abject Mother, that is, women; second, Pentheus is the representative of the male Phallus, therefore (self-)mastery, which is always oppression both of oneself and others. Pentheus’ punishment is precisely ‘self-shattering’: dismemberment at the hands of the Maenads.<sup>88</sup> Leading them, the first one to tear a limb off Pentheus’ body, is his own mother, Agave. This is the dark side of female, motherly, semiotic jouissance and the pre-symbolic.

It is significant that this work is an ancient Greek play: one whose primordial function was catharsis, the exorcism of that which could otherwise destroy the members of the audience as subjects, which is thus discharged onto the flawed, tragic hero. In this way, we are purged of the extremely dangerous feelings associated to the hero’s tragic flaw, his related hubris and the overwhelming punishment befalling him. Indeed, and in Kristeva’s own words, the semiotic can lead to a ‘poetic purification’, a catharsis that may protect from the repetition of the abject ‘by dint of being immersed in it.’ This is brought about ‘through rhythm and song, therefore through what is not yet, or no longer is word, “meaning”’ (*POH*, p. 28). Thus, a first link between abjection and literature is established, prompting Kristeva to define the latter as the former’s ‘privileged signifier’ and to invoke its ‘nocturnal power’. (p. 208).

---

<sup>87</sup> Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard UP, 1995; repr. 1996), pp. 101, 125. In Freudian psychoanalysis, narcissism is originally ‘a sexual perversion in which the subject is in love with himself rather than with another person.’ (Storr, p. 57).

<sup>88</sup> Euripides, *Bakkhai*, intro. by Charles Seagal, tr. by Reginald Gibbons, *The Greek Tragedy in New Translations* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2001), lines 1,229-1,301 (pp. 84-86).

Following Kristeva, Charles I. Armstrong remarks how contemporary literature is a sublimation of the abject, which it names and keeps under control, allowing the reader (I would say the writer, too) to come face to face with it (Armstrong, p. 181; *POH*, p. 26). Ultimately, the Word discloses the abject, while at the same time it purifies from it; this being so, it helps avoid the subject's annihilation following its acknowledgement (Armstrong, pp. 181-82; *POH*, p. 2). This is the reason for literature to conjure up the abject it seeks to dispel, as if in order to exorcise the 'foreign and impure' it consists of, ultimately resulting in catharsis (McAfee, pp. 49-50, 54). Within a Christian cultural context, Kristeva states explicitly, 'even during the most odious times, [...] art provided sinners with the opportunity to live, openly and inwardly apart, the joy of their dissipation set into signs'; then, citing the Gospel of Mark, she concludes: 'And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name shall they *cast out devils*' (*POH*, p. 131, my emphasis). These devils would be those besieging the ever-in-progress, always problematically unstable speaking subject. Hence, functionally, abjection could even take over from the sacred, to which it could be related on the grounds of its 'nocturnal' nature, 'at the limits of social and subjective identity', and substitute for it at the time of the death of God and the demise of official creeds and organised confessions. (pp. 26, 208, 155; McAfee, p. 49).<sup>89</sup>

I actually believe that claims of sacredness and para-religious consecration in the literary cultivation of abjection could still be upheld by considering, in Kristeva's Céline-inspired formula, its being 'triggered by' and 'umbilicated to' 'the Lady', the archetypal mother, Robert Graves' Moon Goddess, Mozart's and Schikaneder's Queen of the Night (*POH*, p. 146).<sup>90</sup> It is my claim that this literature (and also its related critical and

---

<sup>89</sup> In this respect Terry Eagleton's idea of English as an academic subject substituting for religion in the contemporary academic syllabus would not be that wrong, after all. See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008), pp. 20-22.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Graves places worship of this Goddess as the rule in traditional agricultural societies. Her cult is therefore earlier than advanced economies, 'urban civilization' and 'the industrial machine', which are linked to the philosophical tradition started by Socrates. This tradition would reach its peak during the Enlightenment. The latter's secular beliefs in individual liberty, rationalism and objective, scientific knowledge and truth would all be deeply inimical to the Great Mother. See his preface to *The White Goddess*: Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1966), pp. 9-15 (pp. 9-10, 14)

The Great Mother as imagined by Emanuel Schikaneder, Mozart's co-librettist in *The Magical Flute* and a fellow-freemason of the former's, could be thought of as the embodiment of Kristeva's 'nocturnal power', her attributes being irrationality, passion, spite, jealousy, hatred and vengeance, as befits an inspirer of superstition, ignorance and prejudice. See for example the lyrics of her most celebrated aria in the mentioned

theoretical corpus) of negativity, darkness and transgression is central to the understanding of certain trends in post-WWII Anglo-American literature.<sup>91</sup> In this sense, I will be showing some of the many implications in Beckett's *Three Novels* that seem to anticipate, *avant la lettre*, French post-structuralism and deconstruction in their negative thinking of difference and in their decentred structure and methodology, which has made them available and productive, e.g., for feminist criticism and theory.<sup>92</sup> It would be these literary, critic and theoretical trends, and not existentialism, that would have influenced the literature I am studying in this thesis. At least two of the works I analyse in it (Beckett's *Three Novels* and Ballard's *Crash*) exemplify this.

---

opera: 'Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen'. The English version of the original libretto can be accessed in *Mozart: The Magic Flute*, Chandos Opera in English, in *Chandos: The Sound of Classical*, <<https://www.chandos.net/chanimages/Booklets/CH3121.pdf>> [accessed 14.10.2019], p. 134.

<sup>91</sup> Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California, 1992), p. 7: '1944-56 [...] the years in which modern French high culture flourished and established a worldwide hegemony'. This influence would have continued over time, French philosophy having remained 'the mainstay of critical theory in recent times.' According to David Rudrum, writing in 2006, 'the most interesting and challenging of the many phases in the development of literary theory have been intimately wedded to developments in French thought over the past generation or so.' David Rudrum, 'Introduction', in *Literature and Philosophy: A Guide to Contemporary Debates*, ed. by David Rudrum (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants. and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 9-12 (pp. 11-12).

<sup>92</sup> See for example Pattie, pp. 169-70, on J. Y. Toyama; see also McDonald, pp. 121-22.

Russell Smith sees this avowed affinity as an instance of 'instrumental teleology' on the side of postmodernists, otherwise highly suspicious of modernism's 'rhetoric of overcoming': 'Endless Beckett: Rewriting Modernity and the Postmodern Sublime', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 14 (*After Beckett / D'après Beckett*) (2004), 405-20 (p. 411). See also Fernando de Toro, 'Samuel Beckett, el Innombrable y el fin de la Modernidad', *Epos*, 26 (2010), 217-244 (pp. 223-24, 230). In any case, H. Porter Abbot remarks the fact that "[I]f Beckett's work glosses deconstruction, it was a modernist scribe who wrote the gloss", as cited in Gilbert Yeoh, 'Beckett's Persistent Humanism: Ethics and Epistemology in *Molloy*', *AUMLA : Journal of the Australasian Universities Modern Language Association*, 103 (2005), 109-135 (p. 109).



## Chapter 5 – Contemporary Literature as a Literature of Nihilism and Abjection

It would be the longing corresponding to ‘the moment of subjectivity closest to irrationality’, that of the primitive ego trying to separate itself from the mother, that would explain the existence of such a tradition of negativity, transgression and self-destructive mauduitism in French literature, as we already mentioned (Beardsworth, p. 82). Negativity would be a way for the repressed to reappear in language, the repressed being here the abject.<sup>93</sup> Common themes in this tradition would be those related to ‘inhumanity’, as is the case with ‘horror, death, madness, orgy, outlaws, war, the feminine threat, the horrendous delights of love, disgust, and fright.’ (*POH*, p. 137) As regards more specifically transgression, these authors celebrate sex as a danger and a threat to ‘the self, society and even the universe.’ (Weeks, *Sexuality*, p. 119)

The existence of this literary tradition and its bearing on abjection would be possible on account of the conceptual closeness obtaining between abjection and nihilism. This is an especially important question for this thesis, as it links directly two of its main theoretical concerns. Thus, Kristeva construes nihilism as ‘the tendential severance of the semiotic and symbolic’ or, to put it another way, ‘the dissociation of representation from embodied experience’ in modernity (Beardsworth, p. 57).<sup>94</sup> More specifically, nihilism would be the result of ‘the need, and failure, of the semiotic to take on symbolic form in prevailing institutions and discourses’, such failure being the consequence of ‘the failings of modern institutions and discourses to accommodate the corporeal, affective, and mimetic

---

<sup>93</sup> Although the abject is ‘radically excluded’, it is ‘never banished altogether.’ Unlike what is merely repressed, the abject does not completely disappear from consciousness: it remains both an unconscious and a conscious threat to the clean and proper self (McAfee, p. 46).

The ‘clean’ is an important category, according to Mary Douglas, as it translates into our culture the innumerable taboos existing in other cultures studied by anthropologists: dirt is dangerous enough to be excluded as defiling, since it threatens and violates the ‘boundaries and classifications’ inherent in the very idea of ‘social order’ (Reader, pp. 47-48).

<sup>94</sup> Or in postmodernity, since this term is often substituted by ‘modernity’ in France: we will see this further ahead.

dimension of separateness and connections with others.’ (ibid.) The literary school we have mentioned would try to deal with these failings.

With this in mind, abjection can be noticed in several notions and attitudes that can easily be shown to be related to nihilism as well, such as negativity and the rejection of traditional humanism. This last discourse entails the idea of a reality previous to and external to language as its ultimate referent, the existence of a unified, complete and unchanging self as the source of linguistic expression and meaning, and ‘man’ as the origin, author and master of History (even if following God’s designs in Christian humanism: McAfee, pp. 1-2; Belsey, p. 35).

Even more directly, abjection is related to one of the theoretically defining characteristics of nihilism, namely meaninglessness. Thus, Kristeva contends, the abject is that which draws the self to that place where meaning collapses; consequently, the self cannot acknowledge the abject as a thing, as in such space or dimension things, objects or subjects, all of them depending on language and the symbolic for their very existence and acknowledgement, have no reason to be. As a result, what the self recognises in the abject is just a ‘weight of meaninglessness’ (*POH*, p. 2). Abjection would thus be the subject’s ‘impossible within’, acknowledged by the self as constitutive of its very *being* (p. 5, original emphasis). This would be even more so because of the unavoidably alien nature of the self as constituted in the imaginary and in the symbolic orders. Indeed, in this latter social, intersubjective, ‘fluctuating, disjointed, heterogeneous’ order which ‘outdoes and overreaches the subject’s desires to find a stable point for its identity in the Imaginary’, the subject is not allowed to ‘recreate in his own image’ what lies ‘beyond him.’ (Bristow, p. 91) In this respect, the Lacanian subject is always a subject of desire, and can only know about itself by way of launching itself into the field of the other in search of a response. This response cannot be known in advance, though. Therefore, all the subject can aspire to is to know what it might have become, always in a process of ‘deferred becoming’ (p. 89). As a result, our true self, as we will see in our analysis of Beckett’s *Molloy Trilogy*, can only be expected to appear in some deep layer of our pre-subjective psychology as something meaningless, irrational, and prior to our own self-image and our social identity and roles.



## **PART 2 - Samuel Beckett's *Three Novels***



## Chapter 1 - Introduction: Modernism and Postmodernism. *Three Novels, Crash, Headhunter*

Samuel Beckett and abjection as an expressive constant of much of post-WWII art will lead us to a third major theoretical concept in this dissertation: postmodernism, a label to include at one and the same time many widely different aesthetic theories, creative practices, critical orientations and, more generally, a number of attitudes towards life developed generally after 1945. This date is so significant in this respect as to make Will Slocombe state that WWII was ‘*the* most important contributing factor to the development of a postmodern sensibility’, postmodernism being ‘essentially a rebirth, a post-apocalyptic philosophy intended to remedy that which led to the Holocaust’.<sup>95</sup> Even more explicitly, he defines postmodernism as ‘that which originates in the Holocaust,’ the postmodern configuring itself as ‘a deliberate rejection of what “Enlightenment” and “modernity” mean.’ (Slocombe, pp. 77, 80, 157, original emphasis).<sup>96</sup> Robert Eaglestone adds to this: ‘postmodernism in the West begins with thinking about the Holocaust’ and, ‘understood as poststructuralism,’ it is ‘a response to the Holocaust.’<sup>97</sup> This is how the Enlightenment, understood as ‘the grand narrative form for the history of modernity’, comes to an end (Jenks, *Culture*, p. 192). Thus, postmodernism (at least provisionally) would be the art and the culture developed within postmodernity, that is from the end of WWII on.

We already mentioned how Beckett could be viewed as a transition figure from modernism to postmodernism, given some features related to his negativity in both subject matter and formal strategies. It is my contention though that, for all his negativity, in spite of the positive, radical values and principles held so dear by many canonical high

---

<sup>95</sup> This is why, ‘for all his insistence upon the protean temporality of the postmodern,’ Lyotard suggests 1943 as the year inaugurating postmodernity, as it was then that the Final Solution was agreed upon (as cited in Crosthwaite, p. 11).

<sup>96</sup> Hans Bertens explains the birth of postmodernity as a process whereby ‘the self-reflexivity inherent in the modern project has come to question modernity at large.’ It is as though ‘critical rationality’ had turned ‘upon itself’, thus being ‘forced to reluctantly admit to its costs.’ (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 237).

<sup>97</sup> Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2004), p. 2.

modernists, and his doubts about ‘the presuppositions of modernist writing,’ Beckett is the last great modernist master, the pinnacle of late modernism.<sup>98</sup> This can clearly be seen in his full awareness of being not merely a writer or a playwright, but an artist in the fullest sense of the term. I mean by this someone essentially and vocationally engaged in a lifelong formal quest, completely alien to ordinary considerations of critical or social success, always standing as someone ‘from nowhere’, having ‘no kith’, ‘the exceptional writer who lays claim to a unique aesthetic project’, who ‘stakes his being’ for the sake of ‘high solitary art’ (McDonald, pp. 25, 28; Gasiorek, *History*, p. 18; Siess, p. 178).<sup>99</sup> In fact, during his central and most fruitful period, to which his *Three Novels* belong, he will subscribe to an aesthetics of failure according to which being successful is equivalent to failing better, only to yet again court failure in the next work to follow. In this sense, even supposing there would only be false tracks for an artist to follow, one still ought to be very careful in choosing precisely the bad track which would suit one best (Siess, p. 180). This deliberate will to follow such a tortuous path and not any other would weigh more heavily on Beckett’s balance than the claim made by some that ‘the postmodern affirms nothing

---

<sup>98</sup> Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California, 1999), pp. 392, 20.

<sup>99</sup> See Samuel Beckett’s ‘Homage to Jack B. Yeats’, in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. by Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove, 1984), p. 134. Regarding literary success, already in 1937, in the so-called ‘German letter’ addressed to Axel Kaun, Beckett writes how ‘responses of small as well as large audiences are becoming more and more mysterious to me and, what is worse, less significant.’ He offhandedly adds, ‘if we absolutely must earn money, we do it elsewhere.’ Samuel Beckett, ‘German Letter of 1937’, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, I (1929-1940), ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: CUP, 2009; repr. 2014), pp. 516-21 (p. 517).

With regard to social and financial success, Beckett expressed his determination ‘to resist not only the values of the commodity and the market-place, but the value of value itself’: Andrew Gibson, *Samuel Beckett, Critical Lives* (London: Reaktion: 2010), p. 152. Therefore, ‘for Proust or Joyce, God had been replaced by art, whereas for Beckett even art lost its supreme value.’ (Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, ‘Non-Teleological Narration’, in *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. by Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema, A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages Series (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1997), pp. 273-82 (p. 275)). See also Hugh Kenner, *A Reader’s Guide to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), p. 37. As regards success among his peers and critics, he recognized in an interview that he was of the persuasion that ‘If you notice the echo [of your work] you are done for’ (Siess, p. 188). In connection with this, Cioran makes this memorable reflection: ‘Samuel Beckett. Prix Nobel. Quelle humiliation pour un homme si orgueilleux ! La tristesse d’être compris !’ (‘Samuel Beckett. The Nobel Prize. What a humiliation for such a proud man! The sorrow of being understood!’) E.M. Cioran, ‘23 October’ (1969), *Cahiers 1957-1972*, NRF Essais (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 657 (my translation).

John Pilling: ‘Beckett’s ‘prose [...] was an attempt to provide structure for a random universe’ (as cited in Pattie, p. 133). All of this, according to H. Porter Abbot, he did with ‘intense earnestness’, which ‘distinguishes him from so many of his post-modern contemporaries’ (as cited in Pattie, p. 195).

Finally, Richard Begam calls Beckett’s novels from *Murphy* to the first trilogy ‘the most influential expression [...] of “the end of modernity”’ (ibid.).

beyond its own failure [...] without regret and without longing.’ It is one thing to lightly fail in an aesthetic project and another to do so consciously and on purpose, ignoring conventions and dismissing expectations. Beckett would be confirmed as a (late) modernist writer, then.<sup>100</sup>

Beckett’s ‘deep seriousness’ about art, his extreme, uncompromising zeal after a form that would accommodate the mess he sees in existence will lead him to oppose any adaptations of his work, either cinematic (as a matter of principle) or for the stage (against innovative productions beyond unquestioning observance of his indications in the text): he always attempted to be ‘il miglior fabbro’.<sup>101</sup> This would be in flagrant contradiction with what Lyotard calls ‘the postmodern as a break from the modernist hegemony of art.’ (Slocombe, p. 85) In a way, as he went down his own personal road of stylistic impoverishment, concentration and reduction towards a minimalist ideal, Beckett was very successful in the expression of (the / his own) failure (of expression).<sup>102</sup> In this cult of failure, as an artist of ‘damage, devaluation, and impoverishment’, Beckett also stands as a representative of ‘a radical modernity anxious to save art from the pre-emptive operations of institutionalized culture.’ (Calvin Thomas, p. 80; Bersani, *Homos*, p. 181) Substituting ‘modernism’ for ‘modernity’, Bersani’s judgement of Beckett’s art would still make sense.

Nevertheless, the critically disputed fact whether Beckett was either a (late) modernist or a(n early) postmodernist will not draw much attention from us, because of two reasons: first, our rejection of a linear, neatly periodised, teleological, dialectic, Hegelian history of literary forms; and second, the exemplification of (full) postmodernism in the last text

---

<sup>100</sup> Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, TNCI (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 115.

<sup>101</sup> Breon Mitchell, ‘Samuel Beckett and the Postmodernism Controversy’, in *Exploring Postmodernism*, ed. by Matei Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema, Utrecht Publications in General and Comparative Literature, 23 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1990), pp. 109-121 (p. 114).

‘Il miglior fabbro’: as T. S. Eliot famously hailed Ezra Pound in his dedication of *The Waste Land*: T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ed. by Michael North, Norton Critical Editions (New York and London: Norton, 2001), p. 3. See also James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), pp. 490-91; and C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader’s Guide to his Works, Life, and Thought* (New York: Grove, 2004), pp. 165-66.

<sup>102</sup> Audrey Wasser, ‘From Figure to Fissure: Beckett’s *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*’, *Modern Philology* 109.2 (2011), 245-65 (p. 254)



explored in our study: Timothy Findley's *Headhunter*.<sup>103</sup> J.G. Ballard's *Crash* would be situated somewhere in between both works.

It is by focusing on *Headhunter* and *Crash*, both of them being also deeply steeped in nihilism and abjection, that I intend to explore the notion of postmodernism and the historically and culturally associated concept of postmodernity. It is from the theoretical standpoint, among others, of a Marxist theorist and critic, Fredric Jameson, that I plan to carry out this study. According to Jameson, postmodernism would be the cultural dominant of what he calls late capitalism, the mode of production reigning supreme in our globalised, (neo-liberally) post-ideological era, the so-called 'end of History'. By the 1980s, the time of publication of Francis Fukuyama's (in)famous article (1989), as well as the prelude to the fall of the USSR in 1991, postmodernism would already have started to pervade every single aspect of Western culture, sometimes under the guise of pop.<sup>104</sup>

It was precisely in the more or less underground, 'pop' world of Sci-Fi pulp-fiction magazines in the Britain of the 60s and 70s that our second author, J.G. Ballard, first published, to eventually become a living canonical figure of post-WWII literature. Coming out in the emblematic year of 1973, *Crash* was adapted for the cinema in 1996 by art-house film director David Cronenberg.<sup>105</sup> We find in this film an outstanding example of the marriage of a ceaseless flow of oddly unsettling images of sexual perversion and abjection, and a celebration of one of the most commonplace commodities of our consumerist culture: the automobile, in its thousand brands and models.

Although this novel could be picked out as a perfect representative of what Jameson construes as the intensities of a schizophrenic society and an art that have forgotten any sense of history and causality, there is more to it than just that. In fact, the novel suggests and is compatible with the existence of other concepts of postmodernism, such as Linda

---

<sup>103</sup> On the first of these two reasons, see Richard Begam and Fredric Jameson, as cited and discussed in Russell Smith, pp. 410-11.

<sup>104</sup> In Fukuyama's article it is contended that, after the fall of communism, we might be witnesses not merely to the aftermath of the Cold War, but to 'the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.' Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History', *The National Interest*, Summer (1989), n. p. (par. 4).

'Pop in the broadest sense was the context in which a notion of the postmodern first took shape': Andreas Huyssen, as quoted in Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 33.

<sup>105</sup> Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, Theory, Culture & Society Series, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Los Angeles and London: Sage, 2007), p. xvi.

Hutcheon's. According to her, there is room in our society for a postmodern art that would allow for non-dogmatic social criticism through the use of parody and irony. This lack of dogmatism (dogmatism being by definition a risk with regard to the work of Marxist critics such as Jameson) would contribute to the opening up of a space of social dialogue that would not exclude anyone from the very start in an elitist sort of way.<sup>106</sup> This could be so because of what Jean-François Lyotard foregrounds as the essential characteristic of postmodernity: incredulity in and therefore the demise of what he calls metanarratives (*TPC*, p. xxiv). These can be defined as the linguistic-ideological, all-encompassing constructs that have historically shaped our worldviews in our Western civilisation. Marxism would be one of them.

In any case, Lyotard's use of the term postmodernity, rather than postmodernism, in *The Postmodern Condition* points to the conceptual complexity of the cultural situation existing since the second half of the last century and also of its critical assessment, as we will see later. For the rest, Lyotard also seems to posit an objective, social, civilisational concept of postmodernism when he uses this term, which makes him come close to Jameson when the latter defines it as the cultural dominant of late capitalism. Lyotard actually speaks about postmodernism as 'the state of our culture', one that allows for 'the malcontentions of an infinity of factional interests' to be heard, as opposed to the preponderance of generalising, universalising, rational discourses in modernity. Thus, postmodernism might not be a mode of thought, a methodology, or an aesthetics, but rather 'a cultural climate' or 'an attitude towards culture', as well as 'an academic fashion' (Jenks, *Culture*, pp. 200, 203-04; *TPC*, p. xxiii).

Finally, I have purposely chosen to study a third work, Timothy Findley's *Headhunter*, as an instance of a lesser kind of literature in which the characteristics of postmodernism, in the worst sense of the term as developed by Jameson, can be noticed. Here, we are dealing with a '# 1 bestseller' (as literally and prominently displayed on my copy's cover),

---

<sup>106</sup> By way of example, Christopher Butler is of the conviction that 'postmodernists', a category where he seems to lump critics of postmodernism such as Fredric Jameson, 'are by and large pessimists, many of them haunted by lost Marxist revolutionary hopes, and the beliefs and the art they inspire are often negative rather than constructive.' On top of this, even if they may be 'good critical deconstructors,' they tend to make 'terrible constructors.' By sensing 'the authority and the threat' of categories, according to the critic's theoretical preferences, such as 'race, class, rank,' or 'sexual power-play' in everything we say, they may just become unable to tell between 'truth and fantasy', something that would blur them 'in a whirlwind of pessimistic assumptions about the inevitability of [...] conflict', eventually perpetuating 'a long post-Nietzschean tradition of despair about reason.' (Butler, *Postmodernism*, pp. 114-116).

a sort of psychiatric thriller with some absurd pretensions to social criticism. This is so because of its basic object: a highly improbable concoction, prepared for the benefit of a middle- to low-brow readership, of a number of stories that mix up the family life of the rich as fashioned after the conventions of soap opera, along with intergenerational misunderstanding, sham existential ennui, high-profile prostitution and finally, in a most sensationalist way, a secret society of incestuous voyeurs winding up in parricide. In a word, this is a paradigmatic example of Jameson's concept of 'pastiche': the use of assorted styles (in this case, those of certain *pop* literary genres) for the mere sake of citation, an 'empty gesture' without any integration according to a global, unifying view of the work, only for effect (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 157).<sup>107</sup>

In this novel, the general strategies of stylistic citation are enhanced by the fact that schizophrenia, rather than a metaphor about intensity of experience, is quite literal here: two of the main characters are schizophrenics. Not content with this, Findley makes one of them conjure up several classic fictional characters, such as Joseph Conrad's Kurtz (*Heart of Darkness*) or Emily Brontë's Heathcliff (*Wuthering Heights*). For the benefit of the average Canadian reader, I suppose, Susanna Moodie is also to appear in these hallucinations. All of this takes place, moreover, within the framework of a highly traditional third-person, omniscient narration that will not mislead its postmodern readers in their unquestioning, passively nihilistic pursuit of some literary pleasure of sorts, duly seasoned with the spice of sexual abjection. That's entertainment (and business).

---

<sup>107</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (London and New York: Verso, 1991; repr. 1992), p. 17.

## Chapter 2 – Samuel Beckett: Negativity and Aesthetics

Immediately after the end of WWII, during which Beckett was successively a member of the French Résistance, an escapee from the Gestapo hiding out in Vichy France, and an official of the Irish Red Cross in Normandy, he came back to the Paris he had chosen many years ago as his home and working place, estranged from an independent Ireland where he felt he did not fit.<sup>108</sup> Still a rather obscure citizen of the Republic of Letters and shadowed by the massive figure of Joyce, whose collaborator and almost secretary he had been for some time, he underwent a period of several years of intense and isolated work, a real ‘frenzy of writing’: the so-called ‘siege in the room’, which Beckett himself dates between 1946 and 1950 (Shenker, p. 161).<sup>109</sup> Comprised in its output were almost all of his major contributions to the contemporary Western canon.<sup>110</sup> To begin with, he culminated this period with the play that would make him almost instantly someone in his own right in the Parisian literary scene: *Waiting for Godot* (first released in Paris as *En attendant Godot*, 1953: Knowlson, p. 491). This work, however, he only undertook as a sort of diversion from his sustained struggle after the set of three novels that would eventually be known as the *Molloy Trilogy* (or, alternatively, as *Three Novels*), which critical consensus sees as his

---

<sup>108</sup> Israel Shenker, ‘An Interview with Beckett (1956)’, in Graver and Federman (eds.), pp. 160-63 (p. 161): ‘I preferred France in war to Ireland in peace.’ For his engagement with France’s destinies on the brink of war with Nazi Germany, and his contempt for Irish neutrality, see Gibson, p. 97. For his activities during and immediately after the war, see McDonald, pp. 14-15.

<sup>109</sup> Beckett excludes his translations, or rather adaptations into English, of the original French trilogy. By the time of his interview with Shenker (1956), he had still not finished his adaptation of *L’Innomable*, which would eventually be published as *The Unnamable* in 1958 (p. 161). Knowlson also excludes the English *Three Novels* from the ‘siege in the room’ period, which he dates 1947-50 (p. 465). David Pattie makes it last until 1953 (p. 30).

<sup>110</sup> Harold Bloom, for instance, includes the *Three Novels* in Beckett’s ‘major work’, along with *How it Is*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp’s Last Tape*: Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and the School of the Ages* (New York, San Diego, CA, and London: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 494; *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), pp. 219, 221. Quite significantly, when dating the ‘siege in the room’ period, Beckett refers to his 1946-50 output as ‘all my work’ (Shenker, p. 161). This would include not only the French trilogy, but also *En Attendant Godot*.

major authorial achievement: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* (McDonald, pp. 10, 16-17; Pattie, pp. 12, 30, 34-35).<sup>111</sup>

A number of features characterise these works as evidence of a swerve in Beckett's writing from his previous output: firstly, their minimalism, a sort of exhaustion of structure and syntax (a 'syntax of weakness'), with a preference for a limited display of formal resources, in which repetition and parallelism, a peculiar combinatorics in the syntactic domain, and an intensive use of oxymoron and paradox are accompanied by a willing poverty of plot and characterisation (McDonald, p. 105).<sup>112</sup> These formal features, adding up to what Jonathan Boulter calls a 'self-contradictory, self-cancelling rhetoric' may possibly be related to a will not to make things easy for any attempt at 'comforting' interpretation; this rhetoric could also be linked to what may be described, in Joycean terms, as an *epiphany* or revelation of impotence and ignorance that Beckett underwent in Ireland immediately after the end of the war (Pattie, pp. 29-30)<sup>113</sup>. In his own words, this was a turning point in his career as a writer. From then on, he would leave the 'folly' of his

---

<sup>111</sup> Jonathan Boulter, *Beckett: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Guides for the Perplexed (New York and London: Continuum, 2008), p. 6. For evidence that Beckett was specifically after a series of three novels, see John Fletcher, *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964), pp. 119-20.

James Knowlson epitomises the predominant opinion among critics: 'They are almost certainly the most enduring works that Beckett wrote.' (p. 465.)

<sup>112</sup> See Simon Critchley, 'Who Speaks in the Work of Samuel Beckett?', *Yale French Studies*, 93 (*The Place of Maurice Blanchot*) (1998), 114-130 (pp. 122-23).

'Syntax of Weakness' is a term coined by Christopher Ricks and defined by Critchley as 'an endlessly proliferating series of non sequiturs, of planned inconsistencies and contradictory sayings and unsayings', 'a poetics of increasing impotence', 'a comic evocation of [...] the experience of crispation, abjection and senescence.' (*Very Little*, pp. 1, 23, 162, 27). Linking directly with this, although much later, in an interview with James Knowlson in 1989, Beckett speaks of his ideal of an art 'unresentful of its insuperable indigence', acknowledging his 'desire to make myself still poorer', his way being always one of impoverishment (as cited in Gibson, p. 151). Andrew K. Kennedy finds an overall unity in Beckett's oeuvre in that it focuses on 'diminishing human faculties' which he transcribes into 'diminishing language': Andrew K. Kennedy, *Samuel Beckett, British and Irish Authors: Introductory Critical Studies* (Cambridge and New York: CUP: 1989; repr. 1991), p. 1.

Simon Critchley, commenting on Christopher Ricks' study of Beckett's 'syntax of weakness', describes the author's style as a 'language of oxymorons, antitheses, paradoxes and reasoned absurdities.' Later on, he gives an example of indeterminacy of sense, according to which in the opening paragraph of *Molloy* there are four uses of 'perhaps', five of 'apparently' and six of 'I don't know': *Very Little*, pp. 169, 203 (n. 61). As Beckett himself would remark regarding his dramatic oeuvre and its interpretation, 'the key word in my plays is "perhaps"': Tom Driver, 'An Interview with Beckett' (1961), in Graver and Federman (eds.), pp. 241-47 (p. 244). Commenting on this issue, Beckettian actor Jack McGowran is reported to have said that either Beckett or his characters, in writing or saying 'perhaps' are 'sure of only two things: he was born and he will die.' (As cited in William Hutchings, "'The Unintelligible Terms of an Incomprehensible Damnation': Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, *Sheol*, and *St. Erkenwald*", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 27.2 (1981), 97-112 (p. 99)).

<sup>113</sup> On Beckett's feeling of his own ignorance, see McDonald, p. 11.

neo-Joycean modernism (as noticeable, e.g., in *Murphy*, published in 1938) well behind. Even before that, as early as in 1937, he had already written the following: there is 'no higher goal for a writer today' than to 'drill one hole after another into it [language] until that which lurks behind, be it something or *nothing*, starts seeping through ('German Letter', p. 518, my emphasis).

Moreover, Beckett chooses French as his literary language, in a move occasionally anticipated in his previous work (mirroring another great Anglo-Irish writer, Oscar Wilde: McDonald, p. 15; *Pattie*, p. 33).<sup>114</sup> This switch to French would also help him accomplish his intention to lay his language bare, to emancipate it from what he calls 'style', the merely accessory and ornamental, in stark contrast with his former high-modernist self. Hence, what he really writes during these years of 'siege in the room' is a set of French works only later translated or, rather, adapted into English.<sup>115</sup>

This formal stripping accords with the development of the plot of the *Three Novels* too, which is modelled after a traditional, conventional mould: the quest. This quest will have the meaning of the self as its goal, and is usually deployed in parallel with themes of cosmic entropy, physical decay, and moral and social disintegration and degeneration (Russell Smith, p. 408).<sup>116</sup> As the novels succeed one another, the quest becomes more and

---

<sup>114</sup> For Beckett as following the 'Wildean route', see McDonald, p. 9; Gibson, p. 29.

<sup>115</sup> He translated / adapted *Molloy* in collaboration with Patrick Bowles, and on his own those that followed, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*: *Pattie*, pp. 33, 66)  
L. Graver and R. Federman (eds.), pp. xviii-xix.

As for the relationship between both the French and English versions of his work, Brian Evenson claims that they must be considered apart from each other: both sets of works would inhabit a 'heterotopic space', heterotopia being defined as 'two or more disparate systems existing in the same space without interacting.' Brian Evenson, 'Heterotopia and Negativity in Beckett's *Molloy(s)*', *Symposium*, 45.4 (1992), 273-87 (pp. 273, 283). We will take advantage of this to focus on the English versions.

<sup>116</sup> On this issue, Tyrus Miller writes:

To the modernist sublimation of culture in the self-reflexive mastery of literary language and form, Beckett counterposes an aesthetics of entropic decay, deformation, debasement, and disfiguration. To the modernist self-presentation of consciousness, Beckett opposes a deliberately "surgical" handling of textual matter, "self-depiction as autodefacement".

(*LM*, p. 405)

Raymond T. Riva, 'Beckett and Freud', *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*, 12.2 (1970), 120-132 (p. 124, my emphasis): 'Beckett's works imply again and again the power – even the desirability – of our instinct towards social disintegration.' The use of the word 'instinct' allows us to deduct that this

more reductive in a process led by radical negativity and eventually arriving at a strange metaphysical dimension where plot and character, ever more tenuous and rarefied, are no longer recognisable as human or human-related. Indeed, near-extinction of individual subjectivity takes place in a context where language, independent from any material or spatiotemporal referent, stands in its own right as the object of a self-fuelling process that ultimately results in meaninglessness and, if the paradox is allowed to us, in an apotheosis of nothingness.

Between on the one hand a traditional interpretation of this negativity as constitutive of an existentialist orientation, and on the other hand a post-structuralist celebration of this set of novels as a pure linguistic feat, emancipated from any characterial subjectivity or psychology, I will stake my claim for the *Three Novels* to be a staunch, if generally tacit, implicit statement of nihilism.<sup>117</sup> At least, that should be our conclusion if we accept Nietzsche's proposition 'everything lacks meaning' as nihilism's byword or motto (*TWTP*, p. 7).<sup>118</sup> In my opinion, this phrase could also work as a fine synopsis of the entire *Trilogy*.

---

tendency to disintegration is not merely the outcome of a certain set of contingent circumstances, but rather a constitutive part of mankind's ontological structure.

<sup>117</sup> Mark Pedretti, 'Late Modern Rigmarole: Boredom as Form in Samuel Beckett's *Trilogy*', *Studies in the Novel*, 45.4 (2013), 583-602 (p. 583).

<sup>118</sup> Nietzsche associates this meaninglessness with the collapse of our interpretations of the world, which will lead the interpreters to suspect all interpretations to be false (*ibid.*). Quite clearly, he is thinking of the historical demise of the Christian-moral interpretation of the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### Chapter 3 – Beckett’s Problematic Nihilism

Regarding Beckett’s nihilism, I am fully aware of Mark Pedretti’s remark that ‘early emphasis on nihilism [...] now appears dated’ in Beckett criticism; in an even more dismissive fashion, Simon Critchley writes that the ‘stalest of all the stale philosophical clichés in terms of which Beckett’s work has been interpreted is the claim that it celebrates the meaninglessness of existence and is therefore nihilistic.’ (Pedretti, p. 583; *Very Little*, p. 176). Beckett himself states in a 1967 interview: ‘I simply cannot understand why some people call me a nihilist.’ (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 127) Although, as I see it, Beckett does not celebrate nihilism, it is my contention, however, that he fully acknowledges its centrality in his / our time, consequently and uncompromisingly showing it in his oeuvre. This would be incompatible with Critchley’s claim that nihilism in Beckett is only the result of the concealment of ‘the extraordinariness of the ordinary’ under certain conditions, which he understands to stem from the existence of illusory ‘narratives of redemption’ (Critchley, *Very Little*, 179). According to him, such a predicament would derive from mankind’s being cursed by the need to ‘people the void’ and to overfill the world with narrative-created meaning in order to feel saved.

Although I agree that Beckett’s approach involves an invitation to face meaninglessness ‘without the rose-tinted glasses of redemption’, as well as a deconstruction of such narratives, I cannot understand how this may allow for any possible positive reading of ‘the mess’ he describes and thematises so uncompromisingly as ‘an achievement of the ordinary’. In this respect, despite any possible charges of datedness, and in sight of systematic and often brutal rejection of any positivity by the narrators of the *Trilogy*, a rejection, moreover, which is not contradicted in any possible way by other voices in what is basically a monologue in each of the *Three Novels*, I will endeavour to prove how a reading that does not take account of the *Trilogy*’s nihilism as its most defining feature in terms of content is not a well-informed one. One thing is to posit a certain resistance to nihilism, as Critchley does, in Beckett’s ‘elevation of form’ as a ‘syntax of weakness’ and in his ‘acknowledgement of the finiteness of the finite and the limitedness of the human



condition’, and another is to think that this may counter what his narrators seem to take on almost every single occasion not as a mere set of discursive ‘conditions’ or a consequence thereof, but rather as something ontologically constitutive of the very core of their fictional universe, where the narrating protagonists might ‘go on’ out of a ‘desperate élan’ or mere hopeless inertia (Critchley, *Very Little*, pp. 179-80).<sup>119</sup> Meanwhile, they would feel just as overwhelmed by universal purposelessness and meaninglessness, and as tempted by ultimate extinction as before. If nihilism is understood in the terms of Nietzsche’s definition thereof in *The Genealogy of Morals*, namely as a ‘will to nothingness’, then there is no doubt that the narrators of Beckett’s *Three Novels* are nihilists (*Genealogy*, pp. 96, 122).<sup>120</sup> This would imply, at least in principle, that the *Trilogy* itself is nihilistic, too. At the very least there would be in the *Three Novels* an acknowledgment of such nothingness, an adamant rejection of anything that might smuggle it out of sight, and a total lack of any constructive alternatives. To me, that would account to very much the same as being nihilistic; the world of the *Three Novels* is one of overwhelming negativity.

### 3.1 – Beckett’s Aesthetics and Nihilism. Form and Thematics: The Mess

In my study I am giving priority to nihilism and to the thematics of the *Three Novels* precisely because of Beckett’s explicit aesthetics, which has become the basis for a currently dominant formalist-poststructuralist analysis and interpretation of his work. I will consider a period broadly coinciding with the duration of the so-called ‘siege in the room’, the adaptations into English included, and onwards to the publication of *How It Is*, his last masterpiece according to general critical consensus, in 1961. Although this is a rather late date, I will take it into consideration as long as I believe there is a doubtless link with earlier formulations of Beckett’s aesthetics, as based on the same or very similar concerns and preoccupations. This will be all the clearer to me when Beckett associates late general aesthetic speculations with some of his earlier works.

---

<sup>119</sup> Thus, Nishitani Keiji claims that ‘the deepest significance of nihilism is ontological, not merely psychological or cultural’: in David Storey, ‘Nihilism, Nature, And the Collapse of the Cosmos’, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 7.2 (2011), 6-25 (p. 9). Hugh Kenner: *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (New York: Grove, 1961), p. 132.

<sup>120</sup> It should not be forgotten, though, how the will to nothingness remains still a will: ‘man would rather will even nothingness than not will.’ (Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, pp. 312-13).

In *Three Conversations with Georges Duthuit*, written in 1949, Beckett defined his ideal of an art in which mimesis, focused on the mere surfaces of the represented object, had no role whatsoever. In very famous wording, Beckett stated his commitment with an impossible art oriented towards and consisting in ‘the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.’ (Pattie, p. 31)<sup>121</sup> The object of this obligation to express would be precisely what cannot be expressed (Slocombe, p. 202).

This impossible, or at the very least problematic kind of art becomes however actual in as far as Beckett finds an object for such expression; thus, in an interview given in 1956 he admitted not being a master of his material, unlike his once master and mentor, James Joyce (Shenker, p. 162).<sup>122</sup> He went on to define this ‘material’ in terms of subject matter: according to him, he would be working with ‘impotence’ and ‘ignorance’, and more generally with ‘a whole zone of being that has always been set aside [...] as something by definition incompatible with art.’<sup>123</sup>

Five years later, he goes beyond this objective qualification of his work. He now defends the idea that ‘one cannot speak anymore of being, one must speak only of *the mess*.’ Digging deeper into these material considerations, he makes a direct link between this mess and lived experience, as described in sensory terms; in this way, he contends that, in order to ‘see’ the mess, one only has to open one’s eyes: ‘One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that now is simply the mess.’ (Driver, p. 242, my emphasis)

As already said, Beckett’s idiosyncratic material, the object of a revelation of sorts while in Ireland (more precisely in his mother’s room, as though he were Molloy himself) in 1945, is related to finding his own voice as an author, showing him a way to overcome

---

<sup>121</sup> This aesthetic declaration of intent resembles quite extraordinarily one written by Maurice Blanchot in his foreword to *Faux pas* (1943): ‘The writer finds himself in the increasingly ludicrous condition of having nothing to write, of having no means with which to write it, and of being constrained by the utter necessity of always writing it.’ Maurice Blanchot, *Faux pas*, ed. by Werner Harnacher and David E. Wellbery, trans. by Charlotte Mandell, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2001), p. 3.

<sup>122</sup> For the impossibility of an art of expression, see Weller, *Taste for the Negative*, p. 62.

<sup>123</sup> Yet again, there is an amazing coincidence with Blanchot in his foreword to *Faux pas*, though on this occasion rather in the concept than in the wording: ‘Nothingness is his [i.e. the writer’s] material’. (p. 3).

his own ‘folly’ by writing about the things he felt.<sup>124</sup> This link between experience and subject matter became firmly established since then by acknowledging that his experience was that of a ‘non-knower’ and a ‘non-can-er’, eventually leading him to ‘complete disintegration’ in the last novel of his first trilogy, *The Unnamable* (Knowlson, pp. 440-42). In this work, in Beckett’s own words, there is no more ‘I’, nor ‘have’, nor ‘being’; all there is just ‘a mess one cannot make sense of’ (Shenker, p. 162). Its form, that of a non-stop, demented monologue by a vaguely humanoid entity would finally admit the chaos (another wording for ‘the mess’) without making it pass for something else. The artist’s task would be precisely to ‘find a form that accommodates the mess’ (Driver, p. 243).

It is nonetheless some aesthetic considerations made by Beckett that might complicate the assessment of the otherwise vital importance of subject matter and thematics to the *Trilogy*, for the benefit of form and style. Thus, for instance, on the grounds that, in the same 1961 interview given to Tom Driver, Beckett stated that ‘form [...] exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates’, Shane Weller, while comparing Beckett’s case in this regard with Kafka’s and Genet’s, qualifies this separation as ‘radical’. This is in a sort of continuum with the view of one of the gurus of poststructuralism, Jacques Derrida. According to this thinker, Beckett’s style is ‘fundamentally more important’ than his exhausted thematics, and therefore ‘the most “interesting”’ feature of his work.<sup>125</sup> Leaving aside this last value judgement, which I find strictly personal and subjective, and therefore legitimate though irrelevant, there could be some grounds for this attitude in Beckett’s own later aesthetics, where form governs content in that, by giving a shape to that which is in itself shapeless, namely negativity, denial and rejection, it becomes in its own right a kind of affirmation beyond the content.<sup>126</sup> This formalism seems to be the predominant trend in Beckett’s criticism since at least the eighties (McDonald, p. 120).

---

<sup>124</sup> Gabriel d’Aubarède, ‘An Interview with Beckett’ (1961), in Graver and Federman (eds.), pp. 238-40 (p. 240).

<sup>125</sup> As cited in Kathryn White, *Beckett and Decay*, Continuum Literary Studies (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 154.

<sup>126</sup> Samuel Beckett in a conversation with writer Charles Juliet in 1973, as quoted in Weller, *Taste for the Negative*, p. 61.

In spite of this and a myriad humanistic, generally existential interpretations developed in the first two decades of Beckett criticism, it is my claim that thematics is still an essential, even more urgent object of interpretation than strictly formal analysis on at least three accounts: first, the *Trilogy* should be construed with reference to Beckett's aesthetics at the time of its writing (or later, when soundly amenable to his way of writing during the siege in the room), as described in the preceding paragraphs. The opposite would also be legitimate, even though its likeliest outcome would probably be some more deconstructionist vagaries dictated by the mood and inspiration of the interpreter in question. I do not find much potential in this interpretive trend in terms of orientation or clarification for the unspecialised reader (or even for the specialised one, if they are not particularly patient with poststructuralist jargon and mannerisms): in my opinion, this is just a mere machine churning out tons of secondary literature in all possible senses of the expression.<sup>127</sup>

Having made this clear, I believe that the functional link between form and content, which, as I have shown, is absolutely explicit, undoubtedly signals form as the work's component having to accommodate, to mediate, to facilitate the expression of the content, never the other way round: Beckett's criteria about the separation of content from form are stated in terms of the latter's accommodation of the former, and in fact precede such conclusion in the 1956 interview with Shenker, as I will substantiate in the following paragraphs. If on the brink of publishing *The Unnamable* Beckett refers to *Endgame* as basically an issue of 'fundamental sounds', its context should give us a clue for an interpretation. Surely, neither *Endgame* nor the *Three Novels* are phonetic poetry (or drama, or narrative) or concrete music. What Beckett wants to escape from when speaking of 'fundamental sounds' is an authoritative interpretation or *programme* as demanded by 'journalists', as he dismissively calls them in a note to his dramatic director.<sup>128</sup> As he remarks, he has 'no elucidations to offer of mysteries' to be solved: the words on the page are just too much for him as an artist to have come by during a period when, as he

---

<sup>127</sup> On the existence of a professional coterie of 'advanced' critics of difficult contemporary literature, see Edward Said's anecdote about their being 'three thousand critics reading each other' in his 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community', in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983; repr. 1987), pp. 135-59 (p. 138).

<sup>128</sup> For Beckett's drama as consisting of 'fundamental sounds', see extracts from his correspondence with Director Alan Schneider in *Disjecta*, pp. 94-98 (p. 94)

confesses in the 1956 Shenker interview, *The Unnamable* had driven him to an impasse regarding his writing (p. 163). This does not mean, nonetheless, that in *Endgame* there is not any content (to begin with, there is an especially alarming embodiment of the mess in it, namely impending nuclear war and subsequent extinction of the human species), or that it has been suggested by a form that, on the contrary, accommodates it. As Beckett himself puts it while comparing his work with Kafka's, in his there is always consternation (that is, the mess) behind the form (Shenker, p. 162).

Second, if we are not moving away from poststructuralist fundamentalism, from the 'impératif langagier', the rather metaphysical contention according to which, since everything is language (which exists prior to any social, institutional or discursive instantiation of meaning), and since language does not point to any pre-existing outer referent in 'reality' (which would thusly be just a linguistically supported construct), we will eventually arrive at an impasse where linguistic fetishism will strand us in an odd, peculiar dimension where any attempt at eliciting any meaning out of a text, because of its being articulated in and through language, becomes a sterile exercise in critical onanism.<sup>129</sup> One thing is that form and content must remain separate, what I can understand in the sense that the stylistic dimension of a text has its own particular features and requirements because of its linguistic nature, and that accordingly it should not be the subservient, mimetic vehicle of a certain content, and another is that in the end the meaning of the text in question must always remain undecidable, subjectively relative, inaccessible, inexistent or totally subordinated to its rhetorical components. While I can agree with the idea that the form of a literary work may contribute in a greater or lesser degree to its propositional, ideological or expressive content, while I certainly concede that meaning can escape the conscious intentions of an author, thus resulting in (puzzling) ambiguity, indeterminacy, or greater richness of potential meaning, I cannot accept that the meaning of a text is merely its form, nor can I grant that this was Beckett's intention during the time of the 'siege in the room', as I have already argued. As Christine van Boheemen-Saaf points out: 'There is more to textuality than just language [...] the poststructuralist attempt to circumscribe the

---

<sup>129</sup> For the 'impératif langagier' as coined by Alain Badiou and personified by Maurice Blanchot, and for his 'unholy alliance' with nihilism (as represented by Jean-Paul Sartre), see Weller, *Taste for the Negative*, p. 19.

world as text, the psyche as language, may paradoxically backfire to draw our attention precisely to what it excludes in its originary repression.’ (as cited in Crosthwaite, p. 43)

Language, the raw material of literature, is composed of words, which are double-faced signs, consisting of a signifier and a signified, the latter containing necessarily some ideal, objective, denotative meaning.<sup>130</sup> As Steven Pinker puts it, ‘the way we see colors’, or the world for that matter, ‘determines how we learn’ and use ‘words for them, not vice versa.’ (*Lang. Instinct*, p. 63) This also goes for the combination of words into phrases and sentences: for all the liberties that authors may want to allow themselves, given the deviation from the norm that literary language necessarily implies and the unfamiliarisation of language and meaning expectations this results in, they have to respect certain combinatory limits when it comes to representing the logical relations existing between the concepts involved (p. 78). To forget this is to be willing to reduce literature to the condition of a poor relation of *musique concrète*, phonetic poetry, ever-self-repeating Dada experiments or, in F.R. Leavis’ terminology, ‘solipsistic games’. All of these are perfect scenarios for some theorists to go on mumbling opaque technicalities or witticisms on the linguisticity of everything *ad aeternum*, but that cannot change the nature of the universe or its objective existence (Gasiorek, *History*, p. 555).<sup>131</sup> In this sense, although that is not my critical aim either, I would rather fall prey to a sort of humanist or

---

<sup>130</sup> As Brian McHale, a staunch supporter of postmodernism, puts it: words ‘are not abstract “counters,” things, no matter how we manipulate them; inevitably they belong to associational fields, carry semantic charge, *mean*.’ (Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987; repr. 2001), p. 150, original emphasis).

<sup>131</sup> Already in the so-called ‘German letter’ of 1937, although posing as a radical ‘logoclast’, Beckett refers to Gertrude Stein’s ‘logographs’ in a rather dismissive way, as a dead track leading nowhere (*Letters I*, p. 519).

On the subject of nihilism as meaninglessness and deconstruction as being part of the problem rather than a solution to it, see for example Young, p. 196.

Thinking more generally of poststructuralism in literary studies, René Wellek writes:

No self, no author, no coherent work, no relation to reality, no correct interpretation, no distinction between art and nonart, fictional and expository writing, no value judgment, and finally no truth, but only nothingness – these are negations that destroy literary studies.

(As cited in Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 141)

impressionist criticism in defending this thesis than to ‘a linguistic jargon actively hostile to the content of a literary work.’ (Currie, p. 44)

Language is also to be understood as occupying a space between thought and several pre-symbolic and pre-discursive agencies that are also invested on it: the body, the drives, the instinctual. In other words, if there is to be a ‘world of nature’ rather than a merely ‘linguistic world’, then ‘the corporeal, affective, and mimetic moments of subjectivity and meaning’ must be accommodated in the symbolic (Beardsworth, p. 115). In both thought and art, the unconscious, which speaks ‘in images rather than words’, is key (Easthope, p. 36). The fetishisation or reduction of thought and art to ‘mere artifice’ would therefore lead to the promotion of ‘a mere linguistic universe’ through the foreclosure of the underlying moments of language, those related to the semiotic and even the abject, winding up either in narcissism, understood as ‘the dominion in subjectivity of the semiotic deprived of symbolic form’, or else in ‘modern nihilism’ (Beardsworth, pp. 169-70). I already mentioned the poverty of symbolic means that Julia Kristeva understands as a characteristic of our post-WWII time, a narcissistic time.

Third, although Beckett once stated that ‘I’d be quite incapable of writing a critical introduction to my own works’, he also left us a blueprint for their interpretation, one that very significantly consists of two philosophical propositions, propositions that are therefore meaningful in the strongest sense of the word: ‘Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis’ (where you are worth nothing, there you should want nothing), and ‘Naught is more real than nothing.’ (Weller, *Taste for the Negative*, p. 75)<sup>132</sup> Beckett himself was of the opinion that neither was ‘very rational’.

If we pay some attention, we can realise how a word is used in both sentences: nothing. This is Beckett’s final destination in his exploration of themes of ignorance and impotence: nothingness. Nothingness and negativity are both paramount in Beckett’s aesthetic musings even before his 1945 revelation of ignorance and impotence. Thus, in his 1937 German letter, articulating a logoclastic discourse that already alienates him from his master, James Joyce, and whereby, unable to get rid of it altogether, he intends and aspires to violate language and to make it fall into disrepute in every possible way, he describes

---

<sup>132</sup> Sabbar Saadoon Sultan, ‘The Critical Aspects of Beckett’s *Trilogy*’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 14 (*After Beckett / D’après Beckett*) (2004), 421-35 (p. 433)

his as ‘a veil one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the *nothingness*) lying behind it.’ And it is on the grounds of this nothingness he suspects on the other side of language, of ‘a whispering of the end-music or the silence underlying all’, that he points, *avant la lettre*, to a literature of exhaustion, of silence, of the unword (‘German Letter’, pp. 518-20, my emphasis).<sup>133</sup>

The engine propelling this impossible endeavour would be no other than failure, that is to say a will to failure, since being an artist committed to this radically inexpressive, unfruitful and insurmountably indigent art Beckett dreams of involves ‘to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail’.<sup>134</sup>

In conclusion, both nothingness and negativity inform Beckett’s authorial attitude (which we could describe as one of continuous self-erasure) and also his thematics, whose object is the ‘indestructible chaos of timeless things’, ‘a world collapsing endlessly, a frozen world’ made of ‘wastes where true light never was, nor any upright thing, nor any true foundation, but only these leaning things, forever lapsing and crumbling away, beneath a sky without memory of morning or hope of night.’ (*TN*, p. 35) In other words: a nihilistic world.

### 3.2 – Historical Paradigms of Negativity: An Excursus

Since negativity, as we have just said, is such an important concept in Beckett and the *Three Novels* because of its immediate relationship with the more specific notion of nihilism, and because in spite of this it is generally taken for granted in the secondary literature, I will proceed to explain what I consider to be the essential meaning of this term.

---

<sup>133</sup> Ihab Hassan, one of the earliest and most important theorists of postmodernism during the first stages of postmodern theory in America, coined the term ‘literature of silence’ to refer to the object of some of his early elaborations on postmodern literature. As antecedents of this literary trend, he mentions the members of a hypothetical European tradition among whom we can find Beckett (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, pp. 36, 38, 40). Patricia Waugh defines this kind of literature as one of ‘pure formalism, a literature solely concerned with its own linguistic processes.’ (Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, New Accents (London and New York: Routledge, 1984), p. 48).

<sup>134</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘Three Dialogues’, in *Disjecta*, pp. 123-30 (pp. 16-27, 130)



Negativity would be an inclusive category to accommodate concepts such as absence, lack, rejection or denial. Thus, for example, Nietzsche equates it with ‘rejection’, ‘denigration’ or, more generally, ‘no-saying’ attitudes, which would therefore be radically at odds with his philosophy of life affirmation, experience, willingly meaningful suffering or, in a word, ‘yes-saying’ (Dienstag, p. 164).

This category has had a tremendous significance since the beginning of Western theological and philosophical thought. Already the pre-Socratics built up their theories of the Cosmos or God by recourse to this concept, either implicitly or explicitly. Among the former, we would find systems such as Democritus’ atomism, where the atoms are in perpetual motion, thus producing everything that exists through their interaction in the void, the opposite, negative pole of matter.<sup>135</sup> Plato’s theory of being, which follows and is inspired by the metaphysical revolution brought about by Socrates, his master, is the most distinguished case among the latter.

### 3.2.1 – Platonism

Plato’s system pits the truth and full ontological presence and reality of Ideas against the impure reflection of these eternal and unchanging essences in our world of mere appearances, subject to the infirmities of matter and time, which lead everything into decay.<sup>136</sup> This Platonic account of reality, essentially confirmed by Aristotle’s hylomorphism (beings or entities are made of the combination of both matter and form), would constitute the first paradigm of negativity as a metaphysical category.<sup>137</sup> Some of its traditional vehicles in terms of imagery and symbolism, such as the contrast between light and darkness, or the one between truth on the one hand and lies, confusion or deception on the other, are to be found in abundance in Beckett’s first trilogy, where the negative usually and overwhelmingly outscores the positive. We will see many examples in our analysis of the *Three Novels*.

---

<sup>135</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, ed. by E. Capps, T.E. Page, and W.D.H. Rouse, tr. by R.D. Hicks, The Loeb Classic Library, 2 vols (London and New York: Heinemann and Putnam’s Sons, 1925), II, pp. 453, 455.

<sup>136</sup> Gerald A. Press, ‘Plato’, in *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, ed. by Richard H. Popkin (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia UP, 1983), pp. 32-52 (pp. 44-45).

<sup>137</sup> David Gallop, ‘Aristotle: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Mind’, in *Routledge History of Philosophy II: From Aristotle to Augustine*, ed. by David Furley (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 76-108 (pp. 92-93).

### 3.2.2 – Christianity and Gnosticism

A second major paradigm of negativity would be that of Christian doctrine and thought, where we can find a fundamental opposition between a ‘true world’ of light, goodness, presence and origin, identifiable as God and his creation; and another, negative world stemming from the Fall both of the rebel angels through disobedience and of mankind through sin. This is signified through ideas such as suffering, death, curse or damnation.

In the *Three Novels*, Beckett, who was brought up in the negativity of Protestant theology, based on the Calvinist idea of mankind’s helpless corruption after the Fall and the absolute necessity of divine Grace for salvation, goes beyond this, approaching what we could call Gnosticism. According to this now almost forgotten religion (there are still a few thousands of believers, such as the Mandeans or the Yazidis), the world of matter and time we inhabit is essentially flawed and defective, the product of an incompetent, malevolent deity: the demiurge.<sup>138</sup> The universe, then, is not only devilish or demonic in its

---

<sup>138</sup> On the gnostic Demiurge and his ‘bad world’, see Roelof van den Broek, ‘Gnosticism I: Gnostic Religion’, in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter J. Hanegraaff and others (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2006), pp. 403-416 (pp. 404, 413). For evidence of Beckett’s ‘working knowledge’ of Manicheism, a historical dualistic religion very much related to Gnosticism and now fully extinct, see Paul Stewart, *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett’s Work*, New Interpretations of Beckett in the Twenty-First Century (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 4.

This would lend colour to the references made to the assistants of this incompetent demiurge in *The Unnamable*, whom the narrator calls ‘tyrants’ or straightaway ‘devils’. The demiurge himself is once referred to as ‘the devil’, who taught the Unnamable ‘how to speak, and what to say’ there ‘in the darkness’ (van den Broek, 409; *TN*, pp. 304, 341, 398). This would also link the Unnamable to another notorious ‘savage’ in English literature, Shakespeare’s Caliban, apparently rescued from darkness and evil by Prospero, in reality submitted to slavery by the latter:

[...] when thou cam'st first,  
 Thou strok'st me, and made much of me, wouldst give me  
 Water with berries in't; and teach me how  
 To name the bigger light, and how the less,  
 That burn by day and night [...]

(William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. by John Dover Wilson, The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare, 33, (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2009), I. 2. lines 333-37, my emphasis)

very origin, but it is the worst of all possible universes: its Creation was also its Fall (*WWR2*, pp. 349, 583).<sup>139</sup> In this, Schopenhauer's influence on Beckett is quite apparent: not only is there ample evidence in the world to make us hate matter and the body, but also absolutely everything else in this universal prison in which we live (if we live at all, given the negative conditions under which such life takes place). Nothing to wonder at, considering its being originated in an entirely malevolent will that could be thought to be the ultimate evidence against theistic optimism and its argument from design (Young, p. 39).<sup>140</sup> Here, Hugh Kenner's comment on Beckett's temperament as a man and an artist reveals itself as accurate and very insightful: if Descartes (and the Occasionalists) provided him with material for thematisation and imagery, Schopenhauer helped him develop his own way of understanding life and the world; Beckett would have read Cartesius as fiction, and the old, grim German metaphysician as truth (as cited in Bloom, 'Introduction', in Bloom (ed.), (1988), p. 2).<sup>141</sup>

For the Mandaean, see Kurt Rudolph, 'Mandaean', in Hanegraaff and others (eds.), pp. 151-57.

<sup>139</sup> Harold Bloom (ed.), *Samuel Beckett's 'Molloy', 'Malone Dies', 'The Unnamable'*, Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), p. 9. For Beckett's 'natural rather than [...] revealed Gnosticism', see *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>140</sup> For Schopenhauer's influence on Beckett as to 'God' (they were both atheists) being a completely malevolent will rather than an omnipotent, loving deity, see, e.g., Young, pp. 39-40 and McDonald, p. 11. For Beckett's admiration for Schopenhauer, see Gibson, p. 95.

For Harold Bloom, Beckett's 'Cartesian dualism' is 'less fundamental than his profoundly Schopenhauerian vision.' ('Introduction', in Bloom (ed.), (1988), p. 1). Martin Esslin calls Beckett a *heretical* Cartesian: 'Telling It How It Is: Beckett and the Mass Media', in *Samuel Beckett*, ed. by Harold Bloom, Bloom's Modern Critical Views (New York: Chelsea House, 2011), pp. 13-24 (p. 13, my emphasis).

Leo Bersani identifies imprisonment as one of the main motifs in Beckett's work: 'Beckett and the End of Literature', in Bloom (ed.), (1988), pp. 51-70 (p. 56). This is linked most directly with hatred of the bodily and the material in the characters of the *Three Novels*; an outstanding example may be Moran's principles concerning his son's education, one of them being 'that most fruitful of dispositions, *horror of the body and its functions*.' (*TN*, p. 113, my emphasis)

<sup>141</sup> Beckett's relationship to Descartes' work is a mere illustration of his overall engagement with philosophy as a privileged quarry of fiction material, fodder for 'fiction-engendering speculations.' (Andrew K. Kennedy, p. 3)

Of Schopenhauer's influence on Beckett, Ulrich Posthast writes: 'There can be little doubt that Beckett's interest in Schopenhauer was a lifelong intellectual commitment, probably stronger and deeper than his contact with any other of the many philosophers whom he quotes or refers to in passing.' Ulrich Posthast, *The Metaphysical Vision: Arthur Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Art and Life and Samuel Beckett's Own Way to Make Use of It* (New York and Washington: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 16. In Schopenhauer, Beckett himself states how he found above all an 'intellectual justification of unhappiness', as cited in Knowlson, p. 161.

### 3.2.3 – Cartesian Dualism

It is precisely René Descartes, the philosopher who, by inaugurating modern philosophy through his radical doubt of everything except his own consciousness, and by dismissing any possible argument of authority (putting therefore an end to Aristotle's long reign in Western thought, either directly or indirectly through Aquinas) establishes a third paradigm of negativity with his dualist system. This system is based on the distinction between matter, 'res extensa', and mind or soul, the so-called 'cogito' or 'res cogitans'.<sup>142</sup> The latter is equivalent to thought, self-awareness or consciousness, which remains uncontaminated by 'the imprint of the body upon cognition' in the form of delusions.

Descartes also makes a distinction between two distinct aspects of subjectivity: an empirical one, as a subject in the world, and a transcendental subject that corresponds to 'thought attempting to think its own [...] ground.' (Caroline Williams, pp. 16, 8) This dualism was exacerbated in the work of some of Descartes' followers, such as the Occasionalists. Among these, we can find Arnold Geulincx, an obscure Belgian thinker of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the author of one of the two philosophical maxims which Beckett himself, as we already saw, thought could somehow shed some interpretative light on his work: 'Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis'. According to this maxim, where you are worth nothing (as mere res extensa, perishable flesh, brutish matter), there (i.e., in the world, the universe) you should want nothing: abstain from the world, that realm of negativity.

Beckett, however, cannot be persuaded of reason's positive function in human life, either. Rather, he seems to think, along with David Hume, that reason, 'an absurd little faculty', is quite a flimsy theoretical foundation for anything at all, being something

---

<sup>142</sup> John Cottingham, 'Descartes: Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind', in *Routledge History of Philosophy IV: The Renaissance and Seventeenth-Century Rationalism*, ed. by G.H.R. Parkinson (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 187-219 (p. 202).

Michael Allen Gillespie makes a crucial point concerning the dissolution of final causes and the appearance of instrumental reason in Western thought: since reason could no longer discover ends or finalities in nature (as mere res extensa), it would become strictly instrumental, heteronomous with regard to other sources of value and normativity. Hence, the will would determine the tasks to which reason should be applied (Storey, p. 22). Theoretically, this switch from value-oriented (wertrationales) to instrumental, purpose-oriented (zweckrationales) reason was already explained by Max Weber, as quoted in Wolin, p. 162. Accordingly, the modern crisis of humanism is linked to the way in which subjectivity gets lost in the mechanisms of scientific and technological objectivity (Vattimo, p. 36). This would result in the unspeakably horrible outcome of this techno-scientism: the megacrimes of the 20th century. It is a tragic irony that a paramount example of a thinking of reason opposed to Descartes', Martin Heidegger ('we must free ourselves from the technical interpretation of thinking', as thinking 'is not "practical."' was a passive accomplice), through his Nazi party membership, in the most abhorrent of such technologically instrumented megacrimes: the Holocaust ('Letter on Humanism', p. 218).

‘perfectly inert’, ‘wholly inactive’, and ‘utterly impotent’ (as cited in Neiman, p. 168). In the end, reason would only be one among several ‘fictitious syntheses and unities’ existing in our culture, such as ‘spirit’ or ‘logic’ (*TWTP*, p. 284). This is expressed in very original images that debunk Descartes’ foundational philosophy, such as that of the ‘centaur man’, in Hugh Kenner’s wording, inspired by Beckett’s motif of man on a bicycle: a metaphor for a dualist creature consisting of a rational mind governing a strictly mechanical device, the body. The human being would thus be a ‘ghost in the machine’.<sup>143</sup> We only have to think of Molloy’s ludicrous arrival at Lousse’s town on his peculiar bicycle, and of his even more peculiar fashion of riding it on account of his stiff legs, to realise what he thinks of what for Descartes and his followers was the absolute, positive principle of certainty represented by the cogito, the thinking self.<sup>144</sup>

Reason might also have a demiurgical origin, or be yet another illusory appearance of Schopenhauer’s all-constituting, all-encompassing Will, the blind, impersonal, self-unconscious, all-powerful force the entire universe may ultimately be made of. The universe would thus be just a dynamic, ever-changing set of countless representations or avatars of the Will.<sup>145</sup>

### 3.2.4 – The Dialectic

Finally, and more significantly for modern and contemporary Western thought, there would be a fourth paradigm of negativity: Hegel’s philosophy of history, governed by the so-called dialectical method. According to this method, any positive statement of philosophy (thesis) originates its own opposite (antithesis), the conflict between them being overcome through a process Hegel calls ‘Aufhebung’ (sublation) by a third

---

<sup>143</sup> Lee Oser, *The Ethics of Modernism: Moral Ideas in Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett* (Cambridge, New York: CUP, 2007), p. 6.

<sup>144</sup> Lousse is the name whereby Molloy refers to a woman whom he encounters on his journey to his mother, as he rides over her dog on his bicycle. As a result, he spends a few days with her in her home, eventually leaving her for his more characteristic world of vagrancy under wide skies, tired of the comforts and the sexual ambiguities of civilised life (*TN*, pp. 28-54).

<sup>145</sup> See, e.g., the articles dedicated to Schopenhauer’s Will in David Cartwright, *Historical Dictionary of Schopenhauer's Philosophy*, *Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements*, 55 (Lanham, MD, Toronto and Oxford: Scarecrow, 2005), pp.181-87.

proposition or synthesis, which becomes in turn a new thesis.<sup>146</sup> This would be an unstoppable process of objectification whereby ‘Geist’, that is to say Spirit, Reason or God (understood as supreme rationality, the rational principle of the universe) guides human history to that point where all that is rational would be real (through its incarnation into political, juridical or axiological institutions) and vice versa. Negation becomes in this way ‘the driving force of history’, which has to be thought of as essentially dialectical, consisting in ‘spirit’s critical dialogue with itself.’ (Young, p. 60; Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 67) Beckett, however, was never interested in this metaphysical system and its affirmative outcome, which he saw as an instantiation of objectified reason. In Beckett’s *Trilogy* there is no *logos*, no universal principle of progressive order or rational understandability; rather, every instance of negation of the negative (Hegel’s sublation) seems to lead to something even worse, more negative than that which pre-existed it. History, for Beckett, may well have been a mere ‘proliferation of blind alleys’ making up an ‘issueless maze’ (Gibson, p. 162).

In this he coincides with a good friend of his by the time he was composing his *Three Novels*, E.M. Cioran: Western time being infinite and linear, neither good nor evil will ever triumph; in its eternity, nothing will prevail, rather everything will eventually be ravaged (*Despair*, p. 114). Against Hegel’s historical optimism, as well as against all other philosophies of history, which he considers mere lunatic mythologies, the Romanian thinker believes that time unfolds with no consideration for external aims; there are no absolute goals in time, which for him, as for Nietzsche, is just becoming. In History, ‘every step forward is followed by a step back’ and has no ultimate meaning: ‘the universe begins and ends with each individual’. Time is ultimately ‘demonic’, and the key problem for human beings. To put it more succinctly, also in Cioran’s terms: ‘Universal history: history of Evil.’ (p. 114; Wicks, p. 75).<sup>147</sup>

---

<sup>146</sup> Robert C. Solomon, ‘Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit’, in *Routledge History of Philosophy*, 10 vols (London and New York: Routledge), X (*The Age of German Idealism*, ed. by Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, 1993), pp. 181-216 (p. 200); p. 397.

<sup>147</sup> E.M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. by Richard Howard, The Arcade Cioran, (New York: Arcade, 2012), pp. 12, 93, 128, 131, 145. This work was first published in French, as *Précis de décomposition*, in 1949. Beckett’s English version of *Molloy* would be published only two years later.

More than a century earlier, Hegel put it somewhat more floridly: ‘history is the slaughter bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed’. Michael Berenbaum, ‘The Experience of the Void’, in *Elie Wiesel’s ‘Night’*, ed. and intro. by Harold Bloom, Bloom’s

Furthermore, Beckett is not interested in history as a narrative of progress, the basis for Hegelian-derived philosophies such as Marxism, which would proclaim mankind's perfectibility through time and socio-economic and political r/evolution. Rather, in Beckett's work, and certainly in the *Three Novels*, we come across time as a more and more static dimension in which the character's situation is defined in negative terms of helplessness, impotence, ignorance, lack of transcendence and existential indigence, without any expectations of improvement in their situation. Time in the *Trilogy* is a trap into which one falls not to rise again; one of the key elements to the characters' predicament is precisely their *chute dans le temps*, their fall into time.<sup>148</sup> Linking up with his Gnosticism of sorts, time is for Beckett 'the enemy above all others'.<sup>149</sup> Along with matter, it deserves to be considered 'supreme alienation', an utterly negative principle.<sup>150</sup> Schopenhauer's influence is clear in this respect, as well as that of classical pessimism: contemporary Western time is linear, and 'has no pattern (progress), goal (telos), or end (eschaton)', overwhelming us in its 'endlessness and meaninglessness.' (Dienstag, p. 31) In its gradual turn towards temporal stasis in the *Molloy Trilogy*, Beckett is furthermore journeying ever farther away from canonical modernism, foretelling the importance of space as a structural dominant in postmodern fiction.<sup>151</sup> Thus, both Molloy and Moran roam around Ireland's countryside without any further temporal precision, Malone slowly

---

Modern Critical Interpretations (New York: Chelsea House, 2001; repr. 2009), pp. 17-30 (p. 18). In a more precise and less colourful way, Joyce makes Stephen Dedalus state: 'History [...] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.' James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Modern Classics (London and New York: Penguin, 1992; repr. 2000), p. 42.

<sup>148</sup> Mankind's fall into time, according to Cioran, consists in its having been ejected from eternity into history: Jason Weiss, *Writing at Risk: Interviews in Paris with Uncommon Writers* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1991), p. 7.

Just as theologians rightly speak of ours as a post-Christian age, some day we shall hear of the splendors and miseries of living in a post-historical age [...] "Henceforth there will be no more events!" [...] A chapter – the most curious of the entire cosmic unfolding- will thus be closed.'

E.M. Cioran, *Drawn and Quartered*, trans. by Richard Howard,  
The Arcades Cioran (New York: Arcade, 2012), p. 30.

<sup>149</sup> Harold Bloom, 'Introduction', in *Samuel Beckett*, Bloom's Modern Critical Views (New York: Chelsea House, 2011), pp. 1-11 (p. 8).

<sup>150</sup> Vladimir Biaggi, *Le nihilisme*, Corpus (Paris: GF Flammarion, 1998), pp. 9-44 (p. 26), my translation.

<sup>151</sup> Or, more precisely and in Jameson's words, 'the will to use and to subject time to the service of space' (*Postmodernism*, p. 154).

dies as he remembers and narrates in his uncanny room while whole days pass in an eyewink, and the Unnamable may have stayed in his particular limbo either for ages or for a few hours while he rants on (and we read).

### 3.2.5 - Conclusions

In conclusion, Beckett's comprehensive thematisation of negativity guides us to nothing other than nihilism: the negation of purpose, meaning and value of both body and soul in an inscrutable universe resembling chaos rather than cosmos. That Beckett's (probably self-aware) attitude is nihilistic is defensible from the angle of its closeness to Nietzsche's wording of the world's nature in *The Gay Science*: 'The total character of the world [...] is for all eternity *chaos*, [...] a lack of order, organization, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever else our aesthetic *anthropomorphisms* are called.' (*TGS*, p. 109, my emphasis).

This formulation is very close to the following one, penned by Beckett: 'I am not interested in a "unification" of the historical chaos any more than I am in the "clarification" of the individual chaos, + [sic] still less in the *anthropomorphisation of the inhuman necessities* that provoke the chaos.' (as cited in Gibson, p. 82, my emphasis)

That this chaos may not be willed by Beckett, but rather merely acknowledged and uncompromisingly displayed, or that there may be traces of resistance to its absolute sway on the part of his narrators and characters does not change their fundamental situation at the end of every novel in the *Molloy Trilogy*: all they and we are left with is nothingness, total negativity.<sup>152</sup>

## 3.3 – Beckett and Nothingness: The Interplay of Positivity and Negativity

If we just saw how both matter and consciousness are decried by departing from Gueulincx's maxim 'Ubi nihil vales...', it appears that the second philosophical fragment mentioned by Beckett as a hermeneutic tool enabling us to understand his work is even more insightful: for Beckett, there is certainly nothing more real than nothing, and he is

---

<sup>152</sup> 'Hope is alien to Beckett's mature fiction [...] A Gnosticism without potential transcendence is *the most negative of all possible negative stances*' (Bloom, 'Introduction', in Bloom (ed.), (1988), p. 4, my emphasis).



more attracted by and interested in the void than in the atoms randomly moving in it for all eternity. Indeed Malone, who cites this proposition verbatim, qualifies it as one of

‘those little phrases that seem so innocuous and, once you let them in, pollute the whole of speech. *Nothing is more real than nothing*. They rise up out of the pit and know no rest until they *drag you down into its dark*.’

(*TN*, pp. 186-87, emphasis original and mine, respectively).

Having said this, we will have to look somewhere else to find any trace of positivity in Beckett. This is what most commentators have actually made, thus justifying Shane Weller’s apposite remark that they seem to have defended Beckett ‘not so much against others but against himself’ (Weller, *Taste for the Negative*, p. 6).

Concerning this disputed positivity, an outstanding issue is that of Beckett’s resistance to nihilism or even his overcoming thereof, as we will see. If anything, I would say that the only indisputably affirmative factor in the *Trilogy* is humour.<sup>153</sup> Certainly, if there is nothing at which to laugh in the post-Auschwitz world, we may laugh precisely at nothing (Slocombe, p. 199). Beckett’s humour, however, is usually abrupt and disruptive, and although it may make us laugh at first, it very soon becomes not funny anymore.<sup>154</sup> All in

---

<sup>153</sup> ‘Beckett regarded himself as [...] basically a comic writer, a humorist, even though his humor is black humor, gallows humor.’ Esslin, ‘Telling It How It Is’, p. 24.

<sup>154</sup> In *Endgame*, Hamm’s parents, Nagg and Nell, have the following dialogue on funny things and laughing:

NELL (*without lowering her voice*):

Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. But---

NAGG (*shocked*):

Oh!

NELL:

Yes, yes, it’s the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it’s always the same thing. Yes, it’s like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but *we don’t laugh any more*.

all, Beckett's is a 'tragically comic' kind of humour, as it is based on 'language trying to commit suicide but being unable to do so' (Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 157). This is coincidental with Schopenhauer's idea of life as a 'cosmic joke' and his remark that 'the life of every individual, viewed as a whole and in general, [...] is a tragedy; but gone through in detail has the character of a comedy.' (*WWR I*, 322; Dienstag, p. 117) At its best, Beckett's nihilism would be a barely cheerful one, not more. Molloy is quite explicit on this question: 'I have no reason to be gladdened by the sun, and I take good care not to be [...] I had neither taste nor humour, I lost them early on.' (*TN*, p. 25)

In this context, the seemingly affirmative resolution about 'going on' appearing at the end of *The Unnamable* (thus also closing the *Trilogy*) may not be anything other than the result of pure inertia: what Beckett's friend E.M. Cioran calls 'an automaton's resignation' (*Decay*, p. 95). After all, the *Three Novels* were first published at a time of widespread 'sense of living on, of being survivors, of being as survival.' (Crosthwaite, p. 10) Theodor Adorno masterly phrases this:

After the Second World War, everything, including a resurrected culture, has been destroyed without realizing it; humankind continues to vegetate, creeping along after events that even the survivors cannot really survive, on a rubbish heap that has made even reflection on one's own damaged state useless.<sup>155</sup>

This inertia may also prove to be true with regard to the obligation to 'go on' of the failing artist, fully aware of the futility and ultimate inconsequentiality of his writing, having got rid of 'knowledge, logic, and ontology' as driving factors in his oeuvre. As he acknowledged after his personal revelation of the need of impoverishment in his work, Beckett would only write the things he felt, 'in a world without meaning, in the face of an

---

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*  
(London: Faber and Faber, 1986), pp. 68-102 (p.77, my  
emphasis).

<sup>155</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', in *Notes to Literature*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, tr. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen, European Perspectives, 3 vols (New York: Columbia UP, 1991-92), I & II (1991), pp. 241-75 (p. 244).

existence without hope.’ (Siess, p. 180)<sup>156</sup> Therefore, the residual empathy to be found in the *Three Novels* may be construed as founded on anything but traditional humanism, anthropological positivity or any other instance of optimistic discourse.

### 3.4 – Beckett and Nihilism: Concept and Terminological Precisions. A Second Excursus

#### 3.4.1 – Scepticism

As the critical debate on Beckett’s disputed nihilism has been marked by value (pre-) judgements, a prerequisite for such a debate should be a clear demarcation between that concept and some similar ones whose application to philosophy and literature has muddled and mystified the issue (Dienstag, p. 4). Hence, on the threshold of the analysis of the *Three Novels*, we may want to give some thought, to begin with, to the concept of nihilism itself. We will begin with the qualification of Beckett’s nihilism according to Emil Cioran, who, for a number of years at least, was close enough to him as to make himself liable to be an influence, apart from the fact that his work dealt with similar subject matter.<sup>157</sup> Thus, by preliminarily defining scepticism as ‘an undoing of values that never arrives at their complete annihilation’, and thinking of Dostoyevsky, Cioran glosses nihilism as ‘the step beyond scepticism, the annihilation of any vestige of belief or value’ (as cited in Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 72). This definition may be very apposite to describe the attitudes of Beckett’s narrators and characters in his *Three Novels*, as it does not necessarily require an active affirmation (of negativity) or a will to nothingness.

According to Joshua Foa Dienstag, the scepticism that Cioran takes as his starting point to define nihilism would involve a belief in the linearity of time and, therefore, in Cioran’s own terms, a ‘fall into time’, a notion we already commented on. Apart from this, a sceptic would also believe, although only provisionally, that there are no formulae or practical

---

<sup>156</sup> This is at least how I interpret the statement that ‘the only motivation Beckett would recognize was the need to write’ or, as we have already seen in an alternative wording, the ‘obligation to express’ (Siess, p. 178). It may well be that Beckett wrote his mature work guided by more or less unconscious feelings and pure inertia, just like his writing characters, Molloy, Moran and Malone.

<sup>157</sup> Michael Friesen, *Before the Curtain Falls: Samuel Beckett and E.M. Cioran*, unpublished B.A. thesis (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2012), p. ii.

mechanisms for producing freedom or happiness on this sub-lunar sphere; besides, they would also provisionally believe that, would they exist at all, such formulae could only be come across in this base world, therefore they cannot be received from any exterior source of knowledge, meaning or power, such as God. A nihilist, according to Dienstag, would take these two last propositions not as provisional, but as true without any further qualifications, showing a stronger negativity and a more comprehensive attitude of rejection (p. 264).

### 3.4.2 – Pessimism

Dienstag is of the opinion that such a set of convictions is a necessary though incomplete prerequisite of nihilism. In fact, it defines pessimism, ‘a preliminary form of nihilism’, as its logic would be one of ‘valuelessness’ and ‘meaninglessness’ (*TWTP*, p. 11).<sup>158</sup> For Dienstag, nihilism involves a plus: satisfaction with the state of affairs described by those negative believes or propositions (Dienstag, p. 264). We already saw how Simon Critchley also understands this notion as implicitly involving a celebratory mood regarding meaninglessness on the part of the alleged nihilist.

As I see it, this is not a definition of nihilism, but rather of a specific kind of psychosis I will not take the trouble to describe or name. That the meaninglessness of human existence, as linked to the awareness of the linearity of time and therefore of one’s own mortality, is likely to produce any feelings of elation or satisfaction in the average human being (this latter category also allowing for the inclusion of philosophers and thinkers of a sound frame of mind), does not work for me. Rather, I would say that the ordinary, expectable response to such awareness would be either despair (temporary or permanent), or, at the very least, disappointment. Disappointment would be normal among vital optimists, since they have many hopeful expectations for life. In the pessimist, disappointment could also be compatible with a wish for self-extinction, either physical (falling prey, in Freudian terms, either to the ‘oceanic feeling’ of becoming yet again one

---

<sup>158</sup> A special case would be a Dionysian pessimist, who, according to Dienstag, would believe in the linearity of time only provisionally (Dienstag, p. 264). The Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy* would be an example. Dienstag claims to follow this tradition, whose specifically political implications he defends. His understanding of it, on the grounds of ‘the energy of its logic’, could be close to Nietzsche’s qualification thereof as ‘pessimism of *strength*’ (*TWTP*, p. 11). As a preliminary form of nihilism, however, Nietzsche’s main conception of pessimism seems to be a negative one: a pessimism of ‘decline’ (*ibid.*).

with inorganic matter, or to suicidal thoughts) or spiritual (Buddhist Nirvana or Hindu Moksha), although Nietzsche would call this passive nihilism (Dienstag, pp. 33, 40).<sup>159</sup>

### 3.4.3 – Existentialism or Absurdism

A reaction of despair in the face of life's meaninglessness would rather be related to existentialism; the same would apply to the feeling of rebellion, challenge and life-affirmation in the face of absurdity characteristic of Albert Camus.<sup>160</sup>

Existentialism is important in our discussion, since it was a staple in the scholarly industry of Beckett criticism, first in France and then anywhere else, for many years after the Irish writer had become a literary celebrity in the early 1950s in the wake of the Parisian premiere of *En attendant Godot*. I am specifically opposed to this school of criticism, especially in its interpretation of the *Three Novels*, in that it is focused on a presumed heroic stand of Beckett's narrators against the absurdity of their existential condition (if this expression can be applied at all to the Unnamable, to start with). This absurdity, defined as 'the persistent mismatch between human purposes and the means

---

<sup>159</sup> A clear example would be Malone's 'yearning for nothingness' depicted as a 'disease of earnestness' (Bersani, 'Beckett', p. 63). Nothingness is precisely what Schopenhauer quite nihilistically underlines as the ultimate result of the abolition of the will and the self in the human being: 'No will: no representation, no world. Before us there is certainly left only nothing': Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E.F.J. Payne, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1966), I (repr. 1969), 411.

Freud defines this oceanic feeling of personal dissolution as one of 'limitlessness' and of an 'indissoluble bond' with the universe. Its origins would be obscure, but they would be clearly related to infantile helplessness and the need for parental protection, as well as with religion later on: Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, ed. and tr. by James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962), pp. 12, 15, 19).

Julia Kristeva associates depression and 'oceanic' suicide in the following terms: 'The depressive denial that destroys the meaning of the symbolic also destroys the act's meaning and leads the subject to commit suicide without anguish of disintegration, as a reuniting with archaic non-integration, as lethal as it is jubilatory, "oceanic."' (*Black Sun*, p. 19).

In contrast with all these views, and from an extremely sceptical attitude which I find deeply comic, Cioran contends that only optimists ever commit suicide: if they cannot find any reason to live, why would they wish to die either? (Biaggi, p. 42).

<sup>160</sup> John Marmysz defends an alternative concept of nihilism which would not entail celebration of worthlessness or nothingness, or a necessary association with despair or 'absolute negativity'. According to him, behind the concept and experience of nihilism, there is an 'incongruity' between human potentialities on the one hand, and 'admiration for the superlative' or 'a passionate adherence to the highest and most unattainable ends' as ideal standards for the exercise of those potentialities on the other hand. Although, in his view, humans can do nothing to get rid of this incongruity, it would allow for the estimation of 'degrees of value' in human life as originating in the strife after those ideals, even if such strife would always be doomed never to reach them (Marmysz, pp. 3, 5). In my opinion, this would be closer to Camus' existentialism than to nihilism proper, as any such 'ideals' would never be acceptable for a nihilist as anything but words, naïve and indefensible idealisations only to be found in an unacceptable 'true world' full of meaning. Nietzsche even dedicated an entire chapter of *Twilight of the Idols* to this *true* or *real* world: 'How the "Real World" Finally Became a Fable: History of an Error' (p. 20).

available to achieve them’, could be deduced, above all, from the repetition in all three novels of a ‘go on’ motif. In actual fact, Beckett did not believe either in the concept of absurdity or in its critical application to his work. In an interview with fellow writer Charles Juliet, Beckett is reported to have stated: ‘It is absurd to say that something is absurd. That’s still a value judgement.’ (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 127) Besides, the existentialist notion of the absurd posits a conception of the individual, of subjectivity, that has been left well behind in Beckett’s oeuvre by the time of his *Three Novels* (Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 148). As Adorno Writes on Beckett’s *Endgame*, everything in Beckett has to do with ‘forlorn particulars’ that will actually mock any abstract conceptuality. In Beckett, therefore, ‘the absurd cannot be turned into a meaning for the meaninglessness of existence,’ and ‘meaning nothing becomes the only meaning’ (Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, p. 149).

In my analysis of the *Three Novels*, I will argue that this going on despite the mess surrounding the narrators has to do more with disenchanting inertia than with anything else. What Beckett shared with prototypically rebellious and ultimately life-affirming Camus was that they were contemporaries, that their literary life was based on Paris, and precious little else. There is very little affirmation, if any, in the *Trilogy*, where the warmth, if despaired, existing between Didi and Gogo, the heroes of *Waiting for Godot*, has been replaced by isolation, solipsism, and the chill of an all-pervading nothingness. Not even Beckett’s humour, generally black and often forbidding, can kindle a little warmth in the frozen world of the *Three Novels*.

#### 3.4.4 – Conclusion

While considering himself not exactly a nihilist, but merely someone tempted by the habit of negation, Cioran was however of the persuasion that Beckett, having started his career at the impossible, at the exceptional, at the *impasse*, had reached the limit of nihilism, and persevered there till the very end (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, pp. 71-72).<sup>161</sup> We

---

<sup>161</sup> In an interview, Cioran states about himself: ‘el propio nihilismo es un dogma. Todo es ridículo, sin sustancia, *pura ficción*. He ahí por qué no soy un nihilista, porque la nada es aún un programa.’ Hans Jürgen Heinrichs, ‘Cioran: No soy un nihilista: la nada es aún un programa’, *El Malpensante*, 39 (2002), n. p., par. 12 (my emphasis) <<http://opacudea.udea.edu.co/query.php?789678>> [accessed 02.07.2015] It must be taken into account, however, that Cioran does not believe that one might dwell indefinitely in nothingness: ‘Taken to its extremes, the awareness of nothingness is not compatible with anything’. My translation of the French original: ‘La conscience du néant poussée au bout n’est compatible avec rien’, as cited in Biaggi, p. 43.

will therefore understand Beckett's nihilism, resuming all that has been said in this epigraph, as one coinciding with Dienstag's non-traditional notion of pessimism, if only qualified by his radical negativity.

---

Robert Wicks interprets that Cioran's loss of religious faith was somehow survived by a 'religious sentiment' that made him go on searching for meaning, despite his conviction that such search was hopeless (Wicks, p. 83). Although not led by anything of a religious nature, the resolve of Beckett's characters to 'go on' searching for nobody knows exactly what is very similar to Cioran's own stance on this question.

## Chapter 4 -Thematic Analysis: *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*

### 4.1 - Plot

The general plot design of the *Three Novels* (if ‘plot’ is to be used legitimately at all with regard to *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*) is as follows: *Molloy* is divided into two parts, both of them constituting what John Fletcher calls ‘an asymmetrical diptych’ (Fletcher, p. 132; Calvin Thomas, p. 88). In the first part, its eponymous character, a peculiar mix of a vagabond and a clown inhabiting an old, collapsing body, who writes on an unknown’s behalf in his mother’s room, tells us precisely about his quest for his mother, which has been going on for some time before he starts his narration.<sup>162</sup> This involves several anecdotes, the last of which ends up with him in a ditch, as he begins to hear an unexpected, inner voice telling him of hope and coming help in his plight (*TN*, p. 85).

In the second part of *Molloy*, Moran, a private detective and a widowed father, after introducing us to the very much organised everyday life of his apparently pious, Catholic, middle-class household, sets off on a journey after Molloy, following indirect orders from his unknown boss, whom he calls Youdi. After some occurrences, he comes back to his ruined household, having become himself a physical wreck and a man more and more innerly similar to his initial quarry.

*Malone Dies*, the second novel in the series, begins with an old, moribund man writing on a bed in a place he himself and his readers may deem to be somewhere between a hospital and an asylum, although he is not sure of where he is. He is writing at someone else’s prompting, which is not the only resemblance or coincidence with *Molloy*’s plot, of which this novel could be construed as a continuation. Indeed, there are many points of coincidence between Malone and Molloy as characters, the latter having possibly been a previous fictional avatar of the former.<sup>163</sup> Apart from this, Malone is resolved to tell us a

---

<sup>162</sup> For both Molloy and Moran as clowns, see Fletcher, p. 128.

<sup>163</sup> For Molloy, Moran and Malone as writing characters, and for ‘self-conscious’ narrators in Beckett’s oeuvre since *Molloy*, see Fletcher, p. 130.



number of stories whose heroes oddly remind us of him, until he dies at the very end of the novel, something we gather from an accelerated dissolution of syntax into silence (McDonald, p. 99). In itself, *Malone Dies* would qualify as the privileged object of the assertion that the *Trilogy* is Beckett's 'most sustained exploration of [...] "impotence" and "ignorance"' (p. 87).<sup>164</sup>

In *The Unnamable*, its eponymous protagonist inhabits, along with several characters easily identifiable as his former avatars (Molloy, Moran and Malone among them), a kind of limbo either before birth or after death (according to different theories put forward by critics). It is in this unlikely location, after some early precisions and stories, that an endless final paragraph drowns the Unnamable in both a desperate struggle against and an embrace of unstoppable, torrential speech that proliferates like a terminal cancer, invading everything.<sup>165</sup> The novel's ending does not make clear what the ontological lot of this fleshless consciousness will be henceforth: whether he will be able to avoid being born into a life he abhors in advance, or else if he will find the magical password that would emancipate him from his demiurgical torturers and the insufferable pack of alter egos following after his tracks.

#### 4.2 – Reasons for the Separate Study of the *Three Novels: The Unnamable*

In the following analysis, I will make a preliminary distinction between the first two titles of the *Trilogy* and the last one, *The Unnamable*. This distinction will determine their separate treatment in different epigraphs. The reasons for this are many, all of which could be resumed in one major feature: if *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* are still clearly within the paradigm of late modernism, despite their radicality in terms of abstraction and thematic exhaustion, *The Unnamable*, while building on several elements inherited from the two previous novels in the sequence (for instance, the presence of characters from those, starting with Malone), goes a step beyond that radicality, to the very limits of narrative

---

<sup>164</sup> E.M. Cioran believes ignorance to be a divine 'gift' forfeited by the first couple in Paradise: *The Fall into Time*, tr. by Richard Howard (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1970), p. 35.

<sup>165</sup> So fleshless that he may be construed as a mere sequence of words: 'El Innombrable produce la ilusión de ser una mente, pero en un cierto sentido no es más que una secuencia de palabras.' José Ángel García Landa, 'El Centro Ausente: El Innombrable de Beckett', *Atlantis*, 12.2 (1991), 45-63 (p. 60). The paragraph structure of *The Unnamable* has a precedent in the first part of *Molloy* (Fletcher, p. 136).

possibility, culminating the steady progression of the *Three Novels* towards ‘total meaninglessness and impoverishment’ (*TN*, p. 286; Bersani, ‘Beckett’, p. 57).<sup>166</sup> *The Unnamable* is an experimental work where exhaustion also reaches the field of form, language taking over the central role in the narrative from character, plot or theme. Character, in particular, dissolves to a minimum, appearing imprisoned in a labyrinth of words, a textual maze, a logosphere where fiction gets reduced to a web of words.<sup>167</sup> This means that formal considerations, even within our primordially thematic orientation, will take on more importance.

Regarding theme, both *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* are structured after the narrative model of the quest, one for ‘true self’. This is not an irrelevant issue, since from the beginning of modernity, during the Renaissance, Western thought has always considered the self to be ‘the Archimedean point from which the world achieves meaning.’ In addition to this, the self is important as the foundation of subjectivity or consciousness, which, as we have seen above, has been considered the origin of all truth claims and human knowledge since Descartes, thus constituting, along with the ‘privileging of subjectivity over objectivity,’ the ‘dominant paradigm in Western political and philosophical thought.’ (Caroline Williams, pp. 4, 18) It is understandable, therefore, even plausible, and not at all eccentric or absurd that the main characters in the first two titles of Beckett’s *Three Novels*, Molloy, Moran and Malone, are after a glimpse of who they really are, regardless of whether they embark on such a project consciously or otherwise, and regardless of whether there is any actual physical travelling or displacement in it (McDonald, pp. 91-92). Molloy, the very opposite of the Cartesian *res cogitans*, looks for his mother instinctively, as it were, as he has already done on several previous occasions, such journeys appearing to play a central, organising role in his life. This is just an example of one of Samuel Beckett’s most frequent motifs, namely the male’s perpetual flight from and return to the abject, motherly female (Stewart, p. 12). On the other hand, Moran is surprised by the way his search of Molloy becomes one after himself.

---

<sup>166</sup> For example, the presence of characters from the *Trilogy*’s two other novels (Malone, to start with: *TN*, p. 286), or even from novels written before WWII, such as *Murphy* (p. 287).

<sup>167</sup> Roch C. Smith, ‘Naming the Minotaur: Beckett’s *Trilogy* and the Failure of Narrative’, in Bloom (ed.), (1988), pp. 115-22 (pp. 116-18, 121).

Malone, for his part, consciously implements, if in a flawed and deviant way, his project of trying to make sense of his liminal situation between life and death by telling himself stories about a theoretically fictional character who nevertheless resembles him more and more. He calls this character Saposcat (or more often, Sapo) at first, Macmann later on, and depicts him as ‘another, far beneath me [...] of whose crass adventures I can now tell at last’ (*TN*, pp. 174, 181, 189). This fiction increasingly interacts with Malone’s self-examination, to the point where the characters are no longer distinguishable from each other, which makes Malone’s narration highly unreliable (Fletcher, p. 152). In his stories we can observe a longing to lose himself completely in someone else’s identity, to escape from his own self into a different one in order to gain permanence. As a result of this, and in a characteristically Beckettian, paradoxical way, he tries to find his true self in somebody else’s.

Malone seems to be ‘the first Beckettian hero to seek to know himself through writing fiction’ (Fletcher, p. 171). Writing is a true obsession in his case, as he does so of his own accord, rather than as the result of an order or an arrangement with someone else, as we saw was Molloy’s and Moran’s case. Moreover, Malone’s drive to write foretells the Unnamable’s logorrheic obsession as a way of preventing extinction (Fletcher, p. 166). However, this quest for an essential, permanent, unchanging self on the brink of extinction is fruitless: all Malone achieves is an uncanny feeling of not having a self of his own (Andrew K. Kennedy, p. 128). In a sort of onanistically circular way, his stories, which are ‘made to correspond [...] with the apparent structure of his life,’ demonstrate that the latter is ultimately nothing else but such stories. So central to his existence of sorts is his quest for self through them that he dies at the very moment he refuses to go on telling any more of them or to identify with them: ‘I shall say I no more’ (*TN*, pp. 276; Waugh, p. 44).

This implies that there is still a residual self preserved in the main characters of *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, whose consciousness (although rather weakened from the start in Molloy’s case and progressively so in Moran’s) still provides them with a certain ‘Weltanschauung’, a worldview, a global perspective or outlook on reality as a whole: they have a recognisable discourse and a narrative role to enact. In this way, we can identify Molloy as a tramp, and Moran as a father and a private detective.<sup>168</sup> At the beginning of the

---

<sup>168</sup> As regards Moran, his initial selfhood is so full and firm that, in what is clearly authorial sarcasm about Cartesianism and more generally the West’s essentialist metaphysics, he states: ‘It is [...] sensations,

second part of *Molloy* we can even see Moran taking part in a few sketches of an almost Naturalist character involving his housekeeper and the parish priest (e.g. *TN*, pp. 95-97). In *Malone Dies*, the moribund protagonist's freakish existential and narrative situation appears in contradistinction to that of his fictional alter ego, Sapo / Macmann, who is also involved in some Naturalist scenes with a peasant family, the Lamberts.

Residual selfhood is accompanied by residual descriptivism, too. Despite the uncertainties of the narrative mode and the frequency and importance of digression in both parts of *Molloy*, the landscapes of rural Ireland, sometimes evoked with haunting lyricism, are still prominent. Even in more alienating settings, such as the rainy, excrement-littered, urban dead-end alley that Molloy hides in just after leaving Lousse's house, or the police station of the first town he hits on his journey, where he is held for a while, the descriptive mode is apparent (pp. 55-56, 17-20). The same goes for the evocations of rural, if brutal life in young Sapo's upbringing stories in *Malone Dies*, as well as for those yet again almost Naturalist episodes where his parents discuss the (lack of) promise in him and the fears and hopes they have about him (although they are depicted in a rather disquieting light, given their obvious alienation and their sketchy, puppet-like characterisation: pp. 181-83, 204-05).

The main setting of *Malone Dies*, namely Malone's room in the institution he has been confined to, however, foretells that of *The Unnamable* in its minimal, metaphysical character, presided over by a disconcerting, eerie grey light whose origin is unclear. Malone even thinks he emits it:

there is really no colour in this place, except in so far as this kind of grey incandescence may be called a colour? Yes, no doubt one may speak of grey, personally I have no objection, in which case the issue here would lie between this grey and the *black* that it overlays more or less [...] I myself am very grey, I even sometimes have the feeling that I emit grey, in the same way as my sheets for example.

(p. 214, my emphasis).

---

which happily I know to be illusory, that [...] thanks to them I find myself a meaning.' His certainties become more and more subject to doubt as he progresses on his trip towards utter abjection (*TN*, p. 106).

Other significant elements in the narrative construction of this setting are the sights from his window, which may not necessarily be real (pp. 212-13, 228); the spectral hand, attached to no body, face or discourse, that regularly brings him both a plate and a chamber pot (pp. 178-79); the scarce furniture and the small heap of personal possessions he keeps in a corner of the room and regularly rummages through with a stick he eventually loses (pp. 178, 247); the elastic time, dissociated from any coordinates but the succession of day and night (sometimes not even that: ‘In a flicker of my eyes whole days have flown’, p. 180); or the unknown, disquieting visitor that hits Malone on the head without even addressing any words to him (p. 262). In this and other respects, *Malone Dies* marks a transition to *The Unnamable*’s strange and disturbing realm.

*The Unnamable*’s is a world set in a totally different dimension from both previous novels. Beckett may be placing us in front of the liminal situation of an either prehuman or posthuman character who is more of a compulsive monologist than of a narrator proper. Indeed, he has very little to narrate other than his failed fabrications about some fictional avatars or surrogates for himself. Furthermore, he inhabits an alien, metaphysical sort of limbo where everything seems dead, except for a capability for speech or monologue (Riva, p. 124). In it, time is not the existential parameter we humans are accustomed to, either. What is more, the Unnamable’s evocation of some blurry cohort of suprahuman torturers, a ‘whole college of tyrants’ headed by a kind of demiurgical entity to whom they are accountable, is connected to what he deems to be an unbearable punishment for an uncommitted or unacknowledged crime:

Yes, I have a pensum to discharge, before I can be free (free to dribble, free to speak no more, listen no more), and I've forgotten what it is. There at last is a fair picture of my situation. I was given a pensum (at birth perhaps), as a punishment for having been born perhaps (or for no particular reason, because they dislike me) - and I've forgotten what it is. But was I ever told? [...] But this is my punishment, that's what they judge me for. I expiate vilely, like a pig: dumb, uncomprehending, possessed of no utterance but theirs.

(TN, pp. 304, 362)

Taking all of this into consideration, together with the total absence of what little plot we can still find in the two other novels, we realise that the main component of this work is

language, the speech of stunned, compulsive, unstoppable logorrhoea, seeking not so much a ‘true self’ (something unlikely in an inhuman existent of sorts) as rather an escape from the threatening prospect of being born. Such a dismal prospect might be avoided through finding what the Unnamable seems to take for a magical password for the demiurge or the members of his supernatural court to allow him to re-join what he intuits to be original silence. Existence and being, therefore, and their relationship with nothingness, not selfhood in the traditional sense, will be the main themes in *The Unnamable*, along with speech and language themselves.

#### 4.3 – Nihilism and the Oedipal in *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*

Reviewed by Georg Lukács as perhaps ‘the *ne plus ultra* of’ nihilistic literature, *Molloy* (1955) is above all nihilistic fiction delivered in abundant abject imagery.<sup>169</sup> Indeed, both nihilism and abjection are determinant in the work’s structure, as they define its thematics from the very start: its first part, focused on the character Molloy, implies a deconstruction and, ultimately, a destruction of the idea of motherhood, while the second part, revolving around Moran, focuses on fatherhood from the perspective of what Moran himself calls the ‘disintegrations of the father’ (*TN*, p. 151). Combined with a radical questioning of subjectivity, these two deconstructive operations ultimately come down to an indictment of human existence, understood as meaningless and futile, and to an obsession with nothingness. In *Molloy*, we are in the presence of utter ‘ruination of the human as such’, narrative thus becoming ‘a means of generic annihilation’ (Weller, *Taste for the Negative*, pp. 99-100).

When they begin their quests (Molloy for his mother, Moran for Molloy), both characters occupy a structurally equivalent place in an Oedipal triangle with regard to its two other vertices: the father and the mother, against whom they try to shore up their precarious sense of identity. Each of them, however, aligns himself differently with their

---

<sup>169</sup> Lukács quite typically, given his Marxism and his pliability to Stalinism’s official views of literature and art, construes *Molloy*’s nihilism as ‘a solipsistic derealization of “objective reality”’, as well as ‘the spontaneous product of the capitalist society’: Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 71.

progenitors.<sup>170</sup> Thus, Molloy represents an alignment with the mother and the pre-symbolic psychic landscape existing before submission to the law of the father. For Lacan, this socio-symbolic law, which substitutes for the desire for the mother, and ‘of which all other cultural developments are no more than consequences and ramifications’, is the ‘governing principle of all societies.’ (Homer, pp. 57-58)<sup>171</sup> Moran, on the other hand, stands for the acquisition of paternal authority after that submission, as well as for the acquisition and mastery of language, the very material of the symbolic order, as *logos*. In other words, by inheriting the Forbidding Father’s name and values through submission to the symbolic law, ‘we take up a place in society, on condition that we reproduce its signifying practices’, which make up Lacan’s symbolic order (Reader, p. 28; Belsey, p. 59). Logos is moreover upheld by other agencies of male power in patriarchal social networks hierarchically organised and aimed at establishing and promoting ‘interdependence and solidarity among men’ in order to ‘dominate women.’<sup>172</sup> In *Molloy* we can find among such agencies, for example, Father Ambrose, Moran’s parish priest, or Youdi, his boss, whose word is law and to whom he only has access through the mediation of Gaber, his messenger, and through Moran’s written reports on his commissions (Cousineau, pp. 83, 86).<sup>173</sup> In this sense, Moran is completely steeped in homosociality, to which he tries to introduce his son. Homosociality is defined by Joseph Bristow after Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as ‘men working in patriarchal league with one another’ within a sphere of privilege denied to women. The fact that this social institution is regulated by misogyny and homophobia is relevant in that Moran, a father and a dedicated professional, will undergo a gradual feminisation during his chase of Molloy (Bristow, p. 205). Logos, homosociality, the phallus, the Name-of-the-Father and the ‘performative exercise of power’ that Jacques Derrida calls ‘phallogocentrism’ will eventually be rejected by Moran (Reader, p. 28).

---

<sup>170</sup> Thomas J., Cousineau, ‘Molloy and the Paternal Metaphor’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 29.1 (1983), 81-91 (p. 83)

<sup>171</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, ed. by J.-A. Miller, trans. by D. Porter (New York and London: Routledge, 1992; repr. 1996), p. 67.

<sup>172</sup> Heidi Hartmann, as cited in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York (Columbia UP: 1985), p. 3.

<sup>173</sup> It has been put forward that Youdi would stand for Yahweh or Jehovah, the Father of all fathers, and Gaber for Gabriel, one of His arch-messengers or archangels. Names are important in Moran’s world precisely because of their symbolism; in Molloy’s, on the contrary, they are not: he does not even remember his mother’s, which does not matter to him at all (Cousineau, p. 88; *TN*, p. 13).

#### 4.4 – *Molloy*: Abjection and Sex / Gender. The Primeval Mother: Darkness

That the *Trilogy* is steeped in abjection is clear from its very first page. Thus, we have a first mention of the mother at the very start of Molloy's narration, precisely as he is in her mother's room (or, rather characteristically, as he believes it to be the case, although not with full certitude), writing a report on his journey to her (*TN*, p. 3). In this way, it is the mother that is constituted as the novel's ultimate reference, beyond the few and miserable 'adventures' that Molloy or Moran get themselves to tell or to be entangled in throughout the novel.

Hence, if Camus' *L'Étranger* (1942) opens with the fatal 'Aujourd'hui, maman est morte', Molloy responds: 'I am in my mother's room.'<sup>174</sup> In another obvious parallel, if Meursault, Camus' antihero, is indifferent to her mother's death on learning of it, Molloy is bothered by 'the indifference with which I learnt of her death' (*TN*, p. 53). That his mother's room may not be a physical space is acknowledged by the fact that he has taken possession of it in a way that clearly reveals its links with his regression to the pre-symbolic order and the semiotic chora. What Molloy is doing there is writing, narrating (himself), quite tellingly with a language of which he has forgotten half the words and its spelling: he is halfway back to the mother's womb, where language does not exist (p. 4). By the time Molloy crosses his way with Moran's in the countryside, he will ask the latter for a piece of bread with the strange accent 'of one who has lost the habit of speech.' (p. 140)

If this were not enough as a clue, he points to the abject allure of the pre-symbolic mother, a favourite site where to place the scatological in one's life. Thus, not only does Molloy sleep in her bed (with some Oedipal reminiscences that will be confirmed as probably incestuous later on in his narration), but, literally, he also pisses and shits in her pot, as such a 'bitch' deserves (pp. 3, 75). Indeed, and following Kristeva's concept of abjection, the mother is despised and rejected in order for the emergent self to constitute a separate, autonomous identity, thereby breaking the bonds of dependence on her by

---

<sup>174</sup> Albert Camus, *L'Étranger*, ed. by Ray Davidson, Twentieth Century French Texts (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 44.



ceasing to be a part of her ‘impossible’, borderless body (McAfee, p. 48). This is the reason for Molloy’s lack of scruples when calling her ‘Mag’ rather than ‘Ma’, as if he were liable to become infected even by her very name, which leads him to imagine the final ‘g’ as equivalent to spitting on her:

I called her Mag, when I had to call her something. And I called her Mag because for me, without my knowing why, the letter g abolished the syllable Ma, and as it were spat on it, better than any other letter would have done. And at the same time I satisfied a deep and doubtless unacknowledged need, the need to have a Ma, that is a mother, and to proclaim it, audibly. For before you say mag you say ma, inevitably.

(TN, p. 13).

In this we find the huge contrast established by Lacan between what he calls the ‘Name-of-the-Father’, associated with entry into the symbolic order and acknowledgement of the symbolic phallus, and the marginal, despicable name of the abjected mother.<sup>175</sup> Molloy, however, could not care less about the Name-of-the-Father and the Phallus. We must remember that he writes all his abuse, yet again, on his mother’s bed, no less.

The abuse aimed at his mother by Molloy is illustrative of the *jouissance* deriving from the very fact of symbolising, of uttering the abject, thus achieving deliverance from the narrator’s (and thus also Beckett’s and, indirectly, the reader’s) ‘ruthless maternal burden.’ (POH, p. 20) In such verbal, scatological violence against his mother, Molloy is mimicking

---

<sup>175</sup> In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the phallus should never be mistaken for the penis, functioning as the signifier of the father’s power or Name-of-the-Father, namely both the prohibition barring the child’s desire for its mother and the threat of castration as punishment for such an offence: it is the signifier that substitutes for the ‘Desire-of-the-Mother’. In its therefore symbolic and signifying nature, the phallus could be defined as ‘what no one can have but everyone wants’, namely ‘bodily unity, wholeness, perfect autonomy’. As a symbol of fatherly authority, it would nevertheless be ‘only trivially “masculine”’ in that the mother ‘in her very lack partakes of it [...] as its constitutive Other’, since she is ‘the ever-present possibility of its absence or severance.’ In this sense, ‘man has the phallus’, but ‘woman *is* the phallus’ (my emphasis): Reader, pp. 23, 29-30.

Like an omnipotent phantom or an all-presiding deity symbolising paternal authority, the phallus retains its pre-eminence by hiding within the structures it governs, as it ‘sustains the structure of desire with the structure of the law’: Bristow, p. 95; *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by J.-A. Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York and London: Norton, pr. 1998), p. 34.

See also Easthope, p. 98.

the so-called ‘rituals of defilement’, all of them ‘based on the feeling of abjection’ and ‘converging on the maternal’, whereby human cultures have traditionally warded off their fear of the identity of their members ‘sinking irretrievably into the mother.’ (p. 64) ‘Secular “filth” becomes thus ‘sacred “defilement”’, that which is ‘jettisoned from the “symbolic system.”’ (p. 65, original emphasis)

Both alluring and repulsive, an illustration of Lacan’s distinction between the ‘idealised’ and the ‘disparaged’ woman, the mother is so central to Molloy as for him to affirm: ‘all my life, I think I had been going to my mother’; later on, he tells us ‘when I was no longer with her I was again on my way to her’ (*TN*, p. 81; Easthope, p. 106). In any case, in the end, deprived of any paternal reference, one feels as if it had not been possible for Molloy to introduce ‘the symbolic dimension between “subject” (child) and “object” (mother)’, therefore establishing an object relation (‘fondness for the mother and fear of the father’) worthy of that name, where the mother would be the first object of both desire and signification for the child (*POH*, p. 44; Beardsworth, p. 85). As a result, tangled with her mother in an incomplete Oedipal triangle, the alluring prevails in such a way as to make him not mind being symbolically castrated, thus never achieving real self-completion and a masculine identity: remaining ‘an orphan in the symbolic realm’, Molloy, like the average melancholic, has no real motivation to engage in it (McAfee, p. 63). Thus, he imagines himself ‘happier, livelier, amputated at the groin.’ (p. 31)<sup>176</sup> For him, the phallus is less than nothing.

On his way to her, from time to time, Molloy will encourage himself by pronouncing her talismanic name: ‘Mother’ (p. 84). This flagrant contradiction with the aforementioned prejudice against that very name speaks clearly of his ambivalent relationship with the maternal. In the end, it might not be ‘a part of himself, vital though it may be,’ that he would be risking by losing contact with his not properly abjected mother, but ‘his whole life.’ (*POH*, p. 53) Not caring any longer about his condition as a separate subject, he would be just too eager to consummate his always wished ‘narcissistic union’ with his

---

<sup>176</sup> In Freudian psychoanalysis, fear of castration by the intimidating father will make the male infant renounce his desire for his mother. The threat of castration works by reason of the child’s prior narcissistic loss of the mother’s breast (Weeks, *Sexuality*, pp. 2, 140). With Molloy, the abhuman, if not directly monstrous son of an unknown father, one who is always either going to or fleeing from his mother, with whom he may even have committed incest, such a threat means nothing. So, he concludes: ‘And if they had removed a few testicles into the bargain I wouldn’t have objected.’ (*TN*, p. 31)

‘first love’, the pre-symbolic mother (McAfee, p. 48).<sup>177</sup> In conclusion, the maternal is not only a reference, but an obsession for Molloy.

With regard to its negative side, this ambivalence towards the mother and the feminine can reach the stage of physical violence. This is exemplified by Molloy’s peculiar habit of communicating with his mother by battering her skull, and is directly related to the ritualising of the feminine as defilement, the religious equivalent of filth, as we have just seen. Ultimately, this would be linked to a conception of the female as ‘dark’ or ‘nocturnal’, about which we already wrote. Thus, violence bespeaks men’s resolution to be granted rights over women as ‘baleful schemers’ from whom men have to defend themselves and who are finally construed as ‘a radical evil [...] to be suppressed.’ In the end, this bears witness to the male’s ingrained fear of the ‘archaic and inscrutable quality’ of female sexuality, and the Sphinx-like ‘riddle’ or ‘enigma’ of the feminine as ‘an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power’ (*POH*, p. 70; Bristow, pp. 78, 82).<sup>178</sup> Hence, already Freud writes of man’s ‘generalised dread of women’, whom he characterises as ‘different from man, for ever incomprehensible and mysterious, strange and therefore apparently hostile’ (Easthope, p. 140).

Molloy is linked from the very start to an imagery of pervasive darkness, itself related to an always unstable sense of personal identity and subjectivity, which will provide the overall dominant tonality of Molloy’s narrative.<sup>179</sup> Thus, when he writes about the town he was born in, Molloy describes it as the place where he ‘first saw the *murk* of day’ (*TN*, p. 26, my emphasis). Earlier, as he tells us about the dangers of daylight for a vagrant such as he is, he states how much impenetrable his night is, so much so that if he writes about the presence of stars in it, it is only ‘by mistake’ (p. 11).

---

<sup>177</sup> Narcissism, for Freud, was one of the two main drive forms of the reproduction and survival instinct, the other being sexuality (Easthope, p. 45). In McAfee, glossing on both Freud and Kristeva, narcissism is described as ‘an ongoing structure of the ego’ whereby from infancy on the libido that the speaking subject would otherwise cathect onto an external object is however invested on themselves. If in adulthood it has to be considered a perversion, in infancy it would provide the child with a way ‘to start incorporating and thus mimicking what is other to itself, even before it has a concept of a self–other distinction.’ (McAfee, p. 36)

<sup>178</sup> The ‘archaic’ defining female sexuality would be none other than the semiotic (Beardsworth, p. 251).

<sup>179</sup> One should bear in mind, though, what Beckett says, apparently about life in general, in an interview given in 1961, a few years after completion of the English version of his *Three Novels*: ‘If there were only darkness, all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness, but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable.’ (Driver, p. 244).

Of course, he is speaking about something other than physical night. Thus, as his narrative unfolds, Molloy gets closer and closer to the non-symbolic, wordless night and the darkness of the forests. In this respect, he is tellingly associated to an imagery that we can relate to his gradual self-dispossession, thus becoming more and more abject.<sup>180</sup> As Kristeva suggests, abjection is ‘shady’, like the primeval forests existing before the first permanent human settlements were set up (*POH*, p. 4).<sup>181</sup> In *Molloy*, these forests could be read as an emblem of both Europe’s pagan past, when men’s hearts were still so far away from the worship of the masculine, Apollonian Christ and the pieties of Christian morality, and (closer in this to Jung than to Freud) of the unconscious itself and its many dangers, too.<sup>182</sup>

Thus, Molloy travels by night, ‘that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes’, as it is the night before separation from the Mother’s boundless Ur-space and Ur-time (*POH*, p. 10). Therefore, Molloy travels in radical ‘confrontation with the

---

<sup>180</sup> ‘The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being *opposed to I*.’ (*POH*, p. 1, my emphasis)

<sup>181</sup> ‘Man need never have left the forest: he is a degenerate, nostalgic animal’: Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, as cited in Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 104.

<sup>182</sup> Hence, according to Juan-Eduardo Cirlot, Jung contends that ‘the frights of the forest, so common in fairy tales, symbolise the dangerous side of the unconscious, in other words, its devouring nature and its occultation of reason’: *Diccionario de símbolos*, Colección Labor, Nueva Serie, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Barcelona: Labor, 1992), p. 102 (my translation); the Spanish original: ‘los terrores del bosque, tan frecuentes en los cuentos infantiles, simbolizan el aspecto peligroso del inconsciente, es decir, su naturaleza devoradora y ocultante (de la razón)’.

That forests are perilous places where one risks not only limb and life but also one’s soul is reminded at the very beginning of Dante’s *Comedy*:

Midway along the journey of our life  
 I woke to find myself in a *dark wood*,  
 for I had *wandered* off from the straight path.  
 How hard it is to tell what it was like,  
 this wood of *wilderness, savage and stubborn*  
 (the thought of it brings back all my *old fears*),  
 a bitter place! *Death could scarce be bitterer* [...]

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Volume I Inferno*, trans. by Mark Musa, Penguin Classics (New York and London: Penguin, 1984), I. 1-7 (my emphasis).

feminine’, on a ‘journey to the end of the night’, being ‘immoral, sinister, scheming,’ relentlessly becoming uncannier and closer to the abhuman (on which I will elaborate later on). Quite significantly, while in the woods, Molloy moves in circles, corresponding to a cyclic experience of time and, symbolically, to an eternity historically associated with the cult of Mother Goddesses, rather than with the linearity of time inherent to masculinist Judeo-Christian civilisation. He does so, besides, without any references or sense of orientation, without ‘getting his bearings’, like all the *Trilogy*’s wandering antiheroes, through a non-idyllic, non-romanticised, non-domesticated nature (*POH*, p. 8).

Ultimately, what these references to Molloy’s circular wanderings through the dark woods at night are related to is Nietzsche’s death of God and its subsequent nihilism. Thus, as we saw earlier with respect to Molloy’s ‘straying’, Nietzsche writes what follows in ‘The Madman’ section of *The Gay Science*: ‘Isn’t night and more night coming again and again? Don’t lanterns have to be lit in the morning?’ (*TGS*, p. 120) A dangerous night, as Zarathustra carries the tightrope walker’s dead body on his shoulders through the woods, at night, in search of a place for a dignified burial, with the threat of the woods’ wolves always in the background (Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, pp. 13, 15). If Molloy’s first motive for his straying pilgrimage to the Primal Mother’s shrine is self-loss into the abject, Beckett’s might have been the West’s nihilistic cultural condition at the time of writing *Molloy*, buried alive (or half-dead) in the most nihilistic moment in its entire history: slightly after the end of WWII, the long night dominated by the wolves of Nazism.

Meanwhile, Molloy’s alimentary habits symbolically partake of the woods’ dark nature, too, since he feeds off roots and mushrooms as he wanders through them; thus, he feeds off the darkness of the subsoil, the abode of the dead and of chthonic powers in most human cultures. In so doing, he also feeds off the wood’s very shadows, as that is where mushrooms (many of them meaningfully poisonous) and grass (the natural staple for many animals) grow.

This mention to animals must be linked to Molloy’s gradual shift towards the animal condition, not only owing to his straying through the woods, where he significantly crawls like a reptile, but also because of the psychoanalytic association of murder and animalism: ‘The abject demonstrates the subject’s disavowed relations to corporality, to animality and death.’ (*POH*, pp. 12-13; Jones, p. 68). Indeed, though a decrepit invalid at first sight,

Molloy allows himself the polluting, abjection-sowing gesture of murder (*TN*, p. 78; *POH*, p. 58). In this way, by forcefully introducing the most paradigmatic representative of abjection, the corpse, into his narration he makes a statement about his not belonging to the ordinary human community: he is an utter deject, completely immersed in the unmediated, direct, obscure and brutish materiality of the abject, beyond signification and symbolism, completely at the margins of society (p. 3).

#### 4.5 – The Maternal and the Temptations of Self-Dissolution

In addition to what we have just said, in his pilgrimage towards the abject Great Mother, Molloy appears to become a corpse himself: ‘the truth of this world is to die.’ Consequently, a ‘man [...] is nothing but arrested putrescence.’<sup>183</sup> We become corpses: we are made for abjection.<sup>184</sup> Ever more estranged from the common decencies of human civilisation, his motor capacities becoming more and more atrophied, Molloy’s journey can be described as a ‘degraded and degrading imitation of Dante’s’, its outcome being ‘an inhumanization rather than a spiritualization.’ (Weller, *Taste for the Negative*, p. 99)

On his journey, as long as his mother cannot only be thought of as abject, but also as sublime, in the sense of being too large and overwhelming, like the pre-symbolic dimension she represents, Molloy’s straying is one that, carrying him away to the point of ‘dazzlement’ or cognitive failure brought about by the closeness of the object of his search, drowns him in ‘a spree of perceptions and words’ associated with that lost space, the mother’s body, the semiotic chora (Shaw, p. 2). This makes his memory expand ‘boundlessly’, yet only a step away from the self-dissolution ‘in the raptures of a bottomless memory’ implied by the attainment of his quest: re-admission to the original silence of the maternal womb, that ‘secondary universe’ where ‘I’ and language are no more (*POH*, p. 12).<sup>185</sup> As a result, Molloy becomes more and more prone to succumb to

---

<sup>183</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline, as cited in *POH*, p. 143.

<sup>184</sup> The corpse ‘dwells in me, spends me, and carries me to the point where my identity is turned into something undecidable.’ (*POH*, p. 150)

<sup>185</sup> This silence, to which postmodern aesthetics, according to critic and theorist Ihab Hassan and composer John Cage, is very close, will play an essential role in the closing title of Beckett’s *Three Novels*, as we will see later (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 158).

the temptation of abandoning all knowledge, eventually that of his own being, too. Ultimately, he comes across as ‘never *one*, nor *homogeneous*, nor *totalizable*, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic.’ (p. 8, original emphasis) He embodies the main currents of contemporary continental thought with respect to the subject, which, rather than as a ‘unity of consciousness’ with a ‘singular intentionality’, is seen as characterised by ‘fragmentation, fragility and contingency’ (Caroline Williams, p. 2). In his heterogeneity, as a subject seeking for his true self only to lose himself into the self-destroying *jouissance* of merging again with the Other, with the Great Mother this side of the symbolic order, he could be applied Rimbaud’s dictum: ‘Je est un autre.’ (*POH*, p. 10)<sup>186</sup>

In this longing for oblivion through silence, as we will see later on, he anticipates the Unnamable, the antihero of the last part of Beckett’s *Trilogy* and arguably its true protagonist, Molloy and the rest of its other main characters being therefore only his avatars. In the end, Molloy finds *jouissance* in the achievement of his pilgrimage’s ultimate goal: to cut oneself loose from identity as a subject through the mother.

This theme of self-annihilation is also related to the Freudian death-drive and even more directly to nihilism and the death of God. It is in the very same section that Nietzsche dedicates to this last event in *The Gay Science* (‘The Madman’, incidentally the first occasion on which this issue is explicitly addressed in Nietzsche’s work), that we can read how the Madman addresses his fellow humans in the marketplace: ‘Aren’t we *straying* as though through an *infinite nothingness*?’ (Vattimo, p. 148; *TGS*, p. 181, my emphasis) Fixed on self-extinction, all that someone like Molloy can do is to carry on, regardless of whether in circles, only a few metres a day, completely oblivious to the snares of this illusory world and of man’s inconsequential consciousness or rationality.

#### 4.6 – Literature: Fascination and Suffering

Coming back to the Unnamable, Molloy is also very close here to the former’s existential plight in that he is caught between his wish for self-extinction and the fear of

---

<sup>186</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works, Selected Letters: A Bilingual Edition*, tr. by Wallace Fawley (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 2005), pp. 370-71.

utter termination, fended off by his never-ending speech, as we will see later. The Unnamable's speech finds its functional equivalent in Molloy's writing, the occupation we found him dedicated to at the beginning of the novel, where he recapitulates his pilgrimage adventures. For the same reason, although 'peripheral' because of him and his mother (ultimately the Mother) being 'rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level', as well as being a self-forgetting outcast and an antihero, and despite being 'marginal' as representative of what is jettisoned beyond the boundary of the clean and proper, his writing stands as 'symbolically central' and maybe even cathartic: by preserving traces of that which has been 'expelled as "Other"', it allows the return of 'objects of nostalgia, longing and fascination' for its abjection-afflicted readership (*POH*, p. 69; Calvin Thomas, p. 81)<sup>187</sup>

As in the rest of Beckett's *Molloy Trilogy*, literature is here 'a recounting of suffering', the quieting down and the concatenation into a story of 'fear, disgust and abjection' (*POH*, p. 145). If the law is 'internalized under the sign of negation and disgust', disgust is often imprinted with desire, which marks the unconscious but structural gap left by the loss of the real, as well as the potential to make us whole again through its satisfaction (Belsey, p. 59). Thus, Molloy may be a paradigmatic example of the low and excluded in the type of the 'savage', but at the same time has been incorporated into 'the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture.' (Stallybrass & White, pp. 6, 191)

#### 4.7 – Moran: The Superego, the Id, and the Pleasure Principle

As we said above, Moran initially stands in stark contrast with Molloy. The last of a line of obedient Catholic believers and conscientious professionals, he is firmly steeped in the symbolic order. He behaves as a disciplined and authoritarian father who exerts his

---

<sup>187</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986), pp. 5, 191.

Thinking of Beckett's abject antiheroes, Calvin Thomas avows how he cannot conceive of a 'writing more indifferent to personhood—the author's, the narrator's, the narrated's, or the reader's—than Beckett's. Nor can I imagine any "persons" more radically socially inept than Beckett's abject, expelled figures.' (p. 82, original emphasis)

That Molloy is continually forgetting about everything, himself included, must be linked with his superficial brushings with language, on which memories depend, and therefore with the symbolic order (Storr, p. 37).



prerogatives on his son while trying to integrate him into this patriarchal circle (Cousineau, p. 86). According to this and from a psychoanalytic point of view, Moran has to be construed as the very embodiment of the phallic father and the superego, the psychic agency generated from the introjection of parental and societal standards, an internalised ‘cultural censor’, an ‘alien we have taken inside us’ (McAfee, p. 31; Easthope, pp. 56, 79). Formed by the acceptance of the prohibition of incest, the superego is thus the successor to the Oedipal complex when this is completed, as well as ‘the voice of tradition’ (Bristow, p. 74; Easthope, p. 142). Among its major functions, we can find conscience, its voice being heard ‘whenever the ego falls short of the ego-ideal.’ (Storr, p. 63). In his dealings with his disappointing son, Moran always tries to pass for an unobjectionable role-model, or from the son’s side of the relationship, for an estimable ego-ideal (ibid.).<sup>188</sup> In his arbitrary, unnecessarily strict, and at times aggressive handling of his son, however, all Moran achieves is to demonstrate how the superego can be ‘as cruel as the id’, thus making a contribution of his own to the existence of ‘a pure culture of the death instinct’ (Easthope, p. 57).<sup>189</sup>

The id, in its turn, could perfunctorily be described as the drives often running rampant within the speaking subject, coming close to Nietzsche’s Dionysian in that it represents the vital energy at the heart of reality, the unstructured and overwhelming chaos always threatening order (McAfee, p. 31; Marmysz, p. 26). To describe it even more simply, the id is the unconscious (Easthope, p. 45).

In Lacanian terms, Moran first appears as the absolute possessor of the symbolic phallus, hence the sole authority in his household (Homer, p. 57). Yet, from the very start of the second part of *Molloy*, we can notice some notorious fissures in this profile, all of which find a connection to abjection. Some of them can be noticed even before he sets off to chase Molloy at the behest of his uncanny boss, Youdi. A widower and increasingly alienated from the world, though he will still call himself his employer’s ‘faithful servant’,

---

<sup>188</sup> According to Lacan, and like the ideal ego, which appears in the mirror phase, this ego ideal, which is linked with the symbolic order and therefore with entry into language, is an idealised transformation and a ‘source of delusion’: just how one would like to see oneself (Easthope, p. 63).

Pamela Thurschwell, *Sigmund Freud*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 48.

<sup>189</sup> In *Malone Dies*, its eponymous antihero, according to Antony Easthope, also exemplifies this psychic agency as ‘a wild beast of earnestness’ padding up and down ‘roaring, ravening, rending’ (p. 57; *TN*, p. 189).

he nevertheless no longer recognises the former's cause and his endeavours as related to himself (*TN*, p. 126).

Quite meaningfully, in remaining faithful to his employer he only follows the admonitions of an inner voice analogous to the one heard by Molloy in the ditch, at the end of his narration. Voices will also play a most significant part in *The Unnamable*, as they will presumably stand for what its protagonist takes to be a whole cohort of undergods or 'devils' assisting a demiurge (Moran's Youdi) in the running of his pathetically defective, farcical creation. In Moran's case, his being an apparently devoted father and an assiduous and successful member of his profession on the one hand, and the very fact that he is hearing voices on the other do not augur well for him.

Already before leaving home, while preparing for his journey after Molloy, Moran very significantly refers to the 'pleasure principle' as uncannily presiding over his arrangements (p. 94). As 'the most basic, *primitive* principle of mental dynamics', the one governing the id, according to Freud, being aimed at the 'satisfaction of *instinctual* needs', and normally associated to a lack of sufficient repression or sublimation in the properly constituted adult subject, this principle can only be understood as contrary to the demands of the one criterion after which Moran, a responsible, mature person, has hitherto organised his entire life: the reality principle (Storr, pp. 61, 103). Quite obviously, Moran has always behaved according to rules and patterns inherited from his predecessors in the exercise of phallic authority and the exertion of disciplined self-control. This requires strenuous efforts, but it is rewarded by a prominent social role as a father and a professional, too. From now on, however, Moran gives in to the uncertainties of an unpredictable life in which he will have to adapt his former principles and habits to the hazards of each and every day, very much in resemblance with Molloy's peripatetic existence. That this must be so, moreover, seems to come to Moran's mind as a sort of ineluctable fate, whereby he could only be subject to self-abasement and humility. In a sort of premonition of the impending metamorphoses he is about to undergo, he tells us about his 'losing [his] head *already*.' (*TN*, p. 94, my emphasis)

A first sign of abjection working in the background in *Molloy's* second half is the express rejection of male authority and an actual disregard for the threat of symbolic castration on the part of Moran's son. Despite the lack of the mother in his Oedipal

triangle, as she is dead by the time the novel starts, Jacques Jnr rather seems to harbour for Jacques Snr the same aggressive feelings as any member of the primal horde had for the primal father.<sup>190</sup> Therefore, despite the enhanced possibility for him to acquire a full, strong subjectivity of his own through an easier renunciation to the imaginary phallus than otherwise, it seems as though he would not completely give up his rivalry with his father with regard to his mother's memory, and accordingly he is not able to erase the last traces of the imaginary order still surviving in him (Homer, pp. 55-56, 59). This is actualised not only by his increasing hostility and opposition to Moran's tyrannical behaviour towards him, but also, once they are living rough in the countryside, by his eventual desertion, leaving his father almost without any food or money on the pretext of an errand in a neighbouring town (*TN*, pp. 154-55). In any case, it has been clear to Moran from the start that he and his son are both 'done for' (p. 87). His efforts to turn his son into an exact copy of him (which, as we can see, achieve only mixed results) are as compromised from the very beginning as his respectable façade as a father and successful professional by some inner unbalances incompatible with such roles. This will become apparent in his tracking of Molloy, as we will see later on when analysing sexuality and its relation to abjection in both *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*.

#### 4.8 - The Abject and Subversion: Feminisation, Violence and Murder

Although in Moran's wanderings after Molloy we do not find the same stress on the motifs of darkness and night, so conspicuous in the novel's first half, there is a similar thematic concern with their ultimate conceptual referent, namely self-dispossession, the twilight of self-conscious subjectivity. Moran even voices this literally, on acknowledging 'his growing resignation to being dispossessed of self' in the course of his journey after Molloy, calling his very self 'that unfailing pastime' and nothing else (*TN*, pp. 143, 156).

His resigned renunciation of selfhood could be read, as we have already mentioned and in as much as it implies a rejection of his rights and privileges as a father and as an instance of legitimate authority, as an 'ultimate proof of humility' (*POH*, p. 5). More than

---

<sup>190</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. by James Strachey, Routledge Classics (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 166.

this, he enters a process of personal degradation more and more given to the abject, morbid and nearly masochistic (therefore, in Freudian terms, to the perverse). Thus, Moran starts a progressive shedding of masculinity in giving himself to sensual and unmistakably sexual feelings and drives. These are related to the same primeval femininity as Molloy yields to while in the shadowy woods that Moran is now crossing after the tramp's tracks (p. 127). Hence, as Simon Critchley remarks, 'the authoritarian Oedipal subject becomes the pre-Oedipal abject self' (*Very Little*, p. 162).

This process shows most clearly on waking up one morning, while in the countryside, when Moran has to acknowledge an unexpected half erection, apparently unrelated to any obvious stimulus (*TN*, p. 133). Trying to resume his walk after Molloy, and on discovering himself unable to because of a stiff leg, just like his quarry, he resolves 'to take refuge in the horizontal', immediately introducing a telling comparison: 'like a child in its mother's lap.' The sudden shift in this metaphor from the symbolic, rational and geometrical (the 'horizontal') to the terms of a dimension defined by affect and pleasure and linked to the maternal ('its mother's lap') bespeaks the change of stress from the masculine and authoritative to the feminine, bodily and pleasurable: 'Yes, when you can neither stand nor sit with comfort, you take refuge in the horizontal, like a child in its mother's lap. You explore it as never before and find it possessed of unsuspected delights.' (p. 134) In this psycho-cultural shift, Moran verifies Bataille's assertion that 'a liking for the abject involves [...] subversion'.<sup>191</sup>

Hence, Moran is already undergoing a metamorphosis after his quarry, thereby encountering the unexpected delights of the long ago abjected in order to become a subject: those of the imaginary order, blending into the 'infinite' mother as implicitly evoked by his lying on the ground. This is confirmed when describing the pain in his joints: his kneecap feels 'like a clitoris.' His aroused sensitivity exposes itself in the following terms, explicitly dismissive of the gravity and respectability of his former identity as a discreet, male individual: while fantasising on 'being literally incapable of motion at last', his mind 'swoons' (*TN*, pp. 133-34). The sexual overtones are undeniable.

---

<sup>191</sup> My translation of the French original, as cited in Paul Hegarty, 'As Above So Below: Informe/Sublime/Abject', in *The Beast at Heaven's Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, ed. by Andrew Hussey, Faux Titre, 282 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 73-80 (p. 74).

Indeed, from now on the man who was once a detective will not lose contact with Mother Earth, as when, looking for some lost keys, he bewilderingly does so first by dragging himself on the ground, and then by rolling over (pp. 146-47). Furthermore, if he still qualifies this unlikely way of motion by reference to a geometric body (he rolls ‘like a great cylinder’), it is also quite clear that in thus moving, just like Molloy before him, he resembles a snake, the chthonic animal par excellence, one of the conventional components of the iconography of the Great Mother in ancient religion, and ultimately a symbol of the Fall by Woman in our Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>192</sup> Because of its association with matriarchal religion and its connections with fertility and sex, the snake would also hint at what Susan Sontag believes to be the ‘special case’ that sexuality has always been in our Judeo-Christian culture through its links with ideas such as virtue and vice (Weeks, *Discontents*, p. 3).

Moran’s links with the animal do not stop at the snake as a symbol of the lost imaginary order and of female sovereignty, but include, like in Molloy’s case, murder, which, as we saw above, is linked to animalism in Kristeva’s theory of abjection. Yet again after an unexpected encounter in the middle of nature, and yet again with some sexual innuendo concerning Moran’s relationship with his victim (the stranger greets him with the unusual formula ‘you unexpected pleasure’), this man, who is moreover an uncanny sort of doppelganger, gets his advances rewarded with his head being turned into ‘a pulp.’ (*TN*, pp. 144-45) Although Moran does not remember exactly how such a thing might have happened, it is evident that he does not care much, either. Later on, Moran may actually have gone on to a second murder on account of an uncomfortable encounter with a landowner whose property Moran was trespassing on. After lying to him about his reasons for it and bribing him to let him walk on, he uncompromisingly states how he would have

---

<sup>192</sup> Genesis, 3: 1, 4-6 (*The Holy Bible: Old and New Testaments, King James Version*, Duke Classics, p. 12.)

For the snake as the chthonic or earth-bound animal par excellence, see, e.g., Ake Hulkrantz, ‘The Religion of the Goddess in North America’, in *The Book of the Goddess: Past and Present*, ed. and intro. by Carl Olson (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2002), pp. 202-216 (p. 214). For evidence of worship of a ‘Queen of Heaven’, a title common to other Near East goddesses partaking of the nature of the ‘old Mother-goddess’ even in the Yahweh-zealous kingdom of Judah, as well as to the possible association of her cult and the serpent, see Meindert Dijkstra, ‘El, the God of Israel— Israel, the People of YHWH: On the Origins of Ancient Israelite Yahwism’, in *Only One God? Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah*, ed. by Bob Becking and others, The Biblical Seminar, 77 (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 81-126 (pp. 117-19)

preferred to resort to violence, despite his finally deciding on a different course of action (p. 168).

In fact, this violent penchant exists in Moran from quite early in his narration, as his considerations on his son clearly show: ‘I reflected with bitter satisfaction that if my son lay down and died by the wayside, it would be none of my doing.’ (p. 117) Sacrificial echoes and yet more confusion of the human and the animal come to our minds if we think of the book of Genesis, where Abraham is more than ready to give his own son as a burnt offering to God, only for the latter to accept a ram in replacement.<sup>193</sup>

What all this comes down to in the end is Moran’s gradual abandonment of a position of authority sanctioned by paternal and patriarchal law: in his gradual shifting to the abject, he adopts a whimsy, expedient behaviour in which strength, cunning and lack of scruples are the only principles. One would say Moran has been seduced by his quarry over the course of his chase. That he has not only committed a major crime, but also turned so unscrupulous and unprincipled hints, as Kristeva writes, at ‘the fragility of the [paternal] law’ and Moran’s becoming more and more of a deject (*POH*, p. 4). It is in such a way that he advances in his invented pilgrimage to ‘the Turdy Madonna’, following Molloy’s example in scatologically and blasphemously referring to the primal female, towards which, however, Moran feels more and more attracted, getting more and more self-dispossessed in the process (*TN*, p. 167).

#### 4.9 – Inner Metamorphoses, Universal Abjection

What Moran achieves in doing all we have just described is to shift over to the abject, giving himself up to ‘the great inner metamorphoses’ taking place within him during his search for Molloy (p. 157). Besides, he is following a structural pattern noticeable in the *Three Novels*, consisting in a regression ‘from a journey to stasis.’ (McDonald, p. 107) At a certain given time, not far from the novel’s end and yet again in a very similar way to Molloy’s, he just crawls out of his refuge, starved, unwashed and unshaven, in order ‘to

---

<sup>193</sup> Genesis, 22: 1-10 (*The Holy Bible*, pp. 52-53).

have a good laugh at the lights of Bally’, a nearby town he can see from his position. Nearly at the novel’s end, he goes around on crutches (*TN*, p. 169).

What Moran does by so laughing is to debunk the reality principle, his male subjectivity, civilisation as embodied in that recent invention, namely the city, and the entire rationalist and enlightened tradition of the West as represented by such ‘lights’ (*ibid.*; Storr, pp. 102-03).<sup>194</sup> By the time his son abandons him, Moran goes on getting weaker and weaker in the middle of nowhere, more and more of a shadow of the one he used to be before the beginning of his fateful expedition after Molloy; nevertheless, he feels the more ‘content’ on this account, despite his not eating for several days (*TN*, p. 156). Advancing deeper and deeper into his inner night, he can no longer be that ‘symbolic light’ that could help his son develop as a mature man worthy of the phallus, as he helped him separate from the mother when it was necessary for him to leave behind the last traces of the imaginary order, of immaturity, of dependence on anyone else, and to reach the symbolic order (*POH*, p. 13). Had this been young Moran’s wish, it would have been far too late.

Indeed, by this time, ever nearer to Molloy’s abject, thwarted subjectivity, Moran has already fallen prey to some of the former’s unhumanising habits, like eating ‘certain mosses’ (*TN*, p. 160). As these foodstuffs mark ‘a boundary between nature and culture, between the human and the nonhuman’, they must be construed as impure and abject (*POH*, p. 75). In this, they bespeak a conception of the entire universe as abject. This is illustrated by Moran’s evocation of the Milky Way as ‘Juno’s milk’ if we relate this to his earlier discomfort at the ‘revolting skin’ of his milk as it gets cold while preparing his expedition still at home (*TN*, p. 115). Many years after *Molloy* was first published, Kristeva will think of the same substance to give a paradigmatic example of her own sense of the abject (*POH*, pp. 2-3). For Moran, therefore, the whole planet would be enveloped in a disgustingly abject shroud of milky light.

It is in this patently abject and degraded context that we must frame Moran’s return to his home, after giving up on his search for Molloy. In fact, when he comes back to his wasted household, he ends his narration entirely transformed into someone else, utterly

---

<sup>194</sup> Georges Bataille: “‘It is time to abandon the world of the civilized and its light.’ As quoted in Wolin, p. 159.

indifferent to the essentials of his former convictions and lifestyle, and unmotivated by anything belonging to his former life, maybe just waiting for death to come along: ‘What would I do until my death?’ (*TN*, p. 162)

Completely dominated by voices, this is all the more worrying as the voices are non-symbolic: the degree of his psychic regression to a state before his mastering of language and the advent of himself as a subject is implied by his referring to himself in the third person. The words uttered by these voices, moreover, are not the same ones ‘that Moran has been taught when he was little and that he in his turn had taught to his little one.’ (pp. 169-70) That he is back to a dimension before subjectivity and the law transpires in the exact repetition of the same words he used at the beginning of his tale: ‘It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining.’ (p. 170) Moran having turned into a denizen of Molloy’s realm of negativity and uncertainty, the story has come full circle. Thus, he follows the pattern of Molloy’s journey across the woods: the circle, the symbol of the Mother’s eternal sway, outside of history. If beforehand he was the embodiment of the superego, Kristeva seems to have been thinking of Moran when she writes: ‘To each ego its object, to each superego its abject.’ (*POH*, p. 2)

#### 4.10 – *Malone Dies* and the Abject’s Allure: The Joys of Darkness

Malone’s link with abjection is less evident than Molloy’s or Moran’s. To begin with, Malone is neither inscribed in any paternal-filial relationship, nor does he have a mother, for all we know. In the *Trilogy*’s second novel, plot, setting and characterisation get recognised a rather less prominent role in favour of a certain metaphysical condensation. Malone is above all a writer, and everything he tells us, apart from the few descriptive comments he dedicates to his room and his minimal lifestyle, to call it somehow, has to do with his avatars Saposcat and Macmann. His main association with the abject will be related to their sexuality, as we will see later.

Nevertheless, Malone shares with Molloy and Moran the somehow paradoxical awareness of becoming less and less conscious, gradually giving in to nothingness. Confined to the horizontal on his preternatural bed, Malone believes he got there precisely after probably losing consciousness. Since then he has been living in ‘a kind of coma’,



whole days having flown by ‘in a flicker of [his] lids’ (*TN*, pp. 177, 180). Closer to death and self-extinction than Moran, he never held in great esteem the consciousness he suspects first drove him to his bed and that he is about to lose for good:

One day I found myself here, in the bed. Having probably lost consciousness somewhere, I benefit by a hiatus in my recollections, not to be resumed until I recovered my senses, in this bed. As to the events that led up to my fainting and to which I can hardly have been oblivious, at the time, they have left no discernible trace, on my mind [...] *The loss of consciousness for me was never any great loss.*

(p. 177, my emphasis).

For the rest, and as a token of the gradual progression towards ever greater negativity that can be traced in the *Three Novels*, if Molloy is born to a murky daylight, Malone directly nourishes on a *murk* that is killing him (p. 187, my emphasis). Quite clearly, through this paradox, that of a presumed foodstuff (and an abject one, too) that will not make its consumer thrive, but actually bring him nearer and nearer the bitter end, negativity is underscored, while existential and metaphysical darkness close in more and more tightly on its prey.<sup>195</sup>

An expert in the secret, negative ‘joys of darkness’, the darkness that, he confides to us, ‘accumulates, thickens, then suddenly bursts and drowns everything’, Malone tries to spare Sapo, the juvenile antihero of his stories, from their frequentation (pp. 187, 184). Meanwhile, he remains ‘alone’, ‘abandoned in the darkness’, for ever without a light, in the shadows. These are the sanctuary he keeps fleeing to in order to protect himself from that most scandalous and incomprehensible spectacle of others doing what he could never attempt without losing his head, in spite of all his determination to the contrary: living (pp. 174-75, 178, 189). As he lies dying, he partakes of the dehumanisation suffered by Molloy over the course of his progress across the shady woods separating him from his mother.

---

<sup>195</sup> The idea that Malone’s ‘nourishing murk’ is an instance of the abject, apart from being semantically evident, is taken further by H. Porter Abbot, for whom it would be related to an ‘invisible power, shrouded in darkness’, to whom Malone keeps faith. According to this critic, this faith would derive from aspirations to be ‘an omniscient and omnipotent artist’, like his ‘romantic forbears’: ‘The Harpooned Notebook: *Malone Dies*’, in Bloom (ed.), (1988), pp. 123-29 (p. 127). This would give the novel a sort of unexpected Gothic character. In the same way, the idea of Malone as an artist has Kafkaesque undertones for me: he would be an artist of death, in an analogous way, for instance, to Kafka’s Trapeze Artist in ‘First Sorrow’.

Malone does so, for instance, by evoking the abjectness of the corpse in an especially powerful way: while on his deathbed, trying to think of all the possible reasons that might support the thesis that he is still alive, he concludes that maybe ‘all that is nothing but my worms.’ (p. 213)

#### 4.11 - Dark Holes and the World’s Night: A Third Excursus

A notorious allegoric contrast between light and darkness, the latter weighing considerably more heavily on the scales, illustrates Beckett’s *Three Novels* and challenges divergent interpretations thereof in their relation to nihilism. On the one hand, if we follow Martin Heidegger’s hermeneutical analysis of Friedrich Hölderlin’s ‘Bread and Wine’ elegy, we could interpret the previously commented passages as related to the despair inherent in the ‘world’s night’ of a ‘destitute time’ such as the aftermath of WWII, the time ‘for which the ground fails to come,’ whereby we would all be hanging ‘in the abyss.’<sup>196</sup>

Yet, on the other hand, what if, despite the apparently diaphanous nature of Heidegger’s remarks, and in spite of the light that his reflections seem to throw on the question, the phantom of nihilism itself lurked there, on that hypothetically original ontological ground we would now long for? That is what Adorno suspects: Heidegger’s light might actually be a rather dark one, that of a poorly dissimulated traditionalism in the arts and politics. To Shane Weller it bespeaks, on its hidden, unspoken side, the centrality of the German language and essential Germanness in Heidegger’s analysis. These would have been slyly, underhandedly smuggled into terms such as ‘the West’ or ‘Western’ in the philosopher’s project of walking away from Americanised homelessness, namely from post-war liberal democracy, consumerism and technology; it is the latter, if we follow the Swabian thinker, that renders Dasein homeless, this being a symptom of nihilistic oblivion of Being, too (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 52; Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Phil.*, p. 97; Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, p. 242)<sup>197</sup>. In other words, Heidegger’s alternative to nihilism

---

<sup>196</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry. Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter, Modern Classics (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), pp. 89-90.

<sup>197</sup> Originating as a Germanic-rooted alternative to the Latinate ‘Existenz’ (English ‘Existence’), Heidegger’s ‘Dasein’ could cursorily be defined as ‘the entity that is ontologically distinguished from all other entities by the fact that, in its very existence, the challenge and meaning of existing is an issue for it.’ Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary*, The Blackwell Philosopher Dictionaries (Oxford and Maiden,

would be the damaged merchandise of ‘idealistic’, non-biological, ontological, ‘apolitical’, *völkisch*, still unaccomplished, ‘true’ National Socialism.<sup>198</sup> Under such premises, Heidegger’s ontology would be a form of nihilism itself because of being based on ‘indifference to human being and humanist concerns’ and therefore ‘hostile to man’, despite his respect for nature (Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Phil.*, p. xix; *On Heidegger’s Nazism*, p. 12).

In this light, Malone could be read by Heidegger as being a representative of Western mankind’s post-war alienation. This alienation would originate in the bloody demise of a traditional, centuries-long civilisation where Being could still operate through culture and provide humans with a meaning rooted in authentic relationships within a human community. This would have been substituted by a systematic banalisation of human life in the new context of American (anti-)cultural bombardment and the dubious benefits of generalised supermarket consumerism. For Heidegger, these developments would be a part of the ‘hopeless frenzy of unchained technology and of the rootless organization of the average man’ inherent in a nihilism that he thinks of as ‘a subjection to technology as deracination’ (*Introd. to Metaphysics*, p. 40; Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 39).

Adorno, on the contrary, is of the firm conviction that all art, all poetry that is interpreted in the essentialist, metaphysical ways that Heidegger fosters as an antidote to the alleged spiritual homelessness of the West in the post-war era would be nothing but fodder for immediate consumption by the culture industry in the fashion of shallow slogans or superficial, pseudo-philosophical tenets, only to the greatest counter-productive effect:

---

MA: Blackwell, 1999), p.42; Frank Schalow and Alfred Denker, *Historical Dictionary of Heidegger’s Philosophy*, Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements, 101, 2nd edn (Lanham, Toronto and Plymouth: Scarecrow, 2010), p. 71.

<sup>198</sup> In 1953, ‘even after he turned away from real National Socialism’ (which only happened in the year of total defeat, 1945), Heidegger would still be speaking of ‘the inner truth and greatness of this movement [i.e. Nazism]’, always remaining faithful to an ideal form of it (Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Phil.*, xiii, xvii-xviii). Hence, his philosophy’s ‘later evolution’ would be ‘largely determined by his continuing concern with Nazism.’ (Rockmore, *On Heidegger’s Nazism*, p. 5) On his concern with the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic concept of the German people as ‘Volk’, his ongoing commitment to it as a philosophical leitmotif since 1933, its historical realisation and manifest destiny, and destiny itself as an explanatory historical concept, see pp. 8-11, as well as *Heidegger and French Phil.*, p. 91. Tom Rockmore’s final appraisal of Heidegger’s political bias is certainly severe: according to him, he was ‘a lifelong Nazi, not merely in a marginal or transient sense’. He may even have asserted his claim to ‘the spiritual leadership’ of the Nazi movement, leading its leaders as ‘the philosophical *Führer*’ of the Nazi Reich, Hitler’s Plato: Tom Rockmore, ‘Introduction’, in *The Heidegger Case: On Philosophy and Politics*, ed. by Tom Rockmore and Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP, 1992), pp. 1-8 (pp. 1-3).

something even more deleterious than the circulation of ‘enlightenment as mass deception’ and its corollary, ‘one-dimensional’ American ‘man’, prey to a ‘uniform and debased “mass culture” which aborts and silences criticism’, a cultural debasement that Molloy, Moran, Malone and their fictional avatars would be witnesses to (Jenks, *Culture*, p. 108)<sup>199</sup>.

#### 4.12 – Art and Nihilism: Resistance and Overcoming

For Adorno, after Auschwitz, there could only be hope and potential for reconciliation with life in a genuine, ‘radically darkened’ art whose ‘primary color’ would certainly be ‘black’ and that would not peddle any easy consolations (Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 75; Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 19, 39). This art, precisely because of its negativity, of its departing from zero in its wholesale rejection of the yet-again-the-same, would embody, even at its darkest, a potential for resistance and the utopian promise of a world completely different from the existing one, ‘the world of a genuinely emancipated humanity.’ (Weller, *Uncanniest*, pp. 76-77)<sup>200</sup>

Beckett’s literature would be for Adorno the most consummate example of such darkened art, the very ‘pinnacle’ of ‘contemporary anti-art’ at the end of a tradition initiated by Hölderlin and culminating in the meaningless ‘protocol sentences’ of *Endgame* and the ‘genuinely colossal’ *The Unnamable* (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 154, 271, 265).<sup>201</sup> In these works, as we already argued, the absence of meaning would constitute itself the only meaning, which could be seen in itself as an anti-nihilistic achievement (Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 27). Although in its radical ‘critique of the world as it is’ and

---

<sup>199</sup> In actual fact, Adorno is not criticising Heidegger’s aesthetic-metaphysical ideas here, but Sartre’s and Brecht’s assumedly progressive theatre, which he understands as aligned with the ‘faded positivities’ and counter-productive affirmations he attributes to almost all of the cultural and artistic proposals of the post-war period. In this light and *a fortiori*, we can easily deduce what impression Heidegger’s high-worded discourse on poetry and art after the war could have made on the Jewish thinker. On the other hand, an index of his appreciation of Beckett as an artist of negativity was his intention to dedicate his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* to him (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 381; Weller, *Uncanniest*, pp. 69, 74). For Adorno’s alternative, anti-Heideggerian reading of Hölderlin, see *ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>200</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Heine the Wound’, in *Notes to Literature*, I & II (1991), pp. 80-85 (p. 85)

<sup>201</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Parataxis: On Hölderlin’s Late Poetry’, in *Notes to Literature*, III (1992), pp. 109-49 (p. 137)

according to Nietzsche its author would deserve being called a passive nihilist, Beckett's work means for Adorno precisely the opposite of any identification with nothingness, or even a privileged form of resistance to any such identification (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 381). Therefore, not only would Beckett's work be non-nihilistic, but also a bulwark against nihilism. In other words, it would never be nihilistic enough to overcome or at least resist actual, historical nihilism or the philosophies, such as Heidegger's, that exemplify and articulate nihilism under the pretext of defining, exposing and opposing it (p. 380; Weller, *Uncanniest*, pp. 74-76). Against those providing arguments to charge Beckett precisely with being a nihilist, Adorno states openly: 'Thought honors itself by defending what is damned as nihilism', a loathed term mobilised for 'the moral defamation' of those who will not endorse the current state of things after WWII (*Negative Dialectics*, pp. 380-81). Adorno finds that Beckett is neither optimistic nor pessimistic, affirming neither meaning nor the absence thereof (Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 82). He would simply be committed to what, thinking of Kafka, Adorno calls the task of the negative.<sup>202</sup> Moreover, the reasons for his radical rejection of the world as it is would lie precisely in this commitment, which Adorno believes to be the only ethical attitude possible or acceptable in an artist after Auschwitz, as the post-war world is a 'radically evil' one (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 381). Indeed, this world can only be thought of as one where the principle of identity has been consummated in Auschwitz as genocidal, 'absolute integration', nihilistically reducing alterity and thus life itself to nothing through 'repressive *égalité*'. As a result, the 'administrative murder of millions' in the Lager caused them not to die as individuals, but as specimens or numbers, entirely unified and indistinct in 'their total nullity.' (p. 362; *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, p. 9) At work behind this, as well as behind 'a wholly integrated life-style and a wholly predictable and replicable course of action' on the part of most people through the culture industry, we could find a 'metaphysics of comprehension' understood as 'the desire for and the methods by and through which Western thought, [...] comprehends, seizes, or consumes what is other to it and so reduces the other [...] to the same'; thus, 'omnivorous thought's aim to assimilate

---

<sup>202</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', in *Prisms*, tr. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1981; repr. 1997), pp. 243-70 (p. 270): 'Our task is to do the negative – the positive has already been given us.' Franz Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms*, trans. by Michael Hofmann (London: Harville Secker, 2006), p. 27: 'We are instructed to do the negative; the positive is already within us.'

It is remarkable, however, how in a 1977 interview Beckett says: 'Negation is no more possible than affirmation.' (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 127).

what is other to it' accomplishes its task (Eagleton, pp. 4, 340; Jenks, *Culture*, pp. 108-09). Beckett's rejection of such a world, one that finds continuation in the Cold War, would qualify his work as an instance of genuine art, one which involves not only a protest against the world as it is, as we have already said, but also an 'ever broken promise of happiness' in the fashion of a better world whose possibility is thus implicitly affirmed (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 82, 136; Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 77).<sup>203</sup> This art's protest would lie in giving voice to 'what ideology hides' by revealing, because of its nature as a form of 'negative knowledge of reality', the 'reification of the world', the 'domination of human beings by commodities [...] since the industrial revolution'.<sup>204</sup>

Hence, Malone's nihilism according to Heidegger would not be such for Adorno, but rather an active, resisting force against it precisely because of this radical negativity, absolutely unamenable to reactionary politics trying to pass for man-liberating ontology: by refusing 'to dominate life or redeem history', by not tolerating any totality, even in a negative or negated mode and, accordingly, by refusing to wipe the slate clean in a gesture of active nihilism, Beckett's art 'fails to provide any sanction for violence.' (Calvin Thomas, p. 83; Katz, p. 235) Malone and presumably Beckett could not care less for Heidegger's elegy for an allegedly lost world of premodern authenticity, ontological rootedness and existential meaningfulness. As Adorno would put it, 'false positivity [such as Heidegger's] is the technological locus of the loss of meaning' (*Aesthetic Theory*, p. 159). Still more vindictively, Adorno states:

To assert that existence or being has a positive meaning constituted within itself and orientated towards the divine principle (if one can put it like that), would be, like all the principles of truth, beauty and goodness which philosophers have concocted, a pure mockery in face of the victims and the infinitude of their torment'.<sup>205</sup>

---

<sup>203</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'Extorted Reconciliation: On Georg Lukács' *Realism in Our Time*', in *Notes to Literature*, I & II (1991), pp. 216-40 (p. 225).

Daniel Katz, "'Epidemics of Enough': Beckettian Sufficiencies', in Ansell Pearson and Morgan (eds.), pp. 235-248 (p. 236)

<sup>204</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', in *Notes to Literature*, I & II (1991), pp. 37-54 (pp. 39-40)

<sup>205</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, tr. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000; repr. 2001), pp. 101-02.

After Auschwitz, the presence of a positive meaning or purpose in being can no longer be affirmed; under the long and heavy shadow of the Holocaust, ‘all the traditional affirmative or positive theses of metaphysics [ . . . ] simply become blasphemies.’ (*Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, p. 121) It is imperative to reject ‘the Western legacy of positivity’ and the subscription ‘to any meaning of things as they exist.’ (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 380). ‘To say "I accept" in an age like our own’, writes George Orwell, ‘is to say that you accept concentration camps, rubber truncheons, Hitler, Stalin, bombs, [...] putsches, purges, slogans’.<sup>206</sup> Therefore, it is morally justified to resist ‘all positivity or affirmation’ (Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 67). In Beckett, the positive categories, such as hope, would be the absolutely negative ones; like in Kafka, ‘failed negation’ would be ‘the sole form that can legitimately be taken by hope in the dark times of modernity.’ (83; Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 118) With respect to this, and according to a comment of Beckett in a conversation with Adorno, the former would be aiming at a highly enigmatic ‘kind of positivity’ in ‘pure negativity’. Adorno interprets this as ‘a positive nothingness’, the ‘nothingness of something’, a nothingness ‘at odds with itself, a nothingness that is not governed by the principle of identity’ (Weller, *Uncanniest*, pp. 83-84). This would allow him to maintain a ‘non-self-identity of nothingness, an opening onto the absolute alterity of reconciliation.’ (p. 84) Hence, in his work we could find ‘the negative image of a genuine reconciliation’ understood as ‘the overcoming of homelessness’ through the release of the nonidentical, which would contribute to the acceptance of ‘the thought of the many as no longer inimical’ (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 6; Weller, *Uncanniest*, pp. 76, 84). Such an image would never present itself ‘other than as a slightest difference within the negative’ (p. 84). Art could thus be saved as ‘that which [...] would remain within the negative [...] in the interests of a better world in which the positive would no longer be fatal.’ (p. 85)

---

<sup>206</sup> As cited in Charles I. Glicksberg, *Modern Literature and the Death of God* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), p.28.

#### 4.13 – Sex and Reproduction: The Temptation Not to Exist

Sex is always a big problem in Beckett's *Three Novels*, as well as in the rest of his oeuvre. In Beckett's fictional world, sexuality is equated with death and the perpetuation of suffering through reproduction. This leads our author, under Schopenhauer's and Augustine of Hippo's influence, beyond hatred of the body and its 'long madness', towards universal damnation: sin is 'constitutive of man', his nature is an irretrievably fallen one (*TN*, p. 51; *POH*, p. 121). Man is always already evil; sin is permanent: mankind is *massa damnata* (p. 125).<sup>207</sup> Not even Christian belief in God's incarnation in human flesh or hope in the resurrected, glorious body will alleviate the rigours of Beckett's dualism. Lust and its overwhelming sway over the *rational* animal may well be understood as a fitting penance for the original sin of disobedience, spanning from mankind's first, spiritual death (the Fall) to everyone's second, physical demise: we are all not only born into death, but we are also guilty of existence (p. 123; Stewart, pp. 3-6). Nevertheless, as Cioran points out, the problem might not be death, but being born into this defective creation sprung from the demiurge.<sup>208</sup> This would be the ultimate meaning of Greek tragedy, whose main concern was not with human, but with eternal justice, according to Schopenhauer (*WWRI*, p. 254; Pothast, p. 155).

Meanwhile, heterosexual sex is but a grotesque ordeal of impotence and disgust under the pretext of 'true' love for ambiguously gendered, geriatrically abject females on the verge of physical collapse, in whose credit it can only be said that they will at least not pollute the world with any more death-row convicts (Stewart, p. 13; *TN*, pp. 51-52, 253-55, 257-58). Accordingly, Molloy's main (or only) praise of his mother is that she was decent enough not to give birth to any more specimens of his wretched bloodline, of which he is

---

<sup>207</sup> 'L'Homme depuis la chute est dans la nature un accident pathologique, une maladie': Marcel Jouhandeau, as cited in Reader, p. 40. My translation: 'Ever since the Fall, man is a pathological accident, a sickness'.

<sup>208</sup> 'No corremos hacia la muerte; huimos de la catástrofe del nacimiento [...] el nacimiento [es] fuente de todas las desgracias y de todos los desastres.' (Cioran, *Inconveniente*, p. 8) My translation: 'We do not run towards death, we escape the disaster of being born, [...] the catastrophe of being born [is the] source of all infirmities and all disasters.'

Emanuele Severino words it like this: 'being born is man's main crime, that is to have wrapped himself up in the clothes of individuality': Emanuele Severino, *La filosofía contemporánea*. trans. by Juana Bizogni, Ariel Filosofía (Barcelona: Ariel, 1987), p. 32, my translation of the Spanish translation of the Italian original).

Writing of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Kristeva states: 'Suffering [is] the place of the subject.' (*POH*, p. 140)



proud to be the last and final one (p. 15). Furthermore, women are abusively referred to (for instance, as ‘cunts’) by reason of their ‘baleful power [...] to bestow mortal life.’ (*POH*, p. 158) In fact, throughout the *Trilogy* Beckett seems to be very close to Céline’s idea of birth-giving as ‘the ultimate of abjection’, ‘something horrible to see’, at the very limit of the impossible, a sort of ‘incest turned inside out’ (p. 155). In the end, ‘females can wreck the infinite’.<sup>209</sup>

‘Silenus’ wisdom’, that is antinatalism, will thus be the main principle of Beckett’s thematising of sexuality. At the end of the day, all three main characters in the first two novels in Beckett’s *Trilogy* feel the strong temptation to come back to that original place, that disrupted whole shared and constituted by mother and child before what we could call, glossing on Cioran, the *fall into language*: what Lacan terms the imaginary order. There, in the original silence of the *wombtomb*, all wish for procreation gets annulled by the annihilation of the self, life experience and its memory, thus confirming those characters’ nihilistic rejection of life because of painful and absurd.<sup>210</sup> As Malone puts it, in a way reminiscent of Cioran: ‘I shall never be born and therefore never get dead’ (*TN*, p. 219).

Calvin Thomas makes a suggestive extension of this antinatalism to Beckett’s art, one of willing failure and impoverishment, where he would refuse to reproduce the person. Because of this ‘underlying ideal’ of his aesthetics, I understand that it could be put forward that Beckett, ‘a non-breeder in more ways than one’, would refuse to succeed in becoming a part of the canon, or in contributing to its continual accretion (Calvin Thomas, p. 87).

This could make more understandable why all of the four main characters in the *Trilogy* seem so fond of the idea of a universe unsullied by their presence (e.g., p. 183). Moran’s regret for having begotten a child is very meaningful in this respect, and fits perfectly with Molloy’s view of babies as little shits (p. 99).<sup>211</sup> Not only are children not wanted because of what they are, obnoxious matter and rebellious minds impossible to mould after their

---

<sup>209</sup> Céline, as cited in *POH*, p. 159.

<sup>210</sup> Thus, for example, Malone writes about his longing for ‘the rapture of vertigo, the letting go, the fall, the gulf, the relapse to *darkness*, to *nothingness*, to earnestness, to *home*’ (*TN*, p. 189, my emphasis).

<sup>211</sup> In this, Molloy might be following, more or less unconsciously, his maker’s residual Protestantism. Thus, John Calvin once wrote ‘We take nothing from the womb but pure filth’: as cited in William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1989), p. 36.

parents' wishes, as Moran knows just too well, but they will also carry on involving their parents' blood and name in this farce of a world that Moran wishes to leave as soon as possible: the death drive is at large in the *Three Novels* in all of its possible forms.

Furthermore, in Beckett's *Trilogy*, children being the living sign of this unending chain gang of humans doomed to death since their very birth, not only do you not want to beget a child, but you do not want to become a little child to gain God's reward in His Kingdom, either. Rather, you want to scandalise and offend children, and to erect a monument to the memory of king Herod, who saved his land from the 'tyranny of the child' by having them all throat-slit (Stewart, p. 13).<sup>212</sup>

This should be the discursive context to have in mind when interpreting, for instance, the relationship existing between Moran and his son: that the latter is called after the former, we are told, is due to thoughtless habit, rather than anything else; this is what Moran's explicit rationale for such a naming comes down to: not to lead to any 'confusion.' (*TN*, p. 87) The ordering principle of such a relationship appears to be mere inertia and, in any case, Moran finds his son 'clumsy, stupid, slow, dirty, unfaithful, deceitful, prodigal, unfilial' and with a bad breath into the bargain, too. What is more, after such a demeaning catalogue, even if he states that his child will at least not abandon him, this is exactly what happens two pages later (pp. 152, 137, 154)<sup>213</sup>.

Characters in Beckett's *Trilogy*, moreover, have neither much love nor faith to spare for the ultimate responsible for this state of things: the Lord of fatherhood and death, whose angel so dutifully visited the firstborn of Egypt, is dead himself. No main character in the *Trilogy* would celebrate Passover: the firstborn of Israel survived.<sup>214</sup> Children are no longer a blessing coming from a God nobody believes in any more. This is key to helping us read the irony in Gaber's apparent enthusiasm for Youdi's comment at a time when Moran is already unable to move, as coming from an impossible demiurge trying to pass for John

---

<sup>212</sup> Matthew, 18:3, 6; Mark, 9: 36-37, 42; Luke, 17: 2: *The Holy Bible*, pp. 2171, 2238-39, 2326.

<sup>213</sup> In Moran Jnr's bad breath there might be an obscure hint at Moran's despair with his child, whose very life might have got corrupted and spoiled by dint of his many failings as a father. Thus, that breath would be an allegorical reference to the stale breath of a God by now dead and unbelieved-in, whereas the very same breath was once narrated to be the divine principle used to instil life into that creature made in His image, now also done for: man. Genesis, 2:7: 'And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.' (*The Holy Bible*, p. 10)

<sup>214</sup> Exodus, 12: 29-30: *The Holy Bible*, p. 169.

Keats: ‘life is a thing of beauty, Gabe, and a joy for ever.’ (p. 158)<sup>215</sup> In Moran’s own words: ‘to Hell [...] with God.’ (p. 159)

Both strands to negativity, antinatalism and rejection of God, will converge in a particularly abject and nihilistic fantasy of Malone’s, in which he creates ‘a little creature’ only to end up eating it, as a new Cronus, an old, superseded, forgotten deity gone crazy with fear of being deposed:

Yes, a little creature, I shall try and make a little creature, to hold in my arms, a little creature in my image, no matter what I say. And seeing what a poor thing I have made, or how like myself, I shall eat it. Then be alone a long time, unhappy [...]

(p. 219)<sup>216</sup>

This Malone actually does with his storytelling, language doing and undoing Macmann, Saposcat’s mature avatar, whom Malone ‘eats’ in a way by condemning him to an orgy of violence resulting in death and preceding Malone’s own death of aphasia at the end of the novel (pp. 280-81).

#### 4.14 – An Aesthetics of Waste: Perversion, Incest and Murder

It is in the context we have just described that we can understand and interpret Molloy’s lack of practical knowledge of women’s anatomy and his subsequent inability to tell the sexes. In any case, what this inability might well come down to would be Beckett’s refusal ‘to reproduce personhood or sociality’, as these are both institutionally ‘predicated on the difference of the sexes’ (Calvin Thomas, p. 86). Molloy even reckons how he has rubbed up against a few men in his lifetime, but not against any women. There are two exceptions to this: one is his own mother, to whom, abjectly enough, he ‘did more than rub up’; the second one, one Ruth or Edith, whom he met in a ‘rubbish dump’, could also have been his

---

<sup>215</sup> John Keats, *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, in *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats*, intro. by John Hirsch (New York: Modern Library, 2009), I. 1 (p. 107.).

<sup>216</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, in *Theogony and Works and Days*, tr. and intro. By M.L. West, OWC (London and New York: OUP, 1988), pp. 1-33 (pp. 16-17)

mother or even his grandmother, for that matter. As he was determined to finally know what ‘true love’ was, he had intercourse with her; candidly enough, though, he tells us he might as well have rubbed up against a goat with the same purpose (*TN*, pp. 51-52). Concordant with such extensive knowledge are his fantasies of anal birth: children will unfailingly, abjectly, scatologically be born through the anus into the *Trilogy*’s excremental world.<sup>217</sup> In this, Molloy is faithful to the one foundation of his real stand in the field of sexuality, which is no other than the memory of a time before childhood proper, when abjection had not yet taken place: a time before selfhood and subjectivity. Indeed, according to Calvin Thomas, Beckett often privileges ‘the anus as a site of both self-shattering and indifference to personhood’. This would illustrate ‘an ethically salient aesthetics of waste’ that would be linked with both his cult of failure and the work of one of the paradigmatic representatives of the French literary tradition of negativity, transgression and nihilism: Jean Genet (Calvin Thomas, p. 82; Bersani, *Homos*, p. 181). This ethical valency of Beckett’s anal writing would make of the anus a site of resistance in his work.

Yet, the one logical consequence of all this is much more directly related to Molloy’s abject, nihilistic views on life: babies are just like ‘little shits’, without any further theoretical complications (*ibid.*). Freud, however, provides us with a theoretical explanation for these cloacal fantasies: the child itself links its own birth with defecation, thus seeing itself as a ‘voided, hapless turd.’ (Calvin Thomas, p. 3) Furthermore, Molloy’s fantasies are in line with Freud’s theories on infant sexuality and explanations of how children are born, ‘coprophilic inclinations’ being ‘constitutional’ in them (Stewart, p. 24). If we link this to Molloy’s apparent memory of being born through his mother’s ‘hole in the arse’, which he considers the way to his ‘first taste of the shit’, it seems obvious he does not feel that fond of either heterosexual sexuality or reproduction: it is already much more than enough for him to be the last of his mother’s ‘foul brood’, as we already saw (*TN*, pp. 12, 15). In Moran’s improvised invention of a pilgrimage to a ‘Turdy Madonna’, we can also acknowledge the conflation of maternity and scatology (p. 169; McDonald, p. 93).

---

<sup>217</sup> Calvin Thomas links these fantasies of ‘cloacal birth’ with what he calls the writer’s ‘*scatontological dysgraphic anxiety*’: ‘the unease that seizes me when I see “myself” reproduced/expelled/spelled out on paper resonates with the dread “memory” of having “originally” been “jettisoned from the mother” as *kakon* or bad object’ (p. xiv, original emphasis).

Prominent among the perversions recreated in Beckett's *Trilogy* is incest. As for 'perversions', I am using the term in its Freudian sense: any sexual behaviour that extends beyond the genitals or that lingers on aims other than genital intercourse and therefore reproduction (Weeks, *Sexuality*, p. 77). Incest is prominent, first, because of the importance of its prohibition with regard to the individual's psychosocial makeup through the Oedipal complex; secondly, because it is a very common thing in the *Three Novels*. The most relevant instance thereof has to do precisely with Molloy. More specifically, both the fact that in his case incest may have been consummated, and the fact that incest is an evident 'transgression of the boundaries of what is clean and proper' make him a true prisoner of the abject, apart from accounting for his continuous coming back to his mother (*TN*, p. 51; *POH*, p. 85). In this, he has gone beyond what for the average speaking subject is 'a stifled aspiration towards an other as prohibited as it is desired'. This ban is the very foundation of the law of the father and therefore of civilisation itself (p. 47). So important would this prohibition be that it has been contended how our species would not be defined by reason, but rather by the unconscious, the latter being understood as 'the incest taboo represented inside us by the Oedipus complex.' (Easthope, p. 140) Freud hammers home: 'What is unconscious in mental life is also what is infantile', the most infantile being the repressed wishes and desires of infancy, especially those of an incestuous nature (Weeks, *Sexuality*, p. 69). Lacan words this conviction beautifully: 'I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking.' (*Écrits*, p. 430)

Seen from this perspective, it seems as though Molloy would never have left his mother's room, where we first met him as he was writing what we later learn to be *Molloy*, the novel. In fact, if we consider, as we have already seen, how Molloy even kills someone during his wanderings, we can understand him as beyond 'the two taboos of totemism' and therefore of civilisation: murder and incest (*POH*, p. 57). Beyond prohibitions, a vagrant without papers at the mercy of the police when in town, rubbing up against men in the dark woods, having committed incest with his mother, and having eventually become a murderer, he stands as the consummate deject.

In *Malone Dies* the Lambert family, frequented by Saposcat, Malone's youth avatar, has incest as a measure of its fall into deep abjection. Thus, we are told that the aberration of incest is 'in the air' in their household (*TN*, p. 209). Indeed, both father and son may well have consummated it with whom is their daughter and sister, respectively. The father, who

is very disturbingly described as a feral drunkard, a womaniser and a pig slaughterer, is also married to a cousin of his (pp. 193-94). As for her, who is aware of and indifferent to incest lurking in the shadows, she suffers, of all possible illnesses, from a feminine one (p. 211). That is what befits, one would say, a poor, uneducated, abject peasant wife. Her son is described as often practising masturbation too:

When the meal was over Edmund went up to bed, so as to masturbate in peace and comfort before his sister joined him, for they shared the same room. Not that he was restrained by modesty, when his sister was there. Nor was she, when her brother was there. Their quarters were cramped, certain refinements were not possible. Edmund then went up to bed, for no particular reason. He would have gladly slept with his sister, the father too, I mean the father would have gladly slept with his daughter, the time was long past and gone when he would have gladly slept with his sister.

(p. 209).

This is not at all the end of abjection and the Lamberts. In effect, the reader may easily be overwhelmed by the atmosphere of poverty and dismay dominating the household, which translates itself into the presence of the abject of all abjects, the animal corpse, in it (pp. 205-06). We must yet again relate this to Kristeva and the link she establishes between the animal, sex and murder (*POH*, p. 13). In the end, considering the other animals the Lamberts keep in their farm, as well as the rough, uncommunicative, poverty-stricken, degenerated behaviour they display, it is evident that a threatening animalism (animals representing our ‘dirty selves’), runs rampant in their household (Jones, p. 62).<sup>218</sup>

Coming back to *Molloy*, the fact that its eponymous protagonist avows his rubbing not only against his mother, but also against other men is witness to his sexual indeterminacy, his deviant narcissism and his complete immaturity, as well as to the more general truth that abjection is, in sexual matters too, or even more than in any other domain, ‘above all ambiguity’ (*POH*, p. 9).

---

<sup>218</sup> It might not be by chance that the animals that the Lamberts keep at home are goats: they would stand for disorganised, unruly nature and sexuality, as in the stories connected to the ancient Greek god Pan, traditionally represented with a billy goat’s horns and hooves, and his satyrs (*TN*; p. 195; Pierre Grimal, *A Concise Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, ed. by Stephen Kershaw, trans. by A. R. Maxwell-Hyslop (London and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 324-25).

Nevertheless, homosexuality is not favoured in the *Trilogy* any more than heterosexuality: in the end, Beckett will ‘not allow the nonheteronormative possibilities to coalesce into an alternative identity based on sexual preference.’ (Stewart, p. 13) Such a thing could certainly be fraught with danger, as Molloy and Moran’s encounters with lustful third parties in the middle of nowhere have taught us: the distance between them and murder could be very short indeed.

Finally, a very peculiar blend between homosexuality, para-incestuous sex and tyrannical fatherly abuse is depicted in the scene where Moran applies an enema to his son before setting off after Molloy, in which we are not spared a sizeable helping of abject, scatological detail and language:

I gave him an enema, with salt water. He struggled, but not for long. I withdrew the nozzle. Try and hold it, I said, don’t stay sitting on the pot, lie flat on your stomach. We were in the bathroom. He lay down on the tiles, his big fat bottom sticking up. Let it soak well in, I said. What a day.

(TN, p. 113).<sup>219</sup>

#### 4.15 - Perversions: Masturbation. Silence and the Inorganic

The true scope of Molloy’s sexuality is that of a never-grown-up, narcissistic child who has never been able to fully break the asocial dyad linking him to his mother and who has consequently never made a full transition from nature to culture.<sup>220</sup> Thus, a stranger to the phallus and the paternal figure, and totally submitted to the infinite, primeval mother, his

---

<sup>219</sup> Considering Moran’s wife is dead, this enema can also be construed as illustrative of ‘the boundary between semiotic authority and symbolic law.’ Taking over from her in this sort of domestic practice, the contents of young Jacques’ bowels go to the drain along with any traces of the non-objectal mother that there might still be remaining in him (*POH*, p. 73). In this way, Moran stands as the representative of the paternal and symbolic ‘absolute’, the ‘relentless coherence of Prohibition, sole donor of Meaning’ to this ritual of defilement (p. 74).

It should be noticed, however, how a Roman Catholic such as Moran might develop more ambiguous relations with the feminine, as in this branch of Christianity there is a cult of Mary, *Alma Redemptoris Mater*. This would involve, within certain limits, the ‘acceptance of [an] archaic and gratifying relationship to the mother’ close to pagan views of the feminine (p. 115). This would also account for another characteristic of the abject among Christians, namely that abjection would be ‘no longer exterior’, but imagined to be ‘permanent’ and coming ‘from within’, thus constituting a ‘divided and contradictory being.’ (pp. 113, 116) As a result, the speaking being would be ‘rent between two potentialities, demoniacal and divine.’ (p. 117)

<sup>220</sup> Easthope, pp. 33, 36.

sexuality's external manifestation is the one we already saw in the Lambert siblings: masturbation. This is at least defensible, for example, in the following passage, corresponding to Molloy's trip to a town where he is busted while on his way to his mother:

It [Molloy's bike] had a little red horn instead of the bell fashionable in your days. To *blow* this horn was for me *a real pleasure*, almost *a vice*. I will go further and declare that if I were obliged to record, in a roll of honour, those activities which in the course of my interminable existence have given me only a mild pain in the balls, the blowing of a rubber horn—toot! would figure among the first. And when I had to part from my bicycle I took off the horn and *kept it about me*.

(TN, p. 12, my emphasis).

Paul Stewart finds 'masturbatory overtones' in Molloy's description of his bike's big horn, even if in Molloy's bizarre and conflicted universe pleasure seems to reside, scatologically and negatively enough, in 'only a mild pain in the balls' (Stewart, p. 19). His habit of sucking stones could also be related to his practice of the solitary vice or with oral sex practiced with other vagrants or with strangers encountered on the road (Easthope, p. 74).

This same 'vice' appears in Moran, probably standing as the initial piece of evidence in the case against his apparently being the epitome of fatherhood, as well as the first of the 'inner unbalances' preventing him from responsible and efficient fatherhood. Thus, already at the start of his report on Molloy, he gets upset by his son coming into his room without knocking, lest he might have caught him 'with yawning fly and starting eyes, toiling to scatter on the ground his joyless seed' (TN, p. 97). Once he is alone in the countryside, while his son is running some errands on his behalf, he takes advantage to masturbate 'at last', suspecting that his boy, in his turn, must be doing the same thing (p. 139). This 'at last' might be quite revelatory in the sense of Moran being a consummate, devoted wanker.

Another possible clue would be his doubts as to use his autocycle (Moran is a man of more solid means than homeless Molloy, so bikes are out of the question) in quest of the latter: he might care for the throb of this powerful thing between his thighs (p. 93; Stewart, p. 19). Here, he mirrors Molloy's use of a machine for his sexual arousal, probably in a



metaphorical or allegoric reference, yet again, to the dualism of Descartes and the Occasionalists, as well as in a distant anticipation of J.G. Ballard's connection between human sexuality and technology, as we will see later. That Moran is a widower, though, might not be as important as his vital alienation in order to explain this kind of practice, prey to self-defining habit and custom, which in him substitute for 'nature'. In fact, in the one explicit example of him masturbating, he avows not to have relieved himself enough, as if performing a routine that, by his mere repetition and listless execution, could not afford any jouissance: he wishes his son enjoyed it more than he did (*TN*, pp. 143, 139). Physically isolated and longing for complete oblivion and ataraxy after his quarry's example, this might be the sort of solipsistic erotic behaviour most adequate to him.

Finally, Malone himself could be suspected of the solitary vice if we interpret in this sense his vague reference to playing with himself, 'abandoned in the dark' (p. 175).

In conclusion, anything having to do with sex is suspected and associated with the abject in the *Three Novels*. This is in stark contrast with the inherent peace of the inorganic and asexual, and, according to Moran, with 'the silence of which the universe is made.' (p. 116) We have also seen how many of the sexual motifs related to perversion find an easy connection with nihilistic attitudes, beginning with antinatalism and explicit rejection of religious belief, and ending with the longing for self-extinction in original silence and mindlessness.

#### 4.16 – Nihilism and Abjection: Universal Homelessness and Resentment

Now is the moment to underline how the three main characters in *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* eventually end up in a position where their anti-adventures converge into an inextricable intertwining of abjection and nihilism. Early in *Molloy*, over the course of a rather abstract, deliberately morose and digressive narrative about two walkers referred to as A and C, and in the context of Molloy writing in his mother's room according to his commercial arrangement with an unknown man that collects his writings every few days as a rule, he abruptly breaks off to state how, in his opinion, it would be at least no worse 'to fill in the holes of words until all is *black* and flat and *the whole ghastly business* looks like

what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless *misery*.' (*TN*, p. 9, my emphasis)<sup>221</sup> The link between this writing of the mess and life experience, now still indirectly represented by evocation of the idea of 'darkness' ('black'), so pervasive in the *Three Novels*, is made explicit later on by Molloy himself:

if ever I'm reduced to looking for a *meaning in my life* [...], it's in that old mess [...] the mess of *that poor old uniparous whore* and myself the last of my foul brood, *neither man nor beast*.

(p. 15, my emphasis)

It is quite clear that what has been a mess *ab initio* has been Molloy's life, a life he cannot even call human and which has been bestowed on him by a despicable, abject female. In this way, two main thematic fields, namely those of nihilism and abjection, get explicitly connected. In fact, as the process of accessing or achieving subjectivity through separation from the (m)other is a universal human trait, even the existence of the whole human race since exile from Eden (another forceful separation, if mythical) could be described as a vicious mess. Thus, Molloy would be the abject representative of 'a homeless humanity' (Diken, p. 108).<sup>222</sup> Furthermore, we may well argue for the extension of this mess to the entire meaningless universe in which Molloy's and mankind's life take place: the object of a lesser god's whimsy and incompetent creative concerns, such universe would thus be, deprived of meaning, value or purpose, an abject, nihilistic one.

Within this unbreathable atmosphere of negativity and active rejection of both existence and every existent, Moran imagines himself, as he crawls through the woods, 'shitting out [his] entrails and chanting maledictions', presumably against the men and animals he earlier confessed not to like, and the God that he also begins to be disgusted with (*TN*, pp. 160, 100). These maledictions eventually turn into a massive statement of universal hatred

---

<sup>221</sup> Cioran, *Cahiers*, p. 708: 'Les personnages de Beckett ne vivent pas dans le tragique mais dans l'incurable. C'est la misère, ce n'est pas la tragédie.' My translation: 'Beckett's characters do not live in the tragic but in the incurable. It's misery, not tragedy.'

The A and C story might be an allusion to Abel and Cain, illustrating Beckett's preoccupation with the unpredictability of God's favours (Fletcher, p. 121).

<sup>222</sup> Here, Diken is glossing on characters in Michel Houellebecq's novels, but I believe his comments to be perfectly applicable to the *Trilogy*'s characters, especially Molloy and Malone, which I am doing in the notes to this and the following page.

by Malone, of which he only excludes his youthful fictional alter ego, Saposcat. He does so out of the blue, after some initial, quite moderate remarks on himself and his contingency ('I shall die tepid, without enthusiasm'), in the very first paragraph of *Malone Dies*:

‘Let me say before I go any further that *I forgive nobody*. I wish them all an atrocious life and then the fires and ice of hell and *in the execrable generations to come* an honoured name.’

(pp. 173-74, my emphasis)

Here we can see how, if mankind has been blighted ever since the Fall and its exile from Paradise, if innocence and immortality have been transformed into the hell of time- and death-awareness, then no hope is available for our successors in this vale of tears to which our species is fettered, deserving Malone’s every curse. In making his over-negative statement, moreover, Malone portrays himself as a man of *ressentiment*, his hatred generally disguising itself as ‘modesty and declarations of inferiority’, while provisionally attempting to pass for someone ‘self-deprecating and humble.’<sup>223</sup> Enabled by his misfortune to write ‘like a complete bastard’, ‘with impunity’, Malone manages to turn this writing into ‘a source of surplus enjoyment’ (Diken, p. 107).

Having said which and being aware of the philosophical-political crossways on which Beckett’s *Three Novels* and their disputed nihilism stood when they were published, an elaborate characterisation of nihilism is no longer avoidable.

---

<sup>223</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 38: ‘the man of *ressentiment* is neither upright nor naive nor honest and straightforward with himself. [...] his spirit loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors, [...] how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble.’

## Chapter 5 - Towards an Integrated Concept of Nihilism: Its Traces in *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*

For the aforementioned purposes, we can propose a working concept of nihilism as the situation, or the awareness thereof, whereby human life lacks a purpose and therefore also a meaning, which makes it worthless. If human life, up to the death of God and according to Christianity's grand narrative, had been understood essentially as a pilgrimage towards reunion with an almighty, benevolent God that had created the human race in His own image, and if therefore every single stage in its development had been seen as comprised within a wider frame of salvation, its ultimate goal and purpose, the Enlightenment and its epigones put an end to this set of two-millennia-long convictions.

Indeed, the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century brought about a Copernican change in the domains of epistemology, science, technology, industry, commerce and finance, a change that was crowned by the toppling of the Ancien Régime after the American and French Revolutions. The certainties and the authority of traditional institutions, both sacred and secular, began to dissolve as a result of these changes, only to be replaced by the material, quantitative imperatives of production, profit and economic growth. These were in turn enhanced by a rhetoric of progress that could not achieve, however, the dissimulation of the many contradictions implicit in this burgeoning capitalist society. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Nietzsche's time, and even more so in the following century, this rhetoric, deprived of a proper direction, became more and more eroded and blunt. This led to the dissolution of the very concept of progress and to the falling apart of the ideology of human emancipation through science and technology (Vattimo, p. 15). Hence, modern unbelief would no longer be based on science, but on the denial of faith in both science and in religion (Glücksberg, 18). It is in this context, after the successive revolutionary waves of 1830, 1848 and 1870-71, that the first diagnoser of modern nihilism, Friedrich Nietzsche, rises. As he states in his own definition of nihilism: "The aim is lacking; "why?"

finds no answer.’ (*TWTP*, p. 9) In this way, and in his own words, he was ‘the first to *discover* the truth, by being the first to sense—*smell*—the lie as a lie...’.<sup>224</sup>

## 5.1 – Purposelessness, Meaninglessness, Existentialism

Purpose is directly related to meaning. It is the lack of the latter that renders human life deprived of a goal, end or finality. Aristotle’s and Aquinas’ ‘final cause’ or *telos* does not obtain any more in a universe where the ultimate sources of meaning have run dry. This, in turn, brings forth alienation and an indifferent behaviour, along with looseness in ethics. A perfect example of this is apparent in one of the many narrative digressions in *Molloy*, where its protagonist, after regaling us with several pages on the possible combinations of the stones he keeps for sucking and their placement in his pockets, eventually tells us how completely indifferent it was to him which stone he would suck at each time or not ‘until the end of time’ (*TN*, p. 69).<sup>225</sup> This is Baudelairean *ennui* plus alienation to the power of infinite in a fragmented world without any apparent finality.

Heidegger calls this fragmentation ‘unholy’; for him, implicitly, such a world is a desecralised one.<sup>226</sup> Having lost the sense of our ontological foundation, we would live ‘existentially separated and alienated’ from it (Marmysz, p. 35).

---

<sup>224</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are*, tr. and intro. by Duncan Large, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2007), p. 88.

<sup>225</sup> Molloy’s habit of sucking stones could be linked to his own pre-symbolic archeology as an infantile, pre-Oedipal not-yet-subject. For Raymond T. Riva, this habit, related to breast-feeding in early childhood, would stand for a wish to regress to a happier or at least not so unhappy state placed even before birth: total non-being (p. 124). As I said before, this is the condition that Beckett imagines for *The Unnamable*’s narrator. This being so, Beckett’s depiction of such an unlikely state is not very enthusiastic in terms of happiness.

<sup>226</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. by Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 179.

For Heidegger, ‘poetry would undoubtedly stand as what Nietzsche terms the “only superior counterforce” to nihilism, resacralizing the world or, at the very least, gesturing towards such a resacralization.’ (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, pp. 90-91, my emphasis). *TWTP*, p. 452: ‘Art as the only superior counterforce to all will to denial of life, as that which is anti-Christian, anti-Buddhist, antinihilist par excellence.’

For religious undertones in Heidegger’s ontology, full of references to ‘sacredness’, ‘divine’ instances, ‘flight of the gods’, ‘visions’, etc., see e.g. Marmysz, p. 40. His little-Völkisch, piously Catholic origins and upbringing (he considered priesthood as his occupation while still young) are apparent throughout his work, despite his Greek etymologies, his philosophical erudition and ingenuity, and his obscure neologisms (see, e.g., Inwood, Heidegger, pp. 1-2; Tom Rockmore, ‘Introduction’, in Rockmore and Margolis (eds.), p.6).

‘Nostalgia for unity’, in Camus’ wording, is nevertheless no option in this scenario of goalless fragmentation, unless we want to make an undignified ‘leap of faith’ (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 65; Young, p. 164).<sup>227</sup> No modern ‘anti-theologies’ made into ‘meta-religions’, ‘surrogate creeds’ or, more simply, ‘mythologies’ built up on the basis of claims of ‘totality’ about the human condition will fill up the void, the ‘darkness in the middle’ left by the death of God as its most significant and challenging legacy.<sup>228</sup> Even if God were proven to exist, Sartre contends, ‘what man needs is to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself,’ from the fact that he is free, which necessarily drives him to choose who he wants to be. And if ‘life has no meaning *a priori*’, we can give it one, thus creating value. In this way, it would only be ‘in bad faith’ that Christians might sustain that humankind is without hope. From his point of view, in conclusion, ‘existentialism is optimistic.’<sup>229</sup> If only because of this, we should not think of Beckett as an existentialist, for all of the existential criticism written about his work in the 1950s and 1960s.

A response to this problem will be supplied by Nietzsche, who relates it to ideas of destiny and identity. The only purpose that could be held on to under the existing circumstances would come from within: it should be actively created. This is what Nietzsche proclaims in a proto-existentialist way: we cannot discover in us an essence that would restore unity in our universe, giving our life purpose and focus. We have to create and cultivate a certain identity, an individual destiny originating in our actions, in our individual choices: in Heidegger’s words, written some thirty years after Nietzsche’s demise as a sane mind, ‘Dasein is its *possibility*, [...] it can, in its very Being, “choose” itself and win itself’; therefore, ‘the essence of Dasein lies in its existence.’<sup>230</sup> Some

<sup>227</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. by Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 36.

<sup>228</sup> George Steiner, ‘The Secular Messiahs’, in *Nostalgia for the Absolute* (Toronto: Anansi, 2004), pp. 1-11 (2-3). These mythologies will be debunked by Steiner in this series of conferences; more specifically, he deals with Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis and contemporary forms of ‘return to the irrational’, such as the belief in UFOs: ‘The Little Green Men’, *ibid.*, pp. 38-49 (p. 48).

<sup>229</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, ed. by John Kulka, tr. by Carole Macomber, intro. by Annie Cohen Solal (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 2007), pp. 29, 51, 53-54, original emphasis.

<sup>230</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1962; repr. 2011), pp. 67-68, my emphasis.

twenty years later, Sartre will basically reword this last idea in his *Existentialism Is a Humanism* lecture: ‘Existence precedes essence’ (p. 20). Already in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre writes how ‘existence precedes *and commands* essence’: one exists as a ‘power of free choice’ (p. 438, my emphasis; Young, p. 143). Dasein, so Heidegger, is ‘constantly “more” than it factually is,’ ‘it is existentially that which, in its potentiality-for-Being, it is not yet.’ (*Being and Time*, pp. 185-86) One is not: one *becomes*; one does not discover oneself (for instance, in a common ‘human condition’ understood as an unchanging essence), but one creates, *invents* oneself (Young, p. 88, my emphasis).

Man, therefore, is doomed, but not necessarily damned; his existence is individual, accidental and unpredictable: it is defined by contingency, not by necessity (Wicks, pp. 38-39; Glicksberg, p. 7). This is what Moran implicitly asserts in a parodic, pseudo-Cartesian statement about the illusory sensations that, according to Descartes and his followers, envelop and distract an unenlightened consciousness: ‘It is thanks to them [i.e. ‘these illusory sensations’] that I find myself a meaning.’ (*TN*, p. 106)

Meaning is, no doubt, the cornerstone of the modern concept of nihilism. Nietzsche will react against the idea, based on the revealed nature of the religions historically dominating the West, Christianity and its forerunner Judaism, that the only meaning humans can interiorise and refer themselves to in their everyday lives must be received from above, and that the only alternative to this is paralysis. On the contrary, he claims, in a manner reminiscent of Voltaire, that they can create their own individual meanings; individual, since they will do so in their own little corner of the universe, in a temporary, non-absolute way, presumably according to their contingency: as the *philosophe* par excellence concludes, ‘we must cultivate our garden.’<sup>231</sup> Nietzsche also has a word to put in regarding this: ‘we want to be the poets of our life - first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters.’ (*TGS*, p. 240) In this way, humans can shape their own lives as a freely chosen, wilful, aesthetic creation giving them ‘meaning and importance.’<sup>232</sup> This is so, at least and in accordance with Nietzsche, for the ‘honest, brave, and intellectually strong.’ (Donald E. Hall, p. 69) Indeed, to the posthumous Nietzsche of *The Will to Power*, ‘it is a measure of

---

<sup>231</sup> Voltaire, *Candide and Other Stories*, trans. by Roger Pearson, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2006), p. 88.

<sup>232</sup> For Camus’ reception of Nietzsche’s will to power as will to happiness and eternal return of the same, as well as for his aestheticisation of life in *L’étranger*, see Donald E. Hall, p. 75.

the degree of strength of will to what extent one can do without meaning in things', with the awareness that the world has no natural or God-given meaning as a whole (p. 318; Dienstag, p. 179). Style makes those free souls admirable in that through it their selves achieve 'controlled multiplicity and resolved conflict.'<sup>233</sup> Postmodernity seems to acknowledge itself as a 'historically unparalleled' situation in its potential for attaining such a goal (Donald E. Hall, p. 71).

It seems that Molloy can certainly do without meaning in his life. His challenge and his bet, however, appear to be much more radical than any existential philosophy preconising the creation of meaning by the individual himself. We can take, for instance, Heidegger's call for existential authenticity as the measure of a meaningful life, something so influential for an entire generation of French existentialists (Young, p. 128). According to the thinker of Messkirch and against the dictates of what he terms the 'dictatorship of "the they"' (*das Man*), which 'prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness', Dasein is defined by the unavoidable choices that he is called upon to make in his life, thus becoming 'autonomous' and self-governing (pp. 116-17; Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 164).<sup>234</sup> The opposite is equivalent to falling into the world, 'Being-lost in the publicness of the "they"', falling away 'from itself as an authentic potentiality for Being its Self', betraying itself as 'the primary locus of truth.' (p. 220; Inwood, *Heidegger*, p. 50) Sartre words this slightly differently: 'In so far as I am the object of values which come to qualify me without my being able to act on this qualification or even to know it, I am enslaved.' (*BAN*, p. 167) Dasein's own being, therefore, is to be taken very seriously, as a real existential 'issue' (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 32). The only way to get over this slavery is by means of creating oneself, giving oneself laws, becoming, in Nietzsche's words, 'new, unique, incomparable' (*Zarathustra*, p. 189; *TGS*, p. 266).

The opposite to this would be what Sartre calls bad faith, the way in which we take flight from our own responsibility, originating itself in our need and obligation to choose and exercise our freedom. We do this by accepting and performing pre-fabricated identities embodied by different social types or roles, whereby we become 'hollow men'. Thus, we

---

<sup>233</sup> Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard UP, 1985, pr. 1999), p. 7.

<sup>234</sup> I cannot resist the temptation to point at the translinguistic irony to be found in the name of Heidegger's birthplace: *Mess-kirch*, as it were 'Kirk/Church in/on/at the *Mess*'.



try to flee from anguish, the price of our freedom, and from the responsibility deriving from such choices by hiding behind a social convention, a mask (*BAN*, p. 43; Young, p. 156; Wicks, p. 40). In this way, we try to objectify ourselves, to convince ourselves that we are a being-in-itself, to wit, a mere thing, solid, stable, reliable, rather than a being-for-itself, Sartre's analogue category to Heidegger's *Dasein*, which is always 'fundamentally free-floating and non-secured.' (*BAN*, p. 566; Young, p. 139; Wicks, p.42) Bad faith could be exemplified by the famous figure of the just too precise Parisian waiter in *Being and Nothingness*, 'who plays with his condition in order to realize it.' (*BAN*, p. 99) To this bad faith, which Sartre describes as constitutive of a kind of self-deception that always frustrates 'our fundamental need for meaning', Molloy can oppose the following reflection, prompted by his memories of studying anthropology, one of the many scholarly disciplines that, very stunningly, he seems to have frequented in the past, if ultimately to little or no avail:

What I liked in anthropology was [...] its relentless *definition* of man, as though he were no better than God [...] But my ideas on the subject were always horribly confused, for my knowledge of men was scant and *the meaning of being* beyond me.

(*TN*, p. 35, my emphasis)<sup>235</sup>

Prefiguring Adorno's comments on Heidegger's ontology as a 'jargon of authenticity', Molloy expresses very candidly his distrust for all sorts of categorisations of the human.<sup>236</sup> In fact, rather than exemplifying an indifferent 'self-betrayal' in Heidegger's terms, or 'bad faith' in Sartre's, what this remark of Molloy's implies is the notion that the question of being might be rather meaningless itself, constituting a secularised and vulgar form of the persistence of metaphysics in our time (Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 20; Young, p. 114). As Vattimo remarks, the authenticity of the experience previously offered by metaphysics is no longer so: it has died alongside God (p. 29, my translation). Molloy and the other major

---

<sup>235</sup> Young, pp. 139-40, 156. For Molloy and Malone as intellectuals, 'like all the Beckettian heroes', see Fletcher, pp. 126-27, 158.

<sup>236</sup> Adorno uses this expression on the grounds of his suspicion of the problematic of nihilism implicit in the work of whom he considers to be reactionary thinkers, namely Spengler, Jünger and Heidegger. In his mind, they would carry out an ontological analysis of phenomena that should be studied in sociological and economic terms (Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 20).

characters in Beckett's *Three Novels* could not care less about falling away into inauthenticity or anything else, as long as this is not equivalent to the great temptation: nothingness and total oblivion.

Of special interest, given the French context of the original writing and publishing of the *Three Novels*, is the relation between Beckett's thought and work and those of the most dashing representative of a particularly bold, action-prone and avowedly anti-nihilistic form of existentialism: Albert Camus. Being the patentee of an especially successful version of the concept of absurdity, he defined it as the product of the 'confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world', resulting in the desire for there to be a meaning in life (Camus, *Sisyphus*, pp. 11, 24). Certainly, since 'everything that dies is deprived of meaning', and as the human race is afflicted by a universal death sentence, 'fighting against death becomes a vindication of the meaning of life': it is noble to fight 'a losing battle against an unbeatable enemy', time (Wicks, p. 65).<sup>237</sup> Precisely because of this universal deadline, each moment is one of reprieve, and must be lived to the full as something precious: 'life is indeed hopeless, but still of immeasurable value.' (pp. 63,66)

Hence, if we humans are always in battle with a universe that has no objective purpose, and if human life is 'a relay-race without an ultimate goal,' yet Camus proposes political engagement, human solidarity, and responsibility in the face of this universal absurdity. Thus, he finds a way out of the otherwise lonely, solipsistic, alienated existence of each individual, the commonest charge levelled against other existentialists and proto-existentialists from Nietzsche on having been the shift from 'a common ethics' to 'wholesale self-serving, solipsistic power-seeking.' (p. 60; Glicksberg, p. 30; Donald E. Hall, p. 72) Camus achieves this escape from solipsism, unlike the other great representative of French existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, through the affirmation of a common condition or nature in mankind: 'I rebel—therefore we exist.' (*L'homme révolté*, p. 112, my translation).<sup>238</sup>

---

<sup>237</sup> My translation of the French original: 'L'insurrection humaine, [...] n'est et ne peut être qu'une longue protestation contre la mort, une accusation enragée de cette condition régie par la peine de mort généralisée. [...] ce qui meurt est privé de sens. Lutter contre la mort, revient à revendiquer le sens de la vie': Albert Camus, *L'homme révolté*, Nouvelle Revue Française (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), pp. 128-29.

<sup>238</sup> The French original: 'Je me révolte, donc nous sommes.' (*L'homme révolté*, 132).

Absurdity springs from the fact that the world is neither rational nor meaningful in itself, and ‘ridiculous reason’ sets one ‘in opposition to all creation’. That is why Camus preconises ‘living [...] through one’s body’, with ‘Greek insolence and naivete’. No metaphysical or religious antidotes can be made use of without attempting on human dignity. After all, ‘what can a meaning outside my condition mean to me?’ One can only understand in human terms (*Sisyphus*, pp. 38, 95-96).

Camus staunchly defends an attitude of active struggle in order to give life a meaning, if ultimately a perishable one, as we are perishable, too (Dienstag, p. 37). This meaning lies in ‘revolt against the irremediable’ and the impossible, which is described as trying to reduce ‘this world to a rational and reasonable principle’ or, in other words, submitting to reductive nihilism (*Sisyphus*, pp. 22, 37). It is in this ‘commitment to the impossible’ that the only *greatness* that a human can aspire to, ‘integrity’, would lie. There could also be even heroism in this commitment, in that it could save life from nihilism (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, pp. 65-66). In Camus’ own words in the preface to *The Myth of Sisyphus*: ‘even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism’, living and creating ‘in the very midst of the desert.’ (*Sisyphus*, pp. 3-4) Therefore, ‘the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart’; life’s meaning lies in dogged perseverance (p. 82; Young, p. 164).<sup>239</sup> And even if there were no meaning at all, not even one created by humans, life could be lived ‘all the better’ without it, even feeling ‘happy’ in one’s ‘scorn of the gods’, without appeal to any ‘deceptive divinity’ (*Sisyphus*, pp. 38-39, 80, 101).

To these lofty raptures of Camus’ pen, to his civic example during the occupation of France and even to his photogenic, best-selling celebrity profile, Beckett’s Moran opposes the following words:

---

Actually, Sartre had already made it clear, in a language evocative of Kant’s ethics, how ‘in choosing himself,’ every human being ‘is choosing for all men.’ In this way, by creating the man each of us wills ourselves to be, there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be.’ Every human being is therefore ‘responsible for all men.’ (Sartre, *Existential Humanism*, pp. 23-24)

<sup>239</sup> This may remind us of Hesiod’s preaching to his brother Perses: ‘in front of Superiority the immortal gods set sweat; it is a long and steep path to her, and rough at first. But when one reaches the top, then it is easy, for all the difficulty.’ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, in *Theogony and Works and Days*, pp. 35-61 (p. 45).

‘But I do not think even Sisyphus is required to scratch himself, or to groan, or to rejoice, *as the fashion is now*, always at the same appointed places. [...] And perhaps he thinks each journey is the first. This would keep hope alive, would it not, *hellish hope*. Whereas to see yourself doing the same thing endlessly *over and over again* fills you with *satisfaction*.’

(*TN*, p. 128, my emphasis)

So much for Camus’ heroism and the strife to give life a meaning: in the end, Sisyphus’ plight is Camus’ version of Nietzsche’s eternal return, and a dull one for that, ‘a vain struggle of ceaseless travail whose only escape is death.’ I would add, it is also similar to drawing a dull version of the Nietzschean strength of character, directly linked to Sisyphus’ situation, and of Nietzsche’s overman in order to preconise an absurdist adventurer, a conqueror of one’s character, someone who thus grows beyond their former selves, as an existential hero.<sup>240</sup> To take Sisyphus as an absurdist hero, however, one who is absurd but not nihilistic, is just an absurdity (Marmysz, pp. 46, 65; Wicks, p. 69).<sup>241</sup> Furthermore, there is in this passage by Beckett an ironic reaction to Camus’ theory of quantitative revolt against absurdity, whereby one should live with a haste bordering on waste (*Sisyphus*, p. 98).<sup>242</sup> In any case, this ironic, even sarcastic fragment reminds us of two things: first, the narrators of the *Three Novels* inhabit this side of existentialism and of

---

<sup>240</sup> Camus would have thought of four typically absurdist heroes or existential characters: Sisyphus, the conqueror-adventurer we have just described, the seducer, and the actor; for these last two types, see Wicks, p. 68.

<sup>241</sup> Robert Wicks puts forward a telling interpretation of Camus’ absurdist heroes whereby Sisyphus would symbolise the condition of a factory worker (p. 71).

In my opinion, to think of someone, Titan as he might be and for all the praise Camus lavishes on him, shoving a rock uphill all day long only to see it fall downhill at the end of every single day, and to have this for an example of moral strength, integrity and revolt is not only absurd, but straight ludicrous. And to think of Camus as ‘celebrating the human condition’, and therefore being a humanist of sorts, just reminds me of the humanism we will see in Ballard’s *Crash*: that of someone with the ‘moral strength’ of racing cars full speed at all possible times regardless of the consequences, eventually crashing into a tree along with his editor, thereby bereaving wife and kids at age 46. Something neither very heroic, nor edificant.

<sup>242</sup> For Camus, the quantity of life is more relevant than its quality, the latter being achieved by the mere awareness ‘that one is still alive right now’. On no account are any moments better than others. One should search for as many different kinds of experience as possible (Wicks, p. 67). ‘The present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man.’ Accordingly, ‘the purest of joys [...] is feeling, and feeling on this earth.’ (*Sisyphus*, pp. 44-45) The only reasonable freedom has death and the absurd as its principles; the human tasks on this earth are sustained hedonism and revolt (Wicks, pp. 66-67).

philosophical attempts at overcoming nihilism, in a ‘beyond’ irreducible to any rhetoric of existential heroism and self-sacrifice; second, Beckett himself refused to have anything to do, at least directly, with some of the most celebrated ideas and ideologies present in his intellectual milieu, as he considered them to be basically avatars of ‘fashion’. In actual fact, that was the reason for his rejecting the label of ‘intellectual’, so prestigious in his time in his adoptive Paris and France (Bloom, ‘Introduction’, in Bloom (ed.), (1988), p. 6; d’Aubarède, p. 240; *TN*, p. 128; Judt, *Past Imperfect*, p. 265).<sup>243</sup>

There is ample evidence to think that Molloy is just as fond of existentialism as Moran. In the former’s case, his favourite existentialist will be Heidegger. More specifically, the philosopher’s understanding of authenticity and resoluteness will be given due attention by Molloy, in spite of his destitution, grime and despair. His existential situation is certainly ideal for consideration of the deep excogitations of the sage of Messkirch, which in his first period, presided over by his *Being and Time*, is focused on the meaning of Dasein’s experience in time and its individual and intransferable destiny: death, its own outmost possibility, *being-towards-death* counting as the most authentic form of existence. No one else can die my death, neither can I die anybody else’s; in this way, man chooses his own essential relationship with Being by becoming its ‘shepherd’, rather than its master. In that death is an owning up to one’s own inevitable demise, it confers ‘wholeness’ on Dasein, giving it ‘autonomy and focus *at one and the same time.*’ (*Being and Time*, p. 307; Marmysz, p. 36; Inwood, *Heidegger*, p. 73; Young, pp. 115, 117, original emphasis; Severino, *Contemp.*, pp. 236-7). In its openness, death belongs to the very essence of Being. Thus, death allows Dasein the ‘moment of vision’ that makes it possible for it to take fateful, resolute decisions (Inwood, *Heidegger*, p. 82).

With respect to this, we had agreed that Molloy was in quest of meaning in his life, which he translated into trying to find his mother, or in other words to reach his most inner self. He attempts this even if, precisely because of being related to her, this primeval self might be steeped in primal abjection and therefore in the lack of any meaning whatsoever,

---

<sup>243</sup> For Camus’ Sisyphus as ‘hero of the absurd’ and his revolt as an attempt to overcome nihilism, see Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 66.

As for the fact that Beckett was not a fan of intellectual labels or fashions, this should not preclude his having some strong affinities with the thought and attitudes of some of the most renowned French intellectuals of his time, as this thesis will be showing. He did not go as far as his friend Emil Cioran, for whom the intellectual was ‘the major disgrace, the crowning defeat of *homos sapiens.*’ (*Syllogismes de l’amertume*, Folio essais (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), p. 59, my translation).

as meaning is always post-symbolic and related to language and the father's law (if we follow Lacan and Kristeva's psychoanalytic framework). In actual fact, the collapse of meaning experienced in Europe at the time when Beckett is writing *Molloy* may be considered by its protagonist in the same way as by Beckett's contemporary, Georges Bataille: 'a "disintoxication", an almost beatific experience'. Indeed, Molloy's self-dispossession during his abject pilgrimage across Ireland's fields and woods, and even more so the one experienced by Moran under similar circumstances, would be examples of the movement of an 'inner experience' that could be construed as 'the dissolution of the thinking subject and [...] a breaking with consciousness of individuation' ('Beast at Heaven's Gate', pp. 9-10). For all the apparent worth of resoluteness as regards human existence, Molloy quite candidly and in a characteristically scatological fashion confesses that he has

'never been particularly given [...] to resolution, but rather inclined to plunge headlong into the shit, *without knowing* [...] on which side I had the better chance of skulking with success'

(TN, p. 28, my emphasis)

Skulking indeed, as in his dangerous vagrant world it comes as no wonder that 'people imagine that, because you are old, poor, crippled, terrified, that you can't stand up for yourself, *and generally speaking, that is so.*' (p. 79, my emphasis).

After all, resolutions can be very hazardous, especially for those who have to experience them as their object with no say in the issue; for instance, 'the resolution of others to annihilate us first as men in order to kill us slowly afterward', which Primo Levi had to endure in one of the places created to fulfil such a resolve by leaders of the party that Heidegger belonged to from 1933 to 1945 (Levi, *If This a Man*, p. 84). Regarding death, and reflecting on his own upbringing, his experience of the Lager and the aestheticisation of death in German culture, one of the victims of the Holocaust, Jean Améry, bitterly remarks: 'No bridge led from death in Auschwitz to *Death in Venice.*'<sup>244</sup> There was no chance for the victims of Heidegger's friends to aestheticise their demise as self-sacrifice

---

<sup>244</sup> Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, trans. by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980), p. 16.

in the Nazis' resolve to create a new world or perish among the ruins of the decadent one they tried so hard to replace with a racial *paradise*. As opposed to all this *Lust nach Untergang* and *Götterdämmerung* mysticism, all the victims could aspire to do was to resist the temptation to commit suicide or let themselves die, and to save their skin in any possible way, even with the prospect of being haunted by the darkest memories for the rest of their lives (Wolin, p. 57). As Molloy pertinently notes, he had

‘always preferred slavery to death: I mean being put to death. For death is a condition I have never been able to conceive to my satisfaction and which therefore cannot go down in the ledger of weal and woe.’

(TN, p. 62).

So much as well for meaning, Dasein's resolutions, and death as its outmost possibility.

Heidegger's practical preferences do not seem to have been very different from Molloy's when it came to that, though: for instance, when choosing to distance himself from his patent Nazi involvement, or to suspiciously remain silent about it rather than to risk more stringent consequences than the ones deriving from his denazification hearings.<sup>245</sup> Life (or literature) makes very strange bedfellows: clownish Molloy and sublime Martin Heidegger stranded on the moor of inauthenticity, well beyond Promethean gestures. Like it or not, we are animals, and we are genetically programmed with a survival instinct into the bargain. In E.M. Cioran's words: ‘Habitué of despair, complacent corpses, we all outlive ourselves’; what is more, ‘the tragic attitude suits only an extended and ridiculous puberty’ (*Decay*, pp. 40, 95). Taking this into account, fundamental ontology and existentialism in general may appear to be very minor trifles indeed: in Malone's unmistakable allusion, just ‘all this ballsaching poppycock *about life and death*’ (TN, p. 218, my emphasis).

---

<sup>245</sup> See, e.g. Theodore Kiesel, ‘Heidegger's Apology: Biography as Philosophy and Ideology’, in Rockmore and Margolis (eds.), pp. 11-51 (p. 17).

## 5.2 – Religious Nihilism and the Death of God

The link established in Nietzsche's thought between nihilism and religion is made explicit in his idea that nihilism, namely the belief that the world is meaningless, is a reactive response to our awareness that its moral interpretation by Christianity, which has taught countless generations that the world is indeed meaningful (under certain conditions related to obedience of Christian dogma and morality), is based on a 'will to untruth'. In this way, nihilism would not only be equivalent to the negation of the Christian-moral view of the world, but also the consequence of such an interpretation (Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 8; *TWTP*, p. 7). Once the cultivation of 'truthfulness' by morality has led to awareness of the 'teleology' and the 'mendaciousness' of the Christian-moral interpretation of the world, then we cannot allow ourselves 'any longer to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves', including those that Lyotard, several decades later, will call 'grand narratives', starting with that of the Judeo-Christian tradition (Tanner, p. 38). This will unleash 'a process of dissolution' ending up in an alienation stressed by Hegel, Marx and eventually Nietzsche (*TWTP*, p. 10; Severino, *Contemp.*, p. 112). More importantly, Christianity being a system, once either God or Christian morality are no longer believed in, its entire worldview collapses (Tanner, p. 38). In this way, Nietzsche would inaugurate a decidedly post-Christian era in which 'the best lack all conviction, while the worst | Are full of passionate intensity'.<sup>246</sup> The ultimate outcome of this process would be nihilism in the fashion of the devaluation of the 'highest values' (most prominently those of aim, unity and truth), and 'the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability'. Thus, 'existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking: the character of existence is not "true," is *false*', as its material is 'a mass of images and metaphors' (*TWTP*, pp. 7, 9, 13, original emphasis; Severino, *Contemp.*, p. 116, my translation).

It is at this stage that such values do not impress or mean anything to Westerners any longer, no matter how much they could still be mouthed around (Tanner, p. 37). What was formerly held to be the meaning of the universe, in as much as it had a heteronomous

---

<sup>246</sup> 'The Second Coming', in W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. by Richard J. Finneran, Scribner Paperback Poetry, rev. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp. 186-87 (p. 187).



nature, as something coming from above us humans, would only be a secondary, derivative, illusory simulacrum of unity, coherence and totality imposed on the world by monotheistic beliefs (Diken, p. 15; *TWTP*, p. 10). These would be the roots of religious nihilism, an anthropomorphisation of the flux and the chaos that the world ultimately is (or rather *becomes*). Our experience of the world would thus be turned into a mistaken belief in a comfortable or at least inhabitable place in which to dwell. No longer being able to believe in having been fashioned in the likeness of ‘some whole that is infinitely superior to him,’ and therefore unable to see himself ‘as a mode of the deity’, man would no longer be able to believe in his own value (p. 12). Now, no longer at the centre of becoming, and aware that ‘becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing*’, the mood of the average self-aware Westerner would be one of disappointment and even despair, the most powerful ‘means of preservation’ of the human species having become inoperative (pp. 10, 12, original emphasis). This is not an exaggeration: in the former Christian-moral dispensation, even pain and suffering would have made sense, as they might have earned us salvation in imitation of the sacrificial Lamb and in the service of life’s meaning and man’s ‘*knowledge of absolute values*’. By means of self-inflicted suffering whose meaning would be inherent in the very fact of being actively sought out, self-administered and then extended to the whole of life, mankind would prefer masochism to meaninglessness (p. 10; Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, pp. 162-63; Neiman, p. 216; Tanner, p. 85). Now, with no goals sanctioned by Heaven above in sight, we would be living a time of insecurity, wariness, despondency and demoralisation, even shame in the face of mankind’s centuries-long emotional investment in a chimera, only to no ultimate avail (*TWTP*, p. 10). That is the sense of the *self-devaluation* of the highest values formulated by Nietzsche in *The Will to Power*, and the reason why Nietzsche, against some interpretations of his thought, dreads the imminent advent of nihilism above anything else in Western culture (Tanner, pp. 36-37; *TWTP*, p. 9, my emphasis). After all, ‘yearning for a new humanity’ can be seen itself as the sign of a wish to overcome what is near if not already among us.<sup>247</sup> That this might well be the case shows in Nietzsche’s work itself: ‘The sight of man now makes us weary – what is nihilism today if it is not that? – We are weary of man.’ (*Genealogy*, p. 44)

---

<sup>247</sup> Keith Ansell Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as a Political Thinker: The Perfect Nihilist* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 102.

Meaninglessness as the essential defining element in nihilism is itself a consequence of the phenomenon known as the ‘death of God’. Nietzsche deems this to be ‘the greatest recent event’: as an ancient and profound certainty, ‘the belief in the Christian God’, has become ‘unbelievable’, faith, in turn, can only be seen as a real ‘will to blindness’ (*TWTP*, pp. 199, 510). Having been passed on for centuries in order to give meaning to our lives and to those of our offspring, these lies could only do so so by projecting us onto a superior, metaphysical, transcendent plane of existence beyond death. After the death of God, during His current absence and even before (the verdict against Him was passed a long time ago, according to Nietzsche), all there is in terms of meaning in our civilisation is just axiological disorientation or despair with the world as it is (Neiman, p. 214).<sup>248</sup> Indeed, if the highest values hold no longer, then ‘nothing more remains to which man can cling and by which he can orient himself’. Besides, ‘the emerging of the insight that the ideal world is not and is never to be realized within the real world’, the fact that we cannot posit a true world beyond becoming or a transcendent in-itself of things, can only lead to despair. These would be passive and radical nihilism, respectively, both of them born out of original religious nihilism. According to the former, what is wrong is our values; according to the latter, it is the world as it is that is wrong (Diken, 29; Heidegger, ‘Word of Nietzsche’, pp. 61, 66). These forms of nihilism would prevail as long as men would not set up a new axiological framework (Tanner, p. 41).

This is the context that best allows us to understand Moran’s bitter and demolishing parody of what we must take to have been the highest expression of his belief and of his life’s meaning hitherto, since at the start of his narration he presents himself as an obedient son of the Church, *mater et magistra*: the Pater Noster, the Lord’s Prayer. Having reached the end of his account of his anti-pilgrimage after his true self, the ‘pretty quietist’ prayer he recites no longer praises the no longer hallowed name of Him who is no longer held to be in Heaven, presiding over the universe on His eternal throne. The keener vilification he inflicts on the Lord’s Prayer comes when Moran writes that its middle and end are ‘very pretty’, so pretty as to allow him to take ‘refuge’, in his alienation, in the ‘*frivolous* and charming world’ it helped build for almost two millennia (*TN*, p. 161; my emphasis). When entire discourses of eschatological sacrifice and redemption, as well as the

---

<sup>248</sup> According to Susan Neiman, the verdict against God’s existence may have been passed as soon as in the Book of Job (p. 18).

certainties of a lifetime become *frivolous*, there cannot be much to be expected in terms of value, purpose or meaning.

Molloy will behave in a similar way regarding God and religion. In this way, while yet again ranting on about his quest for his mother, he makes a passing allusion to how all things hang together, as it were, ‘by the operation of the Holy Ghost’. Maybe he should have placed such a blasphemous comment somewhere else in his narration, but he soon finds an excuse and a justification: not everything can be mentioned in its proper time and place, as ‘you must choose, between the things not worth mentioning and those *even less so*.’ (p. 36, my emphasis) The ages-long Great Chain of Being (which we will see in depth later on) has been broken where stronger for centuries: at the link between God and His creation. The consequences are immediate: ‘From Nature’s chain whatever link you strike, | Tenth, or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike.’<sup>249</sup> The universe is arbitrary and random, and no worth is to be found among its constituents; therefore, it does not have any meaning any longer, either.

That even a vagrant and an indigent can allow himself no fear or trembling of any kind before (arguably) committing the unforgivable sin against the Holy Ghost (pronouncing blasphemy against Him) is in step with the times, after all. Modernity (let alone postmodernity), as we said before, goes hand in hand with atheism. This is so despite Descartes’ steering away from scholasticism by anchoring his methodical doubt in the one undoubtable principle on which he grounds his self-awareness as *res cogitans*: the existence of a God of Perfection and Goodness that would never deceive him as to such evidence.<sup>250</sup> Conversely, thinking of Nietzsche, Heidegger writes: ‘Philosophical research is and remains atheism, which is why philosophy can allow itself “the *arrogance of thinking*”’.<sup>251</sup> In this light, the hubris of the Cartesian cogito may not have been prompted by God, but by the empty shadow of One who is no more. Certainly, despite the fervent faith of the founder of modern philosophy, by the time of the Enlightenment most thinkers,

---

<sup>249</sup> Alexander Pope, as cited in Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York and London: Penguin 2003), p. 129. More and more deeply into the Great Chain of Being later.

<sup>250</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy, with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. by Michael Moriarty, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2008), p. 38.

<sup>251</sup> Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. by Theodore Kisiel, *Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1992; repr. 2009), p. 80.

either deistic or not, have many things to think about other than the God of both Covenants. More than this, it is likely that to some of these thinkers God certainly starts to be a nuisance, sometimes even a cause for disgust. This is precisely what happens to Moran, as we already saw, with regard to one of his by now familiar explosions of impatience; its consequence is rather drastic, although any good observer may certainly have foreseen it: ‘to hell with [...] God’ (TN, pp. 100, 159).

This is a widespread mood at the time of Western nihilism’s consummation in the Holocaust, the ‘epitome of negation’ and ‘*the absolute event of history [...] where all history took fire, where the movement of Meaning was swallowed up*’ (Slocombe, p. 32).<sup>252</sup> Certainly, the death of God was more than a scholarly concern for a young boy deported to Buchenwald, who had doubtless never read Nietzsche but who could write how he had the impression of witnessing the end of human history in a ‘ritual of death ungraced by the possibility of resurrection.’ (Langer, p. 13).<sup>253</sup> These were the times of indigence, distress, absence and exile commonly known as late modernity, between the Heideggerian flight of the gods and their foretold return (although this metaphysical hope is certainly not shared by most contemporary thinkers or authors). Such a period could be described by applying to it the metaphor that Julia Kristeva coined to refer to the fictional world of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, another fellow-traveller of the Nazis: life as ‘the horror of Hell without God’ in the century of megacrimes (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 88; *POH*, p. 147; Young, p. 77).<sup>254</sup>

It is at this point that literature is justified, according to Maurice Blanchot, as ‘the effort to make manifest, through the image, the error of the imaginary, and eventually the ungraspable, forgotten truth which hides behind this error’. An error, besides, which is due precisely to the lack of certitude as to the divine presence, the gods being absent ‘twice over’: at the same time ‘no longer there,’ and ‘not there yet.’ (*Space of Literature*, pp. 83, 246) At this moment, in their absence, literature allows for the expression of the

---

<sup>252</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska, 1995), p. 47, original emphasis.

<sup>253</sup> As cited in Ellen S. Fine, ‘Witness of the Night’, in Bloom (ed.), *Elie Wiesel’s Night*, pp. 47-67 (p. 64).

<sup>254</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska, 1982), p. 83.

‘unnameable’ or ‘inhuman’ as that which is ‘devoid of truth, bereft of justice, without rights’ in an era of decline, darkening, decay, and dissolution, the time when the ‘soul’ is ‘something strange on the earth’ (p. 232; Heidegger, *On The Way to Lang.*, pp. 163, 196). Thus, we would be speaking of a literature based more on ‘the experience of error and exile rather than homecoming’, as if its principle were a ‘becoming unhomely’, as if it tended towards a ‘limitless exile’ or ‘pure homelessness.’ (Weller, *Uncanniest*, pp. 100-01) Deprived of ‘illusions and lights,’ of ‘the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land’, divorced from his own life, and prey to ‘the feeling of absurdity’, man’s exile appears now ‘without remedy’ (*Sisyphus*, p. 10). Though writing about himself, Cioran nicely sums up the general zeitgeist: ‘All my life, I have lived with the feeling that I have been kept from my true place. If the expression “metaphysical exile” had no meaning, my existence alone would afford it one.’ (*Inconveniente*, p. 40)<sup>255</sup>

Nihilism, experienced precisely as the withdrawal of the numinous and not being any more a passive social concern, becomes now active, destructive, modernity no longer being able to explain itself but by turning towards it in a bout of moral sickness and a frenzy of irrational, ‘wholesale destruction’ (*Space of Literature*, 233; Slocombe, p. 32). It would remain as both that against which an always ambivalent literature would be pitted and that with which literature would constantly be threatened to merge (Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 102).<sup>256</sup>

It is no wonder than in the parallel universe of Beckett’s *Three Novels*, Malone, who is not altogether beyond the evocative power of a song he overhears in his room as sung by a choir time and again in the distance, thinks of it as dedicated to ‘the honour and glory of him who was the first to rise from the dead, to him that saved me twenty centuries in advance’. However, Christ’s salvific work is not only demeaned by the fact that Malone does not use any capitalisation to refer to Him, but also and above all by the fact that he describes the song as belonging ‘already to the long past’. To bring the combined meaning of these two factors home, he concludes by saying: ‘The final *bawl* lends colour to this view.’ (*TN*, p. 202; my emphasis). In this worst of all possible worlds, in the untenable

---

<sup>255</sup> The French original: ‘Toute ma vie j’aurai vécu avec le sentiment d’avoir été éloigné de mon véritable lieu. Si l’expression “exil métaphysique” n’avait aucun sens, mon existence à elle seule lui en prêterait un.’

<sup>256</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1995), p. 341.

situation following the Death of God, hymns to Christ cannot be sung, but merely bawled, bellowed or howled, as if performed by a demented Pope in a painting by Francis Bacon.<sup>257</sup>

In the mess of the post-WWII world, the crucifix can only stand as a symbol for the absurdity of a carnal liaison between Malone's narrated alter ego, the impossible boy named Sapo, now confirmed in his grown-up alias Macmann (i.e. no less than 'Son of Man'), and a decaying, fetid nurse on the threshold of death, who is very aptly (and abjectly) nicknamed Sucky Molly. She wears two crucifixes as earrings and has furthermore had the image of the 'celebrated sacrifice' carved onto one of his few remaining, though rotten and faltering teeth. In passing his tongue over her almost nude gums, his not less disturbing lover Macmann can allow himself to say, 'Christ is in my mouth' (*TN*, pp. 255, 250, 257). His narrating creator subsequently perpetrates an imagined sacrifice, a parody of Isaac's by his father Abraham, only that on this occasion the very remote 'chief', Youdi, I mean Yahweh, has not intervened to stop it: as if he were a post-Christian Cronus, Malone eats a 'little creature' previously fashioned in his image, after which no prayer comes any longer to his blood-stained mouth so as to be addressed to who knows whom (to Satanael, the Bogomils' – and Cioran's - little demiurge?).<sup>258</sup> Indeed, this is an absurd sacrifice, if not more so than Moran's ludicrous theological preoccupations at the end of his failed journey after Molloy, among which we find such all-important issues as, for instance, 'the excommunication of vermin in the sixteenth century' (pp. 219, 93, 161).

Equally absurd seemed to many, as Beckett was still writing his *Three Novels*, the persisting efforts of some thinkers to make sense of the scandal of a war that sent fifty million lives down the sink, including some six million of them for the non-reason of being Jewish, or of the horror of the invention of the technically very efficient death camps, which translated 'Hell from a mythical underground to a mundane reality', with the consequence of the breach of 'the liberal humanist contract' (Steiner, p. 47). Thus, for example, Hanna Arendt's attempt at bringing the Shoah within the grasp of reason is

---

<sup>257</sup> Rina Arya, 'The Existential Dimensions of Bacon's Art', in *Francis Bacon: Critical and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. by Rina Arya (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 81-102 (p. 93).

<sup>258</sup> Edina Bozoki, 'Bogomilism', in Hanegraaff and others (eds.), pp. 192-94 (p. 193); see also Heinrichs, n. p., par. 9, and Stewart, p. 4.

vigorously rejected by Adorno and Levinas. Auschwitz was, in Levinas' eyes, that moment 'when the impossible became true', after which no more explanations could be given or believed, because of their utter meaninglessness: to try to lend moral, transcendental or historical meaning to the Shoah would be 'to renew in thought the violence they [i.e. the victims] suffered in body.' (Druker, pp. 12, 30) In this light, the 'conceptual devastation' brought about by the Holocaust was totally incompatible with any kind of neo-Socratic theodicy, with any moral intellectualism any longer: Evil existed, and it was out and about, thus shattering 'the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience.' In Adorno's words: 'Nothing is harmless anymore.' (Neiman, pp. 303, 251, 256-57, 239-40, 305; *Negative Dialectics*, p. 362).

More recently, and from a thoroughly postmodern point of view, Lyotard contends that the Shoah is beyond any possible conceptualisation. Regarding the silence proposed by Adorno as to its intellectual elaboration, Lyotard finds that it points to its unrepresentability if not in a negative way, and to its radical indeterminacy, every possibility of representing it, however, remaining open for the future. The opposite would be automatically unjust, as it would imply the understanding of the event and therefore its consumption as an object of knowledge. What the Holocaust signifies is precisely the impossibility of such knowledge: it should never be phrased 'in terms of a judgement of understanding' (Shaw, pp. 122, 128).<sup>259</sup>

It is in this light that we must interpret and understand the *Three Novels*, as the proposed examples have already shown. Beckett seems to be very close to Freud in this respect, despite the markedly rationalist militancy of the father of psychoanalysis. According to him, in the face of tragedy, we have to acknowledge that, as a culture or civilisation, if that means anything at all any longer, we are nothing but lost children, looking for protection out of sheer terror and helplessness. Therefore, we cannot go on deceiving ourselves: there is nothing to be found on God's path, which leads nowhere. It is no use going on anthropomorphising 'blind and impersonal forces' stronger than us, wishing our Imaginary Friend would save us from the freezing night surrounding us. Providence has been

---

<sup>259</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988), pp. 57, 88.

reversed. As Schopenhauer concludes: not only do we live in the *worst* of all possible worlds, as we already said, but also this world is so bad that, were it a bit worse, it would cease to be; as a matter of fact, it can only go on existing ‘with great difficulty’ (*WWR2*, p. 583, original emphasis; Janaway, p. 120). Apart from an ever-failing art and the experience of the need to go on failing, apart from the pure inertia that drags the narrators of the *Three Novels* on and on, ours is a time of nihilism. There are neither meaning nor justice in the world (Neiman, pp. 228-29, 198-99, 7).

### 5.3 - Silenus’ Wisdom, European Buddhism, and Metaphysics: the ‘True World’

In the wholesale criticism that Nietzsche inflicts on modern European culture and society, there is a yet more insightful aspect in that it projects itself back in history well before the advent of the by now dead Judeo-Christian God. Now Nietzsche aims for Western metaphysics as his target, going as far back as Plato; in fact, Christianity is for Nietzsche nothing other than ‘a Platonism for “the people”’.<sup>260</sup> What Nietzsche is criticising here is the belief in an illusory, ‘true’ world of Being, inaccessible to the senses, in which has been invested Western mankind’s longing for an existence other than the one we know on this earth, that is to say an existence marked by the uncertainties and the weariness of becoming and suffering (Young, p. 10).

It is already in Greece that we can find evidence of a wholesale rejection of life on this account. Thus, one of the ancient Greek lyric poets, Theognis of Megara, articulates what in a less sophisticated, more proverbial form, was always a constituent of popular wisdom in ancient Greece: that life is not worth living, given the many mishaps and suffering it has in store for most human beings, only to make them all end up dying. Thus,

Best of all things is never to be born,  
never to know the light of sharp sun.  
But being born, then best

---

<sup>260</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 3.



to pass quickly as one can through the gates of Hell,  
and there lie under the massive shield of earth.<sup>261</sup>

Sophocles would hammer it down in *Oedipus the King*: ‘Count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.’ (Sophocles, as cited in Eagleton, *Lit. Theory*, p. 11).

As opposed to his handling of other ideological pillars of our civilisation, Beckett (or his narrators on his behalf) is very explicit about antinatalism, and therefore to life’s ultimate value. An outstanding example concerns Macmann, Malone’s fictional alter ego in his adult age. In the middle of an episode of especially base abjection, in which he lies prone on the mud, under the rain, Malone, in his capacity as narrator of Macmann’s anti-adventures, comments on the latter’s confused feelings about being guilty of he does not know what sin, despite the fact that atoning for it might be a sin itself, too. In this way, Macmann (and behind him Malone, too) personifies the purgatorial figure of the scapegoat as central to Beckett’s art (Gibson, pp. 169, 23). A few lines ahead, Malone / Beckett is more specific, in that one of Macmann’s reasons for puzzlement in the face of his sense of guilt is his awareness of not having committed what in the context one might well understand to be the deadliest possible sin, namely begetting a child:

And without knowing exactly what his sin was he felt full well that living was not a sufficient atonement for it or that this atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement, and so on, as if there could be anything but life, for the living. And no doubt he would have wondered if it was really necessary to be guilty in order to be punished but for the memory, more and more galling, of his *having consented to live in his mother*, then to leave her. And this again he could not see as his true sin, but as yet another atonement which had miscarried and, far from cleansing him of his sin, plunged him in it deeper than before. And truth to tell the ideas of guilt and punishment were confused together in his mind, as those of cause and effect so often are in the minds of those who continue to think. [...] *his semen had never done any harm to anyone*. So his link with his species was through his ascendants only’

(*TN*, pp. 233-34, my emphasis).

---

<sup>261</sup> Theognis of Megara, ‘Our Course’, in *Ancient Greek Lyrics*, trans. by Willis Barnstone, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2010), p. 130.

Going a bit further in our reflection on this, antinatalism may well lead to another instance of Beckett's instinctual rather than intellectual Gnosticism: if in *Genesis* the first couple receives the order 'be fruitful and multiply', for Beckett this could be one of the strongest arguments against the existence of a benevolent God.<sup>262</sup> In effect, only an evil being could command the perpetuation of flesh called to decay and death, apart from endless suffering in the meantime. This is evoked by Malone in an especially abject kind of nightmarish fantasy, in which he features as an 'old foetus' being given birth into death, her mother delivering him 'with the help of gangrene', with the result that he lands 'head-foremost mewling in the charnel-house', 'clinging to the putrid mucus'. In this horrific context, it is virtuous of Macmann to be linked to his ancestors only, those whose existence Molloy calls 'the long sonata of the dead' (pp. 219, 234, 27).<sup>263</sup> In this way, he would not be submitting to the demiurge's despicable purposes for the perpetuation of that pernicious species of vermin, homo sapiens. In the end, Beckett might have been very close to his friend Emil Cioran in believing us all to have inherited the demiurge's 'vexing' incapacity to remain within oneself: 'to engender is to continue in another fashion and on another scale the enterprise which bears his name—it is, by a deplorable mimicry, to add to His "creation"', thus subscribing to 'the gimmicks of the flesh', 'the propagation of life being reserved to the fallen.'<sup>264</sup> Not in vain did both Cioran and Beckett remain childless throughout their lives.

Here, we have to come back to Adorno and his thoughts on Beckett as not being nihilistic enough. His appreciation of Beckett in his essay on *Endgame* is built on the following idea: after Auschwitz, brought about by modernity's prostitution of reason as instrumental, the real nihilists were those who did not remain in negativity, in a radical negation of the post-WWII administered world of torture, a world of reification and domination of nature governed by the principle of identity (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 281, 362; *Metaphysics*, p. 101). For Adorno, 'for so long as the world is as it is', and after Auschwitz it is at the very least naïve to believe that it will fundamentally change, 'all

---

<sup>262</sup> Genesis 1:22, 28 (*The Holy Bible*, pp. 8-9).

<sup>263</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, pp. 7-67 (II. p. 64): 'They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.'

<sup>264</sup> E.M. Cioran, *The New Gods*, tr. by Richard Howard (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 2013), pp. 11-12.

images of reconciliation, peace and quiet resemble death' (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 381). In this way, Beckett's work, as all 'authentic' works of art, effaces any trace of reconciliation precisely in the interest of reconciliation (Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 156). In such a 'corpsed world' as the one existing in the aftermath of WWII, to write poetry would be 'barbaric.'<sup>265</sup> Maurice Blanchot will extend to narrative this impossibility of poetry after the Shoah: 'I would suggest that there can be no narrative of Auschwitz', as Auschwitz 'is the ultimate sign of the impossibility of language to speak the truth' (Silverman, p. 25).<sup>266</sup> Finally, Lyotard will see this event as the one putting an end to an idea of history as something that can be recuperated through language 'within a cognitive framework.' (p. 29)

Silence being the only ethical response to this situation, Adorno claims, it would be morally justifiable to ask, 'whether it would be better for nothing at all to be than something' (cited in Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 64).<sup>267</sup> Regardless of his paradoxical theory of radical negativity, which he sees in Beckett's work (a work that in Beckett's 'Gnostic negation of this world' could at the same time imply, like Kafka's, the promise of a haven for hope, a 'no man's land between [...] being and nothingness' or 'the possibility of another world, not yet in being' for the future), it is clear what Adorno's answer to this question may be: yes, it would have been better for the universe never to have come into being (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 381; Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 23; Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 126).<sup>268</sup> This should not come as a surprise, considering Adorno's deep German roots. Thus, we find an almost literal echo of universal rejection in the founding father of modern German literature: in Goethe's *Faust*, Mephistopheles, 'the spirit of perpetual negation', leaves Faust in no doubt about Hell's nihilistic philosophy:

---

<sup>265</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in *Prisms*, pp. 17-34 (p. 34). Later on in his career, Adorno would change his ethical doctrine of silence: 'Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems.' (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 362)

<sup>266</sup> Max Silverman, in a similar way to what we saw a few pages earlier with regard to Jean Améry, feels there is a danger in this attitude to aestheticise the Holocaust by detaching it from its historical and political context as an allegory for that which cannot be spoken about, 'recruiting the Jew yet again for the purpose of a universal truth'. Paradoxically, this would go against Adorno's express warning and, by constituting the object of 'a cult of memory', would remove the Holocaust from 'the realm of human action'. In our postmodern context, this would correspond to yet another step 'towards the abdication of reason in the face of the Unfathomable and the Indescribable or Unbearable.' It would simply be smuggled away from any possible explanation (Silverman, pp. 28, 32, 34, 36).

<sup>267</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'Cult. Criticism and Soc.', p. 33.

<sup>268</sup> Cioran, *New Gods*, p. 55: 'All things considered, it would be best if there were nothing.'

[...] for all things that exist  
 Deserve to perish, and would not be missed—  
 Much better it would be if nothing were  
 Brought into being.<sup>269</sup>

There would be an ethical aspect to this nihilism of Adorno's whereby not only does 'true' silence, as 'absolutely Other to ideological control', avoid 'the violence of representation' after Auschwitz, but also absence avoids 'the violence of *existence itself*.' In this radical 'ethic of absence', we can only understand our existence as living at the expense of the Other, especially the absent Other: 'life after Auschwitz is guilty life' (Slocombe, p. 271, my emphasis; Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 66).

Absence, moreover, would be a conceptual space where both nihilism and postmodernism would be intertwined: 'The kernel of the world is empty, the beginning of what moves the universe is the space of nothingness, around absence is constructed what exists.'<sup>270</sup> As 'the uncanniest of guests', nihilism would be at the door of that space if imagined as a house, a house built by Being and threatened in its foundations by that very nihilism (*TWTP*, p. 7).

The one relevant thing for our discussion here, though, is the qualification of the question made by Adorno, namely if it is morally justifiable to ask such a thing about the world *as it is*. In this, Adorno's (and according to Adorno, also Beckett's) rejection of the world as it is would fall entirely within the scope of Nietzsche's condemnation of Schopenhauer's world- and self-hatred, steeped in morality, which can only be called nihilism (Dienstag, pp. 178-79). In fact, we could call this variety of nihilism 'normative', as it involves and implies a judgement of value about the world and life, being the expression of a 'discontent with the world'; a world in which the nihilist, given its 'indigent and distorted' nature, finds nothing worthy of 'sublime respect' (Marmysz, pp. 71, 97-98; Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 247). The intellectual, emotional and spiritual

---

<sup>269</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Part One*, trans. and intro. by David Luke (Oxford and New York: OWC, 1987; repr. 1998), (6. 1339-42).

<sup>270</sup> Italo Calvino, as quoted in Slocombe, p. 288.

investment in this belief that the world is not the way it ought to be, ultimately results in a civilisation that revolves around nothingness, earning itself the dishonourable epithet of ‘nihilistic’ that Nietzsche bestowed on the pessimist doctrine of his major early philosophical influence, Arthur Schopenhauer. According to Nietzsche, this philosophy is based on a longing for death as the only effective means of achieving the termination of the suffering implicit in and synonymous with life. This would be a particular type of nihilism characterised by a ‘distress of longing’ for something other than what there is, even if this ‘other’ is held to be impossible or inexistent. We could call this radical nihilism (Marmysz, p. 76). In Nietzsche’s view, this death wish makes Schopenhauer’s philosophy deserve not only to be considered a form of passive nihilism, but even more straightforwardly it makes it earn the label of ‘Buddhism for Europeans’ (*Genealogy*, p. 19).<sup>271</sup> Not in vain did Schopenhauer prescribe resignation and a progressively ascetic negation of our instincts as the only effective solution against the permanent assault of ‘painful desire.’ (*WWR I*, p. 233; O’Hara, pp. 259, 256) Nietzsche would not be too mistaken in these appreciations, since after him Freud, who had a worldview much closer to Schopenhauer’s than Nietzsche’s, calls ‘the Nirvana principle’ ‘the dominant tendency of the psyche [...] to reduce inner stimulative tension, to maintain it at a steady level, to resolve it completely’.<sup>272</sup> In other words, it would be the lifetime strife of every human being to reach that state ‘where no stimuli from either within or without disturb its everlasting peace.’ (Storr, p. 66)

Behind desire, according to Schopenhauer, there would always be the primordial constituent of our universe: the Will, ‘the innermost essence, the kernel, of every particular thing and also of the whole.’ (*WWR I*, p. 110) Its nature would be that of a blind, relentless and pitiless ‘flux of immaterial energy or “force”’ that manifests itself in the basic drives and strivings of all living beings (Young, p. 33). In this, he also foretells Freud’s idea of instincts as urges ‘*inherent in organic life to restore an earlier stage of things* which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces’

---

<sup>271</sup> On Nietzsche’s realisation of Schopenhauer as the first European to openly embrace a sort of Eastern mysticism potentially deleterious for European culture, see Schacht, p. 82.

<sup>272</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. by John Reddick (London and New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 95.

(Freud, as cited in Storr, p. 66).<sup>273</sup> Liberation beyond the merely temporary consolations of art (music above all for Schopenhauer and the earlier Nietzsche) could only come in the fashion of self-extinction: a European modality of nirvana (Young, p. 40).<sup>274</sup> This would be preceded by a state of ‘complete abolition of the will’ after which only knowledge, an ‘ocean-like calmness of the spirit’, and eventually ‘nothingness’ would remain (*WWR1*, pp. 411-12). In the end, what life teaches us is not to want it: ‘existence is certainly to be regarded as an error or mistake, to return from which is salvation;’ thus, ‘nothing else can be stated as the meaning of our existence except the knowledge that it would be better for us not to exist.’ (*WWR2*, p. 605; Dienstag, p. 36).

That human existence is endless suffering is the main foundation of Schopenhauer’s philosophy: ‘there is only one inborn error, [...] that we exist in order to be happy.’ Indeed, life shows us that ‘joys and pleasures [...] are in themselves deceptive’. ‘Everything in life proclaims that earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated, or recognized as an illusion.’ (*WWR2*, pp. 634, 573) In actual fact, we should all accustom ourselves ‘to regarding this world as a place of atonement, a sort of penal colony’ where ‘each of us is [...] being punished for his existence’.<sup>275</sup> This agrees with Schopenhauer’s view of life as a perpetual pendulum-like oscillation ‘between pain and boredom’, the pain caused by unsatisfied

---

<sup>273</sup> The conceptual similitudes existing between Schopenhauer and Freud in these and other issues prompted Thomas Mann to claim how the concepts of the father of psychoanalysis were ‘Schopenhauer’s ideas translated from metaphysics into psychology.’ (Storr, p. 144) Freud himself felt prompted to write on this influence in order to make it pass mostly as a few coincidences, arguing he had read Schopenhauer very late in his life (Janaway, pp. 138-39).

<sup>274</sup> On the temporary freedom from the Will’s tyranny that art grants us, Schopenhauer writes: ‘for that moment we are delivered from the miserable pleasure of the Will. We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still.’ ‘Aesthetic enjoyment’ would install us in ‘a state of pure objectivity of perception’ that would allow us to feel ‘positively happy’. Art would put us in touch with the timeless, recreating us as will-less subjects, ‘a pure intelligence without aims or intentions’, our own person having been completely forgotten, as if the boundary between I and not-I had dissolved, ‘aware [...] hardly at all of ourselves.’ (*WWR1*, pp. 185, 196; *WWR2*, p. 368; ‘On Aesthetics’, in *Essays and Aphorisms*, tr. by R.J. Hollingdale (London and New York: Penguin, 1970; repr. 2004), pp. 147-57 (p. 147); Dienstag, p. 109). Music as the privileged type of art would be ‘a copy of the will itself’, speaking ‘of the essence’ where the other arts would only speak ‘of the shadow’. Thus, it ‘could still exist even if there were no world at all’ (*WWR1*, p. 257, original emphasis).

For ‘Dionysian’ music in both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. by Ronald Speirs, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1999), pp. vii, xi.

Very nicely, J.D. O’Hara remarks how the original French version of *Malone Dies* finishes with the same word as Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*: rien, nichts; in other (English) words: nothing. J. D. O’Hara, ‘Where There’s a Will, There’s a Way Out: Beckett and Schopenhauer’, *College Literature*, 8.3 (1981), 249-70 (p. 262).

<sup>275</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, ‘On the Suffering of the World’, in *Essays and Aphorisms*, pp. 38-47 (p. 47).

desire (of which sexual desire would be the strongest, most insistent and urgent variety) and the boredom of its satisfaction. This satisfaction, in turn, would leave us ‘no happier than before’ after having been made ‘the dupe of the species’. Following this, pain would shortly appear again in the form of lack and therefore also renewed desire (*WWR1*, p. 312; *WWR2*, pp. 557, 571; Janaway, p. 104).<sup>276</sup> Meanwhile, we make time pass between now and death, lest existence be experienced as ‘an alien, meaningless phenomenon.’ (*WWR1*, p. 312; Young, p. 37). Hence, subjected to desire and illusion, Hinduism’s Maya, we believe ourselves to be rational beings, when it is really an overwhelming yet unconscious force that controls our life (Janaway, pp. 18, 41). Besides, another error plunges us deeper into unhappiness, namely the ‘special error’, the ‘false step’ of our individuality, of being who we are, which is nothing but yet another illusion: ‘the real self is the will-to-live.’ (*WWR2*, pp. 491-92; 606).

Freud also sees suffering as the core of mental life and the cause of desire and frustration: ‘what decides the purpose of life is simply the programme of the pleasure principle [...] and yet [...] all the regulations of the universe run counter to it.’ (Freud, *Discontents*, p. 23) For both thinkers, moreover, the positive term in the experience of pain or pleasure will be the former: happiness will be merely the absence of unhappiness. Pain is therefore more real than pleasure, and unsatisfied desire is ‘the true constant’ in our lives (Dienstag, pp. 93, 96). This conspicuity of suffering, however, should not surprise us, given our Judeo-Cristian cultural context: Christianity even has as its symbol what Schopenhauer considers to be not a sign of salvation (the only salvation is nirvana, the total destruction of the universal Will), but chiefly an instrument of torture and a symbol of suffering (which in Judaism, precisely because of this, becomes a sign of scandal).<sup>277</sup>

Instead of Nietzsche’s elitist and agonistic argument that suffering makes a noble heart stronger and nobler by being form-giving and greatness-achieving, it is clear to me that Beckett’s spiritual world is much closer not only to Schopenhauer, but also to the French tradition of ‘nihilists’ and transgressors that we have already mentioned. Thus, suffering is

---

<sup>276</sup> Sex would be ‘the public secret [...] always and everywhere understood to be the main thing as a matter of course, and [...] always present in the mind of all.’ (*WWR2*, p. 571).

<sup>277</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, ‘On Suicide’, in *Essays and Aphorisms*, pp. 74-77 (p. 76).  
*1 Corinthians* 1:23: ‘But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness’ (*The Holy Bible*, p. 2,549).  
*Deuteronomy* 21:23: ‘for he that is hanged is accursed of God’ (*The Holy Bible*, p. 494).

for de Sade a self-evident argument against divine Providence, life being always senseless and forever in chains (Young, p. 91; Neiman, pp. 182, 198). Kristeva, writing about arguably the greatest exemplar of this tradition in the central years of the past century, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, an author and a man directly linked to the Shoah in his condition of apologist for the anti-Semitic and collaborationist policies of Vichy France, makes it clear how in his fiction suffering leads to no glory, opening up only to idiocy (*POH*, p. 147). This lack of transcendence or any positive potentiality in suffering is already present in the *maudit* par excellence, Charles Baudelaire, who notes in the third part of his *Journaux intimes* how one day he felt brushing against his cheek the wings of imbecility, supposedly because of his excesses, driven by the quintessentially *fin-de-siècle*, decadent variety of suffering: *ennui*.<sup>278</sup> Already in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Levinas opposes any attempt to find either justification or purpose in human suffering other than ‘the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the other [which] opens suffering to the ethical perspective of the inter-human.’ The ‘paradigm’ of gratuitous human suffering would be the Holocaust (Druker, p. 86). The author of one of its most renowned testimonies, Jean Améry, summarises and brings home this meaninglessness of suffering, both moral and physical: in his view, springing from direct personal experience, camp suffering ‘created nothing of value’ (Neiman, p. 265). Western theodicy does not hold any more. As T.S. Eliot once wrote: ‘This is how the world ends | Not with a bang, but a whimper.’<sup>279</sup> The whimper let out by those ordinary, suffering Jews and Gentiles massacred on the Eastern front with a shot in the back of their necks before falling into the mass grave they had dug themselves in advance.

---

<sup>278</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Hygiène : Troisième partie des journaux intimes*, I (86) (p. 5), in *Groupe « ebooks libres et gratuits »* <[https://www.ebooksgratuits.com/pdf/ baudelaire\\_hygiene.pdf](https://www.ebooksgratuits.com/pdf/ baudelaire_hygiene.pdf)> [accessed 14.10.2019]: ‘J’ai senti passer sur moi le vent de l’aile de l’imbécilité’.

<sup>279</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘The Hollow Men’ [1925], in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), pp. 77-82 (pp. 82, 28-31).

In my opinion, it should be kept in mind how one of the victims, if a survivor, of Auschwitz, namely Primo Levi, had a completely different stand from Adorno’s and Améry’s concerning the Holocaust. Thus, always an impenitent humanist and a supporter of the Enlightenment, he found that it was both possible and legitimate to turn negative experience into positive knowledge: ‘No human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analysis’. For him, there was always a what and why, refusing to ‘relegate it [i.e. the Holocaust] to a realm beyond comprehension.’ (*If This Is a Man*, p. 121; Druker, p. 21). As an Ashkenazy proverb goes: ‘It’s good to tell past troubles.’ Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. by Ann Goldstein, in *Complete Works*, pp. 761-976 (p. 763).



#### 5.4 - Platonism and Christianity

In such a context of suffering, frustration and even nihilistic negation of life, what metaphysics does is to annihilate what is given in painful reality by turning it into appearance, and to institute the nothingness that has never been given as the real into pure Being beyond such contingencies as pain and suffering. It is by dint of Plato's scission of the merely apparent from the intelligible, the latter being held as the only true reality (if invisible to those exiled in this lowly world, unless they submitted themselves to dialectic training in order to become true philosophers, hence being initiated into the knowledge of the eidetic world), that nihilism would surge as the outcome and apotheosis of metaphysics (Muresan, p. 48). In the end, according to Heidegger, the entire history of Western metaphysics since Plato would be a 'gradual unfolding of nihilism.' (Marmysz, p. 35)

Once more, Beckett's nihilistic heroes of the *Three Novels* run full headlong to the encounter of grand narratives armed with irony, if not sheer sarcasm, against their underlying *telos*. It is Malone who points at the absurdity of the true world's Platonic origins: the meaning of words sublimated into eternal Forms, the apotheosis of the signified (Young, p. 10). Waiting for death as he devises stories trying to account for what his life may have stood for, Malone loses the stick with which he usually rummages through his scanty possessions. His loss brings forth a bitter sneer, as he decides on the following course of action: to 'meditate and be edified' by means of dialectically ascending 'from discovery to discovery [...] towards the light', towards the pristine, eidetic world of Platonic Forms, until gaining, 'painfully', an 'understanding of the Stick.' It is so that humans distinguish themselves from apes. He concludes, poisonously: 'What a broadening of the mind.' (*TN*, p. 247) The true world is swept away at one stroke of Malone's pencil butt. Diogenes the Cynic (i.e. the Dog) would not have done it better.

Apart from this radical separation between the ideal, perfect and immanent from the apparent, material, defective, perishable and contingent, Platonism lends some other structural components to Christianity as yet another true-world grand narrative. Thus, there also obtains a tripartite story of Sin, Fall and Redemption (the Fall not being charged on God, but on His creature), life as the exile and pilgrimage of an immortal soul (the meaning of life being provided by this spiritual journey), and sex as a major problem to account for (Young, p. 20).

Although Platonism is chronologically earlier than Christianity and instrumental in providing it with a philosophical-metaphysical structure as a vehicle for nihilism, the very fact that, as far as nihilism is concerned, the latter is a stronger, even more deleterious variation on the former, has to do with the static quality of Plato's ideal world, which is exempted from the linear flow of time existing in both Judaism and Christianity. Indeed, in the monotheistic tradition God is the active Master and Lord of History, as he providentially intervenes in it to guide His people (either Israel or the militant Church) to salvation, history being culminated by a universal, eschatological Judgement. It is this expectation, going on for two millennia, that makes Western civilisation one dominated by angst, an 'awaiting' civilisation prone to forget the here and now. Hence, it is also prone to nihilism as the rule of a set of values founded in the nothingness of an illusory world to come (Muresan, pp. 48-50).

### 5.5 - Cosmic Order: The Great Chain of Being. Nature and Heideggerian 'Guardianship'

Another residue of the centuries of Western metaphysics from Plato on was a model of Nature that explained the world as an all-integrated whole in which every single existent would find its proper place according to a divine plan whose structure human reason could understand and represent. One of its most consolidated representations was the Great Chain of Being. Behind the world that humans were born into there was a divine design and a *telos*. The arrival of modernity disrupted old certainties in this domain, too, as it did with respect to religious faith itself.

Although increasingly eroded by advances in science and their implied refutation of the beliefs of the Church in this domain from quite earlier, it was during the Enlightenment that those teleological beliefs started to suffer from systematic criticism. Rather than a cosmos supported by a divine maker, or at least by a transcendent, rational logos, already in Hume the universe is depicted as governed by Evil and disorder. As we have no other language, we would just be using 'venerable' words, such as 'design', to express our worship of God or, before monotheism, 'to save the honour of the gods'. Nevertheless, such linguistic usage is just the product of a mere projection, a kind of 'magic thinking' or

an ‘unthinking anthropomorphism’ without any other fundament. Kant will follow Hume in this: ‘we praise the order of the universe in the hope that God is listening, and will reward us by making it run the way we want.’ (Neiman, pp. 166, 154-55) Nietzsche, the ‘intuitive, anti-deductionist, anti-rationalist’ thinker will go yet further in this debunking of reason: ‘faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism.’<sup>280</sup> Thus, notions such as truth, the absolute nature of things or even the Kantian ‘thing-in-itself’, by being falsely projected into the essence of things, have been mistaken for something other than what they really are: simplifications ‘for the sake of life’, at the service of the survival of the human species (*TWTP*, pp. 13-14; Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 73). There is no truth, there are no facts but interpretations thereof; all knowledge depends on a given perspective, on a certain point of view. Not in vain does each man live ‘as if he were the center of the universe or the center of history.’ (*TWTP*, p. 267; Cioran, *Despair*, p. 33) And yet, their world, according to Nietzsche, would only be a gigantic mass of errors and ‘a consolidated custom of fantasy’ (Severino, *Contemp.*, p. 110, my emphasis and my translation of the Spanish translation of the Italian original). The cogito, the ‘I’, would be one of these errors, a stable, unifying structure, a simplification used by the instinct of survival against the becoming it would like to control and dominate (p. 112).

Much later than Nietzsche, Sartre expresses the same conviction: my interests, projected as so many values or meanings, define myself as a centre of interpretation. Thus, as Heidegger remarks, truth is always on the move, in transit: we will never get to things in themselves (Tanner, p. 74; Wicks, p. 46; Inwood, *Heidegger*, p. 55). Nietzsche moves further from this point: ‘It is no more than a moral prejudice that truth is worth more than mere appearance; [...] there would be no life at all if not on the basis of perspective estimates and appearances’ (*Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 46). ‘The value of an idea, what it does,’ would ultimately be more important than any claims about its veracity (Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 74)<sup>281</sup>. Rather than faith in knowledge based on the ‘explicability of nature’, the world would be in urgent need of ‘tragic wisdom’, that of the ‘Dionysiac man’,

---

<sup>280</sup> With regard to this, Camilla Paglia also relates this ‘categorical superstructure’ of ‘absolutist Western mind’ to both the history of Western art and ‘fascist political power’: *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, Yale Nota Bene (London and New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2001), pp. 39, 59).

<sup>281</sup> For Nietzsche, ideas become true because they are powerful, not the other way round (Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 74).

who can gaze into ‘the true essence of things’ (Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 40). Modern positive science and morality, those creatures of reason founded on a common ‘overestimation of truth’ and aimed at making sense of the universe and suffering, would just be manifestations of passive nihilism, a form of nihilism that cannot break free from the moral interpretation of the world, unable to go beyond good and evil, preventing humans from no longer being in ‘need of the tyranny of the virtue-imperative’ (*TWTP*, p. 478; Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 32; Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 35). Heidegger also thinks of science as a secondary phenomenon, one among the many ways of being of Dasein, derivative and dependent from other more immediate, everyday ones; if this were not enough, he believes that science is not an original happening of truth (Inwood, *Heidegger*, pp. 61, 121).

With antecedents as distant as Heraclitus (for Nietzsche, the true ‘Dionysiac philosopher’), but also much more recent ones, such as Spinoza, Nietzsche denies that there could be any other design in reality, in the world of becoming (the only existing one for the *untimely* thinker) other than an ongoing play of chaos without any telos. There is nothing such as order in nature (Marmysz, p. 25; Dienstag, p. 268; Diken, p. 9).<sup>282</sup> According to Allan Bloom, this conception of order derives from the conquest of nature by modern science, with the consequence that what was seen as a cosmos is now turned into an ontologically homogenous plane of extended matter in motion (Storey, p. 16). The conclusion of the entire process is nihilism, understood as ‘a disruption in the relationship between humanity and nature’. Once again, we come across nihilism as the uncanny guest lurking in almost every single turn on the path of philosophy (p. 24).

Still more recently, a different philosophical sensitivity, which we could call ecologist, finds expression, for example, in Heidegger’s post-WWII thought. Thinking of *poiesis* or poetic activity, Heidegger defines it as ‘bringing forth’. Of its two possible varieties, *techne* and *physis*, he establishes the second one, whereby the pre-Socratics referred to nature as a whole founded on and governed by a common essence, as its model for poiesis. To Heidegger, *physis*, a bringing forth of nature that takes place without the craftsman’s or the artist’s intervention, would be the self-disclosure of divinely originated things (Young,

---

<sup>282</sup> Emanuele Severino, *La filosofía futura*, trans. by Salvador del Carril, Ariel Filosofía (Barcelona: Ariel, 1991), p. 144.

pp. 199-200).<sup>283</sup> The proper human concern related to this divine, animated nature and its bringing forth or blossoming, would be that of helping along this process of disclosure, to which invasive scientific and technological processes are completely alien and destructive: ‘nature, the world, and Being are not forces to be fought against’, as they constitute a ‘numinous’, ‘holy’ universe (or at least they did so in Heidegger’s mythical ancient Greece: Marmysz, p. 40; Young, p. 200).<sup>284</sup> Heidegger’s ideal would be to recreate the Greek experience of nature as poiesis by way of ‘insight into that which is’.<sup>285</sup> Like this, unlike in modernity, we should adopt a behaviour towards Being as disclosed in the world which Heidegger calls ‘guardianship’. This guardianship should be informed by an attitude of bringing forth rather than exploitation or violation, and it should always be comprehended within a necessary gratitude for the existing and ‘the will to conserve the fundamental order of things that is granted to us.’ This would be the only way for mankind to proceed towards a genuinely postmodern age (pp. 207-08). Modernity would have left the Swabian philosopher’s idealised pre-modern world as ‘a set of raw materials to be reconstructed rationally and in the service of profit and commerce, and to be manipulated and exploited in the form of industrial capitalism’.<sup>286</sup>

---

<sup>283</sup> Despite Heidegger’s atheism, he seems to be thinking of the gods as Hölderlin’s: some incomprehensible yet overwhelmingly powerful creative and sustaining forces expressing themselves through nature. In fact, all through his work, especially in his second period, his concept of Being is clearly the object of a religious feeling. Thus, for the former student of Theology in a Catholic seminar that Heidegger was, Being appears in the likeness of the ‘God of the poets’, Hölderlin’s ‘unknown God’, an awesome and radiant presence that approaches man in what is most familiar to us, ‘the nearest of all’, being immanent in the world, yet also mysterious and infinitely far away (Heidegger, *Poetry*, 223; Young, p. 211).

<sup>284</sup> According to Emmanuele Severino and rather counter-intuitively, Being must not be understood as that which is shared by beings, but rather as every being’s difference. Being is every being’s other, a non-being, therefore it is nothingness. This nothingness, however, would not be a *nihil absolutum*, an absolute principle of nothingness, but rather the condition of transcendence of beings, the *light* in which they appear or manifest themselves. For Heidegger, Being would be the very appearing of beings, their non-occultation. As their transcendence, Being is the light in which beings appear, their self-disclosure. It is also their being-allowed-to be, therefore their non-foundation, their finiteness (Severino, *Contemp.*, pp. 230, 231, 233, original emphasis). In conclusion, Being ‘is’ not, but ‘gives itself’; it is the appearance of beings (Severino, *Futura*, p. 264). Heidegger himself, in his condition of frequent amateur etymologist, contends that ‘being’ means ‘appearing’ in Greek (p. 268).

<sup>285</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, p. 33.

<sup>286</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*, The Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine (New York, Chichester, W Sussex: Columbia UP, 1994), p. 84.

Something fishy could be suspected when considering how scandalously Heidegger compares post-war, mechanised agriculture to the instrumental rationality of the Nazi death camps. If for Adorno Auschwitz changed everything, for Heidegger the Shoah would be apparently just another instance of Ge-stell (or ‘Enframing’), man’s domination of nature by technology (*Modernism and Nihilism*, p. 62). Although he was

His caring for a certain kitsch idea of community and a peculiar theory of Being rooted in a delusionally *völkisch* history and tradition cannot but be put in relation to his idealisation of the small German peasant and the rural world he wanted to see himself as a part of. In this light, his ontology would be based in a large way on an ‘national aestheticism’ (Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 51). The most disturbing element concerning Heidegger’s case, however, and the main cause for repeated discussion about it in this thesis, is his reception: in postmodern milieus, especially in France (as we already remarked), Heidegger is a byword for philosophical postmodernism. Apart from this, his legacy can possibly be considered the most influential one in the history of continental philosophy after the end of WWII.

Yet, for all of his periods of reclusion in his beloved cabin in the Black Forest and his love for nature, the ex-rector of Freiburg was a university professor and, accordingly, he was remunerated out of public funds supported by the taxes paid by industrial workers, civil engineers, street sweepers and other manifestations of inauthentic Dasein, both before and after the war. Most of them lived in cities and could not care less about *völkisch* ideals of ‘community’; in fact, their ancestors ultimately fled to the cities as a result of the proverbial poverty of the countryside. Even in ancient Greece, a civilisational model for the Nazis, their fellow travellers and their useful idiots, things were very much the same, which can be ascertained, for instance, by a mere perusal of Hesiod’s *Works and Days*.

In my view, we could read something between Heidegger’s lines: if, as he seems to assume, there are forces to be fought against in modernity, which could those be? Quite clearly, ‘Americanism’, that is to say parliamentary democracy, free elections, individual rights and public liberties, high levels of consumption and other indices of material welfare. To him, all of this would be nothing but pure homelessness, ‘pure nihilism’, a world-annihilating power. In this sense, America would stand for just an ahistorical foreigner with neither past nor future. In other words, Heidegger sees in ‘America’ the radical, unendurable Other of his idea of Europe, the absolute prose that is incompatible with (German) *Dichtung*, all that which is opposed to the realisation of that great

---

not interested in biology and pseudo-scientific theories allowing for humans to be classified into superior or inferior races, Heidegger was a committed, *idealistic* Nazi even after the war, as we already saw. I cannot but think of his concept of ‘guardianship’ when reading Maurice Blanchot’s thoughts on the Holocaust, written thirty-five years after the end of the War: ‘*How can thought be made the keeper of the holocaust where all was lost, including guardian thought?*’ (*Writing of the Disaster*, p. 47, original emphasis)

‘historical’ movement: his peculiar, non-biological, idealistic, communitarian, ontological version of National Socialism and the redeeming promise it would always stand for with regard to the ‘people of the centre’, the German *Volk*. In a word, Americanism would be just a philosophical booby trap set up after the end of the war in order to spiritually destroy Germany and, by extension, Europe (Weller, *Uncanniest*, pp. 55-57). If innovative ideas about nature are to be considered as having a potential to resist or oppose instrumentally nihilistic thought, or forces focused on the manipulation of nature with a view to economic profit, I do not think that Heidegger’s really count for much.

In any case, Molloy would certainly never have been taken in so easily by such deceitfully naive existential proposals for a meaningful world of *Blut und Boden*, one based on the holiness of the hallowed hills fertilised by the bones and irrigated by the blood of the dead ancestors, the ontological heroes of *intrahistory*.<sup>287</sup> Accordingly and as usual, he drops his accustomed bitter, annihilating, notoriously a-philosophical grenade from behind a cloud of irony and sarcasm. As he leaves town for the countryside stretching between him and his mother, after a night spent in ‘a hypotenusal posture’ in an alley littered with excrements, human and otherwise, he comments: ‘See how all things hang together.’ (*TN*, p. 36) Later on, if there were still any doubts as to the import of such an expression, he congratulates himself once more ‘in the heart [...] of the pre-established harmony that makes so sweet a music’, which involves a parody of Leibnitz (p. 57; Knowlson, p. 469) One can only assume this sweet music to include the dissonance of a decaying tramp’s body crawling through the woods fifteen paces a day, nearly starved, his mind almost gone, his legs ever stiffer, and nevertheless eventually killing someone on his way to his mother (*TN*, p. 78).

Moran does the same, alone in the middle of the bucolic, presumably Irish countryside, after some unwished-for advances by a stranger who uncannily resembles Molloy very much. In *Molloy*’s universe, nature seems to be a place of violent encounters with country

---

<sup>287</sup> Introduced in the Spanish language, according to the Real Academia de la Lengua, by D. Miguel de Unamuno, *intrahistory* is defined as ‘traditional life, the permanent background to changing, visible History’ (my translation of the Spanish Original: ‘Vida tradicional, que sirve de fondo permanente a la historia cambiante y visible.’) ‘Intrahistoria’, in *Diccionario de la lengua española*, 23rd edn, <<http://dle.rae.es/?id=Lynu9Mx>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

people (pp. 57, 78, 144-45, 166-68). Not much to build on against nihilism that way.<sup>288</sup> No reason to feel obliged to Heidegger for his National-Socialist pastoral.

On the contrary, Moran's killing may be read as yet another sign of his metamorphosis into someone very similar to Molloy, an act prompted by dread and rejection of community, an instance of social nihilism. In the same way as Molloy needs some bread from time to time, the persistence of sexual desire and the boredom of masturbation also make him feel the need to rub himself against someone else every now and then; yet he will not relate to anybody at all, always wishing to stay as free from (true) 'love' as from 'help' or 'charity' (pp. 51, 73). On his coming back home after his long absence, Moran is isolated, too: abandoned by his son, stranded by his housekeeper, alienated from the local priest and the universal Church he represents, and given himself over to a voice. In other words, both of *Molloy's* protagonists are adamantly 'determined to remain marginal' (pp. 168-69; Stewart, pp. 110, 117).

In this, they are not far from Sartre when he writes that 'hell is other people'.<sup>289</sup> In the end, life would only be a Hobbesian state of permanent, indiscriminate war pitting everyone against everyone else. Moreover, unlike Hobbes, Beckett's anti-heroes will not accept surrendering their natural freedom to any sovereign for the sake of security and peace: running risks is preferable to giving up one's will to self-determination and autonomy, indigent and infirm as one might be, hellish and nihilistic as life might be (Young, pp. 149-50).<sup>290</sup> In this way, they exemplify what could be called an existential 'power of dissent' whereby the subject always has the chance to transcend its facticity, its past. This is especially so in Moran's case, a former authoritarian, Catholic father, now turned into a self-transcending nothingness with no intrinsic nature of his own: an absurd,

---

<sup>288</sup> In 'The Adventure of the Copper Beeches', Sherlock Holmes explains to Watson how Spring mornings in the countryside can be very deceptive: 'It is my belief, Watson, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.' Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Wordsworth Classics (Ware, Herts: Wordsworth, 1992; repr. 1995), p. 277.

<sup>289</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, trans. by S. Gilbert and I. Abel (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 45

<sup>290</sup> For Hobbes and his theories on the state of nature, the social contract or covenant, and his ideas on sovereignty and power, in that they are relevant to think of Molloy and Moran's confronting an unrestricted state of nature in the wilderness, see Garrat Williams, 'Thomas Hobbes: Moral and Political Philosophy', in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource*, n. p., par. 28-29, 31-32, 34-35, 43-44, 47-48, 51-52, 55-56, 58-60 <<https://www.iep.utm.edu/hobmoral/>> [accessed 14.10.2019].



empty, purposelessly breathing no-thing with no significant past, no bonds and perhaps in the process of becoming an abhuman (*BAN*, pp. 42, 439; Young, p. 130).

However, it is not only neo-romantic, communitarian theories on a nature still uncontaminated by modernity and techno-science where beings could find their proper place that are debunked in the *Three Novels*, but nature itself, *tout court*. Survival being the immediate goal of every existent, and the Will manifesting itself in every will primarily as a will to live, everyone finds themselves thrown into ‘fear, terror, pain and death’. These, moreover, are not occasional malfunctions in a benign natural order, but rather the iron law that makes nature not care for individuals, but for the species (Young, p. 35). In Heidegger’s idealised nature, in the midst of a ‘scene of horror’ consisting of ‘much and long suffering, constant struggle, [...] everything a hunter and hunted, pressure, want, need, and anxiety,’ and ‘shrieking and howling [...] *in saecula saeculorum*,’ individuals must become overdogs if only for the sake of not becoming underdogs. Thus, it is a fact that ‘the chief source of the most serious evils affecting man is man himself; *homo homini lupus*.’ (*WWR2*, pp. 354, 577, original emphasis) And man is, no doubt, a natural being.

Accordingly, ready for death, Malone cannot hide his joy in the imminent prospect of, as he styles it, being given ‘birth to into death’, of finally being done with ‘the great cunt of existence’, of his absurd flesh and his even more absurd pulsing for endless decades. This is certainly the opposite of feeling to be a Dasein placed in the middle of a natural world where they are supposedly called to lead an authentic, meaningful life by way of becoming a shepherd, a guardian of Being, such as the once rector of Freiburg deemed necessary for any human (or only German?) being (*TN*, p. 276; Inwood, *Heidegger*, p. 24).<sup>291</sup> What is the right term to describe the vital attitude of someone so in love with the very idea of self-extinction? Of course, nihilism. And no Chain of Being, universal harmony or untainted Nature can bring a nihilist’s death wish into submission any longer.

---

<sup>291</sup> ‘Man is the shepherd of Being [...] whose dignity consists in being called by Being itself into the preservation of Being’s truth’ (‘Letter on Humanism’, p. 245).

## 5.6 - The Death of Man: Antihumanisms, Modernity and Modernism

Also related to the death of God - one of the main motives of modern, post-Nietzschean nihilism, as we already saw - and the subsequent rejection of human life to the point of antinatalism and longing for death, is what could be termed the death of Man: when the absolute is no longer believed in, the natural outcome would be doubt of the reality of the self (Glicksberg, p. 18). The self, the 'Man' whose death is now being declared, must be understood as the universal moral agent and transcendental subject of Western humanism since the early Italian Renaissance and Descartes' philosophical revolution. This humanism, in its turn, would be linked with culturally prestigious and historically dominant Greco-Roman conceptions of the human which were founded on the (presumed) dignity and potential of human beings for spiritual, artistic and cultural achievement.

This humanist conception is opposed to the more popular and by far older lore on life's worthlessness: the so-called 'wisdom' of Silenus, of which we have already written and whose memorable formula was composed by Theognis of Megara. If folk wisdom would lead to the rejection of physical existence, the death of Man would point to his spiritual decay. To Nietzsche and his followers, humanism was yet another ideological formation positing an immortal soul, pure spirit unburdened by our earthly, animal passions and instincts.<sup>292</sup> In other words, we are still within the framework of a 'truer', 'better' world, in which our higher hopes would be invested, alongside a rejection of this world as it is. As long as there are any essences or foundations, God will still be at large; in this way, terms such as Man, Human Nature, Reason, History, etc., are just underhand substitutes, 'majestic names' given to Him along the path of secularism that Western civilisation has been following since the Enlightenment (Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, p. 17). This is why the historical crisis of nihilism under way by Nietzsche's time has the death of God as its true substance (Vattimo, p. 33, my translation).

Related to those 'majestic names' are what Nietzsche calls '*the big words*', 'ideals' or 'higher feelings' such as 'revolution', 'love of peace, justice, truth'.<sup>293</sup> To Nietzsche, they

---

<sup>292</sup> Although historically there have also been atheistic humanisms – e.g. Sartre's or, even more clearly, Camus' - where no 'soul' has played any role.

<sup>293</sup> Derrida will call these majestic names 'transcendental signifiers'. Our discourse would be structured around them through the use of 'violent binaries' or 'hierarchies', philosophical oppositions where one of the terms governs the other: Jacques Derrida, *Positions: Entretien avec Henri Ronse, Julia Kristeva Jean-Louis*

would be ‘a source of misfortune and man's loss of value.’ (*TWTP*, p. 50) The ‘triumph of man’ preconised by the Enlightenment, as expressed in such lofty ideals, necessitated the death of God as its prerequisite; nevertheless, as enlightened values were the product of merely refashioning traditional, hitherto divinely grounded ones, and despite the apparent substitution of rational, self-grounding, autonomous Man for the Judeo-Christian deity as their only source, the spread of an already ‘latent culture of nihilism’, intimately linked to the Christian worldview and its morality, got only accelerated.<sup>294</sup> Consequently, humanism will be for Nietzsche just a ‘life-giving mythology’, only that such a life would be one unworthy of that name, as it would still be linked to a deceptive ‘true world’ above and beyond the real one (Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, p. 51). It would correspond to a modernity that in its final stages might deserve to be called post-religious, but certainly not post-metaphysical (Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 9). We might therefore venture to posit Nietzsche’s ‘deadly hatred’ of Christianity in his view of modernity, and for the same basic reason: ‘because it created sublime words and gestures to throw over a horrible reality the cloak of justice, virtue, and divinity’ (*TWTP*, p. 364). His final word on the issue is inflexible: far from being an ‘absolute value’, the human being is merely an ‘accidental occurrence in the flux of becoming and passing away’ (p. 9).

After the end of WWII, humanism is essentially a discredited set of beliefs and attitudes. In the ideologically polarised, hyper-industrial, and nuclear-armed post-

---

*Houdebine, Guy Scarpetta*, Collection ‘Critique’ (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972), pp. 56-57, my English version. The original French: ‘dans une opposition philosophique classique, nous n’avons pas affaire à la coexistence pacifique d’un *vis-à-vis*, mais à une hiérarchie violente. Un des deux termes commande l’autre (axiologiquement, logiquement, etc.), occupe la hauteur.’ (original emphasis) The positive, privileged terms in these binaries are not natural but produced in discourse, and are conferred their supremacy through what Derrida calls ‘chains of connotation’ and ‘associative links’ (Currie, p. 49). Derrida argues that origins are always already contaminated by what in terms of pure causality would come after them, or they are alternatively reduced to a secondary degree of signification despite their chronological priority. This would involve a supplementarity of the terms comprised in any such binary structure (p. 135). On these grounds, postmodernism would always have shown a preference for ‘a liberation of difference from the confines of opposition,’ for the liberation of the forces reduced to a mere dyad by binaries, and for ‘the multiplication of difference’ (pp. 17, 87).

Max Silverman offers a telling explanation of Derrida’s rejection of violent binaries as ‘founded on a binary opposition of its own’ between ‘Jewish’ and ‘Hellenic’ which to Silverman’s mind has a nearly essentialist nature, turning ‘the Jew’, the ‘postmodern nomad par excellence’, into the ‘reified marker’ of ‘a new universalism’. Silverman does this in the context of a discussion of the continuity from the Enlightenment towards the Holocaust, and the ‘backlash’ to be found in French post-WWII ‘anti-humanist and deconstructionist philosophy’ (Silverman, pp. 19, 6, 24).

<sup>294</sup> David Michael Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 3-4.

Holocaust world, the tenets of humanism were widely perceived, at their best, as the quaint pieties of a few old men who felt nostalgia for a bygone past of Christian faith and bourgeois virtue. These would go on cherishing and defending the idea that knowledge of literature and the humanities, as focused on ‘a centre of excellence’ and capturing ‘essential elements of human experience,’ could still enhance the positive potential of mankind (Jenks, *Culture*, pp. 100-01). Yet, its major principle, as expressed in Protagoras’ dictum ‘man is the measure of all things’, deserved to be described, in Adorno’s wording, as ‘a tribal *folie de grandeur*.’ (Davies, p. 107)<sup>295</sup> Nietzsche would write of ‘the *hyperbolic naivete* of man’ in ‘positing himself as the meaning and measure of the value of things.’ (*TWTP*, p. 14, original emphasis) Beckett appears to be of a very similar turn of mind, as he defined humanism as ‘a word that one reserves for the times of the great massacres’ (Gibson, p. 11).

And yet, we cannot dismiss Protagoras’ formula and its relationship with Western modernity, as explicitly acknowledged by Heidegger: ‘That period we call modern . . . is defined by the fact that man becomes the center and measure of all beings.’ (Levin, p. 3) After the Holocaust, however, humanism’s ‘basic inability to guarantee the privileges of humanity of which humanism had considered itself the repository’ becomes manifest. In the wake of Auschwitz, a young Elie Wiesel could write how he felt ‘alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man.’ (Levinas, as cited in Eagleton, *Lit. Theory*, p. 318).<sup>296</sup> After the decolonisation of the 1950s and 1960s, Frantz Fanon feels legitimised to write about a traditionally humanist ‘Europe which never stops talking of man yet massacres him at every one of its street corners, at every corner of the world.’<sup>297</sup> As a consequence and according to Levinas, humanism should be denounced, if only because of not being ‘sufficiently human.’<sup>298</sup> It is now evident that humanism, which is to all intents and purposes an expression of Western metaphysics, cannot believe itself to hold and

---

<sup>295</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. by Robin A. H. Waterfield, Penguin Classics (London and New York: Penguin, 1987), p. 30.

<sup>296</sup><sup>296</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*, ed. and intro. by Harold Bloom, trans. by Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang: 2006), p. 68.

<sup>297</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004), p. 235.

<sup>298</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 1998; repr. 2006), p. 128.

represent any different, alternative values to those of the technological dispensation (Vattimo, p. 40).

The term ‘tribal’ as used by Adorno in his debunking the central tenet of humanism could also be understood in a more restricted sense as primarily related not to all of mankind, but rather to its Western section. According to its worldview and its ideal of ‘Man’, the rest of the human species could be compared, classified, judged and eventually exploited within a wide colonial and imperial framework. This is what Roland Barthes remarks in his *Mythologies*, where he denounces ‘the ambiguous myth of the human “community”, which serves as an alibi to a large part of our humanism’.<sup>299</sup> In postmodernity, there would obtain a ‘disorientation of history’ in that the past, the present and the future become the object of a refusal to be assessed according to a single orientation, that of Western humanism. In Lévi-Strauss’ terms, Western civilisation (humanism included therein) could only be understood now as merely one among the many ‘historical or geographical modes’ of man’s being. The opposite would be an exercise in naivety and ‘eurocentrism’: actually, the West is not a civilisation, but one among many *cultures* (and a plural, multicultural one at that), each of them being constituted by a distinct symbolic universe.<sup>300</sup>

In any case, according to Michel Foucault, who traces an entire ‘deconstructive archaeology’ of the concept, ‘man’ would be ‘only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old,’ and ‘the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge.’ Being one of the many normative, discursive ‘chimeras’ of all humanisms, an ‘invention of recent date’, and ‘perhaps nearing its end’, Man is very likely to disappear once those arrangements are reconfigured. Then, it might just ‘be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.’ (Davies, p. 70)<sup>301</sup> Being the outcome of the vectors composing a force-field or an ensemble of structures of which they are unaware, the human being is no longer the autonomous subject of Western Enlightenment (Finkielkraut, pp. 67-68). Accordingly, Ihab Hassan remarks how ‘five hundred years of humanism may be coming

---

<sup>299</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, tr.by Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday, 1972; repr. 1991), p. 100.

<sup>300</sup> Alain Finkielkraut, *La derrota del pensamiento*, trans. by Joaquín Jordá, Argumentos, 5th edn (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1990), pp. 63-64, my emphasis.

<sup>301</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Routledge Classics (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. xxv, 422.

to an end as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call post-humanism.’<sup>302</sup> Even more categorically, N. Katherine Hayles affirms: ‘we have always been posthuman.’ (Hayles, p. 291) Keith Ansell Pearson words this conviction in an even more radical way: ‘from its “origins” and even beyond cultural difference, the human has been constituted by technical evolution.’<sup>303</sup> The essentially unchanging subject of Western humanism is no longer.

Every form of humanism is therefore necessarily perspectival, in Nietzschean terminology.<sup>304</sup> In fact, Nietzsche, ‘the starting-point for many of the twentieth-century “antihumanisms”’, had already condemned humanism as a ‘delusion’ related to the ‘lack of historical sense’ of all philosophers, always ignorant of the fact that all there is in reality is becoming, not essences or eternal, objective ‘truths’. Thus, even mankind is nothing but a ‘figure of speech’ (*TGS*, p. 114; Davies, pp. 32-33, 37).<sup>305</sup> To Heidegger, because of its historical conditioning, humanism would only be a manifestation of metaphysics, therefore of nihilism, too: ‘humanism thinks metaphysically.’ (‘Letter on Humanism’, p. 237) Certainly, ‘metaphysics turns away from being, resulting in homelessness and alienation.’ (Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Phil.*, p. 97) Actually, by not setting the *humanitas* of man high enough, humanism is to be opposed (Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, pp. 233-34; Vattimo, p. 34).<sup>306</sup> What for centuries was taken for granted, namely human nature, now falls short of an immoral thought (Pinker, *Blank Slate*, p. 13).<sup>307</sup>

---

<sup>302</sup> As cited in Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1999), p. 1.

<sup>303</sup> Keith Ansell Pearson, *Viroid Life: Perspectives on Nietzsche and the Transhuman Condition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 4.

<sup>304</sup> For example, Tony Davies writes that ‘as Marx famously argued, the most powerful ideas in any epoch are the ideas of the powerful, and it requires no particular ingenuity to demonstrate that the essential human being tends in any period to bear a striking resemblance to the dominant group of that time and place.’ (p. 59)

<sup>305</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1996; repr. 2005), pp. 12-13.

<sup>306</sup> Tom Rockmore interprets Heidegger’s late ‘post-metaphysical’ antihumanism as ‘a turning away from personal responsibility’, which he earlier stressed through the notion of ‘resoluteness’, to ‘emphasis on Being as the ultimate historical agent.’ (*On Heidegger’s Nazism*, p. 11)

<sup>307</sup> Steven Pinker’s attitude toward the issue of human nature is not ambiguous:

Be that as it may, what cannot be doubted is that Molloy is not very appreciative of humanist positivities, given his narration of an incident he is involved in on leaving Lousse's town after his stay in her peculiar *bower of bliss*: after making up his mind, absurdly enough, to deliver a speech bound 'if not to offend at least to astonish' the complete unknown he tries to approach in the street, he bumps into 'a wealth of filthy detail', for which he apologises to the reader; before resuming his narration, he comments: '*homo mensura* can't do without staffage'. The sarcastic note is obvious, which is moreover enhanced by its setting: a paragraph besprinkled with abject lexicon in a wider frame which includes a suicide attempt in what seems to be the perfect metaphor of human life for Beckett: an alley covered by excrement (*TN*, pp. 55-58). If this were not enough, the episode in question also includes, as we already saw, a mention to the 'sweet music' of pre-established harmony (p. 57). In Molloy's universe, any cosmos divinely or metaphysically ordered appears to be a chaotic, scatologic puppet matinée.

In this respect, Molloy exemplifies a 'loss of innocence' that has taken place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and prevents us humans to believe any longer in any explanations of human experience as linked to our belonging to one and the same species.<sup>308</sup> This, which was

To acknowledge human nature, many think, is to endorse racism, sexism, war, greed, genocide, nihilism, reactionary politics, and neglect of children and the disadvantaged. Any claim that the mind has an innate organization strikes people not as a hypothesis that might be incorrect but as a thought it is immoral to think.

(*Blank Slate*, p. 13)

As opposed to language-oriented poststructuralism, which he describes as 'a cult, in which fantastical beliefs are flaunted as proof of one's piety' and which shows only contempt for the very concepts of 'truth, logic, and evidence', Pinker believes that there is still a chance for 'the new sciences of human nature' to lead the way to 'a realistic, biologically informed humanism. They expose the *psychological unity of our species* beneath the superficial differences of physical appearance and parochial culture.' (pp. 14-15, my emphasis)

<sup>308</sup> Related to this belief in the irrelevance of any cultural constraints derived from our common biological constitution and, therefore, a common human nature, Alain Finkielkraut denounces an attitude prevalent in the West since the end of WWII and even more so after decolonisation took place in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: our postmodern time would be presided over not only by a diversity of cultures, but also by the equivalence and the lack of any hierarchy among different cultural identities. Any community of conscience among humans would thus have been negated and abolished. The French philosopher puts this down to a feeling of guilt and a will to expiation on the part of the former colonial powers and, ultimately, to the rehabilitation of German political and cultural Romanticism. This stance would be embodied by Herder and the same irrationalist and reactionary arguments the German romantic movement made use of in its ideological combat against the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Hence, made up of individuals chained to their respective cultures by the unbreakable bonds of language and history in the form of tradition,

characteristic of humanism, is impossible at the ‘impasse’ at which Western humanism has arrived by the time Beckett is writing his *Three Novels*. Our only certainty, in Eric P. Levy’s words, is ‘the falseness of all interpretive structures’, humanism included. If we consider that these are essential to avoid ‘the radical unintelligibility of human experience without them’, we must agree that our situation is very serious indeed: in Moran’s graphic and abject expression, ‘that of the turd waiting for the flush.’ (*TN*, p. 156)<sup>309</sup>

A similar example of this loss of innocence comes in the conclusion that Molloy reaches through a ‘divine’ analysis of his own verbosity: the awareness of his incapability to stay silent ‘conduces to knowledge of yourself and of your fellow-men, *if you happen to have any.*’ (p. 30, my emphasis) If we follow E. P. Levy’s understanding of humanism, the relevant question as regards self-knowledge is not ‘Who am I?’, but ‘What is man?’, i.e. who I am as a member of my species, as a human being (Levy, p. 70). This makes more understandable the otherwise strange qualification that Molloy introduces with regard to having ‘fellow-men’. Implicitly, he would be pointing to the fact that, so far in his abject life, he may have turned into something ontologically different: not merely an outcast, but a *monster*, an abhuman.<sup>310</sup>

The concept of the abhuman, if not strictly the term itself, is due to Kelly Hurley, who fashioned it by building on Kristeva’s idea of the abject over the course of her study of Gothic fiction. According to Hurley, the abhuman is the condition of a character who has developed into ‘a not-quite-human subject’, whose body has become ‘metamorphic and undifferentiated’, and who is ‘continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other.’<sup>311</sup> It is the product of a nontelic process that is an expression of the ‘ruination’ of both ‘the human subject’ and of ‘constructs of human identity’, a ‘defamiliarization and

mankind could only be inflected in the plural as an assortment of peoples or ethnicities (Finkelkraut, pp. 67-68, 17, 14).

<sup>309</sup> Eric P. Levy, *Beckett and the Voice of Species: A Study of the Prose Fiction*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980), p. 10.

<sup>310</sup> Molloy could be charged with being a monster on yet another, non-psychoanalytic account: as ‘a being whose survival is incompatible with the existing order.’ (Denis Diderot, as cited in Bernstein, p. 24).

<sup>311</sup> Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality: Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1996), pp. 3-4.



violent reconstitution of the human subject’, whose subjectivity is ‘fragmented and permeable.’ (Hurley, pp. 3-4, 10, 125)

If Kristeva’s abject, furthermore, is an abased castaway whom we understand to be both a threat and a promise to our own human identity and whose sight awakens both revulsion and a morbid allure in us, in the abhuman we find a welcomed confrontation with the boundaries of the human self, delighting in the dark, unimaginable and forbidden pleasures coming from the metamorphosis it undergoes. It expresses both a nostalgia for the lost unity and wholeness of the human subject, and yet also the thrill of the unthinkable other-than-human (p. 4).

This could be a useful interpretative tool in order to make sense of Molloy’s doubts about his supposed humanity (‘I’m human, *I fancy*’), as well as to his statement that he is ‘the last of my foul brood, *neither man nor beast.*’ (*TN*, pp. 72, 15, my emphasis in both cases) An event of paramount importance in this regard is Moran’s meeting, during his quest, someone whom we may well suspect to be Molloy. In this episode, Molloy is presented as an inhuman ‘fabulous being’ rather than a man proper. In fact, Moran finds him to be a disturbing negative of himself: his very opposite, his own ‘dark self’, his doppelgänger, someone he may already have invented or even found ready-made in his head. Moreover, this last conclusion would already have been confirmed by his evocation of Molloy while still at home, before setting off after him. This is a turning point where Moran’s initial purpose shifts into a different one, whereby he gets more and more transformed into the abject, perturbingly alluring mode of being that Molloy embodies. Through this process, since the abject is that which is opposed to ‘I’, Moran increasingly experiences a dispossession of his former self, achieving the fulfilment of his mission through his very disintegration. In fact, both characters tend to overlap all through their narration (*POH*, p. 1; Andrew K. Kennedy, pp. 116-20; *TN*, pp. 140-41, 106-08, 143).

Their metamorphoses into the abhuman also cast light on the puzzling and shocking bliss, ecstasy and abandon with which Molloy and above all Moran experience their progressive paralysis, to the point of being able to move only with the help of crutches or eventually by crawling. This process could also explain their longing for a complete loss of

the sense of self, full oblivion or absolute ignorance: to disappear into a *cloud of unknowing*.<sup>312</sup>

A clue to this abhumanity may be found in Heidegger, for whom the defining human feature is not reason, but the capacity for speech; in fact, in Heidegger's thought speech may well precede 'man' as an embodiment of and a vehicle for Being, man remaining a mere window to it: 'Humans are finite. Being is not.' The two cannot be reconciled (Marmysz, p. 64).<sup>313</sup> On meeting Molloy along his way, Moran has this insight into his abhuman model, when he comments on his accent as being that of 'one who had lost the habit of speech', this being the outcome of his life-long, unhumanising quest for his mother (Weller, *Taste for the Negative*, p. 99; *TN*, p. 140). On coming back to a ruined home after his failed mission, which has nonetheless brought him to resemble his quarry very closely, Moran still has enough traces of the paternal, symbolic order left in him to very vocally disparage it by addressing the issue of abhumanity: 'I have been a man long enough, I shall not put up with it any more'. Even the starting point in his metamorphosis may not have been the human, as early in the second part of *Molloy* he describes his life as a 'contrivance' and, above all, as a '*contraption*' (*TN*, pp. 169, 109, my emphasis).

Another embodiment of abhumanity would be Macmann, who is described by Malone, his creator, as 'a great *cylinder* endowed with the faculties of cognition and volition.' (pp. 169, 239, my emphasis) Here, parody of rationalist metaphysics would go along with sheer deprecation of humanity and humanism: 'man' interpreted *sub specie aeternitatis*; to wit, not as a contingently social, cultural or historical agent, but rather as a geometrical organisation of matter plus a few mental faculties analogous to the lobster's pincers or the elephant's trunk in their species-defining potential.

In any case, after the thinkers of the school of suspicion, the fact of being human does not appear to be any special privilege conferred on God's presumably favourite creature.

---

<sup>312</sup> For example, when Molloy expresses his longing for a situation in which one can 'know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in'. In this expression, an echo of Schopenhauer might be heard: when he refers to the state when the will has been subdued, he uses the expression 'that peace that is higher than all reason' (*WWRI*, p. 411). Another example would be that when Moran, ruminating on 'the advantages of a local and painless paralysis', remarks how 'to be literally incapable of motion at last, that must be something! My mind swoons when I think of it.' (*TN*, pp. 59, 134)

<sup>313</sup> Heidegger, 'The Way to Language', in *Basic Writings*, pp. 393-426 (p. 397): 'The capacity to speak distinguishes the human being as a human being. Such a distinguishing mark bears in itself the very design of the human essence.' As we will see later, language speaks through man, not the opposite.

Rather, it would mean being related to a number of species generally known as apes, across which hierarchical social structure is a common feature, one which determines a different share of the means available for the satisfaction of the individual's basic needs within the group. This social organisation is upheld by brute force when necessary, which reveals might as its ultimate foundation. We would therefore be living in the planet of the capitalist apes, the apes being ourselves. This is certainly not very flattering as a conclusion.<sup>314</sup> With his talent for laconic, sarcastic debunking, Molloy summarises: 'Human nature. Marvellous thing.' (p. 31)

Freud, moreover, assesses the specifically 'human' components of our condition as not very praise-deserving, either: the further away from our original animality we have fared as a species, the unhappier we have grown; animals, in lacking self-consciousness and reflection, are spared the torture of care, anxiety, expectations and deceived hope.<sup>315</sup> As Cioran explains, we have only slid from the animal condition into mankind because of an initial defect: we are all *marked* animals (*Cahiers*, p. 551, my translation, original emphasis).<sup>316</sup> Having departed from this inglorious starting point, the price to pay for any advance in civilisation would have been 'loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt', guilt eventually becoming 'the most important problem in the development of civilization' (Freud, *Discontents*, p. 81). Thus, reason, the ultimate foundation of the Enlightenment project that Freud remained so loyal to throughout his entire life, in that it is destructive of illusions, must be judged as cumulatively conducive to unhappiness. 'Thought is after all nothing but a substitute for a hallucinatory wish;' a mere 'roundabout path to wish-fulfilment which has been made necessary by experience', thus allowing for gratification of desire in reality rather than through delusion.

---

<sup>314</sup> In an exercise of brilliant, ultra-negative imagination worthy of Borges (see e.g. 'El Inmortal', in *El Aleph*), Cioran goes a step beyond and imagines a hypothetical development in which mankind, after the fall out of eternity and into time that the human condition implies, eventually falls out of temporality into what he calls 'posthistory'. In this dimension, becoming is suspended and we sink into the inert. In the quagmire of posthistory, in a condition where 'we would be neither human nor animal', we would worship our current temporal world as a lost paradise, (as cited in Dienstag, p. 147, n. 18). We would therefore long for an ape paradise.

<sup>315</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, 'Additional Remarks on the Doctrine of the Suffering of the World', in *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, trans. by E.F.J. Payne, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), II (repr. 2000), 291-305 (pp. 294, 296).

<sup>316</sup> The French original: 'je crois que l'homme est un animal *marqué*, qu'il est réellement affecté d'une tare initiale, et c'est grâce à elle qu'il a glissé de la condition animale à la condition humaine.'

To make things worse, the process is irreversible: ‘our animal past is a homeland to which we can never return.’ There is no way back to the unrestricted sovereignty of the pleasure principle experienced in early childhood (Dienstag, pp. 28, 95, 129).<sup>317</sup> Drawn by a sort of centrifugal force, the more mankind has sought its true nature, the more it has distanced itself from it (Cioran, *Cahiers*, p. 552, my translation).<sup>318</sup> The more humans have repressed the inclinations proper to the pleasure principle in order to gain security and stability for their lives, the more ‘terrified’ they have stuck together in their little towns (such as the one obscenely named Bally, in *Molloy*) where they have combined their efforts to defend themselves from the potential threat of their innermost natures. Moran, Molloy’s disciple in the task of becoming an abject abhuman, personifies this threat. Against him and those like him, the lights of culture, civilisation, conscience and reason, all of them being the outcome of mankind’s ‘flight from reality’, are only like those of Bally to Moran, who sees them in the distance as ‘flickering’. That is why he allows himself to abjectly crawl out of the woods and ‘have a good laugh at’ them and their half-hearted, vacillating nature (Neiman, p. 235; *TN*, pp. 156-57).

This image of terrified men living inside their discursive den is subject to some subtle variation in Malone’s evocation of modernity as humanism’s nemesis by way of an urban landscape reminding us of T. S. Eliot’s nightmare of a bleak early morning by London Bridge: memories of ‘the corridors of the underground railway and the stench of the *harassed mobs scurrying from cradle to grave* to get to the right place at the right time.’ (*TN*, p. 220, my emphasis)<sup>319</sup> There is no hope of self-fulfilment through the free exercise

---

<sup>317</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), p. 606.

<sup>318</sup> The original French: ‘[...] cette force centrifuge, cette force funeste qui l’éloigne de lui-même; plus il cherche sa vraie nature, plus il s’en écarte’.

<sup>319</sup> See Eliot, *The Waste Land*:

Unreal City,  
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
 I had not thought death had undone so many.

(Book I, ‘The Burial of the Dead’, 60-63 (p. 7))

of our human potentialities in modern mass society and mass culture. Instead, these would be the perfect emblem of ‘the reification of the world’ and of a tendency towards ‘the subhuman and the mechanized’, according to Adorno. What is more, ‘by creating a passive audience peculiarly responsive to the techniques of mass persuasion used by demagogues’, mass culture would be encouraging ‘totalitarianism’ (as cited in Weller, *Uncanniest*, pp. 4, 74; Jenks, *Culture*, pp. 106, 112).<sup>320</sup> This would be a world presided over by productivity as the ratio between input and output, and by the basic premise of political economy, namely that an economic agent will behave rationally by taking that course of action that will render them the highest profit at the lowest cost, maximising their utility: the rationality axiom.<sup>321</sup> The *rational* corollary to this is that even the human being has been made into a replaceable commodity. Thus, If Eliot’s was a Wasteland deprived of a few million young men offered in holocaust to the infernal deities of nothingness in their muddy trenches just a few years before, Beckett’s (or Malone’s) is one where two young men, ‘decent, quiet, harmless’, are assassinated in the orgy of violence that, unleashed by Malone as narrator, puts an end to his tale. Despite both world wars, despite Shoah, Malone nevertheless concludes: ‘there are [still] billions of such *brutes*.’ (*TN*, p. 280, my emphasis) The *nature* (or, in Moran’s terms, the *custom*) of such still-standing brutes would consist in being exploited since boyhood or, according to circumstance and if need be, in eventually ending up as cannon fodder under a storm of steel in a trench by the Somme, or else in a gas chamber somewhere in Poland.<sup>322</sup>

If modernity is humanism’s nemesis, modernism (Eliot is our witness) also defies the centuries-long doctrine of Protagoras and his Christian followers (in spite of Eliot being a Christian). As a result, an ideal of geometrical impersonality opposes nature’s messiness, just in the same way as ‘revulsion against the human’ is a reaction against ‘humanist sentimentality’, described by Ezra Pound as ‘an old bitch gone in the teeth’, itself a part of

---

<sup>320</sup> It must be remarked, though, that the so-called mass culture is considered by some to be a conservative ‘political myth’, a ‘rhetorical weapon’, not a ‘descriptive category’ (Jenks, *Culture*, p. 113).

<sup>321</sup> Neva Goodwin, and others, *Principles of Economics in Context* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 178.

<sup>322</sup> In the course of some otherwise irrelevant rambling on his mental habits, Moran, in a meaningful slip of the tongue, says: ‘it was not my *nature*, I mean it was not my *custom* [...]’ (*TN*, p. 143, my emphasis)

‘a botched civilization’<sup>323</sup>. In a substantially equivalent, if toned-down wording, Virginia Woolf will conclude: ‘Either we are cold, or we are sentimental’ (Davies, pp. 48-49; Oser, p. 23). This penchant for ‘cold’ geometry is expressed through modernism’s aesthetic ‘privileging of the individual artwork and its unitary organization’ (Butler, *Postmodernism*, p. 31). Nevertheless, the most salient feature of modernist literature could be, according to Karl Löwith, the fact that in it ‘the human being as such disappears.’ (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 79) The huge importance of this development can be properly gauged by considering that ‘the human’ had hitherto been, according to Erich Auerbach, ‘the central topic of European literature’ (as cited in Davies, p. 53). In its fictional sphere, ‘modern man’ would be synonymous with Robert Musil’s ‘man without qualities’: namely, ‘a nihilist’.<sup>324</sup> That would be, paraphrasing Moran, ‘the kind of man I have become’, the outcome of two millennia of ‘exploits of the human race in its slow ascension towards the light’ (*TN*, p. 125). The light of the deflagrations of mammoth artillery firing for days on end on the Western front; the impersonal bulb light flickering on the frantic convulsions of shell-shocked soldiers in post-war hospital wards; the flames of the crematoria surging forth grimly in the endless night of the soul that prompts a pious Jewish boy called Élie Wiesel to curse his hitherto beloved God.<sup>325</sup> Thus, ‘modern apocalypse’, understood as ‘an explosion of time in a void of meaning,’ outgrew both God and Man.<sup>326</sup>

---

<sup>323</sup> Ezra Pound, ‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberley’, in *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1957), p. 89, lines 45-46.

<sup>324</sup> Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, trans. by Burton Pike (New York: Vintage International, 1996), p. 1334.

<sup>325</sup> Élie Wiesel, *Night*, pp. 33-34:

‘Why should I sanctify His name? The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent. What was there to thank Him for?’; ‘Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever [...] Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.’

<sup>326</sup> Steve Erickson, as cited in Slocombe, p. 170.

## Chapter 6 – Thematic Analysis: *The Unnamable*

### 6.1 – Textuality and Ontological Nightmare

The final title in Beckett's *Molloy Trilogy*, while sharing some features with the two earlier ones, stands alone as a final narrative tour de force (if narrative it is at all) on a nameless character about whose nature many theories have been put forward by critics. Indeed, it / he is that strangest of beings: one who fears and loathes the very idea of being born, presumably into mankind, or even just into mere indefinite existence. He expresses his horror for this prospect in an unending soliloquy, the last and by far largest part of which is a single, exhausting paragraph. This soliloquy, until he is born (if that is his destiny after all), confirms him to be but a borrowed voice and vocabulary: 'I'm in words, made of words, others' words'; 'I have no language but theirs' (*TN*, pp. 379, 319).

Therefore, despite the avatars he imagines for himself in order to narratively make sense of what he is (if he is at all in a proper sense, which he doubts and we may too), it is language that is constitutive of his existence of sorts: psychoanalytic considerations aside, he is but a textual entity, carved out of logorrhea and manifesting itself in an unstoppable 'frenzy of utterance', a compulsion to speak (McDonald, p. 103; *TN*, pp. 293, 295). It is words that pronounce him alive and show him how to be. Apart from this, he has neither essence nor existence proper (p. 329). At the end of his soliloquy, he has to admit, there is nothing in it but 'all words, there is nothing else.' (p. 407)

Furthermore, the Unnamable is ontologically alienated from himself in that he ascribes this borrowed language to a vaguely evoked 'college' of vapid half-deities or 'tyrants' presided over by an incompetent demiurge, a sort of Elohim posing as the supreme Lord of a council of lesser gods:

there may be more than one, a whole college of tyrants, differing in their views as to what should be done with me, in conclave since time began or a little later, listening to me from time to time, then breaking up for a meal or a game of cards) ...

(p. 304).<sup>327</sup>

It is by the (lack of) grace of this demiurgical gang of metaphysical ‘tormenters’ that the Unnamable exists, and it is they who are to blame for the criminal project of wanting him to be born; criminal indeed, because, even if he is not a ‘man’ proper, it can be said of him what Simone de Beauvoir writes while thinking of humans: ‘man feels horror at having been engendered; [...] through the fact of his birth murderous Nature has a hold upon him.’ (McDonald, p. 103; *TN*, p. 329).<sup>328</sup> In this respect, rather than abhuman or posthuman, the Unnamable deserves to be held as inhuman or not-yet-properly-human. ‘Awakened to life out of the night of unconsciousness,’ his existence must therefore be described as vestigial, tendential or incomplete (*WWR2*, p. 573; Hutchings, p. 98).

Taking this into account, it is not difficult to understand the Unnamable’s hostility towards the language that has been infused into him and that subordinates him to his ‘makers’, as well as towards the very naming of his ‘delegates’ or avatars (he himself lacks a proper name) that is based on it (McDonald, p. 104). In the end, the Unnamable is living an absurd ontological nightmare, whereby he is summoned from nothingness for the dubious prospect of undergoing life’s most ‘overwhelmingly salient characteristic’, according to Schopenhauer: suffering (Young, p. 34; Neiman, p. 107) Thus,

No one asks him to think, simply to suffer - always in the same way, without hope of diminution, without hope of dissolution. It's no more complicated than that: no need to think in order to despair.

(*TN*, p. 361)

---

<sup>327</sup> Psalm 82:1, 6: ‘God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods. [...] I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High.’ *The Holy Bible*, pp. 1388-89.

<sup>328</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. by H.M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953; repr. 1956), p. 166.



While speculating that this horror may be due to only one ‘god’ rather than to a bunch of them, he compares his creation with ‘abominable, downright masturbation’ in that ‘he might get mixed up with his victim’: the providential, or even Christological implication is quite clear (p. 354). Thus, it would not be enough for the demiurge to irresponsibly spurt the suffering universe out of his para-divine loins, but he might still have to become base flesh in order to save ‘his creatures’. Christ or no Christ, however, it is clear for the Unnamable that the demiurge, ‘ravening in heaven a sporting god’, can only be expected to plague his propitiatory victims ‘per pro his chosen shits’, that is the ‘herd of shites’, the ‘devils’ that beset the Unnamable on his behalf (pp. 332, 376, 341). Regardless of what the Unnamable’s sufferings might ultimately consist of, false consciousness would not be one of them, neither the Stockholm syndrome.

Thinking of the Unnamable’s alienation in more historical and political terms, he could also be understood in the terms of Giorgio Agamben’s theory of ‘bare life’, already dealt with at the beginning of this thesis. As subject to the demiurge’s ‘thanatopolitics’, the Unnamable could pass for an allegory of the average postmodern Western human. I find this theory far-fetched in its political lineaments, however, preferring to think of the Unnamable’s nature in strictly metaphysical terms. Indeed, whereas Agamben’s theory is predicated of biological, physical existence, the Unnamable and his different avatars quite conspicuously appear to be entities floating in a limbo before a sort of birth that is not too clearly human. If anything, we could stretch and force Agamben’s argument into a metaphysical application thereof, according to which we might envisage the Unnamable’s uncanny abode being the space where the demiurge’s sovereign, tyrannical, whimsy and incompetent power would be exerted; or in other terms, that space would be a metaphysical Lager under the demiurge’s rule, his devils harassing his victim as so many SS officers or barrack kapos, depriving him of privacy, leaving him ‘constantly exposed’ to an arbitrary source of brute force (Noys, pp. 31, 42).

Considering his incomplete ontological condition, not only Mahood and Worm, who are presented from the start as false, provisional and symbolic stand-ins for the protagonist, but also Molloy, Moran, Malone and Macmann might be counted among his vice-existents or ‘delegates’ (McDonald, p. 103; Weller, *Taste for the Negative*, p. 107; *TN*, pp. 289, 309). These could be seen as so many attempts at a unified, coherent, nameable identity, of course only to be dismissed in the end: initially seen as part of him, they might also appear

as obstacles for the Unnamable's 'self-expression' and his ultimate goal: self-integration (McDonald, pp. 106-07; Weller, *Taste for the Negative*, p. 107). Merging with his 'avatars', shifting from one to another, ever contradicting himself, he gets more and more fragmented and elusive, eventually disintegrating into a 'multiplicity of irreconcilable voices'. (McDonald, p. 104; Weller, *Taste for the Negative*, p. 105).<sup>329</sup> This is a sign of the evolution undergone in *The Unnamable* from late modernism towards 'the ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction,' as well as of the tendentially postmodernist 'ontological uncertainty about the contradictory nature of the world' projected by Beckett's text (Butler, *Postmodernism*, p. 69; McHale, *Postm. Fiction*, p. 10).

The Unnamable's referring to all of his avatars either in the first or the third person contributes to an overall effect of confusion under a verbal deluge not only in the reader, but also in the narrator, blurring the distinction between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration all through the novel. It could even be maintained that the Unnamable cannot be held to be a true narrator, as in his tale 'narrative distance' just collapses (*TN*, p. 348; Pattie, p. 69). From a certain moment on, which might be pinpointed as the beginning of the novel's unending last paragraph, the mechanical, 'deterministic flow' of language, the 'intensification of utterance' contributes to this confusing effect, too, making the Unnamable's selfhood even more 'suspended and contingent' (McDonald, p. 108). Thus, it is no coincidence that the paragraph in question starts with the following confession: 'I, of whom I know nothing' (*TN*, p. 298, my emphasis).

## 6.2 – Blanchot: The Worklessness of Language and the Aporia of the 'I'

We might conclude, along with Maurice Blanchot, that the speaking voice in *The Unnamable* does not correspond to either a character or a subject, but rather to the 'worklessness' or 'unworking' of an empty speech articulated from an empty place, that of an empty 'I'.<sup>330</sup> Behind this ontological heterogeneity, rather than a subjectivity proper,

---

<sup>329</sup> Although Weller makes this comment on *Malone Dies*, I think it is perfectly applicable to *The Unnamable*, too.

<sup>330</sup> The Unnamable makes this point very clear at the very end of his narrative: 'I, say I. Unbelieving.' (*TN*, p. 285).

there would only be a ‘being without being’, ‘neither body nor soul,’ unable either to die or to live (*TN*, p. 406).<sup>331</sup> In Blanchot’s terminology, he would be ‘a subjectivity without a subject’, a ‘consciousness attached to no particular body or agency’, although sometimes exhibiting ‘a kind of compromised interiority’ radically disruptive of what has traditionally been thought of as the ground of human identity: desire, power, discourse. (Adelman, p. 89; Boulter, p. 129).<sup>332</sup>

Consequently, the Unnamable’s existence is not even solipsistic, as he is a divided entity, dispossessed of an ever more elusive ‘I’ by his heteronomous, faulty language. To him, his unbelieved-in ‘I’ is nothing but that ‘cursed first person’. In the end, ‘I’ is an aporia for him: he pronounces this word without even knowing what it means (*TN*, pp. 285, 336; Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 173).

Yet, his resolve (ephemeral, like all his resolutions) to replace it with the third person will not achieve anything, either: the nightmarish proliferation of ‘I’s throughout his narration is not unimportant with regard to this alienation, that of a consciousness without identity, lost in the midst of a throng of inauthentic simulacra of his own true self, which is ultimately nowhere to be found. Hence, he cannot be defined but as a multiply split subject with ‘no thickness’, ‘in the middle’ of nowhere, between ‘two [black] holes’ (*TN*, pp. 348; 376).

### 6.3 – Metalinguistic and Ontological Simulacrum

In *The Unnamable*, the narrator comes across as an abstract personification of the narrative function, a metalinguistic, metanarrative subject (G<sup>a</sup> Landa, pp. 60, 56, 49). Thus,

---

In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, this heterogeneity of identity is alternatively explained as deriving from the fact that we borrow it from the symbolic order, yet we are treated as if our identity was something inherent to our very being; this is not the case, though: it is the signifiers around us that constitute identity (Easthope, pp. 59-60). In this way, one neither thinks nor speaks, but rather is thought and spoken (Davies, p. 60).

<sup>331</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Work to Come*, trans. by Charlotte Mandel (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003), p. 213.

<sup>332</sup> Terry Eagleton, ‘Self-Undoing Subjects’, in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. by Roy Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 262-69 (p. 268).

he has no 'I' until he says the word; and as soon as said, this 'I' becomes the subject of an empty utterance doomed to meaninglessness (Pattie, pp. 69-70). In this sense, unlike other Beckettian (anti-) heroes, who are trapped within a skull, subjected to their solipsistic consciousness, the Unnamable lives trapped within an uncontrollable narrative (p. 70). Searching for self-definition by way of telling stories, he soon becomes overwhelmed by their own narrative thrust; later trying to break free from the need to tell them, he cannot but tell yet more stories: narrative is the chain that ties him in an unbreakable vicious circle (p. 72).

As opposed to his precursors in the earlier novels of the *Trilogy*, even his vice-existents contribute to the strengthening of this chain with yet another link by telling him stories about himself and his rather unlikely family (*TN*, pp. 303, 312-ff.). Drowning in the two-way flow of meaningless stories, he resigns himself to go on shitting, literally, some more on his avatars (p. 373). The scatological twist is related to the driving force of the entire circular process, namely his tormenters: 'I shall transmit the words as received [...] roared through a trumpet into the arsehole'. After all, the nature of this process is not different from 'the rest of the shit' and the indignity his metalinguistic existence of sorts essentially consists in (p. 343). If there were any doubts about this assessment, the Unnamable hammers the scatological note home: 'shit' is 'the right word' (p. 359).

Speaking of shit, and in the same way as the Unnamable wants to kill his mother (regardless of lacking a proper one), his anal dejections (of which there are several examples throughout the novel, despite his lack of a human body) stand for a 'mastered *repetition* of a more archaic separation (from the maternal body)' that, in his case, has not taken place (*POH*, p. 108; *TN*, pp. 285, 331, 373). In this, we could compare him to a machine that, despite having been provided with the software for abjection from the mother and growth into separate subjectivity, has not been fed the data for it. An abyss separates him from the flesh and blood of a true pre-subject. He is denied even the comforts of the imaginary order: the intimate, warm, soothing rhythms of the semiotic while still in the maternal chora. Quite simply, he does not know any such thing. In the end, he is but a simulacrum of a human existent.

#### 6.4 – Subjectivity: Unnameability vs. the Cogito

In his inhumanity, there remains nothing of the ‘sovereignty of rational consciousness’ or of the ‘authenticity of individual speech’ in the Unnamable: he does not think, but he is thought; he does not speak either, he is spoken instead (Davies, p. 60). The consolations and certainties of humanist selfhood and subjectivity are not available to our metaphysical antihero. Punning on Descartes’ exit out of the maze of methodical doubt, the Unnamable could truly say about himself *loquor ergo sum* (Hutchings, p. 106).

All in all, the Unnamable is constituted as an inarticulate point of proliferation of indistinct, empty, senseless, meaningless words in the half-baked, labyrinthine, punitive dimension that he inhabits (*TN*, p. 308). In this, we can see an invective against the traditional Western sense of selfhood as expressed in the Cartesian cogito. Thus, if the ‘philosophical *cogito*’ is ‘at the center of the mirage that renders modern man so sure of being himself even in his uncertainties about himself’, subjectivity as self-awareness becomes relentlessly fragmented here (G<sup>a</sup> Landa, pp. 50, 53-54; Donald E. Hall, p. 82). The ultimate outcome and reward of the Unnamable’s quest for his true self is but an aggravation of those of the previous narrators of the *Trilogy*: he lives in a gallery of mirages, a Borgesian labyrinth of mirrors. The Unnamable’s very namelessness or unnameability is very significant in this respect. At the same time, this plural, indeterminate ontological condition, ‘its own identity swallowed up in difference, each of its several avatars and many voices being no more than a difference between differences’, (hence existing as their multiple reflections, and inhabiting ‘a labyrinth without a thread’, just like Borges’ Minotaur), makes the Unnamable a perfect representative of what Deleuze believes to be literature’s philosophical potential ‘to distort representation, to convey movement, flux and multiplicity’ in a more telling and efficient way than philosophy itself (Currie, p. 63).<sup>333</sup>

---

<sup>333</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton, Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers (London and New York: Continuum, 1994; repr. 2001), p. 56.

Like Asterion, Borges’ Minotaur, the Unnamable believes he is ‘unique’; like Asterion’s house, the Unnamable’s is also ‘the size of the world; or rather, it is the world’; like the Minotaur, he also expects and waits for redemption: Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The House of Asterion’, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, trans. by James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 138-40 (pp. 138-39).

In this way, the Unnamable would be dismantling Descartes' confidence in consciousness 'by exposing the fissure between the thinking "I" and the being "I".' There cannot be any 'coherence' or 'continuity' in the Unnamable's problematic subjectivity (McDonald, p. 104). Rather than a spontaneous, autonomous, self-sufficient consciousness and free will, in the Unnamable we find an exemplary objectification of the Lacanian contention that it is ultimately language that 'subordinates the subject to its own orders' (Bristow, p. 88). The subject is always '*subjected* to the meanings and sentence structures that language permits', as well as to its 'accepted signifiers' (Belsey, p. 37, original emphasis). That is the framework within which all our beliefs and convictions are allowed and contained: the subject originates nothing (p. 73). Through the subject, in Heidegger's terms, 'it is language *alone* that properly speaks' ('The Way to Lang.', p. 423, original emphasis).

## 6.5 – Proto-Poststructuralism and Proto-Postmodernism

That language is constitutive of the Unnamable's problematic identity or self, which makes him a mere syntactic slot, a barely functional 'I' rather than a moral unity centrally constituted around a hypostatic 'human nature', historical experience, personal memory or objective value, is a proto-poststructuralist insight of Beckett's. Because of their arguably being his vice-existents or avatars, this might be retrospectively applied to the protagonists of the two previous novels in the *Trilogy* sequence, too (Weller, *Taste for the Negative*, p. 107). In itself, this is nothing new, as it reaches back as far as poststructuralism's forerunner, Friedrich Nietzsche, or even to his major early influence, Arthur Schopenhauer. Thus, 'I' would only be one of those words we use 'at the point at which our ignorance begins', a 'grammatical custom' marking a 'strong belief' in a unity where there is only multiplicity. The speaking 'I' would only *seem* to be an individual because of 'a general defect of grammar which has to rely on pronouns'. The subject would not be a given, but something added, invented: a fiction predicated on its 'continual transitoriness and fleetingness' (*TWTP*, pp. 267-68, 271; Pothast, p. 179, original emphasis). In postmodernity, the self can only be construed as 'a decentred network rather than a mysteriously elusive spirit.' Any quest for true self or 'the truth of the subject' is doomed to have to face the fact that, once we enter language and the symbolic order, the self is

irremediably ‘divided up into an unending chain of partial meanings.’ (Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, pp. 17, 52) The multiplicity of ‘I’ is consistent with the poststructuralist concept of difference, which establishes the division of the signifier from the signified. According to Terry Eagleton:

Since the meaning of a sign is a matter of what the sign is *not*, its meaning is always in some sense absent from it too. Meaning, if you like, is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers.

(Eagleton, *Lit. Theory*, p. 128, original emphasis.)

In the end, as there is ‘no longer a closed system of meaning’, there appears ‘an open horizon’ with an ‘infinity of possibilities and substitutions, with no certainty provided for the subject’ (Jenks, *Culture*, p. 197).

According to Julia Kristeva and as opposed to Freud’s ‘unitary subject’, subjectivity can only be understood as being ‘always in the making and remaking’, something that challenges the humanist ‘assumption of a unified self and an integrated consciousness.’ (as cited in Donald E. Hall, p. 99; Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. xii). Moreover, subjectivity would be understood by poststructuralism not only as constituted, but also controlled, ‘subject-ed’ by ‘ideologically motivated discourses of power’ which are dominant in the societies inhabited by such subjects (Butler, *Postmodernism*, p. 50). In the Unnamable’s case, these discourses would correspond to the demiurge’s inscrutable decrees and to those of his retinue of harassing demons.

These features, as well as the dismissal of the traditional conventions of the genre (plot, character, a minimal spatio-temporal setting, etc.), place *The Unnamable* on the very threshold of postmodernism. Indeed, if postmodernism, according to Lyotard, is an attempt at presenting ‘the unrepresentable’, understood as non-representational, heterogeneous and undecidable, we have a case in point here (Armstrong, pp. 175, 184, 192, 194; Pattie, p. 128).

## 6.6 – Inauthenticity, Abjection and Nihilism

The Unnamable's fragmentation and 'unpresentability' is clear from his own formulation of self-identity: 'I'm ready to be whatever they want' (*TN*, p. 341). This is the only possible answer he can give to the essential questions he poses himself at the very beginning of his narration, most notably 'Who now?' Such questions can only be futile, nothing meaningful can come out of them. The Unnamable makes them only 'unquestioning', and certainly 'unbelieving' either in them or in their possible answers. He winds up endlessly revolving around a central negativity made explicit in the prefix 'un-'.<sup>334</sup>

Even more explicitly, while in the middle of one of his inconsequential ramblings, he says: 'There at least is a first affirmation, *I mean negation*, on which to build.' (p. 333, my emphasis) For all of his repeated uttering of the magical word embodying self-identity, this 'constructive' spirit of his can only lead to the negation of any 'I' whatsoever: 'I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me.' (p. 285) Both generated by and alienated from the words he continuously spills on the inexistent page that Beckett transcribes, without ever grasping any meaning in their never-ending, thoughtless repetition, he ultimately does not feel involved in what those words might imply in terms of self-awareness or self-definition: 'I don't care a curse about what I just said.' (p. 297) This prevents him from ever reaching even a shadow of his own identity, which in his case, as we already saw when writing about Blanchot, might be just lacking. What is more, in the midst of his doubts about his identity, the Unnamable might feel like Cioran in *A Short History of Decay*: unable to pronounce the fatal word, 'I', without shame.<sup>334</sup>

Everything that the Unnamable says throughout the novel, especially about himself, must therefore be taken with a grain of salt, as uttered by an either expressly or tacitly self-negating 'I' which will not endorse the meaningfulness of any of the terms of its own discourse. After all, this should be considered the normal outcome of having been 'glutted' with lies by the cohort of demonic underlings of a defective undergod presiding over a black hell where truth can never find any foundation: there where he neither lives nor dies, everything is but a lie, 'God and man, nature and the light of day, the heart's outpourings and the means of understanding' (*TN*, pp. 298, 318). Under such circumstances,

---

<sup>334</sup> 'If we had the courage to confront the doubts we timidly conceive about ourselves, none of us would utter an "I" without shame.' (Cioran, *Decay*, p. 96)



to say I'm someone, to say I'm somewhere, to put me out, into the silence, I see nothing, it's because there is nothing, or it's because I have no eyes, or both, that makes three possibilities, to choose from, but do I really see nothing, it's not the moment to tell a lie, *but how can you not tell a lie*, what an idea [...]

(p. 403, my emphasis)

Certainly, the Unnamable's unstoppable rambling shores itself up against continuous repetition, rhetorically expressed in tropes such as parallelism. Pure verbal combination and permutation reveal the narrator's as a non-discourse rather than the opposite, since any coherent building up of meaning and sense is disrupted and undermined by this ongoing, random variation.<sup>335</sup> In so doing (or in so being done), the narrator betrays himself as a 'subject of abjection', one of the symptoms of such a condition being the 'rejection and reconstruction of languages.' (*POH*, p. 45)

In this (although this is developed in another context by the Swabian thinker), the Unnamable's inauthentic pseudo-discourse enacts Heidegger's 'compulsive talk', one that 'only proves the presence of the nothing', rather than any meaningful speech proper.<sup>336</sup> Even the Unnamable has to acknowledge its 'futile' nature (*TN*, p. 301). Hence, he can be

---

<sup>335</sup> A paradigmatic example:

I add this, to be on the safe side: these things I say (and shall say, if I can) are no longer, or are not yet, or never were, or never will be - or (if they were, if they are, if they will be) were not here, are not here, will not be here, but elsewhere. But I am here. So I am obliged to add this: I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak (and therefore perhaps think a little), cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am [...]

(*TN*, p. 295)

<sup>336</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. by William McNeill, trans. by John van Buren, and others (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1998), p. 89.

A paradigmatic example of the Unnamable's compulsive, inauthentic, self-referential discourse: 'Here all is clear. No, all is not clear. But *the discourse must go on*. So one invents *obscurities. Rhetoric*.' (*TN*, p. 288, my emphasis). At times, the frantic display of repeated nonsense uttered by the Unnamable could also be linked to a rather non-literary saying: the *show* must go on.

seen as the very embodiment of what, glossing on the philosopher's terminology, we might venture to call the anti-thinker or the anti-poet. In fact, irretrievably estranged from his own rambling speech, deprived of any possible rooting in a 'tradition' (how can he have a tradition who has not even been born?), he personifies contemporary literature as 'a manifestation of nihilism', 'predominantly destructive', and definable as 'a will to homelessness' (*Uncanniest*, p. 50).<sup>337</sup> As such literature, he embodies the opposite of poetry or *Dichtung* as the 'world-forming power' of language, language being understood, in its turn, as the original speaking of Being (ibid.).

Indeed, *The Unnamable* does not use language as something received from Being as a gift and a means of ontological comprehension, as a vehicle for its intelligibility, as well as constitutive of a community within which it is passed on from generation to generation as the major social and spiritual link (Young, pp. 204-05). If one of Beckett's more important insights into language is that every tongue is a foreign one, in the Unnamable's case this is doubly so: he is not an agent of Being's self-disclosure in the world, and there is no 'clearing of Being' for him to inhabit, but an impenetrable smoke screen preventing him from any possible understanding of either his condition or his situation. The Unnamable's is not a Heideggerian 'world' where Being reveals itself as intelligible through the language it 'sends' to deeply rooted humans, but rather an inscrutable chaos this side of an original and unimaginable 'night of time' before his tormenters' talk began (*TN*, p. 346; Dienstag, p. 246; Young, pp. 204-05).<sup>338</sup> There, no sense can be made by an ignorant inhuman who dwells all alone and, according to his own confession, 'always liked not knowing' (*TN*, p. 303). By the end of the novel, about to finish (on the page, at least) his unending soliloquy, he has to avow: 'I'll never know' (p. 407).

---

<sup>337</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Philosophical and Political Writings*, ed. by Manfred Stassen (New York and London: Continuum, 2003), p. 37.

<sup>338</sup> 'Language too, [...] is an impersonal force that constitutes Dasein and its world, not simply an instrument for communication.' (Inwood, *Heidegger*, p. 128) 'In terms of the essence of language, [...] language speaks, not humans. Humans only speak in as much as they respond to language': Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. by Reginald Lilly (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991), p. 96. In the end, 'language is the clearing-concealing advent of Being itself.' (Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', p. 230).

## 6.7 – Gnosticism, Silence and the Will to Nothingness

From another, even more metaphysical point of view, this discourse made of words that constitute him and at the same time subject him to anguish and despair points yet again to a gnostic element in Beckett's fiction. Thus, the novel's narrator and antihero cannot understand his blabber but as a penum, a kind of school drill that enslaves him more and more with every single word he utters (*TN*, p. 304). More than this, the narrator feels overwhelmed by his necessity of ever having to keep on speaking as a sort of punishment for a sin he can never feel capable of specifying, but which he suspects to be related to the one and main sin of every existent: that of being born, the original sin (p. 369). In this, he would be following Macmann's precedent in *Malone Dies*, as we already saw. Beckett's reason for this would also be the same: antinatalism, contempt for an undergod's creation.

So deadly would this sin be that it might be punished even for its mere conception, even when arising from an external or heteronomous will. Like in Josef K.'s, there is no innocence in the Unnamable's underworld: being born, or just conceived into his indeterminate ontological condition, is crime and punishment at one and the same time, and all there is left for the 'uncomprehending' culprit and victim is to 'expiate vilely', 'like a pig' (pp. 362, 369).<sup>339</sup> The animal element in this last comparison is not irrelevant, as, according to Kristeva and in a Christian cultural context, sin is related to abjection. Through 'interiorization', this category would blend defilement with guilt and the more material idea of abomination (*POH*, p. 116). In the Unnamable's case, the abomination would be conception itself, being incarnated into matter, absurd, vile flesh.

Nevertheless, the Unnamable also quite delusively and paradoxically interprets this necessity to speak at all times as a likely way to freedom from his metaphysical slavery. The ransom he would have to pay for being set free from his verbal limbo or Dantean purgatory, an 'unthinkable unspeakable' 'black void' well beyond the weak, indeterminate, but still grey light wrapping Malone's death in life, would be a hypothetical password that, in his naive hope, he might happen to stumble upon (*TN*, pp. 298, 315, 328).<sup>340</sup> Desperate

---

<sup>339</sup> Here, we are also reminded of Josef K.'s memorable last words in Kafka's *The Trial*: 'Like a dog!' Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, tr. by Mike Mitchell, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2009), p. 165.

<sup>340</sup> I find a seeming analogy between this password to silence, in its being strictly arbitrary, thoughtless and formalistically ritual, and the so-called 'negative confession' of the souls at the moment of judgement in

to transcend his demiurgical prison into nothingness, he yearns for such an illusory password ‘like a drowning man who clings to the idea of shipwreck.’ (Cioran, *New Gods*, p. 47).

Thus, he might be able to unlock the door that he discovers at the end of his soliloquy, maybe a way out of the indescribable dimension he feels caged in (*TN*, pp. 406, 380; Hutchings, p. 111). Such dimension would precisely be that of ‘boundlessness [...], the untenable, the unsymbolizable.’ Therefore, its narration would be one of ‘infamy’ or ‘the infamous’: that is, a narrative of abjection (*POH*, p. 23-24).<sup>341</sup> As he persists in his attempts at the elusive and almost certainly inexistent password for freedom, and as he floats free in his solitary limbo, he expects the absolute worst, being born into mankind, to happen at any time,

Against this background, all his hopes to be liberated from the pending horror of becoming a human being are focused on silence, which he intuits to be his and everything else’s ultimate origin, as he imagines himself to be ‘made of silence’, always longing to be ‘back in the silence’ (*TN*, pp. 369, 406, my emphasis). In this intuition, he coincides with Moran in *Molloy* about silence being the original stuff out of which the world would have been made (p. 116). This bespeaks the internal cohesion of the *Trilogy* in thematic terms, as well as the intimate connection existing among its main characters, of which the Unnamable appears to be the likeliest candidate for real protagonism, the rest of them being his alternative narrative conduits.<sup>342</sup>

On the grounds of this longing and because of his considering everything else (ultimately the universe) to be a ‘long sin against the silence’, just an ‘unimaginable, unspeakable’ story, an unending ‘noise about *nothing*’, ‘a tale | told by an idiot, full of

the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead: The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, trans. by E.A. Wallis Budge, intro. by John Romer, Penguin Classics (London and New York: Penguin, 2008), pp. 360-62.

<sup>341</sup> ‘Like a dog!’ he said. It seemed as if his *shame* would live on after him.’ (Kafka, *The Trial*, p. 165, my emphasis).

<sup>342</sup> There also seems to be a clear influence of Cioran’s *Syllogismes de l’amertume*, published the previous year (1952), in the original French version of Beckett’s *The Unnamable* (1953) with respect to the Unnamable’s intuition regarding the liberating power of silence: ‘No salvation, except in the imitation of silence.’ This is my translation of the French original: ‘Point de salut, sinon dans l’imitation du silence.’ (p. 14)

sound and fury | signifying *nothing*', we can understand the Unnamable's identification of this original silence with nothingness (pp. 369, 406, my emphasis).<sup>343</sup> Thus, 'every word' would be 'one word *de trop*.'<sup>344</sup>

'The interrelationship between speech and silence' would actually be the centre of 'a rhetoric of paradox and aporia' that characterises *The Unnamable* as increasingly focused on the nature of a 'subjectivity in dissolution'.<sup>345</sup> Indeed, the Unnamable would understand silence to be the only gate to dissolution into the peace and bliss of not being any longer, not even tentatively, for ever out of reach for his demiurgical fashioners and masters. Such is his temptation, or even his will to nothingness. Certainly, according to Bataille, nothingness and silence are to be found in the falling away of the subject, without believing 'that truth lies in the void', either.<sup>346</sup> There is never an answer to the search for true self, even less so for a being which is not properly one, for a consciousness without identity, for a metaphysical abortion.

That should be the key to understanding The Unnamable's references to 'true silence' as a dimension one reaches never to return from it, where he 'won't have to listen any more', free at last to 'dribble' in a corner, 'my head gone, my tongue dead', emancipated from the slavery of language and the hellish prospect of coming into being, rejoicing in unconsciousness and 'the bliss of coma.' (*TN*, pp. 386-87, 318) These expressions of longing for a complete lack of consciousness and utter mindlessness are also essentially coincidental with those made by Molloy and Moran during their wanderings across Ireland in *Molloy*. As in their case, for the Unnamable nothing could rival the worthiness and desirability of extinction, without even as much as leaving a trace behind: 'to end would be wonderful, no matter who I am, no matter where I am.' (p. 296) In this respect, all the protagonists of Beckett's *Three Novels*, despite their devotion for silence and the utter

---

<sup>343</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by A. R. Braunmuller, New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1997; repr. 1999), V.5.25-27 (my emphasis).

<sup>344</sup> E.M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Arcade, 2011), p. 90 (original emphasis).

<sup>345</sup> Derval Tubridy, "'The Absence of Origin": Beckett and Contemporary French Philosophy', in Rudrum (ed.), pp. 24-36 (pp. 24, 30).

<sup>346</sup> Paul Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), p. 82.

termination they imagine it to involve, are always denied it. They are doubly bound by a ‘negative dialectic’ implying the inability to speak on the one hand and the inability to be silent on the other. Their glimpses at the void are necessarily mediated by language, always failing at its articulation, without any other alternative for the achievement of their self-annihilating purpose (Critchley, *Very Little*, pp. 153-54). Ultimately, silence, which is death, is unrepresentable, hence the inertia or ‘going on’ of meaningless language: that which is unable to represent it (p. 167).

If we draw an analogy between this coveted silence and death (which the Unnamable cannot truly reach, as he has not been born proper), we could imagine silence as ‘outside, or resistant’ to the power of the Unnamable’s maker and his assistants, and therefore as the only possibility of freedom for him (Noys, p. 39). A scatological remark, a token of Beckett’s ferocious, deleterious black humour, underlines the Unnamable’s concern for the level of being and existence he would thus be freed from: ‘I wonder if I couldn’t sneak out by the fundament, one morning, with the French breakfast.’ (*TN*, p. 346)

In the same way, when he thinks of the password we have mentioned above in order to escape from the anticipated disaster of being born into mankind, he does so in terms of ‘the only chance I have [...] of saying something at last that is not false [...] so as to have *nothing more to say*.’ (315, my emphasis) In the world of lies inhabited by the Unnamable, we can take at least one thing absolutely for certain: he wants ‘to go silent.’ (p. 304) The likeliest outcome, however, because of his utter ignorance, is that he will keep on talking *ad aeternum*, a victim of both the inertia of his meaningless verbosity and of his hopeless quest for an unlikely passport to Nirvana (p. 407).

The fact that our antihero wishes for total self-extinction into silence, brings us back to both antihumanism and nihilism. As for the first one, his very longing for true, definitive silence implies a negation of the human essence, since mankind’s very defining characteristic, yet again according to Heidegger and as we have already seen, would be language, a capacity for speech (Heidegger, ‘The Way to Lang.’, p. 397). Lacanian psychoanalysis, the basis for Kristeva’s, also shares this vision of man as ‘speaking subject’ rather than ‘natural man’, confirming this antihumanism on the part of the Unnamable (Weeks, *Discontents*, p. 171). As for Beckett, his ideas on both issues are

perfectly clear: every word he wrote was ‘an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.’ (as cited in Noys, p. 152)

## 6.8 – The Death Drive: Life as Abnormality

Continuing our analysis of Beckett’s *The Unnamable* and regarding nihilism, as long as we dare reconstruct an ideological kernel in his ‘thought’, the Unnamable is possessed by contempt and hatred of the very idea of Being, the original presence felt by Heidegger to be prior to every existent, the human being, Dasein, included (*TN*, p. 361). In this way, and linking with Beckett’s long-life interest in the mineral, the Unnamable seems to deem life an aberration in an inert universe; or, in a simpler way, beyond any ontological terminology, being would be just a ‘nuisance’:

And there is nothing for it but to wait for the end, nothing but for the end to come, and at the end all will be the same, at the end at last perhaps all the same as before, as all that livelong time when there was nothing for it but to get to the end, or fly from it, or await for it (trembling or not, resigned or not, the nuisance of doing over, and of being, same thing, for one who could never do, never be.

(p. 364).

More precisely, consciousness, precarious as it is in our metaphysical antihero, is often presented in the *Three Novels* through metaphors of a geological type, as arising from the mineral, only to return to it after a short period between the mud and the scum, as Molloy masterly puts it (*TN*, p. 10).<sup>347</sup> This would be but yet another token of the already evoked hatred of matter and the body that the characters of Beckett’s *Trilogy* feel within a wider dualistic metaphysical system in which consciousness, despite its contradiction of and opposition to matter, in as much as it ultimately derives from the inorganically material, as we have just seen, is in itself a by-product or even ‘a prisoner of matter.’ (Adelman, p. 97) In this respect, consciousness would be the object of a mistake or even a tremendous

---

<sup>347</sup> An interesting association of ideas could be made between Beckett’s attraction for the mineral and Mircea Eliade’s reflexions on stone as a sort of hierophany in ancient societies, given its hardness, permanence and incorruptibility: Benjamin Keatinge, “‘The Hammers of the Stone-Cutters’”: Samuel Beckett’s Stone Imagery’, *Irish University Review*, 37.2 (2007), 322-339 (p. 325)

blunder when spiritualised, made into a unity or a soul, let alone when taken for ‘the highest achievable form’, absurdly overestimated as the ‘supreme kind of being’, a synonym for God (*TWTP*, pp. 285-86). Matter is the master and tyrant of consciousness. The Unnamable cannot be clearer on this issue: ‘I’m tired of being matter’, matter at the hands of his torturers, ‘pawed and pummelled endlessly in vain.’ (*TN*, p. 341) An image of his avatars as ‘bodies groping their way’ in the black void that is home to the Unnamable confirms this repulsion for the material (p. 380).

Thus, death would be the ultimate debt due to nature, the latter always being constructed, in Beckett’s atheism and philosophical scepticism, and under Democritus of Abdera’s influence, as a senseless, contingent and ever-changing arrangement of atoms, completely external, disconnected from and indifferent to consciousness and its experience.<sup>348</sup> The very death drive could be construed, in Freudian terms, as a pre-birth nostalgia for the originally mineral and inorganic, life being a detour from death to death, a strife towards a state prior to life itself (Dienstag, p. 92; Storr, p. 66; Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 78)

Departing from a metaphysical perspective completely different from Freud’s, Cioran reaches the same conclusion: ‘it is not normal to be alive, [...] Death [...] is no more than the cessation of an anomaly.’ (*Drawn and Q.*, p. 90) Nietzsche already put it as follows a few years before Freud: ‘The organic is [...] inexpressibly derivative, late, rare, accidental, which we perceive only on the crust of the earth [...] The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type.’ (*TGS*, pp. 109-10) In this, he follows his master, Schopenhauer, who considered life to be ‘a uselessly disturbing episode in the blissful repose of nothingness.’ (*Parerga*, 2, 156) Darwin having previously exposed life as an accidental evolutionary phenomenon, the logical outcome could only be its lack of any intrinsic meaning (Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, p. 32). From there to the practical contempt held for it by the nihilistic, totalitarian political systems dominating the interwar period there was just a very short step.

---

<sup>348</sup> According to Democritus of Abdera, ‘the first principles of the universe are atoms and empty space; everything else is merely thought to exist.’ In other words, everything else is opinion, mere *doxa*: Diogenes Laertius, p. 453.



Despite the fact that the Unnamable has not been born proper, let alone as a human, I believe it can be contended that he suffers from this dark, all-too-human longing for an unspeakable self-annihilation into nothingness, for ‘the blissful knowledge you are nobody for all eternity.’ (*TN*, p. 332). That is why he can envisage success in dying (although he is only incipiently alive) as ‘the most comforting hypothesis’ among those open to him in his metaphysical predicament, without even having been able to believe he ever lived: life, being do not even deserve to be remembered (p. 335).

This would be so even if the Unnamable, corrupted by the one human attribute bestowed on him, if defectively, by his wilful and incompetent makers, what he uncompromisingly calls ‘the pus of reason’, cannot remember or understand that original state except through the always unreliable mediation of words (p. 347). For all he cares, reason would be just a linguistic combinatory technique whose concern with meaning would not obtain (p. 400). ‘Blessed with’, that is ‘reduced to reason’ just like a ‘parrot’, the only utility he can find in this essentially human sort of ‘rubbish’ is to scratch his arse with it. Hence, when it comes to uttering words, he prefers not to think (pp. 292, 329, 331).

For the aforesaid reasons, the Unnamable ‘remains unable to comprehend, to escape or to change’ his existence, while not being completely unaware of it (Hutchings, p. 99). In this way, the second pole of Beckett’s metaphysical dualism, namely reason, consciousness or thought, which we just saw as a by-product of the material and inorganic, is not privileged with regard to matter and physicality, either: for Beckett, thought seems to be but ‘the excrement of being.’ In the same way, being would also be excrementalised in the *Three Novels* (Calvin Thomas, p. 83). The Unnamable’s life, therefore, would be a horror epitomised by the prospect of the pangs of birth, the unavoidable sufferings of existence and the agony of anticipating the inexorable terminus of such a wearisome journey, always without thinking.

## 6.9 – Fear, Speech, Writing, Inertia, and Heroism

Notwithstanding this horror, and precisely because he has been fashioned as a tentative existent, now waiting to meet his doom in the *life row*, the Unnamable cannot help being afraid of total extinction. This is a paradoxical and additional indignity he has to suffer as

the seed of humanity planted in him minimally takes root: the human being, whether speaking subject or not, whether rational consciousness or not, is defined by their fear of death. This would be an interpretative key to the obsession with ‘going on’ displayed by the narrating voices throughout the novel. Thus, speech, ‘the terror-stricken babble of the condemned to silence’ would be the last, desperate recourse to provide oneself with in the face of the threat of extinction posed by original silence, the only route left to escape from it (*TN*, p. 348; *Pattie*, p. 71).

If we follow Kristeva’s thought on phobia in *Powers of Horror*, we will be able to understand the relationship Beckett establishes between speech and ‘terror’ or fear. First, Kristeva contends that art, and more specifically writing, is the only ‘know-how’, as she puts it, where phobia is concerned. This being so, she goes on to state that any practice of speech, if writing is involved, becomes ‘a language of fear’, as fear would be its ‘terrifying, abject referent’. In the Unnamable’s case, this is so because of its association with silence as an agent of total dissolution and extinction.

Fear, furthermore, would deprive us of the self-assurance that speech ordinarily gives us regarding the integrity, uniqueness and unchangeability of our self. In the Unnamable’s case, this would be even more so, as his sense of self is very precarious, and also because the object of his fear is no other than the self-extinction that he associates with ‘true silence’. According to Kristeva, the writer is a phobic who is successful in metaphorising in order to avoid ‘being frightened to death’, thus coming to life again in signs. If we consider that the sign, the word, is based on a ‘fetishist denial’ of reality, of the thing that is the object of a lack or a want, and that language, ‘our ultimate and inseparable fetish’, is made of signs, then we have to conclude that language is ultimately a ‘life preserver’, a talisman. In this way, we keep our sense of being ‘untouchable, unchangeable, immortal’ subjects through language, speech and writing (*POH*, pp. 37-38). This would be all the more urgent in the case of the Unnamable, as his attempts at self-integration are imperative precisely because of its indefinite and problematic ontological nature and sense of self. In any case, this sort of writing would be one that accesses and gives form to the semiotic’, a true ‘literature of abjection.’ (Beardsworth, p. 90)

Of what has been said, if we agree that the Unnamable is a sort of writer, his text being his own existence of sorts, and that he constitutes himself as a textual entity through

speech, there follows how in this way he exorcises his fear, and how he keeps his phobic object, extinction through silence, at arm's length (*POH*, pp. 37-38). In other words, the Unnamable's speech is the only way he has to exorcise his gnawing fear of disappearance. In this, even without knowing it, his staying 'alive' in his strange metaphysical abode would have a rationale. Meanwhile, Beckett's writing confirms itself as one of heterogeneity, crossing over binaries such as those contrasting the pure and the impure, morality and immorality, life and death, silence and 'going on'. In the end, fascinated by the abject, being 'both subject and victim' of this 'language of abjection', he perverts language, style and content into transgressive writing (pp. 16, 206).

Consequently, once set in motion, as fear rises in the Unnamable in the face of what could otherwise have been considered to be the safe haven of Nirvana, speech will snowball down the entire novel, ever gaining momentum till its very end, rolling over and sweeping away any meaningful potentiality in its linguistic object, since its function is that of a life-preserving fetish rather than a way of enlightenment or betterment of the Unnamable's ontological situation (*TN*, p. 380).

It is thus that *The Unnamable* finishes: not with a heroic stand against (para-)existential absurdity, as it has been defended for several decades, but with a mere acknowledgement or a sign of helpless inertia: even if doomed to ignorance and meaninglessness, 'you must go on'; and, more importantly, one *will* go on (p. 407, my emphasis). This would only be a final confirmation of what the protagonist states at the very start of his soliloquy, as underscored by the use of the same modal verb: 'I'll never be silent. Never.' (p. 286) Hence, the Unnamable's discourse comes full-circle after the odd two hundred pages his legacy to mankind consists in.

And yet, the Unnamable's contradictory resolution to ever go on speaking (if the Unnamable, in his inhuman nature, is capable of taking any resolutions at all), could be illustrated in terms of heroism and antiheroism in an alternative way. Thus, if traditional criticism of Beckett's oeuvre, as we just explained and argued against, saw the characters of his siege-in-the-room period as Sisyphus-like existential heroes, the Unnamable might after all be seen as a hero on a very different account. If we could disregard, at least for a moment, that he is not properly human and that he does not have a mother (yet?), the Unnamable's heroicity would reside in his adamant loathing of and resistance to the

prospect of being born, as springing, in Lacanian terms, from his ‘lost object’, namely the imaginary order. It is this realm, which the yet unborn Unnamable calls silence or even ‘true silence’, that he obsessively seeks despite his dread of the total extinction it would imply.

Indeed, if we are to follow Charles I. Armstrong’s interpretation of Kristeva in his reading of *The Unnamable*, this pre-symbolic silence, corresponding to the mother’s body as prior to all words and their ceaseless metastases, would be the ultimate site, both repulsive and alluring, of the death drive on its path to nothingness beyond subjectivity, beyond both life and death. In his dogged will to return to it whatever the cost, in his rejection of his own defectively, artificially, externally constituted ‘I’ for the sake of original silence, the Unnamable would heroically be pleading for self-destruction, for avoiding the indignity of suffering crowned by ineluctable, material death, in spite of his self still being so embryonic and out-of-the-ordinary (Armstrong, p. 188; Belsey, p. 91).

#### 6.10 – Fear: The Abject Mother as the True Unnamable

Although motherless in the ordinary sense of the term, and thus not directly involved in the Oedipal struggles that the other protagonists of the *Trilogy* were all subject to, the Unnamable’s nature and destiny are intimately linked to the abject mother. Thus, yet again following the ambivalent behaviour of his avatars in the two previous novels in the *Trilogy* sequence, and despite the fact that she does not exist proper, he bitterly curses his mother for ejecting him into the world, calls her a ‘cunt’ and, as we already saw, wants to kill her (*TN*, pp. 316, 385).

She may be taken to be the real, primal Unnamable, thus making the novel’s protagonist and narrator a vicarious, secondary one, his very name depending on her: she would be the big ‘M’ starting the names of all the antiheroes of the *Three Novels*, the ultimate destination of all narcissism, indifferent to the phallic appeal of social models and roles. In this, and very much like Molloy, the Unnamable could be said to be yet another of Beckett’s resisters to society and civilisation, a savage, an ignorant, an abject holy fool: ‘in the silence you don’t know’ (Armstrong, pp. 187-90; *TN*, p. 407).

Yet the Unnamable, so attracted by the primal, abject mother and led by such a peculiar version of the universal death drive, is a less heroic and more complex figure than, say, Moran as a representative of all the other protagonists of the *Three Novels*: if Moran consciously advances through his quest ever more given over to the dark allures of the pre-symbolic, contradicting the most basic foundations of his masculine, paternal, patriarchal, ultimately phallic and symbolic universe, the Unnamable, who is much closer to the pre-symbolic than any of the other main characters of the *Trilogy*, dreads total extinction precisely because of this reason: he is just too acquainted with it, having always been so close to it.

Hence, if abjection is ‘a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego)’, it also turns the death drive into ‘a start of life’: if the death drive lures the Unnamable into final, true silence, abjection sends him back to speech (*POH*, p. 15). In a way, distinctly small and insignificant, equally fearful of both birth and the ultimate nirvana of pre-natal silence, at the antipodes of the quintessential epic hero, man-slaughtering Achilles, his attitude resembles the latter’s as made manifest in the words the Myrmidon addresses to Odysseus in Hades:

By God, I’d rather be a slave on earth for another man –  
 some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive –  
 than rule down here over all the breathless dead.<sup>349</sup>

Ultimately, as long as he goes on speaking instead of staying silent once and for all, the Unnamable himself acknowledges his utterly unheroic condition by means of tacitly envisaging, after all, the prospect of becoming himself part of the ‘denatured clay’ fashioned by that ‘miscreant’, Prometheus: the human being (*TN*, p. 297). Thus, only marginally human as he is, he would commit the unforgivable crime, the sin of all sins, being born, out of his very human fear of nothingness.<sup>350</sup>

---

<sup>349</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. By Robert Fagles (London and New York: Penguin: 1996), XI, 556-59 (p. 240). For the resemblance of the Unnamable’s limbo to another traditional literary and mythological realm of self-forgetfulness and eternal unconsciousness, biblical Sheol, see Hutchings, p. 102.

<sup>350</sup> At least in some versions of the classical myth: see Grimal, p. 376.

In the end, he is closer to Molloy than to any heroic figure: he will also plunge headlong into the shit, if that allows for survival. Like in Molloy's case, if at a certain moment he calls, in a rather sarcastic way, for 'resolutely, more resolutions', a few lines ahead he has to frame this within a rather disheartening context: that of 'a dead half-wit, hearing nothing of what he says, and understanding even less.' (p. 383) That is the only one 'postulate' to contemplate when thinking about the Unnamable (*ibid.*).

### 6.11 – Hatred of God and Mankind. Mahood

There could be another reason for the Unnamable's rejection of silence as a redemptive option: distrust towards his makers; what, if he were human in the full sense of the word, we could call atheism or even hatred of God. In God's (or the demiurge's) silence, if H/he exists at all, there can be no help; from a Schopenhauerian perspective, which could be argued for in Beckett, as we saw before, there could be no greater horror than dissolution into a Will that could be identified with the demiurge, hence with absolute evil, a malevolent will whose external sign is the abominable creation, having brought forth the insufferable universe (Young, p. 43). And if the Unnamable sometimes, in a rather voluntarist way, thinks of the flawed creator as his 'good master', in the end he has to describe himself in terms oddly reminiscent of a God-forsaken Job, abjectly 'devoured by flies', if not actually sitting on an ash heap and covered with pustules, like the biblical patriarch.<sup>351</sup>

As in Job's case, such a situation does not make the Unnamable that prone to accept the hypotheses of divine providence, justice or even existence. In the Unnamable's personal Hades or Sheol, everything might be but a lie (*TN*, p. 298). As desperate in his plight as the saintly patriarch, he may also wish the Lord had been a bit more explicit about the hypothetical purposes of the unbearable torment he undergoes: that of having a useless,

---

In his utter lack of heroicity, William Hutchings compares the Unnamable to other eminent characters of modernist fiction, such as Leopold Bloom or Joseph K (Hutchings, p. 105). I would include in this catalogue Robert Musil's Ulrich, the man without qualities.

<sup>351</sup> Job, 2: 7-8 (*The Holy Bible*, p. 1216).

purposeless mind, that ‘random phenomenon’ made of an inept, ultimately senseless language, which has been imposed on him (Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, p. 51).

Indeed, the Unnamable very specifically fears to be born as a human, as a self-aware, yet purposeless consciousness subjected to all the pain and suffering deriving from life ‘without hope of diminution’ or ‘dissolution’ (*TN*, p. 361). For him ‘human life, [...] is synonymous with the concentration camp world, a death-in-life’ (Adelman, p. 89). That would be the destiny he evokes concerning all those ‘condemned to life, rotting in [their] dungeon, garroted and racked’, victims of a metaphysical Lager (*TN*, p. 319).

Our earlier mention to Job’s example to describe the Unnamable’s situation is not unmotivated: his antihumanist fear of birth (there is no dignity or worth in the human condition he seems to have been condemned to), if compromised by his fear of that utter extinction he both desires and dreads at the same time, as well as his lack of adherence to the unfathomable though despicable goals of the demiurge that has created him in his misery, can only be related to profuse use of abject imagery and vocabulary, in a similar way to the Bible’s sapiential book.

A case in point is the disgustingly illustrated narration of the Unnamable’s plodding through the viscose remains of his family after they have died of sausage poisoning (!), where mention of their bowels is not spared the reader.<sup>352</sup> In this episode of rejection of quintessential human experience and affect, the showing of the body’s inners, ‘the horror within’, translates the lack of definition and the collapse of the border between the subject’s inside and the outside which is typical of the state of abjection (*POH*, p. 53).

Quite clearly, the Unnamable’s view of the human condition is not a very admiring one, as he ironically makes clear by dismissing Protagoras’ classic claim for human dignity through the known adage ‘man is the measure of all things’.<sup>353</sup> Our antihero, even if he

---

<sup>352</sup> I find an affinity between the very descriptive terms of this especially abject scene and that of Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* where two survivors of Vilna describe how Nazi authorities prohibited them to call their relatives’ remains, when forced to exhume them after having previously had to bury them, anything but ‘puppets’, ‘dolls’ or even ‘rags’ (‘chiffons’ in the French original). This would confirm the fact of Beckett’s configuration of the Unnamable’s abode as inspired, at least in part, in the historical likeness of the Nazi death camps. See Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah*, Folio (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 33.

<sup>353</sup> Protagoras of Abdera, in *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and Sophists*, tr. by Robin Waterfield, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2000), fragment 1, p. 211.

would like to think he also occupies ‘the centre’ of his labyrinthine, metaphysical *life camp*, ultimately avows that ‘nothing is less certain.’ (*TN*, p. 289) While he awaits his human life sentence to be executed, he imagines himself in very graphic terms as his main avatar, Mahood, a speechless, limbless, dismembered trunk (except for his penis, Schopenhauer’s ‘focus of the will’) hanging in a jar ‘on the side of a very quiet street by the shambles’, his skull ‘covered with pustules and bluebottles’: nothing less central and more peripheral than this hopeless and helpless existent of sorts, despite the fact that he may eventually become human (Janaway, p. 60). One suspects that, if that were the case, nothing much would change as to the centrality or the dignity of his condition. Neither could we imagine him to be addressed by his creator in order to tell him about his placing him ‘at the centre of the world so that he might see better what is in the world’, a ‘free sovereign and artificer’ of himself, ‘without the constraint of any barrier’.<sup>354</sup> Rather, one would contrast these humanist formulae against the Unnamable’s pitiless self-definition as ‘a caged beast born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born in a cage and dead in a cage’ (*TN*, p. 380). In Beckett’s metaphysical tale, and thinking back of W.B. Yeats, the centre that modernism tried to shore up against the perfect, autonomous artwork and a lingering belief in human dignity, cannot hold any longer.<sup>355</sup> In fact, it collapsed a long time ago, dispersing and scattering all humanist values to the four winds.

As the Unnamable’s repeated mention to the animal condition suggests, and apart from his doubts about man’s supposed metaphysical centrality, the Unnamable’s hatred for mankind and its pathetic condition finds its primary object in the body as the immediate constituent of the human being and the seat of the Schopenhauerian will-to-live (*WWRI*, p. 391). This is what informs the physical depiction, rather than distinct, holistic representation, of Mahood, an abject, symbolically defective sphere of flesh hanging in a jar by the entrance of a restaurant (*TN*, p. 299). Mahood verifies Bataille’s statement that ‘the body is a thing. It is vile.’ (Shattuck, p. 241) Howling, rather than speech, is the

---

<sup>354</sup> My version of a modern Italian translation of the Latin original: ‘Tu, che non sei racchiuso entro alcun limite [...] Ti ho collocato come centro del mondo perché da lì tu potessi meglio osservare tutto quanto è nel mondo. [...] tu, quasi volontario e onorario scultore e modellatore di te stesso’. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Discorso sulla dignità dell’uomo*, ed. by Francesco Bausi, Biblioteca di scrittori italiani, 3rd edn (Milano: Fondazione Petro Bembo – Ugo Guanda, 2014), p. 11.

<sup>355</sup> W.B. Yeats, ‘The Second Coming’, in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, p. 186.



signifier of his misery, that of a hybrid of Edvard Munch and Francis Bacon (*TN*, pp. 307-09, 347).<sup>356</sup>

This misery, which could be construed as an indirect, sarcastic allusion to Parmenides' theory of the oneness, omnicomprehensiveness and geometrical perfection of Being imagined as a sphere, as well as another made to the dog-like existence of Diogenes the Cynic, whom Diogenes Laertius portrays as living in a broken tub beyond all human cares, is nevertheless surpassed by the abject evocation of yet another avatar: Worm (Diogenes Laertius, pp. 25, 27).

#### 6.12 – Worm: A Libel against Mankind. Bataille's Heterology

It is in Worm, the Unnamable's ontological *reductio ad absurdum*, the most basic among his delegates, that the worthlessness of both matter and consciousness is best exemplified. Thus, he would stay on the very fringes of existence, an inch away from the condition of pure matter, a sort of numb, insensitive and senseless embryo living in total stasis, not even implanted in the Unnamable's metaphysical womb of sorts, completely void of consciousness and not very likely to step onto a further, more complex stage of being. 'Unborn', 'unliving', and 'less than a beast', he is defined by the Unnamable as 'all-impotent' and 'all-nescient', 'having nothing human', not even the imposed language that has made the Unnamable a pseudo-speaking subject, thus being 'outside of life', and, finally, being nothing (*TN*, pp. 340, 342, 351; *POH*, p. 100).

Undoubtedly, the Unnamable is one of Theognis and Silenus' tribe; as in their case, and considering not only his own plight and that of his other avatars throughout the *Three Novels*, but also and above all that of horrifying Worm, who somehow represents the ultimately abject, slimy foundation of the human animal, it is evident that for the Unnamable the greatest good would be never to have been born, remaining in the ataraxy and unconsciousness of the primal silence he so much longs for (*TN*, pp. 382, 406). He

---

<sup>356</sup> In an interview, Bacon makes a statement that perfectly explains the fact of Beckett's imagination of Mahood as being a mass of flesh living by the slaughterhouse: 'Well, of course we are all meat; we are all potential carcasses'. As cited in Peter Jones, 'Bacon and Bataille', in Arya (ed.), pp. 49-80 (p. 63). It seems as though Beckett's programme in *The Unnamable* were very close to that of Bacon's paintings: to take us 'back to the abject nature of humanity.' Rina Arya, 'Introduction', in Arya (ed.), pp. 1-10 (p. 4).

expresses his conviction with especially forceful eloquence: ‘some people are lucky, born of a wet dream and dead before morning’ (p. 373). As for Worm, he cannot even have any ‘hope of death’ (p. 340).

In this kind of aborted embryo of a human, we acknowledge the purposelessness and meaninglessness of that fleshy, viscose, fatal beast we call the human being as reduced to its minimal expression, for he comes into being in that most abject of all possible sites: the (tomb) womb.<sup>357</sup> In his vile and debased materiality, he can be construed as a challenge to the West’s ‘ontotheological tradition’ as one of ‘disavowal of chaos, matter, the formless’ (Jones, p. 57). Rather than being useful for the Unnamable’s ontological reintegration, Worm could easily find a chapter of its own in Bataille’s heterological project, ‘heterology’ being imagined as ‘the science of what is completely other’, devoted to the study of ‘the vilest, most discouraging and corrupted things in the world’, ultimately ‘meaningless and squalid existence.’ (p. 62) Worm would embody Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that ‘wherever life is in the making [...] it arouses disgust because it is made only in being destroyed; the slimy embryo begins the cycle that is completed in the putrefaction of death.’ (p. 166) In what I find to be a probable influence on Beckett’s naming this character precisely Worm, Cioran seems to describe him in the following terms: ‘a worm crawling upon the cosmic carrion.’ (*Decay*, p. 39)<sup>358</sup> In its being on a lower ontological plane than animality itself, Worm, as the ultimate signifier of the Unnamable’s hopeless condition, might support our basic view of the last title in Beckett’s *Trilogy* being a metalinguistic, abject fantasy on an ab/inhuman antihero inhabiting an unknown, unchartered metaphysical dimension, and ultimately a libel against human nature.

---

<sup>357</sup> If the womb is the place where abortive Worm is made into raw, viscose, abject, senseless existence, then the entire universe, as originated in what Plato defines as the chora or the matrix of everything existing, therefore another sort of womb, should not be considered to be any better (McAfee, p. 19).

<sup>358</sup> Cioran pronounces such a harsh judgment on ‘The man who has never imagined his own annihilation, who has not anticipated recourse to the rope, the bullet, poison, or the sea’. *A Short History of Decay* was first published in 1949, earning Cioran instant fame because of being granted the Rivarol prize, thus becoming available to Beckett before publishing *The Unnamable* as *L’innomable* in 1953: Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, *Searching for Cioran*, ed. by Kenneth R. Johnston (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana UP, 2009), p. 5.

### 6.13 – Absolute Nihilism: ‘The Unintelligible Terms of an Incomprehensible Damnation’

If we did not support the idea that human nature, the Unnamable’s likely terrifying destination, is not what it seemed for more than two millennia of classical and Christian humanism, such a contention could be founded on its meaninglessness and purposelessness as abundantly exposed in this novel. These can be summarised in a single formula: the Unnamable’s existence is one of obedience to the terms arbitrarily imposed on him by his hypothetical tormenters, ‘the *unintelligible terms of an incomprehensible damnation.*’ (TN, p. 302, my emphasis)

This last word would be key not only to The Unnamable’s situation but also to that of his vice-existents throughout the entire *Trilogy*. Downtrodden as a result of their absolute heteronomy and in the face of a purposeless universe, they would all just pass the time in coming and going (although the Unnamable, in its utter stasis, seems to be unable to do this), or, in the Unnamable’s idiolect, in filling up the holes, both being common Beckettian tropes for his characters’ fruitless endeavours (pp. 225, 288, 358).

This last expression, in its turn, although immediately related to his efforts to try to find the password seemingly demanded by his maker to give him free entrance to the presumed bliss of annihilating silence, reveals a general indifference towards anything experienced or speculated about by the main characters of the *Trilogy*. Thus ‘yes’ or ‘no’, ‘they are both defensible’ as a possible password (p. 358). And as to ‘holes’ or ‘gaps’, remembering Heine’s ‘German professor’ in his endeavour to stop those which would make his system inconsistent, there have always been them, as the Unnamable acknowledges: the entire universe would be one, one just too large to be stopped in any feasible way (p. 362).<sup>359</sup> It is

---

<sup>359</sup> Heinrich Heine, poem n°. 58, in *The Homecoming*, as cited in Phelan, *Reading Heinrich Heine*, p. 76:

Life and the world’s too fragmented for me!  
 A German professor can give me the key.  
 He puts life in order with skill magisterial,  
 Builds a rational system for better or worse;  
 With nightcap and dressing-gown scraps as material

in such gaps or ‘pitfalls’ that the Unnamable would love to fall and ‘vanish for good and all’ (ibid.) By the end of the novel, this is encapsulated in a memorable passage:

it was never I, I’ve never stirred, I’ve listened, I must have spoken, why deny it, why not admit it, after all, I deny nothing, I admit nothing, I say what I hear, I hear what I say, I don’t know, *one or the other, or both*, that makes three possibilities, *pick up your fancy*

(p. 405, my emphasis)

In a few words, the Unnamable’s world resolves itself into nothingness: full meaninglessness, complete purposelessness, total indifference, utter worthlessness. A world cannot be propped up by mere inertia. Thus, words, despite their swarming round him, can neither bring nor take anything away from the pitch-dark void engulfing the Unnamable (p. 348). This is absolute nihilism.

---

He chinks up the holes in the Universe.



## **PART 3 - J. G. Ballard's *Crash***



## Chapter 1 - Introduction: Historical and Cultural Context

Almost a quarter of a century after the publication of *Molloy* in French, *Crash* comes out. The year, 1973, is not a good one on most records. After the post-WWII economic boom, and owing to the third Arab-Israeli war and the oil embargo decreed by the OPEC, there starts a period of growing unemployment and stagflation: not only does the economy get stagnant, but prices and costs soar, too.<sup>360</sup> Described as part of the ‘fag-end years’ of declining Labour rule in Britain, and contradicting Harold Macmillan’s famous 1957 statement, 1973 is the year when Britons started not to have it so good. The year marked a watershed between a seemingly never-ending period of economic expansion, growth of prosperity and full employment on the one hand, and a flawed economy permanently hampered by structural unemployment and instability on the other. In Britain, the times are moreover associated with a substantial worsening of the Troubles in Northern Ireland after infamous Bloody Sunday, in 1972 (Cook and Stevenson, p. 292).<sup>361</sup> The cultural optimism of the 1960s disappears among gloomy forecasts and demoralisation.

According to some economists and sociologists, such as Daniel Bell and Alain Touraine, there starts a general awareness that the fulcrum of the economy has switched from industry to information and services, entertainment being paramount among these: this is the birth of the post-industrial society, which Lyotard associates with postmodern

---

<sup>360</sup> See Chris Cook and John Stevenson, *The Routledge Companion to World History since 1914*, Routledge Companions to History (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 257, 447. See also Jeffrey A. Engel, ‘A Shrinking World’, in *A Companion to International History 1900–2001*, ed. by Gordon Martel, Routledge Companions to History (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Routledge, 2007), pp. 52–64 (p. 59). On the limits of growth since 1973, see also Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1986), p. 196.

The importance of 1973 as a turning point in the evolution of capitalism and therefore of Western civilisation is such as to have been claimed to divide postwar capitalism in two periods, marking the beginnings of post-Fordist ‘flexible accumulation’. It has also been put forward as the year when postmodernity really starts (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, pp. 161–62, 214–15).

<sup>361</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek, *J.G. Ballard*, British Contemporary Novelists (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2005), pp. 107–08.



culture (Butler, *Postmodernism*, p. 117; *TPC*, p. 3).<sup>362</sup> The idealism of the 1960s and their alternative dreams of peace, racial integration, sexual liberation and personal self-fulfilment now wake up to the hard realities of life, such as final and demoralising US retreat from Vietnam after a useless, decade-long, costly, brutal and absurd intervention. Richard Nixon steps down from the presidency after bitter disappointment and political scandal, killing off the illusory beliefs of the American public in the righteousness of their political system, which had already been seriously damaged by president Kennedy's assassination a decade earlier. Meanwhile the democratic government of Chile fell in a CIA-orchestrated putsch, the first of several to take place in Latin America in the following years.

Apart from this, the disappointed hopes and political expectations of many Europeans after May '68 in Paris or Prague's short Spring of the same year, are also at the root of widespread disillusionment and political disengagement. A deranged minority among the youth of Europe get more and more radicalised, to the point of founding several terrorist micro-organisations, among which the Baader-Meinhof Gang and the Italian Brigade Rosse have remained the most infamously memorable.<sup>363</sup> Despite the level of terrorist violence and state repression, most people seemed to ignore the situation, as they comfortably sat in front of the telly, postwar welfare having tamed them into a silent majority.

After a decade of pot smoking, the brutal face of heroin starts to show in the cities of the West.<sup>364</sup> Crime and insecurity skyrocket (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 234). The end of the hippie age seems to be encapsulated in the deaths of two heroin addicts, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix. A few pockets get extremely fat thanks to a myriad violent TV crime series watched by hundreds of millions. The idea and the practice of community weakens

---

<sup>362</sup> Fran Mason, *Historical Dictionary of Postmodernist Literature and Theatre*, Historical Dictionaries of Literature and the Arts (Lanham, MD, and Toronto: Scarecrow, 2007), pp. xxxv-xxxvi.

Ashley Woodward, *Nihilism in Postmodernity* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 2009), p. 251, n. 32.

<sup>363</sup> J.A.S. Grenville, *A History of the World: From the 20th to the 21st Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 844-45; Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 470-71.

<sup>364</sup> Joseph W. Spelman, 'Heroin Addiction: The Epidemic of the 70's', *Archives of Environmental Health: An International Journal*, 21(1970), 589-90 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00039896.1970.10667300>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

in a process of social atomisation in which almost everyone barricades into their homes, in a more and more conservative society (Huysen, p. 162). J.G. Ballard is the cartographer of this age of growing individualism and hedonism in which the relationship between full-sway materialism and consumerism on the one hand and crisis and psychopathology on the other becomes more and more evident, in addition to the growing complexity of the social and cultural fabric.

The cultural moment, along with the political and social situation, is one of exhaustion, modernism having all but stopped after decades of search after ‘the new’: in the words of Donald Barthelme, one of the main early theorists and practitioners of literary postmodernism, the writer is aware that at this time ‘everything that can be said has been said many times’.<sup>365</sup> It is at this time that the term postmodern first acquires widespread currency, especially in the domain of architecture. In a gesture reminding us of Virginia Woolf’s attempt to approximately date the start of that new climate in the arts which came to be known as modernism, Charles Jencks pinpoints the beginning of postmodernism exactly on July 15th 1972 at 3:32 in the afternoon.<sup>366</sup> In contradistinction to modernism’s totalising fetish of the work of art as a cohesively integrated system, postmodernism would allow for a relaxation in the interpretation of the meanings embodied by a building in what came to be known as ‘double coding’, which would comprise both their elite and popular, low-brow aspects (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 58). A decade later, as we will see, Fredric Jameson will call this pastiche, citation for the sake of citation as an attempt to dissimulate lack of inspiration, historical sense, and organic vision of the work as an integrated whole (*Postmodernism*, p. 17). J.G. Ballard basically coincides with this view of postmodernism, as he defines the past as ‘just a kind of anthology of design statements that one dips into as the mood takes you.’ (cited in Crosthwaite, p. 82) Nothing could be farther away from modernism’s ‘generally non-nostalgic’ use of ‘works from the past as touchstones for [...] the present.’ For Ezra Pound, making it new could take him as far back as the troubadours. In the heyday of modernism, high culture was certainly an

---

<sup>365</sup> As quoted in Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, ‘Teleology in Postmodern Fiction’, in Calinescu and Fokkema (eds.), pp. 41-57 (p. 43).

<sup>366</sup> See Woodward, pp. 14-15, 251, n. 30.

‘inspirational authority’ (Gasiorek, *History*, p. 25).<sup>367</sup> Under the postmodern dispensation, this is no longer so.

The architectural development of postmodernism was preceded in literature by the work of the late modernists since at least the end of the 1940s, as we saw in our study of Samuel Beckett. Both in France and even more so in the United States a literature is being written at this time among whose main features we can find not only pastiche, but metafiction, mixing of genres, hybridity, syncretism, anti-teleology, instability and fragmentation in characterisation and narratorial voice, a problematising of reality (which is construed as a fictive process), a general rejection of the old securities of realism and naturalism in favour of non-mimesis and anti-representation, ironic self-reference to the writing process, and avant-garde textual techniques based on repetition, variation and combinatorics, which contribute, in Derridean terminology, to the dissemination of meaning in the text, the latter being a theoretical-critical category that takes over from that of work, proper to modernism.<sup>368</sup> Since the last 1960s, this literature finds its critical counterpart in the work of several American theorists such as John Barth, the author of *The Literature of Exhaustion* (1967) and Ihab Hassan, who publishes his influential *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* in 1971.

---

<sup>367</sup> Christopher Butler, *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2010), pp. 37, 41, 49.

For an enumeration of authors belonging in Pound’s universal ‘Weltliteratur standard’, see Gasiorek, *History*, p. 26.

By way of example and among other things, one of the biggest names not only in modernist poetry but also in modernist criticism, T.S. Eliot, writes the following in his 1919 essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’: ‘novelty’, which is always much ‘better than repetition’, is not at odds with ‘tradition’, which involves ‘the historical sense’, that is ‘a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence’, and therefore also ‘a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.’ This is ‘what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.’ Ultimately, the ‘ideal order’ of pre-existing literature is thus ‘modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art’, so that the past will be ‘altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.’ T.S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, in *Selected Prose*, ed. by Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), pp. 37-44 (pp. 38-39).

<sup>368</sup> Dissemination would be a way of writing, or rather a force already existing within the language that is being written, that refuses any pretended or intended semantic unity or self-containment by scattering the meaning of words and sentences in several directions at once. Happening without origin or aim, it would refuse ‘the ontology of presence’ in practical terms: Niall Lucy, ‘Dissemination’, in *A Derrida Dictionary* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 27-31 (pp. 27-30). A sign’s dissemination across others will not stop at the end of an utterance or a text (Currie, p. 54).

A perfect example of this kind of literature is J.G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, which was first published in 1970. After a decade contributing to the renewal of Science Fiction, of whose New Wave movement he was perhaps the most widely known representative, this collage of texts revolves around some of his personal obsessions related to political, social and cultural contemporaneity. Among them, we find dissociation between reality and media-organised fantasy, the merging of sexual perversion and violence by technology and the media, and the resurgence of atavistic reactions, both individually and socially, under the conditions of an ever-growing technological mediation of life experience, which becomes more and more second-hand. Formally, he develops this thematic through fragmentation of plot, serial variation of episodes, change of role and identity to the point of dissolution of character, and repetitive cultivation of taboo sex and violence motifs often associated with celebrities, such as the live broadcast assassination of president Kennedy.

Among its chapters or 'condensed novels' there was one entitled 'Crash!', which anticipated Ballard's controversially sexual and violent novel *Crash*.<sup>369</sup> This novel signals a turning in the author's work away from his early apocalyptic fiction towards a more speculative, less linear sort of writing, which is also more pessimistic and clearly concerned with the hidden agenda of modern technology (one of, if not the most significant source of postmodern nihilism) and repressed desire (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 16, 22).

I am extending the thematic approach I used in my analysis of Beckett's *Three Novels* to *Crash*. In my opinion, the understanding of J.G. Ballard's work, and more specifically this novel, reaches its highest degree of insight if its study is combined not only with that of postmodernism, but also of postmodernity. It is late modernity, above all that of the ambiguous, over-determined and hybridised 1960s, that will guide Ballard's preferences in terms of subject matter: sexual revolution, changing relations between men and women, the automobile and technology in general and their relation to eroticism, as well as the media and the effects of their operation on the understanding of reality. (pp. 2-3).

I am offering a summary of *Crash* before proceeding to its thematic study.

---

<sup>369</sup> J.G. Ballard, 'Crash!', in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Flamingo Modern Classics (Hammersmith, London: Harper Collins, 2001), pp. 53-57.



## Chapter 2 – Plot Summary

Ballard, a producer of TV commercials and the novel's narrator, on the death of one Vaughan, whom he has been following ever since a car accident he had in which a man died, remembers the recent past, when his life changed completely.<sup>370</sup> This happens during his recovery in hospital, where he undergoes a sort of protracted epiphany whereby everything around him acquires until then unexpected sexual, mostly perverse connotations: he becomes aware of 'the sexual possibilities of everything' (*Crash*, p. 19). To begin with, he discovers the unexpected kicks one can get out of a stranger's death, that of the man at the wheel of the car that he collided with. Despite mutual promiscuous infidelity in his very open marriage with another young, beautiful, exquisitely perverse professional, Catherine, his accident also projects his marital life into a new, more and more perverse dimension.

He starts a sexual affair with his victim's widow, Dr Helen Remington. Their encounters always take place in Ballard's car, a perfect replica of the one which was destroyed in the fatal crash. Together, they attend a car show where an accident is re-enacted by one Seagrave, a stunt actor Ballard is acquainted with, who drives following Vaughan's indications. Vaughan is a computer expert and a former TV scientist, as well as the novel's true protagonist. He is described by Ballard, despite his high unreliability as a narrator, as a charismatic, narcissistic, obsessed, aggressive, fanatical hoodlum (he is called so twice in the novel), and a typical product of the ruthlessly competitive Anglo-Saxon academic system: a 'pushy careerist with a PhD'; in other words, a 'madman.' (pp. 11, 48). After the show, as Helen already knows Vaughan, they all drive to Seagrave's home, where Ballard is introduced to a group of people obsessed with car crashes, all of them having undergone physical harm because of at least one. The house is covered with hundreds of car crash photographs, and Ballard is shown some more in an album, too. Ballard is fascinated. Later on, Ballard, Remington and Vaughan go to the road research

---

<sup>370</sup> To prevent any ambiguities, from now on we will always call Ballard the author 'J.G. Ballard', whereas we will refer to the narrator-character as 'Ballard'.

laboratory where Helen works, where they release some experimental car crash reels. The sexual tension between Vaughan and Ballard grows.

They start roaming the areas near Heathrow airport on the lookout for car crashes. Catherine, in spite of her awareness of her very likely death as a result, gets involved into these activities. She ends up having sex with Vaughan in front of Ballard, always in a car. Ballard does the same with Gabrielle, the most seriously injured member of Vaughan's cult; throughout their liaison, he penetrates her many scars as if they were new, technology-mediated sexual orifices. Aware that Vaughan is planning his own death in a final crash where Elizabeth Taylor is also meant to die, Ballard starts fantasising about his wife's death in an accident. Seagrave immolates himself in a crash, disguised as Elizabeth Taylor, as though having a premonition of Vaughan's now impending attempt against the actress' life.

Sharing an acid-high ride, Ballard finally sodomises Vaughan. With her full, if tacit consent, Ballard exposes Catherine as a target for Vaughan. She starts being chased by the latter. A few days later, the Ballards hear of Vaughan's death in a frustrated car attack on Elizabeth Taylor. Ballard, aware of his destiny, starts organising the details of his own death in a car crash.

## Chapter 3 – Thematic Analysis: Soul-Searching. Postmodernism and Passive Nihilism

### 3.1 – A ‘Cautionary Tale’

J.G. Ballard’s *Crash* is a narrative of passive nihilism born out of contemporary anomie, the result of the breakdown of traditional normative frameworks which up to then subjected the members of a community to the observance of some basic principles and rules of behaviour. In the ‘decline of Western civilisation’, without what Heidegger calls a ‘world’, that is a shared system of understanding and a common commitment to a goal, the subsequent ‘crisis of meaning’ makes life’s sense more and more elusive (Woodward, pp. 1, 56). Indeed, by 1973, European culture, understanding by ‘culture’ the ‘way of life of a particular people’ as ‘made visible in their arts, in their social system,’ ‘in their habits and customs,’ and ‘in their religion’ is quite clearly in a state of disarray.<sup>371</sup> This society, moreover, would be characterised by a ‘lack of shared values and beliefs, and an increasing failure to achieve shared meanings’ (Jenks, *Culture*, p. 103). This cultural breakdown in the ‘lifeworld’, the world of significances giving solidity and coherence to human existence, would be in itself a symptom of what Heidegger calls ‘actual nihilism’, the dominant force under the existing cultural conditions. In the contemporary world, as Baudrillard remarks, there would be ‘no rigid site of meaning, no transcendental signified.’ (Woodward, pp. 60, 56).<sup>372</sup> Resulting in ‘empty conformity’ in a new, postmodern ‘Dark Age’, this is an era of dehumanising disconnection between reason and the final, self-avowed *telos* of Western society since the Enlightenment: human emancipation (p. 20).

---

<sup>371</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (San Diego, CA, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace, 1976), pp. 197-98.

Alain Finkielkraut, from a universalist, pro-modern point of view, takes issue with this ultimately Herderian concept of culture. To him, it is the way Herder’s and German Romanticism’s *Volkgeist* is called these days. It would not be a goal, but a starting point; just what the Enlightenment took for *lack of culture* or *prejudice*. In our time, it is the ultimate ground of a typically postmodern ‘fetishism of difference’ (Finkielkraut, pp. 85-86, my emphasis).

<sup>372</sup> Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke UP, 1993), p. 72.



This hopeless state of affairs in the West can be related to Nietzsche's prediction of 200 years of nihilism in man's crossing of the abyss stretching between the human (to whom Nietzsche refers as an 'animal') and the anti-nihilistic, life-affirming, posthuman overman (*TWTP*, p. 3; *Zarathustra*, p. 7). A true prophet of nihilism in modernity, in whom 'nihilism becomes conscious for the first time', 'the outstanding incarnation of philosophical modernism', Nietzsche sees himself as 'the first perfect nihilist of Europe, who', having lived through the whole of it, has left it 'behind, outside himself.' (*TWTP*, p. 3)<sup>373</sup> His, therefore, should be termed an active kind of nihilism.

*Crash* aligns itself with Nietzsche's will of revitalising European culture out of nihilism in its characters' search for transcendence of a morality grounded on 'what is useful for the herd' and a way out of the axiological impasse of mass society (p. 157). However, contrary to Nietzsche's reactionary views on technical progress as an actual regress within a paradigm of barely disguised Christian morality, J.G. Ballard's novel adapts the overman motif by celebrating the hybridisation of the human and the technological, of the primordial and atavistic on the one hand, and cutting-edge technology on the other, far beyond the centuries-long, well-intended pieties of traditional humanism (Woodward, p. 36). Indeed, J.G. Ballard's own version of Nietzsche's overman is just another step in an already radical overcoming of humanism's fetish, Man (whom is left well behind once Christian morality has been rendered inoperative since late modernity) and a bold step forward towards the posthuman.<sup>374</sup>

---

<sup>373</sup> 'Avec Nietzsche, le nihilisme semble devenir prophétique. [...] En lui le nihilisme, pour la première fois, devient conscient.' Albert Camus, *L'homme révolté*, Nouvelle Revue Française, Paris (Gallimard: 1951), p. 88. My translation: 'With Nietzsche, nihilism seems to become conscious. [...] In him, nihilism becomes conscious for the first time.'

Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants., and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 374.

<sup>374</sup> 'I teach you the overman. Human being is something that must be overcome. [...] what the human shall be to the overman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. [...] Mankind is a rope fastened between animal and overman – a rope over an abyss. A dangerous crossing, a dangerous on-the-way, [...] What is great about human beings is that they are a bridge and not a purpose: what is lovable about human beings is that they are a *crossing over* and a *going under*.' (*Zarathustra*, pp. 5-7, original emphasis)

In this respect, despite some statements on the contrary by J.G. Ballard himself, he would be neither a moralist nor an apologist of our present condition.<sup>375</sup> Thus, for instance, in spite of accusations by some critics, we cannot construe his fiction as an aestheticisation of violence, but just as a stylisation of it, a concern with its geometries, with its logic, which he endeavours to follow to their natural conclusion. *Crash* cannot be labelled as moralistic, either, despite the author's description of it as 'a cautionary tale' in his 1995 introduction to the novel, and regardless of the puzzling comment he makes to an interviewer shortly before his death about an alleged moralistic strain in his work: nothing is further away in the novel than repudiation of (post) modernity in the name of an old humanist ethos or a conservative nostalgia. (Ballard, 'Introduction', n.p., par. 9)<sup>376</sup> Having grown up in the traumatic environment of cosmopolitan, culturally Americanised, Japanese-occupied Shanghai during WWII, J.G. Ballard could not care less about the Neo-Gothic reveries of a residual Victorianism cultivated by some neo-realists in the aftermath of the war, and has nothing but scorn for the pretended magisterial criticism and commitment to social realism and to 'the very core of all that is pure and worthy in the human condition' of F.R. Leavis and his followers, who were preponderant in the England he got to know after the war, where he started his writing career.<sup>377</sup> Nor was he in any way enthusiastic about the delusional certainties of its abhorred British class system, as epitomised by what he calls the 'Hampstead novelists'.<sup>378</sup> On the contrary and very characteristically, in an interview given shortly after the publication of *Crash*, the writer, who 'knows nothing any longer' under contemporary conditions, states how he ultimately 'has *no moral stance*' as to his work or the reality out of which it has grown (n. p., par. 6,

---

<sup>375</sup> In an interview given to Jeanette Baxter, near the end of his life, Ballard curiously affirms 'there's a highly moralistic strain in my fiction. Too moralist, I often think.' Jeanette Baxter, 'Kingdom Come: An Interview with J.G. Ballard' (2007), in Baxter (ed.), pp. 122-28 (p. 123).

<sup>376</sup> The aforesaid 1995 introduction to J.G. Ballard's *Crash* has incidentally been described as 'the de facto founding manifesto of postmodern SF', as cited in James Sey, 'Psychopathology, Inner Space and the Automotive Death Drive: J.G. Ballard', *South African Journal of Psychology*, 32.2 (2002), pp. 55-60 (p. 55)

<sup>377</sup> J.G. Ballard, *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews*, as cited in Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 3.  
Jenks, *Culture*, p. 99.

<sup>378</sup> For the 'Hampstead novel' as a 'middle-class morality novel', see Kate Kellaway, 'The places where the story of Britain is told', in *The Observer*, 28 Dec 2008, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/dec/28/1>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

my emphasis).<sup>379</sup> Furthermore, above other considerations, it is quite clear that the tone of his exploration of perverse sexuality in *Crash* is mostly celebratory. This last factor must be qualified, though: as we will see, death significantly glides over that narrative all the time.

Nevertheless, it must be said that, in spite of the absence of any moralism, a kind of therapeutic potential could be seen and argued for in *Crash*. As an example of contemporary writing of heterogeneity or even Bataillean heterology (where exalted eroticism and an explicit longing for death, near-sacredness and base materiality go hand in hand), and in its questioning of both institutional and discursive authority, *Crash* could be argued to be calling for a ‘softening of the superego’. By placing ourselves in the place of the abject before its being set aside and cast-off, this softening would be made exclusively by means of verbal displacement, thus allowing for an accommodation of the mess, to speak in Beckettian terms. Its effects could match those of Aristotelian catharsis or, more recently, Nietzschean cultivation of the Dionysian, or of music in Schopenhauer’s thought. In other words, and just like in Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, J.G. Ballard’s work, by uttering the abject, would be purifying it (*POH*, pp. 16-17).<sup>380</sup>

### 3.2 – Ethical Indifferentism and Reductive Neo-nihilism: A Theology of Capital

The cultural background of *Crash* corresponds to a post-industrial society founded on communications, the media and entertainment, in which social bonds are directly handled by new technologies, and where the only link between all people is the economic imperative, understood as the duty to performativity and consumerism in a market where

---

<sup>379</sup> Ralph Pordzik, ‘James G. Ballard and the Postmodernization of the Dystopian Novel’, *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 24.1 (1994), pp. 77-94 (p. 88).

<sup>380</sup> The cathartic qualities of music are explained by Schopenhauer by the fact that its direct object is the universal Will. This is the reason for its ‘inexpressible depth’, which makes it possible for it to reproduce ‘all the emotions of our innermost being, but [...] remote from its pain.’ (*WWRI*, p. 264) As for Nietzsche, not only a music lover himself, but also a composer in his own right, he poetically expresses his love for a music that partakes of the Dionysian in two ways: first, most of the music he prefers comes from the southern side of the Alps, the Mediterranean, Dionysius’ own realm; second, he dreams of music as ‘cheerful and profound, like an October afternoon.’ Not in vain is October the month of the grape harvest, therefore of wine and Dionysius: Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 29.

moral values are absent. This performativity, defined by Lyotard as the optimisation of the global relationship between input and output in any system, regardless of any other considerations, has made science, technology and political economy become increasingly autonomous from the general cultural and ethical discourse, thus merging into one single techno-scientific complex (*TPC*, p. 11). The object of a cult of progress from the Enlightenment on, science now becomes something to be feared, casting an ominous shadow over the future. Action, as long as it is performative, does not need to be meaningful anymore: ends are not taken into account; consequently all values, apart from performativity and profit, are henceforth irrelevant. Now, it is only power that legitimates science on the basis of its efficiency, and in turn it also legitimates this efficiency on the basis of science. Therefore, power is self-legitimasing ‘in the same way a system organized around performance maximization seems to be.’ (p. 47)

This has contributed to the advent of postmodernity, as modern axiological categories such as aim, unity or truth have all but disappeared from the socio-political horizon, and traditional values and institutions have entered a process of inexorable decline. In this way, Lyotard describes the postmodern as ‘incredulity toward metanarratives.’ (p. xxiv) The consequence has been a fragmentation of the self and the undermining of what Lyotard calls the tyrannical metanarratives or grand narratives until then founding and presiding over Western ideologies. This results, in its turn, in a plurality of language games and life forms in an ever more complex society. Against grand narratives and their totalising scope, Lyotard advocates for what he calls ‘little narratives’. These are ‘provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative’, and they are born ‘through the interaction of a group or groups for a specific reason and at a particular moment in time’. Thus, they reflect ‘the complexity and heterogeneity of society’, while they invite ‘a multitude of alternative voices’ beyond the rigid structure of binaries proper to the grand narrative of modernity.<sup>381</sup> They contribute to the inscription of shared meanings and values which are actually lived in particular, limited environments, thus bearing witness to the lack of uniformity or homogeneity among cultures and ‘rejecting the dependency on a guarantor of truth.’ Within these narratives, because of their local and situated nature, and because truth is always in a state of flux, a ‘conditional’ and ‘relative’ meaning could be provided to human activities,

---

<sup>381</sup> Angélique du Toit, ‘Grand Narrative, Metanarrative’, in *The Lyotard Dictionary*, ed. by Stuart Sim (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011), pp.86-88 (pp. 86-87).

beyond ‘the oppressive force of authoritarianism’ proper to the grand narrative and to any related tradition or preconceived ideology (du Toit, pp. 87-88; Wicks, p. 253).

As these narratives are usually incommensurable with one another, disputes between them cannot and ought not to be solved on a normative ground which would be foreign to one, several or all sides, lest injustice should inevitably spring from such decisions. Justice would imply ‘a renunciation of terror,’ understood as ‘the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him.’ It would also entail ‘that any consensus on the rules defining a game and the "moves" playable within it *must* be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation.’ (TPC, pp. 63, 66) For this reason, Lyotard supports paralogy, a faulty or deliberately contradictory mode of reasoning that either breaks the rules or invents new ones, thus shifting and transforming the structures of reason itself (Belsey, p. 99).<sup>382</sup>

Although Lyotard sees these developments as liberating, he concedes that in practice the predominance of performativity in the social landscape makes for a reductive kind of nihilism in which every move of the social agents can only be acceptable as a contribution to the system’s efficient functioning. This ‘neo-nihilism’ would then be directly linked to capitalism, the culmination of what he calls the ‘theology of atheism’, as well as a counterworking force against what he construes as the libidinal intensities released by the demise of Enlightenment values, procedures and institutions in postmodern society (Woodward, pp. 127-28, 130-33). This ‘theology of capital’ would ‘cavalierly justify and legitimize the inanities of the commodified postmodern present’. (Ansell Pearson, *Viroid Life*, p. 2)

Lyotard’s diagnosis of our time comes very close to Kristeva’s in some respects. According to her, the acceleration of time and space in Western societies is transforming people into ‘amphibian’, ‘borderline’ beings, bodies that act, reduced to buying and selling semiotically equivalent, ‘dull, shallow’ goods and services (McAfee, pp. 109-10). As the body is conquering little by little the ‘territory of the soul’, yet at the same time getting anaesthetised by the spectacle ‘in the form of the mass media’, with no ‘inner garden’ to

---

<sup>382</sup> Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, 2nd edn (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997; repr. 1999), p. 29.

help us give a meaning to our lives, performativity is dooming many to a ‘withering’ of their ‘psychic space’, condemning them to less and less of a soul (ibid.).

### 3.3 – Consumer Culture and Suburbanisation of the Soul: Lifestyles

Another champion of liberating postmodernity and even a paladin of nihilism, Gianni Vattimo, also alludes to the globalised ‘colonization’ of the social and the political by the dictates of ‘supermarket culture’ and the demands of ‘development at any cost’ (Woodward, pp. 218, 216).<sup>383</sup> In J.G. Ballard’s own terms, this would lead to the most dreadful evil he can think of: life in England’s (or the West’s) suburbs, the ‘suburbanisation of the soul’, life ‘trapped in the afternoon shopping malls of a limitless mediocrity’, the ‘commodification of everything’, the ‘universal acceptance of the shopping mall.’ (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 192)<sup>384</sup> Indeed, J.G. Ballard coincides in this with Heidegger, for whom one of the symptoms of nihilism is ‘the preeminence of the mediocre.’ (*Introd. to Metaphysics*, p. 47). In this way, by substituting a lame utilitarianism for the by now dead or moribund morality of Christianity, and being no longer able to recognise any greatness, most Western suburbanites would be ‘content to be slaves even when there are no masters.’ (Tanner, p. 87) Completely immersed in the fulfilment of their duties as cogs in the machine of postmodern performativity, the sole purpose observable in people’s lives seems to be ‘the gratification of instant and constantly renewable sensation and desire’, most notably sexual desire (Silverman, p. 88).

Desire, indeed, would have become the ‘buzzword’ for a cultural situation where freedom has been redefined as ‘a sort of ceaseless mobility whose only enemy is that of limit.’ (Eagleton, ‘Subjects’, p. 268) In postmodernity, experience is more important than analysis, and contact is worthier than discourse (Régis Debray, as cited in Silverman, p.

---

<sup>383</sup> It has been claimed that consumer culture is the centre and focus of any global culture that might be emerging (Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, p. xviii).

<sup>384</sup> Zinovy Zinik, ‘Russia on my Mind’ (1998), in Sellars and O’Hara, pp. 356-63 (p. 357).  
For US ex-president George W. Bush on shopping as (almost) a patriotic duty, see Andrew J. Bacevich, ‘He Told Us to Go Shopping. Now the Bill Is Due.’, in *The Washington Post*, 5 October 2008 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/03/AR2008100301977.html>> [accessed 25.06.2016].

For all-dominating consumerism in our time, see Chris Hall, ‘“All We’ve Got Left is our own Psychopathology”’: J.G. Ballard on *Millennium People*’ (2004), in Sellars and O’Hara, pp. 396-406 (pp. 399, 406).

109). Even a serious philosopher, Richard Rorty, believes enlargement of the self, always exploring new possibilities, tastes and sensations, to be the key to the good life (which reminds us of Camus' hedonism and his unquenchable pursuit of vital experience of all kinds). Linking up with the construction of distinctive lifestyles, which are seen by some sociologists as 'the characteristic mode of sociality of the consumer society', they would be central to postmodern consumer culture. Certainly, in postmodernity there would be 'no rules, only choices', thus allowing everyone to be anyone (Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, pp. 66, 81; Clarke, p. 175). In this regard, 'the ludic dimension of consumption has gradually supplanted the tragic dimension of identity.'<sup>385</sup> Hence, identity becomes 'makeshift' (p. 151). It is so that the postmodern individual manages, if primarily in a formal, superficial, non-substantial way, to 'impose some degree of continuity onto their individual life-experiences.' (p. 165)

This is why postmodern urban nihilism can be thought to be a 'happy nihilism' of sorts, 'a relief from the burden of finding yourself as the goal of life;' hence, 'postmodern man', 'disintegrated, libidinized, pulsive', would have 'stopped waiting for Godot.'<sup>386</sup> Under this dispensation, built upon individualism and consumerism, 'you are either *in or out*'; to search for a meaning in life or History would definitely be 'out' (Silverman, p. 49, original emphasis). A few years after the publication of *Crash*, after the demise of Labour rule, the defeat of trade-unions and the null outcome of general social unrest in Britain, the 'happy nihilism' of this growingly dual society based on consumption and communication will quite simply harden into a 'society of exclusion', if it remains a society at all. In it, social conflict has been repressed and eventually done away with.<sup>387</sup>

---

<sup>385</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. by C. T. [sic], Theory, Culture & Society Series (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998; repr. 1999), p. 192.

<sup>386</sup> Steiner Kvale, as cited in Slocombe, p. 213.

<sup>387</sup> In a 1987 interview, Margaret Thatcher, after eight years in 10 Downing Street, makes what follows very clear: 'They are casting their problems at society. And, you know, *there's no such thing as society*. There are individual men and women and there are families.' Douglas Keay, 'No such Thing as Society', *Woman's Own*, 22 September 1987, p. 30 <<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

### 3.4 – (Post-)History and Space: Postmodern Nihilism

In the context we have just described, in an interview given to James Naughtie in 2008, when commenting on the authority of institutions in contemporary England, the author shows his awareness of these social and cultural trends: this is what happens when all there is left to sustain one's dreams in life is consumerism, a social phenomenon that ultimately boils down to nothing but 'wallpaper'.<sup>388</sup> That the events narrated in *Crash* are supposed to take place, by default, in the year of its publication, thirty-five years before the interview, is of no great consequence. The diagnosis is one and the same then and now: according to Jean-François Lyotard, the end of belief in metanarratives, all-encompassing worldviews that would no longer be feasible in postmodernity (unless you are an adept and highly articulate Marxist like Fredric Jameson, who still believes in History and its inexorable rules of development, as discovered and explained by Marx and his followers).<sup>389</sup> In fact, this defining characteristic of postmodernity could be extended to Nietzsche's 'last form of nihilism': that in which 'disbelief in any metaphysical world' would proceed from our awareness of any 'true world' as necessarily and solely founded on 'psychological needs', and as linguistically articulated through particular language games (*TWTP*, p. 13). A significant outcome would follow: the questioning of all kinds of authority.

Hence, J.G. Ballard can recognise the moral authority of 'the past' as 'the main casualty of World War II', Auschwitz having 'irrevocably breached any meaningful alliance between' it and the 'human condition'. Twenty-five years after the end of the war, the future has also gone the same way, according to him.<sup>390</sup> History, therefore, may have come to a (dead) end forty-eight years before the fall of the Soviet Union, perhaps as a secondary effect of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs: Francis Fukuyama may have been quite

---

<sup>388</sup> 'James Naughtie, 'Up a Kind of Sociological Amazon. J.G. Ballard on *Miracles of Life*' (2008), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), pp. 473-83 (p. 481).  
Zinik, p. 362.

<sup>389</sup> Keith Ansell Pearson believes that Lyotard's declaration of the demise of grand narratives has been 'premature' (*Viroid Life*, pp. 3-4).

<sup>390</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, 'The Dominion of Death', in Bloom (ed.), *Elie Wiesel's Night*, pp. 3-16 (p. 12).  
Lynn Barber, 'SciFi Seer', in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), pp. 22-35 (p. 24).



blind to this.<sup>391</sup> This would be the real start of postmodernity, a synonym for the ‘posthistoire’ that, as defined by Lutz Niethammer, would consist in an infinite, unchanging present lived by everyone. This present would absorb the past, the future and any hopes related to the latter in a simultaneous point of time characterised by stasis, the dictatorship of the ever-same (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 109, 175).<sup>392</sup> ‘Lost in the making present of the “today”,’ fallen into the irresoluteness proper to an uprooting postmodernity, humans can only understand the past in terms of a vague, impersonal, inauthentic present that knows nothing of the meaningful everyday concerns that shaped human lives for centuries on end (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 443) Another theorist of post-histoire, namely Arnold Gehlen, will also focus on stasis, which could be described as that situation where scientific and technological (although not necessarily human) ‘progress becomes routine’.<sup>393</sup> In this post-histoire, novelty would be merely that which would allow things to go on the same way (Vattimo, p. 13, my translation). The future is today, and it is no great deal in terms of groundbreaking steps ahead for the human race. Already in his 1995 introduction to the novel, the author had written how the future was ‘ceasing to exist, devoured by the all-voracious present.’ (Ballard, *Crash*, n.p., par. 2) In Cioran’s terms, ‘the idolatry of tomorrow’ is definitely deceased (*Fall*, p. 47).

Despite all of their reckless driving and their odd sexual practices, characters in *Crash* seem to always be living this stasis; being ‘locked in a relentless and voracious present’, in the ‘loss of all temporal horizons’, they are led to ‘the proliferation of fetishised objects and events’ in their never-changing, passive present. Such fetishes would be mere ‘displaced cyphers’ of ‘lost objects’, inane substitutes for ‘unavailable power.’<sup>394</sup> Theirs

---

<sup>391</sup> For some of J.G. Ballard’s ideas on the end of history and the loss of the sense of historicity or even interest in history in postmodernity, see Rosetta Brooks, ‘Myths of the New Future’ (1988), in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 241-47 (p. 244).

<sup>392</sup> Of posthistory (‘post-histoire’), in a much more ironic, sceptic and nihilistic way, Cioran writes the following: ‘When projected onto the future, I can only seldom miss the gods’ hilarity before the human episode.’ ‘Raros son los días en que, proyectado hacia la post-historia, no asisto a la hilaridad de los dioses frente al episodio humano.’ (Cioran, *Inconveniente*, p. 12).

<sup>393</sup> My translation of the Spanish translation of the Italian original: ‘dicha categoría indica la condición en la cual “el progreso se convierte en *routine*”’. (Vattimo, p. 14, original emphasis).

<sup>394</sup> Roy Boyne, ‘Crash Theory: The Ubiquity of the Fetish at the End of Time’, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 4.2 (1999), pp. 41-52 (p. 46).

would be an example of what Vattimo calls the ‘dehistoricisation of experience’ in postmodernity (Vattimo, p. 17, my translation).<sup>395</sup>

This stasis could also be a reason for a gradually increasing focus on space rather than on time, the latter having been a major concern for modernism, throughout J.G. Ballard’s oeuvre (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 207). In this, J.G. Ballard and *Crash* would exemplify postmodernism’s dependence on a ‘supplement of spatiality’ that results from its ‘evacuation of history’, which amounts to space having become ‘an existential and cultural dominant’ in our contemporary age (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 365; Bukatman, p. 18). Whereas modernists assumed the possibility of access to Bergson’s *longue durée* as ‘deep time’ or ‘deep memory’, postmodern ‘spatialization of temporality’ would correspond to a mourning for ‘the memory of deep memory’, as well as to ‘a nostalgia for nostalgia, for the grand older extinct questions of origin and telos, of deep time and the Freudian Unconscious’ originating in ‘the sharp pang of the death of the modern’ (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 156; Crosthwaite, p. 89). When technology has brought about a true ‘time-space compression’, human life itself has become compressed to two dimensions, to an image that deprives it of all ‘its depth and its becoming.’ Time’s submission to transportation technology has been accompanied by ‘a kind of unreal happiness, a suspension of existence, an irresponsibility.’ Ultimately, this euphoria would stop short of a ‘presumption of eternity.’ (Silverman, p. 73)

As a result of this, I see plot in *Crash*, by analogy with the title of Céline’s novel, as a journey to the end of the night at a car’s steering-wheel, looking for essentially the same car crash, helping develop similar sex (and power) fantasies after similar patterns. On that journey, what the characters will eventually discover will be basically, ‘beyond all "fancies"’, the most essential, their ‘animality’: violence, blood, and death. (*POH*, pp. 142, 147).

In the end, the major cause behind Ballard’s joining Vaughan’s cult is no other than postmodern nihilism, the condition under whose heavy burden Westerners have been wandering ‘like aimless Saturday crowds through the great supermarket of life’ since some moment not much later than the end of WWII (Zinik, p. 363). As the author states in

---

<sup>395</sup> ‘I believe in the non-existence of the past, in the death of the future, and the infinite possibilities of the present.’ J.G. Ballard, ‘What I Believe’, as quoted in Crosthwaite, p. 81.

another interview: ‘There’s nothing to believe in now.’ Even the ‘consumer society’ may have ‘come to pass’, leaving us only a sense of ‘nagging’ emptiness.<sup>396</sup> This being so, all available means of transcendence are exhausted. All that is left is an unbearable ‘proliferation of ourselves’, a true ‘hell of the same’.<sup>397</sup> Under these conditions, lacking in purpose and meaning, everyday life can only be ‘an atrocity’.<sup>398</sup>

### 3.5 – On Human Nature and Humanism: The Human Animal

Characters in *Crash* can be described in terms of their struggle out of an unlimited, all-dominating, alienating consumerism into the real and authentic.<sup>399</sup> They try to escape a nihilistic existence that, as Nietzsche already perceived, ‘has no goal or end’ (*TWTP*, p. 13).<sup>400</sup> Related to this is Gregory Stephenson’s claim that J.G. Ballard’s work implies an ‘affirmation of the highest humanistic and metaphysical ideal: the repossession for mankind of authentic and absolute being.’<sup>401</sup> From an anthropological perspective focused on the theory of mental archetypes, Stephenson understands this statement as stemming from a will to metaphysical transcendence of our existential limitations: space, time, matter, as well as consciousness and subjectivity.<sup>402</sup> J.G. Ballard himself recognises in an

---

<sup>396</sup> Lukas Barr, ‘Don’t Crash’ (1994), in Sellars and O’Hara, pp. 283-90 (p. 287).

<sup>397</sup> Victor Sage, ‘The Gothic, the Body, and the Failed Homeopathy Argument: Reading *Crash*’, in Baxter (ed.), pp. 34-49 (p. 34).

<sup>398</sup> Jonathan Weiss, ‘“Not Entirely a Journey without Maps”: J.G. Ballard on *The Atrocity Exhibition*’ (2006), in Sellars and O’Hara, pp. 447-62 (p. 458).

<sup>399</sup> Marshall McLuhan, as cited in Woodward, p. 140. Jean Baudrillard calls McLuhan’s statement ‘the key formula of the era of simulation’: Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities... or the End of the Social and Other Essays*, tr by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and John Johnston, Foreign Agents (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 101.

<sup>400</sup> In strictly Nietzschean terms, however, and reminding the reader of something we established earlier, all those efforts are doomed to failure, as ‘the character of existence is not “true”, is *false*.’ (*TWTP*, p. 13, original emphasis) Therefore, there is neither true self nor any ‘authenticity’ in the world.

<sup>401</sup> Gregory Stephenson, *Out of the Night and into the Dream: A Thematic Study of the Fiction of J. G. Ballard* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), p. 2.

<sup>402</sup> The futurist overtones are undeniable: ‘Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute’: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, ‘The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism’, in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence E. Cahoone, Blackwell Philosophy Anthologies, 2 (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 1996; repr. 2000), pp. 185-90 (p. 187).

interview that he is a firm partisan of self-transcendence understood as the destruction of self, going beyond the ‘enormous limitations’ of our sense thereof and of our physicality, thereby opening up to ‘a larger world’.<sup>403</sup>

The risk implicit in this destruction of the self is unwittingly opening up to a larger nothingness. That *Crash* is not a fairy tale, but a story marked by negativity is clear from its very first sentence: ‘Vaughan died yesterday’ (*Crash*, p. 1). The immediate piece of information we are given after this, in a flashback which shapes the plot, is that Vaughan’s fatal crash has been preceded by many rehearsed ones, which should make us prepare for what is coming: a bizarre trip through the dark alleys of the human psyche with a fatal, unavoidable destination, the death drive. In this way, the novel starts at the ontological opposite of *The Unnamable* if, as we argued above, we interpret that Beckett’s inhuman creature inhabits an unimaginable limbo before birth. In *Crash*, we start with the death, caused by his greed for nothingness, of a human proper.

Besides, the first part of Stephenson’s statement on J.G. Ballard’s presumed positivity, as centred on the ‘highest *humanistic* [...] ideal’ (my emphasis) could be very controversial. If the author defines himself as an optimist, it is quite clear to me that this optimism is not of a traditional humanist kind. Despite the fact that J.G. Ballard comes sometimes very close to anthropological essentialism in that he often talks about ‘human nature’ without any further qualifications, his self-acknowledged perspective as a writer would be that of a scientist, that is, someone who puts forward and tests working hypotheses about observed phenomena without any preconceptions about the results of his experiments (Orr, pp. 62-63; Ballard, ‘Introduction’, no p., par. 6). Thus, he would not really focus on any unchanging nature or condition, as in a more or less Christian or Platonic tradition linked with classical antiquity and the Renaissance. According to these intellectual, artistic, and cultural schools, perfectibility, though possible through knowledge and virtue, will find unmovable limits in man’s physiological and psychological constitution as ultimately fashioned by God in order to fulfil the purposes assigned to him since the very creation of our species. Ballard does not recognise any such divine purposes or even God, to begin with. Neither would his atheism necessarily be coincident with that of contemporary Anglo-Saxon ‘humanism’, which could be resumed

---

<sup>403</sup> Peter Rønnev-Jessen, ‘Against Entropy’ [1984], in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), 199-210 (p. 207).

as some rather anodyne (if well-intended), rational and reasonable, scientifically-based commonalities and good feelings concerning mankind and its coming future.<sup>404</sup>

Rather, his ideas on mankind and its place in the universe, which would be based mostly on evolution, might allow for cumulative, though unpredictable change as derived from genetic mutation. In practice, this could make it possible to think ahead of this contemporary humanism about a future ‘post(hu)mankind’, when science would go beyond his change-descriptive function to become a catalyst for or a factor of speed and intensity in that change. In other words, Ballard may even be seen as somebody who, under certain social and political conditions, would agree with fostering change in the human condition: change might be good in itself.<sup>405</sup>

With respect to this, though, we could find several elements according to which J.G. Ballard, despite his own claims and public statements on the contrary, might be held to be an anthropological pessimist, which would make him be closer to Samuel Beckett, for instance, than one may have suspected at first. He might be as much of a partisan for ‘excavatory’ exploration of human nature as Beckett: what the latter says about his own work might also be applied to J.G. Ballard’s, namely that ‘the only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent.’ (Pattie, p. 72) In Adorno’s words, the writer may also have ‘to work one’s way through the darkness without a lamp, [...] and to immerse oneself in the darkness as deeply as one possibly can.’ (*Metaphysics*, p. 144) Some unsavoury findings could be made by following this underground method: to begin with, that we humans may not be the ‘sane, sensible’ creatures we believe ourselves to be; that we may not have to ‘descend’ very deep to come across ‘parts of ourselves that are not fully sane’; that we are the by-product of the warm, revolting entrails of a mammal we call mother, from whom we separate in unspeakable violence to become autonomous selves; that ‘just below the surface’ there is in us a ‘potential for violence’ which is ‘extremely great’; and thus, finally, that there might not be any ‘innate decency’ in the

---

<sup>404</sup> See, e.g., Richard Norman’s introduction to his *On Humanism* (especially p. 24).

<sup>405</sup> In an interview with the CBC, and reminding us of Rorty’s formula for ‘the good life’ that we saw earlier, the author expresses himself in these terms: ‘more and more change of a more and more random kind [...] makes for a richer and more exciting life.’ Thus, ‘one should embrace all kinds of possibilities, no matter how bizarre, or perverse or *morally reprehensible*’ (my emphasis): Carol Orr, ‘How to Face Doomsday without Really Trying’ [1974], in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 56-71 (p. 64).

human race.<sup>406</sup> According to J.G. Ballard, the more science advances in its understanding of the human being, the more we have to face our ‘taste for cruelty, for the subversive, for the deviant, for the perverse.’ (Gray, p. 380).

Driven by repressed psychopathologies and always refusing to be tamed, the ‘human animal’, the ‘beast’, a being to whose condition war would be endemic, would be closer to the average chimpanzee ‘on a hunting party’ than to the heirs of any humanist tradition or the ‘civilised inheritors of the [...] Enlightenment’ that Westerners take themselves to be (if the seeds of the Holocaust had not already been sown during the Enlightenment, as many have claimed and we have already dealt with).<sup>407</sup> In the end, we have to consider that such anti-civilised behaviour befits a species whose evolutionary history has been red in tooth and claw for most of its presence on the surface of this planet. In the words of one of the characters in *Super-Cannes*, one of J.G. Ballard’s late novels, ‘homo sapiens is a reformed hunter-killer of depraved appetites [...] with a taste for cruelty and an intense curiosity about pain and death.’ (quoted in Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 192) Violence and sex, especially if perverse and opposed to normative superstructures such as religion or ethics, are thrilling in themselves; when associated with the death drive, and in combination with a feeling of power, they may prove irresistible, regardless of the injunctions issued by the reality principle to prevent ‘long pent-up savagery’.

Hence, it can truly be said that Vaughan gives the members of his cult, in Ballard’s words, what they ‘most wanted and feared.’ (*Crash*, p. 76) In the end, Ballard has to confess to getting ‘locked into a system of beckoning violence and excitement’ (p. 142). Such a system, ‘made up of the motorway and the traffic jams, the cars we stole and Vaughan’s discharging sexuality’, would be embodied by the motor car, the machine that

---

<sup>406</sup> John Gray, “‘Technology is Always a Facilitator’”: J.G. Ballard on *Super-Cannes*’ [2000], in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 374-82 (pp. 378-79); Toby Litt, “‘Dangerous Bends Ahead. Slow Down.’”: J.G. Ballard on *Kingdom Come*’ [2006], in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 415-30 (p. 424).

<sup>407</sup> Gray, p. 378; Naughtie, p. 480; Nordlund, p. 226; Hari Kunzru, ‘Historian of the Future’ [2007], in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 463-72 (p. 467).

allows humans to feel overwhelmed by the ‘simple and ingenuous pleasure of being in the centre of *so much power*, so much speed.’<sup>408</sup>

In *Crash* there is a constant tension among those who are discontent with civilisation, being wary of its claims over the energies they are supposed to suppress and submit to its imperatives.<sup>409</sup> In the eternal struggle between Eros and Thanatos that, according to Freud, determines the evolution of human civilisation and constitutes the main tool for the survival of the human species, such repressed energies would clearly be on the side of death and its related ‘natural’ instinct of aggression, characterised by the hostility of each against all and of all against each (Storr, p. 68). Hatred would thus certainly prove Freud to be right in his contention that this instinct is older than love in our species (p. 65). Therefore, although both instincts have equal status, death is the biological telos of life, and the death drive is the first instinct to have developed in animate matter (Freud, *Pleasure Principle*, pp. 78-79).

In *Crash*, this would be even more so, as its characters happen to come across a charismatic leader anointed with blood and semen at a time of utter socio-political and cultural anomie (Delville, pp. 51, 53, 85-86). If we follow this line of thought, we will soon get only one foot apart from Swift’s Yahoo as the average specimen of the human race, which justifies J.G. Ballard’s suspicion of mankind. Of all things, I would not call this humanism, as Stephenson does. If anything, I would think of it as a perfect example of the ‘collapse of the traditional humanist notions of culture and progress’ that Stephenson himself, rather contradictorily, sees as a common feature of the writing not only of J.G. Ballard but also of some of his contemporary British fellow writers, and as one of the defining characteristics of the postmodern era after WWII (Stephenson, p. 153).

Be that as it may, it is clear to me that positivities are nowhere to be seen in *Crash*, a novel that might exemplify Adorno’s notion of negative harmony by embodying ‘in its innermost structure’ the objective contradictions of the human condition and of our

---

<sup>408</sup> David Inglis, ‘Auto Couture: Thinking the Car in Post-War France’, in *Automobilities*, ed. by Mike Featherstone, Nigel Thrift, and John Urry (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), pp. 197-219 (p. 200, my emphasis).

<sup>409</sup> Michel Delville, *J.G. Ballard, Writers and their Work* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1988), p. 48.

debased civilisation as ‘pure and uncompromised’.<sup>410</sup> According to this, *Crash* would be entitled to be considered a ‘successful negative work’ (ibid.).

### 3.6 – Body over Soul: Abject Self-Transcendence

As it is, J.G. Ballard’s antihumanism should be qualified as one addressed against traditional versions thereof, without falling into the ‘dogma’ of the inexistence of any common human nature whatsoever. His scientific education and turn of mind would prevent this conviction as opposed to scientific evidence and common sense (Pinker, *Blank Slate*, p. 13). The main evidence for this is his constant following of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, which made him want to become a psychiatrist while being a young man.<sup>411</sup>

Taking this into account, the unconscious, common to the entire species and probably the most significant component of the untamed human animal, would actually be, in the form of irrepressible psychological energies and drives, the true source of any wish to reintegrate ourselves into what we feel to be a lost primordial unity of being. These energies are experienced by the narrator as a sensory, sensual awakening to an up to then unknown dimension beyond Ballard’s anodyne everyday routine, beyond what we could call his ‘postmodern autism’ or the ‘coma of wellbeing’.<sup>412</sup> It is an ‘uncanny’, Lacanian ‘lost body’, forgotten in the wilderness of the unconscious after overgrowing it and repressed in our psychosexual development towards maturity and adulthood, that Ballard unexpectedly finds and experiences. This body beyond our conscious memory returns and

---

<sup>410</sup> As cited in Bradley Butterfield, ‘Ethical Value and Negative Aesthetics: Reconsidering the Baudrillard-Ballard Connection’, *PMLA. Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 114.1 (1999), pp. 64-77 (p. 67)  
<<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.uned.es/docview/214773758?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:summon&accountid=14609>> [accessed 19.08.2018]

<sup>411</sup> Nicholas Zurbrugg, ‘Empire of the Surreal’ (1995), in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 291-98 (p. 292).

<sup>412</sup> Although the last expression has been coined to be applied to Ballard’s later novels, I find it perfectly fitting for description of the narrator’s reaction to his initial accident and his later meeting Vaughan in *Crash*: Frida Beckman, ‘Chronopolitics: Space, Time and Revolution in the Later Novels of J.G. Ballard’, *sympløke*, 21.1-2 (2013), pp. 271-289 (p. 285).

Mark Dery, ‘“Always Crashing in the Same Car”: A Head-on Collision with the Technosphere’, *The Sociological Review*, 54.1 (2006), pp. 223-39 (pp. 235).



is revealed under the violence of Ballard's accident.<sup>413</sup> Consequently, his attitude, even while still in hospital, is one of 'relief' after his only 'real experience' for many years, finding himself suddenly and unexpectedly 'in physical confrontation' with his own body (*Crash*, p. 28). This experience would validate Nietzsche's historically against-the-grain conviction that 'belief in the body is more fundamental than belief in the soul' (*TWTP*, p. 271). Indeed, despite the violent and perverse elements obtaining in *Crash*, its main characters seem to believe, at least unconsciously, that the 'senses five' may indeed be the key to an entirely new, potentially redemptive 'world of delight'.<sup>414</sup> In this world, meanings and 'mysterious connections' can be read off the surface of things, most prominently the human body, as Ballard does when wildly speculating about the sexual life of the nurses taking care of him in hospital on the sole basis of the contours of their hips or breasts.<sup>415</sup>

Somehow, *Crash* reads as heeding Artaud's remark on his 'theatre of cruelty': 'In our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that *metaphysics* must be made to re-enter our minds.'<sup>416</sup> In this respect, what is attempted by the otherwise very nihilistic characters of *Crash*, most notably its narrator, is to get back to a sort of ontological Eden, to a 'sacred fullness' beyond our limited and flawed existence as contemporary humans, for this existence is felt to be mere illusion (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 64). As long as we do not rise over our existential limitations, we will be 'fallen beings in a fallen universe', part and parcel of what Stephenson considers to be the 'central theme' in J.G. Ballard's oeuvre: 'ontological disorder' (Stephenson, p. 147).

Nevertheless, and most clearly, it is not any disembodied spirituality but the sensory, bodily and actually abject that play a pivotal role in the characters' attempt at escape from

---

<sup>413</sup> Dennis A. Foster, 'J.G. Ballard's Empire of the Senses: Perversion and the Failure of Authority', *PMLA. Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 108.3 (1993), pp. 519-532 (p. 524)

<sup>414</sup> William Blake, 'A Memorable Fancy', in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (New York: Dover, 1994), p.9

<sup>415</sup> There is an obvious link with Baudelaire's concept of 'correspondance' here, in which life and the world, the latter being likened to 'forests of symbols', are believed to 'yield perplexing images': Charles Baudelaire, 'Correspondences', in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. by Richard Howard (Boston: David R. Godine, 1983; pr. 2006), p. 15.

<sup>416</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove, 1994), p. 99.

a culture of over-pacified, sedated, meaningless superficiality. Indeed, their bizarre methods of self-transcendence originate in a rare paraphilia which brings death and eroticism together, as if it had been imagined by Bataille himself: symphorophilia (Reader, p. 60).<sup>417</sup> They actually cultivate and actively court catastrophe, culminating in arranged car crash as sexual stimulus and means of self-transcendence.

In this, the narrator, Ballard, an acknowledged alter ego of the author, as well as the other members of the cell of addicts to car-crash-mediated sex he joins in Seagrave's home, are led by Vaughan, the epitome of the mad scientist character turned into postmodern guru, 'messenger' or prophet (*Crash*, p. 86). Ballard turns to him as he follows what he describes as his 'messianic obsessions', and is even aware of Vaughan being a projection of his own 'fantasies and obsessions', conjured up as his own personal avenging angel in his probably unconscious search for spiritual deliverance. His initial accident, therefore, may have been a mere excuse for finding himself in such a situation (pp. 50, 181). Here, although this would have to be understood only in a general sense, as Vaughan is more complex as a character, we should consider Freud's notion of literary characters as the externalisation as 'separate individuals' of 'the opposing instinctual impulses struggling within them [i.e., 'creative writers']. (Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 76, n. 1)

In any case, by following Vaughan, Ballard tries to come to terms with what from the beginning he feels to be the elusive meaning of his seemingly successful and pleasurable life. In joining Vaughan's cult, he is exemplifying Lacan's concept of fantasy as a way to stage desire: his fantasy '*brings about* the lack which makes the fantasy desirable.' (Easthope, p. 126, original emphasis) His deepest wish will be that of the rest of the members of Vaughan's cult: to learn who he really is in the proximity of death. Sex and death, therefore, will stand as the primary factors in the lives of the band of renegades he joins. They will all hold on to a last chance for meaning, if inarticulate and brutal, in their existence. In the end, they all just want to become, to be their own fantasies about themselves (ibid.)

---

<sup>417</sup> As defined in *Psychology Dictionary: Professional Reference*,  
 <<https://psychologydictionary.org/symphorophilia/>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

### 3.7 – Abject Jouissance: Limit-Experience and the Return of the Real

The wish to be one's own fantasy is based on a fascination for both death and extreme, deviant, often violent eroticism. According to this, Ballard chooses to follow a very peculiar sort of saviour: one dominated by a clearly obsessive and particularly bizarre type of sexual psychopathology whose ultimate focus is final, universal, simultaneous 'autogeddon.' His main contribution to this ideal, impossible to fulfil for a single person, will be the marriage of heaven and hell in the form of orgasm at the very moment of his own and his victim's simultaneous deaths in a willingly undergone car crash. Strangely enough, his victim must be a celebrity (optimally, Elizabeth Taylor: *Crash*, pp. 1-2).<sup>418</sup> Hence, Vaughan would be a deviant, abject Messiah in quest of a redemptive death whereby, through the most intense and perfect orgasmic climax, he would get reintegrated into a kind of superior energy, 'the very energy of life itself', whose major representatives on this earth would be precisely the sexual instinct and its satisfaction (Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 94). In this ending, in that it brings together death and eroticism, Vaughan would be behaving as a true obscene, 'tragically copulative' artist, according to Spanish painter Antonio Saura's conceptualisation of this term: one that experiments failure in the impossible task of 'possessing all the living bodies in the universe in order to achieve the eternal orgasm which happens but does not satisfy, in order to continue with the quest for it until death'. In its 'crazed desiring', he would be celebrating his regressive 'return to the engendering matrix'.<sup>419</sup> Vaughan's messianic charisma would also be related to the truth that for many in our contemporary society resides in 'the traumatic or abject subject', and 'in the diseased or damaged body.' Trauma, the core around which Vaughan's followers have gathered in order to form a community, would stand for a 'return of the real' in our delusional contemporariness. Hal Foster identifies this sensibility within postmodernism, specifically distinguishing J.G. Ballard as one of its forerunners.<sup>420</sup>

---

<sup>418</sup> He also considers Greta Garbo, Jayne Mansfield, Brigitte Bardot and Raquel Welch as targets (*Crash*, p. 109).

<sup>419</sup> As cited in Francisco Calvo Serraller, 'Look to the Ladies', in *Saura: Damas*, Medio Siglo (Fundación Juan March: Madrid, 2005), pp. 177-82 (pp. 179-80).

<sup>420</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, as cited in Crosthwaite, p. 104.

Vaughan's suicide would also be a celebration of both life and death in that orgasm, as Freud contends, implies both the greatest (natural) pleasure imaginable and a momentary extinction (*la petite mort*) in the discharge of the sexual impulses, thus bringing together 'the desexualizing descent towards death and the libidinal excitation for life.' (Bristow, pp. 121-22). Therefore, Vaughan would undergo, both literally and metaphorically, what Bersani calls 'self-shattering', namely 'self- divestiture [...] enacted as a wilful pursuit of abjection, a casting away not only of possessions but also of all the attributes that constitute the self as a valuable property' (Bersani, *Homos*, p. 126).

Indeed, in this 'shattering experience', in this transgressive death worthy of one of Bataille's nightmares of abject jouissance intermingling the limit-experiences of sex and death, one that would overcome its subject with both 'horror and sexual pleasure', Vaughan finally achieves what we had originally identified as the very root and purpose of his symphorophilic brotherhood: to transcend the boundaries and limitations of the body and individual subjectivity (Noys, pp. 101-03, 113). At last Vaughan, as Seagrave before him, is torn away from 'his daily life, from rational society, from his monotonous work,' embodying Bataille's doctrine on eroticism: 'The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives.' (as cited in Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 94) Like this, in a radical attempt to escape the anxiety of being by following the self-destructive 'life force', Vaughan undergoes a 'paroxysm' that plunges him into an 'irrational, violent, and beautiful world', thriving in 'the outer reaches of human possibility', thus experiencing the ultimate 'tragic jubilation': 'to join the undifferentiated continuity of existence' by breaching 'the confines of the body' (pp. 94-95; Noys, pp. 102, 115; Marmysz, p. 28).<sup>421</sup> By doing so, his would be an example of 'base subversion' in the manner of Bataille rather than of the 'Icarian revolt' of those who, like Camus or even Nietzsche, aspire to soar above the 'stinking decomposition' of man's absurd existence on this earth.<sup>422</sup>

---

<sup>421</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. by Patricia M. Ranum (London: Marion Boyars, 1976), p. 57.

<sup>422</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1938*, ed. and intro. by Allan Stoekl, trans. by Allan Stoekl, and others, *Theory and History of Literature*, 14 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985), p. xv.

However, in as much as this redemption of sorts calls for the most bizarre paraphilia and completely disregards, but for the merely aesthetic, other people's wishes or their very lives, we could start doubting its potential to overcome existential nihilism: Vaughan's 'orgiastic experience' would be one of nothingness.<sup>423</sup> In fact, this potential must be understood as diminished on another, lesser account, namely that of identification with celebrities, as this is, in Freudian thought, a form of psychic regression, an instance of psychic infantilism (Easthope, p. 53).

### 3.8 – Nihilistic Transcendence, Object Sovereignty, and Inner Experience

In *Crash*, we are placed before a very complex sort of transcendence, one that could be deemed to be very close to Freud's concept of the death drive. Regardless of the seeming paradox, this would be a very nihilistic kind of transcendence: one towards nothingness. After all, what is sought here could be interpreted as being ultimately a reintegration into what Schopenhauer calls the Will, beyond its representations. According to this philosopher and as we saw above, the Will would be an eternal, protean, irresistible, fatal, unconscious, unthinking, insensitive, insensible, blind force at the very origin of all passions and suffering, and of which the whole universe would be constituted. Understood as the unitary, Kantian thing-in-itself, outside of both time and space, we would not be anything but its objectifications, its representations, our bodies being its spatio-temporal phenomena: the Will is our essence (*WWR1*, pp. 101, 108; Young, pp. 33, 36). What is important about Schopenhauer's doctrine here is how

death is the great opportunity no longer to be I; [...] Dying is the moment of that liberation from [...] an individuality which does not constitute the innermost kernel of our true being, but is rather to be thought of as a kind of aberration thereof.

(*WWR2*, p. 508)

---

<sup>423</sup> Timo Airaksinen, *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 12.

That kernel, as we already stated above, is the Will that sustains all individuals without being any of them, and into which they are all destined to reintegrate after their disappearance, thus putting an end to ‘the fundamental error of true nature,’ namely being ‘something that ought not to be’.

The only alternative to an undesirable reintegration into a Will that is a meaningless and purposeless universal Whole would be complete self-extinction, disintegration into nothingness: what Buddhism has traditionally called Nirvana, the way of ‘him who gives up and denies the will-to-live.’ (WWR2, p. 508) Like this, by no longer burning up in the Will’s fire, he rises ‘above himself and above all suffering,’ extinguishing himself ‘in inviolable peace, bliss and sublimity’ (WWR1, p. 392; Severino, *Contemp.*, p.31). Schopenhauer holds this to be the only way to subtract oneself from the never-stopping wheel of suffering and rebirth, what Hindus and Buddhists alike call Samsara: ‘the world of constant rebirths, of craving and desire, of the illusion of the senses, of changing and transient forms, of being born, growing old, becoming sick, and dying.’ (WWR2, p. 509)<sup>424</sup>

A middle way concept of self-sacrifice could also be applied to our interpretation of Vaughan’s suicide by recourse to Bataille’s notion of ‘sovereignty’: the ‘choice to live’ instead of the acceptance of ‘the burden of living that is placed above one’ in ‘a society that reduces itself to homogeneity’. Such a choice and its object would ultimately be ‘a replacement for and corruption of “reason”.’ (Jenks, *Transgression*, pp. 108-09) According to the terms of Bataille’s thought, Vaughan’s would be a true sacrifice in that it could be read as an act of abject sovereignty aspiring to the sacred. Emerging as ‘the dissolving of the subject and object worlds,’ and representing ‘the overcoming of the divide’ between both, ‘sovereignty can come and undo any autonomy, any identity’, abjecting it ‘beyond the profane world’ of autonomous individuals. If individuality is seen by Bataille (and Beckett via the characters of his *Three Novels*) as a cause of anguish because of its reduction of the human to thinghood (a ‘thing-for-itself’, in Sartrean terminology), sovereignty is beyond and in excess of ‘life as utility’, partaking, just like Vaughan’s

---

<sup>424</sup> In the end, however, J.G. Ballard’s concept of nirvana would be a rather odd one in that it would not be based on nothingness, but on a fusion with the ‘unseen powers of the universe.’ (Rønnov-Jessen, p. 207) Thus, he would be positivising what is essentially a negative concept. For a ‘thoroughly negative’ definition of nirvana by the Buddha himself, see ‘Nirvana’, in Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ, and Woodstock, Oxon: Princeton UP, 2014), pp. 1739-1743 (pp. 1739-40).

ultimate crash, of ‘the divine, of the sacred, of the ludicrous or the erotic, of the repugnant or the funereal’ (Hegarty, *Bataille*, p. 75).<sup>425</sup> By bridging the ‘gap between the “being” and the saying of being’, by surpassing the ‘I’, Vaughan reaches that moment of sovereign existence where ‘inner’ or ‘inward’ experience, ‘inscribed into the body’ and impossible to be articulated in an organisational mode of thought or discourse, is existence ‘without delay’, ‘immanent Being’. Thus, this moment leads us towards a self-annihilation of the subject, into a discontinuity which is an experience ‘both sovereign and ecstatic’ and a form of transgression in that it involves conscious trespassing on social rules (p. 82).<sup>426</sup> Consequently, like poetry, inner experience is ‘an illumination [...] beyond definition’ and the product of a radical negativity that cannot be subsumed into the positive moment of any dialectic, just ‘like the howl of a wounded beast’ (Hussey, ‘Slaughterhouse of Love’, pp. 85-86, 90).

And yet, the ultimate outcome of Vaughan’s sacrifice is the same as the one deriving from its interpretation after Schopenhauer or from its understanding as a self-offering of redemption through excess: beyond his rejection of mastery and his abjection of phallic meaning and sway, and as we concluded in the case of the Unnamable’s longing for silence, one ‘must not believe that truth lies in the void’ (Reader, p. 56; Hegarty, *Bataille*, p. 82). On the other side of Vaughan’s death, there is only nothingness.

In the end, both ways, excess and abstinence, as well as Bataille’s intermediate option, excessive but dismissive of transcendence, seem to mean very much the same. If this were the case, which I find defensible, and starting from a common wish to either avoid or

---

<sup>425</sup> In Sartre’s thought and terminology, ‘being-for-itself’ means ‘the essential nature or way of being of consciousness or personhood.’ It exists only in its relationship with ‘being-in-itself’ as ‘borrowed being’, through its ‘negation, nihilation, denial or lack’. ‘Being-in-itself’ is ‘undifferentiated being’, that which simply is. The dichotomy between these two types of being is, in a certain way, a remaking of the Kantian distinction between phenomenon and noumenon: Gary Cox, *The Sartre Dictionary* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), pp. 26, 30.

<sup>426</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt, *Intersections: Philosophy and Critical Theory* (Albany: SUNY, 1988), pp. 47, xiii.

Andrew Hussey, ‘The Beast at Heaven’s Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression’, in Hussey (ed.), pp. 7-12 (p. 8).

Andrew Hussey, ‘“The Slaughterhouse of Love”: The Corpse of “Laure”’, in Hussey (ed.), pp. 81-90 (p. 84).

Cathy MacGregor, ‘The Eye of the Storm – Female Representation in Bataille’s *Madame Edwarda* and *Histoire de l’oeil*’, in Hussey (ed.), pp. 101-10 (p. 102).

overcome nihilism, to transcend their own historical and subjective coordinates and their own limitations, characters in *Crash* might well end up reaching the same final destination: zero. Therefore, we would be before a frustrated attempt at overcoming existential nihilism, as it ends up in the most absolute metaphysical one.

### 3.9 – The Car and Sexual Deviance: Eros and Thanatos

In *Crash*, the automobile will outstandingly feature as a catalyst for the process of self-search and the resulting enlightenment of life's and self's purpose. This is to be added to the car's already noticeable significance as the provider of 'an entire identity, meaning or image of life', an icon of self-empowerment, independence and individualism in modern societies, as it has been praised and sung at least since Italian Futurism (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 81).<sup>427</sup> Thus, from a modern/ist angle, it has been seen as the number one 'totem of unbridled freedom' of choice, expression, happiness, adventure and discovery (Dery, 'Always Crashing', pp. 225,229). The motor car implies the 'expectancy of new experiences' and the potential for doing 'something crazy'.<sup>428</sup>

Nevertheless, there might also be an abject component in the very concept of the automobile, which would make sense of its symbolic associations with sex and even more so with death. First of all, an analogy could be drawn between the car and the coffin, the object that exists in order to receive the abject object *par excellence* according to Kristeva: the corpse (p. 225; *POH*, pp. 3-4).<sup>429</sup> This could be linked to the celebrity car-crashes re-

---

<sup>427</sup> David Gartman, 'Three Ages of the Automobile: The Cultural Logics of the Car', in Featherstone, Thrift and Urry (eds.), pp. 169-95 (p. 187)

<sup>428</sup> Mike Featherstone, 'Introduction', in Featherstone, Thrift, and Urry (eds.), pp. 1-24 (pp. 13-14)

<sup>429</sup> The evocation of the car as a bier or coffin has Modernist overtones and credentials: 'I stretched out on my car like a corpse on its bier, but revived at once under the steering wheel, a guillotine blade that threatened my stomach.' Marinetti, 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism', in Cahoon (ed.), p. 186, my emphasis.

The corpse in Kristeva allows to establish a relationship between abjection, post-Nietzschean nihilism and post-Enlightenment humanism: in the corpse, 'I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection.' (*POH*, p. 4)

In a more forceful, less technical evocation of the skull's appeal to an average consciousness, we could add: 'To remember suddenly that you have a skull—and not to lose your mind over it!' (Cioran, *New Gods*, p. 70)



enacted by Vaughan and Seagrave, as they might be deemed to rebel against a recent sociological phenomenon, namely that of occulting death as ‘the most private and shameful thing of all’, constituting the object of a new Western taboo whereby it is rendered invisible (Noys, p. 32).<sup>430</sup> Considering the statistics about death causes in the Western world and the prominence of the car crash among them, it is not difficult to imagine the automobile as ‘ready to receive its roadkill-to-be’ (Dery, ‘Always Crashing’, pp. 225, 228; Noys, p. 4; Featherstone, ‘Introduction’, p. 7)<sup>431</sup>. J.G. Ballard is fully aware of this, as is clear in his implicit definition of the automobile as the agent of ‘a pandemic cataclysm that kills hundreds of thousands of people each year and injures millions.’ (Ballard, ‘Introduction’, n.p., par. 7) The motor car could be described, then, as ‘a cosy cocoon [...] with the potential of a weapon.’ (Featherstone, ‘Introduction’, p. 9)

In itself, this would justify an association between the car and our most primitive ‘reptilian hindbrains in the driver’s seat.’ (Dery, ‘Always Crashing’, p. 226). Literally, every time we step onto a car, we would be facing, and maybe venting ‘the repressed awareness that [...] we stand a chance of dying.’ (ibid.) This temptation to ease our psychological tensions by careless or reckless driving would in turn make visible the strong bonds between the car and the death drive, our penchant for (self-) aggression and (self-) destruction (p. 225). Ultimately, for the very fact of being what it is, we can find ‘almost every aspect of modern life’ in a car, including ‘speed, drama and aggression,’ therefore also the death drive, as implied by the last term: if not aimed at our own life, then at other people’s or to objects, thus providing the ego with ‘the satisfaction of its vital needs and with control over nature.’ (Storr, p. 67).<sup>432</sup> As J.G. Ballard himself makes clear, ‘the car crash is the most dramatic event in most people’s lives apart from their own deaths, and for many the two will coincide.’ (ibid.) This dark underside of automobile technology in the fashion of ‘the fact of the dead man’ is what Ballard the narrator finds in

---

<sup>430</sup> Incidentally, Vaughan and Seagrave’s crash shows could also be taken for another common postmodern phenomenon, namely the focus placed on ‘the body, living art and the happening’, as well as ‘the expansion of the artistic professions,’ if we understand these in a broad, non-elitist way (Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, p. 95).

<sup>431</sup> Catherine Lutz and Anne Lutz Fernandez, *Carjacked: The Culture of the Automobile and its Effects on Our Lives* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants. and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 228.

<sup>432</sup> J.G. Ballard, ‘The Car, the Future’, *Drive*, 1971, 102-09 (p. 103)  
<[http://www.jgballard.ca/deep\\_ends/drive\\_mag\\_article.html](http://www.jgballard.ca/deep_ends/drive_mag_article.html)> [accessed 14.10.2019]

hospital, when he wakes up after his accident (*Crash*, p. 28). Definitely, the modern symbol of progress and, more importantly, of faith therein would also be the basis for a very much postmodern suspicion that reason would after all not necessarily be in the ascendant in our societies (Dery, 'Always Crashing', p. 228).

In fact, there could be even a significant percentage of suicides disguised as car accidents: in the end, Seagrave's and Vaughan's fatal crashes, despite their thorough preparations and colourful execution, would not be so exceptional or aberrant (p. 227). In fact, there might be a clue to this in Seagrave's name, symbolically evocative of the 'oceanic feeling' already commented on in this thesis, which can be related either to the origins of religious feeling in the human being or to the death drive making humans long for utter self-loss, 'as lethal as it is jubilatory,' into the inorganic. In any case, our very 'motorphilia' might actually be 'rooted in suicidal impulses' (p. 225). In the end, 'the car is a killing zone.'<sup>433</sup>

The fact that the libido and the life-preserving instincts, Eros, are present in every human psyche alongside Thanatos, would turn the car into a privileged space for the 'psychic collision' of both (p. 226). This would be the basis for the certainly extreme, because of its circumstances and means, but otherwise perfectly understandable coalition of the quest for the car crash and for subsequent injury, mutilation or ultimately death on the one hand, and for sexual pleasure on the other in all the members of Vaughan's cult: as theorised by Georges Bataille, the search for self-obliteration and for orgasmic plenitude in its proximity would not be such a deranged notion (ibid.). In fact, this little death, orgasm, according to strict Freudian theory, would be the most powerful example of the convergence of two forces that would in any case be involved in every single type of human activity and behaviour (Bristow, p. 121; Easthope, p. 163) The clearest example of this would be Ballard's paradoxical evocation of Elizabeth Taylor as Vaughan's 'death-born Aphrodite' and the direct cause of his sacrificial self-immolation:

In his vision of a car-crash with the actress, Vaughan was obsessed by many wounds and impacts - by the dying chromium and collapsing bulkheads of their

---

<sup>433</sup> Shohini Chaudhuri, 'Witnessing Death: Ballard's and Cronenberg's *Crash*', *Strategies*, 14.1 (2001), pp. 63-75 (p.70).

two cars meeting head-on in complex collisions endlessly repeated in slow-motion films, by the identical wounds inflicted on their bodies, by the image of windshield glass frosting around her face as she broke its tinted surface like a death-born Aphrodite, by the compound fractures of their thighs impacted against their handbrake mountings, and above all by the wounds to their genitalia, her uterus pierced by the heraldic beak of the manufacturer's medallion, *his semen emptying* across the luminescent dials that registered for ever the last temperature and fuel levels of the engine.

(*Crash*, p. 2, my emphasis).<sup>434</sup>

Having been published in 1973, *Crash* marks a moment of growing cultural deviance. A major example of this development is sex, which in the novel goes well beyond the pale of the socially tolerable, even after the sexual liberation of the 1960s. According to this, J.G. Ballard was quite accurate in calling *Crash* 'the first pornographic novel based on technology', and one focusing on outrageous desires and practices at that (Ballard, 'Introduction', n. p., par. 8).<sup>435</sup> In it, we can see the car, among other things, as 'a Freudian extension of the genitalia.'<sup>436</sup> In fact, I intend to develop my study of the novel in the terms of a three-member formula: *Crash* as the technology-mediated marriage of sex and violence.

---

<sup>434</sup> If we accept this association, it should not amaze us that the cult of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of (sensual and sexual) love was linked to human sacrifice at a certain historical moment: Lawrence Durrell, *Las islas griegas*, Libros del buen andar (Barcelona: Serbal, 1983), p. 102.

<sup>435</sup> J.G. Ballard uses this very expression to refer to his novel in as many as three interviews among those compiled in Sellars and O'Hara. It is not at all the only case of exact repetition of terms when discussing the theoretical and ideological underpinnings of his oeuvre.

<sup>436</sup> Paul Graves-Brown, 'From Highway to Superhighway: The Sustainability, Symbolism and Situated Practices of Car Culture', *Social Analysis*, 41.1 (1997), pp. 64-75 (p. 70).

### 3.10 – Sex as Everything: Transgression and Deliverance

The first member of my critical formula is sex. Sexuality plays a fundamental role in *Crash*, which must be properly considered in its thematic interpretation. To begin with, not only is it the major obsession of the key characters (Vaughan, Ballard and his wife Catherine), but also a kind of measure for the characters to assess their experience in search of spiritual deliverance while in communion with Vaughan's cult. Thus, as he observes the massive traffic flow over the London road and fly-over landscape, Ballard remembers his wife's sometime comment on impossible satisfaction 'until every conceivable act of copulation in the world had finally taken place.' (*Crash*, p. 86). Sex becomes thus a holistic concept pervading all of reality, a characteristic of our time as the author elaborates on in an interview while speaking about our interaction with technology: he defines it as 'the whole organic expression of our personalities in terms of our bodies and our responses to life.' He goes as far as to seem to imply an equivalence between sex and life in the same conceptual context: in the future, he believes, 'all kinds of intimate junctions are going to be made between sex and technology, between *life* and technology' (Orr, p. 59, original emphasis).

This is all in accordance with several observations made by Jean Baudrillard about postmodern life, where every cultural sphere has undergone 'liberation' beyond its traditional boundaries, each of them thus becoming totalising in itself. Consequently, sexual liberation has made everything sexual. This is a typically postmodern expression of random proliferation of value in all directions, with the result of the impossibility of valuations and critical judgement any longer and the collapse of meaning in culture and society (Woodward, pp. 144-45).

Therefore, despite the deviant nature and the deranged scope of sex in Vaughan's life, as well as the novel's pervasive sexual vocabulary and imagery, in the end this has to be seen as a reflection of what is happening in contemporary society, where sex is becoming more and more the foundation of an explicit and communal rhetoric to be taken for granted in every kind of activity and experience. In this sense, Vaughan would only represent the

‘final destination’ or ultimate degree of this overall development. If anything, he would stand for the normalisation of sexual psychopathology in the contemporary West.<sup>437</sup>

Beyond this, however, the main discursive role sex plays in *Crash* has to do with its being an agent of ‘imaginative change’ in our culture (Zurbrugg, p. 297).<sup>438</sup> In the novel, this is illustrated by its function as the main instrument of self-transcendence among the members of Vaughan’s deviant cell.<sup>439</sup> Actually, under Vaughan’s influence, sex also becomes something much more powerful and important for the mutually and willingly unfaithful Ballard couple, whose sexuality had by this time become circumscribed to a sort of decadent game in which the main element was teasing, and where ‘exquisite orgasms’ were preceded and caused by the minutely detailed rendering of each other’s infidelities (*Crash*, p. 21). From now on, although she is never fully developed as a genuinely autonomous, active subject, Catherine will grow in terms of her narrative importance; she becomes a sort of high priestess of sacred sex, a ‘catalyst to mystical transformation and transcendence’, where sex, risk, violence and transgression contribute to the transmutation of the soul in the vicinity of death, paralysis or mutilation (Stephenson, pp. 68-69).

Indeed, a driving force in this development is transgression, making J.G. Ballard’s novel link up with a transgressive French tradition which he calls ‘literature of dissolution’.<sup>440</sup> This link is deeper and more specific than the one we already noticed between Beckett’s *Three Novels* and contemporary French literature.<sup>441</sup> This penchant for transgression was the cause of strong controversy among J.G. Ballard’s readers and critics

---

<sup>437</sup> Jeremy Lewis, ‘An Interview with J.G. Ballard’ [1991], in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), 248-62 (p. 254).

<sup>438</sup> Here, J.G. Ballard goes beyond himself in suggesting that more sex and violence should be shown on television (ibid.).

<sup>439</sup> Donald Bruce, ‘L’inscription corporelle de la vitesse: la nouvelle “décadence” dans *Crash* de J.G. Ballard’, *Tangence*, 55 (1997), pp. 118-137 (p. 126).

<sup>440</sup> The French connection of *Crash* would also comprise its considerable success in that country, where it has become almost the object of a real cult: Tony Cartano and Maxim Jakubowski, ‘The Past Tense of J.G. Ballard’ [1985], trans. by Sellars, in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 211-23 (p. 216).

<sup>441</sup> See, e.g., Bataille’s thought on ‘perverse sexual activity’ as a source of ‘cultural transgression’ in Wolin, p. 163.

on the novel's publication and in subsequent years, as it was also the object of revived polemics on the release of its cinematic adaptation by David Cronenberg in 1995.<sup>442</sup>

This French influence, as well as the surrealists' in the author's understanding of sexuality as a transgressive power with a transformative potential is enhanced by the influence of William Blake, the first apostle of free sexuality and its redeeming potentialities, on J.G. Ballard's rhetoric. An example of this is the prolific use of the term 'marriage' both by the narrator, as he establishes links between the most seemingly heterogeneous elements (e.g. the body or parts thereof, the interior of automobiles, violence or psychopathology), and by the author when expounding on the relations of sex, violence and technology in our time. The novelist often did so in the many interviews he gave over the course of his career, usually in a way clearly reminiscent of the very title of Blake's masterwork, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Stephenson, pp. 155, 162, 165).<sup>443</sup> Where William Blake proclaimed the marriage of heaven and hell, Ballard, another believer in the primordial and saving value of sexual energy, announces the marriage of sex and technology (Delville, pp. 35-36). In itself, technology should not be deprecated in its capacity for the mediation of sexuality, as it can function as 'a means of stimulation that constantly refuels and recharges the imagination.' (Pordzik, p. 86) Thus understood, technology could even involve 'a promise of redemption' from our drab, unimaginative suburbanite environment. A passage in *Crash* perfectly illustrates this with a kind of uncanny lyricism juxtaposing the organic and the inert: while fantasising about Dr Remington's car, Ballard imagines it as 'brought to life by [his] semen', turned into 'a bower of exotic flowers', creepers and 'moist grass' included into the bargain (*Crash*, p. 97). This 'sex-appeal of the anorganic', upon which we will elaborate later on when considering the postmodern 'machinic body', has been related to the 'fetish characters of commodities' since Walter Benjamin's work (Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, p. 72).

---

<sup>442</sup> See for example Simon Sellars' introduction to a conversation between J.G. Ballard and Cronenberg at the British Film Institute: Chris Rodley, 'Crash Talk: J.G. Ballard in Conversation with David Cronenberg' (1996), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), pp. 328-38 (p. 328).

<sup>443</sup> See e.g. Orr, p. 59; Barr, p. 286; Will Self, 'Conversations: J.G. Ballard' (1995), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), pp. 299-319 (pp. 310, 317).

### 3.11 – Sex: Dionysian Transgression, Dissolution and the Death Drive

Ultimately, it is Nietzsche's celebration of the 'Dionysian mysteries' of sexuality that rings here, its nature as the venerable foundation of all ancient piety, as a privileged 'source of knowledge and pleasure', and as a promise of 'self-violation' through its ability to erase the boundaries of personal identity. As with music in both him and his master, Arthur Schopenhauer, sex can serve as an instrument to defeat time and individuation, a springboard to eternity and transfiguration through living the instant totally and absolutely, without any assurance of its eventual outcome or of what will follow in one's life. Besides, in this way sex makes the self more fluid and better adapted to the pain and suffering that are unavoidably part and parcel of our life as humans (*Twilight*, p. 80; Cioran, *Despair*, p. 116; Dienstag, pp. 140-41, 189). Accordingly, what could initially be described as a quest for true self on the part of both members of the Ballard couple becomes quite a risky endeavour, as the death drive insinuates itself behind their exploration of a perverse sexuality mediated by technology: experiments on self-fashioning or self-modifying through sex can quite easily become self-undermining or even, as we already saw, self-destructive. An example could be the fantasy evocated in the previous paragraph: its apparently luxurious imagery cannot erase the obvious connection existing in it between Remington's car and the fact that its erotic significance lies in her husband's dying in it. Thus, the reference to Ballard's semen as making it become 'alive' could also support the view that in this scene 'the seeds of life spring into an agent of Thanatos.' (Reader, p. 60)

Of course, what we have to do with here is senseless violence at the service of an immature, narcissistic handling of the death drive. This primeval instinct would found what the characters (led by what I venture to call an 'I-feel-good' principle in which intense personal experience is the only basis of value) would experiment as the radical freedom of giving oneself to an anomic, amoral, irresponsible cultivation of transgression close to Bataille's 'unproductive expenditure' (Delville, pp. 51, 85). In the end, 'eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation.' (Bataille, as cited in Shattuck, p. 241)

The same suicidal narcissism can be predicated of the members of Vaughan's circle, as implied by the link that, according to Freud, binds all human groups: first, each member's narcissistic identification with the same object, which they put '*in the place of their ego ideal*', and secondly with each other's ego (Easthope, pp. 155-56, original emphasis). The

current ‘epidemiology of narcissistic character disorders’ proper to our ‘culture of extreme narcissism’ was already under way by the time of the publication of *Crash*, a phenomenon that could only enhance such a characterisation (Levin, p. 17). In this subculture, therefore, the ‘fragile unity of the narcissistic ego’ would engender ‘potential aggressiveness’ as a ‘correlative tension’ of a ‘basic defensiveness’ incessantly fostered by consumerism (Lacan, as cited in Clarke, p. 161). This aggressiveness, this *destructiveness* that Baudrillard equates to the death drive, would express itself through random, ‘uncontrollable, anomic’, meaningless acts of violence ‘structurally linked to affluence’ (which is the social context common, at least, to Vaughan and the Ballard couple and, more generally, to post-WWII Western societies). Regardless of the inexistence of ‘bureaucratic reception structures’ for it, this violence would be reabsorbed by the system through the media and their aestheticisation and replay of what must be considered an especially fascinating object of consumption (ibid.; Baudrillard, *Consumer Soc.*, pp. 177-78, original emphasis). Furthermore, the characters’ ritualised eroticism may provide them, if we are to follow Bataille in this, with ‘a feeling of profound continuity’ in a world otherwise marked by self-fragmentation and emotional isolation (Bristow, p. 124).

### 3.12 – Techno-Thanatos: Rage against Being

Freud’s influence on the author is evident in what regards the characters’ self-destructive tendencies. More precisely, the latter seems to endorse Freud’s hunch that in an age more and more dominated by destructive technology, the unifying work of the life drive, Eros, could be countered and overcome by an all-powerful instinct of death, Thanatos, fixed on total extinction once and for all (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 131, 160)<sup>444</sup>. This death instinct, ‘unamenable to and hostile to consciousness’, which in *Crash* is

---

<sup>444</sup> Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 92:

The fateful question for the human species seems to me whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. [...] Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that *with their help they would have no difficulty to exterminate one another to the last man* (my emphasis).



universalised as a sublimation of late capitalism's 'excess economic energy', would be behind the desire latent in postmodern (un)consciousness to obliterate itself, at least metaphorically, into non-differentiated matter, putting an end to all the pulsing imperfection of human flesh, and reaching back to what is imagined as the bliss of a pre-uterine, inorganic state: these would be 'desperate fantasies' linked to a 'drive to dissolution' (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 91).<sup>445</sup> Accordingly, the more people try to fend death off, 'the larger death looms, *demanding to be experienced*' (Butterfield, p. 69, my emphasis).<sup>446</sup>

This demand brings us to the Lacanian notion of the death drive, which he calls 'the "beyond" of the pleasure principle', or 'the law beyond the law.' (Chaudhuri, p. 66) For Lacan, the death drive only makes sense if it brings us 'into a relation with our own deaths', with the *fantasy* of our own deaths (ibid., my emphasis). In *Crash*, this occurs as a 'vicarious imaginary trip' where the characters are led by their cars, at the very limit between 'a life that moves in the realm of death' and 'a death lived by anticipation' (ibid.). This is the space where they will find the *jouissance* at work in the novel, once they have converted to Vaughan's cult, once the trauma of the accident awakens them to the up to then unexpected and unassimilated thought of their own deaths (ibid.). They will come back to the site of the accident over and over again, as urged by the pleasure principle, to ritually commemorate their 'date with death', their encounter with the real: it is this they ultimately find behind their extreme experiences, the only factor that can give a meaning to their car crashes and make them relive the affect experienced in it (p. 67). More than that, every sexual encounter between the characters is presided over by this shared experience: in their affairs, they verify the Lacanian principle that 'the death drive is the libido's constitutional principle.' (p. 68) It is this shared affect and its intensity, that of an extreme

---

<sup>445</sup> Nicholas Ruddick, 'Ballard/*Crash*/Baudrillard', *Science Fiction Studies*, 19.3 (1992), n. p., par. 16 <<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/58/ruddick58art.htm>> [accessed 14.10.2019].

Mikita Brottman and Christopher Sharrett, 'The End of the Road: David Cronenberg's *Crash* and the Fading of the West', *Literature / Film Quarterly*, 30.2 (2002), pp. 126-32 (p. 129).

<sup>446</sup> It must be pointed out that there is yet a third notion of the death drive, to use Freud's terminology: Bataille's. It differs from Freud's in that it does not involve any dialectic relationship with Eros, the life instincts and drives. Rather, it has its origin in 'systems of economic circulation.' Thus, eroticism and sexuality necessarily involving 'disorderly and anti-rationalistic experiences' that are 'excessive, wasteful, ruinous, even murderous', would be channelled into a degenerating path by physical, 'contagious impulses' (Bataille, as cited in Bristow, p. 122). Bataille's death drive would be thus an aestheticized, tragic and more abject version of Freud's.

experience on the brink of being engulfed by the unknown, unimaginable, impossible, annihilating dimension called the real order (in other words: death) that enables them to celebrate in their wounds ‘the re-birth of the traffic-slain dead,’ and to commune with the ‘imaginary wounds and postures of the millions yet to die.’ (p. 70; *Crash*, p. 167)

The most patent sign of this desire would be the power-embodying consumer good par excellence: the automobile. It is in fact the death drive, mediated by the car, that is moving the entire narrative along in *Crash*, to the point where the wish for total extinction, cultivated as a need, builds up at the encounter of being and non-being; where ‘rage against Being’, in its longing for the timeless peace of the inorganic, is rendered manifest in the obsessive search for the perfect, intricate geometries of the car and the car crash (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 96-97, 160).<sup>447</sup> There will also be a direct link between the death drive and Vaughan’s own repetitive, ritualised and affectless sexual practices, as if the spirit of de Sade haunted the entire novel (Bruce, p. 134).<sup>448</sup> In this way, by constant repetition of the same types of behaviour under the urges of the death instinct, the characters have reduced their selves to ‘the base material of repetition compulsion.’ (Storr, p. 66; Brottman and Sharrett, p. 127). These obsessive patterns are even paralleled by J.G. Ballard’s own obsessive textual repetitions and variations of structures and themes in *Crash*.<sup>449</sup>

This is the background for Vaughan’s ultimate narcissistic death fantasy: to become one with everything through universal Autogeddon, as we already saw (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 97).<sup>450</sup> There could be no better way for Vaughan to get rid of his human body’s ‘biomorphic horror’ and to merge with the ‘transcendent geometry’ of the automobile and

---

<sup>447</sup> ‘Nihilism is a rage against Being: “nihilism” means the destruction of Being: the Being of all beings, including that way of being which we call “human”’ (Levin, p. 5).

<sup>448</sup> ‘Dans les innombrables variantes des accidents et des positions sexuelles l’esprit du Marquis de Sade semble également hanter le roman’. My translation: ‘In the countless variations of the accidents and the sexual positions the spirit of the Marquis de Sade seems to haunt the novel’.

<sup>449</sup> The author acknowledges and defends his habit of frequent repetition in *Self*, p. 304. For Zadie Smith’s opinion on this issue, which she relates to pornography and psychopathology, see ‘Sex and wheels: Zadie Smith on J.G. Ballard’s *Crash*’, *The Guardian*, 4 April 2014, n. p., par. 16, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/04/zadie-smith-jg-ballard-crash>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

<sup>450</sup> Philip Tew, ‘Situating the Violence of J.G. Ballard’s Postmillennial Fiction: The Possibilities of Sacrifice, the Certainties of Trauma’, in Baxter (ed.), pp. 107-119 (p. 119).

its pure, refulgent matter (Sage, p. 39). By doing so, his conflicted self finally resolves in favour of Thanatos rather than Eros.<sup>451</sup>

### 3.13 – A New Dark Age: Irrationality and Superstition

J.G. Ballard's intuition regarding a universal death drive has behind it the awareness that after two and a half centuries the Enlightenment's programme is finally exhausted. For the author, fascination with violence and death is ushering in a new Dark Age of irrationality and superstition, yet probably on account of 'sound evolutionary reasons'.<sup>452</sup> He abounds in this opinion when he expressly acknowledges that human nature may involve a 'talent for the perverse, the violent, and the obscene', and that it 'may be a good thing' to pass through a historical phase dominated by these human features in order to reach knowledge of true selfhood beyond the conveniences of socially constructed subjectivity, as the latter is based on repression and denial of mankind's dark side (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 23). In *Crash*, therefore, car and driver are both 'imbued with the irrationalities of erotic desire and violence.' (Bukatman, p. 292) This could be implied towards the end of the novel, after Vaughan's death, when, on Ballard's visiting the accident site, the latter describes, with a Céline-resounding formula, the massive traffic hold-up as if they were 'all waiting to embark on a *voyage into the night*.' (*Crash*, p. 182, my emphasis) Somehow, London's motorways and roads are for Ballard the same as Ireland's dark woods for Molloy and Moran.

In this light, I can only call Vaughan's behaviour in *Crash*, as well as that of the other main characters in the novel, active nihilism *à la Nietzsche*. Like in Beckett and other illustrious, ambivalent, supposedly nihilistic writers, such as Thomas Bernhard, humour is the only element that might counteract Ballard's active nihilism: the ambivalent, dark

---

<sup>451</sup> Mark Thomas, 'The Rules of Autogeddon: Sex, Death and Law in JG Ballard's *Crash*', *Griffith Law Review*, 20.2 (2011), 333-62 (p. 337).

<sup>452</sup> Jake Huntley, 'Disquieting Features: An Introductory Tour of *The Atrocity Exhibition*', in Baxter (ed.), pp. 23-33 (p. 26).

'Ours is the psychological and the social climate most infected by superstition, by irrationalism, of any since the decline of the Middle Ages and, perhaps, even since the time of the crisis in the Hellenistic world.' (Steiner, p. 38)

humour of those who, in the two hundred years of transition towards the new strength, health and earthly delight of the overman, the ultimate posthuman prophesied by Nietzsche, will smash every single remaining humanist idol out of our culture in the meantime. Besides, in Robert Caserio's view, it would be this humour, the alternation of 'seriousness and *play*' throughout the novel, that would make one of the strongest cases for Ballard's 'total ambivalence' and presumed postmodernism in *Crash* (as cited in Butterfield, p. 68, my emphasis).

Certainly, by turning into a novice in Vaughan's cult, the narrator embarks on a counter-crusade of active nihilism in the sense Nietzsche gives to this expression: a destructive struggle aimed at clearing the ground for a new cultural and spiritual start.<sup>453</sup> It is Vaughan, however, who really embodies the figure of the active, nihilistic terrorist in *Crash*: someone passionately committed to the destruction of what remains of the former Judeo-Christian-humanist axiological world, possessed by 'a lust for destruction that purifies humanity', with no regrets or nostalgia for traditional values, 'to the point of martyrdom' (*TGS*, p. 289; Woodward, p. 39; Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 36). Vaughan would not only accept nihilism as part and parcel of nature and the world, but also as an opportunity to contribute to its overcoming by its active confrontation, thus 'pushing the frontier of human possibility farther than it has ever been pushed before.' In his fight, his motto could be 'whatever does not kill me, makes me stronger.' (Nietzsche, *Twilight*, p. 5; Marmysz, pp. 32-33) His tool, the 'hammer' with which he will 'philosophise' against postmodern decadence, will be his car (Bruce, pp. 127-28).<sup>454</sup>

---

<sup>453</sup> Nietzsche describes active nihilism as 'a sign of increased power of the spirit', whereas passive nihilism would be 'decline and recession of the power of the spirit' (*TWTP*, p. 17).

For Heidegger, one of the symptoms of nihilism is a '*disempowering of the spirit*' (*Introd. to Metaphysics*, p. 47, original emphasis).

<sup>454</sup> 'The original French: 'La voiture [...] constitue un instrument puissant de destruction, mais ici, comme chez les Futuristes, l'instrument de destruction se transforme à rebours en instrument de construction à travers la destruction.' My translation: 'the car [...] constitutes a powerful instrument of destruction, but here, as in the Futurists, the instrument of destruction is transformed *against the grain* in an instrument of construction *through* destruction.' (original emphasis)

### 3.14 – Postmodern Completion and Essence of Nihilism: A Psychopathic Hymn

His active engagement against self-complacent postmodernity might also point to Vaughan as an existential hero *à la Sartre*: someone committed in an active way after a conversion to an authentic form of life, thus fleeing bad faith. On his reckless path to self-transcendence, he constitutes himself as a law-giver to himself and his followers, always oriented by the same ontological principle and practical value: absolute personal freedom, the one defining attribute of the self-authoring animal man is (Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, p. 32). This is how the members of his car crash cult might have seen him as a provider of ‘salvation’ or ‘deliverance’ (Woodward, pp. 52-53). There would be nothing strange about this, as Sartre’s existentialism, in its consisting in being committed rather than in the contents of that commitment, would be to philosophy or ethics what communism was to politics until its final demise: a (secularised) faith (Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, p. 53)

In his reckless authenticity, negating the value of an administered, sanitised existence, Vaughan could also be seen as a sort of postmodern *avant la lettre*: according to Lyotard’s early thought, a representative of the unrestrained intensities of the libido as an unconscious, incontrollable and unpredictable, purely affirmative force. As such, the libido would be beyond any possible lack or deferral implied by conceptual or representational modes of thought, which for Lyotard are ultimately nihilistic systems (Woodward, pp. 188-91, 193). This kind of uncontainable, irrationalist life affirmation is perhaps behind Ballard’s use of the same expression, ‘without thinking’, no fewer than seven times throughout *Crash* when describing his reactions and experiences after his initial accident; it is used yet an eighth time in relation to Catherine and her getting ‘excited’ by being chased by Vaughan on the road (p. 91). Were it not because of their affectlessness and disregard, both of them, along with Vaughan, would be involved in ‘a romantic struggle of intuition and feeling against reason and self-discipline’ (Pordzik, p. 87). In this, they remind us of Camus’ reticence against reason: an existential, absurd hero, according to the French writer, must live with total ‘indifference to the future’; in the words of Miguel de Unamuno: ‘the true future is today’ (*Sisyphus*, p. 43; as cited in Dienstag, p. 136). ‘Life is not to be built up but burned up. Stopping to think and becoming better are out of the question.’ (*Sisyphus*, p. 99) Sartre seems to be glossing on this when he portrays ‘explicit reflection’ as marked by ‘internal division, conflict, and frustration,’ the key to ‘a world of solitude, disengagement, isolation, and alienation’, ‘a world of exile where something is

always missing.’ (Wicks, pp. 43-44) In the end, ‘reason is the enemy of life’: ‘everything vital is irrational, and everything rational is anti-vital.’ All that consciousness avails is nothing but ‘death-in-life’ (Dienstag, p. 126).

The problematic side of all these ‘heroic’ visions of Vaughan, however, would be, from a postmodern point of view, the aporetic nature of a strictly individual attitude of opposition or resistance to nihilism. Under postmodernity, anything concerning meaning is understood to ‘pervade collective social arrangements and cultural conditions’ beyond anyone’s private sphere; hence it also has to be construed as implying a ‘political exigency’: the world is not a private, but a public space of interrelations and interconnections that are constitutive of meaning. As Linda Hutcheon makes clear, ‘language is a social contract: everything that is presented and thus received through language is already loaded with meaning inherent in the conceptual patterns of the speaker’s culture.’ (*Poetics*, p. 25) If this were not enough, the ‘linguistic turn’ associated with postmodern thought and poststructuralism would annul any heroic pretensions of the existentially ‘conscious’ subject as an ‘arbiter of meaning’ (Woodward, p. 242).<sup>455</sup> Neither authors nor characters can aspire to follow the tracks of the canonical writers of modernism, who, prophet-like, defined reality and literature in their own unique, rebellious, authoritative terms. Heroes, even literary ones, are no more in postmodernity. Under this dispensation, not only is no-one an island, but ‘each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before.’ (*TPC*, p. 15).

An even more problematic side of Vaughan as an active nihilist after ultimate self-transcendence would be his association with the death drive. Indeed, by burning all bridges and scorching the land behind him, as exemplified in his moreover botched suicide-assassination, it is implied that Vaughan’s active nihilism eventually becomes a complete one. Complete nihilism could be defined as the belief that there are no transcendent values whatsoever to be founded on anything at all, and that anyway they are not necessary for

---

<sup>455</sup> J.G. Ballard seems to be quite aware of all these factors. Consequently, any affirmation of a meaningful life in his work is strictly referred to the individual. Politics, which he sees as unable to engage the populace’s attention any longer, is no concern of his throughout his oeuvre (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 12)

Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988; repr. 2003), pp. 25, 51.

any kind of valuation: in the end, life would be valueless (Woodward, pp. 39-40). After Vaughan's disappearance, all that remains is Ballard's premonition of his own death in a crash, leading nowhere except to the same void (and a woman's death) that Seagrave's pathetic suicide left behind him. From this point of view, that Seagrave's corpse is described as 'at last escaping out of this uneasy set of dimensions into a more beautiful universe' can only be construed as helpless sublimation, macabre sarcasm or a psychotic symptom pure and simple (*Crash*, pp. 185, 152). In fact, J.G. Ballard constructs this scene following a modern tendency going back as far as de Sade where representation of death is often linked to a desire to shock, exploring it, in the wake of Bataille, as 'a site of defilement and excess.' (Noys, p. 102) In this way, modern art, in its passion for the real, would be 'the art of death.' (p. 103)

Even Lyotard, later in his oeuvre, recognises the need for structural consolidation to work alongside the destabilising effects of the death drive in order not to perpetuate nihilism. Thus, the death drive would now be related to structures rather than just their dissolution through the release of libidinal energies. Ever seeking out 'new intensities' may just lead to a 'suicidal passion' resulting in the destruction of existing structures that would allow for the expression of intensity by themselves or by their connection with others. Turning to Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, we could say that certain lines of flight are always in danger of becoming lines of death (Woodward, pp. 193, 237-38).<sup>456</sup> Lacan, who believes heroism to consist in pursuing the lost object whatever the cost, never giving up on your desire, understands this aim as inextricably intertwined with the death drive, which can be dangerous, if not fatal (Belsey, pp. 91-92). Disguised as a warning against certain evils of modernity, *Crash* is ultimately a 'psychopathic hymn' (Self, p. 309). And psychopaths tend to end up rather badly.

---

<sup>456</sup> This is precisely Robert Wicks' reason for his criticism of Deleuze and Guattari's efforts to find a principle of 'freedom from oppression' in the unconscious, as this search will most probably lead to the loss of the 'integrated self' that he believes to be fundamental to enjoy conscious freedom as 'a distinct and autonomous individual.' (Wicks, p. 277)

'Lines of flight', a theoretical concept coined by Gilles Deleuze in his work with Félix Guattari, is defined by Dino Felluga, within their idea of 'assamblages', as 'movements of deterritorialization and destratification' in any of their components, understood as libidinal flows. They would be 'centrifugal forces' making assamblages burst outward: Dino Franco Felluga, *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 24, 35.

Certainly, as Simon Critchley explains in his typology of possible responses to nihilism, postmodern thought considers that to oppose nihilism by actively trying to overcome it only perpetuates or even deepens nihilistic conditions. So implicated are we all with nihilism in our postmodern world that, as Heidegger metaphorically points out, ‘no one can jump over his own shadow.’ (Woodward, pp. 169-72) Being itself would have brought nihilism to pass: it is Being that has abandoned beings, rather than beings having forgotten Being (Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 45).<sup>457</sup> Because it participates in Being as a being among beings, nihilism can actually give us an insight into Being. Nothing, the very defining object of nihilism, is what creates a space for beings to occur, becoming one and the same with Being in their common negation of all individuated beings (Marmysz, p. 36). Thus, struggling to overcome nothingness would be equivalent to preventing ourselves from access to ‘the revelation of the essence of nihilism as the history of the default’ or of the ‘covering over’ of Being, which is ‘the history of our collective Da-sein.’ (p. 39) Assuredly, ‘nihilism is also not simply one historical phenomenon among others [...] Nihilism, thought in its essence, is, rather, the fundamental movement of the history of the West.’ (Heidegger, ‘Question concerning Technology’, p. 62) Already Nietzsche had concluded that the very category of ‘critical overcoming’ belongs to philosophical modernity, thus disabling itself with regard to leaving nihilism behind, as modernity is the era of the death of God and, therefore, of nihilism (Vattimo, pp. 146, 148).

To Heidegger, even Nietzsche’s diagnosis of nihilism and his proposal of overcoming it through revaluation ‘remain positions internal to metaphysics’, the metaphysics of the will to power, thus contributing to nihilism’s ‘completion or fulfilment’ (Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 14). The will to power ‘wills nothingness’, according to Heidegger (Severino, *Futura*, p. 152). This would be so precisely because metaphysics can only see the Being of beings in terms of power as a will to master and dominate, ‘an “assault” upon beings in forgetfulness of Being’. Nietzsche’s nihilistic strategies in order to overcome nihilism would be ‘a countermovement to nihilism within nihilism.’ (Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Phil.*, p. 101) Actually, Heidegger sees the ‘power’ of Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’ as a redundant clarification of ‘will’, according to which every being would continually be striving to be more than what it is (Marmysz, p. 37). This self-destructiveness of a will that, by negating

---

<sup>457</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, Studies in Continental Thought (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana UP, 1999), pp. 97-98.



its own openness and multiple dimensionality, inescapably leads to forgetfulness or oblivion of Being would be the ultimate ‘essence of nihilism’ (Levin, pp. 21-23).<sup>458</sup> Among its symptoms we could count the ‘spiritual decline of the earth’; the ‘darkening of the world’; the ‘flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the reduction of human beings to a mass, the hatred and mistrust of everything creative and free’; ‘a *disempowering of the spirit*’, its dissolution, diminution, suppression, and misinterpretation’; and ‘the onslaught of what we call the demonic’ as ‘the destructively evil’, all of them experienced to a degree that makes ‘such childish categories as pessimism and optimism [...] become laughable.’ (Heidegger, *Introd. to Metaphysics*, pp. 40-41, 47, 49, original emphasis) Indeed, the West itself and its entire intellectual legacy could be understood as ‘the history of nihilism’, the latter being defined as ‘the conviction that beings are nothing.’ This conviction would be the West’s unconscious.’ Thus, the ‘essence of the West’ would be ‘nihilism, extreme insanity, the essence of insanity.’ (Severino, *Futura*, pp. 188, 193-94, 212, my translation of the Spanish translation of the Italian original).

The very fact that the overcoming of nihilism is thought by Nietzsche in terms of value may constitute in itself the consummation of nihilism, as Heidegger points out (as cited in Weller, *Uncanniest*, p. 38). Being, as the grounding of all beings, ought not to be thought as more or less than itself. We have to remember Adorno’s considerations on Beckett as an example of the negativity that alone can be held to be a haven for hope in a disenchanted world. Aggressive positivities such as those of reactive nihilism, Promethean acts of will always eager to destroy anything that moves, cannot aspire to mend a post-Auschwitz world (Vattimo, p. 30; Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 17). Vaughan’s actual suicide or Ballard’s plans to kill his wife cannot achieve this, either.

---

<sup>458</sup> Nietzsche himself might have been aware of the shortcomings of the will to power as a metaphysical perspective on reality, as Julian Young tellingly argues, thus eventually rejecting it (Young, p. 105).

Keith Ansell Pearson and Diane Morgan understand that by replacing a set of highest values based on ‘the spirit and teleology’ with another based on ‘the body’ and ‘immanence’, Nietzsche was being just as nihilistic as the former axiological dispensation, suggesting that he did so because of spellbound by that he wanted to overcome: ‘Introduction’, in Ansell Pearson and Morgan (eds.), p. xvii.

### 3.15 – Perversion and Technology: Conceptualised Sex, Death of Experience

Sex mysteries are rooted not only in immediate biological urges, but also in the deepest, most unconscious layers of our psyche. They are also related to desire as a structural lack in search of objects with which to feel ourselves whole yet again, as we were before our traumatic separation from the pre-symbolic in order to become autonomous subjects with a personal identity and a role as valuable members of society. According to this, the appearance of lack, the negative foundation of desire, corresponds to the imaginary order, while the symbolic order is the moment of its acceptance (Beardsworth, p. 82). Within this Lacanian psychoanalytic frame, consciousness can achieve precious insights into the atavistic drives that seemingly dominate our sexuality. Ballard the narrator arrives at this stage quite early, thus entering a path of conscious and even conceptualised sexuality, where the primitive drives that he recklessly follows after Vaughan's example are verbally and rather detachedly elaborated on over the course of his narration.<sup>459</sup> As Baudrillard points out, sexuality or sexual desire in *Crash* is only about bodies being able to exchange their signifiers; in the end, sex in *Crash* is no longer sex, but 'something else.'<sup>460</sup>

This is so to the point of a paradoxical impossibility of sexual release without consciously following a verbally mediated fantasy, without consciously cultivating an elaborate perversion, usually with the help of 'deviant technology'. Of course, what is deviant is not the perversion itself, which, according to psychoanalytic theory is merely natural, as it is the by-product of an incomplete process of sexual maturing. Coming back to our three-term formula relating sex, violence and technology in postmodernity, this is indeed the moment of the convergence of sex, desire and fear in technology-related 'systems of excitement and eroticism', the time of the 'nightmare marriage of sex and technology' (*Crash*, pp. 24, 76, 112, 119; Ballard, 'Introduction', n. p., par. 1,7). The horrific wounds imagined by Vaughan are thus for Ballard 'the keys to a new sexuality

---

<sup>459</sup> J.G. Ballard's idea of conceptualised sex is bizarrely interesting: sex 'between you and a machine, or [...] an idea.' (Barber, p. 34, my emphasis)

<sup>460</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'Ballard's *Crash*', tr. by Arthur B. Evans, *Science Fiction Studies*, 18.3 (1991), n. p., par. 9 <<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/55/baudrillard55art.htm#baudrillardcrash>> [accessed 14.10.2019] We should be careful when considering this article, always keeping in mind what J.G. Ballard himself wrote about it: although he admired Baudrillard's *America*, he could never understand this article at all (Zurbrugg, p. 298).

born from a *perverse* technology.’ (p. 6, my emphasis) We should rather say, though: a new sexuality born from the enhancement of perversion by technology; we could think of the car as a technological agent in this development, as ‘an essential ingredient in the rise of suburbia’ (Dery, ‘Always Crashing’, p. 228). The American Dream, both within and without the United States, becomes the American technological Nightmare. One would say that all is not well in Ballard’s quest.

J.G. Ballard’s thoughts on this matter seem to be buttressed by two convictions: first, as we already pointed out, perversions are natural in the human animal; any quest for true self or genuine subjectivity always ends up in the same place: innate perversity (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 23). Second, a new lucidity, expressed in what he terms ‘conceptualised sex’, is possible in our time precisely because of the unlimited possibilities that innovative technologies and social developments offer us when it comes to sex, enabling us, among other things, to undertake ‘a remaking of the commonplace’ (*Crash*, p. 39). Indeed, under such conditions, everything, ‘including sexuality’, is detached, ‘stylised’, ritualised nowadays. In *Crash*, sex is depicted as affectless and instrumental as regards one’s partners, and often related to pornography and its stylisations. In postmodernity, love and its spontaneity, like the God who has been dead at least since Nietzsche, become a myth: sex supersedes love, as well as its discursive role in defining the self (Glücksberg, p. 36) This is also what happens in *Crash* from its very beginning, when Vaughan is described as mentally arranging Liz Taylor’s limbs in the car accident he has been staging for a long time ‘with the devotion of an Earl Marshal.’ (*Crash*, p. 1) Later on, he appears to be doing the same thing with an airport prostitute after the ‘stylized positions’ of a cashier previously dead in another accident (p. 5). While in hospital after his first accident, Ballard, joining the sexually stylised to the sacred, imagines the nurses taking care of him as ministering ‘within a *cathedral* of invisible wounds, their burgeoning sexualities presiding over the most terrifying facial and genital injuries.’ (p. 17, my emphasis) Finally, Ballard and his wife are portrayed as making ‘brief, *ritual* love’ in his car (p. 183, my emphasis). In the end, conventional, ‘spontaneous’ sex would be just ‘the first of the new perversions.’ (Orr, p. 67; Barber, p. 34) In other words, the stylised, ritualised marriage of

sex and technology has turned things upside down in the domain of postmodern sexuality.<sup>461</sup>

Quite obviously, the author does not regret this state of affairs, regardless of its risky, technologically nightmarish potential. If anything, he celebrates it: in his opinion, in the inane, consumerist society we are living in, one which is completely committed to sanity in all spheres, the last refuge for the free mind would be madness. He incontrovertibly states: ‘anything is better than being sane.’<sup>462</sup> Within this mindset, even Vaughan, *Crash*’s ‘psychopath as a saint’, may stand for a ‘nature reserve’, that of psychopathy as ‘a last refuge for a certain kind of human freedom’ (Delville, p. 85). Deviance, then, understood as perversion endorsed and mediated by technology, must be thought of as the only remaining ‘freedom of the spirit’.<sup>463</sup> In other words, the only available refuge, apart from bunkers, is in one’s private imagination, in the realm of technology-fed and driven, solipsistic obsessions.

This analysis is not very far away from Julia Kristeva’s when considering madness our present ‘milestone’, which she does in her analysis of Marguerite Duras’ *L’amant*. According to her, the heavy weight of the unreal, new suffering ‘world of death’ we all have to shoulder nowadays has its cause in the ‘massively, in totalitarian fashion, social, leveling, exhausting’ modern political domain. In her view, private suffering would absorb ‘political horror into the subject’s psychic microcosm.’ (*POH*, pp. 4, 234-35) In this way, the suffering subject would become ‘the site of the uninterrogated significance of the deepest moments of collapse of modern institutions and discourses.’ (Beardsworth, p. 160)

---

<sup>461</sup> Baudrillard also sees *Crash* as the depiction of a domain of affectless, ritualised sex where ‘all is inverted.’ However, he quite curiously resists ‘the moral temptation to read *Crash* as perversion.’ The accident, seen as ‘the irrational’, without any affectivity or psychology, would be ‘the initiator of a new manner of *non-perversed* pleasure’: ‘Ballard’s *Crash*’, n. p., par. 5-6 (original emphasis). The root of the misunderstanding would be, as we have just said, to forget that J.G. Ballard is a Freudian, and therefore he is convinced that perversion is both natural and innate.

<sup>462</sup> Jeanette Baxter, ‘*Kingdom Come*’, in Baxter (ed.), pp. 122-28 (p. 124).

<sup>463</sup> V. Vale, ‘Interview with JGB’ [1982], in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 146-69 (p. 154). Quite shockingly, in this interview the author includes the terrorist acts of the Baader Meinhof gang, a West German terrorist group of the 1970s, in his idea of ‘deviance’. If not exactly defending them, he seems to understand the irrationality of their acts with regard to the society where they took place. Thus, there would be a space for natural political perversion in the human mind, which would only be enhanced by the conditions obtaining in a capitalist society.

As a result, ‘madness is a space of antisocial, apolitical, and paradoxically free individuation.’ This madness would be just the exacerbation of a retreat towards the private, which is ‘emphasized to the point of filling the whole of the real and invalidating any other concern.’ (*POH*, pp. 4, 235) In other words, if up to J.G. Ballard and Kristeva’s time the free Englishman’s home was his castle, in Ballard’s troubled suburbia of postmodernity it is his autistic Shangri-La, where to get disconnected from the rest of the universe as a source of confusion and suffering. In this way, maybe since the 1960s, there has been a constant ‘retreat from the social into an idealized version of the household and everyday life as a form of “privatization” of the individual around consumption’, which eventually becomes ‘the sole remaining value’.<sup>464</sup> Not in vain does postmodern society think, speak and consume itself ‘as consumer society’ (Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, p. 193).

This would be the last stage of a larger phenomenon whereby people have been turning to the private sphere and the values traditionally related to it as the ever more exacting public domain has become more and more deprived of meaning for them. As their ‘fundamental project’ is no longer assumed or perceived from the angle of its belonging to a certain nation or a social class, there has been a growing de-institutionalisation and privatisation of the individual, ‘the predominance of individual rights over collective obligations’ having been asserted more and more vehemently (Silverman, p. 136).<sup>465</sup> Morality would also have become an increasingly private affair till its implosion in the post-WWII society of plenty: at the end of ‘the era of cold, impersonal, distant duty’, there has been an unequivocal rejection of ‘the disciplinary society of “the age of morality”’ (Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, pp. 21-22; Lipovetsky, *Crepúsculo del deber*, p. 123; Lipovetsky, as cited in Silverman, p. 140). It would be interesting to know what Nietzsche would have thought of this so much wished-for death of morality being followed, of all things, by sheer consumerism. The reason is quite simple: powered by ‘compensatory dreams’, consumerism may well have taken over from disciplinary power, thus becoming invested with ‘a force equal, if not superior’ to the latter’s as an instrument of social

---

<sup>464</sup> Although this hypothesis has been put forward with respect to France, I find it fully applicable to Ballard’s Britain (Silverman, p. 137).

<sup>465</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, *El crepúsculo del deber: La ética indolora de los nuevos tiempos democráticos*, trans. by Juana Bignozzi, Colección Argumentos, 5th edn (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2000), p. 202.

control. By ‘enlisting the “pleasure principle” in the service of the “reality principle”,’ desires are harnessed to ‘the chariot of social order’; by the same logic, ‘presumably invincible irrational human wishes’ are turned into ‘guards of rational order.’ (Zygmunt Bauman, as cited by Clarke, pp. 145, 155)

In J.G. Ballard’s analysis of contemporary society, the (post) modern cultural imaginary would also comprise an entire system of contemporary conceptualisation and commodification of sex and life. In our time, these would be mediated away from direct experience, which thus would no longer be meaningful in itself (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 78). In our society of technology and simulation, people having become immunised against experience by them, the roots of sexuality might well prove to be non-sexual, and the technological landscape might also be determined in part by libidinal strategies (Paul Virilio, as cited by Silverman, p. 114).

Among so many mirages, even perverse, non-conventional sex is described technically and aseptically in *Crash*; no slang is used, and the technical vocabulary that signifies it evokes no sensuality or intimacy. The same happens during Ballard’s encounters with his wife, during which she fantasises in a detached, almost clinical way about her husband having sex with another woman; these fantasies are worded in an alienated language that seems to announce ‘a new sexuality, divorced from any possible physical expression.’ (*Crash*, p. 24; Bruce, p. 136).<sup>466</sup> In *Crash*, sex is an epiphenomenon, and sexuality is, in Baudrillard’s terms, ‘without referentiality’ and ‘without limits’: something pertaining to the mind, not the body (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 96; Baudrillard, ‘Ballard’s *Crash*’, n. p., par. 2; Delville, p. 29). Ballard can even get an orgasm by just *thinking* about the car where he usually has sex with Helen Remington: everything is conceptualised (p. 31; *Crash*, p. 65, my emphasis). The sexual instinct, completely detached from the life instincts, affect and the materiality of bodies is thus colonised by the death instinct (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 97).

The proper space for the enjoyment of this postmodern, conceptualised sexuality is one’s main technological-communicational hub: home. Inner, meaningful life becomes virtual and, in the final analysis, technology may turn the most disturbing

---

<sup>466</sup> Bruce’s French original: ‘il y a un effet de détachement et d’aliénation dans le langage car on parle de la sexualité [...] de manière quasiment clinique.’ My translation: ‘there is an effect of detachment and alienation in the language because sexuality is being talked about [...] in an almost clinical way.’

psychopathologies into something private and arguably benign, harmless, manageable, homely.<sup>467</sup> Indeed, this would be basically the world of modern suburbia, another of J.G. Ballard's dominant obsessions, a world behind whose walls anything might happen, or at least be plausibly imagined: 'The more enlightened our houses are, the more their walls ooze ghosts. Dreams of progress and reason are haunted by nightmares.'<sup>468</sup>

As a matter of fact, this would be so because of the freedom stemming precisely from the lack of centre and anchorage in suburban life (Tew, 'Situating the Violence', p. 113). Given the fact that work, which consumes most of people's time in our contemporary consumerist society (thus disappointing the sexual expectations of the public since the liberalisation of sexual customs in the 1960s), has therefore become 'the main libidinal outlet' in our society, free time at home would be the appropriate time and locale for a compensatory 'resurgence of erotic fantasy' in our culture (Reader, p. 131).<sup>469</sup> It would be in middle-class suburbia that people could (or at least believe that they could) experience what I dare call sex party time, a time of private, virtual vices, 'cybersexual smorgasbord', and their instant, 'schizophrenic' intensities (Barber, p. 35; Weeks, *Sexuality*, pp. 107, 147).<sup>470</sup> In the privacy of their homes, postmodern humans may have the temptation and run the risk to avail themselves of the technological, virtual means to feel 'constantly doped up and artificially stimulated, like top sportsmen and women' (Paul Virilio, as cited in Silverman, p. 156). If Gilles Lipovetsky is right when he defines postmodernism (really meaning 'postmodernity', though) as 'the democratization of hedonism', and depoliticised, mass hedonism at that, this would be one of its most prominent expressions (*Imperio de lo efímero*, pp. 198, 315).<sup>471</sup>

---

<sup>467</sup> Christopher Evans, 'The Space Age is Over' [1979], in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), pp. 121-31 (pp. 127-28). This interview was given to the man who was not only J.G. Ballard's best friend, but also the main inspiration for the character Vaughan (p. 121).

<sup>468</sup> Italo Calvino, as quoted in Slocombe, p. 273.

<sup>469</sup> Reader originally makes these considerations in his criticism of *Plateforme*, a novel by Michel Houellebecq.

<sup>470</sup> We will deal with schizophrenia in Fredric Jameson later on.

<sup>471</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide: essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*, Folio Essais (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 98. The French original: 'le postmodernisme apparaît comme la démocratisation de l'hédonisme'.

This benignity and normalcy of the most outrageously bizarre is what the narrator also seems to feel from the very moment of his initiation into Vaughan's sacred mysteries of car-crash-mediated sexuality. Since technology, and more specifically the automobile, embodies the unconscious within a Freudian psychoanalytic model, what the car-crash metaphor ultimately stands for is the relationship between violence and sexual fantasy, the main instruments of postmodern transcendence (Delville, pp. 35-36). Already anticipated in Ballard's strange and counter-intuitive awareness of the 'inescapable and perverse union' linking him and Dr Remington after the model of their interlocked radiator grilles, it is in hospital, after crashing into and killing her husband, that his mind opens up to an unexpected world where everything, and not only potentially, is sexual:

This obsession with the sexual possibilities of everything around me had been jerked loose from my mind by the crash. I imagined the ward filled with convalescing air-disaster victims, *each of their minds a brothel of images*. The crash between our two cars was a model of some ultimate and yet undreamt sexual union. The injuries of still-to-be-admitted patients beckoned to me, an immense *encyclopedia of accessible dreams*.

(*Crash*, pp. 15, 19, my emphasis).

From then on, *Crash* will be a Bildungsroman focusing on Ballard's pilgrimage through perverse sexuality towards a transcendence felt as only feasible through the fusion of a 'post-genital libido' with its technological mediator, the automobile, his sexuality being eventually and 'wholly redirected from flesh to metal.' (Mark Thomas, pp. 343-44, 346). Thus, when Dr Remington goes into a period of 'unthinking promiscuity' right after her husband's death, the erotic charge and mediation of the car are evident in that the latter constitutes the only factor giving sense to her behaviour, to the point of making her unable to experience an orgasm outside it:

What I noticed about these affairs, which she described in an unembarrassed voice, was the presence in each one of the automobile. All had taken place within a motor-car [...], as if the presence of the car mediated an element which alone made sense of the sexual act. In some way, I assumed, the car re-created its role in the death of her husband within the new possibilities of her body. Only in the car could she reach her orgasm.



(*Crash*, pp. 96-97)

This mediating, sense-giving role of the car regarding human sexuality even surpasses the body's, as when Ballard, who has just become Gabrielle's lover, imagines his penis celebrating the marriage of her car and his own: having brought them together, thus also initiating them into sexual perversion, their cars are the only possible space for their relationship (p. 148).<sup>472</sup>

Perverse pansexuality is also behind Ballard's joining Vaughan's cult, whose first article of faith is the acceptance of and belief in the very odd dogma of 'the perverse eroticism of the car-crash'; in this way, he tells us:

I have watched copulating couples moving along darkened freeways at night, men and women on the verge of orgasm, their cars speeding in a series of inviting trajectories towards the flashing headlamps of the oncoming traffic stream. Young men alone behind the wheels of their first cars, near-wrecks picked up in scrap-yards, masturbate as they move on worn tyres to aimless destinations. After a near collision at a traffic intersection semen jolts across a cracked speedometer dial [...]

(p. 9).

This will eventually lead him to homosexual sex with his master, which is preceded by a morbid and perverse rendering of the building up of sexual tension between them just after Vaughan, whom he describes as a narcissist, has had sex with Ballard's wife in front of him. Of Catherine, Ballard tells us that she always had a 'natural and *healthy* curiosity for the perverse' (pp. 137-38, 38, my emphasis).

### 3.16 – Sexual Infantilism: Regression and Positive Abjection

With respect to perversion in *Crash*, leaving aside its enhancement by technology, its origin has to be sought in the main characters undergoing what in Freudian terms is

---

<sup>472</sup> Mimi Sheller, 'Automotive Emotions: Feeling the Car', in Featherstone, Thrift and Urry (eds.), pp. 221-242 (pp. 223).

described as a process of psychosexual fixation or even regression to an infantile stage that will either make bisexuals or homosexuals out of them, or subject them more generally to different types of paraphilia or other aberrant forms of sexuality.<sup>473</sup> The infant's sexuality, according to Freud, has a 'composite nature', being made of different instincts (Bristow, p. 69). These evolve diffusely and separately until they all eventually merge in the adult; until then, we can speak of the infant's sexuality as polymorphously perverse: wanting to make everything and everyone a part of itself and its immediate world. Although in most adults there are traces of these components to be noticed, when they are dominating we can speak of perversions proper: homosexuality, masochism, exhibitionism, voyeurism and fetishism would be among the commonest ones (Storr, p. 30; Thurschwell, p. 44). In the case of the major characters in *Crash*, as well as in the members of Vaughan's deviant cell, we are facing a return to the perverse pansexuality of early childhood, even despite their being married in some cases (namely the Ballards, Dr Remington and Seagrave). Psychosexual development is a complex process that only attains adult desires, object choices and gender identity once many and various types of desire have undergone a strict, disciplined 'narrowing' and repression, struggle and conflict for years, without any 'law', biological or otherwise, guaranteeing any final result.<sup>474</sup> Experimentation or even subversion against this schooling of desire can take place at any time, even casually, without any conscious decision being taken (Thurschwell, p. 51; Bristow, p. 69; Weeks, *Sexuality*, p. 69). Moreover, and always according to Freud, the drives and preferences that perversions are made of would also play a constitutive role in all human erotic behaviour, especially in reproductive heterosexuality (Bristow, p. 68).

In *Crash*, all major characters lack or reject any inhibiting mechanisms related to sexual maturity. These would allow to proceed from 'the subjugation of impulse to the control of intrapsychic restraint', thus ultimately leading to 'deferred gratification and tolerance of unpleasure' within a long-term sexual strategy (Mark Thomas, pp. 335, 337). For instance, while both Vaughan and Catherine Ballard are promiscuous bisexuals from the very start,

---

<sup>473</sup> It has been contended that, in the end, there is a tendency towards evolutionary regression in J.G. Ballard's characters: Brian Baker, 'The Geometry of the Space Age: J.G. Ballard's Short Fiction and science Fiction of the 1960s', in Baxter (ed.), pp. 11-22 (p. 19).

<sup>474</sup> Thus, even when gender identity is fixed according to the rules of socially prevalent heterosexuality and as Freud remarks, both 'masculine' and 'feminine' are 'profoundly problematic and defined only in terms of what they are not.' (Weeks, *Sexuality*, pp. 2, 142).

Helen Remington becomes more and more of a lesbian; Seagrave, in his turn, dies in drag attire, posing as his master's obsessive target, Elizabeth Taylor. Deprived of, or unwilling to acknowledge the 'psychic dams' that, according to Freud, are required to lead an adult, functional sexual and affective life (that is, shame, loathing and morality), the novel's characters will remain 'eternal children', keen on 'immediate gratification' and in complete disregard of the consequences (Mark Thomas, p. 359).

Furthermore, some secondary characters are also described as sexually perverse (in a Freudian reading) in diverse ways, such as certain 'sadistic charge nurses' or 'lesbian supermarket manageresses' (*Crash*, p. 7, my emphasis). These initial pages set the tone for the rest of the novel: one of 'unrestrained hedonism' and dysfunctionality regarding adaptation to a socially controlled, mature sexuality (Mark Thomas, p. 338). Finally, we must not forget that both in Freudian and Kristevan psychoanalytic theory, 'infantile, perverse, polymorphic sexuality' is 'always already a carrier of desire and death.' (*POH*, p. 38)

As for Ballard, while he recovers in hospital from the injuries caused by his first accident, and as a fundamental component of his sensual and sexual awakening, he undergoes an unexpected resensitisation of what he himself calls his 'most infantile zones' (which I would extend to his mind – *Crash*, pp. 22-23). He eventually evolves into bisexuality, at least in his relations with Vaughan (pp. 70, 81). Within a psychoanalytic framework, in all these anomalous, immature, perverse types of behaviour I have just described, the main characters are also privileged representatives of the infantilisation of the contemporary world that the author refers to in his 1995 introduction to the novel: 'we live in an almost infantile world where any demand, any possibility [...] can be satisfied instantly.' ('Introduction', n. p., par. 2). As J.G. Ballard already wrote in his 1974 introduction to the French edition of *Crash*: 'The main fact of the 20th century is the concept of the unlimited possibility.'<sup>475</sup>

---

<sup>475</sup> J.G. Ballard, 'Introduction to the French Edition of *Crash*', in *Porn Studies: Pornography, Modernity, & the Historical Present*, <<http://imagesoferoticism.com/jg-ballard-introduction-to-crash-1974/>>.

From a strictly literary point of view, Ballard's sexual and ethical infantilisation is related to Baudelaire. His convalescence in hospital after his accident recalls a return to childhood, according to the French poet:

This sexual regression finds its most relevant instantiation in Vaughan, because of his charismatic role regarding Ballard and his group of accident-scarred people, as well as for his narcissism. Indeed, Vaughan is above all a narcissist, as he is fixated in the identification of a non-yet-externalised sexual object, namely himself; narcissism implies moreover a *comeback* to one's self as a 'self-contemplative, [...] self-sufficient haven.' (Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 103; *POH*, p. 14, my emphasis) More generally, Vaughan's narcissism is also related to abjection, as abjection is considered to be 'a kind of *narcissistic crisis*', while also being its precondition (pp. 13-14).

The most notorious example of regressive, abject perversion in the novel, however, takes place during Ballard's visit to Seagrave's home, where he sees the stunt driver pretend to breastfeed a little son of his (*Crash*, p. 83). This last behaviour is most typically illustrative of abjection, the very rock bottom of human sexuality: in Seagrave's outrageous gesture, he embraces primal, motherly femaleness to the point of surrendering his symbolically male, fatherly identity to the ideal of a renewal of the pre-symbolic. In this way, he links up with the indistinct, in practice infinite mother the newborn baby feels to be just a part of. In terms of the language the author uses in this episode, the mention to Seagrave's 'nipple' and the implied reference to milk, the motherly fluid per excellence and one of Kristeva's paradigmatic embodiments of abjection, highlight this symbolic rejection of what Lacan calls the phallus and its connection with fatherly authority and social functionality (*POH*, pp. 2-3). This must be linked to what Kristeva calls 'the pitiful

---

The convalescent, like the child, is possessed in the highest degree of the faculty of keenly interesting himself in things, be they apparently of the most trivial. [...] The child sees everything in a state of newness; he is *always drunk*.

'The Painter of Modern Life', in Cahoon (ed.), pp. 136-44 (p. 138, my emphasis)

In his reckless narcissism, it is Vaughan who best embodies this amoral regression to childhood and its anti-social tendencies. He drives through the entire novel, sometimes literally, as 'drunk always', thus escaping from the stasis of pre-postmodern time:

You should always be drunk. This is the whole point, the only question. In order not to feel the horrible burden of Time [...], you must get yourself relentlessly drunk. [...] So as not to be one of the martyred slaves of Time, get yourself drunk; get yourself drunk always!

Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen and La Fanfarlo*, trans. by Raymond N. MacKenzie (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2008), p. 73

power of the feminine’ in a masculinist culture such as the West’s, as it can be ‘unleashed only with the help of masculine degradation’, or the ‘bankruptcy of the father and manly authority.’ (p. 169) What this all ultimately points to is the relationship obtaining between the perverse and abjection: ‘the abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, [...] uses them, takes advantage of them, *the better to deny them.*’ (p. 15, my emphasis)

Here, J.G. Ballard, who also sees abjection as aligned with innate perversion within Freud’s depth psychology model, goes beyond the latter, as he relates Oedipal conflict not to the superego, the ultimate moral referent and the site of the symbolic law of fatherhood, but to the id, the unconscious repository of the love and death drives and instincts. This is not so strange, though, since both the ego and the superego are but outcrops or offshoots of the id, the primal substratum of all consciousness, the oldest, primitive, unorganised, and emotional part of the mind, in which time has no saying, from which the other structures are derived and which we share with animals, thus deserving to be called ‘the realm of the illogical’. Indeed, in it ‘the logical laws of thought’, above all the law of contradiction, do not apply (Storr, p. 60; Dienstag, p. 91). Governed by the pleasure principle, it does not recognise any values, good and evil, or morality, and only by keeping it repressed can we form and keep our own proper bodies and selves, the very touchstone of our human condition (p. 61).<sup>476</sup> Thus, Vaughan himself, that postmodern predatory animal, stands for a viciously unchained id that will not obey any call for delayed satisfaction of instinctual needs. He goes beyond that point where we can be considered functional human beings.

Secondarily, this sexual atmosphere speaks of a time of ethical anomie, in which even gender standards are blurred and uncertain, and things such as the use of children in the playing out of sexual fantasies, or their parents’ responsibility towards them, do not seem to be major ethical concerns.

---

<sup>476</sup> Sigmund Freud, as cited in Wicks, p. 12.

### 3.17 – Abject Tradition and the Perverse Body: Post-/Abhumanity and Teratology

A fundamental characteristic of J.G. Ballard's writing is that it belongs to an abject tradition, both in French (Sade, Bataille... despite his unlikely claim that he has never read them) and in English (Burroughs, whose influence he has contradictorily denied and acknowledged, depending on the occasion, or Henry Miller) – Delville, p. 41; Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 93.<sup>477</sup> Instead of modernism's purity and geometry, Ballard's (arguable) postmodernism is one that drips blood and semen, just like the still warm corpses of car-crash victims in the novel. J.G. Ballard's is a poetics of abjection, placed between 'extremes of baseness and spirituality', and reaching 'borderzones of identity' (p. 92; *Crash*, p. 36; Delville, pp. 40-41). In *Crash*, characters are discontinuous, fragmented, fluid selves who often go beyond *res cogitans* in their Bataille-like cultivation of waste and 'unproductive expenditure', always 'without the least concern for a goal or objective, and, therefore, behaving without any meaning.' (p. 85; Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 101)<sup>478</sup> They inhabit a dimension all of their own where the imperatives of Bataille's 'general economy', the name he gave to his impossible system of thought based on the notions of waste, squandering and destruction, anchor their existence in 'the need (...) for destruction and loss' (Reader, p. 77).<sup>479</sup> There, where life is a potlatch, where 'the human tendency to expend rather than conserve' is acknowledged, they can lose themselves from themselves (Delville, p. 52).<sup>480</sup>

In this respect, Vaughan is an all too organic character, a zombie-like figure out of one of Francis Bacon's most extreme painterly nightmares, a sausage-man inflated by all sort of rancid fluids, unwilling to lead a sanitised life: the personification of Bataille's 'vulgar materialism', the living evidence of the 'the contingent, messy, irreverent and residual

---

<sup>477</sup> Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 93. For J.G. Ballard's points of coincidence and indebtedness to this abject or irrationalist tradition, see, e.g., Delville, pp. 36, 41, 87.

<sup>478</sup> For Bataille, sex would involve a 'deathly moment', denied elsewhere in our lives, when we humans experience Vaughan's (and Molloy's, Moran's, and Malone's) ideal: a loss of self (Bristow, p. 123).

<sup>479</sup> This is my English translation of Bataille's French original, as cited by Reader: 'le besoin [...] de la destruction et de la perte'.

<sup>480</sup> Stoekl, Allan, *Politics, Writing, Mutilation: The Cases of Bataille, Blanchot, Roussel, Leiris, and Ponge*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1985), p. xv.

nature of our own world.’ (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 139).<sup>481</sup> In this sense, maybe the most notorious scene in the entire novel is that of a motorway ride while high on acid shared by Ballard and Vaughan, which culminates in the latter’s sodomisation by the former.<sup>482</sup> Here, Vaughan’s scarred body is described in terms of blood, semen and urine, and ultimately compared to that of ‘a deranged drag queen revealing the *leaking* scars of an unsuccessful trans-sexual surgery.’ (*Crash*, p. 166, my emphasis) The perverse implications of homosexuality are associated with other paradigmatic references to abject substances, as when Ballard describes Vaughan’s penis, which he ends up fellating, in terms of its ‘faint odour of a woman’s excrement clinging to the shaft’ (ibid.). Once anal sex is consummated, the chapter ends with the abject image of yet more semen, this time Ballard’s, *leaking* from Vaughan’s anus (ibid., my emphasis). All of these fluids and substances, furthermore, paradigmatically stand for the abject as they represent ‘for the subject the risk to which the very symbolic order is permanently exposed’: falling back into the motherly, feminine and pre-symbolic. They are also related to the very idea of boundary (of the clean and proper self) and therefore to both psychosexual and socio-cultural margins and marginality (*POH*, p. 69). Certainly, the principle that only female bodies leak fluids and supports ‘phallogocentric culture’ in its ‘attempts to erase and purify the paternal body’ (Reader, p. 36).

Finally, Vaughan’s scars are also signifiers of abjection, as they make visible ‘the alteration of the self and clean into the defiled’ (*POH*, p. 84). As abjection, in a Christian cultural context, is related to sin in that the latter is construed as individualised abjection and thought to be as innate as perversion, scars could also be seen as constituents of a perverse, material and sinful body, purely ‘eager drive confronted with the law’s harshness’, in stark contrast therefore to a subdued, sublimated one after the reconciliation of the body and the law (pp. 124-25, 127-28).

---

<sup>481</sup> Corin Depper, ‘Death at Work: The Cinematic Imagination of J.G. Ballard’, in Baxter (ed.), pp. 50-65 (p.62).

Jeanette Baxter, ‘Radical Surrealism: Rereading Photography and History in J.G. Ballard’s *Crash*’, *Textual Practice*, 22.3 (2008), pp. 507–528 (p.521)

<sup>482</sup> This scene would also be an example of postmodern ‘de-control of the emotions’ and schizophrenic (in Jameson’s understanding of this adjective) self-loss in the immediacy of the object, which, in Ballard’s case and through the investment of his desire, is the brutalist landscape of a London in transition to postmodernity, (Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, p. 70). We will go deeper into schizophrenic intensities when dealing with Timothy Findley’s *Headhunter*.

The next chapter of *Crash*, which starts with the portrayal of the aftermath of sex and acid intoxication, brings things to a descriptive abject climax reminiscent of some extremely delirious painting by Max Ernst or worthy of any sequence in Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* or *L'age d'or*: flies cover 'in thick clumps' Vaughan's body and face and Ballard's hands and arms. The scene, which does not spare mention of Vaughan's limping testicles, finishes with a memorable image: the flies swarming around Vaughan 'as if waiting for the *rancid liquors* distilled from the body of a corpse.' (p. 168, my emphasis) This is not only an animalistic reference to sexuality and death, so common in Beckett's *Three Novels* and here underscoring an earlier comparison between Vaughan's tongue to that of a reptile, but also yet again a key to the novel's discursive core: the fusion of Eros and Thanatos, life lived to the extreme in pursuit of liberating death, which is ciphered in the abject object par excellence, the corpse (p. 82).

The culminating character of these scenes might also be related not only to an earlier dramatic build-up of tension, but also to their homosexual nature. Taking advantage of Kristeva's thought on Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, and considering Vaughan a prototype for the narcissist, as we saw above, it is as though 'the abject truth of sexuality' could only be reached through homosexuality (p. 21).

Vaughan's abjectification takes place after a sudden revelation that will make him drop his former career for the sake of the transformative potential he senses in disaster, even if it will make him embrace death, as it occurs to many other characters in Ballard's fiction (Baker, pp. 15, 17; Huntley, p. 29). Eventually, his very death will be an example of Bataille's irresistible, hideous, transgressive, abject, 'bloody death': one worthy of a self-sacrificing god who would carry 'to the very end *what ordinary men are happy to dream about*' (*Visions of Excess*, p. 69, my emphasis).

Linking up with what was said above on the relationship between body as drive, sin and the abject, Vaughan might still be seen as a kind of abject, pagan St. Paul: blinded by the dark light of abjection and having fallen off the horse of his scientific education and mediatic career, he sets off on a path of salvation, guided by the mystery of the abject sacrament whose object is wounded, mutilated, sacrificial flesh: the fruits of the car crash. Thus, from being originally 'a source of evil and mingled with sin', abjection now 'becomes the requisite for a reconciliation' and 'a source of health': a new Eucharist, an



instrument of salvation. By cultivating his perversions under a deviant imperative of ‘unlimited, non-productive expenditure’ and ‘free play’, Vaughan approaches a ‘quasi-mystical state’ generally associated with ecstasy and the sacred (Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 100). Such an aspiration to ‘a mystic union of self and world, untarnished by language’ would not have been so strange in the literary context of the time, as pointed out by Charles Russell only one year after the coming out of *Crash* (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 71). This would also explain Vaughan’s messianic charisma and his admission of others as devoted disciples and apostles in his new church. We will elaborate on these para-religious elements in Vaughan’s cult later on.

Yet another reading of Vaughan’s abject nature has to do with his relation to maleness and to masculine, phallic authority. In this respect, Vaughan is marked by a particular kind of abjection, linked to semen. This fluid, with which he is constantly associated, would appear in stark contrast to what always appears to be a predominantly phallic kind of sexuality dominating the novel. Indeed, the sexual subtext of *Crash* clearly privileges the male as phallic, hard, penetrating and dominating. Thus, for example, all wounds, when it comes to sexual matters, are seen as invaginations, and whichever the vent, the sexual act is always one of penetration.<sup>483</sup> Semen, on the contrary, is a soft, sticky substance, amenable to other instances of the soft and wet that are quintessentially female, as is the case with menstrual blood or vaginal mucus (ibid.).<sup>484</sup> Yet, a minimum of space for ‘the wet spot’ in the novel allows Vaughan’s behaviour to be seen as a subversive stand against phallus supremacy (ibid.). Thus, regardless of Ballard’s situation after Vaughan’s death and his resolve to die in a car crash himself too, Vaughan is literally abjected, just like human waste, only to confirm the phallic impenetrability of the new, posthuman cyborg that Ballard represents.<sup>485</sup> It would be ‘only by excluding men’s bodily fluids from their self-representations and controlling those fluids through various forms of solidification that men can mark their own bodies as clean and proper.’ (Reader, p. 45). There would be

---

<sup>483</sup> Terry Harpold, ‘Dry Leatherette: Cronenberg’s *Crash*’, *Postmodern Culture*, 7.3 (1997), n. p., par. 18 <<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.uned.es/docview/1426661315?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:summon&accountid=14609>> [accessed 04.12.2016]

<sup>484</sup> Despite the fact that Kristeva herself does not include semen in her catalogue of typically abject bodily substances (Harpold, n. p., par. 16; *POH*, p. 71).

<sup>485</sup> Melissa Iocco, ‘Addicted to Affliction: Masculinity and Perversity in *Crash* and *Fight Club*’, *Gothic Studies*, 9.2 (2007), pp. 46-56 (p. 51).

widespread ‘masculine aversion to the soft, the liquid, and the gooey’ as associated with ‘the *monstrous feminine*.’ In the end, this would stand for ‘feared libidinal energies [...] not beholden to reason,’ hence always posing a threat ‘to wash away all that is rational’ and therefore masculine (Bukatman, p. 303, my emphasis). Another instance of the soft as feminine, irrational and worthless would contribute to underline Vaughan’s abject condition while linking it to the episode in Beckett’s *The Unnamable* where its eponymous protagonist faces what we called ‘the horror within’ by treading on his family’s viscous remains, and to Molloy’s and Moran’s connection to the chthonic and the darks powers of the night while straying in the woods. I am referring to Vaughan’s anal penetration by Ballard, if we are to follow Camille Paglia when she asserts: ‘Sodomy is imagined as ritual entrance to *the underworld*, symbolized by man’s *bowels*.’ (p. 246, my emphasis) This would agree, for example, with the confirmation of Ballard’s masculinity, as opposed to Vaughan, through his fantasy of having a ‘metal body’ during a ride with his wife (*Crash*, p. 90).

Outright abjection is made concrete throughout the novel in actively sought pain, mutilation and fantasised death as tools of self-fulfilment in perverse sexual ecstasy. An early example thereof is rendered by the narrator while still in hospital, after his crash initiation, when he relates an old dream of his in which his wife gives birth to a ‘devil’s child’ among liquid faeces spurted from her breasts. This shocking image, very close to some of the most extremely abject ones in Beckett’s *Three Novels*, is nonetheless still called a ‘nightmare’ by him; by the time Vaughan has had sex with Catherine, Ballard’s abject musings and practices have gone far enough to think of Vaughan’s pale, greasy, scarred body as an ideal of ‘mutilated beauty’ (pp. 22, 141). In between, in just a few pages he regales us with a catalogue of demented fantasies of both Vaughan’s and his in which horrific, ‘insane’ wounds and an almost complete catalogue of bodily fluids play a leading role, along with fellatio, incest and even decapitation, only falling short of coprophilia.

Towards the end of the novel, we come across an especially vicious climax of abjection in several fantasies awoken in Ballard’s mind. All of them pick up some of the elements we have just paid attention to. Thus, by the time he is having an ultra-abject affair with Gabrielle, he goes into a sort of delirium involving the same proliferation of ‘orifices’ that he finds in the wounds scattered all over her body as a result of her accident, which have become instrumental in the consummation of their encounters as so many new vaginas and

anuses. Ballard's dealings with Gabrielle involve two additional paraphilias to the catalogue of perverse varieties of sex in *Crash*: abasophilia (sex with people who cannot walk) and acrotomophilia (sex with amputees - Mark Thomas, p. 346, n. 84). Later on, following Seagrave's abject breastfeeding habits, which we have just described, Ballard has some explicit, appalling fantasies of a paedophilic nature. Finally, some of these motifs come together in a fantasy of incest with his own mother, covered all over with sexual orifices, whose demented character can only remind us of Bataille or de Sade (yet again, despite the author's denial of having ever read either of them), thus confirming the female body as 'primarily a site of abjection' or 'an active site of transgressive horror.' (Rønno-Jessen, p. 205; MacGregor, pp. 103-04)<sup>486</sup> Closer to our main concern here, the abject, these orifices stand for the vulnerability of the body at its margins, as it is through them that certain marginal substances issue. Furthermore, the fact that it is his own mother that Ballard dreams about is also meaningful, as it underlines the difference between female and male. Men are not deemed to have leaking orifices, as we saw above, in order for them not to be considered as abject as women in our patriarchal, phallogocentric culture; and among the latter, the leaking female par excellence is the mother (Reader, p. 48).

This last fantasy amounts quite simply to a perverted positivisation of abjection, a frenzy of cultural subversion in which everything is turned upside down. In this way, it involves a return to a protean, morally indifferent sexuality in which any distinct social role assumed through the process of psycho-social growth out of the unconscious, Lacanian real, through the imaginary order and eventually into the symbolic realm, is actively rejected, if not directly mocked. *Mutatis mutandis*, this could pass for a sexualised version of such extremely abject episodes in Beckett's *Three Novels* as Molloy's crawling through the forest, absent-minded and with no particular direction; Macmann's lying prone on the mud under the pouring rain; or, as already said, the Unnamable squashing on the remains of their sausage-poisoned folks.

Like in these Beckettian nightmares, an abhuman element is strongly suggested, well beyond the posthuman implications of Dionysian sexuality as defended by Nietzsche. With

---

<sup>486</sup> Thirteen years later, though, he implies that he has finally read de Sade, at least: Mark Dery, 'J.G. Ballard's Wild Ride' [1997], in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), pp. 339-48 (p. 345).

them, we are treading on teratological or monstrous territory. Two main examples could be suggested: the first one would be the abject fantasy of a Golem-like ‘homunculus’, uncannily reminiscent of Beckett’s Worm in *The Unnamable*, made out of ‘blood, semen and engine coolant’ during one of Ballard’s sexual encounters with Dr Remington. These are almost the very same abject fluids mentioned in order to describe the reek coming from Vaughan’s crotch somewhere else in the novel (*Crash*, pp. 63, 81). The second example has as its object Ballard’s preference for Gabrielle’s ‘depraved orifice’, a deep wound in one of her thighs in the fashion of a template for ‘new genital organs’, during intercourse, foretelling abhuman sexual mutations. Ballard is quite characteristically disappointed on realising that her breasts are not prosthetic ones:

This depraved orifice, the imagination of a sexual organ still in the embryonic stages of its evolution, reminded me of the small wounds on my own body, which still carried the contours of the instrument panel and controls. I felt this depression on her thigh, the groove worn below her breast under her right armpit by the spinal brace, the red marking on the inside of her right upper arm - these were the templates for new genital organs, the moulds of sexual possibilities yet to be created in a hundred experimental car-crashes. [...] I lifted her breast in my palm and began to kiss the cold nipple, from which a sweet odour rose, a blend of my own mucus and some pleasant pharmaceutical compound. I let my tongue rest against the lengthening teat, and then moved away and examined the breast carefully. For some reason I had expected it to be a detachable latex structure, fitted on each morning along with her spinal brace and leg supports, and I felt vaguely disappointed that it should be made of her own flesh.

(pp. 146-47)

More than that and not surprisingly, he imagines Gabrielle as having undergone a rebirth into an alternative, perverse, deviant, fantasy-based sexuality mediated by technology and its infinite possibilities (p. 79).

### 3.18 – Passivity and Sadoomasochism

According to J.G. Ballard in a conversation on a much later work, *Super-Cannes*, a taste for violence and cruelty is inherent in human nature; in fact, it is his contention that it is so

because of its adequacy for survival (Gray, pp. 379-80). Nevertheless, this has to be contrasted with his appraisal of the future, and even of our present, as an era of passivity, what he calls a ‘Darwinian struggle’ between competing psychopathies’. Such passivity would be turning into a generalised penchant for masochism. This would not only correspond symmetrically to the sadism constituting, according to Freud and the author himself, the human condition, but it would also be at the root of a more and more widespread delight in suffering.<sup>487</sup> It comes as no surprise then that the author himself acknowledges his own enjoyment of the work of one of the most notorious peddlers of postmodern, aestheticised sadomasochism of our time, Helmut Newton (Vale, pp. 160-61).

In this light, I find J.G. Ballard’s considerations about *Super-Cannes* perfectly applicable to *Crash*: thus, for instance, Vaughan’s imagination is likened, in yet another striking comparison, to a slaughterhouse museum, whereas Ballard defines his own relationship with his abject master as a ‘long *punitive* expedition’ into his own nervous system (*Crash*, pp. 6, 159, my emphasis). Also, when he relates one of the episodes where he drives along Vaughan in the surroundings of Heathrow airport, always on the look-out for a car accident, Ballard describes the air traffic as a system of ‘desire and *punishment*’ to be inflicted on his body (p. 119, my emphasis).

From a Lacanian point of view, it has certainly been claimed that characters in *Crash* are trying to recreate ‘prelinguistic, masochistic fantasies around car crashes’ not in order to achieve freedom from sexual repression and a transcendence of sorts, but rather to secure ‘respite from the symbolic’. Thus, driven by a ‘a perverse desire for bondage and discipline’, they would be willing to re-experience ‘the masochistic pleasures of "being the focus of parental surveillance, the victim of trauma" as crash victims’ (as cited in Butterfield, p. 72). Yet again, we are installed in the middle of an infantilised, perverse, irresponsible experience of sexuality as a way to oppose the rigours of the symbolic in our postmodern society. Children are not meant to meet the social restraints that adults do.

---

<sup>487</sup> ‘A sadist is always at the same time a masochist.’ Sigmund Freud, as cited in Airaksinen, p. 31. Baxter, ‘Reading the Signs’ (2004), in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 407-14 (p. 414).

That masochism is a natural symmetrical object of sadism and therefore rooted in human nature could be related to the notion of ‘surplus violence’: ‘the need to prove one is alive by lacerating the flesh.’ (Brottman and Sharrett, p. 128)

Despite Ballard's submission to Vaughan, and in the same way as the latter is bisexual, the reckless arch-nihilist is not just a sadist, but rather a full sadomasochist. No wonder then that, if the narrator feels an 'exquisite and warming pain' in his scars on inspecting the results of a car crash, Vaughan will wound himself and let his own blood mingle with his dried semen in order to stain the contours of the car he is driving in a calculated gesture, as an artist of abject performance (*Crash*, pp. 129, 159, 157; Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 72).<sup>488</sup> When his affair with Ballard gets sexually consummated, and in spite of his position as master with regard to his disciple, he will take on a passive position and let himself be sodomised (p. 166).<sup>489</sup>

Alternatively and drawing from Leo Bersani, we could find in Vaughan's passive masochism a 'radical disintegration and humiliation of the self' with a potential to disrupt 'narratives of cultural authority', thus investing 'the sexual' with an 'aptitude for the defeat of power by pleasure' through undoing of the subject (Calvin Thomas, p. 78; Bersani, *Homos*, p. 100). Vaughan's consent to passive sodomy would be yet another step towards his eventual rejection of self and subjectivity in his final, self-annihilating crash, thus culminating his escape from the meaninglessness of his former life as an authoritative, yet empty mouthpiece of coherent, integrated, conveniently gendered subjectivity and rational, scientific knowledge. Beyond this nihilistic discourse that tries to ground life on a few dry concepts and high-sounding words, he seeks self-transfiguration in his deadly night rides, thus exemplifying Nietzsche's idea of human existence as an artwork, for 'only as an aesthetic phenomenon do existence and the world appear justified' (*Birth of Tragedy*, p.

---

<sup>488</sup> Like the Viennese Aktionists, who were eager to 'present violence literally' in their public performances, in an attempt to break free from 'the hold of images' and eager to show 'the demise of sense' and 'the force of rejection' through 'blood, excrement and willing suffering' (Noys, p. 105; Biaggi, pp. 40-41, my translation). Their performances would have been staged 'against the inauthenticity of representation' (Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, p. 177).

<sup>489</sup> This scene has been quite colourfully described as 'une scène qui eût fait se retourner R. L. Stevenson dans sa tombe [...] le Docteur Jekyll sodomisant le Docteur Hyde après un *trip*.' Roger Bozzetto, 'J.G. Ballard: écrivain, auteur de Science-Fiction', n. p., par. 57 <<http://www.quarante-deux.org/archives/bozzetto/ecrits/auteurs/ballard.html>> [accessed 14.10.2019]. My English translation: 'a scene that would have made R.L. Stevenson turn over in his coffin [...] Dr Jekyll sodomising Dr Hyde after a *trip*.' (original emphasis).

Another odd reflection on this scene is made by Terry Harpold; according to him, Vaughan lets himself be sodomised by Ballard 'because the latter's imaginary fusion with the automobile completes the deepest secret of Vaughan's fantasies': through him, Vaughan 'is finally fucked by his car.' Harpold, n. p., par. 23.

113). His final immolation would be the supreme artwork surpassing all his earlier attempts.

## Chapter 4 – A Few Theoretical Concepts

### 4.1 – Existential Nihilism: Metaphysics of the Subject. ‘Ge-stell’ and the Human as (Sexual) ‘Bestand’

Vaughan’s entire existence, understood as the most intimate fusion of the life and death drives, Eros and Thanatos, is based on a complete confusion between reality and fantasy, which is very characteristic of postmodernity. Just in the same way as in perverse Catherine Ballard’s case, Vaughan’s take on reality also includes death and the dead merely as a part of his ‘sexual recreations’. The only way that Vaughan, in his reckless and unflinching exploration of sex-death and mutilation, can understand and imagine every single driver’s life is just death: for him, as he steps onto his car every night, all of them are already dead. Life, for him, is merely death’s quarry. Although necrophilia as such is not illustrated in the novel, we only fall short of it: the dead, according to Catherine, should be left lying around for months before disposing of the corpses (*Crash*, p. 33); Vaughan also manipulates corpses on the very site of crashes in order to photograph them, thus adding to his preparations for his ultimate, self-annihilating car crash while also providing for his fantasy-based erotic life in the meantime. In the end, both characters, for all their luxuriant sex lives, are living paradigms of existential nihilism as the ‘negation of the value of life.’ (Woodward, 9). Furthermore, Ballard gets contaminated with this postmodern disease right while still in hospital, where he starts having ‘insane fantasies.’ (*Crash*, p. 28). These are just a few instances among the many that contradict Michel Delville’s opinion that, after all, there is a strong positive note in *Crash*, which he connects to a culturally uncontaminated state of sexual grace born of deviance as an ever-flowing stream of vivifying energy (Delville, p. 58).

In this way, death and the ultimate abject item, the corpse, are parts of the perverse pansexuality we are dealing with in *Crash*. This is highly noticeable in Vaughan’s fantasies about his fetishised Elizabeth Taylor, whom he wishes to join those other celebrities whose famous and fatal car crashes he researches and re-enacts:



Elizabeth Taylor stepped from her chauffeured limousine outside a London hotel, smiled across her husband's shoulder from the depths of a rear seat.

Thinking of this new algebra of leg-stance and wound area which Vaughan was calculating, I searched her thighs and kneecaps, the chromium door frames and cocktail cabinet lids. I assumed that either Vaughan or his volunteer subjects would have mounted her body in any number of bizarre postures, like a demented stunt driver, and that the cars in which she moved would become devices for exploiting every pornographic and erotic possibility, every conceivable sex-death and mutilation.

(*Crash*, pp. 8, 110-11).

His fascination with celebrity death could be explained as a 'vicarious extension' of the death drive and 'its endless cycle of repetition compulsion', the celebrity standing for Vaughan's 'ego ideal' in Freudian terminology (Brottman and Sharrett, p. 130). Secondly, this sort of identification with a celebrity would correspond to the blurring of the emotionally disturbing and endlessly fascinating spectacle of 'happy life gone wrong' on the one hand, and the life of the average citizen on the other, which would equate to a sort of spurious democratisation characteristic of contemporary, postmodern societies (Silverman, p. 110; Featherstone, 'Introduction', p. 16).<sup>490</sup> What is more, and refuting Delville, this is a sign that insane fantasies about other people's deaths are not the preserve of a psychopathic or deranged minority, but rather, at least potentially, a mass phenomenon.

Indeed, many examples could be taken out of *Crash* of what Stephenson, referring to *The Atrocity Exhibition*, calls the 'reduction of human individuals to objects' to be exploited without any emotion whatsoever, the relations established among them being merely 'mechanistic, dehumanized' (Stephenson, pp. 64-65). In this way, their condition would be reduced, in Heideggerian terms, to that of objects of 'Ge-stell' or 'enframing', that is the way in which everything, objects and beings, is brought to presence by the challenging revealing of modern technology: namely, as immediately and completely available for use or consumption by human beings, after being previously identified and

---

<sup>490</sup> This would be similar to the 'democratic effusion' that, according to Régis Debray, characterises the behaviour of reality show panel members when these are celebrities (Silverman, p. 111).

duly measured (or ‘researched’ in Vaughan’s case) for instrumental goals. In itself, this would be a symptom of nihilism, corresponding to that moment ‘when the farthest corner of the earth has been conquered technologically and can be exploited economically’ (Heidegger, *Introd. to Metaphysics*, p. 40). As a consequence of what Max Weber calls ‘rationalisation’ and according to Herbert Marcuse, this is a form of political dominance that is thus being imposed in the name of rationality. Indeed, it has been the scientific method that has eventually made a more and more efficient domination of man a consequence of the domination of nature (Habermas, pp. 54, 58). As a result, Ge-stell can be defined as ‘that challenging that [modern technology and, therefore, the scientific method] sets upon man to order the real as standing-reserve in accordance with the way in which it shows itself. That challenging [...] concentrates man upon ordering the real as standing-reserve.’ (Heidegger, ‘Question concerning Technology’, p. 19). That ‘standing reserve’ or ‘Bestand’, would also include human beings, inherently dehumanised as ‘human resources’ or ‘human capital’ (Woodward, p. 62).

This dehumanisation could be put down to the nature of subjectivity as a pure function of the world of objectivity, thus irresistibly tending to become an object for manipulation itself. Western science and its underlying enlightened, bourgeois rationality, which ‘could be harnessed to any end’, apprehends Being itself ‘in terms of manipulation and administration.’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, pp. 65,69) In the Holocaust, when reason expresses itself at its most reified and unreflective, this tendency would find its ultimate fulfilment in humans being rendered as ‘mere material,’ and then as ‘nothing at all.’ (Druker, p. 48) In this, Heidegger’s party leaders and their administrative subalterns were only following a tendency recognisable in rulers since the Enlightenment: ‘For the rulers [...] human beings become mere *material*, as the whole of nature has become material for society.’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 68, my emphasis) In the postmodern market, the ‘global domination of corporate capital’, in its more and more specific customer-targeting, would find an expression in its disguise as ‘individuality and difference.’ (Currie, p. 101) In the end, in assumedly catering for individual needs, capital would be considering everyone under the same logic of equivalence as a potential source of profit: ‘one cannot think about difference without embracing its contradictory other, the principle of equivalence.’ (p. 124)

The ultimate outcome of this process is a totalitarian society with a ‘rational’ foundation. It all takes place, moreover, within a metaphysical framework where Being is understood as full presence (Habermas, p. 58; Vattimo, pp. 43, 45, 153). In this, Heidegger’s mistrust of the subject of modern metaphysics (which has an antecedent in Nietzsche’s), as well as his rejection of the ultimately Cartesian doctrine of the self-evidence of subjectivity in consciousness, bespeak his antihumanism (p. 124).<sup>491</sup> In any case and according to Heidegger, Bestand would be the highest point of nihilism understood as groundlessness or foundationlessness (Woodward, p. 157).

In actual fact, as Gianni Vattimo explains following both Nietzsche and Heidegger, the ‘grandfathers of postmodernity’, ‘nihilism is the consumption of use-value into exchange-value’, which dissolves Being into ‘universal equivalence’ of value. This process is concomitant with capitalism and technoscience, and therefore starts in modernity; thus, already Marx calls our attention to the direct relation existing in a community between the decrease in the valuation of people and the increase in the valuation of things: in other words, technological progress ends up in the commodification of people.<sup>492</sup> It is in postmodernity, however, in the ‘multicultural Babel’ in which we are living and which is

---

<sup>491</sup> It is sad to acknowledge, given Heidegger’s loyalty to the kernel of a sort of idealistic, spiritualised Nazism, the following conclusion reached by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy departing from a shared mistrust of modern subjectivity under Heidegger’s likely influence: according to them, ‘there is [...] a logic of fascism. This also means that a certain logic is fascist, and this logic is not wholly foreign to the general logic of rationality inherent in the metaphysics of the Subject.’ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le mythe nazi*, l’Aube poche essai (La Tour-d’Aigues: Éditions de l’aube, 2005), p. 25. The original French text: ‘Il y a [...] une logique du fascisme. Ce qui veut dire aussi qu’une certaine logique est fasciste, et que cette logique n’est pas simplement étrangère à la logique générale de la rationalité dans la métaphysique du Sujet.’

<sup>492</sup> ‘With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men. Labor produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a commodity’: Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. by Martin Milligan, in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and The Communist Manifesto*, Great Books in Philosophy Series (Social and Political Philosophy) (Amherst, MA, New York: Prometheus, 1988), pp. 13-168 (p. 72). This would accord with Emanuele Severino when he claims that ‘scientific-technological planification, by mobilising the entire being and turning it into an object of both production and destruction, also mobilises man and transforms it into an object of both production and destruction. *The producer becomes product*. [...] in this production, the essence of Western man reaches its entire extension.’ (*Futura*, pp. 58-59, my emphasis and translation of the Spanish translation of the Italian original)

characterised by an ‘alienated rigidity’, that it reaches its zenith (Vattimo, p. 30; Woodward, pp. 157-58).<sup>493</sup>

In *Crash*, this is evident in the way that every single character instrumentalises every member of the crash circle in their quest for their own pleasure. In the end, everyone in the novel, from Vaughan and the members of his circle to road or airport prostitutes, is either in actual fact or potentially a sexual object, flesh to be preyed upon by others without any scruples or regrets at all. As Zadie Smith puts it, ‘*Crash* is an existential book about how everybody uses [...] everybody.’ The difference between things and people has become too small in it to be meaningful any longer (n.p., par. 14, 16).<sup>494</sup>

This is what transpires in Ballard’s statement about enrolling Vaughan in his ‘confused hunt.’ (*Crash*, p. 50, my emphasis) Vaughan could even be thought to embody certain sociologically prevalent, banal modalities of male violence, especially against women, his attempt on Liz Taylor’s life being liable to be read as ‘the ritualistic enactment of cultural meaning about sex’ (Weeks, *Sexuality*, p. 72). What started as a quest for true self and absolute reality has by now become a deadly chasing game after anything that moves. Hence, if we are to believe J.G. Ballard’s claim that the psychopathic hymn that he acknowledges *Crash* to be has a point – namely, that the cultivation of deviant perversity and transgressive violence is risky and comes at a high price-, a hymn it remains: the author’s fascination for his own fiction is clear, as well as the thrill he gets out of his own wayward imagination. As he states in an interview, after defining every sort of violence as ‘wholly bad’, he recognises ‘we’re also *excited* by violence’ maybe even ‘for good reasons.’ (Barber, p. 32, my emphasis)<sup>495</sup>

---

<sup>493</sup> Still, it should not be overlooked how this techno-scientific dehumanisation and ‘twilight of man’ in Vattimo’s thought is accompanied by what he calls the at least potential ‘summons [...] to a possible new human experience.’ (Vattimo, p. 29, my translation).

<sup>494</sup> In his introduction to the novel, J.G. Ballard writes that, ‘in a sense,’ pornography ‘is the most political form of fiction, dealing with *how we use and exploit each other*, in the most ruthless and urgent way.’ (‘Introduction’, n.p., par. 8, my emphasis)

<sup>495</sup> The ultimate meaning of Ballard’s description of *Crash* as ‘a psychopathic hymn which has a point’ is a vexed question, especially after an essay by Baudrillard in which he wrote that in the novel fiction and reality had been abolished by ‘a kind of hyperreality’, all moral oppositions having been annulled and neutralised as well. This has brought about a whole critical cottage industry focusing on the novel’s alleged morality or immorality (‘Ballard’s *Crash*’, n. p., par. 15). An imaginative way out of this controversy is suggested by Gasiorek when he writes about *Crash* as being the product of trying to blend together two

## 4.2 – Death of Affect: Hypermodernity and the Vision Machine

In the end, the human being's abstraction and depersonalisation, their fetishisation, this widespread derealisation of people's both human and material environments, by being something inherent in Enlightenment rationality, evolves into what J.G. Ballard calls the 'most sinister casualty of the century: the death of affect' (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 94-96, 70; Slocombe, pp. 78-79).

If Michel Delville is right when he states that J.G. Ballard's fiction takes place in an 'affectless void', which is our time's, then maybe we should listen to the charges of nihilism levelled against his work with more attentive ears (Delville, p. 82). Thus, at least implicitly, a nihilist principle might be at play here (even if J.G. Ballard himself, rather than his work, were not liable to be called a nihilist after all). Indeed, a world presided over by this condition would be, in Deleuzian terms 'a world without Others, [...] a world without *the possible*'; in other words: a nihilistic world.<sup>496</sup> This posits a serious problem, as our postmodern culture of constant and instant self-gratification does not seem to be very 'conducive to a responsibility for "the other"' (Zygmunt Bauman, as cited in Silverman, p. 88). In the end, the death of affect is not neutral: emotions go nowhere in *Crash*, if not to hasten destruction, self-destruction included.<sup>497</sup>

The key to understanding the novel's predatory inertia and its postmodern, nihilistic take on death and the waning of affect is the fact that its characters, just like us readers, live in an environment saturated with visual representations, with an ever-growing proliferation of images, often of a toxic nature, perpetrated and propagated by the media (Cartano-Jakubowski, p. 220).<sup>498</sup> This state of things is termed super-modernity or hyper-

antithetical orders of discourse encapsulating incommensurable value systems: ethics and aesthetics (*Ballard*, pp. 17-18).

<sup>496</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. by Constantin V. Boundas, trans. by Mark Lester (London: Athlone, 1990), p. 320 (my emphasis).

<sup>497</sup> Toby Litt, 'Foreword', in Baxter (ed.), pp. vii-x (p. x).

<sup>498</sup> 'A huge volume of sensational and often toxic imagery inundates our minds, much of it fictional in content.': 'Plan for the Assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy', in J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Flamingo Modern Classics (London: Flamingo, 2001), pp. 145-46 (p. 145).

modernity by Marc Augé, and it is characterised by an excess of information, images and individuality (Silverman, p. 79). Essentially, the super / hyper-modern condition relates to a world full to the brim with profuse, exaggerated sensory stimulus, so much so that anything is eventually equivalent to anything else, as the human mind gets over-loaded and everything is evacuated of meaning (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 104, 109). In urban super / hypermodernity, those stimuli, considered as signifiers, would float free of their attachment to any specific meaning, ‘divorced from the world of signification’ (Silverman, p. 81).

The most important among these stimuli are those of a visual nature, to the point that we could understand them to be causing a general civilisational shift ‘from word to image’ (p. 82). This is enhanced and reinforced by the availability of second-hand, ‘frozen, stored, contrived, and re-presented’ images for manipulation and control by the media, as mediatic representation, by taking them out of context, makes them extraordinarily malleable. Paul Virilio tellingly gives the name of ‘vision machine’ to this ‘logic of public representations’ or postmodern ‘logistics of the image’ which is based on the ‘fusion-confusion of the eye and camera lens’, ultimately leading to the public becoming ‘anaesthetised against the real’, and to ‘cultural amnesia’ under the ‘rule of the screen’ (Jenks, *Culture*, pp. 163, 165-66; Silverman, pp. 113, 119).<sup>499</sup> This amnesia, which is ‘an amnesia of the age’ befitting the ‘passivization’ of a more and more uncritical individual and the ‘obliteration of choice by a new mass conformism’, is directly connected to the transition from the historical to a ‘mythical stage’ through the ‘media-led’ reconstruction of events (pp. 111, 113).<sup>500</sup> These are ‘hollowed out’, passively ‘consumed by their own representations,’ leaving only the ‘empty shells’ of their own simulations available to the consumers of the products of ‘an ever-expanding media realm’ characterised by its ‘derealizing effects’ (Crosthwaite, pp. 20-22). Another consequence of this process whereby the image reaches a position of dominance in our societies is the transformation of public space into a space for publicity (Baudrillard, as cited in Silverman, p. 82).

---

<sup>499</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, trans. by Julie Rose, Perspectives (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994), pp. 13, 63.

<sup>500</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. by James Benedict (London and New York: Verso, 1993), pp. 91-92.

#### 4.3 – Voyeurism and Ge-stell: Techno-Reason and Evil

Voyeurism, something made not only possible but almost compulsory in this visual, postmodern society, can only end up in utter moral unconcern, as exemplified in Catherine's disappointment on receiving the news that Vaughan, not her husband, has died in a crash; such a reaction is based on the same insane logic as her admiring and even envying Ballard's killing Helen Remington's husband in the accident he undergoes at the beginning of the novel (*Crash*, pp. 181, 33; Litt, 'Dangerous Bends', p. 424). Neither Catherine nor her husband will flinch before the acknowledged fact that Vaughan will crash into her car any day, most probably killing her (*Crash*, pp. 8, 179). In fact, Ballard's fantasies about his wife's death are no less than a part of the 'affectionate responses' they would exchange while together on the road; furthermore and tellingly enough, he defines these fantasies as more and more 'calculated', even surpassing Vaughan's on the same issue (p. 149, my emphasis). This is just an index of how in our mediatic and virtual postmodernity society and thought are exposed to internal confusion and to the virulence and transparency of an evil which, no longer finding anywhere to manifest itself as such, filters everywhere into indifference and even hatred.<sup>501</sup> This is how some of the defining features of Vaughan's and his circle's behaviour coincide with those noticeable in some of the most prominent examples of mediatic violence in our own time, such as the New York 9/11 attacks: sacralisation of death, absolute indifference to the victims, or the transformation of oneself and others into *instruments*. The attackers' conduct, however, could also illustrate how terrorist practices involving the sacrifice of both one's and others' lives could articulate 'a deep-seated challenge to the passive nihilist consumer society, in which to die *for a cause* is unimaginable.' (Diken, pp. 78-79, my emphasis) Nothing to wonder at in a society bent on deterrence, pacification and control, neutralising dissent, and rooting out all radicalism, negativity and singularity (death, the outmost of singularity, included) through contemporary forms of violence more subtle than straight aggression, such as psychic and media regulation (Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, pp. 92-93). Hence, Vaughan and his partners would be following the mandates of enframing in their indifference to their own and others' deaths, while also revolting against them in a

---

<sup>501</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, trans. by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 77.

challenge to the ultra-conformist and ‘framed’ society such mandates originate in, which they refuse to belong to.

This brings us again to Ge-stell as the nihilistically reductive, hegemonic vision of Being characteristic of instrumental reason and its main representative, technoscience, whose predestined, historical essence it would represent. Having overgrown its natural domain, namely that of the ‘horizon’ one inhabits during the process of work, when the being-for-us of things shows up, this mode of world-understanding causes the real to reveal itself as ‘standing-reserve’. As such, all beings stand for sources of energy susceptible of being stored and used after the calculations and plans of willing subjects, or as ‘equipment’ to be deployed in technological activity (Heidegger, ‘Question concerning Technology’, p. 23; Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 28; Vattimo, p. 40; Woodward, p. 62; Young, pp. 202, 206).<sup>502</sup> In this way, the being-in-itself of things disappears into ‘usefulness’ (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 44). In other words, Ge-stell would be the ‘structural principle’ demanding the Earth’s total organisation through technology, which would imply the self-accomplishment of metaphysics in its highest degree of deployment. Hence, in its one-dimensional way of displaying reality, it would deny everything that ‘cannot be reified and totalized’, thus relating all beings in foreseeable causal links susceptible of human mastery and control towards one and the same goal (Vattimo, pp. 40, 158; Young, p. 203; Levin, p. 9). The Being of beings gets identified with their function within the system of the will to power (Severino, *Contemp.*, p. 235). Like this, the absolutisation of any particular ‘horizon of disclosure’ of Being through beings (such as Ge-stell is in the domain of human work) into the only one in which reality can be experienced and understood involves oblivion to the unfathomable ‘mystery’ of Being, a forgetfulness and ignorance of its many-faceted nature, its infinite depth and its boundlessness, the wonder that there are things rather than nothing at all and

---

<sup>502</sup> Heidegger, ‘Question Concerning Technology’, pp. 19-20:

[...] that challenging claim which gathers man thither to order the self-revealing as standing-reserve: ‘Ge-stell’ [Enframing]. [...]

Enframing means the gathering together of that setting-upon which sets upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve. Enframing means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology.



that we are in their midst (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 121-22; Young, pp. 204, 206-07). At this point, the oblivion of Being is total and nihilism thrives and rages in the era of metaphysics and technology, for which nothing of Being is left (Severino, *Contemp.*, p. 236).

As a result, debased to mere self-interested calculation, more than three centuries after its enthronement by Descartes as ‘egological and essentially anthropocentric’, ‘instrumental, pragmatic, practical’, and ‘increasingly asserting itself in self-destructive ways,’ reason would have lost its self-defining emancipatory dimension (Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, p. 22; Levin, p. 4).<sup>503</sup> By excluding all other possibilities of revealing, Ge-stell would hold sway over modernity, of which it would constitute its unique essence (Heidegger, ‘Question concerning Technology’, p. 62). Blinded by Ge-stell, unable to think and understand what truly is, humans lose the sense of their ontological foundation, thus becoming ‘separated and alienated from the world.’ This would be the unavoidable consequence of not listening to Being, of not wanting to allow it to speak to us through beings in their multidimensionality (Marmysz, pp. 35, 39). Under the sway of Heidegger’s Ge-stell, the temptation to enframe the very Being of beings would make nihilism rage in our culture (Levin, p. 9). According to this, when interpellated for a meaning to human life, the universe may seem even to deny itself, with the correlate of the inexistence of any real meaning at all (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 198-99)<sup>504</sup>. After WWII and fully within the postmodern mindset, nihilism being fully triumphant, the question, as Baudrillard, inverting Heidegger, poses it, should be: ‘‘Why is there nothing rather than something?’’<sup>505</sup>

---

<sup>503</sup> Characteristically enough, however, Heidegger sees in Ge-stell a first sign of ‘Ereignis’, the announcement of the event of being beyond the metaphysical mindset, thus allowing beings to overcome the conceptual categories of subject and object (Vattimo, pp. 41, 151).

<sup>504</sup> Although Gasiorek is here commenting on *Millennium People*, I find his ideas perfectly applicable to Vaughan, Seagrave and Ballard’s empty, death-testing and death-tempting gestures in *Crash*.

<sup>505</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 1996), p. 2.

#### 4.4 –Postmodern Apocalypse: The Eclipse of the Other

Ge-stell, in Heidegger's thought and as we already saw, also includes humans in the fashion of 'human material', which becomes disposable 'with a view to proposed goals.' (Heidegger, *Poetry*, p. 109). In this connection, the car and car-crashes as they are depicted in J.G. Ballard's novel could work as the supreme signs of the failure of the imagination: freedom from morality, a theme that the author would develop in his later novels (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 194). Retrenched in their 'new Nautilus', alienated from 'social restraints', and feeling self-sufficient in their cars, 'the demands of others become intrusive' to drivers (Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 88; Graves-Brown, p. 69). Against a background of banalised violence, waste and anomie expressed as aggressiveness, ideas of responsibility towards others might simply not be accommodated in the society *Crash* depicts.

In this plays an important part the fact of the overwhelming weight that humans have to endure in our post-1945 'administered' welfare societies, now that the Other as a contrasting, oppositional image has been tabooed, and 'homeopathic' violence and negativity have been strictly forbidden (Sage, pp. 35, 37-38). The postmodern 'spectrality' of identity, namely its generalised 'dispersal and simulation', and the concomitant transformation of 'relationships into a ceaseless stream of differentiation' would ultimately make difference something meaningless, leading, yet again, to an 'eclipse of the other'. Quite simply, there might be no more room for any 'troubling otherness', one which would unsettle our own selves (Jean Baudrillard and Marc Guillaume, as cited in Silverman, pp. 89-90).

This eclipse of the other would also be the premise of 'a secular attitude without morality, without judgment, without hope', the stuff of a 'black mysticism of transcendental collapse' oriented towards a godless, 'laughing', nihilistic apocalypse (ibid.). The long shadow of a by now presumably dead God still (negatively) lingers in our current anomic society, as well as the practical impossibility of arbitrating a secular ethics whose basic postulates will stay above the unrestricted satisfaction of personal desires as the sole guiding principle of people's behaviour. In this respect, unlike during modernity, we would be living in an immanent, not imminent apocalypse. Postmodern apocalypse, deprived of any 'transcendental meaning', would therefore be a feeling of 'continued

disaster’ from which one cannot maintain any distance. In Maurice Blanchot’s words: ‘How is it possible to say: Auschwitz has happened?’ Indeed, it would never stop taking place (Slocombe, pp. 169-70; *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 143).

#### 4.5 – Information, the Media, Heideggerian ‘Chatter’, and Nihilism

As Jean Baudrillard writes, in the postmodern, global village we are living in, the way information is fashioned by the media makes it ‘directly destructive of meaning and signification’. With the exponential development experimented in the field of computing and other information technologies, ‘reality has moved inside an electronic "nonspace": everything has become data.’ (Bukatman, p. 35) The outcome is that, instead of promoting socialisation and a basic measure of shared meaning within the community, what the media are bringing about is the opposite: fragmentation, isolation and confusion. Hence, postmodern ‘proliferation of information’ does away with ‘genuine sociality’, as well as ‘memory and the real’ in favour of an apathic and sluggish ‘simulated social’ (Silverman, pp. 145, 156).

Baudrillard gets as far as to suggest the existence of a ‘second nihilistic revolution’ whereby the formal dimension of the technology of information, by overshadowing the content of its messages, is causing ‘the destruction of meaning by meaning’ (Woodward, pp. 140-41).<sup>506</sup> This would be a similar phenomenon to the distancing from historical events that is achieved ‘by the very means available to us for remembering’ them (as cited in Crosthwaite, p. 21). Consequently, our ‘contemporary social bond’ would be ‘tenuously located on the assumption of a common imagery’ resulting from the media’s ‘techniques of uniform and predictable representation’ (Jenks, *Culture*, pp. 168, 171).

---

<sup>506</sup> According to Baudrillard, a first nihilistic revolution would have taken place by the rise of modern capitalism and the subsequent reduction of everything to a common language: that of exchange-value. The commodity would have been the supreme medium of this development (Woodward, p. 141). Paraphrasing Lord Darlington’s definition of a cynic in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, written in the heyday of industrial capitalism, such a (nihilistic) world would have been one where people knew ‘the price of everything and the value of nothing.’ Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windemere’s Fan*, III.1, in *eBooks@Adelaide*, <[https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/wilde/oscar/lady\\_windermere\\_fan/](https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/wilde/oscar/lady_windermere_fan/)> [accessed 14.10.2019]

In fact, what Baudrillard is referring to when stating this is his personal concept of nihilism in modern times as ‘the destruction of meaning by the very attempt to make the world meaningful’. The ultimate culprit of this destruction would be representational thought and its views on the real as ‘that which lies beyond appearances’ and can be rationally understood. To Baudrillard, this positing of a real beyond language, which is ultimately the creature of the Enlightenment’s project of rationalising everything, ends up in a disenchanted world where the real gets destructed ‘through the very attempt to realize the world.’ (Woodward, pp. 135-36).

To make things even worse, maybe the clearest example of this socially widespread meaninglessness is that of language itself. According to Ballard, nowadays not only are many among the most socially prominent speakers using language as anything but an instrument of communication, but they are also doing this quite openly (Baker, pp. 19-20; Baxter, ‘*Kingdom Come*’, pp. 124-25). If according to Heidegger nihilism is oblivion of Being, and if language is the ‘house of Being’, then this is a patent sign of the nihilism we are living in (Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, p. 217).<sup>507</sup> If we are to use Heideggerian terminology, ours is a world of ‘chatter’: a way of speaking ‘severed from the context of thought, feeling, and perception’ (Inwood, *Heidegger*, p. 57).<sup>508</sup>

#### 4.6 – Figural Culture: Simulation and Dereferentialisation

One of the most interesting and relevant appraisals of postmodernity, especially because of its criticism of representational thought, is Jean Baudrillard’s. Its pivotal concept is simulation, through which postmodern ‘reality’ would have been generated as a huge fiction, as a catalogue of Disneylands. Simulation would be a part of a wider process of dereferentialising whereby images or copies of a questioned and problematised original are

---

<sup>507</sup> On Heidegger’s ‘humanism’ and its intrinsically anti-humanist nature, see Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Phil.*, p. xix.

<sup>508</sup> In Heideggerian terms, ‘chatter’, a degenerated version of speech or language channelled through the ‘they’ (the German impersonal pronoun ‘man’, that is to say people who live without any anchorage in Being), prevents Dasein from achieving an authentic existence: Inwood, *Heidegger*, pp. 53, 57. This chatter and its impersonality make life a mere routine, and beings merely useful tools or instruments, objects (Severino, *Contemp.*, p. 236).

generated and circulated in society to the point that the real or apparent, in other words the referent, disappears.<sup>509</sup> In our ‘age of simulation’, linked to post-industrial consumer capitalism, the consumption of commodities has been replaced by that of free-floating signs, thus consummating ‘the logic of capitalism’ and leaving us in a situation analogue to ‘the nihilism Nietzsche diagnosed’ (Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, p. 83).

In our time, a revolution in design and the rise of advertising and the media, with images referring only to themselves and having their own reproduction as their sole true purpose, make the boundary between the true and the false, the real and the imaginary disappear or at least be strongly threatened to disappear.<sup>510</sup> Hence, the postmodern world is one of surfaces without ‘relief, perspective and depth’, both ‘spatial and psychological’, thus becoming merely illusory (Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 143).

This cultivation of the merely superficial would be smothering any vestiges of ‘reality’ or referentiality still existing in our society. As the narrator of *Crash* acknowledges at a certain moment while driving through a spectral London, ‘I thought of being killed within this huge accumulation of *fictions*, finding my body marked with the imprint of a hundred television crime serials’ (*Crash*, p. 45, my emphasis). Not in vain does J.G. Ballard claim in his introduction to the 1995 edition of *Crash* that ours is ‘a world ruled by fictions of every kind’, even those of theory (Ballard, ‘Introduction’, n. p., par. 3). Our society would be based on a consensual, ‘esthetic’ [sic] hallucination of reality (Baudrillard, *Simulations*, pp. 147-48; Bukatman, p. 30).

In our postmodern time, everything, war included, becomes spectacle, mere show, and true self or identity is also but a mirage or the stuff reality TV is purportedly made of: TV dissolves into life, life into TV. To my mind, it is not irrelevant that Vaughan, before becoming a metaphysical renegade, was a TV scientist (Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 55; *Crash*, p. 48). In the end, ‘TV is the world’ (Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, p. 67). A transition from word to image having been completed after reality has become confused with an aestheticised image of itself, we are installed in the midst of a figural culture

---

<sup>509</sup> Baudrillard calls this process ‘liquidation’, ‘extermination’, or ‘death sentence’ of the referent: Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. by Paul Foss, and others (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), pp. 4, 11, 142.

<sup>510</sup> Andrew Wernick, ‘Simulation’, in *The Baudrillard Dictionary*, ed. by Richard G. Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010), pp. 199-201 (pp. 199-200).

founded on ‘visual regimes of signification’ where TV is to be found alongside cinema and advertising. All three of them are vehicles for non-stop, omnipresent and almighty spectacle, where the emphasis falls upon primary processes such as desire and the id rather than on secondary ones, such as the ego (Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 152; Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, p. 68).<sup>511</sup> In this way, an alliance of the irrational and the spectacle holds sway over postmodernity.

This is intimately related to the way how, late in his life, as J.G. Ballard comments on horror films and TV series, he affirms that, from his personal point of view, we are living in a time of ‘violence as spectator sport’.<sup>512</sup> This is, for example, the sport that the Ballard couple give themselves to during their onanistic sessions while watching pain and violence on television, thus verifying Paul Virilio’s contention that (post) modern media (and art too, for that matter) can be defined by their ‘obsession with sensationalism.’ (*Crash*, p. 26; Noys, p. 107). There, within a ‘new culture of shock’ that ‘uses the speed of modern media technologies to overcome our capacities for response’, pain and violence are experienced ‘at so many removes’ from the real, that is, only in the head, the last place that was designed to deal with them (*Crash*, p. 26).<sup>513</sup>

If, according to Bataille, ‘confrontation with death always requires the detour of a spectacle’, the latter is confirmed as stronger than the former by far (Noys, p. 113). In the end and in the wake of Bataille, despite their effort to restore death’s dignity by making it the most abject spectacle, all the transcendence achieved first by Seagrave’s and then by Vaughan’s suicide is of this kind: a banal, insignificant non-event, not even five minutes of screen fame, as their ‘sacrificial violence’ only ‘empties the human experience of any transcendent meaning.’ (p. 118; Bukatman, p. 292). That would be the ‘the form of the real in modern culture: the image [of death on television] as nightmarish apparition.’ (Noys, p.

---

<sup>511</sup> Sharon Heller, *Freud: A to Z* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2005), p. 91

<sup>512</sup> Simon Sellars, ‘Rattling Other People’s Cages’ [2006], in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 431-42 (p. 440).

<sup>513</sup> Frank Whitford, ‘Speculative Illustrations: Eduardo Paolozzi in Conversation with J.G. Ballard’ [1971], in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), p. 39.

122) In the end, the only response the universe stoops to pronounce to their meaningless suicides is silence.<sup>514</sup>

Moreover, Vaughan proceeds to his spectacular though irrelevant ending precisely because of his obsession with the images of the ‘imaginary deaths’ and ‘insane wounds’ hanging ‘in the *gallery* of his mind like exhibits in the museum of a slaughterhouse.’ (*Crash*, p. 6, my emphasis) Everything, life included, gets reduced to photographs, to screens, to surfaces, to images; violent ones, for that matter. Thus, we can understand better Ballard’s reaction when, on being shown a photograph album full of deranged snapshots of car crash ‘violence and sexuality’, he comments how ‘some latent homoerotic element’ was brought ‘to the *surface* of [his] mind’ (p. 81, my emphasis).

The characters’ present, like our own, by getting reduced to these instantaneous and all-powerful though superficial flashes of violence, is therefore characterised by J.G. Ballard as ‘a very electric and aggressive place.’ (Orr, p. 58) Quite disturbingly, the author himself compares the ‘image-saturated’ society of the 1970s with Nazi Germany, finding a prophecy of the former in the latter’s ‘maximising of violence and sensation’ as conducive to a similar ‘fictionalising of experience’. (Baxter, ‘Radical Surrealism’, p. 510) In a similar way, in its amorality and superficiality, in its depthlessness, the foreseeable mediatic future can be imagined as a huge, infantile, Vegas-like jukebox or a pay-per-view video device, where life would be just a ‘sensationalist novel’ pervaded by ‘violent imagery’ (Nordlund, p. 228). Also in this American tonality, Baudrillard glosses postmodern meaninglessness and depthlessness by comparing them to Los Angeles and the deserts of the American South West as ‘a challenge to nature and culture’, a hyperspace without an origin or any reference points.<sup>515</sup>

---

<sup>514</sup> ‘The gods have died [...] We emerge from *the void*, we stare back at it for a short while and then rejoin the void [...] the universe has nothing to say. *There’s only silence*’: J.G. Ballard, *Millennium People*, as quoted in Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 195-96 (my emphasis).

<sup>515</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Amérique* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1986), pp. 241-42.

#### 4.7 – Death of Reality: Hyperreality. The Code

In the more recent nihilism of transparency we would be experiencing in postmodern times, according to Baudrillard, the self-destruction of meaning becomes complete, as it gives in to spectacle. Nothing is left of the meaning still existing in modernity, or of the assumed dark recesses of reality where mystery would still be safe from the light of reason (Baudrillard, *Amérique*, pp. 135-37; Jenks, *Culture*, p. 140). Now, the ‘de-spiritualization of the world of appearances’ has finally achieved the Enlightenment’s ultimate goal: ‘the annihilation of ambivalence.’ (Baudrillard, as cited in Clarke, p. 75) When nothing becomes concealed, when everything is transparent and all categories and their dialectical, meaning-constituting oppositions become reversible under the dominance of the media’s reductionism, all that would be left is a melancholic fascination with the disappearance of meaning, while ‘the *nihilistic*, indifferent play of hyperreal simulation’ rules (pp. 136-37, 143, my emphasis). If for the media, as we commented above, the medium has been the message for a long time, what takes place now is the ‘implosion of the medium itself in the real, [...] in a sort of nebulous hyperreality’ (Baudrillard, *Silent Majorities*, p. 101). This is all the more so as ‘we live in a melancholic age’ (Beardsworth, p. 165). This age would be that of postmodernity, which Baudrillard defines as ‘the immense process of the destruction of meaning, equal to the earlier destruction of appearances.’<sup>516</sup>

Apart from destroying history, the social, the individual, and the real, postmodern transparency would also destroy the concept of nihilism as such. The theory of nihilism is no longer appropriate to describe simulated transparency, since it remains ‘a desperate but determined theory, [...] a *Weltanschauung* of catastrophe’ in an indifferent, mediatic universe where theories do not mean anything any longer (Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 151; Jenks, *Culture*, p. 140). In its most extreme form, then, nihilism annihilates even itself. Meanwhile, people get stultified by this phantasmagorical hyperreality that alienates them from any prospect of an authentic, really human life. As a result, we would all be ‘trapped in the hegemonic ideology of simulation.’ (Slocombe, p. 105)

---

<sup>516</sup> My translation of the French original: ‘la post-modernité [...] l’immense processus de destruction du sens, égale à la destruction antérieure des apparences.’ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), pp. 229-30.



In his theory of simulation, Baudrillard goes beyond Guy Debord's 'society of the spectacle', according to which personal experience, which in the past was lived directly, can only be mediated now; consequently, life becomes mere representation, one which is divorced from its presumed object. Therefore, 'an immense accumulation of *spectacles*' takes place where subject and object are not distinguishable any longer.<sup>517</sup> The paradoxical consequence is that the world appears as 'instantly accessible and visible, *as if unmediated*', and a new 'regime of truth' is thus born where the visible is the real and therefore also the truth (Silverman, p. 112, my emphasis). In such a reified and alienated culture, there follows the transformation of the consumer in a passive 'consumer of illusions', in the context of 'an incessant fabrication of pseudoneeds [sic], all of which ultimately come down to the single pseudoneed of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy.' At this moment, when illusions replace commodities for the pseudo-satisfaction of desires rather than for the fulfilment of real needs, we would all be prisoners of the spectacle, social life being degraded to everyone's separation, estrangement and nonparticipation. (Debord, pp. 7, 23-24) It is then, when everything that has been directly lived has moved away into a representation, that referentiality becomes intertextuality: the age of simulation has arrived. From now on, there can be no diaphanous reference to any 'pure meaning prior to language'.<sup>518</sup> Heidegger's world as a web of interreferential significance, and language as made of densely, multiply meaningful, world-laden words essentially referring to existentially significant entities has gone all the way to nothing by the time of Baudrillard's theoretical apex (Inwood, *Heidegger*, pp. 37, 47, 49-50).

In Baudrillard's view, contaminated by its simulacra and defined by its 'affiliation to a model', reality implodes into hyperreality, the 'more than real': the 'generation by models of a real without origin or reality' (*Simulations*, p. 2).<sup>519</sup> Having absorbed the space of the real and even the subject through lack of distance, this transparent hyperreal and its most recent offspring, virtual reality, are no longer the mirror of reality: reality is no longer, it

---

<sup>517</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, n.d.), p. 1.

<sup>518</sup> Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism*, Problems of Modern European Thought (London: Hutchinson, 1986), p. 17.

<sup>519</sup> William Pawlett, 'Simulacra + Simulacrum', in Smith (ed.), pp. 196-99 (pp. 196-97).  
Mike Gane, 'Hyper-Reality', in Smith (ed.), pp. 95-97 (96).

has become ‘an extension of the mass media’ (Gane, p. 96; Bukatman, p. 42). Anything can be codified, because of the code’s ‘anticipation and immanence’, and the terms in which this is made (the terms of the more-than-real, in other words the model or the code) no longer refer to the real (Woodward, p. 143; Wicks, p. 285). If the imaginary was once ‘a pretext of the real in a world dominated by the reality principle’, today ‘it is the real which has become the pretext of the model in a world governed by the principle of simulation’. Hence, what happens, the ‘real’, is constructed according to the model’s specifications, conforming to them, in order to resemble it.<sup>520</sup>

In this way, what must be considered two of the West’s most important metanarrative components, what Derrida calls ‘logocentric’ confidence in language as the mirror of nature and its related ‘metaphysics of presence’, namely ‘the illusion that the meaning of a word has its origin in the structure of reality itself and hence makes the truth about that structure directly present to the mind’, both vanish (Butler, *Postmodernism*, p. 17).<sup>521</sup> The very reality principle would disappear ‘when there is no more virgin ground left to the imagination’, one of J.G Ballard’s main concerns regarding fiction (Baudrillard, ‘Simulacra and Science Fiction’, n. p., par. 11).

---

<sup>520</sup> Jean Baudrillard, ‘Simulacra and Science Fiction’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 18.3 (1991), n. p., par. 8, <<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/55/ baudrillard55art.htm#baudrillardcrash>> [accessed 14.10.2019].

<sup>521</sup> Logocentrism would ‘support the determination of the being of the entity as presence.’ Based on the proximity of voice (which also defines it as phonocentrism) or thought and being, their meaning and their ideality, it would predicate, among other things, ‘the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness,’ and ‘subjectivity’. In this way, logocentrism would inaugurate since Plato the epoch of the logos (essence) as a ‘philosophy of presence’, which is still ours too: Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, rev. edn (Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), pp. 11-12. Logos is defined by Niall Lucy as ‘the undeconstructible origin of the meaning of being, the rationality of thought, the absolute interiority of truth.’ This would make logocentrism ‘endemic to metaphysics’ (*Derrida Dictionary*, p. 71). The ‘transcendental signified’ of logocentrism would be then a denizen of yet another metaphysical ‘true world’, a Platonic ‘realm of pure consciousness’. For Derrida, though, ‘meaning as pure idea is deferred, pushed away and postponed, relegated by the signifier,’ the only one to be ‘present in writing or speech’ (Belsey, pp. 78, 83).

Christopher Butler considers this theory to be false and calls it ‘Derrida’s own grand metanarrative’ (*Postmodernism*, p. 17). Steven Pinker remarks how we all think in ‘nonverbal visual’ images, apart from being constrained in our thoughts by innate conceptual categories such as ‘space, time, objects, number, rate, causality, and categories’ that make the words and the syntax that translates this abstract thought into natural language be closer to a determinate content or meaning than what Derrida and the rest of language-oriented poststructuralists believe. Words may be ambiguous, but not the thoughts underlying them (Pinker, *Lang. Instinct*, pp. 65, 68, 79). The very ultimate source of both philosophical postmodernism and poststructuralism, Friedrich Nietzsche, avows: ‘Even one’s thoughts one cannot reproduce entirely in words.’ (*TGS*, p. 215).

Models, namely the abstract formations or structures where ‘all negative terms are merely the alibis of their positive counterparts,’ (therefore the way things should be seen to be and to happen according to postmodern media and the interests, discourses, strategies and control practices originating or invested in them), ‘no longer constitute an imaginary domain with reference to the real’ (n. p., par. 6; Butterfield, p. 69). In our mass ‘media-ated’ society, the real would have given in to the reel (Slocombe, p. 238). Governed by the model, the media, film and advertising would have transformed ‘the “density” of time into the simultaneity of a two-dimensional space’; a couple of decades after *Crash*, the world would have shrunk even further to the size of the computer screen (Silverman, p. 73).

By being ‘immanent’ to simulation, as they are ‘an apprehension of the real’ themselves, models ‘leave no room for any kind of transcendentalism’ or ‘for any fictional extrapolation’: not only is reality a pretext for the model, but ‘there is no more fiction’ either, since ‘*nothing distinguishes [the] management-manipulation [of models, that is] from the real itself*’ (ibid., original emphasis). Fiction ‘will never again be a mirror held to the future, but rather a desperate rehallucinating of the past.’ Not even Science Fiction will achieve to ‘imagine other universes’ any longer, and ‘the gift of transcendence’ will be unattainable: simulation would reign supreme, ‘impassable, unsurpassable [...] without an exteriority.’ (ibid.)

In this catastrophic context, both reality and fiction having been abolished, in *Crash* there would only be hyperreality instead (Baudrillard, ‘Ballard’s *Crash*’, n. p., par. 13) Depicting ‘a world of hyper-technology without finality’, ‘an entirely aestheticised, postmetaphysical’, purposeless and nihilistic world, *Crash* would be therefore ‘the first great novel of the universe of simulation’ (ibid.; Butterfield, p. 64).<sup>522</sup> So much the worse for Vaughan and his followers, striving out of the morass of postmodern suburbanisation, the death of the soul.

When the gap between the original and the copy has disappeared, when the copy is ‘better’ than the original, the former, as hyperreal, precedes and actually produces the latter, the no longer existing real, which is unable to ‘escape the imagery of the fictions that came first’ (Dennis A. Foster, p. 531, n. 6). As a result, in Baudrillard’s words in *Symbolic*

---

<sup>522</sup> Nevertheless, I cannot concede Baudrillard that *Crash* is devoid of all ‘critical negativity’, as I will be arguing (‘Ballard’s *Crash*’, n.p., par. 13)

*Exchange and Death*, an ‘air of nondeliberate parody clings to everything’, and reference receives its death sentence (as cited in Wicks, p. 285). In *Crash*, this shows, for example, in Vaughan’s habit of plunging ‘into self-parody’ when explaining his morbid, abject study of celebrities and car-crashes, or when lying in postures that seem to parody those of their victims:

Ten days ago, as he stole my car from the garage of my apartment house, Vaughan hurtled up the concrete ramp, an ugly machine sprung from a trap. Yesterday his body lay under the police arc-lights at the foot of the flyover, veiled by a delicate lacework of blood. The broken postures of his legs and arms, the bloody geometry of his face, *seemed to parody the photographs of crash injuries that covered the walls of his apartment.*

(*Crash*, pp. 151, my emphasis).

As a result, the real becomes an impossible utopia, something that can only be dreamed of, ‘like a lost object.’ (Baudrillard, ‘Simulacra and Science Fiction’, n. p., par. 8) In our ‘postreferential era’, all we can access is a reconstituted, hyperrealised ‘hallucination of the real’, one ‘totally lacking substance’, coming from a world ‘without secrets, without depth.’ (ibid., par. 16; Bukatman, p. 117) This comes to our mind when learning of Ballard’s sense of ‘disembodiment’ and ‘unreality’ as he is about to watch some accident reels in the road safety laboratory where Dr Remington works, the entire scene following the imperatives of a ‘dreamlike logic’ at odds with anything real, material and sensorily perceptible (*Crash*, p. 98). Ultimately, the power of the image and the media become so strong that Baudrillard can allow himself the following variation on Nietzsche’s proclamation of modern nihilism: ‘God is not dead, he has become hyperreal’ (Woodward, pp. 95-97).

The link between Baudrillard’s theory of postmodern simulation and literature is made explicit by J.G. Ballard in his introduction to the 1995 edition of *Crash*, in which he rather counter-intuitively argues that we are living inside ‘an enormous novel’ where life and what we call reality have undergone a complete inversion of the terms defining their relationship (Ballard, ‘Introduction’, n. p., par. 3). Hence, in our postmodern time, we would be left with just one ‘small node of reality’ located precisely ‘inside our own heads.’ (ibid., par. 4; Whitford, p. 38) The subjective realm would now constitute ‘the sole

repository of “reality” (J.G. Ballard, as cited in Crosthwaite, p. 78). He words this in an even clearer way: ‘Our inventions are the only realities left to us.’ (Cartano and Jakubowski, p. 215)

In this context, J.G. Ballard feels the urge to *invent* reality, not to wrap postmodernity’s fictionality around some more private fantasies of his (Baxter, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1, 4-5, my emphasis). No alternative seems to be left for his characters either, but to invent their own reality in order to transcend their vital stagnation among the mirages of their fictional everyday life (Delville, p. 19). In this, a certain element of subversion of Baudrillard’s determinism could be argued for: characters in *Crash* try to flee from the oppressive weight of an always-already determined configuration of reality, rising up against the mirages of simulation by the grace of imagination. That their imagination is an abject and perverse one, and that their only true referent is an apparently unnoticed death-drive is another question.

It should be noted, though, that for Baudrillard the truth that characters would be striving for in *Crash* is inexistent in the first place: it could not be grounded in anything beyond the play of simulacra, the real being only the simulacrum of the symbolic (Pawlett, pp. 196-97). Indeed, the symbolic is ‘an act of exchange and *a social relation which puts an end to the real*, [...] and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary.’<sup>523</sup> According to Baudrillard, this development would correspond to Nietzsche’s predictions concerning not only the abolition of the ‘real’ or ‘true’ world, a consequence of the death of God and therefore of metaphysics too, but also to the abolition of the apparent one, now made of simulacra, copies without an original, copies of copies (Wernick, p. 501). Hence, the world itself in its entirety is a simulacrum.

A part of what all this boils down to is the stylisation of pain and violence in our society as part and parcel of the generalised simulacrum the latter has become. Nothing is real any more, everything is fake, we could conclude, thus paraphrasing the French sociologist: everything is part of the ‘fictive reality’ we are living in (Stephenson, p. 153).<sup>524</sup>

---

<sup>523</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant, Theory, Culture & Society (London: Sage, 1993), p. 133 (my emphasis).

<sup>524</sup> That ‘everything is fake’ echoes Nietzsche’s ‘everything lacks meaning’, his expression of what he felt to be the imminent danger threatening modernity (Woodward, p. 31; *TWTP*, p. 7).

#### 4.8 – Self-Alienation: Death of the Subject. Anthropological Pessimism

In the existing postmodern macro-mirage of simulacra, uncritical mass-surrender to the ‘brothel of images’ dominating public pseudo-consciousness would take place among glitzy, glamorised, illusory fictions (*Crash*, p. 19; Delville, pp. 35, 60-61). This progressive standardisation of consciousness, this growing entropy could thus be seen as the dark side of our time’s cybernetic, neon-lighted global village (p. 26). Drowned in this ocean of fictions and due to the resulting ever ‘growing emptiness of the symbolic order’, we assist to ‘the death of its earthly representative, the subject.’ (Dennis A. Foster, p. 531) The ultimate outcome of this process is the completion of nihilism: there can be no ground any longer for any system of metaphysics to overcome or, at least, uplift Western contemporary alienation (Pawlett, p. 197; Wernick, p. 501). Heidegger realises this nihilistic connection even before the advent of postmodernity proper, as soon as 1935:

When any incident you like, in any place you like, at any time you like, becomes accessible as fast as you like; when you can simultaneously “experience” an assassination attempt against a king in France and a symphony concert in Tokyo; when time is nothing but speed, instantaneity and simultaneity, and time as history has vanished from all Dasein of all people; [...] then, yes then, there still looms like a specter over all this uproar the question: *what for?* \_\_ where to? \_\_ and what then?

*(Introd. to Metaphysics, p. 40, my emphasis)*

Whereas for Nietzsche this situation involves a chance for liberation, pessimistic Baudrillard holds it to be the end of all redeeming illusions (Wernick, p. 201).<sup>525</sup> The self-alienation that this implies is explained in a particularly insightful way by the narrator of *Crash* when, at the very start of the novel, he describes his accident and the subsequent rescue operation as a ritual: something formal, conventional, where he experiences sexuality as something completely disembodied, as conceptualised imagery and performance, as if it were not happening to him, as if he could watch the entire scene from without. Here, yet again very shockingly, the absurd, helpless gesture of a nearly dead

---

<sup>525</sup> For the hints made by Baudrillard to a possible ‘poetic reversal’ of this nihilistic impasse, see Woodward, pp. 147-49.

woman who has just lost his husband is compared to ‘the exaggerated pirouette of a mentally defective girl I had once seen performing in a Christmas play at an institution.’ Similar instances of bizarre and abject imagery pervade the text, like Ballard’s comparison of his wife’s rectal and vaginal mucus with the ‘refined excrement of a fairy queen’ (*Crash*, pp. 14, 9). What is the origin of such outrageous similes? The ‘supersession of embodied experience by media simulation’ on the one hand, and ‘the over-arching dynamics of disembodiment and dematerialization’ on the other; in other words, the dissociation between our everyday experience of a now secondary ‘reality’, and the immediacy of the self-sustaining imagery that surrounds us everywhere, all the time (Dery, ‘Always Crashing’, p. 236).

Beyond simulation theory, however, a certain measure of genuine criticism of the passive inanity of postmodern middle-class life cannot be discounted either in *Crash* or in J.G. Ballard’s oeuvre, just like in Baudrillard’s. Hence, the former describes the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as ‘the marriage of reason and nightmare’, a formulation we already saw above. Rather than in jaded and inoperative Judeo-Christian pieties and moralities, J.G. Ballard is interested in the monstrous offspring of Reason’s sleep, according to Goya’s legend in his famous etching.<sup>526</sup> *Crash* is about some of this monstrous progeny and their deeds in ‘an ever more ambiguous world’ presided over by the waning of affect and alienation, both being quite often the result of emotion pre-packaging by the media, as well as of the numbing effect of the repetition of the images they generally use for this purpose (Ballard, ‘Introduction’, n. p., par. 1; Whitford, p. 39; Lewis, pp. 251-52).<sup>527</sup>

Taken together, all these features would ultimately amount to postmodern civilisation’s built-in emotional and spiritual sterility, against which Vaughan reacts in his deranged

---

<sup>526</sup> J.M. Matilla, ‘El sueño de la razón produce monstruos’, en *Museo del Prado: 200 años*, <<https://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/obra-de-arte/el-sueo-de-la-razon-produce-monstruos/e4845219-9365-4b36-8c89-3146dc34f280?searchMeta=e1%20sueno%20de%20la%20razon%20produce>>, [accessed 14.10.2019]

<sup>527</sup> Regarding the role of media images in the waning of affect, as well as its connection with an increasing tendency to isolation and rejection of the social, J.G. Ballard significantly comments in an interview: ‘People don’t want to be together in a physical sense [...] They want to be alone and *watch television*.’ (Orr, p. 70, my emphasis). As a result of this, he predicts everybody’s final retreat ‘into their own heads.’ They will not even stand being in the same room or on the same street (Brooks, p. 246).

pursuit of extreme erotic experience on the brink of death.<sup>528</sup> Hence, we could conceive the very death drive, as it is represented or signified in *Crash*, as ‘the trope for the incipient implosion of [...] the code.’ (Butterfield, p. 68) In the end, however, and in spite of this desperate, self-destructive stand against the spiritual and emotional poverty of the stultifying and alienating postmodern society of simulation, while the implosion of the code takes place or not, Vaughan would be yet another of J.G. Ballard’s isolated (anti-) heroes, unable to have a ‘warm fruitful relationship with anybody’, doomed to the obsessional exploration of his own mental landscapes.<sup>529</sup>

Such characteristics are noticeable everywhere in *Crash*, whose fictional world J.G. Ballard calls ‘an alienated universe’ (Cartano and Jakubowski, p. 214). A meaningful episode regarding these emotional issues can be the public release of a film on car accidents in Helen Remington’s research laboratory, which happens to be something of a social event. While watching the most violent and disturbing crashes on screen, despite their staged nature and the use of mannequins, the narrator becomes aware of his random association of such images of destruction with his fantasy of penetrating Vaughan. Beyond the abject nature of his anal, homosexual fantasies, it is highly significant that he realises how the reels they are both watching and his fantasies are equally ‘abstracted from all feeling’, utterly conceptualised. That this is not the mere product of a mind more and more indulging in its more or less psychopathological musings, as Ballard’s has become by now, is shown in his affectless interpretation of the audience’s reaction to the reels:

The audience of thirty or so visitors stared at the screen, waiting for something to happen. As we watched, our own ghostly images stood silently in the background, hands and faces unmoving while this slow-motion collision was re-enacted. The dream-like reversal of roles made us seem less real than the mannequins in the car. I looked down at the silk-suited wife of a Ministry official standing beside me. Her eyes watched the film with a rapt gaze, as if she were seeing herself and her daughters dismembered in the crash.

(*Crash*, pp. 103-04).

---

<sup>528</sup> Here, I am extrapolating some comments of Gregory Stephenson on *TAE* (p. 64) to *Crash*.

<sup>529</sup> James Goddard and David Pringle. ‘An Interview with J.G. Ballard’ (1975), in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 81.98 (p. 89).



As the author confides in an interview when commenting on sex in *Crash*, what the novel is all about is just this: the annihilation of the world of ‘affection and the emotions’, which he considers ‘the main achievement of technology’ (Rønnov-Jessen, p. 205).

This is yet another example of how, despite his self-avowed optimism, J.G. Ballard comes not far from anthropological pessimism in *Crash*, as we already saw. In this, his thought comes very close to T.W. Adorno’s and his theory of the ‘administered society’ of ‘capitalist mass production’, a type of social organisation that would count ‘freedom, individuality, and progress’ among its ‘casualties’ (Gartman, p. 180). The same could be said with regard to his closeness to Heidegger’s views on technoscience. In the end, everybody will be isolated and alienated, despite the sterile, non-communicative ‘togetherness’ brought about by technology (Evans, p. 122). Even before the advent of the hyper-technological society of the post-WWII era, Max Weber could already write about ‘the “iron cage” in which modern man’, the man of ‘contemporary industrial culture’, had to exist: ‘an increasingly bureaucratic order from which the “spontaneous enjoyment of life” is ruthlessly expunged.’<sup>530</sup> No longer seen as a rational end in itself, enjoyment, being construed as ‘the individual rationalization of a process whose ends lie elsewhere’, finds its foundation in consumption. Thus, equalled to freedom, consumption constitutes itself as a ‘denial of enjoyment’, whereby it ensures ‘the reproduction of its own conditions of possibility.’ (Baudrillard, *Consumer Soc.*, p. 78; Clarke, p. 93)

By 1973, the experience of the (post) modern, urban world has become that of ‘a world of strangers – a world in which a universal strangeness had come to predominate’ (p. 81). This is how the successful careers of the main characters in *Crash* cannot prevent them from feeling terribly isolated, isolation being a constant obsession in J.G. Ballard’s characterisation throughout his entire oeuvre (Delville, pp. 4, 81).

---

<sup>530</sup> Anthony Giddens, ‘Introduction’, in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons, Routledge Classics (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. vii-xxiv (p. xviii).

#### 4.9 – Rebellion against the Symbolic: Postmodern Tribalism

Against a postmodern background of waning of affect and deflation of subjectivity, in their postmodern ‘nomadity’, in their ‘transient play of roles, resources and relationships’, in the lack of a destination for their constant displacements in the urban space, others would only be the object of the flat, affectless, ‘transitory gaze’ of every major character in *Crash* (Deleuze, as cited in Silverman, p. 88). Nevertheless, none could be a match for Vaughan’s ‘aberrant gaze’, through which not only does he constitute the other as an object for his own pleasure, but also self-alienates himself by renouncing to an active role as an autonomous subject and a responsible member of society (*Crash*, p. 95). Through his awareness of such a renunciation and his actively nihilistic rebellion, he chooses to be the one-eyed king in the country of the blind. An example could be how complacently he observes his own helpless posture after rehearsing his own crash-death in an accident prepared by himself (p. 3). This is complete rebellion against the ‘I’, the society that underpins it and the symbolic order that founds, constructs and supports both.

Thus, Vaughan would be a rebel against society on a double count: to begin with, because he willingly chooses to be or to pass for a psychotic, becoming therefore a marginal character lurking on the farthest borders of society; secondly, because by renouncing both his former status as a TV celebrity and his professional profile as a scientist, he refuses ‘to identify with the society of clean and proper bodies’ and its cultural imaginary, one that disowns ‘temporality, fragmentation, specificity, and difference’.<sup>531</sup> As opposed to this, the deviant cell he leads is founded precisely on a defiant ‘solidarity in difference’, the difference of ‘the excluded, the strange, the other, the vulgar’, the perverse and deviant (Covino, p. 12; Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, p. 104). They might be regarded as a typically postmodern tribe, a fluid, temporary emotional community structured around the experience of ‘intense moments of ecstasy, empathy and affectual immediacy’. Such experiences would weld them together in their rebellion, providing them with a transient refuge against a soulless world of social demands and uniformity which they refuse to acknowledge any longer (p. 99). Within a more generic phenomenon such as ‘neo-tribalism’, defined by the emergence of aesthetically defined, ‘ephemeral, spontaneous,

---

<sup>531</sup> Deborah Caslav Covino, *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture*, SUNY series in Feminist Criticism and Theory (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2004), pp. 13-14.

self-creating “clusters” of sociality’, the members of Vaughan’s cell would be able to flee from the pressures of their clone-like social identity as ‘free’ individuals and consumers, thus allowing their ‘collective sensations or “vibrations”’ to give ‘meaning and structure’ to their postmodern experience (Clarke, p. 164).

#### 4.10 – Dissensus: The Differend and Paralogy

Partaking of the problematics related to a different kind of tribalism, namely Romantic nationalist theory, connected to language and ‘Volksgeist’ since J.G. Herder, to the disappearance of modernity’s autonomous and self-governing subject, and finally to the ‘crisis in language’ and communication that, according to Lyotard, defines the cultural context of our post-WWII contemporariness, we must still focus on a theoretical concept fundamental to postmodernity: Lyotard’s dissensus. For Lyotard, it is imperative to realise that communication produces ‘incommensurability in the act of bringing differences into contact with each other.’ (Currie, pp. 97, 99)<sup>532</sup> This goes right against the thought of one of the last and most prominent apologists of the Enlightenment and what for him is the still unrealised project of modernity, Jürgen Habermas. Against Habermas’ ‘ideal of communicative or indeed consensual rationality’ leading towards an ‘ideal speech situation’ grounded in shared values, those of enlightened modernity, with the help of unbiased media and within a public sphere free of interested distortions, Lyotard underscores the insolvability of disputes across cultural differences (Butler, *Postmodernism*, p. 61). Social groups are incommensurable due to the differences in the linguistic games legitimising their structure and constituting their cultural practices, which makes Lyotard identify social and political conflict with problems *in discourse* (Currie, p. 96, my emphasis).<sup>533</sup> Conflict is moreover inevitable in Lyotard, who believes, following

---

<sup>532</sup> In Lyotard, this crisis in language is also related, according to Mark Currie, to ‘things that language cannot express, areas of experience to which linguistic expression is simply inadequate.’ It would be ‘the project of literature, philosophy and politics [...], to try to bring it into the domain of representation.’ (p. 97)

<sup>533</sup> In Habermas, on the contrary, ‘discourse always in principle aims at rationally motivated consensus, even if no actual consensus is forthcoming.’ Discourse, moreover, ‘is the default mechanism for regulating everyday conflicts in modern societies.’ Its aim would be ‘to renew or to repair a failed consensus and to re-establish the rational basis of social order.’ James Gordon Finlayson, *Habermas: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSU (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2005), pp. 41-42.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, that ‘to speak is to fight’ (*TPC*, p. 10). Cultural practices are ultimately unbridgeable, especially on a mistaken appeal to any ‘sub-linguistic reality’ (human nature, e.g.). In this light, to try to solve such problems by means of one and the same rule of judgement, while being a way to solve *litigations* within a certain culture, is in itself a form of violence that subordinates one party to the other in the case of what Lyotard calls *differends* (Currie, p. 96; Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. xi).

A differend would involve at least two different social or cultural groups, as well as different rules of legitimacy in each of the parties involved (p. xi; Currie, pp. 95-96, my emphasis). Moreover, an element whose ultimate nature would be related to radical alterity, that of the ungraspable or ineffable sublime, should be recognised in these different rules (Currie, pp. 94-95, 97).<sup>534</sup> This should be so because, in its attempt ‘to present the unrepresentable’, the sublime is ‘a way to fight against a system of norms that terrorized people into silence.’ (Lyotard, cited in Wicks, p. 254) This would have been caused by a philosophical discourse that makes knowledge something ‘thoroughly quantifiable, mechanizable, and computable’, making way for ‘a technological and totalizing mode of social consciousness which is tending to encompass all aspects of life.’ (p. 248)

This has been the case in the West at least since the Enlightenment, which exemplifies the notion of grand narratives as thought structures situating knowledge within ‘a universally meaningful context’, involving a philosophy of history and accounting for the meaning of human existence. Since that time, too, and under the sign of rationality as making a general consensus or even unanimity on the mentioned issues feasible, the West’s grand narrative has understood society as a ‘unified system’ ruled by the principles of performativity and efficiency, with ever-increasing power as its ultimate goal (*TPC*, pp. xxiii-xxiv; Wicks, pp. 247-48).

Under these circumstances, consensus could only cause repression of the heterogeneity constitutive of the existing social and cultural groups, as well as damage to at least one of

---

<sup>534</sup> Because there is a recurrent modernist interest in ‘the relatively unchartered, interior and subjective experiences of the human mind’, with an emphasis falling on ‘unsayability, inexpressibility and ineffability’, Lyotard’s ideas on the differend have been interpreted as ‘a kind of modernist crisis of language finding its way through Barthes and others into philosophy, and therefore back into literary criticism.’ (Currie, p. 97)

the parties, as ‘a universal rule of judgment between heterogeneous genres is lacking in general’: there is no ‘universal and constant language.’<sup>535</sup> Dissensus, on the other hand,

---

<sup>535</sup> In his animadversion against universality, rationality as an axiom, and the Enlightenment, Lyotard personifies better than probably any other thinker the crisis of modernity undergone in France, the quintessential modern nation, the republic born out of a revolution fought in the name of Reason and the Rights of Man, and whose spiritual legacy articulates itself in terms of universality and ‘the order of the ego, self-consciousness and freedom’. Postwar anticolonialism and the quick yet bloody demise of the French empire would also have influenced this development (Silverman, pp. 6, 13, 46.)

In any case, it is also obvious to me that Lyotard, as so many poststructuralists, is under the distant yet clear influence of the irrationalist theses of German romanticism and its exceptionalist linguistic ideology. As regards this, Lyotard’s assertion that there is no universal and constant language may well be simply wrong, as Steven Pinker makes clear: ‘there is no scientific evidence that languages dramatically shape their speakers’ ways of thinking.’ (*Lang. Instinct*, p. 58) Therefore, Lyotard may be overrating the cultural consequences of differences between languages, following a deleterious school of thought initiated by Herder in the aftermath of the French Revolution (see Finkielkraut, pp. 13-14, where he mentions the ethnic cleansing undergone by the German language during the romantic period in order to make it more properly or purely German, after defeat by Napoleon – that is by the principles and ideals of the French Revolution). In the end, it was not the thinkers of the Enlightenment and their successors, such as Jürgen Habermas, but the representatives of ‘a violent anti-enlightenment and anti-modernity affect’ who ‘exploited ruthlessly modernity’ for their own purposes’, from Herder via Hitler to the nationalist warlords of the ex-Yugoslavia (Huysen, p. 203).

In this deleterious self-hate of the (French) poststructuralists, the influence of yet another German late Romantic (as I understand him to be), namely Heidegger, is apparent. In his idea, already mentioned, that language alone speaks through man, we see the conflation of two phenomena. First, as we have already seen, there is a revival of German philosophical romanticism as an antidote to the presumed ravages of the (French) Enlightenment against (German) difference. Herder’s idea of language as constitutive of the collective identity or the so-called spirit of a folk or cultural spirit (*Volksggeist*) would encapsulate this saving element. Even in 1966, twenty-one years after the demise of Nazism, Heidegger implicitly develops certain assumptions on the superiority and inferiority of cultures on linguistic grounds. This has to be interpreted within a tradition of German thought that ultimately vindicates German superiority on racial foundations and with which such linguistic assumptions are historically linked (despite the fact of Heidegger not being a racist or a ‘biological’ nationalist). Thus, in his famous interview given to *Der Spiegel* in 1966 and posthumously published in 1976, the Swabian thinker, after stating his belief in a special historical task related to Being on the part of the German people, a task this people would be ‘uniquely able to discharge because of the peculiar properties of their language’, an original, uncontaminated one, he allows himself to speak about ‘the special inner kinship between the German language and the language of the Greeks and their thought’. This spiritual connection with ancient Greece and its thought, especially with Heraclitus (whom Heidegger sees not only as a philosopher of becoming rather than of ‘metaphysical’ essence, but also as no less than ‘the original power of occidental-Germanic historical existence, in its first confrontation with the Asiatic one’), is not innocent: it echoes ‘ideas frequently expressed by Nazi authors’ within a sort of “cultural” parallel to the equally essentialist beliefs that underlay biologically based Nazi race ideology.’ The implied German linguistic superiority becomes indirectly corroborated when he mentions what the French, with whom he established intimate links after being temporarily banished from teaching in Germany by the Allies, ‘confirm for me again and again today. When they begin to think, they speak’, of all languages and of course, ‘German.’ As preceded by the presumably dismally ‘portentous transformation Greek thought underwent by translation into the Latin of Rome’, the French, he says, ‘no longer make a go of it in today’s world when it comes to an issue of understanding this world in the origin of its essence.’ Just in case someone missed these implications, he hammers home: ‘One can no more translate thought than one can translate a poem. At best, one can paraphrase it.’ Therefore, we could remake his famous assertion on the primacy of language over man: it is the German language alone (in its neo-Greek mode, patented by Heidegger) that speaks. (Martin Heidegger, ‘Only a God Can Save Us Now’, trans. by William Richardson, in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*, ed. by Thomas Sheehan (Chicago: Precedent, 1981), pp. 45-67 (pp. 62-63), my emphasis; Paul Gilbert, ‘Philosophy, National Character, and Nationalism’, in Guntram H. Herb and David H. Kaplan (eds.), *Nations and Nationalism: A Global Historical Overview*, 4 vols (Santa Barbara, CA, Denver, CO, and London: ABC Clío, 2008), II (‘1880 to 1945’), pp. 527-37 (p. 533); Sonia Sikka, ‘Heidegger and Race’, in *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi, and Sybol Cook, Studies in

would be an inventive, creative way to uphold heterogeneity and difference, reinvigorating our ability to tolerate otherness and incommensurability through ‘the inventor’s paralogy.’ (TPC, p. xxv; *The Differend*, xi; Wicks, p. 250).

From this point of view, it seems to me that *Crash* is a colossal attempt at paralogy on J.G. Ballard’s part. The entire novel would be composed out of the attempt to defend the desperate cause of Vaughan and their tribe of unadapted perverts and suicidal drivers. In my opinion, it would also be, unavowedly, a practical refutation of Lyotard’s theory, which, just like Derrida’s deconstruction, would be rather a part of the problem (postmodernity’s utter irrationalism and a certain tendency to cultural autism in its defence

Continental Thought (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2003), pp. 74-95 (pp. 74, 85, 88-89); Finkielkraut, pp. 9-10, 17).

Secondly, we see in this an irrationalist fragmentation of the human species on linguistic and cultural grounds, something which is very characteristic of postmodernity, as we have already seen. Culture is no longer the space or dimension of ‘man’s spiritual and creative activity’, as it mutates into *my* culture, the spirit of the people (Volksgeist) I *belong* to. After 1945, in the same way as during the French revolutionary and Napoleonic periods, (Western) humankind is dissolved into a plethora of particularisms; universal principles and values become local and historical; and Reason, finally, becomes the collective reason (in lower case) unique to every single people or identity (Finkielkraut, pp. 9-13). Heidegger believes that the very people or folk (Volk) is a monoethnic, ‘organic unity’ created by history: even Dasein’s destiny has ‘already been guided in advance, in our Being with one another in the same world’, which for him means with the community, the folk, thus achieving its ‘full authentic historizing.’ Therefore, what the (German) language would speak through or by (German) speakers would be a speech of völkisch tradition, one not committed to pluralism and democracy, but to an authority greater and more permanent than Dasein, inhabiting an altogether higher ontological region, something he saw at the core of the infamous ideology he never renounced to. Unfortunately, the structuralist, post-structuralist and postmodern defenders of language supremacy and command over man’s thought and praxis have not been aware of the dissolving particularism hidden behind their ultimately universal (despite their hatred of universality and universalism) theories on the sovereignty of language over culture.

In siding with Herder’s theories on language as constitutive of collective idiosyncrasies, in legitimising Heidegger’s idea of the impossibility of translating thought, postmodernity has forgotten that the greatest intellectual figure in German history, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, fell out with Herder after initially sharing his aesthetic nationalism during his youth, only to become a staunch defender of ‘the commerce of ideas among people’. His idea of a world literature (Weltliteratur) made of works that could not be totally explained by merely answering the questions ‘when’ and ‘where’, brought him to especially appreciate the activity of translation and the figure of the translator as responsible for culturally crucial literary circulation, apart from being ‘a creator of literary value’ himself. Being aware that the future was bound to be an era of universal literature, he exhorted everyone to get involved in its advent. After all, it would be key to ‘a generalised tolerance’ through works that embodied the distinct characteristic of the really valuable and worthy: its ‘belonging to all of mankind.’ Individual works should transcend the Volksgeist, and human culture never ought to be reduceable to the mere addition of mankind’s specific cultures: Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 436; Finkielkraut, pp. 38-39, 41-43; Sikka, pp. 83-84, 86, 88; Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard UP, 2004), p. 14.

At the end of the day, all exceptionalist theses on culture founded on the presumed implication between natural languages and related collective worldviews are nothing but irrational superstitions or ‘urban legends’ aiming at portraying the species as a heterogeneous collection of ‘weird and exotic’ cultural psychologies (Pinker, *Lang. Instinct*, p. 64).

of the linguisticity and cultural specificity of everything) than a solution thereto.<sup>536</sup> Ultimately, Lyotard's will to the sublime and its manifestation in the staunch defence of an unregulated freedom of pure difference is nothing but a will to the irrational (Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, p. 30).

---

<sup>536</sup> For the strong link between this postmodern irrationalism and an entire generation of members of the most elitist establishments of higher education in France (Derrida notoriously included), see Wolin, p. 40.

## Chapter 5 – Violence, Sacredness and the Car

Coming back to the formula we proposed as the basis of our analysis of *Crash*, namely the marriage of sex and violence as mediated by technology, it is high time we spoke about its second member, violence, and its most significant technological mediator, the automobile.

### 5.1 – Dionysian Fate: Pessimism of Strength. The Will to Power and the Overcoming of Nihilism

If we follow this agenda, the car can be seen in this novel as a sort of postmodern chariot of fire with the potential to pursue extreme experience as a thoroughfare towards a sacredness totally neglected under the dominance of technoscience and maximised profit in late capitalist societies. In a wasteful gesture worthy of one of Bataille's characters, and irrespective of his failure regarding his initial target, Vaughan immolates himself in an act that is both tragic and erotic, a feat of love whereby the positive forces of life, symbolised by his indiscriminate and obsessive sexuality, might spring yet stronger (*Crash*, p. 142; Stephenson, pp. 68-69). Against a background of technocratic instrumentality and calculation, not only would this self-sacrifice be oppositional, but it would also entail the defining features of the sacred.

As we already said, Vaughan's suicide implies a subversion of the subjectivity posited by technoscience and, more generally, by society; certainly, Vaughan's definitive act of active nihilism could be construed, if we dare appropriate Lyotard's thought and twist it a bit, as a contribution to a greater circulation of libidinal energy and intensities in the social and cultural system. We would certainly be twisting Lyotard, however, as he endorses such a kind of active nihilism only to undermine the remains of religious nihilism (broadly understood as a persistence of other-worldly metaphysics) in modern capitalism (Woodward, 131). Little of that remains in the spectral London roamed by Vaughan in *Crash*.



Vaughan's act is religious in the strongest sense of the word, though. Thus, against a cultural background that, according to Heidegger, presupposes a willing subject that can only understand the world as made of objects ripe for manipulation and control, Vaughan would be transcending his own sacrificed self, his social status and his public persona to meet the bushman, the atavistic hunter-gatherer that represents the larger part of the history of the species (p. 61). By identifying with him, Vaughan would also be vindicating 'primitive' man's supposedly naïve spirituality, centred on the never-ending cycle of the seasons, abundance and dearth, birth and death. In this way, we are facing something completely other than Western conceptions of history as linear and teleological; even beyond postmodern variations on the common theme of the end of history, Vaughan would be negating history altogether: the only perspective for such an act as his suicide is eternity (pp. 18, 125).

Hence, rather than with suicide, we are dealing with a 'ritual of sacrifice and fertility' which negates Western ideas of historical progress. The religious undertones of the scene are evident, pointing to some layer in our deepest psychology, turning Vaughan's self-immolation into something like 'an apocalypse deeply desired by the unconscious.' (Stephenson, p. 73) It would be precisely this, 'the marriage of violence and desire', that would draw crowds spontaneously to the sites of car crashes, as depicted in *Crash* on several occasions (*Crash*, p. 128). Under Baudrillard's influence, these gatherings have been interpreted as instances of 'neoprimitive symbolic exchange with death', which could function as 'orgiastic celebrations for the spectators and as initiation rites for the victims' (Butterfield, p. 73). Thus, Ballard describes the end of one of such gatherings:

The last of the ambulances drove away, its siren wailing. The spectators returned to their cars, or climbed the embankment to the break in the wire fence. An adolescent girl in a denim suit walked past us, her young man with an arm around her waist. He held her right breast with the back of his hand, stroking her nipple with his knuckles. They stepped into a beach buggy slashed with pennants and yellow paint and drove off, horn hooting eccentrically. A burly man in a truck-driver's jacket helped his wife up the embankment, a hand on her buttocks. This pervasive sexuality filled the air, as if we were *members of a congregation leaving after a sermon urging us to celebrate our sexualities with friends and strangers*, and were driving into the night to imitate the *bloody eucharist* we had observed with the most unlikely partners.

(*Crash*, p. 129, my emphasis).

It is after one of these ‘services’, in which ‘pervasive sexuality filled the air’, that Ballard’s reaction to the whole scene is also characteristically religious and worthy of being quoted:

I stood with my feet apart, hands on my breast bone, inhaling the floodlit air. I could feel my wounds again, cutting through my chest and knees. I searched for my scars, those tender lesions that now gave off an exquisite and warming pain. My body *glowed* from these points, *like a resurrected man* basking in the healed injuries that had brought about his first death.

(*ibid.*, my emphasis)

More specifically, and always within the scope of these sacrificial and apocalyptic features, I would like to call the reader’s attention to the novel’s vocabulary focusing on blood as the sustaining element of all life, in a very similar way to its role in Maya or Aztec mythology and sacrificial practice (where blood was the sacred liquor feeding the gods, without which nothing could grow or ripen) or in our Christian heritage (where it is an agent of universal salvation). This is how we could interpret expressions such as ‘haemorrhage of the sun’, which is applied to the dead bodies of the victims of Vaughan’s final crash, or the Christ-like ‘coronation of wounds’ (such wounds being symbolic of bodily and spiritual transfiguration) that in his car-crash devotion he had minutely though unsuccessfully imagined and planned for Elizabeth Taylor, his deadly muse (pp. 1-2).<sup>537</sup> This last metaphor is not the only occasion on which imagery and terminology ultimately derived from the New Testament are or could be used to refer either to Vaughan’s sacrificial immolation as that of a motorised Christ, or to his disciples as apostles of a

---

<sup>537</sup> On the symbolism of wounds in *Crash*, Donald Bruce finds that ‘les blessures que portent les personnages de Ballard sont autant de tentatives de ré-écriture de leur identité corporelle et psychique unique.’ (Bruce, p. 127). My translation: ‘the wounds sustained by Ballard’s characters are as many attempts at rewriting their unique bodily and psychic identity.’

With regard to non-Christian overtones in Vaughan’s self-sacrificial behaviour, he could be seen as a restorer of Aztec priesthood by way of letting his own and others’ blood flow in his many accidents, in payment of the debt owed to the cosmic forces of a life intimately intermingled with death. See, e.g., David Carrasco, *The Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSU (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2012), pp. 67-69.

postmodern gospel of transcendence through bloody passion. For instance, Helen Remington is expressly likened to a Madonna on at least two occasions (pp. 12, 15).

Of course, and leaving Christian analogies aside, we should not forget a non-Christian golden rule in this anthropological schema: a ‘sacrificial king’ and propitiatory victim, a consort of the primordial Mother, the Great Goddess (as embodied by the Hollywood star and sex-symbol), cannot but submit to the ineluctable precept that demands his life in exchange for renewal in creation, while the Goddess lives on in her absolute might and sovereignty.<sup>538</sup> There is a reversal of intentions here, whereby the black goddess of a sect of postmodern thugs commanded by a prophet of the death drive has taken the life of his most dedicated devotee, whose impiety she prevents by killing him at the apex of their mutual love.<sup>539</sup> In this way, he takes up his well-deserved place next to his beloved goddess of death in her black paradise, after many years of injuries and scars earned on his chosen battlefield: the motorways of a phantasmagorical London of asphalt, cement, steel, glass, blood and semen. Ultimately, in the apocalyptic context of an age presided over by the monsters bred by reason’s slumber, the symbolic content of Vaughan’s act is manifest (Zinik, p. 359).

Finally, there could be yet another interpretation of Vaughan’s sacrifice in an alternatively religious way, which has to do with Nietzsche’s celebration of the finite as a Dionysian world of eternal self-creation and self-destruction beyond good and evil. The only goal of this world, if any, would be ‘the joy of the circle’, the overman’s ultimate embracing of fate as the eternal recurrence of the same, and his experience of primal joy even in pain (*Birth of Tragedy*, p. 114). In this ultimate affirmative gesture, in this yes-saying in spite of suffering and lack of transcendence understood in the traditional, moral and metaphysical sense, Vaughan would be stating his acceptance of the world as a

---

<sup>538</sup> See, for instance, Robert Graves’ examination of Heracles as a consort of the Goddess in *The White Goddess*: annually wed to a divine ‘queen of the woods’ and ‘Death-goddess’ in charge of the souls of ‘sacred kings’, he undergoes a gruesome death at the end of which his ‘blood is [...] used for sprinkling the whole tribe to make them vigorous and fruitful.’ (pp. 124-26). The idea of the sacrificial king is first developed by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*.

<sup>539</sup> For thugs (or thugees) and their worship of a black goddess (usually called Kali) through ritual assassination, see Fabrizio M. Ferrari, ‘Saktism’, and Paul Reid-Bowen, ‘Kali and Candi’, both in *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, ed. by Denise Cush, Catherine Robinson and Michael York (London and New York: Routledge: 2008), pp. 733-42 (pp. 740-41), and pp. 398-400 (pp. 398-99) respectively.

‘monster of energy’, as an eternally changing ‘play of contradictions’ surrounded by nothingness. Such a world would be full of meaning for someone always ready to engage in play and experimentation like a child, filled with Nature’s Dionysian exuberance, a stranger to *ressentiment*, always willing to ‘live dangerously’, heroic to the point of self-offering (*TGS*, p. 157, 228; Marmysz, p. 29).<sup>540</sup> In so doing, he would become a new Shiva performing the sacred dance of life and death, creation and destruction, ‘dancing even near abysses’, with a will to do so again and again ‘without beginning, without end’, as all things in the universe and one’s destiny are ‘enchained, entwined, enamored’, implying one another, whereby saying yes to anything means saying yes to everything (*TGS*, p. 290).<sup>541</sup> Hence, as an overman, Vaughan would always be ‘prepared to say Yes to whatever comes along’, transforming chance into destiny, and to do so standing ‘in the middle of the universe’, with a joyful and trusting fatalism, everything being ‘redeemed and affirmed in the whole’. His would not be a commitment to happiness, but rather to his work, to the urgent task of choosing his life. ‘Amor fati’ is the name for this ‘extreme form of faithfulness to becoming.’ (Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, pp. 191, 263; *Twilight*, p. 74; Tanner, p. 57; Marmysz, p. 31; Biaggi, p. 33; Severino, *Contemp.*, p. 120, my translation).<sup>542</sup> Nietzsche’s is a ‘politics of transfiguration’ understood as continuous self-shaping against the chaotic background of a ‘sea of becoming’, aware of the fact that any sense or meaning in existence deprives him of his strength and his extreme possibility (Dienstag, pp. 196, 198; Severino, *Contemp.*, p. 118). That work of transformation and transfiguration he approaches as the artist does his: making it be witness to his gratitude for existence, wishing to realise in himself ‘the eternal joy of becoming—that joy which also

---

<sup>540</sup> According to Severino, the overman, of whom Vaughan may be seen as an abject avatar, in his great love for life can only feel what Nietzsche calls ‘the great contempt’ for all that tries to choke him with a spirit of revenge and hatred (*Contemp.*, p. 118).

It must be born in mind, however, that this eternal recurrence of the same might be to a big extent ‘a parody of all doctrines of another world’, and not even the best among Nietzsche’s philosophical parodies or jokes. As it is, this concept rarely recurs and the overman himself is never heard of again in Nietzsche’s oeuvre after *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Tanner, pp. 64, 69).

<sup>541</sup> For Shiva as ‘the supreme dancer’ and the Supreme Lord ‘responsible for the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe’, see Travis L. Smith, ‘Siva’, in Cush, Robinson, and York (eds.), pp. 799–803 (p. 799).

<sup>542</sup> In his analysis of Nietzsche’s often contradictory thought, Michael Tanner underlines the irony deriving from his affirmation of amor fati and his own destiny, which consisted to a great extent in railing against fate understood as the way things were in the culture of his time (p. 102).

encompasses *the joy of destruction*, taking ‘delight in a world disorder without God, a world of chance’, fortified by a ‘pessimism of strength’ (*TWTP*, pp. 451, 527; Nietzsche, *Twilight*, p. 81, original emphasis).

In this way, he (the overman, the artist of death, namely Vaughan) would be creating his own meaning and his own purposes in his acquiescence to a tragic, pre-Socratic, Heraclitean universe where war, the war that he wages on the roads of London against the contemporary suburban dispensation, ‘is father of all and king of all’. After all, as Nietzsche points out, ‘the free man is a *warrior*’, and he is always ‘in the place where the greatest resistance is constantly being overcome: [...] right on the threshold of the danger of servitude.’ (p. 65, original emphasis) This war, moreover, would be in itself a part of a ‘constant and universal war in which every being seeks to conquer and subdue every other being’, their will verifying itself as ‘a will to violate and to defend oneself against violation’, ‘defending itself against the stronger’ and ‘lunging at the weaker’. This would all take place in a world where ‘everything happens in accordance with strife and necessity’, as there are ‘no purposes’. The only purpose that mankind could ever truly discover would be the eternal struggle of nature’s forces. This world Nietzsche calls ‘the will to power’, the ‘sublime overcoming of nihilism’. In the end, life’s meaning would be no other than ‘power’: ‘self-control, self-affirmation and self-determination’ (*TWTP*, pp. 338, 346, 550; *TGS*, p. 110; Marmysz, p. 32; Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 71).<sup>543</sup>

In this way, power becomes the one and only possible standard of value for Vaughan as an overman: anything is valuable only to the extent that it leads, either directly or indirectly, to the growth of power (*TWTP*, p. 715). In behaving according to this standard, the overman is but the eventual outcome of a process of liberation of the species through a naturalisation of morality; to begin with, the will to power has nothing to do with any ‘free will’, ‘fabricated’ by resentful priests to make their flock accountable before God, but it is rather the consequence of unconscious drives, the product of necessity (p. 462; Nietzsche, *Twilight*, p. 31; Diken, p. 7). For Nietzsche, humans are determined down to their toenails; however, as what determines them is ‘a multiple, decentred, ever-shifting network of conflicting forces’ which are far ‘beyond the puny individual subject’, and since these

---

<sup>543</sup> Heraclitus of Ephesus, fragments 22-23, in *The First Philosophers*, p. 40. Michel Allen Gillespie, as cited in Slocombe, p. 31.

forces play through them, so to that extent they could be said to be ‘free’. Rather than being subjects granted a free will, we simply have either a strong or a weak will (Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 74). This is the sort of human freedom inherited by postmodernity and postmodernism. Ultimately, we would all be ‘a mere spin-off of the ubiquitous will-to-power,’ but a will-to-power which is itself infinitely mobile, plastic, plural, decentred, allowing us to blaze and explore many creative and self-affirmative trails throughout our lives (Eagleton, ‘Subjects’, p. 267).

In rejecting the denaturalised values of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the overman becomes the representative of a new, ‘stronger species’, a ‘higher type’ of humanity (*TWTP*, p. 866). Vaughan is J.G. Ballard’s peculiar interpretation of this character in *Crash*, a semen-besmeared cyborg crossing the bridge between a spectral, decadent, suburban London and a chromed, bright, posthuman future. Till the day this future is achieved, ‘all creativity, all freedom, necessitates violence.’ (Diken, p. 34)

## 5.2 – The Car as Agent of Transcendence

Linking up with the counter-cultures of the 1960s, we are faced here with an investigation into alternative sources of meaning, purpose and self-realisation. However, it is rather ironic, despite its being an especially powerful focus of ‘human impulses, dreams and ambitions’, and in spite of its erotic connotations and the liberational, emancipatory potential of the violent, perverse sexuality it embodies for Vaughan and his followers, that this struggle against alienating, capitalist, postmodern technoscience ought to be mediated by perhaps its most paradigmatic and certainly most socially widespread manifestation in the twentieth century, the ‘Ur-commodity at the heart of postwar consumer culture’: the automobile (Dery, ‘Always Crashing’, p. 228).<sup>544</sup> Besides, it is also ironic that this image of the car as an anti-nihilistic avenger is fashioned by the author at a moment when, because of the oil embargo caused by the third Arab-Israeli war, the car starts a downward

---

<sup>544</sup> Speaking of *Crash*, J.G. Ballard recognises that the car stands there as ‘most clearly representing technology in our lives.’ Peter Linnett, ‘J.G. Ballard’ [1973], in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 48-55 (p. 54). Not in vain are oil and car companies ‘the most powerful corporations on the planet’ (Lutz and Lutz Fernandez, p. 208). See also Gray, p. 376.

race towards humility in the form of ever smaller, more economical and less private-fantasy-embodying models all over the world (Gartman, p. 186; Grenville, p. 461).

Nevertheless, it is ultimately clear that the car in *Crash* is not relevant as a technological or a sociological reality, but rather as ‘the supreme creation of an era,’ and therefore as ‘a *total* metaphor for man’s life in today’s society’, as a spiritual medium (Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 88; Ballard, ‘Introduction’, n. p., par. 8, my emphasis).<sup>545</sup> What the author is ultimately concerned with regarding the motor car is therefore ‘the vast range of emotional ties’ linking the machine and its driver, its reflection of man’s many ‘needs and aspirations’, deep psychological ones included. This makes it an essential ‘part of intimate and personal life’ (Featherstone, ‘Introduction’, p. 5).

Concerning our critical analysis of *Crash*, however, there is a dimension of the motor car’s nature that should be considered to be especially important: its being ‘an outlet for repressed violence and aggression’, as well as an ‘extension of one’s own personality’ embodying ‘all kinds of positive freedoms’, including killing oneself (Evans, p. 125). The fatal sense that Vaughan is doomed from the very beginning of J.G. Ballard’s novel, the idea that both he and his followers are playing with fate, would be a way to reintroduce ‘metaphysics and the religious’, hence also ‘some meaning and value’, into its characters’ lives, which might otherwise be seen as basically meaningless (Featherstone, ‘Introduction’, p. 16; p. 21, n. 22). To summarise it all, the car’s ultimate relevance to *Crash* lies in its being an ‘ultramodern [...] manifestation of the primordial.’ (Stephenson, p. 69)

---

<sup>545</sup> ‘I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population’: Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 88.

## Chapter 6 – Inner Space

### 6.1 – Inner Space, Death of Community, and Wound Culture

Contrary to Samuel Beckett's characteristically late modernist lack of concern with strictly social or sociological issues, J.G. Ballard's preoccupations with the automobile point to the importance of the social and the cultural in what, in contradistinction to science fiction's 'outer space', he calls 'inner space'.<sup>546</sup> Being an obsession of his and a privileged object of his fiction, he describes it as 'an imaginary realm in which [...] the outer world of reality, and [...] the inner world of the mind, meet and merge.'<sup>547</sup> It would comprise liminal, heterotopic spaces where forgotten or repressed desires find an external manifestation. The inner space, therefore, would be the 'latent content' of reality, made of the 'real elements' present in it after it has become a 'goulash of fictions', and whose isolation Ballard thinks is 'the main task of the arts.'<sup>548</sup>

In the end, J.G. Ballard's main goal in the analysis of inner space is to access the unconscious, and within it, the wishes whose fulfilment are behind the manifest, everyday reality in which we live, thus hoping to unravel the extremely complex fabric of the postmodern age. His initial cultivation of science fiction had to do precisely with its potential to achieve this (Thurschwell, p. 49; Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 4).

---

<sup>546</sup> With respect to outer space, J.G. Ballard remained always true to his principle that 'the only alien planet' is ours: Simon Sellars, 'Introduction: A Launchpad for Other Explorations', in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), pp. xi-xx (p. xii).

<sup>547</sup> [Uncredited], 'Munich Round Up – An Interview with J.G. Ballard' [1968], in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), pp. 10-13 (p. 12).

<sup>548</sup> See e.g. Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 55, 63, where these considerations are made with relation to J.G. Ballard's early novels and *TAE*.

Dery, 'J.G. Ballard's Wild Ride', p. 342: 'Freud's [...] latent and manifest content of a dream now has to be applied to the outside world.' See also George Macbeth, 'The New Science Fiction' [1967], in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), pp. 1-9 (p. 6).

In strictly psychological terms, the 'latent content' would be 'a psychical reality which evades representation in the public realm': Sey, p. 55. In Freud, it is the true, though hidden, meaning of a dream, which is accessible through interpretation (Storr, p. 45).



In the twilight of the very idea of community, on which the author elaborates later in his career, but whose beginnings might be traced as early as *Crash*, the notion of inner space can also be applied to what the author feels to be a contemporary psychological tendency towards ‘continuous retreat inwards’. Its objects would include ‘sex, drugs, meditation, mysticism.’ (Barber, p. 25; Brooks, p. 245; Sellars, pp. 441-42) Thus, the only examples of community we find in *Crash* are those of a perverse couple masturbating to violent TV images or teasing about each other’s known and accepted lovers, and a sort of cult made of wounded or crippled people who share their suffering and their self-destroying car-crash trauma, eating at their very core, which nonetheless they turn into the centre of their perverse eroticism (*Crash*, pp. 26, 21, 74-ff; Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 91-92, 154).

An even more deteriorated example of community, or what once was such a thing, is that of the crowds gathered at the site of car crashes, ‘Surrealist’ locales ‘half meat and half machinery’. These would be sites of ‘compulsion, addiction, violence, and affectlessness’, a category among other types of ‘lethal places that make up our wound culture’. Indeed, the car crash would be ‘irretrievably established at the centre of car culture’ (Featherstone, ‘Introduction’, p. 16).<sup>549</sup> In such a dysfunctional and entropic culture psychically parasitising upon others’ suffering, those crowds would constitute what Mark Seltzer calls ‘a version of collective experience that centres the pathological public sphere’ (as cited in Baxter, ‘Radical Surrealism’, p. 523).<sup>550</sup> It is in these categories that I would place the

---

<sup>549</sup> Thus, as Mike Featherstone writes, there are countless webs and articles appearing in mainstream publications on the subject of favourite car crashes and movies, for instance. This is not in contradiction to the fact that the car crash is generally seen as an aberration rather than ‘as a normal social occurrence’ (Featherstone, ‘Introduction’, p. 20, n. 19; p. 3).

<sup>550</sup> Mark Seltzer writes:

‘The convening of the public around scenes of violence – the rushing to the scene of the accident [...] make up a wound culture: the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound. [...] mass attraction to atrocity exhibitions, in the pathological public sphere, takes the form of a fascination with [...] the opening of private and bodily and psychic interiors: the exhibition and witnessing, the endlessly reproducible display, of wounded bodies and wounded minds in public. In wound culture, the very notion of sociality is bound to the excitations of the torn and opened body, the torn and exposed individual, as public spectacle.’

spontaneous gatherings that were earlier referred to as *bloody eucharists*. It is precisely in that passage that the banal attitude of the crowd, despite the religious terminology employed ('as if we were members of a congregation leaving after the sermon'), is contrasted with the narrator's (who has sustained some minor injuries due to the accident), for whom the crash has been a truly sacred occurrence. Describing his experience, as we already saw, he states: 'My body glowed [...] a resurrected man' (p. 129). Taking into account that he has joined an irrational cult based on rather peculiar delusions and indifference to others' suffering and death, Mark Seltzer's theory should be considered when having to interpret such a crucial scene to the novel.

## 6.2 – Mediascape: The Irrational Psyche

In inner space, the car would occupy an exalted place along with certain postmodern technologies, discursive formations and practices, as well as with other components of the contemporary social and media landscape: the apartment tower block, the motorway system, advertising, information networks, television or, more generally, the unusual juxtapositions and coincidences that make up everyday life. (Barber, p. 29; Silverman, p. 86)<sup>551</sup> All of them would stand for the projection and objectification of the contents of that psychic inner space in our material and institutional environment as 'a kind of externalised mental activity.' (Dery, 'J.G. Ballard's Wild Ride', p. 345)

This establishes a hierarchy among its components: in this sense, it is not that J.G. Ballard, *more Beckettiano*, does not care about the social, cultural and technological; it is rather that these aspects are considered a derivation of the strictly psychological, subjective and individual: there would be a direct link between the unconscious, which would be the primary, really substantive level, and 'apparently external sociological phenomena.' (Ruddick, n. p., par. 22) These would always come in second place, as a concretisation of the increasingly isolated human mind and its 'highest achievement', namely imagination,

---

According to Seltzer, J.G. Ballard would be 'one of the compulsive cartographers of wound culture.' As cited in Philip Tew, 'Acts of Reconsideration: J.G. Ballard (1930 – 2009) Annotating and Revising Editions of *The Atrocity Exhibition*', *Textual Practice*, 26.3 (2012), pp. 399–420 (pp. 414-16).

<sup>551</sup> In the last case, the Surrealists' influence on Ballard is patent (Silverman, p. 86).

along with some of the components of the ultimately irrational nature of our psyche: dream, myth, legend, intuition (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 9-10, 12).<sup>552</sup> As the author puts it himself, ‘so much of what used to be an internalised psychological space [...] has been transferred [...] into the corporate sensorium of the media landscape’ or ‘the larger mental space of the planetary communications landscape.’ (Dery, ‘J.G. Ballard’s Wild Ride’, p. 342) As a result, Ballard’s landscapes would ultimately be ‘mindscapes’, constituting an ‘iconography of inner space’.<sup>553</sup> What J.G. Ballard would be doing in *Crash* is bringing to light, making manifest these unconscious mindscapes which are only latent in the everyday conscious landscape.

### 6.3 – Setting: Non-Places. Anomie and Uprootedness

The historical transition from modernity to postmodernity is depicted in *Crash* as an exploration of this ‘inner space’. It would take place in a setting made of impersonal, functional, brutalist architecture consisting of motorways, roundabouts, international airports and hotels, and high-rising steel and frosted glass flat blocks for members of the very much deracinated urban, professional middle classes, whose roles are ‘written by the city.’ (*Crash*, p. 39)<sup>554</sup> This is still the brutalist London of modernity, a city ‘dominated by the grid-iron layout and high-rise’ architecture demanded by its condition as one of the key world metropolises after WWII (Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, p. 97). This is a London replete with what Marc Augé calls ‘non-places’: alienating venues (airports, shopping malls, motorways, supermarkets, hotels) that often display their simulative nature through ‘spectacular imagery’. They are directly linked to Augé’s ‘super-modernity’, which we already discussed.

The average mind, at first and according to Jameson, will usually find nothing but disorientation in these spaces. In these new signifying centres of postmodernity one always

---

<sup>552</sup> Dan O’Hara, in his introduction to Thomas Frick, ‘The Art of Fiction’ [1984], in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 181-98 (p. 181)

<sup>553</sup> J.G. Ballard, ‘The Coming of the Unconscious’, as cited in Stephenson, p. 164.

<sup>554</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, ‘Nothing Is Real, Everything Is Fake’ [2003], in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 383-95 (p. 388).

meets oneself in the fleeting identity of the passenger or customer, for ever lost in circulation and consumption. Any social mixing, bond or emotion are thus denied, which directly links these spaces to anomie, solitude and personal dissatisfaction, constantly ‘in conflict with identity, relationship and history.’ (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 39-ff.; Silverman, pp. 78-79; Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, p. 69).

This is always paramount in *Crash*, where the main characters spend most of their time in the neighbourhood of one of such alienating venues, Heathrow airport, cruising endless kilometres of motorways, roundabouts and high-passes in the process. In so doing, moreover, they are just straying without ‘getting their bearings’, randomly roaming London’s night (*POH*, p. 8). Just like in Beckett’s *Molloy*, these characters would symbolise the way human beings, according to Sartre and Cioran, are ‘condemned to be eternal wanderers who are lost in a futile search for themselves.’ (Wicks, p. 82) Their alienated, nihilistic state of mind links up with some of the main features of the places they roam, which makes it possible to incorporate them to any catalogue of postmodernity’s avatars: loneliness, isolation, absence of past.

One among these non-places in particular has been singled out as a paradigm of post-urban spaces: the hypermarket. Being the instrument of ‘a whole operational simulation of social life’, the hypermarket could stand precisely as ‘a model of the end of the social’ (Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*, pp. 102, 115, my translation; Clarke, p. 94). What is more, in as much as it can be deemed to be a negative satellite of the city and an instrument of the latter’s self-disintegration, as it is transplanted beyond its own boundaries and treated as ‘a hyperreal model’, the hypermarket would be translating ‘the end of the city [...] as a determined, qualitative space, as the original synthesis of a society.’ (Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*, p. 117, my translation) In this way, the postmodern city would no longer be lived or understood practically, having been relegated to the condition of ‘object of cultural consumption for tourists, for an estheticism [sic], avid for spectacles and the picturesque.’<sup>555</sup> In the end, hypermarkets and other isolating non-places would be pre-eminent examples of the great vacuum existing in people’s lives, according to J.G. Ballard. In fact, non-places have been built for non-persons: not for people, but for

---

<sup>555</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, ed. and trans. by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996; repr. 2000), p. 148.

their absence (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 110, 108, 123; Baxter, ‘*Kingdom Come*’, p. 124; Silverman, p. 78).<sup>556</sup>

These non-places might well be taken for the perfect locale for the ‘temporary, transitory, agitated and effervescent urban existence’ of the novel’s characters in ‘the decentred identity of post-structuralism and the post-historical being of postmodernism’ that characterises them. Accordingly, their existence would be marked by an ‘urban culture’ that can only be interpreted as ‘a statement of heterology.’ (Jenks, *Culture*, p. 186) This statement would be made in a ‘heterogeneous site beyond the hierarchies and binaries of “Cartesian” space’. Following Foucault, we could call this site heterotopia. It would be characterised by processes of both deterritorialisation (through the deconstruction of former place and identity) and reterritorialisation (which brings together components from different time-space networks into new, hybrid urban mosaics: Silverman, p. 74).<sup>557</sup>

In this context, the car might be seen as a substitute for home for people whose life itself is based on continuous displacement. Both Ballard and his wife, living independent professional lives, inhabiting an impersonal high-rise near Heathrow airport, and maybe either having already lived somewhere else in London or hailing from outside it, could well exemplify the alienating fact that ‘not only can one be at home in movement, but that movement can be one’s very home.’ (Jenks, *Culture*, p. 187) In itself, this phenomenon is only a part of a wider process whereby the motor car is colonising ‘more and more areas of everyday life’, gaining the upper hand over ‘the lived spaces of communal association’ (Featherstone, ‘Introduction’, p. 7).<sup>558</sup>

That most sexual encounters in the novel take place in such environments bespeaks, yet again, undoubtable alienation and the lack, attenuation or degeneration of any sense of community. This could be interpreted as the consequence of what Lacan describes and

---

<sup>556</sup> Sebastian Groes, ‘From Shanghai to Shepperton: Crises of Representation in J.G. Ballard’s Londons’, in Baxter (ed.), pp. 78-93 (p. 80).

<sup>557</sup> According to Foucault, heterotopias are the ‘real places’ where ‘all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’. They are sites of ‘deviation’, where ‘individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed’: as cited in Dino Franco Felluga, ‘Heterotopia’, in Felluga, pp. 133-34 (p. 133).

<sup>558</sup> Hence, by the beginning of our century, half of the land in the second most populous city in the USA, Los Angeles, corresponds to car-only environments: John Urry, as cited in Featherstone, ‘Introduction’, p. 8.

laments as ‘the promotion of the ego today’, in contradistinction to a traditional culture based on the superego and the ego ideal. This promotion is all the more dangerous as, according to Freud, the ego is organised in such a way that the whole universe is perceived as centred on it (Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, p. 52). This development has furthermore been intensified ‘by the barbarism of the Darwinian century’, the 20<sup>th</sup> century: through ‘competitiveness, aggression, and desire for domination’, Western civilisation, Lacan feels, has eventually ended up in a ‘modern neurosis’ of egotism and self-deception (Easthope, p. 168).

This uprootedness is accompanied by other postmodern phenomena, such as a celebration of surfaces and images, cultural decentring and fragmentation, communicative disconnection, solipsistic egotism and apoliticism, gender and sex ambiguity, and indeterminacy. In the end, given the bankruptcy of the Enlightenment’s project and the decline of its goals and values, as well as considering the demise of Hegel-inspired philosophies of history, we are experiencing the radical contingency of life in an anomic present without any utopian horizon ahead of us (Woodward, pp. 243-45).

Given this background, J.G. Ballard’s aspiration to reconstruct an ontological dimension in which experience would be intensified at the crossroads of reason and unreason, of fiction and cognition, would be the natural consequence of following William Blake’s summons to open up the doors of perception, its natural threshold. Termed ‘absolute reality’ or super-reality by J.G. Ballard’s much cherished surrealist painters, and manifested in the mysterious linkages between theoretically disconnected phenomena, it would be above reason and yet at reach within our everyday experience, as shown, according to the author, by events such as a child’s birth, of which rationality would only be able to give an insufficient account (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 8, 10-11; Baxter, ‘*Kingdom Come*’, p. 128).<sup>559</sup> Gaining access to that dimension would ensure psychic fulfilment, a sine qua non for re-making the world, for giving a meaning to life beyond the one that a psychopath or a madman would give to theirs (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 10). Hence, at least in principle, we should not call J.G. Ballard a nihilist.

---

<sup>559</sup> For André Breton’s coining of the terms ‘absolute reality’ and ‘surreality’, see Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 9, and 24, n. 12)

Special relevance in the recreation of this dimension, now sundered between world and self, and thus transcending a narrowly spatiotemporal reality in favour of a parallel, ‘heightened or alternate’ one, would correspond to imagination. This would involve fiction being key to cognition.<sup>560</sup> The use precisely of certain surrealist techniques in *Crash*, such as the collage of disparate images or objects, or counter-intuitive association of ideas would also be instrumental in the evocation and decipherment of the mindscapes of ‘inner space’ (to the point that Ballard will also call it ‘surrealist space’), while also giving his fiction a ‘redemptive and therapeutic power’ alien to both the realist-naturalist and the modernist traditions (Cartano and Jakubowki, p. 219; Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 8-10).<sup>561</sup>

For these purposes, and in order to defamiliarise the otherwise too obvious, he will also use techniques such as the opening ‘in media res’, directly linked to analepsis as a plotting device, or a particular kind of narrative irony in which an absolutely aware narrator tries to correct the protagonist’s apparently misguided awareness or behaviour after his own principles and leanings (p. 7).

#### 6.4 – Contempt for the Biological: The Machinic Body

Things might be different regarding psychic fulfilment, though. One might be well advised not to expect too much from this absolute reality. To begin with and thinking back of imagination and cognition, the former contributes to the fictionalisation that, according to J.G. Ballard, is necessarily behind any commitment or self-fulfilling project (Delville, 80). In this, Ballard could be following Nietzsche’s idea of life as a necessary fiction, given mankind’s need for ‘consoling illusions’ on the grounds of life’s horrible, maleficent and painful true nature as laid out in *The Birth of Tragedy*: the task of art (or of the humble

---

<sup>560</sup> See the author’s comments about consumer capitalism’s positive effects in post-WWII England in Baxter, ‘Kingdom Come’, p. 125.

Scott Bukatman, for example, is of the opinion that ‘science fiction has become a crucial cognitive tool’ by producing narratives about simulation: p. 117.

<sup>561</sup> It must be borne in mind, though, that these techniques are essentially visual, pictorial, and not literary. In this respect, the author does not think himself as influenced by literary surrealism, which he terms ‘a one generation movement’, and whose techniques, such as automatic writing, he has never used: Whitford, p. 37.

In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Traven, a character that resembles and anticipates Vaughan in several ways, states the following opinion on the phenomenological, space- and time-bound world: ‘the phenomenology of the world is a nightmarish excrement.’ (*TAE*, p. 86)

craft of everyday fiction) would be ‘to free the eye from gazing into the horrors of the night and, with the healing balm of semblance, save the subject from the vain exertions of the will’ (*Birth of Tragedy*, p. 93; Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, p. 9; Severino, *Contemp.*, p. 117). In any case, this doctrine does not seem very likely to inspire anything of great value when facing the challenges an average reader may find in their experience of postmodern life, inner authenticity remaining a foreign concept and an impossible horizon.

If anything, life fictionalisation might just contribute to install the subject in the same kind of negative sublime that characters seem to be occupying in *Crash*, where even our bodily dimension would be denied for the benefit of an infantile, narcissistic fantasy: narcissism, after all and as we already saw, is very close to abjection (the latter is the precondition of the former), while abjection, in its turn, is ‘edged with the sublime’, as both share ‘the same subject and speech’ (*POH*, pp. 11, 13).<sup>562</sup> That speech of sorts would be a painful, silent, ineffable one, related with immanence rather than transcendence, as befits a postmodern affect, and it would be brought about by a distorted misperception of reality. It would describe ‘an experience that is excessive, unmanageable, even terrifying’, exceeding the limits of representation, despite its being comprehended within it, as opposed to the transcendental, romantic sublime beyond reason. Its terrifying effect would be brought about by its relationship with the Lacanian Real (Shaw, pp. 3-4, 147).

For instance, mistakenly feeling the car to be a prosthetic extension of our bodies during the driving experience, when our nervous system would also be linked to it ‘in a very basic way’, the foundations for a ‘car-driver hybrid’ would be laid (Dery, ‘Always Crashing’, p. 236).<sup>563</sup> This sort of fantasy pressures characters in *Crash*, if in different degrees, into an eventual nightmarish machinic body with all the advantages of the perfect machine, the automobile, on the very threshold of the transgenic.<sup>564</sup>

---

<sup>562</sup> This ‘negative sublime’ is characterised by Slocombe as ‘merely a different way of finding a positive feeling of the sublime,’ the sublime being construed as the apotheosis of postmodernism (p. 77). Its sources would be gratuitous, senseless violence, and nihilistic rage against Being as the expression of a rampant death drive.

<sup>563</sup> Nigel Thrift, ‘Driving in the city’, in Featherstone, Thrift and Urry (eds.), pp. 41-59 (p. 47)

<sup>564</sup> For transgenic art, see Noys, pp. 107-08.



Already in 1912, F.T. Marinetti could proclaim his faith in overcoming ‘the seeming irreducible divide that separates our human flesh from the metal of motors.’<sup>565</sup> The strictly bodily would be felt to be a mere organic component of a larger technological system, in a ‘denial of the flesh’ that would link up with ‘contemporary concerns with hygiene, cosmetic surgery, and eating disorders’ ultimately aimed at transcending ‘the animalistic cycles of birth, life, and death.’ (Bukatman, p. 287) Indeed, this is emphatically stated by Marinetti, who, as an inextricable part of the coming ‘reign of the machine’, announces ‘the mechanical man with interchangeable parts’, a man liberated from ‘the idea of death, and hence from death itself’ (*Technical Manifesto*, p. 125). This cannot be stated more explicitly than the way Marinetti does: ‘we must prepare for the imminent and inevitable identification of man and motor’.<sup>566</sup>

As Freud tellingly suggests, Futurist rhetoric fosters the rise of a ‘prosthetic imaginary.’ Hence he writes: ‘Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent;’ yet, as Freud recognises and warns about, ‘those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times’. This would be the flip side of a ‘rhetoric of technological uplift’ that would otherwise help develop in modern man ‘Promethean ambitions’ like those cherished by the Futurists (Freud, *Discontents*, pp. 38-39; Gasiorek, *History*, p. 142). Paul Virilio’s fear ‘that the human body is seen more and more in terms of a constantly accelerating machine’ is fed by this rhetoric (as cited by Silverman, p. 156).

In any case, it is like this that Marinetti comes very close to the definition of the cyborg as formulated by Donna Haraway, in whom the hybridisation of the human and the machine would be an index of ‘the many ways that our lives and consciousnesses depend upon, and mesh ontologically with, a variety of nonhuman entities, including computers, television, artificial limbs and organs, and controlled living environments.’ Jean Baudrillard also remarks how the subject has become ‘a terminal of multiple networks’. In other words: ‘The cyborg is our ontology’, as ‘we are all chimeras, theorized and

---

<sup>565</sup> F.T. Marinetti, ‘Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature’, in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven, CT, and New York: Yale UP, 2009), pp. 119-25 (p. 125).

<sup>566</sup> F.T. Marinetti, ‘Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine’, in Rainey, Poggi, and Wittman (eds.), pp. 89-92 (p. 90).

fabricated hybrids of machine and organism;’ in this way, ‘the human and the technological’ have become coextensive, codependent, and mutually defining.’ (Bukatman, p. 22; Donald E. Hall, p. 120; Mark Thomas, p. 351)<sup>567</sup> Technology and production of identity have become so entwined with each other that human and machine can no longer be separated without loss of ontological meaning.

This ‘intertwining of the identities of the driver and car’, this ‘metaphysical merger [...] generates a distinctive ontology in the form of a person-thing, a humanized car or, alternatively, an automobilized person’ (Thrift, pp. 46-47). Nevertheless, ‘the metal of motors’ would gradually get the upper hand over the organic in this mental complex, thus signalling ‘the final triumph of the technocratic power of instrumental reason’ (Dery, ‘Always Crashing’, pp. 233-34; Bukatman, p. 288). In this way, modernity itself would bring ‘both a fragmentation and augmentation of the body in relation to technology’, thus construing ‘the body as lack’, for which it would provide ‘technological compensation’ (Gasiorek, *History*, p. 142). Drivers being seduced by power and speed, readiness for affectless sex and for the ultimate, joyful apotheosis of Autogeddon, of total self-extinction at the steering-wheel, the ultimate, logical resolution of the struggle between these initially antithetical factors can only be the car crash, in which their ‘unholy’, abject, definitive conjunction would take place (Dery, ‘Always Crashing’, pp. 233-34).

From another point of view, however, this fantasy, which would entail, in the driver’s delirious wish for power, the redemptive cataclysm of being absorbed by their fetish, the motor car, would involve their fatally falling in love not exactly with the machine, but with a complex of images transcendent of their weak flesh in the manner of a film in which they would play the starring role, life itself having become a ‘universal film [...] hyperreal [...], made up of movement and flux’: to all intents and purposes, they may have fallen for a ‘psychotic confusion of subjective experience and filmic fiction’. In William Burroughs’ words in his preface to *The Atrocity Exhibition*: ‘people are made of image’; the entire world itself is getting ‘transformed into images and shows’ (Baudrillard, ‘Ballard’s *Crash*’, n. p., par. 11; Dery, ‘Always Crashing’, p. 235). Julia Kristeva is of a similar opinion: in

---

<sup>567</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 150.

the West's great metropolises, people are 'steeped in their own image'.<sup>568</sup> Performing becomes, therefore, an endemic constituent of postmodern subjectivity.<sup>569</sup>

The result of this being absorbed by the car would be a curiously postmodern version of the Cartesian 'ghost in the machine' where the machine is not made of flesh any longer. This would eventually pressure people into retiring into their own skulls, thus bringing about 'the end of subjectivity and the status of *the self*', their independence as subjects destroyed, prey to an extreme kind of solipsism grounded in contempt for the biological, for ever wallowing in their chromed obsessions, totally subjected to the machine's imperatives. This is nothing to be surprised about, since, due to our daily interaction with technology, nowadays we are all to a greater or lesser degree 'machinic subjects', 'bio-robots'. The driving experience would be just an example of an increasing psychological and physiological 'symbiosis with our machines.' (Dery, 'Always Crashing', p. 236; Bukatman, p. 288, original emphasis) Thus, bodies and technologies are fused in *Crash*, 'inextricable one from the other.' (Baudrillard, 'Ballard's *Crash*', n. p., par. 6)

Depicted as fragmented, on a path to transcend the bodily human towards the machinic and affectless posthuman, characters in *Crash* might end up seeming just as abstract and pointless as Giorgio de Chirico's motionless mannequins against the background of some timeless architecture: this is all that the absolute reality so cherished by J.G. Ballard might come down to in the end. Of course, what is behind this development is death and negation: Thanatos, the death drive, which would be powering contemporary society and of which the motor car would be a paradigmatic embodiment (Delville, p. 25; Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 82-83, 207-08; *TAE*, p. viii). Here, we start to feel that there might be more than the aforesaid regarding J.G. Ballard and his relationship to nihilism.

---

<sup>568</sup> Kristeva writes this in *New Maladies of the Soul*, as cited in McAfee, p. 109.

<sup>569</sup> Christine Cornea, 'David Cronenberg's *Crash* and Performing Cyborgs', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 52 (2003), pp. 4-14 (p. 6).

## Chapter 7 – J.G. Ballard and Speculative Fiction: Modernism or Postmodernism?

Focusing on the third member of our critical equation or formula, technological mediation in *Crash*, a thematic trace of modernity in J.G. Ballard's work is the treatment of issues related to technology and the prognosis of its social impact.<sup>570</sup> *Crash* bears witness to his author's fascination with science and technology, with landmarks of modernity such as the media, the suburbs and brutalist architecture, and with the chances they all grant for the exploration of what he calls the 'benign pathologies' of Western Suburbia's average middle-class person.<sup>571</sup> This befits a writer that first published in Science Fiction magazines and who went on to become the most widely acknowledged representative of the British New Wave Science Fiction movement during the 1960s (Stephenson, p. 11).

As a matter of fact, Ballard has always been an author of a scientific bent of mind who has always been more inspired and influenced by Freud (he started medical training in Cambridge in order to become a psychiatrist) as well as by contemporary surrealist and pop painters than by any writer (apart from William Burroughs, as we already mentioned).<sup>572</sup> *Crash* is not alien to this, having been composed 'to an extent', in Ballard's own recognition, as a 'visual experience'. In more general terms, he unequivocally states: 'all my fiction consists of paintings.' If this were not enough, he hammers home: 'I'm not a literary man.' (Goddard and Pringle, p. 86)

---

<sup>570</sup> See his discussion of the topic of 'speculative fiction' as early as 1968 in an interview with Jannick Storm: 'An Interview with J.G. Ballard' [1968], in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), pp. 14-21 (p. 17).

<sup>571</sup> Delville, p. vii. In an interview, Ballard goes as far as to say that watching television is more important than reading books in that it shows how the world sees itself at a certain given time: Peter Halley and Bob Nickas, 'Interview with J.G. Ballard', in *J.G. Ballard*, n.p., par. 15  
<[http://www.jgballard.ca/media/1996\\_nov\\_index\\_magazine.html](http://www.jgballard.ca/media/1996_nov_index_magazine.html)> [accessed 14.10.2019]

<sup>572</sup> Ballard clearly states 'I think and write in pictorial terms.' (Cartano and Jakubowski, p. 219). For his bent for science, as well as the influence of Andy Warhol and other pop painters on him, see also Goddard and Pringle, p. 83.

In both of the mentioned pictorial movements, as well as in Science Fiction, J.G. Ballard recognises an ‘art of the now’ much more adequate for his narrative purposes than any literary school or aesthetic theory (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 6, 8, 10, 14). If pictorial surrealism opened for him a pathway to the individual unconscious, pop art grabbed his attention in that it dealt with the consumer landscape’s subtexts and hidden agendas as the form of a social unconscious that had nonetheless been unacknowledged so far, despite its daily display through items such as the motor car. This provided him with a means to dig up the unconscious energies at work below the surface of the postmodern everyday scene and to uncover the pathologies hidden underneath the consumer society. As a result, of science fiction the author rather laconically and characteristically stated early in his career: ‘a ton of Proust is not worth an ounce of Ray Bradbury.’ (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 15; Barber, p. 23; Baxter, ‘Introduction’, p. 7; Rossi, p. 75).<sup>573</sup>

Nevertheless, it should be noted how J.G. Ballard prefers to call science fiction, in his own cultivation thereof, speculative fiction. With this term, it is stressed how science fiction is for J.G. Ballard a perspective rather than a set of conventions, and a platform from which to make sense of our time by trying to probe deep into ‘the furthest reaches’ of the human psyche (Delville, p. 3). If anything, he has always qualified his hypotheses by trying to formulate them as non-totalising, always ready to be falsified by some other, more adequate idea: after all, in Nietzsche’s formula, a hypothesis is merely ‘a regulative fiction’ (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 209; *TGS*, p. 200). The openness, innovative quality and the risk usually involved in them have earned him much praise as a transitional figure ‘positioned between the psychoanalytic modernism of the Surrealists and the electronic postmodernism of the cyberpunks.’ (Bukatman, p. 46)

More specifically, he has been praised as a precursor of cyber-punk in his eroticisation of machinery, which is evident in *Crash* (Delville, pp. 1, 38). This is perhaps the reason for the existence of another Ballardian characteristic with regard to modernism and the modernist writers who wrote science fiction (e.g. H.G. Wells or H.P. Lovecraft): he has taken for granted all possible dystopias proposed by them, always with idiosyncratic irony (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 109). In Zadie Smith’s words: ‘In Ballard the dystopia is not hidden

---

<sup>573</sup> Thus, in a 2007 interview, he avows that his main interest is dissecting and exposing ‘the real pathology’ at work in our society below its glossy surfaces (Baxter, ‘*Kingdom Come*’, p. 123).

*under* anything. Nor is it [...] a vision of the future. It is not the subtext. It *is* the text.’ (n. p., par. 5, original emphasis)

Coming down to J.G. Ballard’s relationship with literary postmodernism, a prominent feature of *Crash* is the coexistence of very different linguistic registers in it, such as the spare and well-trimmed, technically accurate prose of scientific journals, along with descriptive sequences based on repetition and sheer word combinatorics, and a conflation of the high-brow with patently sensationalist episodes inspired by tabloid rendition of road accidents.<sup>574</sup> It was his conviction that there could be no critical vantage point outside postmodern discourse and experience (as opposed to Jameson, e.g.), to begin with because of the interpenetration of subjectivity and technology in our time (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 119, 209).

All in all, however, I would not call J.G. Ballard’s form postmodernist, in that he still shares some stylistic features with a kind of mainstream literature which often tacitly assumes a certain realist-naturalist narrative background: despite the superficiality of the characters, given J.G. Ballard’s dismissal of modernism’s subjectivism and psychologism, and unlike Beckett’s *Three Novels*, *Crash* is eminently readable, easily understandable prose, somewhere between the forensic and the Dickensian, with a clearly defined, if not very detailed plot or storyline, and with rather mimetic, if stylised, descriptions of events and objects (car interiors or urban scenarios, for instance). This is so regardless of the author’s apparently comprehensive rejection of the narrative forms of the realist-naturalist tradition (Baxter, ‘Introduction’, p. 3; Tew, ‘Situating the Violence’, p. 113; Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 2-3; Litt, ‘Foreword’, p. viii).

Regarding this and in the light of the thematic material he feels attracted to, J.G. Ballard is also clearly opposed to what he sees as a modernist self-defeating commitment to form and obsession with technique, as well as a rejection of the experiments of the postmodern avant-garde, such as the French ‘nouveau roman’.<sup>575</sup> In agreement with his pictorial penchant, it is Ballard’s opinion that modernist literature might even be lagging behind the

---

<sup>574</sup> James Verniere, ‘A Conversation with J.G. Ballard’ [1988], in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), pp. 231-40 (pp. 238).

<sup>575</sup> See, e.g., J.G. Ballard’s comments on T.S. Eliot and James Joyce as quoted in Baxter, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

efforts of modernist painters such as Picasso and Bacon in its attempt to ‘wrestle with the world’. I construe this last expression as coming to grips with the conceptual, theoretical, and institutional challenges posed to the artist by the post-WWII world in order to understand them and then to transmit this understanding to their readership or audience. In a society of over-aestheticised media where people’s minds are under continuous bombardment by the advertising industry in a general context of widespread psychological shallowness, aesthetics might not be capable of touching human imagination any more (Bukatman, p. 34; Baxter, ‘Reading the Signs’, pp. 408-09). As Ballard acknowledges in an interview given shortly before the publication of *Crash*, form, style, technique have to serve ‘subject matter’: there ought still to be a place for ‘conventional narrative.’ (Linnett, p. 54)<sup>576</sup> In *Crash*, accordingly, there is an overall representational continuity and semantic cohesion, and its prose does not demand any special efforts on the part of the reader to understand it (Pordzik, p. 83). After and above all, he always saw himself as a storyteller, not as an aesthete (Goddard and Pringle, pp. 96-97).

Certainly, an intense commitment to speculative, conceptual thematics, absolutely absent from Beckett’s *Three Novels*, is characteristic of an author who, as we already mentioned, sees himself as working after a scientist’s fashion, namely formulating hypotheses about a number of issues and later testing them against the facts.<sup>577</sup> J.G. Ballard does not write from an increasingly silent and void observatory where language is ever more uncertain and undecidable, but from the vantage point of fascination with what he sees, hears and lives in the everyday world, being willing to articulate his experience in conceptually meaningful language. In the end, his would be a vocation to become a historian, or at least a chronicler of the ever more ambiguous ‘post-war era’, a ‘libertarian’ explorer of the extremely complex, hybrid, uncertain, over-determined, ‘heteroglossic’ chaos of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. As a consequence, the writer, in Ballard’s opinion and in his own words, can no longer ‘leave out anything he prefers not to understand, including his own motives, prejudices, and psychopathology’. (Ballard, ‘Introduction’, n. p., par. 5)

---

<sup>576</sup> See also Goddard and Pringle, p. 92: ‘the subject matter comes first and the technique [...] second.’

<sup>577</sup> J. G. Ballard, ‘Introduction’, n.p., par. 6. A tentative catalogue of Ballard’s thematic preoccupations can be found in Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p.3.

Among the different voices that J.G. Ballard listens to in order to make sense of his time, a fundamental one is that of psychoanalysis, which provides him with much of his subject matter and with a privileged vantage point from which to look at reality. In this respect, and against direct postmodern criticism of *Crash*, it must always be taken into account that he is primarily interested in the real. Consequently, he is not one of Baudrillard's party, whose first conviction about our time is that it is marked by hyperreality and therefore by the disappearance of the real. Quite on the contrary, despite J.G. Ballard's fascination with surfaces and appearances, he is not 'a poet of the surface of things', or 'a postmodernist *par excellence*' (Ruddick, n. p., par. 23, my emphasis). What he aspires to grasp is not the catastrophe itself (in *Crash*, the car accident; in Baudrillard, the proliferation of models and simulation), but the liberation of a deep real, linked with the unconscious, that takes place as its consequence: the crash will be 'a metaphor of revelation'; the real, latent until that moment in 'a "shallow", manifest reality', will be the death drive (n. p., par. 15-16). Thus, if freed from repression, the leakage of unconscious, latent desire into the conscious, 'manifest world' makes it somehow 'dreamlike' at first, in the end that very same leakage renders it 'more real.' (ibid.)

In being fascinated and terrified by what surfaces conceal, Ballard, according to Ruddick and somehow controversially, would be contesting not only Baudrillard's essay on *Crash*, but also postmodernism itself (ibid.). In the author's own words, an 'over-professionalized academia' (from which he nevertheless excludes Baudrillard), who would be trapped inside their 'dismal jargon', would have turned their theorising capacities against 'an innocent and naive fiction that desperately needs to be left alone.'<sup>578</sup> Of postmodern theory, criticism and science fiction, he thinks they are forms of

---

<sup>578</sup> J.G. Ballard, 'A Response to the Invitation to Respond', as cited in Ruddick, n. p., par. 5. The exact formula that J.G. Ballard uses to refer to his understanding of Baudrillard's essay is 'I have not really wanted to understand [it]'.

On postmodern critical and theoretical 'neologizing jargon' and, in philosopher John Searle's terminology, postmodern '*obscurantisme terroriste*', see Butler, *Postmodernism*, pp. 7-8 (original emphasis). For more specific criticism of Baudrillard on the same grounds, see Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998), pp. 147-53. Among other compliments paid to Baudrillard in this book, he is said to be 'as pompous as [he] is meaningless', and he is charged with a 'high density of scientific and pseudo-scientific terminology', which he allegedly uses 'to give an appearance of profundity to trite observations about sociology or history'. Ultimately, one question is posed: 'what would be left of Baudrillard's thought if the verbal veneer covering it were stripped away?' (pp. 152-53)



‘bourgeoisification’. More specifically, the latter was ‘ALWAYS modern’ to his mind (Butterfield, p. 65, original emphasis).

According to this, and as we saw before, J.G. Ballard uses two theoretically antithetical orders of discourse: ethics and aesthetics. As a result, the novel’s is a ‘language in search of objects’, a writing that is closer to ‘commerce and publicity’ than to the standard literary language of the age (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, p. 18). Thus, as a conclusion, it might be fairer to think of Ballard as a contemporary writer, rather than as either a modernist or a postmodernist one: an observer, a chronicler and an interpreter of the post-industrial West; a commentator on issues related to our consumer society as a ‘benign tyranny’, or to simulation and the subsequent ‘loss of the real’ in postmodernity. He may well have agreed to subscribe to Ford Madox Ford’s will to register his own times in terms of his own time (as cited in Gasiorek, *History*, p. 17). That may be why the adjective ‘Ballardian’ has eventually been coined to refer to ‘distinctive images and landscapes which capture the contemporary condition in all of its violence and ambiguity’.<sup>579</sup> As for Ballard himself, he quite simply considered himself a maverick (Gasiorek, *Ballard*, pp. 1-6; Delville, p. 3).

---

<sup>579</sup> Andrew Frost, ‘Crash and the Aesthetics of Disappearance’, n. p., par. 12, <<http://www.ballardian.com/crash-and-the-aesthetics-of-disappearance>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

Elana Gomel invests this adjective with ‘a peculiar mixture of dystopia, lyricism, and violence that characterize his writings.’ Elana Gomel, ‘Everyday Apocalypse: J. G. Ballard and the Ethics and Aesthetics of the End of Time’, *Partial Answers*, 8.1 (2010), pp. 185-208 (p. 196)



## Part 4 – Timothy Findley's *Headhunter*



## Chapter 1 - Introduction: Historical and Cultural Context

*Headhunter*'s year of publication, 1993, falls fully within the postmodern paradigm or, more precisely and following Brian McHale's periodisation, within the 'interregnum' period of postmodernism between 1989 and 2001. That is to say, this period, during which the postmodern comes into its own as a sort of late postmodernism, starts with the decisive events of 1989-91 on the other side of the Iron Curtain, and finishes with the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, when, much to Fukuyama's regret, History came back with a vengeance.<sup>580</sup> Indeed, after the final act of the Hegelian drama of the twilight of institutional Marxism (and, as Marxism is but the last avatar of the belief in a better, 'true' world, of the death of God, too), namely the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (which was triggered in its turn by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989), American analyst Francis Fukuyama, on account of such momentous events and as we already saw, quickly declared the End of History (Young, p. 79). The officially undeclared, long-protracted, proxy-fought Third World War had come to an end with the victory of the West, parliamentary democracy and, above all, capitalism. From then on, free markets and free enterprise would rule supreme in societies the world over. Yet, the New York attacks proved Fukuyama's triumphalist conclusions and the universalising philosophy of History whence they originated totally wrong: there might still be some chance for History and ideology to reclaim at least a part of the space occupied by late capitalism and neoliberal discourse (even if in the grotesque form of the Islamic State, e.g.). Hence, History as a unified, integrated, meaning-producing process intimately related to the existence of a human essence dissolves into a plurality of histories without any emancipatory potential in a plural world where any common human nature is but a mirage. Thus, History undergoes a similar development to Reason: philosophy of history will henceforth be considered a mere metaphysical illusion (Vattimo, pp. 13, 16).

---

<sup>580</sup> Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (New York: CUP, 2015), pp. 123-24, 126.

I believe it would be interesting to think of a number of developments that, since the publication of Ballard's *Crash* (1973), got us to a completely different world at the time when *Headhunter* came out. If the Seventies had ended with the USA being badly buffeted three times in 1979 (Iran, Afghanistan, Nicaragua), from the 1981 inauguration of President Reagan on, another period of intense cold war started, in which American military capabilities would be increased in a daring effort to bring the communist bloc to the point of collapse (Grenville, pp. 635, 648, 712, 911). The military reinforcement of the USA would be linked to unilateral intervention (Grenada, 1983, Panama, 1989), retaliation (Libya, 1986) or massive aid (Afghanistan, Nicaragua) anywhere against communist power, influence or interest (pp. 856, 714). In 1991, a Western alliance would send a formidable US-led force to oust sometime West's henchman, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, out of Kuwait (p. 821). Meanwhile, a moribund USSR looked somewhere else. This was a new crusade in defence of Western interests on Kuwaiti and Iraqi oil fields against Third World nationalism and leadership, as well as a showdown of Western technoscience and its efficiency.

During the days of the Reagan Boom and deregulation of markets, after Mrs Thatcher had defeated coal miner strikes and Labour opposition in Britain, a new cult of now socially approved greed would develop. Low taxes, high incomes for young urban professionals (yuppies) and a glamorisation of finance, stock speculation, and personal success would set the tone for this new era. In Britain, Mrs Thatcher puts forward the idea of popular capitalism, in which families and individuals would invest their savings into real estate, stock shares or their own businesses, cutting themselves loose from any feeling of belonging to a so-called working class, let alone any related institutions, such as trade unions. The welfare state starts to be dismantled.

The Reagan administration also inaugurated a long period of uncontested economic neoliberalism. A first veritable globalisation was brought about by increasingly unified markets in the Asia-Pacific region and in Europe, where increase in membership of the EEC is followed by the creation of the European Union and the implementation of the European Single Market (1993). After that, the EU grows from twelve to twenty-eight countries by 2013. In 1990, Germany had already been re-unified.

If the late Seventies were an era of unbridled hedonism in the West, the onset of the AIDS pandemics is instrumental in the development, especially in the USA, of a new breed of televangelists, firebrand preachers and cultural critics advocating for reactionary standards in all domains, both private and public. A self-styled Christian Majority campaigns for Reagan in both of his presidential runs, while a Polish Pope will lead the Catholic Church along a similarly backward doctrinal and moral road. There starts a new era of social and political hegemony of conservatism.

Youth culture, unlike in the 1960s and to a lesser extent the 1970s, is generally divested of any veritable socially contesting elements. From the 1980s on, it will be intimately related to that most postmodern of all subcultural expressions: the videoclip. The lack of content of this medium, along with the unapologetic mercantilism of the pop music industry, will result in the prevalence of an escapist attitude among its natural consumers: the young. Already besieged by widespread unemployment and the threat of AIDS, this youth escapism will be promoted and supported by the most global and mind-numbing means of communication before the Internet: television plus the satellite dish.

What is more, video appears to its postmodern addressees as a gate to ‘*another reality*’ which is ‘apprehended instantly and without recourse to interpretation,’ perception involving the fusion of subject and object. Unlike the written word, the image, ‘simplifying and impoverishing’, only generates an emotional reaction of ‘affinity’ in the audience, rather than a mature, critical, potentially political one. In this way, we have inauspiciously passed ‘from the era of the “graphosphere” to that of the “videosphere”’ (Régis Debray, as cited in Silverman, pp. 109-10, original emphasis; Silverman, p.114). In conclusion, we would all be living under a true ‘dictatorship of the image’ heralding ‘the demise of three-dimensional “Man”’ (p. 113).

This situation has been consolidated by the spectacular rise of the internet and other forms of information and communications technology, such as mobile telephony, which have made immaterial consumption grow exponentially (Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, p. xxiii). Hence, the leisure industry would be achieving what was formerly attempted by the cult of the Volkgeist: barring the individual from ‘access to doubt, irony, reason’, thus keeping them away from anything that might emancipate them from ‘the collective matrix’. In their infantilism, Western societies would endlessly be repeating the pop song

whose refrain Alain Finkielkraut chose to head one of the chapters of his *The Undoing of Thought*: ‘We are the world, we are the *children*’ (Finkielkraut, pp. 139, 113, my emphasis).

As all these phenomena and developments show, in the Eighties and Nineties there has been a veritable colonisation of the cultural sphere by capitalism. It is because of this that Fredric Jameson can write of the global rule of late capitalism through postmodernism as a cultural dominant (*Postmodernism*, pp. 36, 4). Thus, the social and political potential of art gets limited or annulled in the service of capital, which inspires, funds and acquires postmodern art in an extension of the free market principles to the realm of the spirit. Things being so, anything goes and everything is axiologically and aesthetically equivalent.



## Chapter 2 – Plot Summary

The novel starts with whom later turns out to be a schizophrenic ex-librarian and spiritualist, Lilah Kemp, setting free Kurtz, the character in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, into human flesh and blood. Throughout the novel, she releases some other literary characters, such as Heathcliff from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and even authors, such as Susanna Moodie. Later on she will recognise, according to her 'paralogical thinking', Conrad's narrator, Marlow, to have become incarnated in the person of a certain psychiatrist and lecturer whom she supports against his boss, none other than fellow psychiatrist Dr Rupert Kurtz (*Headhunter*, p. 36). Kurtz is the director and psychiatrist-in-chief of Toronto's very distinguished and academically elitist Parkin Institute of Psychiatric Research, of which Dr Marlow is also a member.

Several secondary narrative threads try to represent the corrupt and purposeless life that many members of Toronto's upper-middle and upper classes presumably lead. These subplots run parallel to the main one, as several of these people are among Dr Kurtz's patients. Both those who are and those who are not are depicted in similar abject terms. Apparently, life in the upper echelons of Torontonian society consists of marital infidelity, promiscuity, serious mental disorders, a proliferation of gay men and lesbians well above the average prevalence of homosexuality in Western societies, child abuse, paedophilia, abortion, incest, murder, and prostitution on board a white Cadillac that roams the leafiest neighbourhoods in town, in whose lore it is referred to as the Great White Whale (another intertextual reference, this time to Melville's *Moby Dick*). The prostitute in question, by way of an example of the novel's thorough absurdity and sensationalism, is a rich surgeon's wife. If this were not enough, we learn that this lady, once a young, hopeful and lively woman from Saskatchewan, now calls herself Emma as a token of her love for Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*; in this, she would be following Lilah Kemp's example, as the latter's life, as she herself avows, depends on 'the insides of books. This also bespeaks Emma's profound alienation, as she lives her life through fiction and films, thus trying to escape her absurd fate: after being disfigured by fire, she is modelled after his husband's own ideal of beauty, becoming his masterwork as the supreme artist of human flesh, always without her knowledge or consent. (pp. 54, 171, 33)

Dr Austin Purvis, another psychiatrist at the Parkin Institute, is unhappy because of Dr Kurz having taken over several of his cases, all of them related to wealthy patients (pp. 56, 94-96). The result of his enquiries into this issue is the discovery of several of Dr Kurz's cases having to do with sexual intercourse with teenagers, eventually leading to the mutilation and murder of at least one of them. Feeling guilty, Dr Purvis calls Dr Marlow, a colleague and a friend of his, to entrust him with the files and to warn him about Kurz's shady dealings. This said and done, he blows his brains in front of his friend.

The files and Dr Marlow's further inquiries reveal how Kurz's professional vanity and lack of ethic have made him cover up the existence of a secret society called The Club of Men. Its members have been meeting regularly for photographic porn sessions performed by teen models, first male, later on also female, for quite a long time. They eventually organise sexual encounters where their partners are the offspring of some of the club's members. One of them is the murdered youngster.

Meanwhile, Dr Kurz has been taking advantage of his exalted connections and the dark secrets he shares with them to extravagantly fund some unethical research projects and the acquisition of a very expensive, nightmarishly abject, and disturbingly violent painting by a schizophrenic artist he also treated in the past.

Coming to know that Kurtz has not gone to work for a few days, Marlow visits his boss in the latter's apartment. The man is dying from sturnusemia, a presumably contagious disease spread by birds. It is actually another cover-up, in which Kurz is also involved: in this case we are dealing with a deadly virus, the by-product of a powerful pharmaceutical company's research programme gone wrong, which is killing people by the hundreds. After Marlow leaves, Kurz dies. Lilah Kemp can at last close *Heart of Darkness* with a sigh of relief. The reader can do the same with *Headhunter*, happily relieved, too.

## Chapter 3 – Thematic Analysis: Postmodern Romance

### 3.1 – Jameson’s Postmodernism (and Postmodernity)

*Headhunter* could be defined as a postmodern romance on social and moral decline in contemporary Western society. The most paradigmatically postmodern of the three works studied in this thesis (considering Beckett’s *Three Novels* to be a single work), it is characterised, from its very first line, by features such as metafiction and pastiche. In its study, I will be following perhaps the most celebrated critical theory of postmodernism, namely Marxist scholar Fredric Jameson’s. By saying this, I want to imply a negative criticism, already hinted at by calling Findley’s work a romance, rather than a novel: in it, Findley is not only quoting pre-existing, available material belonging to that genre, but he is also incorporating its conventions (melodrama, sensationalism, long-winded imagination,...) into his work’s very substance (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 2-3). In this, *Headhunter* is evidence to the ‘end of style’ predicated of the postmodern novel, whereby style, always related to radical values in modernism, now dissolves into ‘postmodernist codes’, thus contributing to a ‘stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm.’ (p. 17) Overlong, unbalanced, unfocused, Manichean, absurdly violent, it accords perfectly with the conceptual core of Jameson’s definition of postmodernism, which incorporates not only aesthetic, but also social and economic features of what other theorists and authors, as we already saw, call postmodernity.

Thus, for Jameson, postmodernism is the cultural dominant of late capitalism. Beyond its most salient stylistic features, eclecticism and demotic accessibility, *Headhunter* would arguably be a perfect instance of the aesthetic as integrated into commodity production in our post-industrial society: Findley would be a popular writer ‘both in aesthetic terms and in sales’, whose works, ‘at first glance’, might seem to be ‘more surface than depth’, the epitome of postmodern authorship (pp. 2-3).<sup>581</sup> In fact, as a bestseller by a celebrated and

---

<sup>581</sup> Herb Wylie, ‘It’s Just a Story: Postmodernism, Politics, and Findley’s Italics’, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 33.4 (1998-99), 63-74 (pp. 64-65, 73).

canonised author, *Headhunter* might well illustrate the case for marketing taking precedence over production in postmodernism (Butler, *Postmodernism*, p. 115).

In the following epigraphs, I will be (loosely) following Jameson's exposition of some of the constitutive features of the postmodern, as exemplified by Findley's novel.

### 3.2 – Depthlessness and Simulacrum

In the postmodern, the divide existing between high and low art, so typical of elitist high modernism, crashes down. Marked by a prominently visual nature and by profound structural discontinuities, *Headhunter* comes across as a sequence of film-like scenes featuring many secondary, archetypal characters, which makes its plot come very near the script of a grade-B movie (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 2). Spineless and rather flat, these often listless, unhappy characters make up the portrait of a corrupt and degenerate upper class in a cartoon-like, dystopian Toronto. This happens presumably in the near future, yet one clearly redolent of the cultural conditions existing in the 1980s or early 1990s.<sup>582</sup> The characters pullulate throughout the first half of the novel without necessarily making it through to its second half, allowing several subplot threads to be extinguished without any conclusion. Hence, if *Headhunter* can be described as 'multi-vocalic', it should be added that quite often it is inconclusively so (Pearson, p. 118)<sup>583</sup>. In the second half, the main

Anne Geddes Bailey, and Karen Grady, 'Introduction', *Studies on Canadian Writing*, 64 (1998), pp. 1-9 (p. 2).

Theo D'haen classifies Findley as a 'magical realist': 'Postmodernisms: From Fantastic to Magic Realist', in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), pp. 283-93 (p. 288).

See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 11-12, for 'depth models'.

<sup>582</sup> Jeffrey S. Bull, 'Giving the Sickness a Name: Reading Timothy Findley's *Headhunter* and Walker Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome* as Diagnostic Fictions', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 33.4 (1998-99), 153-65 (p. 153).

<sup>583</sup> Wendy Pearson, 'Vanishing Acts II: Queer Reading(s) of Timothy Findley's *Headhunter* and *Not Wanted on the Voyage*', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 33.4 (1998-99), 114-31 (p. 118).

A perfect example of these inconclusive subplots is that of James Gatz, a mysterious, attractive man, who made his way into the highest professional and social circles through something close to prostitution. This was so despite a humble childhood in rural Texas, during which he was abused by his father. After an unhappy marriage to a woman who has a past of incestuous relations with her father behind her, we learn that, after luring Emma Berry, the Great White Whale's high-end prostitute into his mansion, somebody who had been waiting for him shoots him dead. We are not told by whom exactly or why. In fact, we will be told nothing else at all henceforth (*Headhunter*, p. 232). In actual fact, as a morbid, sensationalist version of Scott

storyline, which is a sort of derisive adaptation of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to our contemporary time, sinks down under the dead weight of some pretentious and absurd moralising (Wyile, p. 66). Despite this lofty purpose, standing on the 'frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture,' the novel barely deserves the status of paraliterature: airport stuff (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 2). For all of its child abuse, incest, adultery, murders and suicides galore, regardless of its ultra-violent nature, the novel, signed by one of the staples in any course on modern Canadian literature, could not scandalise the most candid of readers. Tedious and dishearteningly written, Findley's romance is ultimately buttressed by nothing but the Baudrillardian code.

### 3.3 – Weakening of Historicity. Historiographic Metafiction

Time, one of the main concerns of the modernists in the fashion of 'durée' or memory, is superseded by space in the postmodern, where intensities define a new kind of vital experience focused on the here and now, in a schizophrenic 'private temporality' utterly disassociated from a future which is also characterised by the moment's intensity: 'Time is obsolete. History has ended'. Hence, we would be living in the 'synchronic rather than the diachronic.' (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 6, 16)<sup>584</sup> In this way, the evocation of the 1980s AIDS plague by way of a fictional contagious disease spread by birds (sturnusemia), as well as the proliferation of gay and lesbian characters in the novel, has above all an allegorical nature, and will achieve nothing but add up to historical confusion in that it also evokes the urban lore and the speculations that in the first years of the pandemic tried to make some sense of what was happening: if AIDS was then a God-sent punishment for homosexual vice or a biological weapon created by the US industrial-military complex, sturnusemia is now presented as Nature's revenge against our destructive civilisation, exemplified by the pharmaceutical industry.<sup>585</sup> In any case, the allusions made to AIDS,

---

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, there is no need to: it is but an instance of the superficial play of intertextuality in the novel, in which the reader is expected to provide his own knowledge of literary history for the sake of interpretation. More importantly, especially in the case of a lack of such knowledge on the reader's part, it simply provides an element of 'decorative overlay'.

<sup>584</sup> Ursula K. Heise, as quoted in Slocombe, p. 275.

<sup>585</sup> There could be a counter-argument to that confusion, though, which is explained by Mark Currie when he thinks of the cognitive import and epistemological relevance of fiction if compared to history: literature

just as the general evocation of an era of utter laissez-faire and everyone-for-themselves, places the novel squarely in Hutcheon's typically postmodern category of historiographic metafiction.<sup>586</sup>

More adequate for building up a sense of historicity in the narration are some elements which place us in the middle of a post-industrial service economy and society: for starters, all through the novel its characters belong to the upper class inhabiting the leafiest suburbs of Canada's major metropolis, Toronto. Characteristically enough and in some cases, especially in the first half of the work, which seemingly purports to convincingly portray this social milieu, many characters are members of the boards of some of Canada's most important companies. Very significantly, though, they are not self-made entrepreneurs, captains of industry and commerce; rather, they are major stockholders engaging in speculation or finance, lacking the active, conquering spirit of their forebears. What is more, in many cases they are traumatised for life by their ancestors' overbearing presence in childhood. As the narrator puts it, a majority of the higher echelons of Toronto's society would come down to a dozen great men and a two or maybe three dozen women who bequeathed millions and a history of operative violence to their descendants (p. 68). Modern agency is thus succeeded by postmodern passivity, where the subject is no longer a unified, cohesive ego bent on fashioning Nature after his wishes, but a conflicted, fragmented one without a historical role to fulfil.

That their offspring are no match for their ancestors shows in the story of the man who defeated Kurtz in their battle after the woman he was in love with: despite his victory over Kurtz, and convinced that a real man's destiny is 'bearing arms against everything else that lived', he altogether deserted her and civilisation, which he took for a prison, disappearing

---

might be able to give us 'a more general kind of truth than history' because of 'its ability to balance the universal and particular properties of the objects or events it describes.' More than that, in our time, fiction would be 'especially adapted to the enactment of the uncertainty, or provisionality, that characterises contemporary attitudes to history.' (p. 77)

<sup>586</sup> In rather vague terms, in my opinion, Linda Hutcheon describes historiographic metafiction as 'those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages', incorporating 'theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs'. Being both 'self-conscious about its literary heritage and about the limits of mimesis', they manage to 'reconnect its readers to the world outside the page'. In so doing, they allow to rethink and rework 'the forms and contents of the past.' As a typically postmodern genre, it embodies double-coding in that they attempt to bridge 'the gap between elite and popular art' (*Poetics*, pp. 5, 20).

for ever in Amazonia (*Headhunter*, pp. 90-91). Like the father of one of Kurtz's clients, led to his practice by his impotence, the phallus is for that self-exiled maverick something more literal than mere masculine authority and social mastery: one could also imagine him holding 'his privates' in his hands and telling his son '*these rule the world*':

That my father should believe such things was the mark-so he told me-of the self-made man. Not for him, *submit or perish*. Never. He fought his way out-and those who didn't fight did not get out because *they lacked the boots and the brains-the balls and the brass-to throw off their chains-and get off their ass!* [...] His bulk in a robe was terrifying. He once exposed himself to me-held up his privates in his hands and said *these rule the world-don't you forget it!*

(p. 141, original emphasis).

In effect, through his disappearance in the jungle never to come back, Kurtz's rival could be considered an escapist character, unwilling or unable to bear the brunt of his exalted social position. Nonetheless, he would be an exception among many other male characters, who are just traumatised by such imposing examples of the ego ideal, as becomes manifest in many subplots in the first half of the book. In these, sex is the core, and rather than powerful male figures, it is dominant women (in some cases big heiresses in their own right who use weak men as a mere means to come by more money and power) who are their main agents.

For the rest, the second half of the book deals in savage careerism focusing on a fictional medical institution where some of the most prestigious professionals in the field of psychiatry systematically take hazardous gambles in a desperate attempt after higher positions, prestige and funds. These will moreover come to happen through patronage of the arts, bonding both professional groups tightly against a bloody background of sex crime and suicide in the heart of the jungle of asphalt (and in green, ecological Toronto and its ravines, too).<sup>587</sup> This is an era of late capitalism in a post-industrial world where media,

---

<sup>587</sup> The most brutal scene of careerism comes in the first half of the novel, in one of the inconclusive, cinematic sketches it mainly consists of. When flying on one of his business trips, Griffin Price, a secondary character and an epitome of postmodern entrepreneurship (he has just acquired a Czech factory specialising in the production of fake Eskimo souvenirs), exchanges a few conversational remarks with a young man sitting next to him. Although it appears that he is a lawyer specialising in corporate banking, it is very clear to

information and services in general spread world-wide for the benefit of an amoral, decadent high bourgeoisie of connoisseurs and dilettantes. Their society is ‘left with no transcendent ethos to provide some appropriate sense of purpose, no anchorages that can provide stable meanings for people.’<sup>588</sup> Like in Beckett’s *Trilogy* and Ballard’s *Crash*, we are treading yet again on nihilistic territory.

Furthermore, despite the recentness of the evoked period, real historicity, a living sense of the past eludes us throughout the novel. Considering this temporal dimension, all we get is the depthlessness and superficiality of aesthetic stylisation. In this way, the novel focuses on several archetypal characters and behaviours which are conventionally represented in order to define an already imagined past: the time of Reagan-Thatcherism, everyone for themselves, and winners trampling on the heads of those who fall down.<sup>589</sup> Reality deserves more than this sort of pop historicisation, this caricatural soap opera resulting in a loss of historical sense to the benefit of hysterical exaggeration.

And yet, the novel’s reconstruction of this era of egotism seems much more vivid than that of a time of hope and illusion it also purports to portray and from which it is not much more chronologically distant: the 1960s, the swan song of late modernism.

### 3.4 – Schizo-Intensities: A New Emotional Ground Tone

Postmodern intensities obey the same temporal principle as schizophrenia, according to Jameson: the succession and continuity between the present, the past and the future are dissolved in the conflation of them all in a single point of time. There, the intensity of experience is only equalled by its hallucinogenic power and by its disconnection with anything else. Such intensities would therefore be defined by their ecstatic and static,

---

the young man what the key to success in his line of trade is: ‘you kiss ass, you suck cock, you get fucked. You smile.’ (*Headhunter*, p. 29, original emphasis)

<sup>588</sup> Daniel Bell, ‘The Coming of Post-Industrial Society’, in Cahoone (ed.), pp. 423-36 (p.434)

<sup>589</sup> Most of that time coincided with what we could call the ‘Mulroney years in Canada’: Diana Brydon, ‘Intertextuality in Timothy Findley’s *Headhunter*’, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 33.4 (1998-99), pp. 53-62 (p. 59).



sublime ‘presentness’ (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 5-6, 16, 34). That this is precisely the tenor of *Headhunter* concerning life experience and time organisation shows in the fact that one of the secondary characters, who later becomes instrumental in the plot climax, is no other than a schizophrenic patient, Lilah Kemp. These are the very terms according to which she describes her life, feeling ‘entirely fragmented’ and ‘disconnected’, as if ‘floating in water.’ (*Headhunter*, pp. 36, 47)

Furthermore, this could be perfectly subsumed under what Jameson calls the postmodern phenomena of the ‘derealization of [...] everyday reality,’ and ‘the alienation of daily life in the city [...] in the form of a strange new hallucinatory exhilaration’ bordering on the experience of the sublime (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 34). We would be living in what Aldous Huxley calls ‘a perpetual present made up of a continually changing apocalypse.’ (Ansell Pearson and Morgan (eds.), p. xvi) This connection with the sublime would be exemplified, according to Baudrillard, by a particular kind of ‘terror proper to the schizophrenic’, which would originate in ‘too great a proximity of everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance.’<sup>590</sup>

This schizophrenic sublime would be, alongside nihilism, a vital component of postmodernism (Slocombe, p. 310). In fact, Lilah Kemp is as spot-on about postmodernism and postmodernity as Jameson himself, as he recognises that ‘alienation’ is not an ‘appropriate’ category to describe postmodernity, Lilah’s fragmentation (as we have just seen) being more exact in terms of the categorial depiction of the new ‘emotional ground tone’: ‘the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter’s fragmentation.’ (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 33-34, 6, 14).<sup>591</sup>

If Lilah’s experience as a schizophrenic were not enough in *Headhunter*, we come across a second schizophrenic, Amy Wylie, whose ‘aberrant behaviour’, also presumably related to the fragmentation of her sense of self and time, gets her interned in the Parkin Institute every now and then as a multiple transgressor against the laws forbidding to feed

---

<sup>590</sup> Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Ecstasy of Communication’, trans. by John Johnston, in Foster (ed.), pp. 126-34 (p. 132).

<sup>591</sup> Fragmentation would differ from alienation in its being non-cognitive (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 159).

birds, the main putative agents of the spreading of sturnusemia (*Headhunter*, p. 18). All that has been said about Lilah also applies to her case.

The only alternative to this instant consummation and utter disconnection of experience in the novel is related to its main character, Dr Kurtz, whose existential project is revealed at the end of the novel to have been one focused on acquiring absolute power over the Torontonian elite, which retrospectively sheds light on his behaviour all through *Headhunter*. In his long-term goals and strategies, he would be closer to the ‘unification and organization of the personality’ so common to modernism, especially in the many modernist instances of the ‘Bildung’ genre, than to the clearly postmodern portrayal of the schizophrenic characters (Butler, *Modernism*, p. 70). However, this alleged instantiation of *durée* is belied by its constructed and above all inauthentic nature. Apart from the trauma this character drags for the rest of his life, which derives from his Oedipal conflict with an overbearing, demanding, demeaning and unsympathetic father, there is nothing that could help him build up his life on the foundations of any ideals or personal convictions, as should be the case in a modernist portrait: all there is, leaving aside his memory of emotional abuse in childhood, which briefly flashes up here and there, is an obsession with power and a more and more pressing thirst for money (*Headhunter*, p. 65). His life, therefore, would not be guided by a personal plan or project proper, but by a number of obsessions guiding his compulsive behaviour.

In addition to this, depicted as a grey, ageless character always dressed up in the same cadaver of a three-piece-suited man who dyes his hair and who ‘had died young’, he is not immune from falling prey to the highly perturbing intensities besieging his otherwise repressed libido (p. 56). This shows, for example, in the unexpected and shameful erection he gets on seeing a viciously violent picture hanging from the walls of an art gallery. The painting in question, of course, was painted by a schizophrenic artist, an old client (not a patient, mind, in Kurtz’s highly peculiar professional terminology) of his.

### 3.5 – The Postmodern’s Relations to Physicality

Although one of postmodernism’s main features, according to Jameson, is its relation to technology, it is clear in *Headhunter* that, unlike in Ballard’s *Crash*, sex and violence,

which are as prominent as in that novel, are not mediated by technology but rather by power and sheer male physicality. In this, it is as though Findley were following some modernist mythology whose kernel would be manhood as expressed through primordial, naked, bodily energies, as in D.H. Lawrence's or in Ernst Jünger's work.<sup>592</sup> Sometimes, the narrative role of this powerful male physicality is enhanced by reference to feral, male-associated landscapes.<sup>593</sup>

Very often this evocation (or sheer fascination, as we will see later) of male physical power as a catalyst and an agent for the most violent behaviour, especially in the field of sexuality, is related to abjection. If we follow Kristeva's thought, abjection in *Headhunter* would derive from the Oedipal conflict, of which we have just given an example concerning Dr. Kurz's childhood. Apart from the proliferation of violent, overbearing fathers that will attack their offspring physically on occasion (there are also cases of even incest and offspring-murdering), mothers are not better off in Findley's violent romance (e.g., pp. 222, 447, 486, 488). Situated within a generally diffident position towards women, which often comes close to misogyny, the author almost invariably presents mothers as either aggressive, promiscuous gold-diggers in constant quest of yet more money and status; or phallic, cannibalistic ones living 'for death' (and whose very surname, in one specific case, is Manly), who verbally assault their sons' girlfriends in expensive restaurants, their hands and lips greasy with seafood (pp. 112-13); or bellicose crones who advocate a concept of masculinity that includes war as the duty, the privilege and actually the joy of real men (p. 284); or conflicted alcoholics who could only breed women, one of her daughters being a schizophrenic and yet another big with a foetus she intends to abort.<sup>594</sup> Like in Beckett's *Molloy*, in *Headhunter* 'matriarchs lusting for power hold sway', too (*POH*, p. 20). Under such circumstances, it will come as no surprise that many of the secondary characters in the book are psychologically scarred (unlike in

---

<sup>592</sup> In the former's case, and among others, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*; in the latter's and for example, *Der Arbeiter*.

<sup>593</sup> Such as those of Texas, the birthplace of one of the secondary characters, James Gatz, about whom I already wrote in an earlier note.

<sup>594</sup> That women can make men accountable for their war traumas is not strange within the discursive universe of 'the very rich' of Toronto's Rosedale community, as depicted by Findley: as the narrator makes clear, this would be 'founded on wealth [...] generated by two world wars.' (*Headhunter*, pp. 303-04) The wars fought by the strong men behind their weak, traumatised descendants.

Ballard's world, psychopathologies are not benign in Findley's fictional universe), and that their sexuality expresses itself in flawed, twisted, and often violent ways.

One could speculate about this latent misogyny of Findley's being derived from his homosexuality and an ambivalent attitude towards femininity: these abject females are countered by a few positive female characters whom the third person, omniscient narrator of *Headhunter* is obviously sympathetic with. These women, however, tend to be sexually inactive, as it is the case with both schizophrenics Lilah Kemp and Amy Wylie, or they are platonically in love with their bosses and clearly somewhat frustrated, like Oona Kilbride and, above all, Bella Orenstein, Dr Purvis' personal assistant and secretary (*Headhunter*, pp. 92-93, 97, 319). This could be argued as an instance of fear or straight horror of the female condition and its sexuality, even in these more positively depicted characters.

Thus, for instance, Lilah, who seems to be the most positive female character in the novel, confirms rather than contradicts the negative connotations that motherhood is characterised by throughout *Headhunter*: we only have to think of her pathetic wheeling around her schizophrenia-born son, whom she rather distressingly (and postmodernly, intertextually) calls Linton (p. 33). In fact, although this does not seem to be stressed by Findley, or not in a negative way at least, Lilah could easily be construed, along with her mother, as a consummated example of 'the horror of their sex' in that they evoke one of the most historically abhorred and therefore abject traits of the female condition in our Western patriarchal culture: witchcraft. They are both said to be able to *raise the dead*, even if this is only metaphorical; even Susannah Moodie (who can be summoned by Lilah, or else unexpectedly appears to her every now and then) is charged with having the same powers, although in her case they are quite clearly related to her being a poet, a creative writer (pp. 25-26, 35, 49). Lilah's biologically and culturally abject heritage implies, therefore, like in Beckett's *Three Novels*, a problematisation not only of fatherhood but also of motherhood in Findley's romance. Nothing solid or comforting may be built upon this, either.

With regard to this, there are some points of contact between this novel and Beckett's *Molloy Trilogy*, where mothers, or women in general, and their sexuality are seen from a distant, defensive angle and viciously deprecated in figures such as *Malone Dies*' decrepit Sucky Molly. Other coincidences could be the similitude between the stillborn child of one

of the Wylie girls, who is preserved in a jar in a Torontonion medical school, and Mahood, the Unnamable's unlikely spherical, fleshy avatar living in a jar at the entrance of a restaurant (p. 21). Both would share the same allegorical meaning as representatives of the banality of coming to being, human or otherwise. In addition to this, *Headhunter's* pervasive, strongly abject imagery and thematics sometimes overlaps with Ballard's in *Crash*, too. We could bring to mind the same pregnant Wylie woman, who, on an occasion she is sitting somewhere, feels something running down her thighs, only to discover, not very clearly whether with relief or regret, that it is only urine (*Headhunter*, p. 23). This scene would not be very far, in terms of abjection, from the one in *Crash* where Seagrave pretends to be breastfeeding his son. It might be noted, though, that where Ballard tends to come across as stylised, imaginatively bizarre and sometimes nearly surreal, Findley is often crude, raw, and consequently much more openly abject.

In any case, despite Findley's problematising of both fatherhood and motherhood, and in spite of his unflattering depiction of womanhood in *Headhunter*, it is the male condition that suffers more from Findley's explorations of sex and gender in his novel. This could be explained by the dual origin of the factors besieging manhood here: firstly, maleness would come across as conceptually or structurally precarious, not only because it can solely be perceived as such 'in its difference from its female Other', as we have seen throughout this thesis, but also and secondly, because of the omnipresence of weak male characters and the proliferation of aggressively self-assertive, especially perverse homosexuality (Reader, p. 205). The most outstanding example of this last phenomenon would be the Club of Men, whose members are true apostates of those corollaries of the conventional manhood they have always had to put up with as upper-class individuals: heterosexual marriage and fatherhood.

Another point of contact, this time only implicitly, concerning abject imagery in both *Crash* and *Headhunter* is related to one of the most crucial explorers of abjection and the human condition in modern art, Francis Bacon. Thus, if we associated Bacon's howling figures with some especially violent, degraded and abject scenes in *Crash*, this link becomes explicit in Findley's novel. Thus, not only does his work hang from the walls of one of the most disturbed clients (yet again, not 'patients') of Dr Kurtz's, Robert Ireland, where it seems to bellow 'for the last breath', but also art gallerist Fabiana Holbach, Dr Kurtz's frustrated love interest in his youth, holds a PhD whose thesis had the Anglo-Irish

painter as its object (*Headhunter*, pp. 209, 52). Fabiana's appreciation of Bacon is quite rich as to its meaning in a postmodern context: regardless of her sincere interest in art, Bacon's work was by the time of *Headhunter*'s publication one of the most expensive commodities in the international modern art market evoked in Findley's novel.<sup>595</sup>

The depiction of great (and not so great) art not only as commodity, but also as a path leading to the deification of fashionable artists and designers as pop stars would also be one of the historical features of the 1980s, the AIDS age, to be evoked in *Headhunter*. Thus, Bacon will be the blueprint for the development of a fictional successor, the so-called Mengele of art, Julian Slade, another client of Dr Kurtz's, as we will see later. Slade passes for an enfant terrible of the world of painting, behaving in the most impossibly childish way at the opening of an exhibition of his work in Fabiana's gallery. He gives her a piece of written communication to be read out to the exhibition's audience. Quite significantly, on such a public occasion, surrounded by Toronto's elite, he will advocate for his horribly violent scenes in the following way: '*You will see here...savage acts which have been done too long in the darkness. It is my belief they should be done in the light. And to that end-these paintings.*' (p. 77, original emphasis) In this way, Slade's work, born of an even deeper darkness than the one across which Molloy and Moran dragged themselves in Ireland's woods, contributes to postmodernity's inertial tendency to finally invade and colonise the remaining areas still not contaminated by abjection and nihilism in Western civilisation. Postmodern art therefore, as embodied by the work of this extreme painter, has nothing in common with what art was considered to be for the centuries during which humanism held sway over the West. To the humanist meanings articulated by artistic discourse from the Renaissance on, Spade's (and Bacon's, and Lucian Freud's, and many others') 'overwhelmingly sexual' art opposes bodies 'exposed as if prepared for manipulation and consumption.' (pp. 78-79) If we add to this the undoubtedly commercial dimension of art, its utter commodification during postmodernity has significantly contributed to the 'leakage of meaning' experienced in Western culture since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which art had previously sought to resist (Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, p. 26).

---

<sup>595</sup> See for example <<https://news.artnet.com/market/francis-bacon-pope-painting-auction-306033>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

Of Slade's previous artistic exploits, we are told how he once had to leave the country on charges of '*showing indignities against the human body*' after staging an exhibition where his at the same time very physically abject and conceptual paintings ingeniously 'bled'. The exhibition had been presided over by a self-portrait in which he brandished a flaying knife. Already in exile, we are told, he gave himself, very appropriately, to the study of Goya, on whose abject progeny we already commented while dealing with *Crash (Headhunter*, p. 69). It might have been thence that one of his paintings, hanging on Robert Ireland's walls, drew his inspiration, as his main figure, 'clothed in shreds', is significantly compared to a 'Goya torture victim.' (p. 210)

Alongside Slade, probably the most perturbing example of abjection in the whole novel is the group of distressed, traumatised, numb, mostly semi-catatonic children and teenagers kept in the Parkin under the supervision of one of Kurtz's subordinates, Dr Eleanor Farjeon, who dies, presumably at their hands, by having her head torn off her body (p. 463).<sup>596</sup> On several occasions, these godforsaken patients are portrayed in abject situations, such as one in which they are shown masturbating each other in public, with an utterly self-engrossed, passionless, absent, autistic, affectless attitude. Not in vain are they 'bereft of language', therefore confined in abjection's motherland, where the only language left for them is that of 'pain and rage.' Institutionalised, not even the soothing, pre-symbolic rhythms of the maternal chora are thus available to them, utterly deprived of individual identity, all of them pressed into one, 'amoebic.' (pp. 178-81)

All this violent, abject imagery may have its origin in an unconscious fear of the 'always-threatening return' of the fragmentation implicit in the fragile, vacillating subjectivity rising from the Lacanian mirror phase, which is reinforced by the 'fragmented undercurrent to subjectivity' implicit in postmodernity (Donald E. Hall, p. 83). This fear would be behind the novel's frequent evocation of what Lacan calls 'imagos of the fragmented body,' such as those images dealing with 'castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body', so common, for instance, in Julian Slade's paintings (Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 85). Through him (and his real life's counterparts, such as Bacon or Lucian Freud), we connect with a pictorial

---

<sup>596</sup> That these children are to all intents and purposes 'numb' quite befits the manifestation of trauma as 'damage to the symbolic order', therefore also to language, its very core (Crosthwaite, p. 25).

tradition having the fragmented body and the ‘aggressive disintegration of the individual’ as its privileged subject. This tradition would already have reached ‘the imaginary zenith of modern man’ as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the person of Hieronymus Bosch, whose work would have been ‘strictly correlative to the emergence of modern subjectivity’ (p. 78). In Slade’s horror of torn muscles, jumbled, mauled trunks and severed limbs, we can see an actualisation of the ‘Lacanian “Monstrous”’ already present in Bosch. Slavoj Zizek defines this theoretical concept as ‘a pre-ontological universe of the “night of the world” in which partial objects wander in a state preceding any synthesis’.<sup>597</sup> This echoes Molloy and Moran’s nocturnal wanderings through the dark forests of the unconscious as imagined by Beckett half a century earlier. We are in the presence of a postmodern sublime defined by Lyotard as ‘the feeling of something monstrous. Das Uniform. Formless.’<sup>598</sup>

### 3.6 – Waning of Affect in Postmodernity

This postmodern narrative feature, which we already saw in our analysis of *Crash*, is related by Jameson to the superficial play of intertextuality in postmodern art and culture, where depth is systematically replaced by surface and a ‘decorative overlay’. This makes narrative proliferate ‘at the expense of any “transcendent” meaning of the text’, thus embodying postmodernism’s denial of all ‘teleological forms.’ (*Postmodernism*, p. 10; Slocombe, pp. 273, 279) Having commodified both object and human subject in addition to the social order, the postmodern text turns them into mere images of themselves, making style not only impersonal, but also getting rid of any emotional charge, all feeling being ousted from it (Silverman, p. 111). In literature, this intertextuality proceeds along with pure pastiche, where the styles of the past are taken advantage of as a readily available source, in a very similar way to what we saw when studying Heidegger’s concepts of *Ge-stell* and *Bestand*.

---

<sup>597</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 1999; repr. 2000), pp. 49-50.

<sup>598</sup> As cited in Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2004), p. 274.



This is what Findley does when portraying the members of the so-called Club of Men, a club of well-to-do, perverted paedophilic voyeurs with a penchant for mutilation and murder, as a bunch of stereotypical sexual psychopaths and villains worthy of any recent B-grade Hollywood erotic thriller. These characters are instrumental in developing the novel's main storyline, as its climax revolves around their assassination of the son of one of the club members and the discovery of Kurtz's shady misdeeds in covering them up. In fact, he will go well beyond this: he will provide them with a still officially unauthorised drug called 'Obedion'. An important pharmaceutical company, which has suborned Kurtz, is underhandedly delivering it for him to test. The ones to be instrumentalised and made docile in this way are the models paid for the Club's photographic sessions, among whom we can find some of the members' sons and daughters. George Shapiro, the assassinated boy, was one of them. Kurtz does all this for the sake of ever greater power and funds for his institute's inhumane experiments.<sup>599</sup> A real headhunter, as Lilah sees him in her obsession with *Heart of Darkness*, for Kurtz spring is the exciting season of experiments: the hunting season (*Headhunter*, p. 60).

Findley's ultimately humanist moral stance is rather weak and compromised when opposed to these affectless perverts, if we are to consider how their depiction, which depends on a full panoply of conventional fetishes, seems to activate some implicit, unconscious complicity in the author, as we will examine later. These fetishes include leather gloves, sunglasses, knives, razorblades and other sadomasochist paraphernalia, which some of the members even display before Kurtz when in the latter's practice (p. 395). More specifically, of Slade we are told

He carried knives and scissors in his pocket and, when he took his pick-ups home, the first thing he did was cut their clothing from their bodies [...] He played at terror all the way through the end of orgasm'

(p. 207)

---

<sup>599</sup> Incidentally, these experiments were inspired by real ones not too different from those in *Headhunter*: see Sabrina Reed, 'Murder by Milligrams: Enhancement Technologies and Therapeutic Zeal in Timothy Findley's *Headhunter*', *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 33 (2012), 161-73 (p. 163)

Aside from this, the club's members, in their 'diminished ability to feel', are a mere cypher, flat electroencephalograms providing a background for the scenes related to the club (Bull, p. 153).<sup>600</sup> It feels as though such a stance towards sex and its literary depiction could have no alternative in a city (and a civilisation) where fatal, affectless sadomasochism is in the air, a blizzard, for example, being the unlikely pretext for a wave of rapes and beatings (*Headhunter*, p. 217). We would not be very far away from Ballard's London and its widespread self-punitive mood in *Crash*. Both would be examples of the 'normlessness, alienation, bureaucratization and madness' of the postmodern urban condition (Jenks, *Culture*, p. 181).

Kurtz also has his own McGuffin in the aforementioned 'Obedion', a name that might have been thought of by the script writers of any Z-grade Hollywood horror film of the 1940s or 1950s. However, this name might also be interpreted as quite fitting after all, since Kurtz's main motivation, as revealed at the end of the novel, will be, of course, his immoderate thirst for transcending himself beyond Good and Evil as a sort of lesser, corrupt god always craving for mastery (Bull, p. 157). As Étienne de la Boétie memorably wrote nearly four and a half centuries before the publication of *Headhunter*:

it has always happened that tyrants, in order to strengthen their power, have made every effort to train their people not only in *obedience* and servility toward themselves, but also in *adoration*.<sup>601</sup>

Nevertheless, it might be that in his claim for attenuation of responsibility (he was just 'lost'), Kurtz is not so far away from both the executioners of the Club of Men and their victims: if the former were possessed by a similar feeling of mastery over the models, and more specifically their children, the latter did what they did not just because of the drugs they were given, but also on account of their greed and because they craved their parents, as Kurtz puts it (*Headhunter*, pp. 499, 504). These, in turn, the bunch of 'faggots' self-

---

<sup>600</sup> Thus, one of them, Robert Ireland, is a university lecturer in History specialised in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, who will always deliver the same lectures verbatim without ever looking up from the lectern (*Headhunter*, p. 123). Without his dark glasses, razorblades and other sadistic accoutrements, he is just a zombie (pp. 163-65).

<sup>601</sup> Étienne de la Boétie, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. by Harry Kurz (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2008), p. 69 (my emphasis).

styled as the Club of Men, could also pass for a very peculiar embodiment of postmodern sex: sex with ‘the safest fuck in town’, your own children (p. 447).<sup>602</sup> Considering that one of his members is even capable of stealing underwear from his hosts when invited round, it will not be so hard to believe their common determination to mould their children according to their needs, that is to say their perverted, narcissistic, fetishist, voyeuristic, affectless desires, at any cost (pp. 58-59, 433-34). Thus, they would not even have to wear a condom in the age of AIDS (or of sturnusemia for that matter); everything, of course, while compulsorily wearing a jacket and tie (pp. 354, 447).

Detached and isolated from each other, they all might be just as ‘lost’ in their egotism and maybe in their megalomania as their common master, a man whose flat alarm system would only respond to passwords such as “ME”, “MYSELF” or “I” (p. 64, original emphasis).<sup>603</sup> These passwords would stand for the ‘great Me’ that, alongside power and pleasure, would reinforce each other in every Western person, thus making of violence a constant hazard in our culture.<sup>604</sup> Hence, the desire for mastery, expressible through different forms, would be just a common trait of our affectless, postmodern civilisation, as well as a piece of evidence of the ‘moral vacuum’ where sex is being practised today (Bull, p. 153; Weeks, *Discontents*, p. 3). It might as well be legitimately concluded that it is ‘an entire society’ that would be killing its children (Pearson, p. 118). In the extreme postmodernism of *Headhunter*, feelings of mercy and compassion, even for oneself, may have gone a long time ago.

---

<sup>602</sup> For the Club of Men as one of ‘faggots’, its members could very well exemplify Freud’s notion that all single-sex institutions are ultimately based on blocked and rechannelled homosexual feelings, which are then sublimated into some kind of amorphous emotions of solidarity allowing to build a sense of brotherhood among its members: Weeks, *Sexuality*, pp. 1, 78.

<sup>603</sup> As opposed to the members of Vaughan’s cell in *Crash*, the Club of Men’s, along with other characters belonging to the leafy, privileged world depicted in *Headhunter*, would embody the quintessential egotism characteristic of postmodernity’s sway over Suburbia or, even more simply, that of passive nihilism. Hence, if Vaughan and his people want to lose themselves from themselves through their cult and courting of car crashes, wounds, mutilation and death, Emma Berry’s clients will be safely taken ‘back full circle to themselves’ after the danger they expose themselves to by allowing themselves to be blown to heaven at the back of the Great White Whale (*Headhunter*, pp. 224, 229).

<sup>604</sup> Michel Meyer, *Philosophy and the Passions: Toward a History of Human Nature*, trans. by Robert Barsky, Literature and Philosophy (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2000), p. 5.

### 3.7 – Nostalgia for Modernism

Findley's moral failure can also be seen in the scene which, in my view, is the main vehicle for the novel's discursive core. This scene would correspond to the narrator's, and ultimately the author's take on contemporary society and culture as defended by their mouthpiece and Lilah's former teacher while at university, Prof. Fagan. This is yet another superficially portrayed character, a nostalgic of the ideological and stylistic positivities of modernism, if not something worse: a representative of modernism's nostalgia for a truth that is coveted, yet regrettably no longer accessible 'at the level of the signifier.' (Belsey, p. 102)<sup>605</sup> He is chosen and dearly paid by whom he rightly considers to be a couple of uneducated and insensitive nouveaux riches to deliver a prestigious lecture bearing the name of these plutocrats. In that his vision is not only nostalgic, but also acknowledges the unavoidability of this state of things, to which he ultimately yields, regardless of his irony and apparent wisdom, the whole scene is as pointless and inane as Fagan's discourse.

Furthermore, the core of intellectual and moral convictions of this professor, whom I see as an outside character, not less stereotypical than their 'Pat and Mike' patrons, is perfectly conventional, too. This can be concluded if we take a look at his personal letter to Lilah once the lecture is over; here, he comes across as an all-too-sweet, yet also regretting old sage, all love and good intentions for his ancient pupil, herself a shadow of a character, all schizophrenic antics and delusions. What real human warmth can be recreated in such a way?

The same question could be posed with regard to yet another scene which purports to evoke a warm relationship, the unlikely and unexpected friendship between two utterly different neighbours, namely a prestigious psychiatrist and a schizophrenic who believes she has woken up Joseph Conrad's Kurtz into contemporary Toronto. Despite the author's intentions, their friendship scenes remain wholly and literally unbelievable: quite simply, they are superficial, therefore no achieved evocation of psychological and moral wholeness is made. A professional's compassion for the different does not seem to be the most solid

---

<sup>605</sup> This inaccessibility of truth originates in the rejection of the values of realism, which is denounced as 'the effect of a trick'. Postmodernists will celebrate this impossibility of truth as a foundation for absolute freedom: authority and other certainties having been undermined, postmodernism will face the challenge 'to think beyond the limits of what is already recognizable' (Belsey, pp. 102-04).

of foundations for such a strong human bond. The same could be said of the secretaries of the Parkin psychiatrists, Kurtz's included, whose depiction is characterised by instrumentality, emotional dependence and utter subjugation. Their meetings at the café where they usually have lunch, just as much as Dr Marlow's domestic raids on cuisine or the scenes describing Dr Farjeon's alienated lifestyle before her assassination, fail in their attempt to make these characters credible as human beings, even if fictional ones (*Headhunter*, pp. 363-64). In the way they are represented, the positivities embodied by all these characters seem just as jaded as the negativities embodied by Kurtz, his pet researchers, the entire bunch of plutocrats behind him, and the sexual psychopaths under his care. Rather than as 'moments of humanity' or 'small triumphs of the human heart', all these scenes could be thought to be, in Jameson's terminology, literary pseudo-events, unable to convey any verisimilitude (Pearson, p. 118; Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 48).<sup>606</sup> The novel is a mere spectacle of shadows, a puppet show.

### 3.8 – Nostalgia and Nihilism: Resentment for the Loss of Symbolic Authority

Unlike in Beckett's *Trilogy* or in Ballard's *Crash*, there clearly seems to be an axiological centre that both the narrator and the author cling to against the very alarming instances of nihilistic postmodernity in *Headhunter*. In this respect, and availing ourselves of Walker Percy's critical concept, the novel would be an example of 'diagnosis fiction'. In this way, its 'explicit and ultimate concern' would be 'the nature of man and the nature of reality where man finds himself', and its ultimate goal would be presenting a challenge against ambient nihilism (as cited by Bull, pp. 155-56). Whereas Walker Percy is a militant Roman Catholic writer, we could qualify *Headhunter*'s and, more generally, Findley's axiological convictions as a variety of atheistic humanism. I am of the view that this humanism is ultimately anchored in a nostalgia for the modern, for its 'order and clarity', which, in our present postmodern context, would be absolutely futile (Wyile, p. 73).<sup>607</sup>

---

<sup>606</sup> Brian McHale defines pseudo-events as 'a function of the communications media that supposedly reported but actually generated them.' (*Cambridge Introd.*, p. 181).

<sup>607</sup> See, e.g., Wyile, p. 66, for an ingenious hint at a possible relationship between Findley's use of italics and a 'modernist resonance' in his work.

That Findley's humanism is *piously* atheistic can be seen very early in the text, when Lilah Kemp tells us about her ineffectual invocations of God in her quest for Kurtz, whom she fears to be up to no good after setting him free (Bull, p. 160, my emphasis). However, God is not very responsive to the prayers of a schizophrenic person who can hear mice within the walls and who commands the same fictional characters she frees from books to come back to them in the name of postmodernity's dead God (*Headhunter*, pp. 3, 5, 11). Only she would consider this as a last resort with a mind to stopping all the regrettable events taking place in the novel's fictional Toronto: as she says herself, apart from sturnusemia, there is another plague on the loose, one of non-belief. No wonder.

Indeed, when Marlow faces Kurtz in the latter's exclusive flat as he is dying of sturnusemia, his diagnose has to be pronounced by using common, medically unspecialised concepts such as 'absence of conscience' or 'megalomania', despite falling short of the great man's derangement, which in an older time may have been given the name of an especially grave sin (pp. 499, 8). Among other things, his diagnose is based on one of the documents Marlow comes by, where Kurtz justifies his means by reference to his ultimate goal: the acquisition of absolute power 'for good'; this last phrase, however, has been crossed out (p. 493). In this, Kurtz has taken a step beyond his avatar in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where the latter writes in a report commissioned by and addressed to the so-called International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs how they whites can 'exert a power *for good* practically unbounded' among the natives, as their stage of material, cultural and spiritual development must necessarily make them appear 'with the *might* as of a deity' before the natives' eyes. But for the difference in the intended target, the wording for Kurtz's main goal is almost identical: 'We psychiatrists [...] must necessarily appear to the mentally ill as being in the nature of gods.'<sup>608</sup> A thaumaturgic, alarmingly messianic, Christological note is moreover added to Conrad: 'We approach them with miracles up our sleeve.' In postmodernity, power is desirable for itself or, if anything, because of the instrumental ends it can serve, both immediate ('access to the pockets of the elite') and mediate (inhumane experiments thus funded). As Kurtz's secretary concludes after reading all this, and coinciding with Lilah Kemp's impressions on Kurtz at the beginning of the novel, the very writing of such a thing would be

---

<sup>608</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness in Heart of Darkness and Selected Short Fiction*, Barnes and Noble Classics, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003; repr. 2008), pp. 84-168 (p. 137, my emphasis).

equivalent to believing oneself to be a god or to performatively speaking oneself into one. Thus, Kurtz writes in his diary:

I began this journey when I was young. All these many years, I have been on my way upstream-the stream of human endeavour. A man must go against the current until he reaches that point where the river rises-the point of absolute power. It is only by arriving at this point that one can begin to place one's theories in the mix of things and float them back downstream to the mouth of the river, where others have been assembled to obey one's orders-to fulfil one's dreams.

*(Headhunter, p. 493, original italics)*

This would be in itself a symptom and the logical consequence of the death of God in our nihilistic Western culture (p. 43; Deleuze, as cited in Biaggi, p. 149, my translation). In his delusional and deranged search for power, Kurtz forces himself 'to find the sublime in the infamous' (Bataille, *Lit. and Evil*, p. 71). Western godlessness, scientific nihilism, the instrumental nature of its means regarding its ends, and its lack of moral considerations, just like in *Crash*, conspicuously show again. Yet again, living in the era of the advent of nihilism prophesied by Nietzsche, when the death of God allows for everything to be permitted and possible (at least, according to Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov), what Ballard would call a moral 'failure of the imagination' deriving from a science-inspired 'monologic vision' of reality and a simplistic view of human beings as 'just organisms in an environment' can only lead to a particular kind of reductive nihilism, latent in our postmodern society. Under its sway, people would no longer feel responsible for the consequences of their behaviour regarding others (Bull, pp. 153-4, 159-60, 162).<sup>609</sup>

On this lack of concern for others, who are considered to be merely available material for diverse goals, some existential comments may be made. To begin with and speaking in Sartrean terms, this could be thought to be one of the pillars of Kurtz's 'fundamental project', through which he would choose himself in the world, thus giving his life a unity,

---

<sup>609</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Andrew R. MacAndrew, Bantam Classics, (New York: Bantam Dell, 1981; repr. 2003), p. 299. Nietzsche echoes this in his *Genealogy of Morals: 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted.'* (p. 150). On this, Camus writes: 'À ce « tout est permis » commence vraiment l'histoire du nihilisme contemporain.' (*L'Homme révolté*, p. 65) My translation: 'It is at this "all is permitted" that the history of contemporary nihilism really begins.'

consistency and meaning that is absent in other characters (Young, p. 132). The object of this project is clear: achieving power through knowledge, an absolute goal not to be hindered or frustrated by any humanitarian considerations. In itself, if we remain within this specifically Sartrean frame, this shows how Sartre's doctrine of authenticity through unavoidable free choice may easily drift into actual, practical nihilism, as this choice will not be enlightened by any specific determination of what is morally good: Sartre's freedom, in that it can accommodate any moral decisions, is one beyond good and evil (Wicks, p. 56).<sup>610</sup> In addition to this, Kurtz's 'fundamental project' bespeaks how postmodern techno-scientific knowledge has ceased to be linked to the realm of the spirit, shifting 'to the everyday and purely pragmatic world of the performative' (Silverman, p. 108).

Regardless of the obvious nihilistic connotations, however, there could exist an ontological frame within which we might understand Kurtz and his ways better. Each of us is trapped in our own subjectivity, the natural consequence of being a being-for-itself, that is to say an ontological structure for which, if 'the subject-object distinction is absolute and unbridgeable,' so is it as well for the subject-subject relationship (Wicks, p. 52). Ultimately, this consequence derives from the solipsism proper to the metaphysical doctrine of the founder of modern French philosophy, René Descartes, for whom 'the Other's existence remains purely conjectural.' (*BAN*, p. 213; Young, p. 153) Certainly, under the Cartesian and the Enlightenment dispensations, subjective consciousness is not merely 'separated from the physical world of nature' but also 'from the social world of human beings' (Donald E. Hall, p. 20). At the end of the day, others 'are for me objects': that is the fundamental relationship between oneself and the rest of mankind (*BAN*, p. 252).

Besides, if we already established, always thinking about Sartre, that 'hell is other people', so much is true if we think about Kurtz: disillusioned with love and life (we must remember his frustrated affair with the art gallerist and his Oedipal trauma), and obsessed with his work, always greedy for power, he builds his subjectivity upon the collapse of the Other's, this collapse being a defining feature, as we have already seen, of our inane and

---

<sup>610</sup> The lack of a morality proper can also be predicated of the other great representative of French existentialism, Albert Camus, whose aesthetic hedonism, despite commitment to solidarity and the ideal of justice, is based on the gratification of every wish, thus remaining 'unconcerned with moral reflection.' (Wicks, p. 68)



self-fragmentating postmodernity. This is a time of unstable and disappointing relations among decentred selves, of ‘fragmentation of all forms of solidarity and consensus’ (Jenks, *Culture*, p. 188). Lapsed into the ‘factual solipsism’ of ‘indifference’, Kurtz sees and treats people just as ‘functional objects’ (Young, pp. 147, 156). In this, he presents us with an example of how the cancelling out of differences is a nihilistic principle par excellence, and how the power of nihilism is one that pours everything into indifference (Diken, p. 88). In the end, he would come to see himself as ‘the only genuine person in a world of robots.’ Although Kurtz might not be in agreement with the first part of the following proposition by E.M. Cioran (and even so we should think of his atheism and his childhood trauma), yet I believe his case perfectly matches it on the whole: ‘*I am absolutely persuaded that I am nothing in this universe; yet I feel that mine is the only real existence.*’ (*Despair*, p. 64, original emphasis). In the end, apart from ethical considerations, Kurtz is nothing but the embodiment of the postmodern predicament of existing as ‘an isolated individual in an arbitrary and fragmentary world.’<sup>611</sup>

This outcome is not very different from the one we saw in Vaughan’s and his followers’ behaviour regarding their victims in *Crash*. Even more clearly than Vaughan, who is originally a man of science too, Kurtz embodies a certain nihilistic type of humanity: he represents the ‘Socratic man’, a ‘typical *décadent*’, the ‘theoretical’ man whose life relies on the possibility of always finding a rational explanation of nature. His ideal of rationality ‘at any price’, being targeted ‘*against* instinct’, constitutes ‘a dangerous, life-undermining power’ threatening the creative, artistic, ‘Dionysian’ man, precisely the one Vaughan seeks and approaches in his rebellion against his past life in Ballard’s *Crash*.<sup>612</sup> In Kurtz, science verifies itself not only as a failed counterforce to nihilism, but actually as nihilism itself (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 46; Weller, *Mod. and Nihil.*, p. 83).

Being a super-narcissist and feeling threatened in his identity as exceptional scientist by those things that link him to the rest of humankind, Kurtz may despise in others what he

---

<sup>611</sup>Theo D’haen, ‘Postmodernism in American Fiction and Art’, in *Approaching Postmodernism*, ed. by Douwe W. Fokkema and Hans Bertens, Utrecht Publications in General and Comparative Literature, 21 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1986), pp. 211-231 (p. 223).

<sup>612</sup>To the Socratic man, Nietzsche opposes the ‘Dionysiac type’, embodied by Aeschylus and Sophocles, who would always accept any aspect of life’s becoming, including ‘the threat and the chaotic and irrational unforeseeability of things.’ (Severino, *Contemp.*, pp. 108-09, my translation of the Spanish translation of the Italian original)

fears most in himself: any trace of empathy or sympathy, which for him might well be but expressions of moral weakness or disloyalty to a science to which he is uncompromisingly committed. For him, the otherness of others as non-scientists or minor, inferior scientists is the category against which he defines himself negatively: he is not one of them. His would be an extreme case of Freud's 'narcissism of minor differences', as well as an example of how otherness is ultimately a negative complement to mere difference by turning the latter into that of an inferior, thus constituting a power relation. Therefore, difference as otherness becomes a 'secondary identity in relation to which a dominant identity is structured.' (Currie, pp. 86, 94)

In any case, both Vaughan's and Kurtz's behaviour resembles that of the members of *Headhunter's* Club of Men. These would represent just a specifically sexual variant of Kurtz's indifference towards his 'clients' or Vaughan towards his victims. Thus, they try to force their prey to become pure flesh in their eyes, absolute sexual objects through sadistic torture, their movement becoming 'obscene', purely 'mechanical' (Young, p. 147). In this, they may exemplify the risks of taking Nietzsche too seriously in his defence of a law of their own for the strong-willed as opposed to the herd, something which would link both Kurtz and the Club's members to none other than de Sade himself. Hence, a fictional mouthpiece for the divine marquis and very significantly a member of the aristocracy, proclaims in *Juliette*:

Laws are made only for the common people: being both weaker and more numerous, they need restraints that have nothing to do with the powerful man and that do not concern him. In any government *the essential thing is that the people never invade the authority of the powerful.*

(Sade, *Juliette*, as cited in Shattuck, p. 277, my emphasis)

At the end of the day, it might be the case that the risks of widespread sadomasochism in our time would not be so clearly related to the postmodern condition, but to something as old as the human tendency to use any means, ideological ones included, to prevail over others in defence of their interests, as perverse or violent as these might be. If this were so, we would not be suffering from one of the usually decried components of the legacy of modernity, but rather we would still be living under some of the conditions afflicting most people under the Ancien Régime. Thus, the members of the Club of Men would not be so

different from Gilles de Rais, the Marshall of France who raped, tortured and killed hundreds of children.<sup>613</sup> As a progressive writer, Findley is up to his reputation at least in this respect.

In terms of nihilism, the members of the Club of Men would embody a specific case thereof, namely that of a nihilism which is both active and passive at the same time. Both themselves and their children would reproduce in small scale the nihilistic involvement of Nazi leaders and the German nation in their common ‘weariness of this world’ and their wish to be ‘used up, depleted, and emptied out.’ Lured by ‘the quietude and silence of nothingness’ and ‘hurtling headlong into the abyss of nothingness’, all their actively nihilistic violence would have been guided by their unconscious craving to become the most passive among passive nihilists, their spiritual weakness engendering a sort of instrumental, short-termed strength. In this light, the death of one of the children of a member of the club must be considered anything but random or casual. Determined to be done with life, they must use life up first (Marmysz, p. 45). Until the Day of Reckoning comes, they can be expected to relish ‘those inestimable [joys] of bursting socially imposed restraints and trespassing on every law.’<sup>614</sup>

Some very telling considerations could be made about the Club of Men and his members on the basis of the analysis that Bülent Diken makes of the work of Michel Houellebecq. I am doing so in virtue of a common postmodern background that would account for many similarities with Findley’s novel. To begin with, we should take into account the post-Oedipal character of the society the Club’s members are part of, even more so if we consider their social status: in the secrecy of the photographer’s shop they usually gather in for their abject parties, they are far away from any behavioural restrictions originating in any adult, responsible, authoritative discourse (Diken, p. 94). Wealthy, influential and powerful, they take full advantage of the ‘excess of freedom’ that allows them to live not a sexually emancipated life, but rather one of psycho-sexual

---

<sup>613</sup> ‘Gilles de Rais: French Noble’, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*  
 <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gilles-de-Rais>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

<sup>614</sup> My translation of the French original: ‘jouissances qui réunissent à des attrait bien plus piquants, ceux inappréciables de la rupture des freins sociaux et du renversement de toutes les lois’, Donatien-Alphonse-François, Marquis de Sade, *La philosophie dans le boudoir, ou Les instituteurs immoraux: Dialogues destinés à l’éducation des jeunes demoiselles*, Maxi-Poche Classiques français (Montréal: Phidal, 1995). p. 162.

regression to a never-ending childhood. In this post-infantile childhood, they go for all the ‘moments of unlimited pleasure’ that their money can grant them in a ‘universe of impulsive and instantaneous play’ (pp. 92, 94). In this way, they react against the absolute sexual pauperisation that a sex-related ‘law of the market’ has created in our postmodern culture, which condemns them in principle to be excluded from spontaneous sexual exchanges taking place in the big city. As opposed to this, their wealth compensates the low rating that their sagging bodies would grant them in the urban human flesh market, affording them the status of sexual tourists at the very heart of Western society (p. 96). Indeed, why not bring things to their ‘natural’ course and show their young models and relatives who is in command? Why not revolt against the sexual tyranny of the young, attractive and potent, making them pay for all their elders have invested in their upbringing? (pp. 96-97) In this, of course, they show an ambivalent attitude towards the lack of sexual restrictions in postmodernity: they are resentful of the collapse of the symbolic authorities and discourse that allow them to behave the way they do in the first place (pp. 94, 102). And this being so, why not indulge in their fantasies, which reach beyond the pale of anonymous, mercenary young flesh to include their own young relatives? By controlling them, maybe even with their own youths’ greedy, tacit consent, as we already saw, they would also get the kicks provided by the sensation of being their true masters, body and soul. In this way, they eventually turn from being victims of psychologically crippling trauma and resentful losers in order to become spiteful avengers of the symbolic authority they never were up to, as well as abject heroes (pp. 97, 102). Moreover, in a similar way to Vaughan’s abject, symphorophiliac circle, their ideological and practical fanaticism in the exertion of raw power makes them representatives of a clearly postmodern penchant to identify with something external (no matter whether religion, nationalism or any other similar discursive structure) as a way to achieve unity and identity, thus standing against the fear of self-fragmentation we spoke of above (Donald E. Hall, p. 83).

This fear would be expressed by its members’ obsession with mutilation, razor blades or flaying knives, for instance: by the negation of bodily integrity to others, they would obtain a reassuring feeling of self-integrity. Linking up with what we wrote at the very beginning of this thesis on the Enlightenment’s project of freeing men from fear by installing them as masters, in their cultivation of deviant, aggressive and destructive sexuality, and as they

exert their power, sanctioned and blessed by the psychiatric institution, over their prey the Club's members might as well think the same as one of de Sade's characters in his notorious *Juliette*: 'Crime has nothing fearsome about it when you're fucking.' (as cited in Shattuck, p. 275)<sup>615</sup> Of course, the whole process eventually ending up in the killing of a child, their cultivation of group violence as a way of bonding and identifying with each other must be thought of as producing the ultimate nihilistic low. Not even children can escape rage against Being in the unofficial capital of the country with probably the highest quality of life on the planet and with one of the cleanest records concerning respect of human rights.

### 3.9 – Atheistic Humanism and Hero Cult: Alienation in a Desacralised World

The world we have just described would be a desacralised one utterly devoid of values. The only possible outcome of this situation, sooner or later, would be the catastrophe foretold by Nietzsche in his preface to *The Will to Power*: 'disaster – blighted, self-deceived, diseased.' (Bull, pp. 153-54, 161)<sup>616</sup> In this world, even for those not having gone beyond the point of sanity which the Club's members left behind them a long time ago, the only extant faith would be one in reason and will alone (p. 154). Under the dispensation of this atheistic 'humanism of reason' implemented by the will, only the production, reproduction and legitimation of those conditions that inevitably lead to alienation and oppression can be expected (Levin, pp. 4-5). It was also by the simple exercise of their *will* that whites could exert their *legitimate* power on Africans in Kurtz's former life in Conrad's fictional universe (Conrad, p. 137, my emphasis). Under the same premises, the patients at the Parkin are applied the strictest discipline and the most inhumane treatment with Kurtz's blessings. All in the name of reason and for their own good.

---

<sup>615</sup> It is a curious coincidence and comes as no wonder that later on in *Juliette*, the eponymous character, while masturbating the speaker in this fragment, who in his turn has condemned her child to the flames, will propose him to poison fifteen hundred people and blame it on an epidemic (Shattuck, pp. 275-76).

<sup>616</sup> 'For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect.' (*TWTP*, p. 3).

As a matter of fact, scientific nihilism and its reductive views on reality is not restricted to Kurtz and his elitist pet researchers in *Headhunter*: even the novel's hero, Dr Marlow, for all of his seeming humanism and concern for his patients, might not be that far from the former in his rigid worldview, primarily informed by orthodox psychiatric knowledge and practice. Beyond that, as he must acknowledge himself, he is a believer in the worship of cultural heroes, in the wake of a current of thought stretching from the Victorian era (Carlyle, e.g.) to high modernism. Thus, if at the end of the novel, after Kurtz's death, Marlow concludes that 'Kurtz, too, is in all of us, all of us in Kurtz', he also comes close to being acknowledged in his own professional and discursive domain as much of an elitist snob as pro-fascist Yeats and Pound, for instance, those cultural heroes of high modernism, were in the realm of literary art (*Headhunter*, p. 508).<sup>617</sup> Indeed, Marlow would stand much closer to aberrant Kurtz than to schizophrenic spiritualist Lilah Kemp in this respect: for someone like Marlow, Kurtz is complex enough never to reduce him to a psychiatrist gone *native* in his surrender to power delusions, or the embodiment of an increasingly iconic figure of postmodernism, namely the psychopath. Thus, Marlow is not merely repelled by Kurtz's insanity and amorality, but he is also attracted to his knowledge and outstanding achievement (Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 79).<sup>618</sup> Most likely, and I believe it is legitimate to do so in default of any additional information, we could presume a similar socio-cultural background for both Kurtz and Marlow: one that would have branded them as inheritors of previously existing 'cultural capital' and 'habitus' since their early school days, making them eligible for the most advanced and acclaimed institutions of higher education and research. In this way, they would share specific modes of perception, thought style, and ways of appreciation and action (Jenks, *Culture*, pp. 128, 130). While attending Fagan's lecture, uncomfortable with the plebeian audience and nouveau-riche setting, Marlow recognises himself as 'a snob, an élitist', someone who believes in 'that most dangerous of concepts': that some men and women are simply 'superior.'

---

<sup>617</sup> To the point of considering fascism a political form of modernism (Griffin, p. 182). See also Huyssen, p. 163.

<sup>618</sup> Victor Kennedy, 'Myths of Authority in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Timothy Findley's *Headhunter*', in *Research Gate*, p. 4  
[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Victor\\_Kennedy2/publication/236145776\\_Myths\\_of\\_Authority\\_in\\_Joseph\\_Conrad's\\_Heart\\_of\\_Darkness\\_and\\_Timothy\\_Findley's\\_Headhunter/links/00b4951659131e31cf000000/Myths-of-Authority-in-Joseph-Conrads-Heart-of-Darkness-and-Timothy-Findleys-Headhunter.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Victor_Kennedy2/publication/236145776_Myths_of_Authority_in_Joseph_Conrad's_Heart_of_Darkness_and_Timothy_Findley's_Headhunter/links/00b4951659131e31cf000000/Myths-of-Authority-in-Joseph-Conrads-Heart-of-Darkness-and-Timothy-Findleys-Headhunter.pdf)  
 [accessed 25.07.2018]

(*Headhunter*, p. 308) For him, until his eventual discovery of the extent to which Kurtz had debased his knowledge and professional authority for power's sake, the latter may have stood very close to the condition of a cultural hero in Marlow's eyes, too: being a version of sorts of the Renaissance over-reacher or the Faustian antihero, Kurtz could pass for one of those motivated by the Nietzschean aspiration to the burden of creating greatness in the wake of the death of God, without which life would have no point; not in vain did Nietzsche believe that greatness, which involves 'putting pain to work', is greater than goodness (Tanner, pp. 42, 30).

In fact, in his celibacy and exhausting dedication to science, it could be contended that Kurtz may well exemplify the Nietzschean figure of the 'ascetic priest', the very embodiment of the ambiguity of nihilism: an apparent denier and enemy of life, yet also to be counted 'among the greatest conserving and yes-creating forces of life' on the grounds of his 'distinctive fervor and passion' (Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, pp. 120-21). In his extreme individualism, and despite his moral isolation and lofty solipsism, Kurtz, just like Vaughan in Ballard's *Crash*, could be read to be one of those 'strongest and most domineering natures that enjoy their finest gaiety in such constraint and perfection under a law of their own' which they would both create and enforce in the most ruthless and uncompromising way, having 'the strength to cope with what are, for any complex person, experiences which could lead to disintegration or at the very least self-loathing.' Under such circumstances, such natures may not allow themselves Zarathustra's one and perhaps unforgivable sin: 'pity for mankind', the ultimate reason for the death of God (Tanner, pp. 45-46, 48; Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, pp. 69, 235). Western science and knowledge would never have advanced the way they did were it not for the dodgy dealings of some men who dared put humanitarian considerations aside at one or another moment. The same could be said of other domains outside science: 'Almost everything we call "higher culture" is based on the spiritualization of *cruelty*, on its becoming more profound' (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 158, original emphasis).

Although utterly unprincipled in ethical matters, Kurtz embodies, like Saint-Just and other revolutionary-totalitarian historical personages, the ability to abandon oneself to principles 'isolated, fixed, and silent', which amounts to dying for 'an impossible love which is the contrary of love'. Thus, a 'passion for reason' that prevents from empathy inexorably becomes an implacable basis for Terror. At the end of the day, Kurtz's idolatry

of instrumental reason is an ‘antivitalism of reason.’ (Camus, *L’homme révolté*, p. 139; Dienstag, p. 131).<sup>619</sup> Yet, all in all, just like Nietzsche, Marlow could also find that ‘*a will to nothingness*’, like a priest’s, Kurtz’s or Julian Slade’s, ‘is and remains a *will*’, something not to be automatically taken for granted in our passively nihilistic postmodernity (Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 163, original emphasis).

---

<sup>619</sup> My translation of the French original: ‘les principes sont donc seuls, muets et fixes. S’abandonner à eux, c’est mourir, en vérité, et c’est mourir d’un amour impossible qui est le contraire de l’amour.’



## Chapter 4 – Irony, Parody and Paradox in *Headhunter*

### 4.1 – Medical Discipline and its Deviations

As I see it, rather than Dr Purvis' suicide, which I consider to be a typical kind of McGuffin narrative trick, what really motivates Marlow's investigation of Kurtz, by analogy with *Heart of Darkness*, is his admiration for him (*Headhunter*, p. 327). If in his former avatar he had to go upstream the Congo searching for a personal obsession, increasingly mesmerised by Kurtz's elusive but fascinating personality and deeds, he now embarks on a journey traversing an inner landscape (like in Ballard's *Crash*) on 'the boundary between sanity and madness' (Victor Kennedy, p. 3). It is precisely the continuous negotiation of these extremes and other similar oppositions (reality vs. fiction, hierarchy vs. anarchy, good vs. evil) that makes *Headhunter* a 'self-deconstructing text' potentially rich in meanings and interpretations. Hence, it deserves to be taken for an ironic inversion of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, or a 'postmodern parody' in Linda Hutcheon's construal of this term (pp. 4-5; Brydon, p. 53). In a very much postmodern way redolent of Derrida's strategies of deconstruction, Findley rejects violent ontologies that can only understand the world as based on the aforementioned radical conceptual oppositions or binaries, which embody hierarchy and oppression (Pearson, p. 125; Tanner, p. 72; Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 57).<sup>620</sup>

---

<sup>620</sup> For Derrida, the meaning of each member in every binary opposition 'depends on the trace of the other that inhabits its definition.' (Belsey, p. 75) 'Embedded in a context,' the meaning of a sign 'bears the trace of the signs that surround it' in the signifying chain, either preceding or following it. These 'retensions' and 'protensions', respectively, destroy the 'illusion of presence' foundational to 'the linear sequence of past, present and future' that grounds the entire edifice of mainstream Western thought, what Derrida terms the West's '*metaphysical history*', defined by its 'desire for presence'.

Under the postmodern dispensation, language is always in motion, *difference* is always at play: the sign's availability for being circulated, repeated and used without its presumed referent being present implies in itself a 'fall from presence'. This effect and the process leading to it Derrida calls 'differance': the 'opposite of presence,' or the 'non-existence of presence', always contaminated by either immediate or distant absences, traces of context. Differance involves moreover a critique of structuralism's synchronic approach to language and difference (Currie, pp. 52-55, 58-59, 61, original emphasis).

And yet, because of his intellectual and cultural prejudices, Marlow's alliance with, in his eyes, much more unidimensional Lilah Kemp, a mere ex-librarian with a pristine faith in literature alone fuelling her crusade against Kurtz and having nothing to do with science except for being its passive subject, is one *contra naturam* (*Headhunter*, p. 25).<sup>621</sup> In fact, Marlow would be very close to Findley in his paradigmatically modern belief in clarity and order, as embodied by the already commented binaries, despite the author's postmodern, para-deconstructionist strategies or the psychiatrist's odd fraternising with a schizophrenic patient. Thus, we can imagine a similar attitude to his art on Findley's part when reading about Marlow's rejection of what he understands as appalling, 'post-modern theories about the insane' (p. 151, my emphasis). Findley may even be directly and consciously ironic about postmodernism in this passage, despite exemplifying every single feature in Jameson's catalogue of postmodern characteristics throughout *Headhunter*.

In this light, and yet again as he has to admit himself, what Marlow has been trying to do in the course of his entire professional life is precisely to reduce the fabulous complexity of his patients as individuals to a simplifying norm of sanity through some 'chemical adjustment'. In this way, he would be unacknowledging their freedom and their right to self-determination as to the very basic conditions of their being in the world, psychosis and all (Bull, pp. 159, 162). Hence, as many physicians, Dr Marlow would be trespassing the Hippocratic oath and its prohibition on causing harm to his patients for the sake of a 'therapeutic zeal' that, bent on suppressing certain symptoms 'at all costs', would ultimately risk causing 'grievous harm' to them (Reed, p. 164). By installing himself at the apex of a certain normative paradigm of what and how life should be, by placing himself 'into a timeless and unreal vacuum from which all reality had been pumped' in order to dismiss his patients' personal narratives and replace them with others more amenable to the impersonal disciplinary power that the medical institution itself is a part of, he may have been causing such harm precisely because of unwilling to consider his patients, in their lack of medical knowledge and therefore in their ignorance of what may ultimately be good or bad for them, as sovereign over their own lives (p. 168). Marlow would be doing this, moreover, 'with a simple pill', just in the same way as Kurtz is making his way ever deeper into the elite's bank accounts, hearts and souls (*Headhunter*, p. 493).

---

<sup>621</sup> Marlene Goldman, 'The End(s) of Myth: Apocalyptic and Prophetic Fictions in *Headhunter*', *Studies on Canadian Writing*, 64 (1998), 32-55 (p.45-46).

Thus, by the end of the novel, Lilah Kemp sees all the vials and pills usually available in a medical centre she often goes to as ‘full of sleep and peace.’ Nonetheless, this is not an alluring prospect, but rather a way ‘to pull yourself into *the dark* and wrap oneself in *normalcy*.’ (p. 411, my emphasis) In the end, medication is but a short cut ‘*all the way to nothing*.’ (ibid., original emphasis) The end of the novel, therefore, is not such a happy ending, if we consider how Lilah calls her medication at its beginning: ‘murder by milligrams’, something depriving her of ‘her world of wonders.’ (p. 35)

In fact, at some moment during his dealings with schizophrenic Amy Wylie, who is being repressed for being an activist against the sturnusemia hoax rather than being taken care of because of her condition, Dr Marlow becomes aware of what he is doing precisely with regard to this issue. He concludes that, just like her medication, he also promotes a world of lies imposed on the weak (p. 427). Indeed, his patient can stand for those who suffer from ‘practices of decontamination’ in cases where the illness itself is not infectious, yet it is socially considered abject, making them become veritable pariahs.<sup>622</sup> In fact, she stands as an example of the ‘colonization of the self by the State’ that is always possible even in one of the Western countries with a better public system of health care (Diken, p. 139). This could be accounted for by the nihilistic heritage implicit in democracy, always a potential factory for the mass production of a mediocre, ‘useful, industrious, handy, multi-purpose herd animal’, always ‘prepared for slavery in the subtlest sense’, if we are to believe Nietzsche (*Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 176-77). Marlow would be complicit with this and what is more, aware of his complicity.

The lack of concern for others would be very similar in all such cases: there is no time for the nuances and idiosyncrasies that every individual’s life consists of. From here, there would be but one step to ‘enhancement interventions’, aiming directly at an improvement of the human. At this point, advances in biotechnology and the temptation of a type and a degree of power until recently only imagined in literature (from Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Frankenstein* to Ballard’s *Crash*, as we have already seen) have made it possible for scientists and political administrators alike to fix their aim at the posthuman as something seemingly feasible (Reed, p. 165).

---

<sup>622</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, in *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 2001), pp.7-64 (p. 7).

The likely results of such temptations, besides, are evident to Marlow, who meets Emma Roper, an ancient patient of his, again in Toronto... or rather, he meets someone else: Emma Berry, the surgeon's wife, whom we mentioned above and Marlow may be in love with (*Headhunter*, pp. 161-62). Having a bone structure 'nature had failed to take advantage of, and being therefore a mere object in his husband's eyes, she exemplifies the dystopian horizons thus opened by science and preyed upon by power-deluded medical practitioners, regardless of their speciality: surgeons or psychiatrists, such as Kurtz.

This medical hubris, however, could be countered by the fact of the surgeon's likely ego-impoverishing on operating Emma after his own beauty ideal. In this light, he may have fallen to this temptation out of love for an unattainable, ideal woman, 'more and more sublime and precious,' his desire for her being impossible to satisfy. In moulding Emma after this ideal, he obtains possession of his unattainable object, which is '*put in the place of the ego-ideal*' at the price of 'self-sacrifice', according to Lacan (as cited in Easthope, p. 66, original emphasis). The supreme artist of flesh could thus be understood to be a proud achiever in the eyes of many, while being at the same time the abjectly low servant of a chimera. This would only bespeak the surgeon's weak ego, despite his professional prestige and his high social status. This could be one of the traits of postmodernity, where strenuous professional effort and dedication through many years isolate the individual in our over-complex society. More generally, it is also an example of how fantasy is 'the correlate of desire and a principle of its organisation.' (Weeks, *Discontents*, p. 132) Furthermore, this is an illustration of how nature can strike back with a vengeance in the case of medical enhancement interventions.

His wife would also exemplify an even much more serious outcome of tinkering with human nature and destiny: the unleashing of the death drive in the form of self-destructive behaviour on the part of the victims of such irresponsible interventions (Reed, p. 166). In this way, Emma first marries her 'maker', or rather, as we saw in Beckett's *The Unnamable*, her petty demiurge, within a year of being unknowingly given a new face, then she becomes a prostitute in an extreme gesture of defiance against him and the society that allowed him to do what he did out of respect for his professional proficiency (*Headhunter*, pp. 54, 198). If we interpret this double self-debasement within this negative conceptual context, she can be deemed to incarnate Bataille's idea of the 'low' prostitute in the sense of a symbolic embodiment of death. According to him, male heterosexuality

would require a female sexual object, whose paradigm is the prostitute, in order not to fuse with a woman, but with death (Bristow, p. 127).

Even more clearly, the plague ravaging Toronto, which will eventually take Kurtz's life, is yet another example of this enhancement temptation: it had its origin in the development of a virus for the perfectly banal goal of manufacturing especially efficient skin cosmetics, such as sun screens and tanning creams. Of course, nobody weighed the risks posed to public health (*Headhunter*, pp. 443-ff; Reed, p. 167). While about to die on its account, Kurtz, who has covered the whole scheme up from its inception, still justifies himself by speaking of the grand, delusional projects that it may have contributed to (*Headhunter*, p. 501). Lost in the unreality of his sublime ends, Kurtz will also quite openly refuse to acknowledge the blatantly unacceptable harm he has caused to the traumatised minors in Dr Farjeon's charge, as expressed in the incident in which one of them tries to emasculate himself in his presence after recognising him:

[...] the naked boy had grasped his penis and was pulling at it frantically. It seemed, at first, like a manic form of masturbation-but in seconds it was clearly nothing of the sort. The boy was trying to tear his penis free of his groin and it began to spurt blood against the glass. [...] *Kurtz turned away*. The sight before him was *too alarming to be admitted*.

(p. 40, my emphasis).

Sabrina Reed makes the ingenuous deduction that these children have reached their perturbed stage precisely because of Kurtz's connivance with the Club of Men, whose members would have brutalised them (Reed, p. 169). Although certainly not reaching the seriousness of Kurtz's behaviour, Marlow's more or less unconscious lack of concern or empathy for his 'ignorant' patients when deadening them with the psycho-pharmacological panoply at his disposal could be construed as a mere specification or concretisation of such an attitude, which would be informed by the same underlying principles. Against these extremes of therapeutic zeal and enhancement intervention, an 'ethics of restraint', consisting in 'thoughtfulness about the needs of others and an awareness of the consequences of one's actions' before giving in to 'one's desires and impulses', would be suggested in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Headhunter*, according to Reed (p. 169). This

ethics would be based on the more general notion of self-mastery (or the ‘golden mean’, as we will see later).

If this were not enough, in his intransigent, life-simplifying scientism, by turning his patients into medicated zombies unable to live their lives in their own terms, in their radical individuality, in their irreducible mystery and openness to life, Marlow might also have been depriving himself and the community of alternative, intuitive insights into reality which might thus have contributed to reveal, in Findley’s own words, ‘the insanity of the world around them’ (Bull, pp. 156, 160, 162). As opposed to traditional lore that understood the insane as unable to tell lies, and maybe related to ancient religious consideration of them as often gifted with special capabilities to interpret the earthly as a manifestation of the sacred and to ‘speak the unspeakable’, serving as living oracles or spiritual guides of the community, Marlow condemns them to a marginal social role: that of passive subjects of the dominant, disciplinary discourse of modern medicine, which would be profoundly inimical to anything even distantly related to the spirit (pp. 160, 162). In this way, he makes his own little contribution to the rising of more and more psychiatric cases in our society and ultimately to the death drive gaining the upper hand over the life instincts, as Freud himself remarked a few years before the Nazis’ rise to power in Germany (*Headhunter*, p. 313; Freud, *Discontents*, p. 92).

#### 4.2 – The Elect vs. the Corrupt: Eschatological Reflections

Amenable to this extra-rational and somehow religious context, linked to the novel’s intertextual nature, as well as related to Findley’s ambivalence regarding his constant and ‘painstaking negotiations’ between ‘realistic’ and ‘visionary’ elements in *Headhunter*, a curious theory is developed by Marlene Goldman when trying to explain the reasons for the informal alliance that the most disparate characters forge against Dr Kurtz (Goldman, p. 37). She does so by pitting an eschatological paradigm on the one hand, and an apocalyptic one on the other, developing this opposition in relation to the prophetic books of the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation in the New Testament respectively (p. 33). According to this theory, we would be in front of a dualistic struggle in the fashion of light against darkness, or good against evil, between a ‘desperately oppressed minority’ of the ‘elect’ and a ‘demonic host’. In more secular terms, we could call these two antithetical

blocs the renegades and the defenders of our current postmodern, nihilistic civilisation (pp. 33-34, 40).

With respect to the former, we would be dealing with an ‘elect group’ whose members, in front of the ‘catastrophic signs’ of this postmodern time (AIDS-like sturnusemia, rapes and beatings during a blizzard in Toronto...), are granted a transcendent, ‘mystical vision’ of what is really happening in rotten Toronto and the consequences that such occurrences will involve (pp. 33, 36; *Headhunter*, pp. 6-8, 31). Considering again the figures of schizophrenics Amy Wylie and Lilah Kemp, we have to come back to what we said earlier about the ‘deviant knowledge’ of the insane, disciplined and repressed by the discourses of psychiatry and pharmacology.

Lilah in particular stands as the keeper and protector of ‘sacred scripture’, which in the novel corresponds to the liberal humanist heritage of the Western literary canon, ‘the essential creative achievements – of our civilization’, one of the forms of ‘the good’ and the object of both the fervent faith and the sole common reference of this unlikely, heterogeneous group whose members have anointed themselves, *more platonico*, ‘guardians’ of this ‘aesthetic heritage’ (Goldman, pp. 38-39; Jenks, *Culture*, pp. 101-02, 104). Fagan, a man who embodies the idea of literary criticism as ‘indispensable to a civilised society’ and who once taught Lilah at university, would be their ideological leader. Dr Marlow also integrates this circle; indeed, literature plays an important part in his life and thought, too, as it is implied in its application to psychiatric research while Fagan was lecturing at Harvard, heartily approving of it (Goldman, p. 39; *Headhunter*, pp. 32, 295). This unlikely group of people would all share the conviction that they have been chosen to fight and depose the existing ‘decadent and brutal social order.’ (Goldman, p. 41) Theirs would be a ‘moral project’ in that it aims at a ‘solidaristic community’ strong enough to face successfully ‘the material changes and pressures’ of our contemporariness. Literature would be their weapon, a ‘panacea’ intended to heal ‘the wasting condition’ afflicting postmodern society ‘as a whole.’ (Jenks, *Culture*, pp. 99, 103)

On the other side, of course, we would find another fanatic, Dr Kurtz, the archangel of disciplinary psychiatry, who has avowedly been entrusted with an equivalent overhuman task: to lead to their successful conclusion the inhumane research projects developed at the Parkin Institute, beyond any considerations related to the suffering they might have been

and would furthermore still be causing. An essential difference in purpose distinguishes him and his researchers from Fagan's side: as opposed to his humanist opponents, who are ultimately moderate and temperate reformers, in the fashion of the pre-exilic prophets of Israel, Kurtz, who apocalyptically dismisses any superior authority and rejects any social responsibility like the post-exilic prophets, wills to make a *tabula rasa* of the extant social order, which he instrumentalises to his own advantage and to the achievement of his deluded psychiatric goals. That is the measure of his concern for the traumatised children in Dr Farjeon's charge and for those whose fathers are members of the Club of Men (Goldman, pp. 39, 44; *Headhunter*, pp. 40, 499). Prey to the temptation of absolute power, his hubris, expressed in his theory that the mentally ill (that is everyone, at least potentially) should consider psychiatrists as gods, makes him into an archetypal figure of the Antichrist, the Fallen Angel (Goldman, p. 43; *Headhunter*, p.493). Besides, we should notice the analogy obtaining between the natives in *Heart of Darkness* and the insane in *Headhunter* as natural subjects of their 'divine' overlords.

#### 4.3 – Postmodernism, or Art as an Illustration of Theory

Goldman's apocalyptic interpretation of *Headhunter* is relevant in that apocalypse can be construed as 'the foundations upon which the postmodern house is built', in the same way as the absurd can be seen as 'the postmodern house in which we live', and ethical absence can be agreed upon as the determinant factor of the way we live in it (Slocombe, p. 275). Beyond this, Goldman's apocalyptic reading is the more useful, in my view, as it unveils many structural flaws in the novel. To start with, and elaborating on what I have already written on Findley's depiction of Marlow's friendship with Lilah as an example of the saving grace that ordinary, 'good' people would be the potential channels of in our society, I must say I cannot see this former Harvard lecturer as a likely candidate to partisanship in any crusade launched in the name of any faith, especially if we consider this faith to be ultimately supported by what to all intents and purposes can only look like schizophrenic delusions to him. For him, to take up arms in support of this strange endeavour led by two schizophrenic patients would be equivalent to siding with whom once said, concerning his Christian faith in the context of a still powerful, pagan and



philosophically sceptical Roman Empire, *credo quia absurdum*.<sup>623</sup> People like Dr Marlow quite simply do not believe in oracles. And if it comes to facing Evil in a metaphysical, Armageddon-like, all-out showdown led and guided by someone who is believed to be engaged in a constant battle against reality (despite their belief in having been chosen by some transcendent power to lead a spiritual crusade), a Harvard lecturer in psychiatry could certainly not avoid recalling Freud's definition of religion or any faith as indeed a delusional system: a complex of illusions, transcendent fantasies, nonsense, 'the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity'.<sup>624</sup> If postmodernity has its beliefs, it certainly has no faith whatsoever (Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, p. 16).

The author himself seems to sanction the postmodern irrelevance of religion in the novel, too. To my mind, the clearest instance of *Headhunter's* ambient godlessness, distrust and irrelevance of religion, for all its articulating this cumbersome apocalyptic apparatus, has to do with Kurtz's assistance to an exhibition by Spade. There, a bishop is mentioned among the distinguished customers of the brothel formerly set up in the premises now quartering Fabiana Holbach's art gallery: 'Prisons are built with stones of Law, | Brothels with bricks of Religion.' (*Headhunter*, p. 52)<sup>625</sup> In a soulless age, money, the Devil's excrement according to a Jewish adage, and 'the alienated "mankindedness" of man' in Karl Marx's words, equalises religion and the oldest profession in the world (Steiner, p. 7).<sup>626</sup> It is implied that the art gallerist is also procuring the excitement demanded by her moneyed, intellectually sophisticated clients, whose sins of the flesh are

---

<sup>623</sup> For this misquotation attributed to Tertulian, see Robert D. Sider, 'Credo quia absurdum?', *Classical World*, 73 (1980), 417-19 (p. 417), <[http://www.tertullian.org/articles/sider\\_cred.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/articles/sider_cred.htm)> [accessed 14.10.2019].

<sup>624</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, ed. and tr. by James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1975), pp. 30-31, 43.

<sup>625</sup> William Blake, 'Proverbs of Hell', in Blake, pp. 9-12 (p. 10).

Findley's more or less unconscious misogyny shows most clearly in a psychotic dialogue between Lilah Kemp and the painting by Julian Slade that Kurtz later buys for the Parkin Institute, where the painting, a problematic statement of male bodily and sexual power, tells her that 'women are not allowed' in it (*Headhunter*, p. 332). Women, therefore, despite Fabiana's managing the gallery, are excluded from the power displayed by the works at her exhibition, whereas they were certainly allowed to sell their bodies to the forerunners of Fabiana's clients in the brothel previously existing at the premises. Among those present, it is clear that the ones bent on purchase are the men.

<sup>626</sup> Primo Levi, 'The Return of Cesare', in *Lilith and Other Stories*, trans. by Ann Goldstein, in *Complete Works*, pp. 1422-26 (p. 1426).

now sublimated by the social prestige of art. Nothing too alluring to bring about the unlikely alliance of the systematic hallucination any faith would consist in and its vocational, methodical repression in the name of science and reason.

From a strictly fictional angle, besides, I find Dr Kurtz's characterisation as a secular, postmodern Antichrist all the more flawed when I read about his equally delusional exaltation at having 'a believer at his feet' in Julian Slade, another schizophrenic. Here, I feel the novel is beginning to slip into the bathetic. Indeed, it reaches the point of degeneration into the ludicrous when Kurtz thinks of the painter as 'something of a disciple' rather than as a mere patient (or *client*). To me, this sounds like some apocryphal Star Wars kind of narrative, with Kurtz posing as an indescribable sort of Senator Palpatine, and Slade playing the role of an AIDS-smitten apprentice in the likeness of a Sith knight. The entire thing is all the sadder when we consider that in the end all of this pseudo-metaphysical, para-religious allegory could easily have been avoided by an author who is a public atheist.<sup>627</sup>

Certainly, it could always be argued that the use of a narrative structure or a fictional blueprint is a legitimate option on the part of any writer, regardless of their faith or ideology, or of their lack thereof. Nevertheless, if in the secular, postmodern world which Findley is rather mimetically representing, the only hope comes from the conflation of certain schizophrenic delusions and vague intuitions of a better world cleansed of greed and instrumental rationality, plus an unlikely, irrational, irresponsible faith on the part of someone who has dedicated his life to a scientific ideal, I do not think we are better off than before reading the novel. I actually believe that the narrative structures and strategies that Findley is using in *Headhunter* are compromised by their very object, which makes them inoperative or even counter-productive.

Of course, the novel's structural flaws could still be salvaged by recurring to some of the many, often mutually contradictory theories of postmodernism as an aesthetics, or a style, or the cultural dominant of late capitalism. It could be said, for example, that Findley

---

<sup>627</sup> Although he seems to have a profound faith in Nature (as shown in the two schizophrenic characters in *Headhunter*, who have a deeper understanding of and a special commitment to it), which could explain his use of such narrative structures: the same basic structures underlie all sorts of faiths, regardless of their object. At the end of the day, however, to believe is to take for certain something for which we do not have any conclusive evidence. Faith is therefore irrational.

is just playfully enjoying his writing without any constraints as to the usual conventions of realist fiction, lavishly using irony, parody, camp, or simply self-aware, defiant, Biblical pastiche. However, it is my conviction that when a fictional text has to be construed in such a subsidiary way, utterly depending on secondary literature, without being able to impose itself on the reader, we are faced with a difficult and sorry situation. Hence, if it has been argued that ‘Modern Art has become completely literary: the paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text’, it might as well be said that in our time, postmodern literature exists only to illustrate the theory (Pinker, *Blank Slate*, p. 354).<sup>628</sup>

In my opinion, in a postmodern context where it is clearer than ever before in the history of literature that the reading time conceded to us mortals is limited, we should be considering some other text to give it to... unless some theorist or critic happens to remind us that postmodern texts do not tend to exert the kind of violence that modernist texts usually do to the reader by imposing themselves, which is in itself an authoritarian characteristic, etc. Thus, we would come back to a typically postmodern circular and inherently inconclusive argument in which two paradoxical theses can successively be put forward without much ado. If the postmodern text is poor and sub-standard, so much the better, as the modernist or realist or naturalist text, even if it is *good*, is all the worse, because it is so on the grounds of its authoritarianism, which the postmodern text tries to dismantle by being a pastiche, and so forth: good is bad, bad is good, or both categories are equivalent, or indifferent, because both good and bad are ideological-linguistic constructs, or... and over and over again.<sup>629</sup> This would in any case be insufficient to absolve Findley’s novel of its narrative and ideological failure: to me, *Headhunter* would still be the same sensationalist, unreadable *guignol*, an allegoric puppet show.

---

<sup>628</sup> ‘Many would now say that for committed postmodernists, interpretative implications were always (and disastrously) “privileged” over the enjoyable artistic embodiment and formal sophistication which so many had learned to appreciate in modernist art.’ Accordingly, postmodern art might even be a pretext for interpretational or theoretical display and / or professional advancement. Furthermore, it might often have been the case during postmodernism’s apex that ‘an allusion to “theory” along with a bit of “calling into question”’ were ‘sufficient’ for a ‘minimally significant work of art.’ (Butler, *Postmodernism*, pp. 6, 84). The very same critic, however, reminds us of how ‘long before the rise of “theory”, much modernist art’ was ‘understood through the quasi philosophical, theological, and psychological speculation’ that inspired it (Butler, *Modernism*, p. 27).

<sup>629</sup> ‘The bad is good – or rather [...] both of these “metaphysical” terms have now been decisively outmoded by a social order which is to be neither affirmed nor denounced but simply accepted.’ Terry Eagleton, ‘Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism’, *New Left Review*, 152 (1985), pp. 60-73 (p. 68).

#### 4.4 – Irrelevance of Humanist Art in Postmodernism: The Postmodern Sublime and the Real

Art will be one of Kurtz's favourite baits to lure his favourite prey, the very rich. Sexually aroused by Julian Slade's latest exhibition at Holbach's gallery, he at least succeeds to hide it. Another potential bidder, David Shapiro (whose name itself is evidence of his being yet another stereotype, of Jewishness in this case), the member of the Club of Men whose son has been ritually assassinated with his consent and active participation, will tell him however he is wet in his pants by the violence displayed in front of them; Slade's previous exhibition had given him a hard-on, but this time he feels he is just coming. Despite his contempt for such a vulgar way of putting things, Kurtz silently acknowledges he is right, and makes up his mind to acquire the largest and most notoriously powerful exhibit, *The Golden Chamber of the White Dogs*, however much the cost might be, in order to make it hang nowhere else than on the walls of his beloved Parkin: he hopes it will become a source of inspiration for its most deranged inmates, and a source of vanity for the funders of such a deranged decision. The social ends of art as a way to moral improvement, as defended by a centuries-long humanist tradition, hold no longer.

This is even more so in that Slade's paintings not only display an obscenely powerful male physicality, but they also do so in a certain way. Thus, the figures depicted in them represent male bodies as distorted, twisted, tortured, on the other side of the humanist tradition that, since the Italian Renaissance, represents them as the site of an organised, coherent and enlightened subjectivity which is aware of its own dignity. On the contrary, these paintings stage the male body, borrowing from Bataille's critical terminology, as a 'disordered body': one of the heterogeneous elements that, 'along with "otherness", the unconscious and base / abject matter resist "the establishment of the homogeneity of the world"' (Jones, p. 57). No repressive device engineered by society will ever manage to undo the knot of a subjectivity that is 'merely aggregated, non-systematic, and non-necessary'. Powered by unconscious, unquenchable desires and ultimately based on a socially denied, yet instinctual and fatal organicity, such a subjectivity resists 'rationalization and social homogenization.' (Wicks, pp. 274-75)

This would be just another instance of the postmodern sublime, a sublime ‘greater than the beautiful’, ‘dark, profound, and overwhelming and implicitly masculine,’ a shocking, ‘divisive’ force preventing the viewer from coming to terms with the meaning of something that exceeds the norm and is incommensurable with any concept, thus constituting itself as an absolute, alien other. This force would be clearly linked to the non-symbolic and, ultimately, to the death drive and the Lacanian Real (*TPC*, p. 79; Shaw, pp. 9, 116). By standing in front of the abject horrors perpetrated on his canvases by Julian Slade, Kurtz stands before the ‘boundary separating something from nothing’, as if he were ‘teetering on the edge of nothingness.’ (Lyotard, as cited in Shaw, p. 122) The thick textures of Slade’s painting must be understood as made of ‘immaterial’ matter which resists the imposition of either form or concept, ‘not finalized, not destined’, and turning ‘towards a thing which does not turn towards the mind’: the real order, another name for death.<sup>630</sup>

Ultimately, as Marlow can read from Kurtz’s papers at the end of the novel, this world, the real world, is one of flesh. In this, the absolute lack of transcendence in *Headhunter* comes closer to Beckett’s *Three Novels*, particularly to *The Unnamable*, than to Ballard’s *Crash*, where, as we have seen, technological delirium and sexual bizarrerie lead characters to a kind of beyond or an odd version of transcendence, regardless of its close link to the death drive and the universal predation of others. Findley’s is a world closer to Beckett’s *Worm*, pure flesh with neither consciousness nor bodily form in an empty, wordless void. In other words, the real truth of this world we are living in is the Lacanian Real: ‘the flayed body, the palpitation of the raw, skinless red flesh.’<sup>631</sup> This is the world painted by someone beyond sanity, such as Julian Slade: a ‘physical world’ characterised by its ‘absolute impersonality and contingency’, and presided over by ‘the brute materiality and mortality of the human body’ (Crosthwaite, p. 30).

---

<sup>630</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1991), pp. 140-42.

<sup>631</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), p. 116. Postmodernity is the time of the real order, returning as the traumatic: after the Japanese blasts, August 1945, “language” becomes the culture’s overriding obsession as we seek words to deny the Real’ (Walter A. Davis, as cited in Crosthwaite, p. 42). Indirectly, we find a link between the beginnings of postmodernity and the meta-linguistic monomania of postmodernism, poststructuralism and deconstruction.

At a certain moment and rather rhetorically, the alcoholic Wylie matriarch asks one of her troubled children about their unhappiness: could it be that they are being punished for the sin of being born? (*Headhunter*, p. 19) We are back in Silenus' world of antinatalism. In fact, the Wylie girl being addressed by her mother is the pregnant one, who has decided not to give birth to the foetus she calls 'the Voice' and has imaginary conversations with every so often. In this corrupted universe, Nature, Cosmos, is no longer the other of society, as Sartre, an anti-humanist humanist of sorts, could still maintain (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 35).<sup>632</sup> In Findley's Toronto, the ravines, a sanctuary of Nature in the middle of one of the world's most developed cosmopolises, are places where, as we already mentioned, a beating, rape or murder can happen during a blizzard or at any other given time (*Headhunter*, p. 217). As a matter of fact, Lilah's mother was murdered in one of them (pp. 26-27). As in de Sade's oeuvre, 'nature is an enemy', its laws prescribe destruction, and men are beasts 'by nature.' What is worse, civilisation is part of the state of nature, violence being inherent to it, and its ultimate role is the exploitation of the weaker by the stronger.<sup>633</sup>

#### 4.5 – Civilisation and Postmodernism

All the stated reasons contribute to the implausibility of Findley's siding with 'civilisation'. In his novel, I see this ideal to be embodied by the canonical and iconic modernist figures of Freud and Sartre, as evocated in professor Fagan's short story, *The Assassination of Jean-Paul Sartre*, allegedly on 'a film about Sigmund Freud' whose script would be written by Sartre and directed by John Huston: *Freud: The Movie* (*Headhunter*, p. 309). I find simply untenable the claim that the story, written after his Toronto lecture, would be a way to 'fight back' against the sordidness he found there and a manner of wielding 'the influence of his anger'. The way Fagan evokes the late modernity of the

---

<sup>632</sup> For Sartre, 'the physical world sublimely defies comprehension and philosophical reflection in an almost intimidating and debilitating way.' Its nature, as an in-itself, is 'essentially alien to consciousness.' It is 'an "Other" to us all.' (Wicks, pp. 37-38) For Jameson, along with the unconscious, until now the other last stronghold of authenticity, nature has eventually been colonised by 'multinational capital' (*Postmodernism*, p. 49).

<sup>633</sup> Airaksinen, pp. 2, 11-12, 16 (my emphasis).

1960s is merely nostalgic, unable to achieve anything substantial against the misdeeds of postmodernity.

Despite Fagan's ironic awareness, his evocation of the stereotypical ideality of a bygone time, which we might well call 'Sixtiness', acknowledges, if not the actual, at least the possible aesthetic colonisation of the past in the fashion of certain poses and externalities: for instance, Sartre sitting by Simone de Beauvoir in a Rive Gauche café while being served by the waiter impersonating bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 19). In that his pastiche recreation of late modernism might be related to his own personal memories of an exciting time when some of his lost friends were still there and he himself was younger, Fagan would be stepping beyond irony, parody and pastiche into the hazardous region Jameson denominates 'the emergent ideology of the "generation".' (ibid.) This would be the ultimate instance of the reification of the past, a time once alive and now a commodity duly tagged and available on the shelves of postmodernism's culture or even of a mere entertainment supermarket. What many experienced once as the lived hope of revolution and the promise of a new foundation for lived meaning now crystallises into the bitter tongue-in-cheek grimace of an old professor whose life approaches its end. What he conceives as a stand against ignorance and the sheer brutality of financial power might after all be of interest to some barbaric movie producer very much like his lecture patrons. His alleged oppositional gesture would then merely come down to a lame verbal-conceptual recreation of a dead cultural style to be sold in the globalised media market. Just like Findley's *Headhunter*.

In fact, in writing his story about the Sixties, Fagan could be charged with falling prey to nostalgia as a 'social decease', thus degrading the present by 'the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition'. Yet, interestingly and following Linda Hutcheon's ideas on Jameson's thought on nostalgia, in the end Fagan would only be following the example of the very nostalgic Jameson. As a good Marxist, the latter would be regretting the passing away of a more stable and authentic, pre-postmodern world: that of modernism. Thus, Jameson, would only be doing in reality what Fagan does in fiction: building up an aesthetics and even a politics of nostalgia, idealising a world about which

we are not sure whether it ever existed at all or, at least, mythologising and mourning it as a time of aesthetic plenitude and a much larger Marxist constituency.<sup>634</sup>

If many years ago Findley had written that a book is ‘a way of singing [...] our way out of darkness’, now Fagan himself acknowledges that the ‘world of great literature’ he has devoted his entire life to is ‘failing and falling apart.’ (*Headhunter*, p. 110) The sixties are far away in a past more and more disconnected from the everyday life of almost everyone in our postmodern society. Practically nobody might remember the old professor just a short while after his death. Certainly, not his hosts and funders, too engrossed in making some more millions out of their building business. Without any ‘transcendent guarantor’ behind them, and under postmodern conditions such as the overwhelming power of money, always ready to find new and mightier ways to make its commandments obeyed and its influence felt, Fagan’s (and Findley’s) moral metafiction on the power of literature to change the world or to make it a more inhabitable place could come down to very little indeed as an efficient counter-discourse (Bull, p. 160). In this context, Fagan’s evocation of some of modernism’s cultural heroes might be coincidental with the nostalgic, critically inoperative appraisal, if not straight justification of cultural stratification made in their day by the most prominent members of the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer (Jenks, *Culture*, p. 110).<sup>635</sup> After the end of his very well remunerated lecture, Fagan would

---

<sup>634</sup> Linda Hutcheon, ‘Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern’, *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory*, *Studies in Comparative Literature*, 30 (2000), 189-207, <<https://vdocuments.mx/irony-nostalgia-and-the-postmodern-linda-hutcheon.html>> [accessed 14.10.2019], n. p, par. 12, 21.

<sup>635</sup> Adorno himself, a man of the best taste, would be incurring in a contradiction if he refused this Irish couple the little bit of luxury they would be offering Fagan’s audience while paying for it: apart from bragging some conspicuous consumption this side of want (which most probably Fagan, and certainly Adorno, born a rich man, never were acquainted with, unlike ‘Pat and Mike’), they would objectively be gracing their community with what Adorno takes to be a progressive factor, namely luxury, beyond their social calculations (*Minima Moralia*, pp. 119-21). As for Fagan, I see him very much in an elitist position, a proud holder of what Pierre Bourdieu calls cultural capital, an instrument of legitimation of material differences with the pretext of high culture. It is a component of a broader category, social capital, which Bourdieu defines as ‘a resource consisting of durable social obligations or connections, such as group or network memberships, that can be called upon to access other valuable resources.’ As cited in Jeff Manza, ‘Social Capital’, in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*, ed. by Bryan S. Turner (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2006), pp. 557-59 (p. 558).

I can imagine Fagan reacting in a similar manner to Theodor Adorno in 1969, as he was publicly mocked during a lecture by three girls with naked breasts who threw flower petals on him while moving seductively and whom he would later call ‘hippies’: by grabbing his hat and hurriedly leaving the lecture theatre, ‘waving his briefcase at the young women in self-defence’, prey to ‘the already substantial gap between himself and his students’. At the time of the student protests taking place all over the West in the wake of the events of



morally stay somewhere of his own, out of time and space, in his exclusive if nostalgic elitism.

Be that as it may, the very fact that Marlow – and we too through him - reads Fagan’s story off the pages of *Harper’s Magazine* puts a full period to the entire question. What sort of resistance to the postmodernism described by Jameson and to ‘ignorance, inattention and indifference’ as symptoms of postmodern nihilism could this all stand for? (Bull, p. 163) As Marlow himself concludes after dropping his copy of the magazine: ‘Civilisation [...] had itself become a plague.’ (*Headhunter*, p. 312). Having accomplished everything that could be expected from it, civilisation might have become a meaning-depleted word, ‘waste and meaninglessness’, consisting in all there would be left after ‘brutality has supplanted imagination.’ (Bull, p. 161) In this, he coincides, almost literally, with Thomas Mann, who, on the threshold of the Nazis’ arrival to power, judged the situation as an ‘emancipation of brutality’, the outcome of giving free rein to instincts and mocking every kind of human authority.<sup>636</sup> Moreover, as Linda Hutcheon claims, the postmodern, having rather cooled down after its oppositional and idealistic beginnings in the 1960s, ‘has to acknowledge its own complicity with the very values upon which it seeks to comment.’<sup>637</sup> Hence, there would be no way to stand outside the postmodern condition in order to criticise it, since counter-discourse and parody would be inevitably implicated in what they contest; the fact that ‘we are *within* the culture of postmodernism’, that is within postmodernity, is not without consequences (Hutcheon, as cited in Brydon, p. 54; Jameson, as cited in Wyile, p. 65, original emphasis). Within that culture, it might occur that, twisting Lyotard a little bit, ‘the confusion which reigns in the “taste” of patrons’ will make them fund a lecture of which they will not manage to understand a

---

Paris, May 1968, Adorno was already out of sync, inhabiting a dialectical system that would only enable him to react to such a childish event by producing expressions such as ‘idiotic brutality of the left-wing fascists’ or ‘malicious joy of all reactionaries’ to describe what had happened. As a result of the event, he abandoned his lectures altogether, dying shortly of a heart attack: Wilber W. Caldwell, *1968: Dreams of Revolution* (New York: Algora, 2009), p. 170; Brian O’Connor, *Adorno*, Routledge Philosophers (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 13-14.

<sup>636</sup> Thomas Mann, ‘A Wave of Anomalous Barbarism’, in *European Literature from Romanticism to Postmodernism: A Reader in Aesthetic Practice*, ed. by Martin Travers (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), pp. 257-59 (p. 259).

<sup>637</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, New Accents (London and New York: Routledge: 1989), p. 11.

single word, without it making much difference either to them or to anybody else: after all, ‘eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture’ (Lyotard, ‘What is Postmodernism?’, p. 76).<sup>638</sup>

By definition, under the postmodern dispensation we would be living the death of art as a specific, autonomous domain of human experience, rescued and separated from the rest of its constituents. In our postmodern figural culture, the autonomy of art has disappeared through a process of de-differentiation from the real world (which, besides and as we have already seen, is not ‘real’ any longer, but merely simulated). The eventual outcome of this process within a general postmodern ‘profusion of information and proliferation of images’ has been a ‘de-auraticization of art’ in favour of ‘an aesthetics of desire, sensation and immediacy.’ (Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, pp. 68, 81) What Fagan’s revered Sartre and other existentialists called ‘life project’ has definitely been replaced. This has happened within a general aestheticisation or stylisation of life accompanied by a widespread ‘calculating hedonism’, mere ‘lifestyle’ (p. 84). This would make of postmodern art, or of art in postmodernity, something utterly non-redemptive and unrelated to any ‘higher’ metaphysical realm, in contradistinction to modernism. By insisting on ‘the adversary function of *écriture*’, Fagan incurs in ‘an overestimation of art’s transformative *function* for society which is the signature of an earlier, modernist, age.’ (Huyssen, p. 210, original emphasis) He just stays deluded by ‘heroic visions of modernity and of art as a force of social change’ (p. 217). As Thomas Mann wrote while thinking about German society in 1930: the time is one of ‘decline and disappearance of stern and civilizing conceptions such as culture, mind, art, ideas.’ (p. 259) Our situation, many decades later, would not have changed substantially. If anything, it might have worsened.

Indeed, this twilight of art would be just an aspect of the more general end or death of metaphysics (Vattimo, pp. 53, 59). In the West we would all be compromised with this process, especially tenured professors from Trinity College, Dublin (incidentally the most exclusive academic institution in Ireland, where Beckett was educated), who may also be

---

<sup>638</sup> ‘By becoming kitsch, art panders to the confusion which reigns in the “taste” of the patrons.’ (Lyotard, ‘What is Postmodernism?’, p. 76) In this case, for reasons of personal and cultural prestige, these patrons have gone for the real thing (which does not make much difference, considering the current cultural situation). Fagan did not care much about their ‘kitsch’ patrons either when signing on the dotted line or when being transferred the sum offered for his travails.

paid some substantial sums by wealthy universities on both sides of the Atlantic while touring or working as visiting academics, without mentioning their income in exchange for articles or stories to be published in magazines such as Harper's. Probably without wanting to acknowledge or even think about it, Fagan personifies the transition from a modern cultural paradigm grounded on 'meaning, explanation and interpretation' to a postmodern one based on 'expression, information and communication.' (Silverman, p. 109) What is essential in Fagan's lecture, what is communicated and expressed, and what his audience is being informed about is his patrons' wealth and power; to begin with, because most of his audience, despite the presence of some outsiders like Lilah Kemp, belong to the higher social circles. Behind the prestige and accomplishment of Fagan's scholarly elitism there might be hiding, after all, what Jameson calls the bloody 'underside' of worldwide 'American military and economic domination' (or of deeply entrenched Anglo-Irish privilege and clout) (*Postmodernism*, p. 5).

One could even speculate if a more or less unconscious feeling of guilt might have had something to do with Fagan's fatalistic conclusion on the human predicament regarding history: 'self-destruction' might well be the 'destiny' of the human race, something experienced in postmodernity as the perfect illustration of both Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (*Headhunter*, p. 111)<sup>639</sup>. Stated in a simpler way: nihilism might be both the West's history and destiny (Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 15). In this, Fagan would be submitting to the same fascination with disaster or even straight apocalypse that already Nietzsche, in the pre-history of postmodernity, could foretell, in spite of Fagan having avowedly been combatting it all through his life (Goldman, pp. 36-37). In this regard, one can remain legitimately sceptical about any claims about literature being a tool for transcendence of the darkness we already found in Beckett's *Three Novels: Headhunter* would be bogged in this dark morass itself, unable to make anyone, not even his fictional characters, realistically hope for anything else but to grope around with no clear direction.

---

<sup>639</sup> In a prototypically postmodern example of intertextuality, one of Kurtz's two favourite pet researchers is called Dr Shelley. She experiments on animals and is in charge of administering Obedion to the children delivered by Dr Kurtz to the Club of Men's sadistic perverts (Reed, p. 168). I find it very curious that already in 1993 Findley is still referring to the author of *Frankenstein* by her husband's surname. It seems he was not very impressed by postmodern political correctness in this respect, despite his being gay, his 'rejection of traditional male power structures' such as 'business, family and the psychiatric profession', and of 'meta-narratives' like those of 'religion, history, medicine, science' (Pearson, p. 117).

Findley's vapid 'civilisational' humanism would also be embodied, by contradistinction to Kurtz's self-avowed materialism and greed for power, by a certain 'domestic', pedestrian ideal of 'goodness' in *Headhunter*: that of 'good people' such as neighbours Marlow and Lilah Kemp. As I already pointed out, sketchy characterisation and the piling up of sensationalist, anti-climactic scenes throughout the work so as to build up the plot and explain the motives of characters (say Dr Purvis' astounding and spectacular suicide in front of his friend, Dr Marlow) or to call the reader's attention to the corruption of our postmodern society in the way this is done in the novel, do not help to make the narrative plausible. This goes in turn to the detriment of Findley's residual defence of humanism.<sup>640</sup> For instance, that professionally most successful Dr Marlow is depicted as a 'normal person' in a scene describing his dinner preparations would not achieve much in providing a believable context for his unlikely friendship with a peculiarly schizophrenic patient such as his neighbour Lilah, let alone for his entrusting her to break the law in his attempt at revealing to the world who Kurtz really is. Jeopardising his more than promising career by way of inducing a psychotic person whose behaviour nobody (including herself) can control to commit a crime against the property of a presumably public institution in a country such as Canada, therefore resisting what in principle should be seen as the legislator's legitimate authority in a way which is not exactly nonviolent, is absolutely out of the question: this is just an unbelievable act of recklessness and irresponsibility. Such an ancient humanistic tenet as the right to resist tyranny or oppressive power would thus be weakened.<sup>641</sup> Besides, how is it that Kurtz so clumsily allowed for such sensitive papers of his to go astray in the first place? In a novel such as this, no matter how postmodern, which can and is surely meant to be read, apart from other subtlest considerations, as a thriller or a detective story, these details ought to be important and be given some thought before sending the work to its publishers. On the other hand, I do not think that Findley's publishers minded in the least, given the succulent financial prospects stemming from such

---

<sup>640</sup> This shows for instance in many characteristically postmodern, over-the-top scenes or episodes of sensationalist sex, such as one where one of Dr Purvis' patients, who normally has a fetish for athletic young men wearing women's clothes, falls in love with a friend's young son, making Kurtz laugh over it as he reads his file (*Headhunter*, pp. 116-17).

<sup>641</sup> See for instance how stealing cannot be comprehended within Gene Sharp's taxonomy of 'nonviolent resistance' measures, as cited in Bryan Caplan, 'The Literature of Nonviolent Resistance and Civilian-Based Defense', *Humane Studies Review*, 9.1 (1994), 1-16 (pp. 4-6).

sort of demotic, easily readable literature signed by a social and cultural icon of contemporary Canada: ‘enrichissez-vous!’<sup>642</sup>

---

<sup>642</sup> For this classic expression in support of capitalism, pronounced by Guizot, one of the ministers of Louis-Philippe, ‘the bourgeois king’, see ‘François Guizot (1787 - 1874): Le conservateur « éclairé », in *Herodote.net* <[https://www.herodote.net/Francois\\_Guizot\\_1787\\_1874\\_-synthese-435.php](https://www.herodote.net/Francois_Guizot_1787_1874_-synthese-435.php)> [accessed 14.10.2019]

## Chapter 5 – The Controversial Role of Homosexuality in *Headhunter*: Postmodernity and the Powers of Horror

There could be an even stronger argument to render Findley's humanism of sorts utterly ineffectual: a particularly morbid fascination with the primal power of male physicality, which he seems to share with his characters. This mighty physicality would find an expression through what I think to be particularly ecstatic renderings of some scenes in a context of heightened sexuality: for instance, in Julian Spade's exhibition, as we have just pointed out; or in one of the Club of Men's meetings, where one of the models, who has already been through one of its photographic sessions and is not described as a homosexual, sports a very conspicuous potency almost from the start. Even incest-evocating scenes seem to be in thrall of this all-powerful male sexuality: an example would be that where Ben Webster, a neophyte of the Club, fantasises over three nieces of his, all of them in their early teens, when a naked Torontonion scion unexpectedly turns up in order to tease the girls by brandishing an erection (*Headhunter*, pp. 241-42, 245).

As it has already been remarked, this might be enhanced by the mostly negative renderings of female sexuality, which in the novel is universally described in terms and with connotations of greed, power, unfaithfulness or symbolic 'cannibalism'. This could be related (or not) to the psychobiography of a gay man, his negotiation of the Oedipal conflict, his relationship to both mother and father, as well as to the acquisition and exertion of the Lacanian phallus, understood as the prerogatives and privileges of fatherly and masculine authority, which might be different from those of the average heterosexual man.

Of course, this implies going beyond the text and extrapolating from biography. However, firstly, I believe it is legitimate to do so, as the workings of 'gay strategies of representation' in the novel cannot be doubted; secondly, I cannot be persuaded of the opposite precisely because of the force conveyed by the aforementioned scenes (Pearson, p. 116). In any case, it is clear to me that the very idea of humanism would be inextricably bound to a minimum of self-mastery and, in Freudian terms, sexual (self-) repression: even

Kurtz might eventually discover that ‘in the absence of restraint,’ only ‘absolute corruption’ can result (Victor Kennedy, p. 5). Not in vain was Apollo’s temple at Delphi crowned by three carved inscriptions purporting to represent the god’s wisdom, one of which was an early, proverbial expression of what would later be called the golden mean: ‘nothing in excess’ (Reed, p. 170).<sup>643</sup> It is this that I feel sometimes to be eclipsed by sheer, primordial, overwhelmingly powerful sexuality not only in the fictional characters we are dealing with, but also, considering the depiction of scenes revolving around sex in the novel, in their very creator: one can feel the thrill, the fascination, even the subjugation that this rough, fierce, asocial sexuality may inspire in the author. Hubris might have gained the upper hand over Findley in these passages: overcome by the Dionysian raptures of youth’s might and the splendour of triumphant flesh, he risks being (discursively) torn apart, as happened to sacrificial victims during the celebration of the Dionysian mysteries, according to what we saw regarding Euripides’ *Bakkhai*. Indeed, by letting himself be overcome by such enthusiasm connected to the Freudian pleasure principle, he may be slipping into a trap that would ultimately jeopardise his writing, turning it far away from a presumably committed ethical stance.<sup>644</sup> There can be no ethics outside civilisation or culture, realities whose very emergence, according to Freud and yet again, necessitate repression (Weeks, *Discontents*, p. 130). Even our phylogenetic memory, *more Lamarckiano*, if we are to believe Freud, demands submission to the paternal law after the murder of the primal father. Civilisation and the unrestricted satisfaction of all drives are antithetical (p. 158; Storr, p. 107). Thus, even if Lacan believes that ‘the myth of the murder of the father is the myth of a time for which God is dead’, God goes on living ‘inside us’ through the law (Easthope, p. 138; Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 177). To be supported, civilisation needs ‘psychic forces even *stronger* than “natural feelings”’ or the ‘wishes and fantasies’ through which the unconscious expresses itself in its continuous search for pleasure (Easthope, pp. 27, 36, original emphasis). It is on the negation of ‘uncontrollable desires’, Bataille writes while thinking of no less than de Sade, that

---

<sup>643</sup> ‘First, then, let us consider this, that it is the nature of such things [i.e. moral virtues] to be destroyed by defect and excess’: Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, intro. by Lesley Brown, tr. by David Ross, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2009), p. 25.

<sup>644</sup> Anthony Storr calls our attention to how ‘Dionysian and Apollonian closely resembles Freud’s duality of primary process and secondary process’, in other words, irrational and rational types of mental activities, or the pleasure and reality principles, respectively (Storr, pp. 144, 49, 61-62). Unbalance between the two is *hubris*: guilty excess. Trouble.

‘consciousness has based the social structure and the very image of man’.<sup>645</sup> In not heeding this, Findley risks falling as low as de Sade’s contemptible anti-heroes or Bataille’s mindlessly transgressive characters.

Hence, an important measure of cultural transgression against the socially dominant, heterosexual male gaze, which objectifies its Other (the ‘abnormal, inverted, perverted’ homosexual), is to be observed in *Headhunter* (Pearson, pp. 115, 120). This transgression, which is brought about by art (Slade’s paintings and the pictures of John Dai Bowen, the Club of Men’s member and official photographer), consists in a reversion of perversion (which is what homosexuality is thought to be according to Freud and orthodox psychoanalysis, as we already saw). This perversion would consist in an immature fixation of the sexual drive on some intermediate step of the psychosexual development process, with the result of arresting it or dissociating it from its culturally assumed goals, namely heterosexual coitus and reproduction, in any possible way (120; Weeks, *Sexuality*, p. 79; Weeks, *Discontents*, p. 138). What the art of these two homosexuals does in this context is to make the subject (the heterosexual male) face unexpected desire for its symbolic Other, the otherwise socially invisible, naked male body as a powerful, undeniably material, corporeal source of unquenchable energies, of singularly intense pleasures and delights (Pearson, pp. 120-21). The heterosexual male thus becomes a captive of masculine, physical, unavoidably challenging sexual potency, in thrall of sheer maleness, the heterosexually marked female and feminine disappearing from the symbolic scene altogether. By being interpellated by this powerful, crude and unexpected force that demands the heterosexual male’s full attention, he gets brought into ‘shame and confusion’ over his ‘unacknowledged desire’, ‘ill with excitement’, seeing himself reflected in the mirror held before him: the male body (ibid.; *Headhunter*, pp. 79, 82) This is all the more dangerous since, while pleasure can be controlled and kept in its place by the ego, either postponing the satisfaction of excitations or suppressing them altogether, desire, according to Lacan, cannot be held in place, always going beyond ‘the threshold imposed by the pleasure principle’ (as cited in Easthope, p. 94; Storr, p. 62).

---

<sup>645</sup> Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. by Alastair Hamilton, Modern Classics (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 76.



This is what happens to Kurtz in Slade's exhibition: in 'submitting to masculine strength', even if he displaces his unease towards David Shapiro, owing to his crude language and way of thinking, he 'loses his own sense of himself as male', thus giving up his 'freedom.' (Pearson, pp. 121-23) By becoming an object that poses a threat to the heterosexual male, as is the case with the male models posing for the Club of Men, there is an inversion of the hegemony of the hitherto discreetly and interestedly invisible, but still socially and symbolically dominant heterosexual (pp. 115, 121).<sup>646</sup> This eruption of the invisible into visibility reaches a climax when George Shapiro, David's son, poses before the Club and is ritually mutilated and killed (p. 122; *Headhunter*, p. 486). The slaughter of this new Isaac, sacrificed by his own father, an impious Abraham (even more so, because he is Jewish and therefore is or should be steeped in the Biblical narrative), is the final symbolic challenge to the hegemony of the supreme male heterosexual, hence also to the dead God of our fathers, no longer the Lord of Hosts, but an exile among the unbelieving men of the contemporary, postmodern West.

If this were so, and maybe unwittingly, by his being unable to avoid falling prey to 'unleashed male power' and being compromised himself with the postmodern by his own position as a subject and an author, Findley's 'cautionary fable' (in a way similar to Ballard regarding *Crash*), and even more importantly, his humanism would become dangerously close to a practical posthumanism characterised by at least a profound scepticism regarding any possible restoration of the human soul in our postmodern context (Pearson, pp. 122, 127).

Coming back to Nietzsche, his celebration of Dionysian sexuality and its incontrovertible relationship with the death drive in its forgetfulness of the self, this philosopher's prophecy about the coming of the overman at the end of a lengthy period of nihilism might contemplate the transformation of the human as an alternative to its mere restoration. Against this background, what Griffin Price (who nevertheless can pass for one of the most balanced characters in the peculiar human menagerie of *Headhunter*) says to Kurtz while at Slade's exhibition might not be irrelevant: after calling Slade 'the Mengele of art' and wondering what he might do next to 'improve the human race', he bluntly

---

<sup>646</sup> Being more precise, what is invisible in heterosexuality is its dominance and hegemony, while it is paradoxically visible as a mode of being; as such, homosexuality would be invisible in as much as it is culturally undesirable and therefore clandestine, an object of social stigma (Pearson, p. 115).

states: ‘The human race needs another Mengele to bring it up to date.’ (*Headhunter*, p. 70) Given the postmodern context, where divine Providence cannot hold any longer, and considering Darwin’s theory of evolution as based on random, unpredictable, purposeless genetic mutation, Griffin Price might not have to worry too much, though: human beings can be considered to be the greatest freaks of nature, and ‘the only futures we can be certain of are *monstrous* ones characterized by perpetual mutation and morphing.’ (Ansell Pearson, *Viroid Life*, p. 5, my emphasis) The members of the Club of Men might subscribe to this, too. In their sadism, in their wanting ‘everything at once, regardless of consequences’, and for all they care, they might even consider some advantageous offer on being provided clones of their own children (Airaksinen, p. 11). They verify Freud’s theory that it is in sadism, when it allies itself with Eros, that the death drive’s existence is betrayed. It is in their ‘narcissistic enjoyment’, moreover, in their ‘blindest fury of destructiveness’ beyond the sexual instinct, and in the fulfilment of their ‘wishes for omnipotence’ that the ‘ubiquity of non-erotic aggressivity and destructiveness’ is confirmed as evidence of both ‘the undeniable existence of evil’ and of the instinct of aggression being ‘the greatest impediment to civilization’ (Freud, *Discontents*, pp. 67-69).

If we consider Findley’s outspoken and challenging homosexuality, as well as his life-long commitment to antifascism, I think there is at the very least a frightful ambivalence in him towards this feeling of being in thrall to being male, especially by the agency of young men (Pearson, p. 126). Thus, despite his deploying a whole literary arsenal of ‘irony, allegory, humour and a [...] camp sensitivity’ in *Headhunter*, Findley would often be getting too close to a ‘potential of complicity’ with this feeling. A case in point could be Slade’s painting made hang on the Parkin’s walls by Kurtz. Here, an invitation could have been made to the reader to ‘participate [...] in the depravity of the executors’ as an ‘onlooker’ or even as a torturer (Victor Kennedy, p. 6).

This should remind us of the aestheticisation of young maleness, physical strength and vigour, and youthful violence by historical fascist regimes in Europe, as well as of its dark sex appeal to many homosexuals, artists and intellectuals included (Diken, p. 97).<sup>647</sup> This

---

<sup>647</sup> We could think, for example, of the scene recreating the Night of the Long Knives in Visconti’s *The Damned*, where the commanders and cadres of the Nazi SA, and their young, tall, handsome, homosexual lovers are very disturbingly represented, despite the director’s communism, almost like martyrs butchered by the much more efficient, disciplined, docile, heterosexual SS. Very significantly, the film’s original Italian title was *La caduta degli dei*, that is, *Twilight of the Gods*, thus paraphrasing and punning on Nietzsche’s

issue could be all the more important in that this ambivalence is not infrequent in Findley's narrators or characters, often artists or artist-figures, who would be haunted by this kind of 'covert fascist desires.' Findley could be falling for the same object of 'reverence' as the character Robert Ireland, namely youth, sensing a promise of fulfilment in the splendour of youthful flesh, no matter whether under a brown or a black shirt (*Headhunter*, p. 123). In fact, this ambivalence (which can be rather 'frustrating' for the reader because of, contradictorily, both its criticism of and its complicity in certain 'mythic and allegorical structures' usually ending up in violence or death) is as important as to justify its having become the main focus of criticism levelled at Findley's work (Bailey and Grady, p. 3). The issue is certainly crucial, despite the defeat suffered by fascism in WWII, as 'focus on the body as a political category,' and fascist 'emphasis on biopolitics' have become 'a commonplace in Western liberal culture.' (Diken, p. 97) In this context, Findley would be exemplifying an amoral 'postmodern penchant [...] for obscuring', inverting Kermode's notion of fiction as a chance for 'finding out' or making sense of our experience as humans (Victor Kennedy, pp. 4, 7).<sup>648</sup>

Ultimately, we might be faced with an irresponsible, morbid, abject fascination for certain *powers of horror* related not to the motherly and feminine, as in Kristeva, but to the aggressively aestheticised male and masculine. Maybe Findley should have considered what could never have amounted to a warning, coming from a paradigmatic anti-moralist and 'a prophet of post-modernity' such as Georges Bataille, but could certainly have been

---

*Twilight of the Idols* (and Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, *Twilight of the Gods*). Many nuances can be found in this sort of pun by Visconti: Nietzsche's twisted friendship with the composer, later turned into abhorrence of his music and aesthetic theory; the historical links between Nazism and elitist capitalist interest in between-the-wars Germany; the relationship between high art and lowlife street crime (embodied by the SA, an organisation incidentally counting several homosexuals among its highest commanders); the association between the upper class, corporate interest, patriarchy and homophobia (as embodied by the aristocratic, elitist and death-driven SS); the abject underside of patriarchy (incest in the aristocratic family of the film's protagonist, the part being played by a notorious homosexual, Helmut Berger, actually the director's lover), ... See Henry Bacon, *Visconti: Explorations of Beauty and Decay* (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1998), pp. 144-155.

In its pastiche and metafictional mode, this would not be Findley's only non-avowed reference to Visconti in *Headhunter*: we also have the very embarrassing and bathetic description of Kurtz's 'first fever' after Visconti's *Death in Venice*, where the death of Thomas Mann's Gustav von Aschenbach, impersonated by Dick Bogarde and preceded in Visconti's cinematic adaptation by his agony on the Lido, is paralleled by Kurtz, 'black dye [...] running down one side of his face' (*Headhunter*, pp. 471-72).

<sup>648</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2000), p. 39.

considered a telling observation: ‘extreme seductiveness is probably at the boundary of *horror*.’ (*Visions of Excess*, p. 17, my emphasis; Hussey, ‘Beast at Heaven’s Gate’, p. 7) Certain acts of transgression, even when only narrative, might have dire consequences; and it is always *fascination* that compels them (Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 133, my emphasis).

After all and by a long detour, we would not be that far from the world of Ballard’s *Crash*: the human, marked by innate perversion and being impotent as to the most alienating aspects of postmodernity, might be exhausted. In this way, Marlow, the novel’s humanist hero, when faced with the ‘horror’ and the ‘vile [...] message’ of Slade’s *The Golden Chamber of White Dogs* (which is maybe the ‘symbolic heart of the novel’ and which the narrator describes as ‘a hymn to violence’), recognises its ‘rightness’ concerning its telling us, in Kurtz’s terms, ‘who we are’ (*Headhunter*, p. 163; Victor Kennedy, p. 5).

There could be, however, an alternative interpretation of Kurtz’s and Findley’s running amok on account of young, vibrant male flesh, which is openly hostile to Freud and Lacan, therefore also to both the perceived repressive nature of the former’s psychoanalysis, always demanding self-control in benefit of order and civilisation, and to the latter’s linguisticity, which considers the body ‘an original nothingness’ or a ‘projection’.<sup>649</sup> I am referring to Deleuze and Guattari’s anti-psychiatric theory. According to them, the subject is an illusion begotten through the resolution of the Oedipus complex, and desire would not be founded on a lack, that of the missing object, but on the absence of a fixed subject (Deleuze and Guattari, p. 26). This implies the connection of what they metaphorically call ‘desiring machines’, that is the unstoppable flows of libidinal energies originating in the body and inherent in all forms of social production as detached from the subject. Hence, sexual energies would be fundamental not only to the individual but also to society (pp. 2-4; Wicks, p. 274). The agent of such connections would be precisely desire, as it would try to bind, always impersonally, the libido and the real objects to be found in the world in ever-changing forms, completely alien from stasis (Deleuze and Guattari, p. 5). This being so, the desiring machines that Julian Slade’s paintings are, disrespectful and heedless of any repressive imperative or its authorities, quite simply overflow and overrun the psychic dams built throughout an entire life by Kurtz, who exists in and through his fantasies of

---

<sup>649</sup>Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hutley, and others (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983; repr. 2010), p. 6.

professional power and influence over Toronto's elite. This is even more so as he experiences this onslaught of desire in one of the temples that the elites have built to greed, prestige and capital's reification of the libidinal, namely the art gallery, where the items exhibited can elicit the most extravagant offers.<sup>650</sup> Regardless of his discipline and his celibate heterosexuality, Kurtz, in spite of some remaining scruples against David Shapiro's low-styled smut, has to yield to the sheer desiring physicality emanating from Slade's paintings, invading and demolishing the very core of his subjectivity. All in all, Kurtz's hubris lies in his dismissal of Freud's warnings and in his forgetting, as prestigious a psychiatrist as he is, that repression of the Real is not accidental, but constitutive of the self. Without it, and without considering the 'ugly truth' life ultimately is, he risks perishing, which he eventually does (Eagleton, *Meaning of Life*, p. 50; *TWTP*, p. 435).

In so doing, of course, in renouncing any rational ethics based on self-control as the proper basis for progress, Findley would be betraying all that his writing life has been interpreted to stand for, opposition to homophobia included. In effect, Deleuze and Guattari's desire, vaguely evocative of a 'Dionysian spirit' directly linked to the body, implies a 'latent naturalism' (I would even call it animalism) of Nietzschean flavour where the 'coherent ego' disappears. This makes not only identity (sexual and gender identity included) but also, even more importantly, reason and *choice* impossible. In its amoralism and 'glorification of polymorphous perversity', this theory would make it impossible to judge negatively aberrant behaviours such as those taking place in the Club of Men (Weeks, *Discontents*, p. 175, my emphasis).

In addition to this, Findley would also be giving in to the scrambling of codes and styles that is definitional of postmodernism: he is writing an ethically ambiguous, sensationalist and all-too-violent pastiche thriller ideal for the taste of a very wide middle-to-low-brow readership that will buy, consume and forget on the spot.

---

<sup>650</sup> Even Lyotard, not only the main theorist of postmodernism along with Jameson, but also one of its staunchest defenders, writes this on the postmodern art gallery: 'Artists, gallery owners, critics, and public wallow together in the "anything goes," and the epoch is one of slackening.' ('What Is Postmodernism?', p. 76)

## Chapter 6 – Findley’s Problematic Postmodernism

I intend to finish my thesis by questioning the theoretical and critical concept of postmodernism. I will do this in two moments: first, I will analyse this notion in relation to the most seemingly obvious example of postmodernism among the three texts studied in my thesis, namely Findley’s *Headhunter*. Nevertheless and secondly, I will question this filiation, exploring the relationships between modernism and postmodernism. This will lead me to question the very category of postmodernism as an aesthetic construct, posing the question whether there has ever been anything such as postmodernism at all.

In a 1996 interview, Findley not only rejected the label of postmodernism, but also affected not even to know the meaning of such a term (Wyile, p. 63). However, it is clear that throughout his work and certainly in *Headhunter*, there is self-evident use of postmodern techniques such as intertextuality, metafiction and parody, all of which importantly bear on issues such as representation, reading, subjectivity, and social and political agency (ibid.).

The question of a text being postmodern or not is not irrelevant, as it contributes to place it in a certain position as regards the conventions of realist fiction and its ideological subtexts, usually linked to the principles championed by liberal humanism and capitalism (p. 64). According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodernism would at one and the same time set up and subvert ‘the powers and conventions of art’ (as cited in Wyile, p. 65). In so doing, as a form of self-conscious art, postmodern fiction would be challenging, up to a point, humanist assumptions on the function of art (ibid.). Among such assumptions of liberal humanism, Hutcheon enumerates the following: ‘autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalisation, system, universalisation, centre, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin.’ (Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 57) Hence, postmodernism would contribute to liberate texts and writing, opening up new horizons for literature beyond realist mimesis, humanistically meaningful content and the strict formal constraints set up by modernism.

Timothy Findley's patent use of postmodern techniques grants him to be considered a postmodern author in as much as their use aspires to interpellate his readership as to 'the urgency of being an engaged reader', thus actively constructing their own meaning out of the text rather than receiving it passively, according to reading conventions inherent to realism (Wyile, pp. 65, 67). Hence, readers are enabled to resist hegemonic readings of the world and experience as conveyed through realist conventions tending to the signifying closure of the fictional text (pp. 65, 72).

This issue cannot be so easily concluded, however, as Findley spouses a number of humanist postulates, such as the healing power of literature, which, when united to his formal accessibility and a tendency to an 'overall sense of closure' in his texts, as well as his aesthetic and commercial popularity, make his alleged 'postmodern subversiveness' something 'problematically limited' (pp. 64-65).<sup>651</sup>

By way of illustration, Wyile refers us to Findley's different uses of italics in *Headhunter* and their respective function, which would support the thesis that his is a sort of incomplete postmodernism. Thus, for example, italics may stress the intensity of some moments in his fiction, although often in a mechanical and melodramatic way that could ground the charges of moralism often levelled against him (pp. 65-66).<sup>652</sup> On other occasions, however, he would use this technique in order to problematise appearances, different instances of social wisdom and practices, narrative itself, or history (pp. 67-68).

Connected to this last issue is Findley's cultivation of historiographic metafiction (even though *Headhunter* deals with a future slightly ahead of our time, I read the novel as recreating the AIDS era) as a way to call the readers' attention to the linguistically and discursively mediated nature of the past, warning them against any pretended transparency or direct accessibility to it, thus guarding it against certain interested versions thereof (p.

---

<sup>651</sup> Terry Eagleton problematizes this subversiveness of postmodern literature in a more general way. His contention is that postmodernism, in its narcissism and ambivalent politics, stands in perfect complicity with the commodity culture and the consumerism prevalent in the West since the second part of the 20th century. Its 'depthless, styleless, dehistoricized, deattached surfaces' would ultimately bring about the 'dissolution of art into the prevailing forms of commodity production' (Eagleton, 'Capitalism', pp. 60-61). Postmodern literary freedom would lead straight to the end of literature as such.

<sup>652</sup> Here, there would be a curious contrast with J.G. Ballard, a writer who, despite his considering himself a moralist, as we already saw, is held to be at least neutral in moral questions, when not directly an immoralist or even an amoralist by almost everyone else.

69). It could be in the domain of subjectivity, though, when the stressing of inner thoughts helps deconstruct or question realist expectations about its unity or coherence, that he could be thought of as most typically and successfully postmodern (Hutcheon, *Poetics*, pp. 11-12).

And yet, we should conclude that *Headhunter* is postmodern only in a particular kind of way: that pointed out by Patricia Waugh, which involves not a refutation, but rather a re-examination of the foundations of ‘coherent subjectivity, historical significance and ethical stability’ in modern thought and representation, which would allow for their recuperation rather than their dissolution (as cited in Wylie, p. 72). In other words, there is room in Findley’s novel for a non-dogmatic type of humanism in which the reader is given a chance of actively, imaginatively contributing to the fashioning of alternative perspectives of texts and reality through destabilisation of familiar ‘scripts’ (for instance and most prominently, that of the detective story in the second half of *Headhunter*), eschewing the monological implications they incorporate in their very constitution (ibid.).

All the same, it should not be overlooked how this postmodern destabilisation of ready-made scripts and their hegemonic discursive implications enables Findley’s fiction to allow for recuperation of meaning in what is ultimately a cohesive, fairly accessible and mainly mainstream sort of text measured according to the reading habits of his large audience and not far away from the realist paradigm of representation, after all (pp. 72-73). In the end, as it has been pointed out earlier, there may be felt to be a yearning for order, clarity and certainty in Findley’s prose, which bespeaks a possible nostalgia for modernism and a kind of signifying closure in his texts (pp. 65, 73).

In *Headhunter*, this is clear in what I believe to be the most immediately challenging and destabilising type of discourse in the novel, namely Amy Wylie’s and above all Lilah Kemp’s paralogical thought (*Headhunter*, p. 36). These two characters live on ‘the other side’ of reality, where they are ultimately confined, on an ontological plane quite distinct from that of the practical hero, Marlow, even if subordinated and amenable to the latter’s normalcy parameters (p. 51). Hence, despite his having been renewed and invigorated by its ‘contamination’ by schizophrenic paralogy, Marlow remains in possession of what is an ultimately coherent, rational, normative type of discourse to which Lilah’s is finally brought back. Once things are back to *normal*, once she no longer needs her insightful



hallucinations to counter the situation of extraordinary disturbance and danger personified by Dr Kurtz, she agrees to undergo medication again, so that her symptoms are kept in check, her discourse being recuperated ‘within a realist aesthetic’ that will represent it, in retrospect, as inappropriately deviant. This marks the end of her ontological destabilisation of the text, therefore of one of the most salient postmodern features of the novel, too (Wyile, pp. 71-73). There will be no more than one reality from now on, and Lilah will have to adapt to it as well as she can: Dr Marlow, the very embodiment of monologicality, will help her along with his empathy and two tons of pills into the bargain. In the end, although Lilah warns the reader not to take the novel as *just* another story, that is not to consume it as yet another (literary) commodity, everything stays in place on the same ontological plane: apart from her resumed treatment, the government may eventually give in to social pressure and order not to go on killing millions of birds, and Marlow might even become Kurtz’s successor at the head of the Parkin Institute (p. 72). A fittingly humanist, hopeful conclusion, belying Findley’s presumed postmodern credentials. We might as well have avoided the long, superficially postmodern detour.

Within this recuperating and sense-making framework, other seemingly postmodern gestures such as Findley’s ironic self-inclusion in his novel as one of Marlow’s patients, though self-deprecating in appearance, might be understood as a facile wink at his many readers, in the way a pop star presents his microphone to the crowd to sing along during a mass concert in the foreknowledge that they will do so (*Headhunter*, p. 162). Hence, we could understand these presumably postmodern stylemes as expectable and consequently reified, unable to perform their destabilising function any longer, having become new conventions. In this way, Findley falls prey to ‘postmodernist codes.’ (Wyile, p. 73; Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 17). In that these are incapable to exert the discursive agency instrumented in the past by modernist styles, and in that they combine with what I understand to be Findley’s notorious lack of humour (which is a serious matter, because he tries to be humorous at times, as when turning up as a character himself), his prose comes across as one ‘devoid of laughter’ and without any edge (*Headhunter*, p. 162; Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 17). Like postmodern pastiche, a kind of parody ‘amputated of the satiric impulse’, which he cultivates, for instance, in Fagan’s story about a film featuring several modernist heroes, I find his fiction ‘devoid of any [real] conviction’, therefore of any interest, too (*ibid.*).

## Chapter 7 – Has There Ever Been any Postmodernism at All?

One fact concerning *Headhunter* makes me wish to finish my thesis with a questioning of the very category of postmodernism and the examination of its links with late modernism and, more generally, with a wider concept of modernism that would also comprise avant-garde experimentalism. This fact is that *Headhunter*, on the one hand, is a clearly postmodernist novel according to those theories and taxonomies of postmodernism that have won the highest degree of support in academia and among critics; and yet, on the other hand and as I have just argued, its postmodern character is rather arguable, too. With respect to this seeming paradox, I also intend to clarify the terminological and conceptual confusion obtaining between modernity and modernism, as well as between postmodernity and postmodernism. It might be that, in the end, postmodernism is not such an important and conceptually clear category as postmodernity.

In the same way as *Headhunter*'s postmodern character is controversial, according to my contention, I find that the two basic criteria that have found favour in the eyes of academia to define postmodernist fiction (criteria that *Headhunter*, as said, fulfils) are highly arguable as well. These criteria are Brian McHale's theory of ontology as the dominant of postmodernism (vs. epistemology in modernism), and Linda Hutcheon's ideas on historiographic metafiction, to which she almost reduces the entire category of postmodernist fiction (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 73; Hutcheon, *Poetics*, pp. 40, 52).

The dominant, according to Roman Jakobson is 'the focusing component of the work of art' which 'guarantees the integrity of the structure' (as cited in McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, p. 15). Thus, according to McHale, in postmodernist fiction the focus falls no longer on consciousness and its cognitive adventures, the world being taken for granted as a backdrop, but rather on 'pluriform, polyphonic' modes of being in a plurality of autonomous worlds, their description and their relations (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 75; McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, p. 15).

For Hutcheon, postmodernist fiction, which she understands basically as historiographic metafiction, is ‘where documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody.’<sup>653</sup> (*Politics*, p. 7) According to Hutcheon, understanding both fiction and history as text, postmodernism both questions and reaffirms representation, achieving a more balanced relation between the epistemological and the ontological (*Poetics*, pp. 50, 93-94, 142). Furthermore, postmodernism involves a significant degree of political agency, if staying complicitous to the society it caters for and the world it belongs to, as if being both inside and outside them; in this way, it legitimises and subverts the humanism and positivism that define our culture at one and the same time, acknowledging ‘its unavoidable implication’ in the dominant culture (McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, p. 76; Hutcheon, *Politics*, pp. 13-15, 24; *Poetics*, pp. 47, 172). In Hutcheon’s opinion (which seems to coincide with professor Fagan’s in *Headhunter*), fiction significantly contributes to unravel the ways in which ideology manipulates us through its strategies of self- and world-constructing (pp. 3, 40, 50). Being almost always double-voiced (‘both academic and popular,’ and therefore easily accessible), postmodern art would be even didactic, and it certainly is ‘political and engaged’ (pp. 44, 41, 54).

Douwe W. Fokkema decries McHale’s ontological hypothesis on the grounds that questioning or reflecting on being does not necessarily exclude an epistemological approach. In any case, he adds, most postmodern fiction does not seem to reflect on essences, existential truth or authenticity; this last domain would be existentialism’s own, a literary school that appears to have become exhausted sometime between the late 1960s and the early 1970s. For the rest, postmodernism’s attitude towards ontological concerns seems to be superficial, a mere matter of positing and describing (Fokkema, ‘Semiotics’, p. 21). As for Hutcheon, a mere stroll down the aisles of any sizeable bookshop will show how for each ‘historiographic metafiction’ novel, and without having to stoop down to pulp, there will be an indeterminate number of traditional, third-person-omniscient-

---

<sup>653</sup> In both incorporating and challenging its object, Hutcheon opposes Jameson as to parody’s crucial role in her concept of postmodernism (*Poetics*, p. 11). For Jameson, postmodern parody, deprived of any ‘satiric impulse’, simply concocts genres or styles into flat, ineffectual pastiche, a mere imitation of dead styles (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 17-18). It is remarkable how Hutcheon conceives of a close trope or figure, irony, which is moreover essential in her concept of historiographic metafiction, as something subverting and serious in its dealings with theme and purpose. The ultimate reason for this, according to Umberto Eco, whom she quotes, is that, quite simply, there is no other possible way to be serious in our time: ‘there is no innocence in our world’ (*Poetics*, pp. xii, 39).

narrated novels, historical or not. If all there is to literary postmodernism is historiographic metafiction, then not only is postmodernism no dominant at all, but a rather minor trend in contemporary fiction.

Having refuted (if cursorily, given the scope of this thesis), I hope, these theories on postmodernist fiction and its identification, I will proceed to set up the main features of what I understand by postmodernist fiction: that is, a fiction which is not defined by its links with postmodernity, in general, but, in a more restricted and precise sense, by its affiliation with postmodernism understood as an aesthetics, a literary school or movement. This postmodernism I am thinking of, moreover, would correspond only partially to the ‘peak phase’ that Brian McHale acknowledges in his history of postmodernism in literature.<sup>654</sup> This phase, to my mind, would start around 1979 or 1980 and span the 1980s and the following decade, while McHale establishes 1973 as its starting point. In the preceding phase (starting roughly around 1966 and, yet again, as I see it, including, at least partially, McHale’s ‘peak’ phase from around 1973 to 1980), a certain literature that gets referred to as postmodern, in as much as it rejects representation and relies on metafiction as a radicalisation of modernism’s self-reflexivity, is set on a course of pure formalism and, therefore, has to be understood as a radical variety of modernism, (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 4).<sup>655</sup> Linda Hutcheon herself, one of the champions of postmodernism, calls

---

<sup>654</sup> McHale chooses 1973 as a plausible date for the beginning of this phase. He makes a number of historical points concerning that year (apart from the OPEC oil embargo, which we already saw, he mentions the end of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal...), including the beginning of what he calls the first neoliberal regime in Chile. For reasons I explain throughout this chapter, I believe that postmodernism’s peak is reached around 1979 or 1980, when a genuine international, not parochially American, postmodernism is born. I also do away with what McHale calls the ‘interregnum’ period, approximately between 1989-2001, conflating it with a final phase of decadence, which I date earlier than him, around the mid 1990s, when different forms of realism start to come back with a vengeance, as I make clear in the main body of this thesis. McHale’s periodisation of postmodernism is laid out in chapters 2 to 4 of *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (pp. 22-170).

As to the neoliberal argument, on which I agree, since I see a streak of historically bourgeois, right-of-centre anarchism or libertarianism in postmodernism, I think one can hardly think of Pinochet’s Chile as a neoliberal regime, which McHale does. One thing is that during the iron years of dictatorship and political repression in Chile some neoliberal economic policies were implemented, and another is to compare this to the economics favoured by Thatcher (since 1979) and Reagan (since 1980) in two of the oldest and most stable democracies in the world with a relatively clear and decent human-right record (if we forget about colonial and imperialist velleities).

<sup>655</sup> Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as a type of writing that not only creates a fiction, but also makes a statement about it, breaking down the boundaries between creation and criticism. Metafiction would entail

that kind of literature which is only about its own verbal patterns ‘ultramodernism’ or ‘late modernist extremism’ (Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, p. 132; Hutcheon, *Poetics*, pp. 144, 52). Brian McHale explains this formalism, when thinking of his ‘peak’ modernism (broadly from 1973 to 1990), as based on a wish to foreground ‘issues of ontology’, a teleology we have already dismissed as irrelevant for our defining purposes, aside from making us postpone the beginnings of peak modernism to a later date than him. Furthermore, this is all the more serious if we consider the fact that such an ontological concern would be almost the only ‘common denominator’ of all these allegedly peak-postmodernist texts (McHale, pp. 73, 75). Andreas Huyssen goes as far as to call this formalist fiction, as well as McHale’s first phase of almost exclusively American postmodernism ‘an offshoot of the avant garde’, its ‘radical extension’ or even its ‘endgame’, signalling its ‘decline’ as ‘a genuinely critical and adversary culture.’ (pp. 168, 170).<sup>656</sup>

If we include the avant-garde in modernism, then the affinities between modernism and early or ‘first-phase’ postmodernism become even more noticeable. If we also include the predominantly formalist literature written in America from 1973 to around 1980, then the distinction between both categories becomes blurrier and blurrier.<sup>657</sup> This is why some critics will not accept radical dichotomies between them, including the binary-based

---

‘both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional (Waugh, pp. 6-7).

An example of a self-consciously self-reflexive literature about nothing but itself would be surfiction, a school developed during the 1970s. See also the theoretical proximity of this kind of literature and Barthes’ ‘writerly text’ in Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 69. In 2001, one of surfiction’s main theorists, Raymond Federman, wrote on the death of postmodernism: ‘we are already beyond postmodernism, it’s dead, dead and gone’ (as cited in McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, p. 1).

<sup>656</sup> Hans Bertens, ‘The Debate on Postmodernism’, in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), pp. 3-14 (p. 4). It has even been questioned ‘whether postmodernism could offer anything that had not been proposed by the historical avant-garde’: ‘Introductory note’, in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), p. 301.

<sup>657</sup> Douwe Fokkema, ‘The Semiotics of Literary Postmodernism’, in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), pp. 15-42 (pp. 32, 34); Matei Calinescu, ‘Postmodernism and Some Paradoxes of Periodization’, in *Exploring Postmodernism*, ed. by Matei Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema, Publications in General and Comparative Literature, 23 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1990), pp. 239-254 (p. 251).

One of the arguments for the inclusion of the historical avant-gardes in mainstream modernism is that the avant-garde side of postmodernism (e.g., OuLiPo, or L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E) is considered a part thereof by most theorists and critics, starting with McHale. Another more specific reason is put forward by Richard Murphy: ‘the avant-garde serves as the political and revolutionary cutting-edge of the broader movement of modernism, from which it frequently appears to be trying with difficulty to free itself.’ (p. 3)

hypothesis proposed by Ihab Hassan in order to tell them apart.<sup>658</sup> At the very least, we must not forget how ‘there is hardly a scholar [...] who does not come to the conclusion that Postmodernism and the Avant-garde movements have a number of features in common.’ (Lethen, p. 234). Even McHale, a defender of the separate identity of postmodernism, makes nonetheless an inventory of the legacy and influence of the historical avant-gardes on postmodernism (*Cambridge Introd.*, p. 21).

Broadening the scope of our analysis and according to Steven Connor, the postmodernism of Jean-François Lyotard, one of the staunchest defenders of the postmodern, could be interpreted as ‘a confirmation of modernist principles.’ The French thinker may have seen ‘postmodernism as the reactivation of principles that had flared up first in modernism.’<sup>659</sup> Lastly, no less than Frank Kermode even thinks postmodernism to be ‘a marginal development of older Modernism’, deserving to be called, at best, ‘neomodernism’ (Lethen, p. 237; McHale, *Postm. Fiction*, p. 4). In conclusion, even if existing independently from modernism, postmodernism, especially in its early manifestations, seems to unconsciously depend on modernism for its very existence and definition: it would be the non-modernist or even the anti-modernist.

This being said and in any case, international theorists have reached a consensus (the only one, according to McHale, regarding this literary movement or period) about the exhaustion of the notion of postmodernism, having proposed so far a myriad labels to name and classify what might come next (*Cambridge Introd.*, p. 5).<sup>660</sup> Leaving aside this terminological battlefield, what is evident is that a new realism, in different varieties, has

---

<sup>658</sup> Helmut Lethen, ‘Modernism cut in Half: The Exclusion of the Avant-garde and the Debate on Postmodernism’, in Fokkema and Bertens (eds.), pp. 233-38 (p. 235)

<sup>659</sup> Steven Connor, ‘Postmodernism Grown Old’, in *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*, ed. by David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris, Bloomsbury Academic (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 65-83 (p. 71).

<sup>660</sup> Writing in 1997, Hans Bertens remarks the existence of ‘a general feeling that postmodernism is at least moribund, both as a creative moment [...] and as a subject for academic research.’ (‘The Debate on Postmodernism’, in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), pp. 3-14 (p. 3)).

More pessimistically, Steven Connor states how the only consensus that critics and theorists seem to have reached on postmodernism is that consensus is impossible on such an issue (Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, p. 9)

taken over the Western literary scene. In some accounts this would have happened already by the mid-1990s.<sup>661</sup>

As I understand it, postmodernist literature, as long as we would still be interested in thinking of it as a distinct period in the history of Western literature, would be characterised by its eclecticism, such eclecticism being, according to Lyotard, ‘the degree zero of contemporary general culture’, as we already saw (as cited in McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, p. 1).<sup>662</sup> This eclecticism, which rose with an affirmative character in the 1970s after the exhaustion of the experimental phase of American postmodernism, would be reflected in several features (Huysen, p. 188).<sup>663</sup> First, it would be a culturally agnostic fiction, by which I mean one that is open to all sorts of genres, techniques, rhetorics, themes... In postmodernist fiction, literally, anything goes. There would be nothing more alien to postmodernism than faith in any aesthetic, theoretical or critical creed. This is self-evident in *Headhunter*, where fantasy and paralogical romance go hand in hand with the detective story, the metafictional appearance of its author as a character being commented on by the narrator (who, we may suspect, is the same person), the apocalyptic genre, loads of generally realist mimesis of contemporary society, and an intertextuality focused mainly on Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and secondarily on works such as Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* or Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.

Second, postmodernist fiction would be characterised by its resolutely jumping over the ‘great divide’ between high art and popular culture, according to which, in its creed of

---

<sup>661</sup> This is the date given by Douwe Fokkema, who adds that ‘a referential reality is being admitted again, the first signs of which became visible at least ten or fifteen years earlier.’ (‘Semiotics’, p. 30)

<sup>662</sup> For a certainly eclectic catalogue of ‘postmodern’ writers and, above all, literary groups or movements, see McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>663</sup> Eclecticism as a defining feature of postmodernism had already entered the debate on postmodern architecture during the 1970s (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 57). His main architectural theorist, Charles Jencks, mentions ‘disbelief’ as one of the most remarkable characteristics of postmodern art (p. 66).

The affirmative character of this new kind of postmodernism accords with John Barth’s manifesto ‘The Literature of Replenishment’ (1980), as opposed to his former ‘The literature of Exhaustion’ (1967). It was this type of postmodernism that was exported to Europe to become what I recognise as the only full-fledged postmodernism: the international postmodernism represented by Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* as one of its most successful early instances (Huysen, pp. 189, 184). Patricia Waugh makes a catalogue of forerunners of this new international phase of postmodernism, who did away with the ‘paranoia’ of the sixties and seventies in favour of ‘celebration’ (Waugh, p. 9). Alternatively, Douwe Fokkema considers Barth’s article and Eco’s novel the watershed between ‘early’ and ‘late’ postmodernism (‘Semiotics’, p. 30).

supreme artistry and detachment from the social, economic and political, modernism constituted itself (Huysen, p. vii). An example of the lingering power of this distinction in *Headhunter* is illustrated in one of its characters, namely Prof. Fagan, and in his (pretentious and ineffectual) nostalgia for modernism. Andreas Huyssen believes that the absorption of mass culture into high culture has been, theoretically and historically, more important than the presumed break between modernism and postmodernism (p. viii). By the time of the first phase of (alleged) postmodernism in the States, unlike in Europe, this development had already taken place, thus compensating for the blunt political edge of the avant-garde it took over from on account of the latter's academic and even commercial canonisation (in the case of surrealists such as Dalí, for example), the backlash of May '68 (when the Western world seemed about to change but did not), the enthronement of politically quietist, language-oriented, poststructuralist theory in American university departments, and the lack of a genuine native socio-political vision in American art.<sup>664</sup> This employment of popular and mass culture elements in postmodernism accelerated from the 1970s onwards (pp. 166-67, 169-70, 197-98).

If we add this to its not looking away from a potential mass readership, *Headhunter* can be said to be informed by what Charles Jencks calls double coding, a feature focused on the use of elements originating in mass culture and the contrast obtaining between them and more 'serious', intellectually authoritative, traditional or even conventional elements related to both form and content in the work of art (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 58). The main examples of this double coding in *Headhunter* would be the stark contrast between professor Fagan's cultured and finely chiselled tirades on the cancer corroding the heart of the contemporary, and the novel's overall demoticism, if not overt populism, deriving from its immediate stylistic accessibility; its systematic use of pastiche and parody regardless of the serious concerns it thematises; the occasional Gothic melodrama (Emma Berry's story); some soft porn (Emma Berry's career as a high-class prostitute and everything related to the Club of Men); and its realist mode (if 'magical' in anything concerning Lilah Kemp, especially in what regards the 'funny' elements in her characterisation).

---

<sup>664</sup> Huyssen sees text-oriented poststructuralism as the swansong of modernism and traces its roots to a wish 'to turn the dung of post-68 political disillusionment into the gold of aesthetic bliss.' (pp. 216, 212). In itself, this would be no other than the outcome of modernism's reflex to 'transform the vulgar contingency of worldly relations into purified aesthetic terms' (Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, p. 115).



One of my motives for excluding a good part of what Brian McHale considers to be postmodernist literature written from 1973 onwards has to do, along with its formalism, precisely with its ‘difficulty’, instead of the ‘mindless pleasures’ associated with the overcoming of the great divide we have just seen. If we add to this the large inventory of, using McHale’s terminology, ‘megafictions’ written in America since 1973 (the year Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* was published), my argument about the scope of postmodernism and its periodisation becomes, I believe, even clearer (McHale, p. 74).

Third and finally, in its being very Canadian indeed, *Headhunter* inscribes itself in a postmodernist kind of fiction counting among its most salient attributes being international in origin, theme and, at least potentially, readership. Not in vain does this kind of fiction count among its landmark titles such as Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, and among its cultivators names such as Salman Rushdie. Since the 1980s, these international writers, along with many others, would have taken the literary scene like ‘a tidal wave’ (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p.11). By international I mean to say non-American (even if English-speaking or -writing, as in Findley’s case), given that, again in McHale’s periodisation schema and as we already pointed out, we can identify a first phase in postmodernism that is essentially American in what concerns both theory and literary practice.<sup>665</sup> As modernism, unlike postmodernism and except in some scholars’ heads, was a strictly Anglophone movement or school, and if we leave aside architecture and the other arts and restrict ourselves to literature, I believe 1980 (they year when Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* and John Barth’s *The Literature of Replenishment* came out) or another close-by date would be more convenient in order to mark the start of international literary postmodernism and, in general, the rise of a new awareness and interest in postmodernism elsewhere than in America (McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, pp. 5, 62-63, 67). At this time, even McHale himself writes of a nearly global or planetary postmodern culture beyond ‘merely consumerist globalism’ (p. 152). This international character is also apparent in *Headhunter*’s plot, with the very international figure of Fagan, a visiting professor and public speaker the world over (despite, yet again, having English as his mother tongue and

---

<sup>665</sup> Theo D’haen takes an inventory of what he calls ‘the select group of white, male U.S. authors to whom until the end of the 1970s the label [‘postmodernists’ or ‘postmoderns’] was almost exclusively applied’. He makes a claim for this being tied to the USA’s condition as ‘the hub of late or multinational or consumer capitalism.’ (D’haen, ‘Postmodernisms’, pp.283, 289)

working tool), and the funny story about the Torontonion plutocrat who buys a factory in Prague in order to produce seeming Eskimo souvenirs for an international clientele (*Headhunter*, p. 67).

This international postmodernism, in its turn, has been related to the surge of neoliberalism and incipient globalisation throughout the 1980s and 1990s, whereas the first phase of postmodernism, always after McHale's model, along with many alleged peak-postmodernist texts written roughly between 1973-1980, cast no influence over foreign literatures: we would be talking about an all-American, elitist type of extreme formalism in which, extending John Barth's original argument against realism in his *The Literature of Exhaustion* (1967), only a few combinations could still be made, the most unique ones having already been thought about.<sup>666</sup> International postmodernism, on the other hand, could be seen as a literature of replenishment in its vital eclecticism and its plural and open condition.<sup>667</sup> Indeed, this literature could be defined by the dominance of 'words over silence, imagination over experience, verbal texts over the empirical context.'<sup>668</sup> Its 'sociocode', as Fokkema calls it, would be a principle of non-selection involving a preference for the 'rejection of discriminating hierarchies, and a refusal to distinguish between truth and fiction, past and present, relevant and irrelevant.' (Fokkema, *Lit. History*, p. 42) Other postmodernist characteristics connected to this principle would be the rejection of 'oppositions between "high" literature and popular literature, between fiction and nonfiction,' as well as 'between literature and philosophy, and between literature and the other arts.'<sup>669</sup> Yet again, anything goes.

---

<sup>666</sup> The category of cosmopolitanism has been put forward to name this cosmopolitan postmodernism, which, paraphrasing Fredric Jameson, may have become the 'cultural logic of late globalisation' (McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, p. 123).

<sup>667</sup> As already said, both 'The literature of Exhaustion' (1967) and 'The Literature of Replenishment' (1980) are essays by one of the main postmodernist theorists and authors, John Barth (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 155). 1980 also saw the publication of Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. This novel, according to Douwe Fokkema, had an 'immense influence' on the European reception of postmodernism and marked the start of a new interest, both academic and general, in postmodernism ('Semiotics', p. 26). I would choose this date as the start of international postmodernism, or of postmodernism proper.

<sup>668</sup> Douwe W. Fokkema, *Literary History, Modernism, and Postmodernism: The Harvard University Erasmus Lectures, Spring 1983*, Utrecht Publications in General and Comparative Literature, 19 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984), p. 55.

<sup>669</sup> Douwe Fokkema, 'Preliminary Remarks', in Fokkema and Bertens (eds.), pp. 1-8 (p. 1).

Having said this, I should like to go back to terminology, where I intend to make a distinction between postmodernity, to which I dedicated the first part of this thesis, and postmodernism. This term has actually prevailed over postmodernity in literary and cultural studies, maybe because of the sociological overtones of a term such as ‘postmodernity’. Instrumental in this has been the work of some of the main theorists of postmodernity (which they tend to call ‘postmodernism’, as I have just remarked), namely Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard.<sup>670</sup>

By postmodernity, I understand a historical or civilisational period comprising the social and economic, the political and, in a broad sense, the cultural. This should always be distinguished from what I call postmodernism, which would refer to culture in a more restricted way: postmodernism would be an aesthetic category concerning literature, cinema, music, architecture, painting, the plastic arts and, possibly, contemporary popular culture as well. According to this, postmodernist literature (in the way one refers to a novel by Virginia Woolf as ‘modernist’, not ‘modern’) should be understood as a literature of postmodernism, not of postmodernity in general (which could be called ‘postmodern’). Postmodernity, therefore, is the ‘postmodern era’, starting sometime between 1945 or the early 1950s, while postmodernism is a ‘cultural tendency’, dominant or not (according to the theorist, critic or reader), obtaining during the postmodern era in the advanced countries of the industrial (or post-industrial) West (McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, pp. 1, 3). Whereas postmodernity is an evidence, surrounding and even besieging us every step we take in our media-intensive, consumerist societies, postmodernism is a far narrower category, with the result that each and every one of its instances might have to be identified and verified as postmodernist by recourse to one of the many and usually discordant theories put forward about controversial ‘postmodernism’.<sup>671</sup>

One of the most noticeable features of postmodernism, and practically the only one which has generated general consensus about it, as we already said, is its being over. This has coincided nonetheless with an ‘industry’ of postmodernism whereby academic tenures

---

<sup>670</sup> Hans Bertens, ‘The Sociology of Postmodernism’, in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), pp. 103-18 (p. 104).

<sup>671</sup> All the same, there are those, like Anthony Giddens, who reject the concept of postmodernity, thus preferring to refer to a ‘radicalised modernity’ on the grounds of postmodernity not having been convincingly theorised yet (Bertens, ‘Sociology of Postm.’, p. 117).

and critical careers have been founded or risked on its analysis as if it were a living category, school or movement. This has been the cause of an inflation of literature on postmodernism which, when combined with the often peculiar jargon of poststructuralism and cultural studies, has often gone beyond the limits of ‘sokalisation’.<sup>672</sup>

In any case, I do not believe that postmodernism has ever really been the dominant of any period of literary history, for the benefit of realism, the supreme mode since the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. No chance of ‘domination’ could possibly have been expected for a group of writers who, in the early and middle stages of postmodernism, saw themselves as outnumbered by non-postmodernists, always catering for ‘mostly academic readers interested in complicated texts’.<sup>673</sup> Linda Hutcheon herself seems to recognise that the cultural dominant in the capitalist West is ‘liberal humanism’, which, as I see it, translates into ‘realism’ in the domain of fiction (*Poetics*, p. 4; *Politics*, p. 13).

If anything, there are many reasons why we should connect postmodernism with modernism (never itself a dominant during its heyday): for instance, both are literatures of the sublime, in the sense expressed in Lyotard’s opinion that postmodernism craves for the unrepresentable as its object (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 97).<sup>674</sup> This sort of elusive presence also haunts modernist literature, a privileged manifestation thereof being the nearly mystical ‘epiphany’ whereby characters catch a fleeting yet enlightening glimpse of the truth of reality and the self or consciousness (Butler, *Modernism*, pp. 51, 56). In this light, it has been defended that the true literature of late capitalism, starting in 1945 and

---

<sup>672</sup> Charles Newman describes postmodernism as an ‘inflation of discourse’, mounting ‘obscurity upon obscurity in endless spirals of self-validation.’ (as cited in Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, p. 7)

For an especially outrageous case of arbitrary obscurity and downright nonsense, namely Luce Irigaray’s on relativity and its ‘sexed equation’, see Sokal, pp. 109-ss.

<sup>673</sup> Douwe Fokkema, ‘The Semantic and Syntactic Organization of Postmodernist Texts’, in Fokkema and Bertens (eds.), pp. 81-98 (pp. 83, 81).

<sup>674</sup> For Lyotard, always within the broad social and political scope of his thought, postmodern art would always be the modern in its nascent stage, an art of radical openness through perpetual negation of rules, achieving in this way ‘optimal dissensus’ and ‘preservation of heterogeneity’ (Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature, 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), p. 79; Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 128). Umberto Eco has a similar idea of postmodernism as a ‘metahistorical category’, both a reaction against modernism and an always existing ‘mannerism’ at the same time (Fokkema, ‘Semiotics’, p. 23).

For modernism not being the dominant form of art in its time, Christopher Butler points out how modernist authors ‘tended to be divorced from and marginal to the society in which they lived, following the 19th century dissenting anti-bourgeois tradition of Flaubert, Ibsen, Wilde, and Freud.’ (*Modernism*, p. 42)

spanning the 1960s and 1970s, is late modernism. This implies that the first phase of postmodernism, according to McHale's model, as well as many works from the first half of his second phase, up to 1979 or 1980, may be assimilated into this category (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 161). As to its proper, international phase, postmodernism, driven by a constant need to innovate (just like modernism: 'make it new!'), eventually underwent modernism's own fate: it eventually became obsolete and disappeared (McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, p. 4).<sup>675</sup>

Finally, postmodernism has not even been the terminological dominant if we look outside the United States. More precisely, a country whose leading influence cannot be forgotten or denied in the international literary scene since at least the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, namely France, has never widely accepted the postmodern terminology. In fact, the country and the Republic of political, ideological and discursive modernity par excellence goes on understanding its own literary modernity from Baudelaire, via Rimbaud and Mallarmé, to the *nouveau roman* school exactly as that: the modern.<sup>676</sup> Not even 'modernism' has ever taken root in French literary theory or creation, such a term and its derivatives being used exclusively to refer to literatures in English: the modern would cover modernism and postmodernism as well. In France, 'postmodernism' or 'the postmodern' are but recent and still not quite domesticated imports.<sup>677</sup> The same can be said about the German-speaking countries, also key actors of the history of Western literature, where only in the second half of the 1980s did critics reluctantly accept a concept introduced by journalists and up to then a frequent object of derision and contempt

---

<sup>675</sup> The emphasis on innovation of both schools or periods could be understood as a response to the 'repetitive structure' of the 'commodity production of consumer capitalism': Fredric Jameson, as quoted in Richard Murphy, p. 253. Both would 'represent an ongoing process of defining a critical response to modernity.' (Murphy, p. 266)

<sup>676</sup> Geert Lernout, 'Postmodernism in France', in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), pp. 353-57 (p. 353).

<sup>677</sup> Things being so, Rubin Suleiman even suggests a modern canon stretching from Baudelaire to John Barth, rather than an inevitably and rather parochially Anglo-American modernist one, or a postmodernist canon where a whole bunch of French authors would disturbingly be added. That way, she argues, the 'unnecessary' dichotomy between modernism and postmodernism could be bridged: Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Naming and Difference: Reflections on "Modernism versus Postmodernism" in Literature', in Fokkema and Bertens (eds.), pp. 255-70 (pp. 255-56, 265-66, 268).

(Huysen, p. 191).<sup>678</sup> In Italy, postmodernity seems to have fared better than postmodernism *sensu stricto*.<sup>679</sup> To cut a long story short, postmodernism is legal tender ‘only in a few countries’ (Szegegy-Maszák, ‘Teleology’, p. 41).

In the end, ‘postmodernism’ would be a ‘portmanteau concept’ or ‘a vaguely intuitive, impressionistic “you know what I mean” kind of term’ signifying virtually anything, depending on who, when and where (42; Rubin Suleiman, p. 267).<sup>680</sup> As Raymond Federman, one of the first theorists and practitioners of (alleged) postmodernism, puts it, it was gone ‘before we could explain it.’ (as cited in McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, p. 5) Maybe this is the reason why serious critics and literary historians conflate alleged postmodernists with clearly modernist authors such as Borges in order to propose yet another questionable postmodern canon that no reader will need in order to appreciate the works included in it in their own right, without any prejudice as to their periodisation (see, e.g., the catalogue in Fokkema, *Lit. History*, p. 37). The postmodernist search for more or less imaginary ancestors, sometimes going back several centuries, does not help much, either: anyone can be a postmodern(ist) (Calinescu, ‘Paradoxes’, p. 248).

Another factor contributing to this conclusion is the lack of a sufficiently distant vantage point on the postmodern(ist): the authors and works usually considered to be postmodern (or postmodernist) are in many cases still out and about or have only recently disappeared. Especially if we are talking about global postmodernism, it might be that mere journalism is masquerading as literary history.<sup>681</sup> If we add to this the large scope of the concept of modernism, John Updike might not be too mistaken when he doubts the future existence of a postmodernist canon with any real potential for permanence in our culture (Mitchell, p. 111).

---

<sup>678</sup> Frans Ruiter, ‘Postmodernism in the German- and Dutch-Speaking Countries’, in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), pp. 359-73 (p. 360)

<sup>679</sup> Monica Jansen, ‘Postmodernism in Italy’, in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), pp. 387-95 (p. 393).

<sup>680</sup> Thinking more specifically about culture, Fredric Jameson writes how in his opinion there has been ‘a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life [...] to the very structure of the psyche itself can be said to have become “cultural”’ (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 48).

<sup>681</sup> Noël Carroll, ‘The Concept of Postmodernism from a Philosophical Point of View’, in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), pp. 89-102 (p. 102).



## Part 5 – Conclusions





As I said in the general introduction to this thesis, its object would be the study of the theoretical-critical concepts of postmodernism, nihilism and abjection in the historical, cultural and ideological context of postmodernity, starting from my conviction that contemporary literature, understood as the literature written in the West since the end of WWII, is defined by postmodernity and transgression. The works that would allow for a close analysis and illustration of those three concepts would be studied from a thematic angle rather than a formal one, the latter having become, in the wake of poststructuralism and deconstruction, the most common critical approach by far in the last decades. By contrast, my thematic approach would load semantically the otherwise neutral notion of ‘postmodernity’: postmodern literature, without any further precisions, would be just the literature written in postmodernity, the historical period starting around 1945 or the early 1950s, according to different theorists or critics, regardless of its formal strategies, content, or genre conventions. As opposed to this, I consider postmodern literature to be related to postmodernity in a sociological or ideological way, thus being informed by themes of antihumanism, transgression and abjection, such as sex (especially deviant sex), violence and / or death: beyond its dimension as a historical period, postmodernity is also a constellation of ideas and attitudes, a zeitgeist. The postmodern writer would be aware of this postmodern condition and willing to write ‘under that sign’, which inevitably entails certain thematic preferences (Mitchell, p. 118). Postmodernist literature, on the other hand, as one defined by its relation to or its derivation from a certain aesthetics or poetics among the very many described or proposed by countless authors, critics and theorists since the 1950s or 1960s, is a much more muddled notion, often consisting in the most disparate things. Hence, considering formalist and genre conventions as key to defining postmodernism produces more uncertainty than the opposite, regardless of this theoretical and critical category having secured (or ruined) academic careers and tenures for many decades, even well beyond the by now generally acknowledged end of the postmodern in literature.

I would like to refer, first of all, to the extreme vagueness of the concept of postmodernism, the alleged dominant literary school after the end of WWII. I am addressing this issue in the first place because of its confusion with postmodernity, which I have just described. To me, the conceptual difference behind this confusion is so clear as to

have made me decide in favour of a material, thematic focus rather than on a formal one, and establish a clear terminological and conceptual separation between the postmodern and the postmodernist throughout this thesis. In this way and given its thematic content, very different formal strategies can be said to have been used in the literature written after WWII. Some of these would lie outside postmodernism understood as a distinct aesthetics or poetics theorised by thinkers such as Fredric Jameson or Linda Hutcheon. This would be the case of late modernism, for instance, of which Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* would be outstanding examples (*LM*, p. 31).

The field of postmodernist literature would even include works written before the second half of the 20th century. Thus, there might have been a postmodernism at a nascent stage of the modern, according to one of the main theorists of both postmodernism and postmodernity, Jean-François Lyotard. Considering 'the modern' in art to be what is usually called 'modernism', this postmodernism of sorts would have been out and about 'always already' or 'before the fact', that is to say before 1945, constituting 'the ever-changing, radical and revolutionary front of modernism as a whole.' In fact and on account of its perpetual negation of rules, what this would stand for is the historical avant-garde, which in the interwar period would amount basically to Dada and surrealism (McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, pp. 10, 17, 51; Murphy, p. 266). Another influential contemporary thinker, Umberto Eco, also thinks of the postmodern as a recurrent, transhistorical phenomenon similar to mannerism: a kind of transition between periods in the history of art where the principles informing a certain aesthetics fluctuate in their course towards another aesthetic paradigm, both echoing the immediate past and drawing attention to new journeys of exploration into the unknown (Fokkema, 'Semiotics', p. 23).<sup>682</sup> This theory also puts forward the idea that there could have been a postmodernism of sorts before 1945; in fact, there would always have existed an equivalent to 'postmodernism' in the fashion of a reaction against the dominant.<sup>683</sup> In my opinion, these two theories muddle the question up even further. There is no need for these spurious, transitional varieties of

---

<sup>682</sup> Thus, it has been written, for example, that late modernism 'appears a distinctly self-conscious manifestation of the aging and decline of modernism', easily fitting 'into a narrative of emergent postmodernism.' (*LM*, p. 23).

<sup>683</sup> In Simon Malpas' opinion, both Lyotard and Eco are among those critics or theorists for whom postmodernism is a style, rather than a period, which would make it locatable 'throughout literary history': Simon Malpas, *The Postmodern*, TNCI (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 28.

postmodernism when we can use labels such as avant-garde, late modernism, etc., to describe and periodise these literary schools or trends without so much ado.

Turning our attention now to postmodernity proper, the historical period starting in 1945 or the early 1950s, it should be taken into account that a literary school linking up with high-modernism and whose continuation it was, namely late modernism, first appeared around 1926, still existing well into the 1960s (*LM*, p. 31). This school would not have subscribed to what Brian McHale describes as the ontological dominant proper to postmodernism. Basically, it highlighted ‘the self-reflexive moment in an otherwise representational modernism.’ (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 4) Late modernism has been associated to the emblematic figure of Samuel Beckett, the last representative of authoritative authorship and uncompromising individuality as a prominent feature both of literary art and the figure of the author after the demise of high modernism by the end of the war (*ibid.*).

Other branches of late modernism, included by many critics within postmodernism and cultivated during the latter’s alleged early phases before the end of the 1970s in the USA, such as surfiction, were characterised by an extreme formalism clearly related to the most experimental side of modernism. Representing a move ‘towards radical aesthetic autonomy,’ they would have passed away around the aforementioned time even according to and in the words of some of its most qualified cultivators (see, e.g., Raymond Federman, as quoted in McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, p. 1; Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 4). Thus, the debate about an alleged postmodernist school or movement would have gone on even despite the extinction of some of its alleged varieties.

Another reason for the vagueness and evanescence of the postmodern as postmodernist would lie in the easily contradicted argument that the dominant in postmodernism has an ontological nature, as opposed to the epistemological dominant of modernism. Against McHale’s reasoning, I have argued how epistemology and ontology do not contradict or rule each other out either in modernism or in postmodernism. Even more importantly, I have expressed my conviction that not even modernism, which is much more widely accepted as a literary school and as a period of Western literary history than postmodernism, was the dominant form of literature during its heyday before WWII. Then as now, realism has been setting the agenda for most of what has been and is being

published.<sup>684</sup> Linda Hutcheon's very restrictive criterion that postmodernist literature proper is basically what she calls historiographic metafiction does not contribute to clarify what postmodernism in literature is or ever was, either, especially when she asserts that historiographic metafiction asks questions that are both ontological and epistemological (Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 50). What is more, too much may have been made of what Hutcheon defends as the subversive side and the historicism of historiographic metafiction, as I pointed out while analysing Findley's *Headhunter*.

If this were not enough, there is a notorious terminological confusion, already hinted at, between modernism and postmodernism, starting with the fact that some of the most reputed theorists of postmodernity, Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard among them, have made their contribution to this field of study by systematically applying the term 'postmodernism' and its derivatives to what should clearly have been called postmodernity, the latter being more an object of sociology and other human sciences than a literary school or, more widely, a trend in the arts or culture (Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, p. 23). This terminological (and eventually conceptual) confusion, in its turn, has been enhanced by the differences in the semantic field covered by the category of the modern in several of the main cultural traditions of the West. Most significantly, the country where the late modern period in Western history was born, namely France, holds the modern in literature to have sprung from the work of the late romantics and their successors, the early symbolists, such as Baudelaire (incidentally, the first author to introduce the very term 'modernity'), sometime before the mid-19th century.<sup>685</sup> In this way, the modern was opposed either to the classic or the realist (Rubin Suleiman, pp.255, 266). A couple of decades later, Rimbaud put this very clearly: 'We must be absolutely modern.'<sup>686</sup> Andreas Huyssen interprets this French notion of the modern as 'an aesthetic question relating to the energies released by a destruction of

---

<sup>684</sup> 'Most canonized and popular literature so far has escaped the imprint of postmodernism.' (Fokkema, 'Semiotics', p. 18) Moreover, postmodernism 'has not replaced liberal humanism, even if it has seriously challenged it.' Linda Hutcheon, 'Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism', in *A Postmodern Reader*, ed. by Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1993), pp. 243-72 (p. 245).

<sup>685</sup> Baudelaire defined modernity as 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent': 'The Painter of Modern Life', in Cahoon (ed.), p. 142.

<sup>686</sup> In the French original: 'Il faut être absolument moderne.' Arthur Rimbaud, 'Adieu', in *One Season in Hell*, in *Complete Works*, pp. 263-305 (p. 302).  
See also Lernout, pp. 353, 355.

language and other forms of representation.’ (p. 203) In France, as precious much in the whole of Western Europe (possibly with the exception of Italy), the postmodern and postmodernist terminology, or even the concept of ‘modernism’, have not taken firm root at all, except to define what are generally understood to be specifically Anglo-Saxon phenomena, above all high modernism. In these countries, proposals have been made to include these schools as particular moments of the modern.<sup>687</sup> These proposals have prompted or found expression in terms such as ‘ultramodernism’, ‘late modernist extremism’, ‘aggravated modernism’, ‘neomodernism’, ‘radicalised modernity’ or ‘cosmodernism’ (McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, pp. 44, 123; *Postm. Fiction*, p. 4; Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 52).

As I said before, I agree with these considerations, to the point of only accepting the concept of postmodernism (rather than the generally postmodern, as the merely related to postmodernity as a historical period) if applied to some of the texts comprised in what Brian McHale considers to be its major phase, spanning from 1973 to around 1990 and being cultivated almost exclusively in America, or to a very specific international movement or school developed basically since the end of the 1970s and up to the mid-1990s.<sup>688</sup> In these postmodernisms, the characteristically late modernist concern for formal experiment and the underlying belief, provided by poststructuralism, that language and textuality constitute not only literature but also the world, are replaced by linguistic accessibility and the use of the conventions proper to many literary genres. Some of these (the detective novel or science fiction, for instance) would initially have been out of bounds for the purposes of serious literature because of their popular origin and readership. Its postmodernist cultivators have thus ignored or surpassed what criticism has termed the ‘great divide’ between the artistic and the popular (pornography included), which was so important to high-modernist literary endeavour, with the result of ‘an expansion and diversification of the forms in which cultural experience is mediated.’ (Connor, *Postm.*

---

<sup>687</sup> Even Brian McHale, the champion of the ontological argument as defintory of postmodernism, avows that, guided by the same innovating imperative as modernism (‘make it new!’), postmodernism could be thought of as ‘more-modernism’ or ‘Modernism 2.0.’ McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, p. 6.

<sup>688</sup> Theo D’haen confirms this idea: on the one hand, especially after 1973, there would have been a postmodernism practised by a ‘select group of white, male U.S. authors to whom until the end of the 1970s the label was almost exclusively applied’, and on the other hand there would have been an international postmodernism ‘enormously extended in terms of geography, gender, race’. D’haen also mentions some of the most relevant authors in each branch of postmodernism (‘Postmodernisms’, p. 283). As already stated, we have our reservations about the American 1973-90 branch of postmodernism.

*Cult.*, p. 15; Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 29) This ‘generic impurity’, this ‘double-coding’ or ‘double-voicing’, mixing up the high and lofty with the low and popular, implies a new aesthetic phenomenon: sophisticated fiction meant to be read by a very wide readership, or the prestigious best-seller for the masses (or almost) (Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, p. 128; McHale, ‘Introduction’, pp. 66-67, 84; Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 202).<sup>689</sup> In Linda Hutcheon’s words, ‘postmodernism is both academic and popular, élitist and accessible’ or what we could call ‘demotic’ (*Poetics*, p. 44). In this light, literature adapts to the requirements of a new democratic, post-1945 Western world where the huge gap formerly existing between those with a genuine interest in literature as art and those without it gets significantly reduced (Malpas, p. 20).

In this respect and always following my thematic approach, I turn now to a phenomenon I have already mentioned, namely the predominance of poststructuralist theory and criticism in what concerns the analysis and assessment of the work of authors such as Samuel Beckett (a late modernist in transition to postmodernism), J.G. Ballard (a modern maverick working at a moment of transition to international postmodernism) or Timothy Findley (an acknowledged postmodernist despite his protestations to the contrary). The importance I am giving to thematics as a defining characteristic of contemporary literature underscores postmodernity as a more critically and theoretically productive category than the very problematical concept of postmodernism. In the end, narrating implies an object, an ideational or conceptual content (even if at times we are faced with a negative one, as is usual in Beckett) whose analysis deserves more than the self-reflexive circularities of metalinguistic poststructuralism or the vagaries and the peculiar lingo of deconstruction.<sup>690</sup> As Hutcheon points out, language and literature can never be ‘totally non-mimetic, non-referential’ and still ‘remain understandable as literature’. Postmodern literature, therefore, refuses ‘any formalist or deconstructive attempt to make language into the play of signifiers discontinuous with representation and with the external world’ (*Poetics*, pp. 52,

---

<sup>689</sup> ‘Many postmodern authors, no longer ashamed of best-sellerdom, want to achieve a large readership for their fiction and will consequently do their otherwise extensive rewriting of earlier literature in secret, invisible ink, as it were.’ Matei Calinescu, ‘Rewriting’, in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), pp. 243-48 (p. 247). It should be considered, though, that until around 1980, or even later, in the same way as postmodernism’s readership has been a small, select one, ‘many postmodernist writers are, or have been, university writers-in-residence or professors of literature’ belonging to ‘an institutional base, an enclosed cultural milieu’: Paul Maltby, ‘Excerpts from Dissident Postmodernists’, in Natoli and Hutcheon (eds.), pp. 519-37 (p. 523).

<sup>690</sup> Hans Bertens, ‘Debate on Postm.’, p. 5.

144). This is all the more important as postmodernist literature appears to be ‘intrinsically narrative’, therefore much more related to story-telling than modernism, which is much more lyrical or poetic.<sup>691</sup>

Thematics, therefore, would function as an index of the postmodern, given its inextricable relationship with some of the most essential features of this historical and cultural period. Paramount among these is negativity: after the Holocaust and the use of nuclear weapons against Japan, negativity pervades the ethos informing the literature written after 1945, the age of post-industrial, consumerist mass society.<sup>692</sup> In this respect, postmodern literature has a theoretical antecedent in what the so-called School of Suspicion (Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche and Freud) termed the death of God and Man, that is the demise of transcendent explanations, not only religious but also metaphysical, of the world. It also leaves behind the very idea of human nature, as well as the narratives that depicted the universe as governed by anthropomorphisations of what could otherwise have been understood as dire necessities independent from and indifferent to the destiny of mankind. In a world where belief in an essential, unchangeable human nature and an eternal soul holds no longer, where divine providence can no longer be posited, and where the gravitational pull of nothingness becomes a temptation to dissolve into, literature becomes the embodiment of a nihilism that pervades all aspects of human life and can be thought to be the defining factor of Western culture. Indeed, in the wake of the horrors of WWII and its aftermath, almost every relevant author in the second half of the century (or, at least, until the outbreak of international postmodernism in the early 1980s) is a naysayer, often an advocate of a literature of silence or extenuation and nearly always a denouncer of war, torture, exploitation, exile, miscommunication, alienation, ... As a corollary of this, literature is no longer the privileged expression of a centuries-long humanism that stressed the dignity of that god-like creature, the human being. If anything, it emphasises the opposite: the ‘abandonment of humanistically oriented world views.’ (D’Haen, ‘Postm. in Am. Fiction and Art’, p. 229) Thus, modernist themes or motifs such as ‘epiphany’, whereby characters catch a generally short yet clear glimpse of the truth of

---

<sup>691</sup> Steven Connor, ‘Postmodernism and Literature’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. by Steven Connor (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2004), pp. 62-81 (pp. 62-63).

<sup>692</sup> This postmodern negativity is heir to late modernism’s, as this school, by decrying high modernism’s ‘attempts to contain contingency and violence aesthetically,’ allowed the expression of ‘violence, madness, absurd contingencies, and sudden deaths’ as the ‘negative forces of the age’ (*LM*, p. 52).



their selves and the universe, implying a tight bond between both, are now irrelevant: both the self and the world are held to be multiple, fragmentary, ever-changing and utterly indeterminate. Every instance or the very possibility of an enlightenment of human life in terms of truth or meaning is simply out of the question. Scepticism or downright nihilism rule.

Also typically postmodern and more characteristic of contemporary literature is the demise of the subject, the universal moral and transcendental agent of Western humanism. Postmodern literature shows in this the influence of a current of thought initially developed in France and later on imported and acclimatised in university departments all over the English-speaking world: poststructuralism, the theoretical and philosophical arm of postmodernity, or a symptom thereof (McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, p. 49).<sup>693</sup> Oriented towards language and textuality, it will question the wholeness, unity and authority of both first- and third-person literary narrators and characters. The suspicions now addressed against linear, sequential organisation of plot, as well as a thematically militant anti-humanism considerably widen subject matter in postmodern literature. If alienation was a mark of modernist fiction, now we are facing postmodern fragmentation as a lack of solidity in characterisation, narration and atmosphere. Already at work in early French symbolism as a radicalisation of the Romantic exaltation of the self now turning into insecurity and self-doubt, Rimbaud could characteristically state: ‘Je est un autre’, I (or the self) is someone else. In postmodern literature, this becomes ‘an attempt at representing character that calls attention to the impossibility of representation and, at the same time, to the fact that what is finally represented may very well be nothing but discourse’, which is an indirect statement about ‘the inadequacy and at the same time the omnipresence of language’.<sup>694</sup> This also marks the influence of a nihilistic literature of transgression developing in France since the marquis de Sade where the stable and responsible subject of Judeo-Christianity becomes a receptacle of unstable and contradictory instincts, drives and desires at constant war with each other. This kind of literature is later to become a veritable tradition of its own where subject matter is commonly linked to abjection.

---

<sup>693</sup> Although Hans Bertens defends the idea that poststructuralism is an American invention, and that its French inspirers were made into poststructuralists by their American disciples (*Idea of the Postm.*, p. 18).

<sup>694</sup> Hans Bertens, ‘Postmodern Characterization and the Intrusion of Language’, in Calinescu and Fokkema, (eds.), pp. 139-159 (p. 157).

Abjection is a psychoanalytic concept introduced into theory and criticism directly from France, as it originates in Jacques Lacan's work and is developed by Julia Kristeva beyond the assumptions implied in Freud's psychological model (a conflicted psychic unity where the self or ego is engaged in a constant struggle against the instincts making up the id or unconscious, to the point of not being master in its own house any longer). It is within this psychoanalytic frame that we can read much of postmodern literature as focusing on the primary process, that is the unconscious, or on its main expression in Freud's thought: Thanatos, the death instinct. Indeed, this drive is at large in this transgressive literary tradition and the literature inspired by it, as is manifest in the novels this thesis analyses. Likewise, essential constituents of the theory of abjection are categories such as the semiotic and the imaginary order, which involve an appreciation of both the body and the instinctual, along with the untamed maternal and feminine, thus allowing for an interpretative practice that goes beyond the monological, hetero-patriarchal norm. The Lacanian Real, a concept which is very close to Freud's death instinct, also looms over this literature. Through *jouissance*, a type of ecstatic joy closely related to the loss of the distinct subjectivity and individuality derived from psychosexual maturation, the semiotic works in postmodern literature as an agent of disruption of the linguistic flows springing from the symbolic, which is narrowly denotative and grammatically standard; furthermore, it also destabilises gender discourse and social identity. More generally, postmodern literature as a literature of abjection and darkness would be a vehicle for themes such as undefinition and indeterminacy, marginality, perversion, self-dispossession and ultimately meaninglessness. As an embodiment of the cathartic powers of literature through the verbalisation of the unsayable or sublime, abjection would contribute to the psychologically liberating exorcism of our fear to fall back into dependence on or undifferentiation from the maternal and pre-symbolic. It also makes postmodern literature become a privileged instrument for dealing with a primal, almost overwhelming sense of the sacred and the sexual (both being intimately linked with one another), as well as with violence and death. In this sense, contemporary literature would be a sublimation of the abject.

Postmodern literature also bears on an antirrationalism inherent in postmodernity. Its organising and operating principle would be a negative thinking of difference that prevents the assimilation of everything into a homogeneous realm of extended matter and exchange-

value. This would be a reaction against the Enlightenment as the philosophical paradigm of modernity, whose by-product would have been the utter disenchantment of the world. This would have taken place through the classification of everything into rigid taxonomies of being whereby nothing would be safe from description, knowledge and instrumentalisation. Against this background, postmodern thought and literature appear as opposed to a metaphysics of presence and systemacity which has been around since the birth of philosophy in ancient Greece and which has considerably been enhanced by modern philosophical Rationalism and the Enlightenment.<sup>695</sup>

Other key thematic factors in defining postmodern literature as written after 1945 and informed by negativity and nihilism will be technology and science. This ultimately leads to a problematising and a questioning of reason and the positive ideologies that presented themselves as prerequisites for the gradual enlightenment and the material progress of mankind. Although science fiction as a literary genre predates the postmodern, and regardless of the fact that the science fiction dystopian novel has even late-Victorian exponents such as H.G. Wells, certain currents in contemporary philosophy allow for an intensive critical exploration of these issues in postmodern fiction. Martin Heidegger, the main inspirer of French philosophy after 1945, has had an indirect though very strong influence on creative writing on matters pertaining to technoscience after WWII; this influence was channelled mostly through French poststructuralism and secondarily through the work of some Anglo-Saxon critics and theorists, such as Charles Olson or William Spanos (Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, p. 125; Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, pp. 19-20, 45; ‘Debate on Postm.’, p. 26). In my thesis this influence is projected onto two main concepts, namely Ge-stell (enframing) and Bestand (standing reserve), whereby everything that exists gets one-dimensionally reduced to the economic as available material for production or storage. This development is an agent of deracination from the community and cultural tradition, including the literary tradition.

\* \* \*

---

<sup>695</sup> According to Jacques Derrida, this metaphysics of presence understands being as ‘essence, existence, substance, subject [...] transcendental, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth.’ This metaphysics would be impossible, as ‘the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences.’ Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger also contributed to the demise of such a metaphysical category, which would demand a philosophical or epistemological ‘center’, which Derrida decries as a mythological or historical ‘illusion.’ Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in Natoli and Hutcheon (eds.), pp. 223-42 (pp. 225-26, 234, my emphasis).

In my analysis of Samuel Beckett's *Three Novels*, written at the period of transition from the modern to the postmodern, I come to some conclusions which are opposed to early existential interpretations, linked to concepts such as the absurd, and, above all, to subsequent poststructuralist readings, which have ended up constituting a veritable industry of postmodern exegesis tending to the sokalisable. Thus, and coinciding with E.M. Cioran, I see the *Molloy Trilogy* as an instance of a literature written at the extremes of a negativity springing from an impasse in modernism and ultimately reaching the limits of nihilism. This would be so despite Beckett's humour, which I consider to be as dark as despairing.<sup>696</sup> There being more to the *Trilogy's* textuality than mere language, and thinking that to pay attention solely to Beckett's 'fundamental sounds' implies a critical mutilation of his work, I believe that the focus of its negativity falls on what he calls 'the mess', a conceptual and emotional domain which is thematised through motifs of impotence, ignorance and non-being. This nihilistic stress would also fall on a will to nothingness with neither meaning nor hope that eventually arrives at total stasis as a materialised ideal (in contradistinction with postmodernism, where the ideal is movement). These themes are enhanced by their confluence with others related to abjection, such as scatology, gradual feminisation of the main characters, and anti-natalism.

This being so, I find a structural dimension to the *Trilogy* in the pre-eminence and explicit connection of both nihilism and abjection in it. This connection would be established through themes and motifs such as the metaphysical isolation and groundlessness proper to a feeling of ontological homelessness. This is what fuels the protagonists' journey to stasis in both *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*. Thus, the sway held by the death drive over both novels may derive from a sense of guilt whose object is mere existence. This finds expression in several instances of murder in both novels as well as in several examples of what I call 'animalism', an atmosphere created by an imagery based on the animal corpse as the most abject of all abject objects. Besides, there is a thematic ruination of both motherhood and fatherhood (equivalent to that of mankind as a whole) which is reinforced by the evocation of a number of what Freud considered to be sexual perversions, from incest to masturbation and homosexuality, the last two ones having to do with a militant antinatalism which is very characteristic of Beckett. In any case, the strong

---

<sup>696</sup> Tyrus Miller, writing about late modernism in general, is of the mind that these authors present laughter to convince readers that a self, however minimal and exposed to the risk of dissolution (as in Beckett's *Molloy Trilogy*), is still around: 'Rideo ergo sum.' (*LM*, pp. 62, 148)

formalism of Beckett's language in these two novels, dominated by what has been called a 'syntax of weakness' gradually tending to the minimalist, as well as the distinct authorial voice to be heard in both works, grant them to be considered late modernist ones.<sup>697</sup>

As opposed to *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* is held to mark a clear transition to postmodernism in that it shows itself to be organised by what Brian McHale calls an ontological dominant (in spite of my disagreement with this argument, as I already made clear while defining postmodernist literature): the questions arising from *The Unnamable* would be related to the existence of the universe inhabited by its eponymous protagonist, the modes of being corresponding not only to him but also to its many avatars, who are also its denizens, as well as the para-divine entities presiding over it.<sup>698</sup> The main features of this mode of being would be fragmentation (e.g. that of the Unnamable into his many avatars), alienation, indeterminacy and the inertia that prompts the protagonist to go on no matter what. The Unnamable, according to this, would be a textual entity whose identity would be constituted by his unending utterance of a speech fed into him by his demiurgical maker and his delegates or demons, which is expressed as an endless soliloquy. His subjectivity would be a proto-poststructuralist one, more of a minimally anthropological, evolving, decentred network of identity constituents than of a moral unity with an 'essential core'. This befits 'the centreless universe of the postmodern', one resembling 'an all-pervading labyrinth' (*LM*, p. 147; Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, pp. 8, 47; Malpas, p. 57). Obsessed with original silence (which we could understand as the nothingness obtaining prior to existence), the Unnamable rants on and on due to his faith in a password that would grant him free passage to it. In so doing, and as his faith in such a password gradually dwindles, he may well be seen as unleashing 'the "idiocy" of language freed from the burden of intention and truth.' (*LM*, p. 395) As the novel approaches its end, we go deeper and deeper into 'an aesthetic of entropic decay, deformation, debasement, and disfiguration.' (p. 405)

\* \* \*

---

<sup>697</sup> According to Linda Hutcheon, 'formalism is the defining expression of modernism, not postmodernism.' (*Poetics*, p. 144)

<sup>698</sup> It must be taken into account, however, that McHale calls the *Molloy Trilogy* 'limit-modernist', precisely because of the 'oscillation' of these novels 'between the dominant features of modernist and postmodernist fiction.' (McHale, *Postm. Fiction*, p. 13; *LM*, p. 35)

Written in 1973, a year after the birth of architectural postmodernism according to Charles Jencks, J.G. Ballard's *Crash* is not so much a work of transition to literary postmodernism, as *The Unnamable*, but rather an interesting mixture of modern and postmodern features forged by an author who considers himself a modern, yet lives and works under a postmodern dispensation. Thus, for example, *Crash* can be read as a document on social atomisation and the death of community, as well as on widespread hedonism and a generalised infantilism that expects immediate satisfaction of every wish. To these postmodern characteristics, we should add its characters' reactions to what Fredric Jameson would call the schizophrenic intensities offered to them in the overlit realm they cruise at night in the environs of Heathrow airport. However, in this novel with no historicist interest, where characters are faced with a past which is dead and a future that takes place today, where direct experience has priority over discourse and body over soul, everything revolves around a modern principle, which here appears as the goal of the characters' behaviour: self-integration, namely the discovery of true self (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 16).<sup>699</sup> In this light, we can understand better how J.G. Ballard explores what he calls inner space in *Crash*: this would consist in the elements of true reality that modern art can contribute to find and isolate amidst the ever-growing media simulation presiding over our lives. This, moreover, could be expected from an author whose main influence is pictorial surrealism and, therefore, Freudian psychology, both disciplines being outstanding representatives of modern discourse. That is why, despite some postmodernist stylemes and narrative devices which are used in *Crash*, and regardless of the author's precaution concerning what he considers to be the self-defeating formal experimentalism of literary modernism, we should not proceed too hastily to consider him a postmodern, as he believes postmodernism to be a 'bourgeoisification'. Ballard, a born story-teller in the age of double-coded, sophisticated postmodernist literature, must be seen as a modern maverick bent on wrestling with the post-WWII world in order to grasp it in its most essential features. *Crash* is therefore a significant example of modern, speculative fiction written just a few years before the beginning of full international postmodernism in literature. His is an example of postmodern literature as a literature of postmodernity, not

---

<sup>699</sup> Against an alienating background, the modern principle of self-integration would set value on the attempt at a 'unification and organization of the personality' in accordance to those of the modernist work of art (Butler, *Modernism*, p. 70).

of postmodernism. In fact, he has never given in to the mannerisms of postmodernism even after the 1980s.<sup>700</sup>

To add up to this ambiguous relationship between the modern and the postmodern in J.G. Ballard, when it comes to what we have considered to be a thematically defining characteristic of the postmodern, namely nihilism, *Crash* portrays an affectlessness, an anomie and a widespread passive masochism that are to be understood as based on anthropological pessimism, despite the author's vocal and optimistic support of technology and modernity on account of the unlimited possibilities that, according to him, both bestow on mankind. In Ballard's novel, nihilism is a rage against Being that has affinities with two ontological concepts developed by Martin Heidegger after WWII, namely Ge-stell and Bestand, or the perception and instrumentalisation of everything, humans included, as available material for heteronomous ends, generally of an economic nature (or, in *Crash*, of a sexual one). In the case of the novel's main characters, Vaughan and Ballard, people are seen merely as potential prey to car crashes, especially those prepared and staged by them. Thus, Ge-stell and Bestand imply a negation of the value of life or its sheer instrumentalisation, which leads to a universal equivalence of non-value, freedom from morality and a failure of the imagination resulting in the eclipse of the other. Indeed, the postmodern world depicted in *Crash* is one of strangers, which is propitiated by a non-communicative togetherness brought about by the media. In their morbid obsessions, the public will be fascinated by a veritable wound culture where people will be attracted by spectacles where both the body and the soul will be shown as split or torn, the once private and intimate being now the subject-matter of reality- and talk-show. We are living in what Baudrillard calls 'the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-the-visible, the obscenity of what no longer has any secret' ('Ecstasy of Comm.', p. 131).

The only values accepted in this morbid postmodernity are those supported by little groups or communities. They are part of little narratives or micronarratives opposed to the

---

<sup>700</sup> Even McHale seems to admit the thesis that there can be a postmodern literature 'of postmodernity' rather than 'of postmodernism' when he writes: 'How one views the likelihood of postmodernism's divergence from modernism partly depends on one's sense of how different the late-twentieth-century world is from the early twentieth-century world in which modernism arose.' However and in spite of this 'material' concept of periodisation according to which contents rather than formal strategies determine historical-literary tags, McHale calls this literature postmodernist rather than postmodern (McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, p. 13).

grand narratives of universal scope and liberating teleology that buttressed modernity until the Holocaust (McHale, *Cambridge Introd.*, p. 68; Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, pp. 28, 252). Now we are living in an affectless inertia whose cornerstones would be conformity and a happy nihilism where consumption is more important than identity, which accords with a proliferation and a lack of permanence of value. Identity will only be achieved by the adoption of aestheticised lifestyles, once the age of morality that modernity was has come to an end alongside History itself. This is what characters react against in *Crash*: being tamed by consumerism into the suburbanisation of the soul, the hell of the self-same where there is no room any longer for human nature or true self (Featherstone, *Consumer Cult.*, p. 47). And yet, they do so by implementing the petty, unsound, egotistical and nihilistic values promoted by Vaughan's deranged cell. They constitute themselves as a postmodern minority: one which is based on 'an agreement not to agree with others, a coincidence in not coinciding.'<sup>701</sup> In the novel and against the background we have just described, what the characters achieve is just a type of nihilistic transcendence bespeaking a new Dark Age of isolation, irrationality and superstition, a world of fictions and mirages staged by the media and the entertainment industry. Its metaphysical nature would be exposed by the characters' crazy dreams of a posthuman hybridisation between the wished-for metallic and streamlined on the one hand, and a contemptible biological on the other: in *Crash*, nihilism is abject, the posthuman is basically abhuman, and the abhuman may wind up into the teratological, the utterly monstrous.

Indeed, in *Crash* self-transcendence itself is abject, and the death drive leads characters, in their axiological disorientation, to a complete variety of nihilism where the return of the real, namely death, makes the subject become a traumatic one. Even sex is colonised by the death drive, as it becomes conceptualised (you can have sex with either a machine or an idea) and mediated by technology in the form of the automobile. In fact, all of experience becomes mediated in postmodernity, in the same way as media simulation leads to virtuality, cultural amnesia and a standardisation of consciousness. Sexual deviance and madness are the last refuges available for the mind under the sociological dispensation at work in *Crash*. Vaughan, therefore, has to be considered an insane and abject Messiah, and all instances of alleged *jouissance* in the novel (mainly, his own suicide and Seagrave's) are to be read as absurd and meaningless apotheoses of a Bataillean vulgar materialism

---

<sup>701</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, 'The Crowd Phenomenon', in Cahoon (ed.), pp. 219-24 (p. 222).



made up of bodily fluids, blood and scars: in *Crash*, transcendence of the self is equal to its destruction. Perversions, which are innate in humans according to Freud, become a form of nihilistic deviance that will only find catharsis in literature by being translated into words. But for this catharsis, the arguable modernism of sorts that J.G. Ballard displays in *Crash* describes a thorough postmodernity. Because of its date and its thematics, it is a postmodern work, then: one of postmodernity. Therefore and in conclusion, it is not a properly postmodernist one.

\* \* \*

Findley's *Headhunter* would be the most clearly and typologically postmodernist novel among those I have studied in my thesis, not only as a novel of postmodernity, but also of postmodernism as described by Fredric Jameson. However, I would like to remark once again how Jameson's theory of postmodernism, as expressed in a number of formal features and stylemes holding sway over postmodernist art, is ultimately a theory of postmodernity, since in his Marxist analysis every single characteristic of postmodernism is one of postmodernity, too. It is ultimately late capitalism that expresses itself through those formal features, which belong to what Marx would call the superstructure: from the very moment that it is established that the mode of production determines its own culture and that postmodernism is the cultural dominant of the present stage of capitalism, namely late capitalism, then every single postmodernist feature in a work of art is also a postmodern one at one and the same time. Jameson himself makes this very clear: 'every position of postmodernism in culture [...] is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today.' (*Postmodernism*, p. 3) This would be even more so on account of Findley's commercial success: 'aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production' (p. 4).

In this way, we can find examples of all the 'constitutive features' of postmodernism in *Headhunter* (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 6). We could start with depthlessness and superficiality as related to 'a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum' and the postmodern belief that 'there is nothing other than appearance.' (Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, p. 122). This is noticeable in the novel's characterisation strategies and in many scenes, such as those depicting the good-neighbour relationship between Dr Marlow and Lilah Kemp.

This feature is in its turn related to a ‘weakening of historicity’ in a novel that keeps conjuring up the canon of English fiction (unacknowledged as such by postmodernism, owing to the overcoming of the great divide between canonical and popular) and the values of a modernism instantiated by figures such as Freud or Sartre as evoked, for the wrong reasons, by Prof. Fagan. Indeed, the canon exists in *Headhunter* mostly as an excuse for fashioning Lilah Kemp as a psychotic and Prof. Fagan as a nostalgic. Moreover, the novel’s indirect portrayal of the age of AIDS is also shallow and propped up by a lot of gratuitous, sensational violence. ‘Free-floating and impersonal’ intensities of a schizophrenic nature, experienced not only by the two schizophrenic characters, Lilah Kemp and Amy Wylie, would subject not only characters but also readers to a succession of ‘pure and unrelated presents in time’ that overcome them through a ‘loss of reality’ and a ‘euphoria’ springing from the plot’s ‘hallucinogenic intensity.’ (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 27-28). These intensities are often displayed as ‘a whole new type of emotional ground tone’ pertaining to postmodernism, as opposed precisely to modernist historicity, since they disappear in the pure actuality of a present that erases both the past and the future (16). This also marks a return to ‘older theories’ of the sublime as the unsayable and un(re)presentable which are inextricably connected to the death drive. Unlike in *Crash*, however, only the last postmodern feature in Jameson’s catalogue does not seem to be especially relevant in Findley’s novel: the conspicuous presence of ‘a new technology’ as ‘a figure for a whole new economic world system’; this is dealt with in the novel, though, by the description of a social milieu made up of upper-class businessmen and women deeply committed to a global, postmodern market which, by way of example, allows to make millions out of producing typically Canadian souvenirs in a country formerly on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain, or by selling at the heart of Ontario masterpieces painted by Anglo-Irish geniuses (p. 6).

Taking into account these features and in a very much postmodernist way (since, as opposed to what happens in modernism, nothing is more alien to postmodernism than explicit and committed partisanship), Findley has made his reputation as a postmodernist author despite his affecting not to know what postmodernism might be all about, what adds up to the general confusion existing about this concept.

*Headhunter*, published in 1993, two years after the alleged end of History according to Francis Fukuyama, is a perfect example of how Western culture has moved, since the early

1990s, from graphosphere to videosphere, that is from Word to Image: we would be living in an intensely infantilised world where we would constantly be assaulted by the dictatorship of the image and the codes utilised by the media to construct a reality in accordance with a non-representational purpose. The media do not represent, but rather construct reality according to their own interests and strategies, until the codes developed out of those start functioning on their own and according to their own logic and procedures. The cultural sphere characteristic of modernism, along with another hitherto uncommodified area, namely the unconscious, have thus both been colonised by late capitalism, which has extended prodigiously in postmodernity. This is a development in which ‘the rise of the media and the advertising industry’ has proved instrumental (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 36, 49).

Findley’s novel would represent a perfect example of what I would call paraliterature, that is an attempt at serious, valuable literature that is actually a concoction of the most compromising devices in the postmodernist writer’s arsenal: those that will result in utter sensationalism and depthlessness as a formula for success, both in sales and even criticism. Thus, for example, and negating in practice the second most influencing theory of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon’s ideas on historiographic metafiction, *Headhunter*, despite its evocation of the age of AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, constructs a historicity that is pre-coded through archetypes and images of an ‘imagined past’. This turns its potential subversiveness, as posited by Hutcheon’s theory, into something rather arguable. Findley’s portrayal of the AIDS era is amenable to what Jameson calls ‘historicism’: a mere ‘imitation of dead styles’ or a ‘cannibalization of all the styles of the past’ whereby the past ‘as “referent” finds itself gradually bracketed’, reduced to ‘nothing but texts’ ‘whose reading proceeds by differentiation rather than by unification’, being the object of ‘profound discontinuities [...] no longer unified or organic’ (*Postmodernism*, pp. 27, 31, 18; Malpas, p. 26). Real history being thus displaced by ‘aesthetic styles’, we are deprived of ‘our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way’, as we are rendered ‘unable to unify the past, present and future’ (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 20-21, 27). As a result, rather than a historical investigation proper, *Headhunter* would be a work founded on the search for an idea of the postmodern sublime as based on the presentation of certain schizophrenic intensities that can only render a fragmented and de-realised portrait of postmodernity. This would correspond to a sublime that is an absolute other, a fatal

organicity or disorganised body made of pure flesh without soul or spirit and commanded by the death drive. In this way, in *Headhunter* nature is an enemy, and civilisation is a part of this nature: one pitting everyone against everybody else. As for the rest, *Headhunter* would be a paramount example of the death of art in postmodernity, of its de-auraticisation and eclecticism, whereby it merges with aestheticized lifestyle and postmodern comment, the latter being its one and only guarantor.<sup>702</sup>

A fundamental aspect of *Headhunter*, in terms of thematics and characterisation, is its controversial representation of both the female and the male, the feminine and the masculine. With respect to femininity, there is an ambivalent attitude where a fascination for the abject, in the form of the greedy if not directly cannibalistic tendencies of some of the secondary female characters, must be contrasted with what is generally a portrait of conflicted and disempowered women for whom there is a general attitude of suspicion or, at times, straight horror. Here, we may think of Ihab Hassan's idea of postmodernity's (although he calls postmodernity 'postmodernism') 'denial against the disgusting "female" acquiescence of matter, of the world, history, tradition.'

It is however Findley's portrayal of the male and masculine that is more controversial in *Headhunter*, going beyond what Hassan calls postmodernity's (same terminological comment) characteristic 'heroic maleness' (Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, p. 117) In its representation, Findley appears to be in thrall to pure male physicality and sexuality, especially when healthy young men are concerned. In these cases, where sex and violence are prominently displayed, a teratological note, related to an evident moral vacuum in a desacralized and valueless world, is suggested. Faced with the symbolic challenge posited by this exhibition of powerful physicality, male freedom and authority are clearly threatened. This leads to an attitude of resentment for the loss of such authority, especially on the part of the members of the so-called Club of Men. Unable to handle what is in effect an excess of freedom granted by their social and economic status, they get carried away in a frenzy of impulsive and irresponsible *play*: rape, mutilation and murder. At the same time, they use their power, money and influence in a rebellion against the sexual pauperisation that their sagging flesh would otherwise earn them in the human flesh market

---

<sup>702</sup> On the death of art under the postmodern, Lyotard believes that 'where modernist art still allows pleasure in the capture of the sublime in artistic form, postmodernist art [...] goes further towards the sublime, in destroying form itself (Connor, *Postm. Cult.*, p. 237, my emphasis).

on account of a new social imperative: the old and the ugly do not deserve to have sex (or, at least, not with the young and desirable). Beyond this, a complicity with certain mythical-allegorical structures intimately connected to violence and death can be noticed in *Headhunter*. The novel, as well as other works by the author, has even prompted charges of being a hymn to violence barely covering what can only be described as fascist desires.

Another deeply masculine sort of hero cult, according to which greatness is better than goodness, is developed even by the novel's 'positive' characters, such as Dr Marlow, who rather disturbingly appreciates Dr Kurtz's outstanding accomplishment as a psychiatrist, regardless of the latter's absolute lack of scruple when trying to achieve his goals. This would overlap with a flagrant elitism on account of which the positive characters identify with each other and even with Kurtz, as opposed to the subordinated nature of the narrative roles corresponding to the schizophrenic characters and to the secretaries of the 'great men' in the story. Marlow's identification with Fagan, which derives from their acquaintance and collaboration some time earlier in Harvard, is related to modernism, as probably Fagan's concept of himself is, too: the latter represents the prestige of the Western literary canon, which entails a belief in the civilising powers of literature and an appreciation of the work of some distinguished modern thinkers, such as Marx or Freud, whose ideas importantly bear on literary theory and criticism. Marlow, moreover, partakes of Fagan's 'prophetic', modernist elitism in being a soldier of psychiatry as a way of influencing the world in the benefit of suffering mankind. This must be seen in the light of the ideals of the Enlightenment and their ultimate goal: human emancipation and progress. This is part of the modernist subtext of a novel whose author has nonetheless organised it as a compendium of postmodernist literary techniques, for all of his offhand comments on not knowing what postmodernism might mean (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 2). In other words, Fagan's modernist ideals (many of which are also Marlow's), those 'of an artistic or political vanguard or avant-garde', are belied or betrayed by Findley's postmodernist writing (p. 15, original emphasis).

When it comes to a direct articulation of his prestigious discourse, Prof. Fagan merely gets caught in the trap of a pastiche that he concocts himself out of his personal memories of a certain historical past, the late 1960s. In so doing, he incurs in what Jameson calls the 'ideology of the generation', which certainly makes him feel closer to those, such as Marlow and even Kurtz, that may have lived those days, either directly or by

the mediation of literature, in the same basic way as him: making sense of them with the aid of the categories of some complex, elitist cultural discourse available for their analysis. In that Fagan manages to make these reflexions by dint of the generous founding of an illiterate, plutocratic couple, his high salary as a professor in Trinity College, Dublin, and his fees as an article writer and public speaker the world over, he might be incurring in complicity with what Jameson terms the ‘bloody underside’ of America or the West: through their patrons, Fagan may be seen as an accomplice in an ‘internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world’ (*Postmodernism*, p. 5). Anyway, it would have been very difficult or even impossible for him to do otherwise: in the words of Linda Hutcheon, one of the most influential theorists of postmodernism, ‘postmodern culture [...] cannot escape implication in the economic (late mass capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) dominants of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within.’ What is more, in its current full institutionalisation, the postmodern acknowledges ‘its unavoidable implication in the dominant culture.’ ‘The economic and the cultural [...] create and feed each other.’ Thus, that questioning will be ‘totally dependent upon that which it interrogates’, drawing its power ‘from that which it contests’, therefore not being either truly radical or truly oppositional. Any change will proceed precisely from within, even if provoked by critical discourse (Hutcheon, *Poetics*, pp. xiii, 7, my emphasis, 47, 120, 42, 222; *Politics*, p. 13; Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 10).<sup>703</sup> In the end, at least since 1929, literature, hitherto one of the pillars of bourgeois civilisation, has been reduced to a rather secondary position in ‘the rear guard of capitalist development.’ (*LM*, p. 89)

---

<sup>703</sup> Linda Hutcheon, ‘Epilogue: The Postmodern ... in Retrospect’, in Rudrum and Stavris, pp. 34-40 (p. 35).



## **Part 6 – Original Contributions and Suggestions**





Among the main contributions of my thesis, I would like to mention:

1. In my analysis, I have brought together three different disciplines, namely History, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis. These perspectives show a complementary nature in the interdisciplinary study of contemporary literature.
2. The main object of my study has been the analytical comparison of three theoretical and critical concepts: nihilism, abjection and postmodernism. I do not know of the existence of any other systematic study of these three concepts in the context of postmodernity. My conclusion is that the first two concepts are intimately related and instrumental in the development of contemporary Western literature as a literature of transgression. I have also contended that the concept of postmodernity, as its historical and (in a broad sense) cultural background, is more important and fruitful than postmodernism as a critical tool.
3. For the purposes of the theoretical and critical comparison of those three concepts, and for their illustration, I have carried out the study of three works: Beckett's *Molloy Trilogy*, Ballard's *Crash* and T. Findley's *Headhunter*. I do not know of any other critical study relating them systematically. This study, backed by theoretical analysis, questions the very existence of a postmodernist dominant in Western literature in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> C; neither does it support the idea that modernism was the dominant in its first half.
4. I have argued that the thematic analysis of contemporary literature is more productive than the formal, obsessively metalinguistic or deconstructive critical trend characteristic of poststructuralism, in itself one of the 'symptoms' of postmodernism; indeed, thematics may be taken for an index of the postmodern. By following this critical path instead of that grounded on form and language, I believe to have contributed to a demystification of the terminological and conceptual confusion obtaining between the terms postmodernism and postmodernity. I have done this not only with regard to literatures in English, but also to those written in other European languages.
5. I have strongly argued against poststructuralism's so-called 'linguistic imperative' in that it shows literally everything to be a linguistic construct. In my argumentation, I have drawn on distinguished psychologist Steven Pinker and his idea, supported by scientific

experimentation, that natural languages are secondary to inborn concepts and rules of logic, among other mental categories. I also support Pinker's conclusions on the existence of a common human nature directly linked to mankind's genetic makeup, a veritable taboo for poststructuralism. In so doing, I have departed from the common critical staple that poststructuralism still is, above all in anything concerning Samuel Beckett's work.

6. As a result of this, I have taken issue with a school of irrationalist thought, mostly traditionalist or directly reactionary, going as far back as J.G. Herder, the founder of modern, ethnic nationalist thought. This school, via German romanticism and its epigones, ended up being one of the main foundations of Nazism's prejudices and criminal misdeeds. For the same type of motives, all throughout my thesis I am openly hostile to Martin Heidegger's thoughts on human deracination and cultural debasement after the end of WWII. Contrary to this line of thought and that of some Marxist thinkers such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, I do not see the Enlightenment and its defence of reason, individual freedom and scientific knowledge, along with commitment to human progress and emancipation from want and ignorance, as the ultimate cause for the megacrimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> C. I am rather of the opposite conviction: those crimes were not the outcome of civilisation; they were the by-product of ethnic nationalism, racism and the irrational, nearly mystical extolment of *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) that propelled Nazism, as well as its profoundly nihilistic worldview and its lust for universal depredation and destruction. This was a movement that Heidegger only rejected in what concerned its biologically racist orientation, being for the rest a Party member from 1933 to 1945, and its spiritual partisan and admirer of its 'inner truth and greatness' right up to his death. To me, this is something much more important, evident and primary than all the technicalities and the jargon of postmodern theory and criticism, their language fetishism and their advocacy of the irrational. This is all the more serious, as Heidegger is undoubtedly the main philosophical inspiration for some of the most renowned theorists and thinkers of postmodernity after 1945, above all in France.

Although I understand that Heidegger's insights into both Ge-stell and Bestand as dehumanising factors under capitalism are valuable, I have preferred to focus on Nietzsche's thought in order to define what has been called 'the key philosophical concept of the first half of the twentieth century' and 'the defining factor of Western culture', namely nihilism. A symptom of violent conflict at the turn of that century, I have argued

that passive nihilism, represented by whom Nietzsche calls ‘the last man’, someone who is content with his own mediocrity and experiencing a happy nihilism of sorts, is the most apposite for a description of anomic postmodernity. This is especially important and noticeable in J.G. Ballard’s work, as my study of *Crash* makes clear.

7. Regarding abjection, I have insisted on the figure of the abject mother and its nocturnal power, as well as on the feminine as radically evil, archaic, inscrutable, uncanny, irrational, wily, immoral, sinister, scheming and hostile to man and civilisation, the latter being symbolised by light in the literature analysed in my thesis. I have underscored these motifs by recourse to comparative religion (e.g., the goddess Kali in Hinduism) and mythology (e.g., Robert Graves’s *White Goddess*).

I have also argued for the ubiquity of abjection and its intimate imbrication with nihilism, to the point of regarding contemporary literature as a sublimation of the abject. It is also this overlap that allows for a literature of transgression understood as one based on nihilism and abjection at one and the same time. I have exemplified the connection of the abject with nihilism, for instance, in the analysis of antinatalism in both Beckett’s *Molloy Trilogy* and Findley’s *Headhunter*, where the worthlessness of human life meets prejudices against the female condition and forbidden desire for children.

8. Although I for the most part follow his periodisation of postmodernism, as I find it especially neat and clear, I have modified Brian McHale’s chronology of literary postmodernism. I have taken advantage of this chronology not only to propose an alternative periodisation, but also to discuss the tricky relationships obtaining between modernism and postmodernism on the one hand, and modernity and postmodernity on the other. I have clarified them by bringing into the picture the avant-garde (especially the historical avant-garde: i.e., Dada and surrealism), so-called late modernism (whose greatest representative may have been Samuel Beckett), and the literary and critical heritage in languages other than English, above all in French. The final outcome of my proposal would be a certainly narrower, but also much more workable concept of postmodernism.

\*\*\*

As to Samuel Beckett's *Three Novels*, I have stressed the importance of nihilism in the novel, which has brought my argument to defy some of the most relevant names in the most recent criticism (to wit, Jacques Derrida), as well as Samuel Beckett himself, who could not understand how some people saw his work as nihilistic. With regard to this, I have argued how poststructuralist criticism stresses excessively the importance of the merely linguistic and metalinguistic in the *Molloy Trilogy*. I have shown how this kind of criticism falls short of a mutilation of the work's meaning by ignoring its thematic content. This content is presided over by an unmitigated nihilism and pervasive abjection. I have arrived at this conclusion after an analysis of some of Beckett's own expressions of his aesthetics over a quarter of a century. To me, Beckett's aesthetic choices always imply a greater importance of the thematic over the formal. In the *Three Novels*, as everywhere else in his work since the end of the war, the form is always thought out from the angle of what he terms the accommodation of the mess. This is the main reason for the increasing minimalism in the *Molloy Trilogy* and in Beckett's subsequent work. In this, Beckett exemplifies that there is always something other than language, style of form to contemporary fiction, contrary to the poststructuralist fetish of (mere) textuality.

More precisely, I have contended for the existence of a pre-eminence and a structural dimension in both nihilism and abjection in the *Three Novels*. In this, not only do I contradict all formalist interpretations of the *Trilogy*, but also what has been the staple discourse of Beckett criticism roughly from the 1950s to the 1970s, namely an idea of the *Three Novels* as being a statement of existential heroism. As opposed to this, I find the *Trilogy* to fall extremely short of being a general, nothingness-obsessed indictment of the human condition, a libel against a universe no longer directed by a now deceased God, and an anthology of the wish for oblivion and ultimate self-extinction, life being conceived as an incomprehensible damnation.

I have also contended that the first two novels in this trilogy (*Molloy* and *Malone Dies*) are clearly included within the late modernist paradigm and canon, while the third one (*The Unnamable*) has to be ascribed to a transition to postmodernism, as it shows evident metafictional characteristics, as well as a conspicuous lack: that of a minimal concern for the human. Consequently, the *Unnamable* is just a textual entity, an unstoppable stream of speech, language thus taking over the central role in the narrative from character, plot or theme.

\*\*\*

Despite J.G. Ballard's *Crash* being published in 1973, the year that, according to Brian McHale, the peak phase of postmodernism started in the USA, I have shown how Ballard could not care less about what he considers to be forms of bourgeoisification, namely postmodern theory and literature. *Crash* would thus be a postmodern novel in the sense of being a novel of postmodernity, not of that narrow school named postmodernism. This accords moreover with his beginnings in the British New Wave of science fiction and his obsession with inner space, The latter's very concept (aside from the pun with science fiction's obsession with *outer* space) originates in his very much cherished pictorial surrealism, which proves, as he himself avows, that Ballard never was a literary man.

As I have argued, *Crash* is basically about postmodernity as an era of freedom from morality that leaves the pre-eminence of discipline and responsibility in modernity well behind. In Ballard's postmodernity, choices have the upper hand over rules, identity is based on lifestyle, and lifestyles are pre-packaged and available in the marketplace. This process has nothing to do with postmodernism in an aesthetic or narrowly cultural sense, but it has a great deal to do with postmodernity as its historical and social background, which confirms my claim that postmodernity is a more productive category in literary analysis and criticism, as its scope is much broader.

In this postmodern impasse, where the very existence of others is merely conjectural, an all-governing affectlessness presided over by the death drive and nihilism sets in. In this context, in that they are led by the death drive in debased ways redolent even of Georges Bataille's 'vulgar materialism', the very efforts of the characters to transcend them abjectify their nihilism. In this, I suggest the existence of a connection between *Crash* and a French tradition of transgressive literature going as far back as no less than the Divine Marquis himself.

Finally, I have reasoned how all these developments result in a universal dark age in which everything and everyone would be reduced to forms of Heideggerian 'Ge-stell' and 'Bestand': that is, available material for production or storage, the entire postmodern world thus becoming reified and commodified, This makes sense of the author's statement that *Crash* is 'a psychopathic hymn which has a point', which I understand to be a tribute tacitly paid to the ambiguity consubstantial to postmodernity.

\*\*\*

Regarding Timothy Findley's *Headhunter*, I have foregrounded two characteristics: first, its being published a year after the publication of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* as a book, following the demise of the Soviet Union and its satellite regimes in Eastern Europe (it had previously been published as an article in 1989, after the fall of the Berlin Wall), therefore at the very fullest of postmodernity, once the emancipatory dreams of socialism and, ultimately, philosophical modernity, had collapsed; second, the fact that it is a fully postmodernist novel, that is to say one of postmodernism, beyond mere postmodernity. With regard to this last characteristic, I have defended the view that it epitomises two of the most reputed theoretical accounts of postmodernism, namely Fredric Jameson's and Linda Hutcheon's.

As to the former, and despite having just acknowledged *Headhunter* as a novel of postmodernism, I remark how Jameson's theory of postmodernism is ultimately a theory of postmodernity, since in his Marxist analysis every single characteristic of postmodernism is one of postmodernity, too. It is ultimately late capitalism that expresses itself through those formal features, which belong to what Marx would call the superstructure: from the very moment that it is established that the mode of production determines its own culture and that postmodernism is the cultural dominant of the present stage of capitalism, namely late capitalism, then every single postmodernist feature in a work of art is also a postmodern one at one and the same time.

Apart from this, I have focused on *Headhunter* as an example of a new emotional ground tone proper to postmodernism, consisting of hallucinogenic intensities. Hence, time gets reduced to a succession of unrelated presents that abolishes both the past and the future, like an over-edited sequence of film-like scenes, both static and ecstatic. Ultimately, we are faced with a form of the formless: the postmodern sublime, the monstrous pre-ontological universe of the 'night of the world', an absolute, incommensurable, alien other which, in Findley's novel, is tacitly masculine.

This brings us to another postmodernist feature, namely a weakening of historicity which in this novel, although seemingly referred to an indeterminate future, evokes the neo-liberal 1980s, Thatcher and Reagan's era and, above all, the time of the AIDS pandemic, here metamorphosed into an imaginary contagious disease spread by birds. I

have applied Jameson's idea of 'historicism' to this evocation, in that it remains as superficial as almost anything else in the novel. What Findley does with regard to the plague that frames his narrative is to depict it in the terms of an already imagined past, coded into available aesthetic styles and pre-established codes. Related to this is a fundamental scene in the novel, in which one Dr. Fagan, an old lecturer in English, mourns modernism as a splendid past before its fall into postmodernism. In the end, that past is adulterated into an idyllic time without its own conflicts, the time when we were young, the days of wine and roses that could have changed the world: the 1960s. This narcissistic phantasm also problematises the novel's effectiveness: there is no counterforce to our ambient postmodernity, and if there ever were one, it would certainly not be nostalgia or melancholy. Moreover, Findley betrays his own ideological modernism with the postmodern pastiche he concocts in *Headhunter*.

I have shown how these historical considerations about the postmodernist novel also find a reflection in Linda Hutcheon's thought, as she focuses on the category she calls 'historiographic metafiction' as illustrative of postmodernist poetics or, in practice, as its main outcome and representative. I have expressed my doubts about one of the main features of this type of literature according to Hutcheon: its purported subversiveness. For Hutcheon, even if born within late capitalism, historiographic metafiction has a subversive potential as to the status quo through irony. In Jameson's thought about postmodernism, this cannot be accepted, because of its being utterly compromised with the existing economic, social and cultural dominants. There is no way to stand outside the postmodern condition in order to criticise it, since counter-discourse and parody would be inevitably implicated in what they contest. Hence, in historiographic metafiction, irony is blunt, deprived of the satiric impulse typical of parody in modernism.

This ultimate dependence of postmodernism on postmodernity through its reliance on the concept of late capitalism, as accounted for by Jameson and Hutcheon, points to a terminological and eventually conceptual confusion, as I have contended in my thesis. In the end, in his cannibalisation of styles and historical periods, in its sensationalism, in its heterogeneity, its prominently visual nature and its profound structural discontinuities, I call Findley's postmodern romance (with all the pejorative connotations of this term and using a Jamesonian concept) paraliterature, an instance of the death of art in postmodernity.



A final consideration about *Headhunter* underlines the obsessive nature and the overwhelming role granted in it to the young, male body and the desires prompted by it. Leaving aside the repercussions of this strategy for dominant male heterosexuality, due consideration should be given to the links it may have, if unwittingly, with certain styles of representation proper to historical forms of fascism. It could be that, according to Bataille, ‘extreme seductiveness is probably at the boundary of *horror*.’ I have related this feature to the work of one of the greatest film directors of all time, Luchino Visconti. I also point to another connection of these fascist desires, to wit one with the strong undercurrent of elitism and hero cult channelled by Findley’s romance.

\*\*\*\*\*

After having displayed my main conclusions regarding the novels examined in this thesis, as well as what I consider to be my original contributions to their critical debate, I would like to briefly make some remarks about the main objects of my study: postmodernity, postmodernism, nihilism and abjection.

Now, ‘dead and buried’, ‘interred’ in the ‘rubble’ of 11 September 2001, no longer being contemporary, belonging to ‘another world’ prior to ‘mobile phones, email, the internet’ and home computers, it may be high-time for new, post-postmodernist writing proposals to be put forward.<sup>704</sup> Maybe it would be a good occasion for agency, humanism, reconstruction, communication, connection and the work of art to come back after several decades of impersonal, solipsistic, metalinguistic, deconstructionist and over-theorised texts.<sup>705</sup> Otherwise and apart from its full institutionalisation and academic appropriation as an object of debate, postmodernism risks becoming ‘a source of marginal gags in pop culture aimed at the under-eights’, and a veritable ‘cultural desert’ located at the ‘weightless nowhere of silent autism’. This would befit a ‘fiction that only wants to know itself and ignores the world’ (Kirby, pp. 84, 87-88, 92, 96; Huber, p. 218). It has even been written how either postmodernism or literature, ‘one of the two has to die.’ (Huber, p.5)

---

<sup>704</sup> Alan Kirby, ‘The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond’, in Rudrum and Stavris (eds.), pp. 84-96 (pp. 87-88, 95).

<sup>705</sup> Irmtraud Huber, *Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants. and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 7, 24, 31, 49.

Postmodernity, however, regardless of the name we address it by, will still be our cultural foundation in a time of ever-shrinking distances, globalised markets, ever-growing ultracapitalism and proliferating nuclear risks, when the basic telos of the enlightenment, namely human emancipation, will be more and more neglected and forgotten in the benefit of performativity, maximised profit and the instrumental (above all, techno-scientific) means needed to achieve them. This is why we can also augur well for nihilism and abjection among the main thematic concerns of the new aesthetic paradigms that might arise. Molloy's, the Unnamable's and Vaughan's long shadows will still haunt our contemporariness. After all, being clearly opposed to postmodern theory, I dare say this outcome will just be a question of human nature under the constant, overwhelming pressure of a global, techno-scientific, ruthlessly metastatic capitalism, the 'homogenizing force' which 'is the overwhelming fact of the world.' (Bertens, *Idea of the Postm.*, p. 236) As Bertolt Brecht would say, this is a bad time for poetry.<sup>706</sup>

---

<sup>706</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'Bad Time for Poetry', in Bertolt Brecht, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Reinhold Grimm, Caroline Molina, and Vedia, The German Library, 75 (New York and London: Continuum, 2006), p. 95.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### 1- Primary Sources

BALLARD, J.G., *Crash* (London and New York: Harper Perennial, 2008)

\_\_\_\_ ‘Introduction to the French Edition of *Crash*’, in *Porn Studies: Pornography, Modernity, & the Historical Present*, <<http://imagesoferoticism.com/jg-ballard-introduction-to-crash-1974/>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

BECKETT, Samuel, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove, 2009)

FINDLEY, Timothy, *Headhunter*, Harper Perennial Canada (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1999)

### 2- Secondary Sources

ABBOT, H. Porter, ‘The Harpooned Notebook: Malone Dies’, in Bloom (ed.), (1988), 123-29

ACKERLEY, C.J., and S. E. GONTARSKI, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader’s Guide to his Works, Life, and Thought* (New York: Grove, 2004)

ADELMAN, Gary, ‘Beckett and Kafka’, *Triquarterly*, 117 (2003), 77-106

ADORNO, Theodor W., *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and tr. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers (London and New York: Continuum, 2002)

\_\_\_\_ ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’, in *Prisms*, 17-34

\_\_\_\_ ‘Extorted Reconciliation: On Georg Lukács’ *Realism in Our Time*’, in *Notes to Literature*, I & II (1991), 216-40

\_\_\_\_ ‘Heine the Wound’, in *Notes to Literature*, I & II (1991), 80-85

- \_\_\_\_ *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, tr. by Edmund Jephcott  
(Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000; repr. 2001)
- \_\_\_\_ *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott, *Radical Thinkers* (London and New York: Verso, 2005)
- \_\_\_\_ *Negative Dialectics*, tr. by E.B. Ashton (New York and London: Continuum, 2007)
- \_\_\_\_ ‘Notes on Kafka’, in *Prisms*, 243-70
- \_\_\_\_ *Notes to Literature*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, tr. by Shierry Weber Nichol森, *European Perspectives*, 3 vols (New York: Columbia UP, 1991-92)
- \_\_\_\_ ‘On Lyric Poetry and Society’, in *Notes to Literature*, I & II (1991), 37-75
- \_\_\_\_ ‘Parataxis: On Hölderlin’s Late Poetry’, in *Notes to Literature*, III (1992), 109-49
- \_\_\_\_ *Prisms*, tr. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1981; repr. 1997)
- \_\_\_\_ ‘Trying to Understand Endgame’, in *Notes to Literature*, I & II (1991), 240-75
- AGAMBEN, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, tr. by Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998)
- AIRAKSINEN, Timo, *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995)
- ALIGHIERI, Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Volume I Inferno*, tr. and intro. by Mark Musa, *Penguin Classics* (New York and London: Penguin, 1984)
- AMÉRY, Jean, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, tr. by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980)
- Ancient Greek Lyrics*, trans. by Willis Barnstone, 4th edn (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2010)
- ANSELL PEARSON, Keith, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as a Political Thinker: The Perfect Nihilist* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994)

- \_\_\_\_ *Viroid Life: Perspectives on Nietzsche and the Transhuman Condition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997)
- \_\_\_\_ and Diane MORGAN, 'Introduction: The Return of Monstrous Nihilism', in Ansell Pearson and Morgan (eds.), viii-xxi
- \_\_\_\_ (eds.), *Nihilism Now! Monsters of Energy* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants. and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000)
- Antonio Saura: Damas, Medio Siglo* (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2005)
- ARIÈS, Philippe, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, tr. by Patricia M. Ranum (London: Marion Boyars, 1976)
- ARISTOTLE, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, intro. by Lesley Brown, tr. by David Ross, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2009)
- ARMSTRONG, Charles I., 'Echo: Reading *The Unnamable* through Kant and Kristeva', *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 1.1 (2002), 173-97
- ARTAUD, Antonin, *The Theatre and its Double*, tr. by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove, 1994)
- ARYA, Rina, 'The Existential Dimensions of Bacon's Art', in Arya (ed.), 81-102
- \_\_\_\_ (ed.), *Francis Bacon: Critical and Theoretical Perspectives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012)
- \_\_\_\_ 'Introduction', in Arya (ed.), 1-10
- BACEVICH, Andrew J., 'He Told Us to Go Shopping. Now the Bill Is Due.', *The Washington Post*, 5 October, 2008, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/03/AR2008100301977.html>> [accessed 25.06.2016]
- BACON, Henry, *Visconti: Explorations of Beauty and Decay* (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1998)
- BAILEY, Anne Geddes, and Karen Grady, 'Introduction', *Studies on Canadian Writing*, 64 (1998), 1-9

- BAKER, Brian, 'The Geometry of the Space Age: J.G. Ballard's Short Fiction and science Fiction of the 1960s', in Baxter (ed.), 11-22
- BALLARD, J.G., *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Flamingo Modern Classics (London: Flamingo, 2001)
- \_\_\_\_ 'The Car, the Future', *Drive*, 1971, 102-09
- \_\_\_\_ <[http://www.jgballard.ca/deep\\_ends/drive\\_mag\\_article.html](http://www.jgballard.ca/deep_ends/drive_mag_article.html)> [accessed 14.10.2019]
- BARBER, Lynn, 'Sci-fi Seer' (1970), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 22-35
- BARR, Lukas, 'Don't Crash' (1994), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 283-90
- BARTHES, Roland, *Mythologies*, tr. by Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday, 1991)
- BATAILLE, Georges, *The Bataille Reader*, ed. by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1994)
- \_\_\_\_ *Inner Experience*, tr. by Leslie Anne Boldt, *Intersections: Philosophy and Critical Theory* (Albany: SUNY, 1988)
- \_\_\_\_ *Literature and Evil*, tr. by Alastair Hamilton, *Modern Classics* (London and New York: Penguin, 2012)
- \_\_\_\_ 'On Nietzsche: The Will to Chance', in *The Bataille Reader*, 330-42
- \_\_\_\_ *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, ed. and intro. by Allan Stoekl, tr. by Allan Stoekl, and others, *Theory and History of Literature*, 14 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985; repr., 1986)
- BAUDELAIRE, Charles, 'Correspondences', in *The Flowers of Evil*, 15
- \_\_\_\_ *The Flowers of Evil*, tr. by Richard Howard (Boston: David R. Godine, 1983; repr. 2006)

- \_\_\_\_ *Hygiène : Troisième partie des journaux intimes*, Groupe « ebooks libres et gratuits »  
 <[https://www.ebooksgratuits.com/pdf/ baudelaire\\_hygiene.pdf](https://www.ebooksgratuits.com/pdf/ baudelaire_hygiene.pdf)> [accessed  
 14.10.2019]
- \_\_\_\_ ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, in Cahoon (ed.), 136-44
- \_\_\_\_ *Paris Spleen and La Fanfarlo*, tr. by Raymond N. MacKenzie (Indianapolis and  
 Cambridge: Hackett, 2008)
- BAUDRILLARD, Jean, *Amérique* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1986)
- \_\_\_\_ ‘Ballard’s *Crash*’, tr. by Arthur B. Evans, *Science Fiction Studies*, 18.3 (1991), n. p.  
 <<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/55/ baudrillard55art.htm# baudrillardcrash>  
 > [accessed 14.10.2019]
- \_\_\_\_ *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, tr. by C. T. [sic], Theory, Culture &  
 Society Series (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998; repr. 1999)
- \_\_\_\_ ‘The Ecstasy of Communication’, in Hal Foster (ed.), 126-134
- \_\_\_\_ *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities... or the End of the Social and Other Essays*, tr.  
 by Paul Foss, and others, Foreign Agents (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Perfect Crime*, tr. by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 1996)
- \_\_\_\_ *Screened Out*, tr. by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2002)
- \_\_\_\_ ‘Simulacra and Science Fiction’, tr. by Arthur E. Evans, *Science Fiction Studies*, 18.3  
 (1991), n. p.  
 <<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/55/ baudrillard55art.htm# baudrillardcrash>  
 > [accessed 14.10.2019]
- \_\_\_\_ *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981)
- \_\_\_\_ *Simulations*, tr. by Paul Foss, and others (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983)
- \_\_\_\_ *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, tr. by Iain Hamilton Grant, Theory, Culture & Society  
 (London: Sage, 1993)



- \_\_\_\_ *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, tr. by James Benedict  
(London and New York: Verso, 1993)
- BAUMAN, Zygmunt, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992)
- BAXTER, Jeanette, 'Introduction: J.G. Ballard and the Contemporary', in Baxter (ed.), 1-10  
\_\_\_\_ (ed.), *J.G. Ballard, Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008)
- \_\_\_\_ 'Kingdom Come: An Interview with J.G. Ballard' (2007), in Baxter (ed.), 122-28
- \_\_\_\_ 'Radical Surrealism: Rereading Photography and History in J.G. Ballard's *Crash*', *Textual Practice*, 22.3 (2008), 507–528
- \_\_\_\_ 'Reading the Signs' (2004), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 407-14
- BEARDSWORTH, Sarah, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*, SUNY Series in Gender Theory (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2004)
- BEAUVOIR, Simone de, *The Second Sex*, ed. and tr. by H.M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953; repr. 1956)
- BECKETT, Samuel, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986)
- \_\_\_\_ *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. by Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove, 1984)
- \_\_\_\_ *Endgame*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 68-102
- \_\_\_\_ 'German Letter of 1937', in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, I (1929-1940)*, 516-21
- \_\_\_\_ 'Homage to Jack B. Yeats', in *Disjecta*, 134
- \_\_\_\_ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, I (1929-1940)*, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: CUP, 2009; repr. 2014)
- \_\_\_\_ 'Three Dialogues', in *Disjecta*, pp. 123-30
- \_\_\_\_ *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 7-67

- BECKING, Bob, and others (eds.), *Only One God? Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah*, The Biblical Seminar, 77 (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001)
- BECKMAN, Frida, 'Chronopolitics: Space, Time and Revolution in the Later Novels of J.G. Ballard', *symploke*, 21.1-2 (2013), 271-289
- BELL, Daniel, 'The Coming of Post-Industrial Society', in Cahoon (ed.), 423-36
- BELSEY, Catherine, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2002)
- BEN-ZVI, Linda, 'Beckett and Disgust: The Body as "Laughing Matter"', *Modernism/Modernity*, 18.4 (2011), 681-98
- BERENBAUM, Michael, 'The Experience of the Void', in Bloom (ed.), (2001; repr. 2009), 17-30
- BERNASCONI, Robert, and Sybol COOK (eds.), *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*, Studies in Continental Thought, Bloomington and Indianapolis (Indiana UP:2003)
- BERNSTEIN, Michael André, *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992)
- BERSANI, Leo, 'Beckett and the End of Literature', in Bloom (ed.), (1988), 51-70  
 \_\_\_\_ *Homos* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard UP, 1995; repr. 1996)
- BERTENS, Hans, 'The Debate on Postmodernism', in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), 3-14  
 \_\_\_\_ *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995)  
 \_\_\_\_ 'Postmodern Characterization and the Intrusion of Language', in Calinescu and Fokkema, (eds.), 139-159  
 \_\_\_\_ 'The Sociology of Postmodernism', in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), 103-18

\_\_\_\_\_ and Douwe FOKKEMA (eds.), *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages Series (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1997)

BIAGGI, Vladimir, *Le nihilisme*, Corpus (Paris: GF Flammarion, 1998)

BLAKE, William, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (New York: Dover, 1994)

\_\_\_\_\_ ‘A Memorable Fancy’, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 9

\_\_\_\_\_ ‘The Proverbs of Hell’, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 9-12

BLANCHOT, Maurice, *The Book to Come*, ed. by Werner Hamacher, tr. by Charlotte Mandell, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003)

\_\_\_\_\_ *Faux pas*, ed. by Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, tr. by Charlotte Mandell, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2001)

\_\_\_\_\_ *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson, Theory and History of Literature, 82 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota, 1993; repr. 2003)

\_\_\_\_\_ *The Space of Literature*, tr. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska, 1982)

\_\_\_\_\_ *The Work of Fire*, tr. by Charlotte Mandell, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1995)

\_\_\_\_\_ *The Writing of the Disaster*, tr. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska, 1995)

BLOOM, Harold (ed.), *Elie Wiesel's Night*, Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations (New York: Chelsea House, 2001; repr. 2009)

\_\_\_\_\_ *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (New York: Warner, 2002)

\_\_\_\_\_ ‘Introduction’, in Bloom (ed.), (1988), 1-12

\_\_\_\_\_ ‘Introduction’, in Bloom (ed.), (2011), 1-11

- \_\_\_\_ (ed.), *Samuel Beckett*, Bloom's Modern Critical Views (New York: Chelsea House, 2011)
- \_\_\_\_ (ed.), *Samuel Beckett's 'Molloy', 'Malone Dies', 'The Unnamable'*, Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations (New York: Chelsea House, 1988)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Western Canon: The Books and the School of the Ages* (New York, San Diego and London: Harcourt Brace, 1994)
- BOÉTIE, Étienne de la, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, tr. by Harry Kurz (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2008)
- BORGES, Jorge Luis, 'The House of Asterion', in *Labyrinths*, 138-40
- \_\_\_\_ *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, tr. by James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964)
- BOUDON, Raymond, and François BOURRICAUD, *A Critical Dictionary of Sociology*, tr. by Peter Hamilton (London and Chicago: Routledge and the University of Chicago, 1989)
- BOULTER, Jonathan, *Beckett: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Guides for the Perplexed (New York and London: Continuum, 2008)
- BOUWSMA, William J., *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1989)
- BOYNE, Roy, 'Crash Theory: The Ubiquity of the Fetish at the End of Time', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 4.2 (1999), 41-52
- BOZOKI, Edina, 'Bogomilism', in Hanegraaff and others (ed.), 192-94
- BOZZETTO, Roger, 'J.G. Ballard : écrivain, auteur de Science-Fiction'
- <<http://www.quarante-deux.org/archives/bozzetto/ecrits/auteurs/ballard.html>>
- [accessed 14.10.2019]

- BRECHT, Bertolt, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Reinhold Grimm, Caroline Molina, and Vedia, The German Library, 75 (New York and London: Continuum, 2006)
- BRISTOW, Joseph, *Sexuality*, TNCI (London and New York: Routledge, 1997)
- BROEK, Roelof van den, 'Gnosticism I: Gnostic Religion', in Hanegraaff and others (eds.), 403-416
- BROOKS, Rosetta, 'Myths of the New Future' (1988), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 241-47
- BROTTMAN, Mikita, and Christopher SHARRETT, 'The End of the Road: David Cronenberg's *Crash* and the Fading of the West', *Literature / Film Quarterly*, 30.2 (2002), 126-32
- BRUCE, Donald, 'L'inscription corporelle de la vitesse: la nouvelle "décadence" dans *Crash* de J.G. Ballard', *Tangence*, 55 (1997), 118-137
- BRYDON, Diana, 'Intertextuality in Timothy Findley's *Headhunter*', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 33.4 (1998-99), 53-62
- BÜCHNER, Georg, *Danton's death, Leonce and Lena, Woyzeck*, tr. and intro. by Victor Price, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1988; repr. 1998)
- BUKATMAN, Scott, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke UP, 1993)
- BULL, Jeffrey S., 'Giving the Sickness a Name: Reading Timothy Findley's *Headhunter* and Walker Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome* as Diagnostic Fictions', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 33.4 (1998-99), 153-65
- BUSWELL Jr., Robert E., and Donald S. LOPEZ Jr., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ, and Woodstock, Oxon: Princeton UP, 2014)

BUTLER, Christopher, *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2010)

\_\_\_\_ *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2002)

BUTTERFIELD, Bradley, 'Ethical Value and Negative Aesthetics: Reconsidering the Baudrillard-Ballard Connection', *PMLA. Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 114.1 (1999), 64-77

<<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.uned.es/docview/214773758?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:summon&accountid=14609>> [accessed 19.08.2018]

CAHOONE, Lawrence E. (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, Blackwell Philosophy Anthologies, 2 (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 1996; repr. 2000)

CALDWELL, Wilber W., *1968: Dreams of Revolution* (New York: Algora, 2009)

CALINESCU, Matei, 'Postmodernism and Some Paradoxes of Periodization', in Fokkema and Bertens (eds.), 239-254

\_\_\_\_ 'Rewriting', in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), 243-48

\_\_\_\_ and Douwe FOKKEMA (eds.), *Exploring Postmodernism*, Utrecht Publications in General and Comparative Literature, 23 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1990)

CALVO SERRALLER, Francisco, 'Look to the Ladies', in *Antonio Saura: Damas, Medio Siglo*, (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2005), 177-82

CAMUS, Albert, *L'Étranger*, ed. by Ray Davidson, Twentieth Century French Texts (London and New York: Routledge, 1988)

\_\_\_\_ *L'homme révolté*, Nouvelle Revue Française (Paris: Gallimard, 1951)

\_\_\_\_ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, tr. by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991)

- CAPLAN, Bryan, 'The Literature of Nonviolent Resistance and Civilian-Based Defense',  
*Humane Studies Review*, 9.1 (1994), 1-16
- CARRASCO, David, *The Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York:  
 OUP, 2012)
- CARROLL, Noël, 'The Concept of Postmodernism from a Philosophical Point of View', in  
 Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), 89-102
- CARTANO, Tony, and Maxim JAKUBOWSKI, 'The Past Tense of J.G. Ballard' (1985),  
 trans. by Simon Sellars, in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 211-23
- CARTWRIGHT, David, *Historical Dictionary of Schopenhauer's Philosophy*, Historical  
 Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements, 55 (Lanham, MD,  
 Toronto and Oxford: Scarecrow, 2005)
- CASANOVA, Pascale, *The World Republic of Letters*, tr. by M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge,  
 MA, and London: Harvard UP, 2004)
- CHAUDHURI, Shohini, 'Witnessing Death: Ballard's and Cronenberg's *Crash*', *Strategies*,  
 14.1 (2001), 63-75
- CIORAN, E.M., *Cahiers 1957-1972*, NRF Essais (Paris: Gallimard, 1997)
- \_\_\_\_ *Del inconveniente de haber nacido*, trans. by Esther Seligson (Madrid: Taurus, 1981)
- \_\_\_\_ *Drawn and Quartered*, tr. by Richard Howard, The Arcade Cioran (New York: Arcade,  
 2012)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Fall into Time*, tr. by Richard Howard (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1970)
- \_\_\_\_ *The New Gods*, tr. by Richard Howard (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2013)
- \_\_\_\_ *On the Heights of Despair*, tr. by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston (Chicago and London:  
 Chicago UP, 1990)

- \_\_\_\_ *A Short History of Decay*, tr. by Richard Howard, The Arcade Cioran (New York: Arcade, 2012)
- \_\_\_\_ *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, Folio essais (Paris: Gallimard, 1952)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Temptation to Exist*, tr. by Richard Howard (New York: Arcade, 2011)
- CIRLOT, Juan-Eduardo, *Diccionario de símbolos*, Colección Labor, Nueva Serie, 2nd edn (Barcelona: Labor, 1992)
- CLARKE, David B., *The Consumer Society and the Postmodern City* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003)
- CLOONAN, William, 'Placing the Unplaceable: The Dilemmas of Samuel Beckett's Fiction', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 47.4 (2001), 1009-18
- CONNOR, Steven (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2004)
- \_\_\_\_ 'Postmodernism and Literature', in Connor (ed.), 62-81
- \_\_\_\_ 'Postmodernism Grown Old', in Rudrum and Stavris (eds.), 65-83
- \_\_\_\_ *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, 2nd edn (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997, repr. 1999)
- CONRAD, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness and Selected Short Fiction*, Barnes and Noble Classics (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003; repr. 2008)
- COOK, Bernard E. (ed.), *Europe since 1945: An Encyclopedia*, 2 vols (New York and London: Garland, 2001)
- COOK, Chris, and John STEVENSON, *The Routledge Companion to World History since 1914*, Routledge Companions to History (London and New York: Routledge, 2005)



- CORNEA, Christine, 'David Cronenberg's *Crash* and Performing Cyborgs', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 52 (2003), 4-14
- COTTINGHAM, John, 'Descartes: Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind', in. Parkinson (ed.), 187-219
- COUSINEAU, Thomas J., 'Molloy and the Paternal Metaphor', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 29.1 (1983), 81-91
- COVINO, Deborah Caslav, *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture*, SUNY series in Feminist Criticism and Theory (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2004)
- COX, Gary, *How to Be an Existentialist or How to Get Real, Get a Grip and Stop Making Excuses* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Sartre Dictionary* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008)
- CRITCHLEY, Simon, *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, Warwick Studies in European Philosophy (London and New York: Routledge, 1997)
- \_\_\_\_ 'Who Speaks in the Work of Samuel Beckett?', *Yale French Studies*, 93 (*The Place of Maurice Blanchot*) (1998), 114-130
- CROSTHWAITE, Paul, *Trauma, Postmodernism, and the Aftermath of World War II* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants., and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)
- CURRIE, Mark, *Difference*, TNCI (London and New York: Routledge, 2004)
- CUSH, Denise, Catherine ROBINSON and Michael YORK (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008)
- D'AUBARÈDE, Gabriel, 'An Interview with Beckett' (1961), in Graver and Federman (eds.), 238-40

D'HAEN, Theo, 'Postmodernism in American Fiction and Art', in Fokkema and Bertens (eds.), 211-231

\_\_\_ 'Postmodernisms: From Fantastic to Magic Realist', in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), 283-93

DAVIES, Tony, *Humanism*, TNCI (London and New York: Routledge, 1997)

DEBORD, Guy, *Society of the Spectacle*, tr. by Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, n.d.)

DELEUZE, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition*, tr. by Paul Patton, Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers (London and New York: Continuum; 1994; repr. 2001)

\_\_\_ *The Logic of Sense*, ed. by Constantin V. Boundas, trans. by Mark Lester (London: Athlone, 1990)

\_\_\_ and Félix GUATTARI, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. by Robert Hutley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1983; repr. 2010)

DELVILLE, Michel, *J.G. Ballard, Writers and their Work* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1988)

DENT, Nicholas, *Rousseau*, Routledge Philosophers (London and New York: Routledge, 2005)

DEPPER, Corin, 'Death at Work: The Cinematic Imagination of J.G. Ballard', in Baxter (ed.), 50-65

DERRIDA, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, tr. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, rev. edn (Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997)

\_\_\_ *Positions: Entretien avec Henri Ronse, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Louis Houdebine, Guy Scarpetta*, Collection 'Critique' (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972)

- \_\_\_\_ 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in Natoli and Hutcheon (eds.), 223-42
- DERY, Mark, "'Always Crashing in the Same Car": A Head-on Collision with the Technosphere', *The Sociological Review*, 54.1 (2006), 223-39
- \_\_\_\_ 'J.G. Ballard's Wild Ride' (1997), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 339-48
- DESCARTES, René, *Meditations on First Philosophy, with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, tr. by Michael Moriarty, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2008)
- DIENSTAG, Joshua Foa, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2006)
- DIJKSTRA, Meindert, 'El, the God of Israel— Israel, the People of YHWH: On the Origins of Ancient Israelite Yahwism', in Becking and others (eds.), 81-126
- DIKEN, Bülent, *Nihilism, Key Ideas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009)
- DOSTOEVSKY, Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. by Andrew R. MacAndrew, Bantam Classics (New York: Bantam Dell, 1981; repr. 2003)
- DOYLE, Sir Arthur Conan, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Wordsworth Classics (Ware, Herts.: Wordsworth, 1992; repr. 1995)
- DRIVER, Tom, 'Tom Driver in "Columbia University Forum"' (1961), in Graver and Federman (eds.), 241-47
- DRUKER, Jonathan, *Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz: Posthumanist Reflections*, Italian and Italian American Studies (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)
- DU TOIT, Angélique, 'Grand Narrative, Metanarrative', in Sim (ed.), 86-88
- DURRELL, Lawrence, *Las islas griegas*, Libros del buen andar (Barcelona: Serbal, 1983)
- EAGLESTONE, Robert, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2004)

EAGLETON, Terry, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', *New Left Review*, 152 (1985), 60-73

\_\_\_\_ *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008)

\_\_\_\_ *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2007)

\_\_\_\_ 'Self-Undoing Subjects', in Porter (ed.), 262-69

EASTHOPE, Antony, *The Unconscious*, TNCI (London and New York: Routledge, 1999)

*The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, tr. by E.A. Wallis Budge, intro. by John Romer, Penguin Classics (London and New York: Penguin, 2008)

ELIOT, T.S., *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (San Diego, CA, New York and London: Harcourt Brace, 1976)

\_\_\_\_ *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963)

\_\_\_\_ 'The Hollow Men' [1925], in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*, 77-82

\_\_\_\_ *Selected Prose*, ed. by Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975)

\_\_\_\_ 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Prose*, 37-44

\_\_\_\_ *The Waste Land*, ed. by Michael North, Norton Critical Editions (New York and London: Norton, 2001)

ENGEL, Jeffrey A., 'A Shrinking World', in Martel (ed.), 52-64

ESCANDE, Renaud (ed.), *Le livre noir de la Révolution Française* (Paris: Cerf, 2008)

ESSLIN, Martin, 'Telling It How It Is: Beckett and the Mass Media', in Bloom (ed.), (2011), 13-24

\_\_\_\_ *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (New York: Vintage, 2004)

- EURIPIDES, *Bakkhai*, intro. by Charles Seagal, tr. by Reginald Gibbons, *The Greek Tragedy in New Translations* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2001)
- EVANS, Christopher, 'The Space Age Is Over' (1979), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 121-31
- EVENSON, Brian, 'Heterotopia and Negativity in Beckett's Molloy(s)', *Symposium*, 45.4 (1992), 273-87
- FANON, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, tr. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004)
- FEATHERSTONE, Mike, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, Theory, Culture & Society Series, 2nd edn (Los Angeles and London: Sage, 2007)
- \_\_\_\_ 'Introduction', in Featherstone, Thrift and Urry (eds.), 1-24
- \_\_\_\_, Nigel THRIFT, and John URRY (eds.), *Automobilities* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005)
- FELLUGA, Dino Franco, *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015)
- FELLUGA, Dino Franco, 'Heterotopia', in *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts*, 133-34.
- FERRARI, Fabrizio M., 'Saktism', in Cush, Robinson and York (eds.), 733-42
- FINE, Ellen S., 'Witness of the Night', in Bloom (ed.), (2001; repr. 2009), 47-67
- FINKIELKRAUT, Alain, *La derrota del pensamiento*, tr. by Joaquín Jordá, Argumentos, 5th edn (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1990)
- FINLAYSON, James Gordon, *Habermas: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSII (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2005)
- The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and Sophists*, tr. by Robin Waterfield, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2000)
- FLETCHER, John, *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964)

- FOKKEMA, Douwe W., *Literary History, Modernism, and Postmodernism: The Harvard University Erasmus Lectures, Spring 1983*, Utrecht Publications in General and Comparative Literature, 19 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984)
- \_\_\_\_ ‘Preliminary Remarks’, in Fokkema and Bertens (eds.), 1-8
- \_\_\_\_ ‘The Semantic and Syntactic Organization of Postmodernist Texts’, in Fokkema and Bertens (eds.), 81-98
- \_\_\_\_ ‘The Semiotics of Literary Postmodernism’, in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), 15-42
- \_\_\_\_ and Hans BERTENS (eds.), *Approaching Postmodernism*, Utrecht Publications in General and Comparative Literature, 21 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1986)
- FOSTER, Hal (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetics: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983, pr. 1987)
- FOSTER, Dennis A., ‘J.G. Ballard’s Empire of the Senses: Perversion and the Failure of Authority’, *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 108.3 (1993), 519-532
- FOUCAULT, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tr. by Alan Sheridan, 2nd edn (New York: Vintage, 1995)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Routledge Classics (London and New York: Routledge, 2002)
- ‘François Guizot (1787 - 1874): Le conservateur « éclairé »’, in *Herodote.net*  
 <[https://www.herodote.net/Francois\\_Guizot\\_1787\\_1874\\_-synthese-435.php](https://www.herodote.net/Francois_Guizot_1787_1874_-synthese-435.php)>  
 [accessed 14.10.2019]
- FREUD, Sigmund, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, tr. by John Reddick (London and New York: Penguin, 2003)

- \_\_\_\_ *Civilization and its Discontents*, ed. and tr. by James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Future of an Illusion*, ed. and tr. by James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1975)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ed. and tr. by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010)
- \_\_\_\_ *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, tr. by James Strachey, Routledge Classics (London and New York: Routledge, 2001)
- FRICK, Thomas, 'The Art of Fiction' (1984), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 181-98
- FRIESEN, Michael, 'Before the Curtain Falls: Samuel Beckett and E.M. Cioran' (unpublished B.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 2012)
- FROST, Andrew, 'Crash and the Aesthetics of Disappearance', n. p., in *Ballardian* <<http://www.ballardian.com/crash-and-the-aesthetics-of-disappearance>> [accessed 14.10.2019]
- FUKUYAMA, Francis, 'The End of History', *The National Interest*, Summer (1989), n. p.
- FURLEY, David (ed.), *Routledge History of Philosophy II: From Aristotle to Augustine*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999)
- GALLOP, David, 'Aristotle: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Mind', in Furley (ed.), 76-108
- GANE, Mike, 'Hyper-Reality', in Smith (ed.), 95-97
- GARCÍA LANDA, José Ángel, 'El Centro Ausente: El Innombrable de Beckett', *Atlantis*, 12.2 (1991), 45-63
- GARTMAN, David, 'Three Ages of the Automobile: The Cultural Logics of the Car', in Featherstone, Thrift and Urry (eds.), 169-95

GASIOREK, Andrzej, *A History of Modernist Literature*, Blackwell Histories of Literature (Chichester, W Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015)

\_\_\_\_ *J. G. Ballard*, *British Contemporary Novelists* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2005)

GAY, Peter (ed.), *The Freud Reader* (New York and London: Norton, 1989; repr. 1995)

GIBSON, Andrew, *Samuel Beckett*, *Critical Lives* (London: Reaktion, 2010)

GIDDENS, Anthony, 'Introduction', in Weber, vii-xxiv

GILBERT, Paul, 'Philosophy, National Character, and Nationalism', in Herb and Kaplan (eds.), 527-37

'Gilles de Rais: French Noble', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

<<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gilles-de-Rais>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

GLICKSBERG, Charles I., *Modern Literature and the Death of God* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966)

GODDARD, James, and David PRINGLE, 'An Interview with J.G. Ballard' (1976), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 81-98

GOETHE, Johann Wolfgang von, *Faust: Part One*, tr. by David Luke, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1987, repr. 1998)

GOLDMAN, Marlene, 'The End(s) of Myth: Apocalyptic and Prophetic Fictions in *Headhunter*', *Studies on Canadian Writing*, 64 (1998), 32-55

GOMEL, Elana, 'Everyday Apocalypse: J. G. Ballard and the Ethics and Aesthetics of the End of Time', *Partial Answers*, 8.1 (2010), 185-208



- GONTARSKI, Stan E., 'A Sense of Unending: Samuel Beckett's Eschatological Turn', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 21 (*Where Never Before. Beckett's Poetics of Elsewhere / La poétique de l'ailleurs. In Honor of Marius Buning*) (2009), 135-50
- GOODWIN, Neva, and others, *Principles of Economics in Context* (London and New York: Routledge: 2015)
- GRAVER, L., and R. FEDERMAN (eds.), *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, The Critical Heritage Series (London and New York: Routledge, 1979; repr. 1999)
- GRAVES, Robert, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1966)
- GRAVES-BROWN, Paul, 'From Highway to Superhighway: The Sustainability, Symbolism and Situated Practices of Car Culture', *Social Analysis*, 41.1 (1997), 64-75
- GRAY, John, "'Technology is Always a Facilitator": J.G. Ballard on *Super-Cannes*' (2000), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 374-82
- GRENARD, Fabrice, 'The French after 1945: Difficulties and Disappointments of an Immediate Post-War Period', in Kettenacker and Riotte (eds.), 204-224
- GRENVILLE, J.A.S., *A History of the World: From the 20th to the 21st Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005)
- GRIFFIN, Roger, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants., and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

- GRIMAL, Pierre, *A Concise Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, ed. by Stephen Kershaw, trans. by A. R. Maxwell-Hyslop (London and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1986; repr. 1990)
- GROES, Sebastian, 'From Shanghai to Shepperton: Crises of Representation in J.G. Ballard's Londons', in Baxter (ed.), 78-93
- HABERMAS, Jürgen, *Ciencia y técnica como ideología*, tr. by Manuel Jiménez Redondo (Madrid: Tecnos, 1986)
- HAGGITH, Toby, 'Great Britain: Remembering a Just War (1945–1950)', in Kettenacker and Riotte (eds.), 225-56
- HALL, Chris, "'All We've Got Left is our own Psychopathology": J.G. Ballard on *Millennium People*' (2003), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 396-406
- HALL, Donald E., *Subjectivity*, TNCI (New York and London: Routledge, 2004)
- HALLEY, Peter, and Bob NICKAS, 'Interview with J.G. Ballard', in *J.G. Ballard* <[http://www.jgballard.ca/media/1996\\_nov\\_index\\_magazine.html](http://www.jgballard.ca/media/1996_nov_index_magazine.html)> [accessed 14.10.2019]
- HANEGRAAFF, Wouter J., and others (eds.), *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2006)
- HARAWAY, Donna J., *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991)
- HARPOLD, Terry, 'Dry Leatherette: Cronenberg's *Crash*', *Postmodern Culture*, 7.3 (1997), n. p. <<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.uned.es/docview/1426661315?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:summon&accountid=14609>> [accessed 04.12.2016]

- HAYLES, N. Katherine, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1999)
- HEGARTY, Paul, 'As Above So Below: Informe/Sublime/Abject', in Hussey (ed.), 73-80
- \_\_\_\_ *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000)
- HEIDEGGER, Martin, *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell, rev. edn. (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1993)
- \_\_\_\_ *Being and Time*, tr. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1962; repr. 2011)
- \_\_\_\_ *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, tr. by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, *Studies in Continental Thought* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1999)
- \_\_\_\_ *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, tr. by Theodore Kisiel, *Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1992; repr. 2009)
- \_\_\_\_ *Introduction to Metaphysics*, tr. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, *Yale Nota Bene* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 2000)
- \_\_\_\_ 'Letter on Humanism', in *Basic Writings*, 213-65
- \_\_\_\_ *On the Way to Language*, tr. by Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971)
- \_\_\_\_ 'Only a God Can Save Us Now', tr. by William Richardson, in Sheehan (ed.), 45-67
- \_\_\_\_ *Pathmarks*, ed. by William McNeill, tr. by John van Buren and others (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1998)
- \_\_\_\_ *Philosophical and Political Writings*, ed. by Manfred Stassen (New York and London: Continuum, 2003)
- \_\_\_\_ *Poetry. Language, Thought*, tr. by Albert Hofstadter, *Modern Classics* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001)

\_\_\_\_ *The Principle of Reason*, tr. by Reginald Lilly (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991)

\_\_\_\_ ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 3-35

\_\_\_\_ *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, tr. by William Lovitt (New York & London: Garland, 1977)

\_\_\_\_ ‘The Way to Language’, in *Basic Writings*, 393-426

\_\_\_\_ ‘The Word of Nietzsche: "God Is Dead"', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 53-112

HEINRICHS, Hans Jürgen, ‘Cioran: No soy un nihilista: la nada es aún un programa’, *El Malpensante*, 39 (2002), n. p. <<http://opacudea.udea.edu.co/query.php?789678>> [accessed 02.07.2015]

HELLER, Sharon, *Freud: A to Z* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2005)

HERB, Guntram H., and David H. KAPLAN (eds.), *Nations and Nationalism: A Global Historical Overview*, 4 vols (Santa Barbara, CA; Denver, CO; and London: ABC Clio, 2008), II, ‘1880 to 1945’

HESIOD, *Theogony and Works and Days*, tr. and intro. by M.L. West, OWC (London and New York: OUP, 1988)

*The Holy Bible: Old and New Testaments, King James Version*, Duke Classics (Durham, NC, and London: Duke UP, 2012)

HOMER, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Robert Fagles (London and New York: Penguin, 1996)

HOMER, Sean, *Jacques Lacan*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (London and New York: Routledge, 2005)

- HORKHEIMER, Max, and Theodor W. ADORNO, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, tr. by Edmund Jephcott, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2002)
- HORVATH, Christina, 'The Cosmopolitan City', in Rovisco and Nowicka (eds.), 87-105
- HUBER, Irmtraud, *Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants. and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)
- HULTKRANTZ, Ake, 'The Religion of the Goddess in North America', in Olson (ed.), 202-216
- HUNTLEY, Jake, 'Disquieting Features: An Introductory Tour of The Atrocity Exhibition', in Baxter (ed.), 23-33
- HURLEY, Kelly, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1996)
- HUSSEY, Andrew (ed.), *The Beast at Heaven's Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, Faux Titre, 282 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006)
- \_\_\_\_ 'The Beast at Heaven's Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression', in Hussey (ed.), 7-12
- \_\_\_\_ "'The Slaughterhouse of Love": The Corpse of "Laure"', in Hussey (ed.), 81-90
- HUTCHEON, Linda, 'Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism', in Natoli and Hutcheon (eds.), 243-72
- \_\_\_\_ 'Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern', *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory, Studies in Comparative Literature*, 30 (2000), 189-207, <<https://vdocuments.mx/irony-nostalgia-and-the-postmodern-linda-hutcheon.html>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

- \_\_\_\_ *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988; repr. 2003)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Politics of Postmodernism, New Accents* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989)
- HUTCHINGS, William, “The Unintelligible Terms of an Incomprehensible Damnation”: Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, Sheol, and *St. Erkenwald*, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 27.2 (1981), 97-112
- HUYSSSEN, Andreas, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism, Theories of Representation and Difference* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1986)
- INGLIS, David, ‘Auto Couture: Thinking the Car in Post-War France’, in Featherstone, Thrift and Urry (eds.), 197-219
- ‘Introductory Note’, in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), 297-305
- ‘Intrahistoria’, in *Diccionario de la lengua española*, 23rd edn, <<http://dle.rae.es/?id=Lynu9Mx>> [accessed 14.10.2019]
- INWOOD, Michael, *Heidegger: A very Short Introduction*, OVSII (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1997)
- \_\_\_\_ *A Heidegger Dictionary*, The Blackwell Philosopher Dictionaries (Oxford and Maiden, MA: Blackwell, 1999)
- IOCCO, Melissa, ‘Addicted to Affliction: Masculinity and Perversity in *Crash* and *Fight Club*’, *Gothic Studies*, 9.2 (2007), 46-56
- JAMESON, Fredric, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London and New York: Verso, 1998)
- \_\_\_\_ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (London and New York: Verso, 1991; repr. 1992)

- \_\_\_\_ *The Seeds of Time*, The Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine  
(New York, Chichester, W Sussex: Columbia UP, 1994)
- JANAWAY, Christopher, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSII (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2002)
- JANSEN, Monica, 'Postmodernism in Italy', in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), 387-95
- JENKS, Chris, *Culture*, Key Ideas, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2004)
- \_\_\_\_ *Transgression*, Key Ideas (London and New York: Routledge, 2003)
- JOHNSON, Nicholas E., 'Language, Multiplicity, Void: The Radical Politics of the Beckettian Subject', *Theatre Research International*, 37.1 (2012), 38-48
- JONES, Peter, 'Bacon and Bataille', in Arya (ed.), 49-80
- JOYCE, James, *Ulysses*, Modern Classics (London and New York: Penguin, 1992; repr. 2000)
- JUDT, Tony, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California, 1992)
- \_\_\_\_ *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005)
- KAFKA, Franz, *The Trial*, tr. by Mike Mitchell, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2009)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Zürau Aphorisms*, tr. by Michael Hofmann (London: Harville Secker, 2006)
- KATZ, Daniel, "'Epidemics of Enough": Beckettian Sufficiencies', in Ansell Pearson and Morgan (eds.), 235-248
- KEATINGE, Benjamin, "'The Hammers of the Stone-Cutters": Samuel Beckett's Stone Imagery', *Irish University Review*, 37.2 (2007), 322-339
- KEATS, John, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats*, intro. by Edward Hirsch  
(New York: Modern Library, 2009)

\_\_\_\_ *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, in *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats*,  
107-94

KEAY, Douglas, 'No such Thing as Society', *Woman's Own*, 22 September, 1987,  
<<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

KELLAWAY, Kate, 'The places where the story of Britain is told', *The Observer*, 28 Dec  
2008, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/dec/28/1>> [accessed  
14.10.2019]

KENNEDY, Andrew K., *Samuel Beckett*, British and Irish Authors: Introductory Critical  
Studies (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1989; repr. 1991)

KENNEDY, Victor, 'Myths of Authority in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Timothy  
Findley's Headhunter', in *Research Gate*  
<[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Victor\\_Kennedy2/publication/236145776\\_Myths\\_of\\_Authority\\_in\\_Joseph\\_Conrad's\\_Heart\\_of\\_Darkness\\_and\\_Timothy\\_Findley's\\_Headhunter/links/00b4951659131e31cf000000/Myths-of-Authority-in-Joseph-Conrads-Heart-of-Darkness-and-Timothy-Findleys-Headhunter.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Victor_Kennedy2/publication/236145776_Myths_of_Authority_in_Joseph_Conrad's_Heart_of_Darkness_and_Timothy_Findley's_Headhunter/links/00b4951659131e31cf000000/Myths-of-Authority-in-Joseph-Conrads-Heart-of-Darkness-and-Timothy-Findleys-Headhunter.pdf)>  
[accessed 25.07.2018]

KENNER, Hugh, *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
1973)

\_\_\_\_ *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (New York: Grove, 1961)

KERMODE, Frank, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford and  
New York: OUP, 2000)

KETTENACKER, Lothar, and Torsten RIOTTE, *The Legacies of Two World Wars:  
European Societies in the Twentieth Century* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn,  
2011)



- KIRBY, Alan, 'The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond', in Rudrum and Stavris (eds.), 84-96
- KNOWLSON, James, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997)
- KOSOFKY SEDGWICK, Eve, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985)
- KRISTEVA, Julia, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, tr. by Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia UP, 1989)
- \_\_\_\_ *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, tr. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia UP, 1980)
- \_\_\_\_ *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia UP, 1982)
- \_\_\_\_ *Revolution in Poetic Language*, tr. by Margaret Waller, European Perspectives (New York and Guilford, Surrey: Columbia UP, 1984)
- \_\_\_\_ *Strangers to Ourselves*, tr. by Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia UP, 1991)
- KUNZRU, Hari, 'Historian of the Future' (2007), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds), 463-72
- LACAN, Jacques, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, tr. by Bruce Fink, Éloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York and London: Norton, 2002; repr. 2006)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, ed. by J.-A. Miller, trans. by D. Porter (New York and London: Norton, 1992; repr. 1997)

- \_\_\_\_ *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by J.-A. Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York and London: Norton, 1981; repr. 1998)
- LACOUÉ-LABARTHE, Philippe, and Jean-Luc NANCY, *Le mythe nazi*, l'Aube poche essai (La Tour-d'Aigues: Éditions de l'aube, 2005)
- LAERTIUS, Diogenes, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, ed. by E. Capps, T.E. Page, and W.D.H. Rouse, tr. by R.D. Hicks, The Loeb Classic Library, 2 vols (London and New York: Heinemann and Putnam's Sons, 1925), II
- LANGER, Lawrence L., 'The Dominion of Death', in Bloom (ed.), (2001; repr. 2009), 3-16
- LANZMANN, Claude, *Shoah*, Folio (Paris: Gallimard, 1997)
- LEFEBVRE, Henri, *Writings on Cities*, ed. and tr. by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996; repr. 2000)
- LERNOUT, Geert, 'Postmodernism in France', in Bertens and Fokkema (eds.), 353-57
- LETHEN, Helmut, 'Modernism cut in Half: The Exclusion of the Avant-garde and the Debate on Postmodernism', in Fokkema and Bertens (eds.), 233-38
- LEVI, Primo, *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, ed. by Ann Goldstein, intro. by Toni Morrison (New York and London: Liveright, 2015)
- \_\_\_\_ *If This Is a Man*, trans. by Stuart Woolf, in *The Complete Works*, 43-239
- \_\_\_\_ *The Periodic Table*, trans. by Ann Goldstein, in *The Complete Works*, pp. 761-976
- \_\_\_\_ 'The Return of Cesare', in *Lilith and Other Stories*, in *The Complete Works*, 1422-26
- LEVIN, David Michael, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988)
- LEVINAS, Emmanuel, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, tr. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 1998; repr. 2006)

- LEVY, Eric P., *Beckett and the Voice of Species: A Study of the Prose Fiction* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980)
- LEWIS, Jeremy, 'An Interview with J.G. Ballard' (1991), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 248-62
- LINNETT, Peter, 'J.G. Ballard' (1973), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 48-55
- LIPOVETSKY, Gilles, *El crepúsculo del deber: La ética indolora de los nuevos tiempos democráticos*, tr. by Juana Bignozzi, Colección Argumentos, 5th edn (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2000)
- \_\_\_\_ *El imperio de lo efímero: La moda y su destino en las sociedades modernas*, tr. by Felipe Hernández y Carmen López, Colección Argumentos, 5th edn (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1996)
- LITT, Toby, "'Dangerous Bends Ahead. Slow Down": J.G. Ballard on *Kingdom Come*' (2006), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 415-30
- \_\_\_\_ 'Foreword', in Baxter (ed.), vii-x
- LUCY, Niall, *A Derrida Dictionary* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2004)
- LUTZ, Catherine, and Anne LUTZ FERNANDEZ, *Carjacked: The Culture of the Automobile and its Effects on Our Lives* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants., and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)
- LYOTARD, Jean-François, 'Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?', in *TPC*, 71-82
- \_\_\_\_ *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, tr. by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988)

\_\_\_\_ *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, tr. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby  
(Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1991)

\_\_\_\_ *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. by Geoff Bennington and Brian  
Massumi, *Theory and History of Literature*, 10 (Minneapolis: University of  
Minnesota, 1984)

\_\_\_\_ *La posmodernidad (explicada a los niños)*, tr. by Enrique Lynch, *Mediaciones*  
(Barcelona: Gedisa, 1987; repr. 1990)

MACBETH, George, 'The New Science Fiction' (1967), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 1-9

MacGREGOR, Cathy, 'The Eye of the Storm – Female Representation in Bataille's *Madame*  
*Edwarda* and *Histoire de l'oeil*', in Hussey (ed.), 101-10

MALPAS, Simon, *The Postmodern*, TNCI (London and New York: Routledge, 2005)

MALTBY, Paul, 'Excerpts from *Dissident Postmodernists*', in Natoli and Hutcheon (eds.),  
519-37

MANN, Thomas, 'A Wave of Anomalous Barbarism', in Travers (ed.), 257-59

MANZA, Jeff, 'Social Capital', in Turner (ed.), 557-59

MARINETTI, F.T., 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism', in Cahoone (ed.), 185-90

\_\_\_\_ 'Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine', in Rainey, Poggi and Wittman (eds.),  
89-92

\_\_\_\_ 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature', in Rainey, Poggi and Wittman (eds.), 119-  
25

MARMYSZ, John, *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism* (New York:  
SUNY, 2003)

- MARTEL, Gordon (ed.), *A Companion to International History 1900–2001*, Routledge Companions to History (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Routledge, 2007)
- MARX, Karl, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and The Communist Manifesto*, tr. by Martin Milligan, Great Books in Philosophy Series (Social and Political Philosophy) (Amherst, MA, New York: Prometheus, 1988)
- MATILLA, J.M., ‘El sueño de la razón produce monstruos’, en *Museo del Prado: 200 años*, <<https://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/obra-de-arte/el-sueo-de-la-razon-produce-monstruos/e4845219-9365-4b36-8c89-3146dc34f280?searchMeta=el%20sueno%20de%20la%20razon%20produce>> , [accessed 14.10.2019]
- McAFEE, Noëlle, *Julia Kristeva*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (London and New York: Routledge, 2004)
- McDONALD, Rónán, *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett*, Cambridge Introductions to Literature (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2006)
- McHALE, Brian, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (New York: CUP, 2015)
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987, repr. 2001)
- McMAHON, Robert J., *Cold War: A very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2003)
- MEYER, Michel, *Philosophy and the Passions: Toward a History of Human Nature*, tr. by Robert Barsky, Literature and Philosophy (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2000)
- MILLER, Tyrus, ‘Dismantling Authenticity: Beckett, Adorno, and the “post-War”’, *Textual Practice*, 8.1 (1994), 43-57
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California, 1999)

- MITCHELL, Breon, 'Samuel Beckett and the Postmodernism Controversy', in Calinescu and Fokkema (eds.), 109-121
- MOZART, W.A., and Emanuel SCHIKANEDER, *The Magic Flute*, in *Mozart: The Magic Flute*, Chandos Opera in English, in *Chandos: The Sound of Classical*, <<https://www.chandos.net/chanimages/Booklets/CH3121.pdf>> [accessed 14.10.2019]
- MURESAN, Vlad, 'Le nihilisme européen entre Platonisme et Christianisme', *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Studia Europaea*, 1 (2009), 41-50
- MURPHY, Richard, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2004)
- MUSIL, Robert, *The Man without Qualities*, tr. by Burton Pike (New York: Vintage International, 1996)
- NATOLI, Joseph, and Linda HUTCHEON (eds.), *A Postmodern Reader* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1993)
- NAUGHTIE, James, 'Up a Kind of Sociological Amazon. J.G. Ballard on *Miracles of Life*' (2008), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 473-83
- NEHAMAS, Alexander, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard UP, 1985; repr. 1999)
- NEIMAN, Susan, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2002)
- NIETZSCHE, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, tr. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966)
- \_\_\_\_\_, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, tr. by Ronald Speirs, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1999)

- \_\_\_\_ *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are*, tr. by Duncan Large, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2007)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, tr. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974)
- \_\_\_\_ *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, tr. by R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1996; repr. 2005)
- \_\_\_\_ *On the Genealogy of Morals, Ecce Homo*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann, tr. by R.J. Hollingdale and Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989)
- \_\_\_\_ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, ed. by Adrian del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, tr. by Adrian del Caro, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2006)
- \_\_\_\_ *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, tr. by Duncan Large, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1998)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Will to Power*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann, tr. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968)
- NISHITANI, Keiji, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, tr. by Graham Parkes and Setsuko Aihara, SUNY Series in Modern Japanese Philosophy (Albany: SUNY, 1990)
- NORDLUND, Solveig, 'Future Now' (1986), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 224-30
- NORMAN, Richard, *On Humanism*, Thinking in Action (London and New York: Routledge, 2004)
- NOYS, Benjamin, *The Culture of Death* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005)
- O'CONNOR, Brian, *Adorno*, Routledge Philosophers (London and New York: Routledge, 2009)

- O'HARA, J. D., 'Where There's a Will, There's a Way Out: Beckett and Schopenhauer',  
*College Literature*, 8.3 (1981), 249-70
- OBRIST, Hans Ulrich, 'Nothing Is Real, Everything Is Fake' (2003), in Sellars and O'Hara  
 (eds.), 383-95
- OLSON, Carl (ed.), *The Book of the Goddess: Past and Present*, intro. by Carl Olson (Long  
 Grove, IL: Waveland, 2002)
- ORR, Carol, 'How to Face Doomsday without Really Trying' (1974), in Sellars and O'Hara  
 (eds.), 56-71
- ORTEGA Y GASSET, José, 'The Crowd Phenomenon', in Cahoone (ed.), 219-24
- OSER, Lee, *The Ethics of Modernism: Moral Ideas in Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett*  
 (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2007)
- PAGLIA, Camille, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*,  
 Yale Nota Bene (London and New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2001)
- PARKINSON, G.H.R. (ed.), *Routledge History of Philosophy IV: The Renaissance and  
 Seventeenth-Century Rationalism*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993)
- PARTRIDGE, Eric, *Origins: A Short Etymologic Dictionary of Modern English*, 4th edn  
 (London and New York: Routledge, 1966)
- PATTIE, David, *Samuel Beckett*, Routledge Guides to Literature (London and New York:  
 Routledge, 2000)
- PAWLETT, William. 'Simulacra + Simulacrum', in Smith (ed.), 196-99



- PEARSON, Wendy, 'Vanishing Acts II: Queer Reading(s) of Timothy Findley's *Headhunter* and *Not Wanted on the Voyage*', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 33.4 (1998-99), 114-31
- PEDRETTI, Mark, 'Late Modern Rigmarole: Boredom as Form in Samuel Beckett's *Trilogy*', *Studies in the Novel*, 45.4 (2013), 583-602
- PHELAN, Anthony, *Reading Heinrich Heine*, Cambridge Studies in German (London and New York: CUP, 2006)
- PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, Giovanni, *Discorso sulla dignità dell'uomo*, ed. by Francesco Bausi, Biblioteca di scrittori italiani, 3rd edn (Milan: Fondazione Petro Bembo – Ugo Guanda, 2014)
- PINKER, Steven, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York and London: Penguin 2003)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind* (London and New York: Penguin, 1995)
- PLATO, *Theaetetus*, tr. by Robin A. H. Waterfield, Penguin Classics (London and New York: Penguin, 1987)
- POPKIN, Richard H. (ed.), *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy* (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia UP, 1983)
- PORDZIK, Ralph, 'James G. Ballard and the Postmodernization of the Dystopian Novel', *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 24.1 (1994), 77-94
- PORTER, Roy (ed.), *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997)

- POSTHAST, Ulrich, *The Metaphysical Vision: Arthur Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Art and Life and Samuel Beckett's Own Way to Make Use of It* (New York and Washington: Peter Lang, 2008)
- POUND, Ezra, *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound*, New Directions Paperbooks (New York: New Directions, 1957)
- PRESS, Gerald A., 'Plato', in Popkin (ed.), 32-52
- RAINEY, Lawrence, Christine POGGI, and Laura WITTMAN (eds.), *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven, CT, and New York: Yale UP, 2009)
- READER, Keith, *The Abject Object: Avatars of the Phallus in Contemporary French Theory, Literature and Film*, Chiasma 17 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006)
- REED, Sabrina, 'Murder by Milligrams: Enhancement Technologies and Therapeutic Zeal in Timothy Findley's *Headhunter*', *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 33 (2012), 161-73
- REID -BOWEN, Paul, 'Kali and Candi', in Cush, Robinson and York (eds.), 398-400
- RICOEUR, Paul, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 1970)
- RIMBAUD, Arthur, *Complete Works, Selected Letters: A Bilingual Edition*, tr. by Wallace Fawley (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 2005)
- RIVA, Raymond T., 'Beckett and Freud', *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*, 12.2 (1970), 120-132
- ROCKMORE, Tom, *Heidegger and French Philosophy: Humanism, Antihumanism and Being* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995)
- \_\_\_\_ 'Introduction', in Rockmore and Margolis (eds.), 1-8

- \_\_\_\_\_. *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press: 1992)
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Joseph MARGOLIS (eds), *The Heidegger Case: On Philosophy and Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP, 1995)
- RODLEY, Chris, 'Crash Talk: J.G. Ballard in Conversation with David Cronenberg' (1996), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 328-38
- RØNNOV-JESSEN, Peter, 'Against Entropy' (1984), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 199-210
- ROSSI, Umberto, 'Mind is the Battlefield: Reading Ballard's "Life Trilogy" as War Literature', in Baxter (ed.), 66-77
- ROVISCO, Maria, and Magdalena NOWICKA (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Cosmopolitanism* (Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011)
- RUBIN SULEIMAN, Susan, 'Naming and Difference: Reflections on "Modernism versus Postmodernism" in Literature', in Fokkema and Bertens (eds.), 255-70
- RUDDICK, Nicholas, 'Ballard/Crash/Baudrillard', *Science Fiction Studies*, 19.3 (1992), n. p., <<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/58/ruddick58art.htm>> [accessed 14.10.2019]
- RUDOLPH, Kurt, 'Mandaeans', in Hanegraaff and others (eds.), 151-57
- RUDRUM, David 'Introduction', in Rudrum (ed.), 9-12
- \_\_\_\_\_ (ed.), *Literature and Philosophy: A Guide to Contemporary Debates* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants., and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Nicholas STAVRIS (eds), *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Bloomsbury Academic (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2015)

- RUITER, Frans, 'Postmodernism in the German- and Dutch-Speaking Countries', in Bertens and Fokkema, 359-73
- SAGE, Victor, 'The Gothic, the Body, and the Failed Homeopathy Argument: Reading *Crash*', in Baxter (ed.), 34-49
- SAID, Edward, 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community', in Foster (ed.), 135-59
- SARTRE, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness*, tr. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square, 1992)
- \_\_\_\_ *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, ed. by John Kulka, tr. by Carole Macomber, intro. by Annie Cohen Solal (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 2007)
- \_\_\_\_ *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, tr. by S. Gilbert and I. Abel (New York: Vintage International, 1989)
- SAUSSURE, Ferdinand de, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, tr. by Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959)
- SCHACHT, Richard, 'Nietzsche and Nihilism', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 11.1 (1973), 65-90
- SCHALOW, Frank, and Alfred DENKER, *Historical Dictionary of Heidegger's Philosophy*, Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements, 101, 2nd edn (Lanham, Toronto, and Plymouth, Devon: Scarecrow, 2010)
- SCHOPENHAUER, Arthur, 'Additional Remarks on the Doctrine of the Suffering of the World', in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 291-305
- \_\_\_\_ *Essays and Aphorisms*, tr. by R.J. Hollingdale (London and New York: Penguin, 1970; repr. 2004)
- \_\_\_\_ 'On Aesthetics', in *Essays and Aphorisms*, 147-57

- \_\_\_\_ 'On the Suffering of the World', in *Essays and Aphorisms*, 38-47
- \_\_\_\_ 'On Suicide', in *Essays and Aphorisms*, 74-77
- \_\_\_\_ *Parerga and Paralipomena*, tr. by E.F.J. Payne, 2 vols (Oxford: OUP Press, 1974), II  
(repr. 2000)
- \_\_\_\_ *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E.F.J. Payne, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1966), I (repr. 1969)
- \_\_\_\_ *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E.F.J. Payne, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1966), II
- SECHER, Reynald, 'La guerre de Vendée: guerre civile, génocide, mémoricide', in Escande (ed.), 227-48
- SEDGWICK, Peter R., *Nietzsche: The Key Concepts*, Key Guides (Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2009)
- SELF, Will, 'Conversations: J.G. Ballard' (1995), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 299-319
- SELLARS, Simon, 'Introduction: A Launchpad for Other Explorations', in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), xi-xx
- \_\_\_\_ 'Rattling Other People's Cages' (2006), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 431-42
- SELLARS, Simon, and Dan O'HARA (eds.), *Extreme Metaphors: Selected Interviews with J.G. Ballard, 1967-2008*, Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, 47 (London: Fourth Estate, 2012)
- SEVERINO, Emanuele, *La filosofía contemporánea*, trans. by Juana Bizogni, Ariel Filosofía (Barcelona: Ariel, 1987)
- \_\_\_\_ *La filosofía futura*, trans. by Salvador del Carril, Ariel Filosofía (Barcelona: Ariel, 1991)
- SEY, James, 'Psychopathology, Inner Space and the Automotive Death Drive: J.G. Ballard', *South African Journal of Psychology*, 32.2 (2002), 55-60

- SHAKESPEARE, William, *Macbeth*, ed. by A. R. Braunmuller, New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1997; repr. 1999)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Tempest*, ed. by John Dover Wilson, The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare, 33 (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2009)
- SHATTUCK, Roger, *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996)
- SHAW, Philip, *The Sublime*, TNCI (London and New York: Routledge, 2006)
- SHEEHAN, Thomas (ed.), *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker* (Chicago: Precedent, 1981)
- SHELLER, Mimi, 'Automotive Emotions: Feeling the Car', in Featherstone, Thrift and Urry (eds.), 221-242
- SHENKER, Israel, 'Israel Shenker in "New York Times"' (1956), in Graver and Federman (eds.), 160-63
- SIDER, Robert D., 'Credo quia absurdum?', *Classical World*, 73 (1980), 417-19, <[http://www.tertullian.org/articles/sider\\_cred.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/articles/sider_cred.htm)> [accessed 14.10.2019]
- SIESS, Jürgen, 'Beckett's Posture in the French Literary Field', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, no n. (*Beckett at 100: Revolving It All*) (2008), 177-89
- SIKKA, Sonia, 'Heidegger and Race', in Bernasconi and Cook (eds.), 74-95
- SILVERMAN, Max, *Facing Postmodernity: Contemporary French Thought on Culture and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999)
- SIM, Stuart (ed.), *The Lyotard Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011)
- SLOCOMBE, Will, 'Postmodern Nihilism: Theory and Literature' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2003)
- SMITH, Richard G. (ed.), *The Baudrillard Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010)

- SMITH, Roch C., 'Naming the M/inotaur: Beckett's *Trilogy* and the Failure of Narrative', in Bloom (ed.), (1988), 115-22
- SMITH, Russell, 'Endless Beckett: Rewriting Modernity and the Postmodern Sublime', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 14 (*After Beckett / D'après Beckett*) (2004), 405-20
- SMITH, Travis L., 'Siva', in Cush, Robinson and York (eds.), 799-803
- SMITH, Zadie, 'Sex and wheels: Zadie Smith on J.G. Ballard's Crash', *The Guardian*, 4 April, 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/04/zadie-smith-jg-ballard-crash>> [accessed 14.10.2019]
- SOKAL, Alan, and Jean BRICMONT, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998)
- SONTAG, Susan, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 2001)
- SOPER, Kate, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism*, Problems of Modern European Thought (London: Hutchinson, 1986)
- SPELMAN, Joseph W., 'Heroin Addiction: The Epidemic of the 70's', *Archives of Environmental Health: An International Journal*, 21(1970), 589-90 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00039896.1970.10667300>> [accessed 14.10.2019]
- STALLYBRASS, Peter, and Allon WHITE, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986)
- STEINER, George, *Nostalgia for the Absolute* (Toronto: Anansi, 2004)
- STEPHENSON, Gregory, *Out of the Night and into the Dream: A Thematic Study of the Fiction of J. G. Ballard* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991)

- STEWART, Paul, *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's Work*, New Interpretations of Beckett in the Twenty-first Century (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)
- STOEKL, Allan, *Politics, Writing, Mutilation: The Cases of Bataille, Blanchot, Roussel, Leiris, and Ponge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985)
- STOREY, David, 'Nihilism, Nature, And The Collapse of the Cosmos', *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 7.2 (2011), 6-25
- STORM, Jannick, 'An Interview with J.G. Ballard' [1968], in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 14-21
- STORR, Anthony, *Freud: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2001)
- SULTAN, Sabbar Saadoon, 'The Critical Aspects of Beckett's *Trilogy*', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 14 (*After Beckett / D'après Beckett*) (2004), 421-35
- 'Symphorophilia', in *Psychology Dictionary: Professional Reference*,  
 <<https://psychologydictionary.org/symphorophilia/>> [accessed 14.10.2019]
- SZEGEDY-MASZÁK, Mihály, 'Non-Teleological Narration', in Bertens and Fokkema, pp. 273-82
- \_\_\_\_\_ 'Teleology in Postmodern Fiction', in Calinescu and Fokkema (eds.), 41-57
- TANNER, Michael, *Nietzsche: A Very Short Introduction*, OVSI (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2000)
- TEW, Philip, 'Acts of Reconsideration: J.G. Ballard (1930 – 2009) Annotating and Revising Editions of *The Atrocity Exhibition*', *Textual Practice*, 26.3 (2012), 399–420



- \_\_\_\_ ‘Situating the Violence of J.G. Ballard’s Postmillennial Fiction: The Possibilities of Sacrifice, the Certainties of Trauma’, in Baxter (ed.), 107-119
- THEOGNIS of Megara, ‘Our Course’, in *Ancient Greek Lyrics*, 130.
- THOMAS, Calvin, *Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory: Essays on Abjection in Literature, Mass Culture, and Film* (New York and Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)
- THOMAS, Mark, ‘The Rules of Autogeddon: Sex, Death and Law in JG Ballard’s *Crash*’, *Griffith Law Review*, 20.2 (2011), 333-62
- THRIFT, Nigel, ‘Driving in the city’, in Featherstone, Thrift and Urry (eds.), 41-59
- THURSCHELL, Pamela, *Sigmund Freud*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (London and New York: Routledge, 2000)
- TORO, Fernando de, ‘Samuel Beckett, el Innombrable y el fin de la Modernidad’, *Epos*, 26 (2010), 217-244
- TOYNBEE, Philip, ‘Philip Toynbee in “*Observer*”’ (1955), in Graver and Federman (eds.), 80-82
- TRAVERS, Martin (ed.), *European Literature from Romanticism to Postmodernism: A Reader in Aesthetic Practice* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001)
- TUBRIDY, Derval, ‘“The Absence of Origin”: Beckett and Contemporary French Philosophy’, in Rudrum (ed.), 24-36
- TURNER, Bryan S. (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2006)
- [UNCREDITED], ‘Munich Round Up – An Interview with J.G. Ballard’ (1968), in Sellars and O’Hara, 10-13

- VALE, V., 'Interview with JGB' (1982), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 146-69
- VATTIMO, Gianni, *El fin de la modernidad: nihilismo y hermenéutica en la cultura posmoderna*, tr. by Alberto L. Bixio, Mediaciones, 2nd edn, (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1987)
- VERNIERE, James, 'A Conversation with J.G. Ballard' (1988), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 231-40
- VIRILIO, Paul, *The Vision Machine*, tr. by Julie Rose, Perspectives (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994)
- VOLTAIRE, *Candide and Other Stories*, tr. by Roger Pearson, OWC (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2006)
- WAGNER, Georg, 'Erhard, Ludwig (1897–1977)' in Cook (ed.), 569-72
- WASSER, 'Audrey, From Figure to Fissure: Beckett's *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*', *Modern Philology*, 109.2 (2011), 245-65
- WAUGH, Patricia, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, New Accents (London and New York: Routledge, 1984)
- WEBER, Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. by Talcott Parsons, Routledge Classics (London and New York: Routledge, 2001)
- WEEKS, Jeffrey, *Sexuality, Key Ideas*, 3rd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 1983; repr. 2010)
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths & Modern Sexualities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985)
- WEISS, Jason, *Writing at Risk: Interviews in Paris with Uncommon Writers* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991)

- WEISS, Jonathan, “‘Not Entirely a Journey without Maps’: J.G. Ballard on *The Atrocity Exhibition*’ (2006), in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), 447-62
- WELLER, Shane, *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of Guests* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants., and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)
- \_\_\_\_ *Modernism and Nihilism*, Modernism and... Series (Houndmills, Basingstoke Hants., and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)
- \_\_\_\_ *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism*, Legenda (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Manley Publishing, 2005)
- WERNICK, Andrew, ‘Simulation’, in Richard G. Smith (ed.), 199-201
- WHITE, Kathryn, *Beckett and Decay*, Continuum Literary Studies (London and New York: Continuum, 2009)
- WHITFORD, Frank, ‘Speculative Illustrations: Eduardo Paolozzi in Conversation with J.G. Ballard’ (1971), in Sellars and O’Hara (eds.), 36-47
- WICKS, Robert, *Modern French Philosophy: From Existentialism to Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003)
- WIESEL, Élie, *Night*, ed. and intro. by Harold Bloom, trans. by Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006)
- WILDE, Oscar, Lady Windemere’s Fan, in *eBooks@Adelaide*,  
 <[https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/wilde/oscar/lady\\_windermere\\_fan/](https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/wilde/oscar/lady_windermere_fan/)> [accessed 14.10.2019]
- WILLIAMS, Caroline, *Contemporary French Philosophy: Modernity and the Persistence of the Subject* (London and New York: Athlone, 2001)
- WILLIAMS, Garrat, ‘Thomas Hobbes: Moral and Political Philosophy’, in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource*, n. p.  
 <<https://www.iep.utm.edu/hobmoral/>> [accessed 14.10.2019]

- WOLIN, Richard, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton, NJ, and Woodstock, Oxon: Princeton UP, 2004)
- WOODWARD, Ashley, *Nihilism in Postmodernity* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 2009)
- WOOLF, Virginia, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* (London: Hogarth, 1924)
- WYILE, Herb, 'It's Just a Story: Postmodernism, Politics, and Findley's Italics', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 33.4 (1998-99), 63-74
- YEATS, W.B., *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. by Richard J. Finneran, Scribner Paperback Poetry, rev. 2nd edn (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996)
- YEOH, Gilbert 'Beckett's Persistent Humanism: Ethics and Epistemology in Molloy', *AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Modern Language Association*, 103 (2005), 109-135
- YOUNG, Julian, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003)
- ZARIFOPOL-JOHNSTON, Ilinca, *Searching for Cioran*, ed. by Kenneth R. Johnston (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2009)
- ZINIK, Zinovy, 'Russia on my Mind' (1998), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 356-63
- ZIZEK, Slavoj, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London and New York: Verso, 1994)
- \_\_\_\_ *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 1999; repr. 2000)
- ZURBRUGG, Nicholas, 'Empire of the Surreal' (1995), in Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), 291-98