

Delicate Monster of Modernity:  
The Art of Representing and Refiguring Ennui in  
Modern French Literature

by

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# INTRODUCTION

There are no two ways about it: ennui is not simple. We cannot summarily dispose of ennui... with a gesture of annoyance or dismissal.

- Roland Barthes

## The Monster of Modernity

“Why would anyone want to spend an entire year studying the idea of boredom,?” is what many people have asked me. This is because the quotidian conception of boredom – the mundane tedium of waiting in line, of watching bad TV shows, of sitting in math class – *is* boring. While this might not be true for everyone, I intuit that this seemingly shallow phenomenon of boredom is one that has profound depths in the human psyche and history, and is paradoxically a source of fecund imagination. In this thesis, I set out to explore the fascinating issue of boredom – or more specifically, ennui – in a number of key texts of French literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, and to unravel the paradoxical tension between ennui as debilitating source of despair and wellspring of (literary) creation. A sort of case study in ennui, if you will.

In order to situate the problem of ennui in the epochs I am studying, I draw from two seminal works that deal with ennui in the literature of the Western Canon: *The Demon of Noontide* by Reinhard Kuhn, and *Experience*

*Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* by Elizabeth Goodstein. In his work, Kuhn undertakes the impressive task of tracing the literary representations of ennui throughout history – from antiquity to the 20<sup>th</sup> century – and concludes that it is an ahistorical, universal condition of human existence. He posits a tentative, but extremely workable definition of ennui as “the state of emptiness that the soul feels when it is deprived of interest in action, life, and the world (be it this world or another), a condition that is the immediate consequence of the encounter with nothingness, and has as an immediate effect a disaffection with reality”<sup>1</sup>. His inclusion of the word ‘soul’ presupposes a spiritual (though not necessarily religious) dimension of this malaise – unlike, he qualifies, the boredom of the student listening to the interminable drone of a lecturer, the mindlessness of repetitive labor, or the merely psychological underpinnings of the boredom of a suburbanite.

Goodstein, on the other hand, argues against Kuhn’s idealistic generalization and slightly elitist definition. Firstly, the ennui of modern Western society cannot be simply lumped together with the romantic melancholy of René, the *acedia* of the disillusioned monk of the Medieval era, or the notion of *taedium vitae* in antiquity. Even though the word ‘ennui’ appeared in the French language between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, she argues that its modern usage that combines an “existential, and a temporal connotation”<sup>2</sup> only arises with the appearance of the word ‘boredom’, which appears in the Oxford English

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhard Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1976), p13

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth S. Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2005) p.3

Dictionary only at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as the Enlightenment was just giving way to the Industrial Revolution. The changing landscape of experience in modernization necessitated a new vocabulary to articulate the new way of understanding the world<sup>3</sup>, hence this linguistic convergence of ‘ennui’ and ‘boredom’. What, then, denotes the ennui that arises in modernity? It would appear that the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century marked the end of an era where religious vocabularies still had sway over the public. With the advent of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these religious overtones, with their focus on the immortal fate of the individual soul, gave way to discourses in the social and natural sciences. As Goodstein puts it, “faith in a coming redemption and in a divinely ordered eternity was increasingly being displaced by enlightened belief in human progress toward an earthly paradise; religious vocabularies of reflection on subjective existence were being eclipsed by a radically different language grounded in bodily materiality”<sup>4</sup>. Goodstein proposes a phrase to capture this phenomenon: the *democratization of skepticism in modernity*. *Democratization* refers to the “potentially positive dimension of the loss of epistemic and cultural frameworks in modernity” while *skepticism* denotes the “incomplete way in which religious and other metanarratives have actually been overcome”<sup>5</sup>, inducing in man a tormenting doubt towards his mode of existence. The Romantic faith of man, in man, was deflating, and coupled with the preceding Enlightenment rationality that basically killed God off, led to a personal crisis of the experience of the self in

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 28

<sup>4</sup> Goodstein, p.3

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 10

an indifferent world. In short, man was experiencing a crisis of *meaning* in a specifically modern, Godless world.

Secondly, one might notice here that there appears to be no distinction in her analysis between mundane, trivial 'boredom' and the more literary, spiritual connotations of 'ennui'<sup>6</sup> (which predates the latter). To complicate things further, 'ennui' in its language of origin indicates both 'boredom' (*s'ennuyer*) and its more dignified English meaning. Throw in words like spleen (which Baudelaire imported from English to French in order to "do justice to the exalted quality of his own ennui"<sup>7</sup>) and melancholy (which Sartre wanted to use as the title of *Nausea*), which continue to be used in concurrence with, or even as synonyms of, ennui in the modern era, and a tangled web of this singular emotion emerges. Goodstein attempts to clear the ambiguity by reuniting these different nuances into one single "modern discourse of boredom" which, "without claiming to erase the differences between the many terms, considers them as a whole in order to connote a phenomenon qualitatively different from all its ancestors and peculiar to modernity". Unlike Kuhn, she believes that the 'peripheral boredoms' – such as the bored suburbanite or student – are no less symptomatic of an existential malaise than the acute agony of poets like Baudelaire. Goodstein argues that in spite of Kuhn's distinction between the "metaphysical malady" of ennui and ordinary boredom, the latter does not

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<sup>6</sup> As Patricia Meyer Spacks writes in *Boredom: A Literary History of a State of Mind*, ennui "implies a judgment of the universe; boredom, a response to the immediate. Ennui belongs to those with a sense of sublime potential, those who feel themselves superior to the environment." (p. 9)

<sup>7</sup> Sean Desmond Healy, *Boredom, Self and Culture* (London and Toronto: Associated UP, 1984), p.29

foreclose its status as “authentic experiences of existential distress”<sup>8</sup>. The boredom of the bored worker in a factory thus does not exclude him from the wretched society of ennui. Boredom, while not exactly ennui, is nevertheless a telling symptom of it. Goodstein thus proposes a much more universal, democratic form of ennui in modernity.

In light of these two diverging perspectives, I would like to propose a working definition of ennui for my thesis, by conflating (parts of) Kuhn’s definition with Goodstein’s historically specific situating of the malaise. Thus, the discourse of ennui – including its various components such as spleen, melancholia, nausea, boredom as symptomatic, or manifestations of ennui – shall be defined as the alienated condition of the modern man who has encountered nothingness. To remove Kuhn’s definition of its elitism, we shall allow the man to be unaware of the ennui he is experiencing. For example, Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* are not explicitly conscious of the malaise of ennui that pervades their experience of waiting as they do anything in their power – unwittingly – to distract themselves.

### **Ennui in France: Why France?**

When I first came across the term Ennui in Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal*, it seemed to me that there was no way to connote the almost Romantic lassitude and poetic despair in any other language. Even its gradual absorption into the English language – to fill the lack of an equivalent term - signified the inherent

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<sup>8</sup> Goodstein, p. 63



untranslatability and uniqueness of this term. However, while writing this thesis, I came to the realization that ennui's connotations of self-indulgent languor became merely part of the whole, as the century (or rather, centuries) passed. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, definition of this concept had expanded to include a more fundamental, less lyrical existential malaise. Nevertheless, to me, it still remains a fundamentally French concept and this was the reason why I initially focused strictly on French literature

Indeed, modern French literature proved to be a rich circumscription for the study of ennui. It seems that France in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries both defined, and was defined by, this attitude. The specific cultural and socio-political history of France especially in the previous 200 years – rife with disappointment, disillusionment, violence, conflict, defeat – led to many revolutions and reactions, both within the realm of literature and without. The authors I picked for this thesis - Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett – seem to me to be representative of the particular brands of ennui that materialized in their respective eras. For each of them, one can argue, ennui forms the fundamental basis of their works – whether they were themselves haunted by a profound disillusionment with existence, or whether they professed to search for a remedy for this malaise.

Even though I argue that ennui makes its appearance predominantly in modernity, the contexts in which it is expressed – the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries - vary widely. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw many changes in the social, cultural and architectural topography of Paris. The failed uprising of the working class

against the bourgeois in 1848 led to the disillusionment of its perpetrators – they “suffered from the uncanny impression that they were living not so much an action as an imitation”<sup>9</sup>. And a poor imitation, at that. Karl Marx spared them no illusions when he characterized the revolution as an involuntary parody of 1789: ‘the first time tragedy, the second time farce’. There was a sense that the French did not learn from history – revolution shed its insurrectionary connotations and started to symbolize the repetitive turning of a wheel that went nowhere. Along with this fundamental disillusionment, the inhabitants of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris –rich and poor alike - were overwhelmed by the rapid modernization and progress of the times, including the radical transformation of the city under Haussmann’s renovation of Paris between 1852 and 1870. The narrow streets and cramped layout of buildings were eradicated in favor of wide boulevards and avenues, opening the city up – literally and metaphorically – to the gaze of society. This new Paris was one where increased visual stimulation led to depersonalized interactions, where the different classes were now in full view of one another, and where man himself became a commodity, out in full view for show. The writers of this generation – among whom Flaubert and Baudelaire remain the most emblematic and essential – strove to capture the whirlwind of indiscriminate change and dubious progress, portraying the fate of the city’s denizens caught helplessly in the tide of history while at the same time being alienated by the very rapidity of this change. The disillusionment and disdain of Flaubert and Baudelaire for the society they were mired in is

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Terdiman, ‘Class Struggles in France’ from *A New History of French Literature*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1989) ed. Denis Hollier p705

manifested in the ennui that is portrayed in their works – whether the “infinite melancholy” of Frédéric, or the spleen of Baudelaire’s poet.

In contrast, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the devastating results of so-called “industrialization and progress” – two World Wars and an ensuing mistrust of the hitherto taken for granted foundations of humanity. Mankind had reached an impasse in its philosophical development – in a Godless world where senseless acts of inhumanity were allowed to happen, what was man to do? The *zeitgeist* of growth and change that characterized the modernity of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was undermined by the devastation of the 20<sup>th</sup>, reflected by the images of inertia, paralysis and *being stuck* in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett, two of the most prolific and vehement post-war writers and thinkers. The “viscous puddle” of Nausea that characterizes Roquentin’s ennui, as well as the perpetual stalemate of *waiting* – without purpose, without validation – of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, are directly opposed to the images of being swept helplessly along the tide of human progress in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The historical specificity of the 19<sup>th</sup> century thus gave way to a universalizing contemplation of human existence and self; at the tail-end of modernization, these authors took on the task of excavating the depths of humanity, at the risk of uncovering the horrifying specter of ennui. The ennui of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while still conforming to my definition, is experienced nevertheless on a different register than in the previous century, a distinction that the trajectory of this thesis will attempt to elucidate.

The first two sections of the thesis focus on the representation of Objects and Time, which emerge as both cause and inescapable symptoms of ennui in the works of each of the four authors.. The first chapter on objects is an analysis – for each author - of the diminution of the autonomy of the subject in the face of a proliferation of objects – either as commodified products or as previously innocuous things that suddenly take on a weight and/or subjectivity of their own. This undermining of one’s subjective autonomy seems to emphasize man’s essential powerlessness and isolation in the world, leading to a pervasive sense of helplessness, hopelessness, ennui.

The second chapter, ‘Time’, will likewise attempt to illuminate the conception of ennui for each author through exploration of the representations of time. Indeed, Goodstein and Kuhn, both indicate that ennui is “inextricably linked with the notion of *time* and space”<sup>10</sup>. In the modern era, the tension between the incessant ticking away of clock time and uncertainty in the success of the endeavor of progress leads to a sense of helpless ennui in man. The moment “lived as meaningless eternity” – much like Baudelaire’s lament in *The Clock* that “each instant devours a morsel of the pleasure granted to man for every season” – undermines faith in the optimistic trajectory of the historical whole; conversely, disenchantment with history, or even the trajectory of one’s own life, as a series of senseless repetitions causes each moment to appear as a meaningless eternity<sup>11</sup>. Time functions as man’s ultimate enemy – if it is not forcing one to exist in the impersonal world of utilitarian productivity, it reveals

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<sup>10</sup> Kuhn, p5.

<sup>11</sup> Goodstein, p6

to one the distressing truth that it passing – more often than not without one noticing - and that regardless of progress, death awaits on the horizon. Both the modern mechanical clock and the sempiternal biological clock undermine man's hapless endeavors in the world.

Delving more in-depth into each author's impression of the ennui that pervades existence will ultimately illuminate the underlying *causes* of their disillusionment with life. The works these four authors have been widely regarded as pessimistic, depressing, and despairing. Flaubert has been called his century's greatest pessimist, and Beckett's plays and novels can be read through the lens of nihilism and hopelessness. However, the fact remains that, in writing about, in spite of, or because of their ennui, each of them has *produced* works of art. From the depths of nothing comes a very tangible, long-lasting *something*. The final chapter, therefore, will be a study of how and why, in spite of their professed disenchantment with existence, they have decided to write about it, to sublimate their experience into art. I suppose this thesis is a personal quest to answer the larger question(s) of: how does one search for meaning in existence, in the absence of any concrete foundations of humanity? Is art – or more specifically, literature – a viable mode through which one can transcend the vacuum of ennui? What, ultimately, is literature's role for the author and society?

What initially attracted me to these four particular authors was the fact that they were at the forefront of a new sentiment, a new movement in their time – their works marked a transition in the prevailing *zeitgeist*. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and *Sentimental Education* came at the tail end of Romanticism

and blazed the trail past mere realism towards modernism. Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* and collection of prose poems, *Paris Spleen*, half mired in Romantic yearnings and yet paving the way away from a bourgeois consideration of the world, presented a radical way of looking at French society in the mid-1800s. It is no wonder that these authors were sent to trial for publication of their works, almost contemporaneously – pioneers and soldiers of ennui, they transgressed prevailing morals and principals of the time to impose their own. Likewise, Sartre and Beckett in 20<sup>th</sup> century were soldiers in their own right – Sartre's literature was a vehicle for the enormous societal implications of his existential philosophy, while Beckett's desire to destroy the prevailing mode of communication catalyzed the transition from modernism to post-modernism, a 'movement' – if one can categorize the almost non-definable nature of post-modernism – within which we are still functioning today. Thus, through the comparison of ennui manifested in the "secular, materialist"<sup>12</sup> contexts of the modern 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as the differing attempts of their artists to combat it, I hope to elucidate an overview of how ennui can actually be a fertile wellspring of beauty and creativity. Perhaps it can also teach us a thing or two about escaping the digitalized, globalized, democratized form of ennui (or should I say, e-nnui) today.

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<sup>12</sup> Goodstein, p3

# CHAPTER ONE: OBJECTS

## 1.1 Flaubert's objects: Creating absence

The effects of the Revolution of 1848 in Paris, with its immense promise and attendant disappointment, could be seen reflected in the shift in literary *zeitgeist* from Balzac to Flaubert<sup>13</sup>. Balzac's controlling narrator, embodied by the feisty Rastignac, had the vigor and creativity to take on the city of Paris despite its chaos and complexity. Rastignac's bird's eye view of Paris at the end of *Père Goriot*, and his declaration of dominance, or at least, compatibility with Paris ("*A nous deux, maintenant!*"), indicates the autonomy of "a voice imposing his will on the city and its texts" (Ferguson, 93). Flaubert's protagonists, however, display no such wit. Emma Bovary, though living in the country, has her heart in Paris. Her hapless attempts to replicate the Parisian social milieu in her suburban setting result in thwarted affairs and disappointed love. Frédéric Moreau, the painfully self-absorbed, overly romantic character in *Sentimental Education*, (hereafter referred to as SE) is a "figure of failure" (Ferguson, 95) unable to convert any of his dreams into concrete reality. They seem to be

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<sup>13</sup> According to Ferguson, "the Revolution... divides more than the century; among other things, as Roland Barthes would later point out in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, it is the crucial factor separating Balzac from Flaubert". Source: Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *The City and Its Discontents*, (University of California Press, CA, 1994)

“suspended in the city and in society at large” (Ferguson, p97); this ultimate futility of existence with each other and within their surroundings is elucidated – especially in SE - through Flaubert’s representation of objects, which play an unusually prominent role in the narrative. In the rapidly modernizing milieu of Paris, with the insistent rise of a bourgeois consumer class, the proliferation of commodities in society led to a disproportionate desire for the possession of *things* – a phenomenon wherein objects start to obfuscate human relations and desires, taking on inordinate significance in the lives of the characters and subsuming the relationships between them.

Frédéric, for one, constantly displaces his hyperbolic desire for Madame Arnoux onto the objects in her immediate vicinity. Despite his professions of undying love for her, the objects themselves seem to become *more* important than the existence of Madame Arnoux, proven by Frédéric’s self-induced reverie during dinners *chez Arnoux*: “Her comb, her gloves, her rings were things of real significance to him, as important as works of art, endowed with life almost human; they all possessed his heart and fed his passion” (63)<sup>14</sup>. In fact, the contingent displacement of Frédéric’s desire for Madame Arnoux unto objects is so ingrained that, upon “finding [her] in a setting which was unfamiliar to him, he had the impression that she had somehow lost something, suffered a vague degradation, in short that she had changed” (121). Love, then, seems to be a mere function of the objects that surround the person – or rather, object – of desire; this once great emotion is presented as essentially hollow and empty.

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<sup>14</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education* (Penguin Books, London, 2004), Trans. Robert Baldick. Subsequent quotations taken from this edition.



Flaubert's depiction of the recirculation and redistribution of objects in the novel, too, indicate the interchangeability of objects, undermining the worth that people place on them. After the Arnoux move out of Paris, the possessions in their apartment are put up for sale – and all the effects of Madame Arnoux that so affected Frédéric are tagged with a quantitative value, an indignity that tears at his heart: “He felt as if a part of his heart were disappearing with each article; and the monotonous effect of the same voices accompanied by the same gestures numbed him with fatigue, inflicting him with a deathly torpor” (445). The auction propels the private into the public domain, putting Madame Arnoux *herself* into circulation, like every other man and woman in the novel<sup>15</sup>. The self is lost in the proliferation of things; subject is obfuscated by object. The sense of inescapable circularity is encompassed in Madame Arnoux's casket, which Madame Dambreuse buys in the end, to the horror of Frédéric. The cruel irony of having to see one of the most significant reminders of Madame Arnoux in the hands of his new lover underscores the underlying meaninglessness of commodities - the object is recycled and passed around arbitrarily, and everyone seems for sale.

Indeed, people themselves start to be viewed, too, as commodities. Marx's conception of the relationship between religious and commodity fetishism is a good analogy here to elucidate this phenomenon. According to Marx, the “physical relation between physical things” is subsumed by the presence of

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<sup>15</sup> Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *The City and Its Discontents*, (University of California Press, CA, 1994) p105

*value-relation* between products, turning them into commodities<sup>16</sup>. Religious Fetishism, wherein a previously innocuous object is taken by man and instated with a significance that is independent of its physical use-value, is used as analogous to the fetishism of commodities, wherein an object's value is realized "only by exchange, that is, by means of a social process"<sup>17</sup>. Basically, the worth of a commodity depends on how much *others* desire it – and in SE, the worth of a person is determined by how much he/she is desired by others. Frédéric views his other mistresses as objects; he desires Madame Dambreuse "as an exotic, inaccessible object, because she was noble, because she was rich" and Rosanette as something to "conquer and dominate". Indeed, Frédéric is not the only one guilty of doing so; Rosanette treats him as her "property" (381), while Madame Dambreuse uses him to stave off her boredom.

Even his 'love' for Madame Arnoux reduces her to an object, commodifying her. Seeing her in her apartment, he was "restrained by a sort of religious awe" (215). She is an objectification, for Frédéric, of a transcendent ideal. Flaubert's depiction of Arnoux's final, unfortunate attempt to sell religious artifacts in a store is evidence of his ultimate undermining of *any* notion of a transcendent ideal. The shop of "ecclesiastical objects" is populated by absurd, tasteless trinkets, such as "holy water stoups in the shape of shells, and portraits of notabilities of the church" (426), epitomizing the commodification of Religion. The deluge of meaningless objects and fetishes ultimately undermines the

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<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, 'Commodities and Money', *Karl Marx: A Reader* (Cambridge University Press, MA, 1986), Ed. Jon Elster, p. 64

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 64

promise of transcendence and a higher purpose in existence – as well as Frédéric’s faith in Madame Arnoux as ecclesiastical trinket of sorts. Desire, ultimately, is an empty illusion.

Flaubert’s intention thus becomes clear here, in relating his depiction of the hollowness of objects to the objectification of humans. Humans are also considered as objects constantly circulated around in society, stripped of agency and purpose. The description of people after the races is akin to that of a river, swept along helplessly in the tide of progress and modernization, as Flaubert relegates humans to the realm of the material: “... on either side of the great avenue, which resembled a river carrying manes, clothes and human heads, the trees stood glistening with rain” (225). Frédéric himself seems to be an object – he is imprisoned in an endless cycle of unrealized purpose and desires, going in circles from his country home to Paris, from woman to woman, like Madame Arnoux’s casket. There seems to be an inability to achieve one’s *telos* and a concrete significance in the world.

Thus, Flaubert manages in the novel to undermine both human desires (by displacing them on hollow material signifiers) and human existence itself (by relating humans to the very objects they inject mistakenly with so much meaning). By establishing the emptiness of objects while associating humans *with* these very objects, Flaubert illuminates the existential crisis in the midst of modernity, an ennui that plagues Frédéric even in the midst of material opulence and luxury: “Tired out, full of contradictory desires, and no longer even knowing what he wanted, he felt an infinite melancholy, a longing to die” (224) His

desires, at this point, are flailing, because they have no concrete object upon which to cling. The ennui that becomes apparent in Flaubert's novel is not the looming *monstre delicat* of Baudelaire's poet – rather, it is the insidious persistence of a sense of worthless endeavor that his protagonist can vaguely apprehend, yet fail to banish. Geoffrey Wall's description of the ending of SE seems to capture, most succinctly, Flaubert's brand of ennui: "the empty wandering, the self-estrangement, the intellectual exhaustion, the emotional sterility, and that dying note of nostalgia for a schoolboy escapade in a brothel"<sup>18</sup>. Frédéric is left languishing in the vast plateau of meaninglessness that seems to plague everyone in the novel, regardless of the fact that they realize it or not.

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<sup>18</sup> Geoffery Wall, Introduction to *Sentimental Education*, (Penguin Books, London), p. xxix

## 1.2 Baudelaire's Objects: Modernity, Materiality and Madness

In his Dedication of *Paris Spleen*, Baudelaire claims to attempt the “description of our more abstract modern life” through his “exploration of huge cities” and the “medley of their innumerable interrelations”<sup>19</sup>. As the dedicated scribe of modern experience in the Paris in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he presents the city to us as a cacophonous onslaught of the senses, a discordant realm where “*la sottise, l’erreur, le péché, la lésine*” and “*le viol, le poison, le poignard, l’incendie*” (Wing)<sup>20</sup> are the decadent, evil counterparts to the process of progress and modernization. However, like the *monstre délicat* that graces the preface to *Les Fleurs du Mal*, *Ennui* is the ugliest, nastiest and most revolting of all the aforementioned vices<sup>21</sup>. *Ennui*’s inextricable link to the experience in the modern city is thus made explicit in the title of the collection – *Paris Spleen* – where ‘spleen’ itself, according to the *Petite Larousse*, connotes ‘ennui of all things, disgust with life’.

In a number of poems in *Spleen*, the modern city is presented as the apotheosis of material splendor, though it is this very materiality that paradoxically seduces the poet and exacerbates the *ennui* that plagues him. Baudelaire’s representations of the modern city, with its dazzling lights and brilliant facades, underscore the sensual, irresistible attraction of material goods

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen* (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1970), Trans Louise Varèse, pg x. All subsequent references to *Paris Spleen* will be from this edition, and will be denoted by the letters ‘PS’.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘Au Lecteur’, *Les Fleurs Du Mal*. (David R. Godine, 1983), Trans. Richard Howard, p.5. My translations here. All subsequent references to *Les Fleurs Du Mal* refer to this edition, and will be denoted by the letters ‘FM’.

<sup>21</sup> “*Il en est un plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde!*” ‘From Au Lecteur’, *Les Fleurs Du Mal*

to all inhabitants of the city, be they rich or poor. This attraction, therefore, is what serves to distract one from the “delicate monster” of Spleen that threatens to envelop his existence. Conversely, the proliferation of objects and the material seem too to divert and take the place of substantive communication and connection between individuals and classes. The material world is thus also presented as illusory and fleeting, the ultimate cause of the “despairing sense of meaninglessness and loss”<sup>22</sup> and isolation of the individual that characterizes Baudelaire’s anguishing sense of *ennui*.

*The Eyes of the Poor* presents a good example of this dichotomy within the material realm, the tension between the lure of objects and the disillusionment they evoke in the modern subject. Modernity in its absurd, incessant desire for material progress is presented here as the indefatigable presence of the “new café forming the corner of a new boulevard still littered with rubbish but that already displayed proudly its unfinished splendors” (PS, 52). Moreover, superfluous material signifiers of wealth adorn the walls of the café: “Even the gas burned with all the ardor of a debut, and lighted with all its might the blinding whiteness of the walls, the expanse of mirrors, the gold cornices and moldings, fat-cheeked pages dragged along by hounds on leash, laughing ladies with falcons on their wrists, nymphs and goddesses bearing on their heads piles of fruits, *patés* and game, Hebes and Ganymedes holding out little amphora’s of syrups or parti-colored ices” (52). These objects, too, masquerading as Classical décor and ‘art’, signify the unfortunate bastardization and commodification of

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<sup>22</sup> Goodstein, p. 222

the fine arts in the city. Yet, the narrator here seems to be overwhelmed by these objects – he is “dazzled” and the gaslight was “blinding”. He is rendered helpless under the deluge of material splendor, seduced by the fact that “all history and all mythology [is pandering] to gluttony”.

Nonetheless, there are indicators of the flipside of this attraction to the material. Already in the initial description of the café, there are intimations of the illusory aspects of the material façade. Despite the presence of the newly constructed café, remnants of the old city - the one that is “littered with rubbish” - remain, stubbornly reminding one of how the transient material world can ultimately be reduced to garbage and thrown to the wayside. Furthermore, objects in this prose poem seem to exacerbate the separation between the narrator and his lover, whom he professes to “hate today”. This “hatred” is the result of the mutual misunderstanding that occurs with regard to the superfluous materiality of the café; the narrator is “a little ashamed of [his] glasses and decanters” under the eyes of the poor while his lover is annoyed by them, and calls for the proprietor to send them away. By the end of the poem, the separation between the lovers is made clear: “So you see how difficult it is to understand one another, my dear angel, how incommunicable thought is, even between two people in love”.

Apart from compounding the mutual isolation between the two lovers, material objects also create separation between individuals in the city - in this case, between the rich and the poor, who are on the outside, looking in “with admiration”. The physical separation between the poor and the rich in the poem,

signified by the proliferation of objects in the realm of the latter as opposed to the material emptiness of the former, mirrors the almost unbridgeable gulf between their souls and the isolation of one from another. This alienation of subjects from each other in the modern environment is a constituent aspect of the *Spleen of Paris* and exacerbates the “phenomenon of estrangement” that is, according to Kuhn, one of the characteristics of ennui.

*The Bad Glazier* is a poem in which the role of the narrator switches to that of the yearning eyes of the outsider who desires the ideal beauty and luxury that the material world purports to provide. This poet, unlike the narrator in *The Eyes of the Poor*, has no recourse to the myriad objects that could distract him from the boredom and banality of his existence in the city. However, in the poet’s attempts to turn to objects in an effort to escape, he is only thrown back with greater intensity into the mire of his existence because of the inherent superficiality and inadequacy of the material world.

The poet calls a glazier up to his room and, after discovering that he does not sell the colored glass panes that he desires - no “magic panes” and no “panes of Paradise” (*Paris Spleen*, 14) - becomes “drunk with madness”, kicks the glazier out and proceeds to throw a flower pot at him as the glazier has failed to “make life beautiful”. All the glazier’s wares are destroyed. Baudelaire here is detailing the impulse of the poet towards the material beauty of the facades that so overwhelms the narrator in *The Eyes of the Poor*; he is searching for the *illusion* of beauty that can be provided by looking out at the world through colored glass panes. It is significant here that glass is used as the material of choice - its



fragility and breakability are reflections of the tenuous nature of the material world and its illusory nature. Correspondingly, the poet is here thwarted in his attempt to search for the Ideal (“Paradise”) in objects. He cannot escape from the banality of ugly existence with the lousy, clear glass panes that are the only ones offered to him, and it is his refusal to accept the *ennui* that pervades his life that renders him mad.

In this poem, Baudelaire displays awareness of the poet’s privileged situation – in terms of class distinction – that allows him to contemplate beauty and “suffer” from idleness in the comfort of his apartment that overlooks the city. This privileged ennui of the poet may result in a momentary madness - the “kind of energy that springs from ennui and daydreaming” - that ends up exploiting others who don’t have the luxury of being idle and bored, such as the glazier: “But what is an eternity of damnation compared to an infinity of pleasure in a single second?” Ennui, therefore, forecloses the presence of a morality with its indifference, installing in its place an *amorality* – acts of madness towards others (and the violence that ensues) are thus justifiably enkindled in the universe of the bored and disillusioned man. Moreover, madness implies the flight *out of* oneself, a sort of self-intoxication; consequently, the poet is exiled further from the world around him as well as from his very person – his estrangement is no longer merely the exogenous effect of the city, but something endogenous to

himself. He is both “exile from within and exile from without”<sup>23</sup> – isolation is total.

In a sense, the poet’s relationship to the materiality in the city evinces the ennui that is simultaneously symptom and cause of the poet’s estrangement from the world around him. Firstly, the collusion of one’s attraction towards the material splendor of modernity with the failure of these very things to provide the illusory solace of meaning and substance results in profound disillusionment. Conversely, the ennui that one apprehends isolates him further from both his surroundings - be it his lover or the hapless working class - and his sense of self. Goodstein, in her essay on Baudelaire, holds that “resignation to the conditions of modern existence is the foundation of [Baudelaire’s] art”<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, in his poems, the search for the ideal on earth – in looking for ‘Paradise’ in mere glass panes – throws the individual back into the mire of existence, as well as underscores the inherent impossibility of this quest in the modern society of Paris. The glazier is doomed to work in banality, and the poet is forced to watch him powerlessly from his dubious position of privilege.

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<sup>23</sup> Nathaniel Wing, ‘Exile from Within, Exile from Without’, *A New History of French Literature*, (Harvard University Press, MA, 1989), Ed. Denis Hollier, p743

<sup>24</sup> Goodstein, p. 217

### 1.3 Sartre's Objects: Things that Touch

The ennui that one encounters in the diary of Antoine Roquentin, the anti-hero of Sartre's *Nausea*, is of a different quality than the ennui present in the 19<sup>th</sup> century texts of Flaubert and Baudelaire. The 19<sup>th</sup> century's whirlwind of change – on a political, social and economic level – swept its hapless denizens along in the tide of progress yet failed to fulfill its promises. Ennui was the expression of disappointment and disillusion in the way the rapid industrialization, urbanization and proliferation of material goods just served to estrange members of society – such as Frédéric and Baudelaire's poet - from each other as well as a sense of personal meaning. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the images of being “swept along” are replaced by those of stagnation and paralysis. It seems that progress has reached a dead end. *Nausea*, written in 1938, presents ennui as a “viscous puddle”<sup>25</sup> (21), an inert expansion of “profound boredom” (157) that seems to form the basis of all existence, or at the very least the existence of Roquentin. This unappetizing image forms the basis of the phenomenon of Nausea in the novel, which seems to be the physical manifestation of Roquentin's conscience of ennui, of the *superfluity* and *absurdity* of his existence. Significantly, Nausea itself is a physical malaise, unlike the more cerebral and spiritual ennui of Baudelaire and Flaubert. In Roquentin's case, Nausea and a profound “boredom” are inextricably linked – the physical and metaphysical aspects of existence are thus conflated in the very person of

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<sup>25</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (New Directions Publishing, NY, 2007), Trans. Lloyd Alexander. Subsequent quotations will be from this edition.

Roquentin. For him, there is no flight to a higher plane – ennui is a very part of his physical being.

The physical world of objects thus plays an important role in underscoring Roquentin's Nausea. When he is consumed by Nausea, Roquentin becomes much more aware and distrustful of the *thingness* of the objects that surround him: "Then the Nausea seized me I dropped to a seat... I wanted to vomit... My glass crushes a puddle of yellow beer against the marble table top, a bubble floating in it. The bottom of my seat is broken and in order not to slide, I am compelled to press my heels firmly against the ground; it is cold" (19).

Throughout the novel, objects torment and confuse Roquentin with their seeming agency, leading him to question *his* agency in his world. It is through his confrontation with objects that the problems of existence – the meaninglessness and superfluity of his presence in the world – come to light and relegate him to a state of apathy and torpor. Like the "viscous puddle" of Nausea that occupies the middleground between solid and liquid, Roquentin too vacillates between a virtual, inactive 'objecthood' and existing with conviction as a man in the world.

However, one must not ignore the fact that Roquentin also had an almost Baudelairian take on objects as representative of the mindless attraction to material indicators of wealth and status. Like Baudelaire's poet, he attempts to distinguish himself from those who are defined through their possessions or their clothes. Roquentin professes condemnatory judgment upon the bourgeois inhabitants of Bouville as they stroll the streets in their Sunday best after Mass, mindlessly adhering to the conventional modes of bourgeois existence (they go

to church!). He fixates on the “hats, the sea of hats” (43) that passes beneath him as he watches from his balcony. These hats, in their idiotic, unchanging sameness, efface the human under them, suggesting a mindless, repetitive existence: “They are peaceful, a little morose, they think about Tomorrow, that is to say, simply, a new today; cities have only one day at their disposal and every morning it comes back exactly the same” (158). Roquentin continually describes the masses from an elevated vantage point – he stands “a whole head above... both columns [of families]” in one instance, and views the city from “the top of a hill” in another. This physical separation evinces his intellectual isolation from those around him, relegating him to a solitary existence. In a sense, this is the ennui we see in Baudelaire; the isolation of the individual from others as brought about by the modern preoccupation with the material world.

Interestingly, the isolation described by both Roquentin and Baudelaire’s poet seems both to be a self-imposed privilege, a necessary condition for the elevated mind that is conscious of the *unconsciousness* of others. However, for Sartre, knowledge of an authentic existence can both be a privilege and a debilitating sickness, a *nausea*. Throughout the novel, the physical presence of objects affect him on a much more profound level than the scorn that the hats of the bourgeois elicit in him.

The first object that makes Roquentin “terribly, deeply bored” in the middle of his travels in Indochina and serves to strip his life of meaning and “adventure”. A “little Khmer statuette on a green carpet, next to a telephone”, a mundane presence in an office in Hanoi, seemed “unpleasant and stupid” to him,

triggering his awakening from a “six year slumber”. The statue seemed to mock his superfluous presence in Indochina, accentuating the absurdity of his travels around the globe: “I couldn’t understand why I was in Indo-China. What was I doing there?... My passion was dead... now I felt empty” (5). This discouragement of his human endeavor – by an impassive object, no less – haunts him even in the years to come. Roquentin’s realization that he has never “had any adventures” is represented by the “Idea” that the innocuous object induces in him four years later: “I am generally proud of having had so many adventures. But today... it seems as though I am lying, that I have never had the slightest adventure in my life, or rather, that I don’t even know what the word means any more. At the same time, I am weighed down by the same discouragement I had in Hanoi - four years ago when Mercier pressed me to join him and I stared at a Khmer statuette without answering.” (36) At that moment, he is aware of the fact that things happen *to* him instead – his agency as a human is stripped from him, reducing the power of his actions and thus his humanity. One might argue that without agency, Roquentin might be no more than a powerless, helpless object.

Here we already start to notice the effect objects have on Roquentin; the gradually dissolving barriers between man and object. Despite his goal, in keeping this diary, to “classify” the “nuances or small happenings” (1) that happen around him, objects begin to elude his attempts to classify, codify and circumscribe them within human categories. In a café, he is “seized by Nausea for the first time – the fact that he seems to be the impassive agent in this situation already points to the dissolution of his agency. Then, he is plagued by

the bartender's (Adolphe's) purple suspenders, which seem to resist any of his attempts to attribute a single color to them: "[The suspenders] annoy me by their sheep-like stubbornness, as if, starting to become purple, they stopped somewhere along the way without giving up their pretensions. You feel like saying, 'All right, *become* purple and let's hear no more about it.' But now, they stay in suspense, stubborn in their defeat" (19). The inanimate suspenders, in this sinister encounter, take on sentient qualities – they “annoy”, they have “pretensions”, and they are “sheep-like” – and confound Roquentin's grasp on the separation between man and object. As objects take on human attributes, it seems as if the humans themselves are losing theirs. Roquentin's will is quelled by the suspenders, as he “cannot turn [his] head” away from them; Adolphe is also reduced to an almost-animal, with no human features: “Cousin Adolphe has no eyes: his swollen retracted eyelids open only on a little of the whites. He smiles sleepily; from time to time he snorts, yelps and writhes feebly, like a dreaming dog” (19). Roquentin's ennui, intensified here in the form of Nausea, stems from growing consciousness of the superfluity of his existence – if there is no separation between man and object, or man and animal, then isn't man's existence meaningless? Or at least worth only as much as that of an inanimate object?

Indeed, this sentiment is made all the more clear by Roquentin's *physical* aversion to objects. The more contact he has with objects, the more he feels they “touch” him in return. He is profoundly disturbed by this: “Objects should not *touch* because they are not alive. You use them, put them back in place, you live

among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts” (10). The fact that inanimate objects can *touch* him indicates further the blurring lines between human agency and the will of the thing. For example, the pebble he picked up “sickened him” with its sickly sweet quality, passing a “nausea” to his hands.

Roquentin’s disturbed perception of the material world is brought to a head during his sudden epiphany in the park as he sits on a bench, gazing at the root of the chestnut tree under his bench. It is then that he finally “understands” existence and is reconciled to the pervading presence of Nausea in his life: “The Nausea is no longer an illness or a passing fit: it is I” (126). It is here that his most affecting confrontation with an object unfolds, that the preceding ambiguity pertaining to the barrier between his existence and that of things balloons into an all-encompassing certainty. The tree root suddenly seems to him to be “nameless”, conforming no longer to the human classification of what a “root” should seem like. Thus, stripped of its worldly identity, its existence loses “the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence”. The veneer of individuality of all things – the park gates, the bench, the grass – is finally dissolved for Roquentin, and pure, “frightful, obscene, naked” existence is what is left. The “paste” of things implies a formless mass of *sameness*, and this seems to be the case for Roquentin: existence, at the fundamental level, is the same for *everything*. For him, for the trees, for the suspenders, for the pebble that sickened him. He thus comes to



ultimate terms with Nausea here; he not only “understands” but also “possesses” (p131) it. He realizes that man has no meaning in the world, any more than the tree root, and that his existence is *de trop*, absurd, superfluous, *in the way*: “And I – soft, weak, obscene, digesting, juggling with dismal thoughts – I, too, was *in the way*... I dreamed vaguely of killing myself to wipe out at least one of these superfluous lives” (p128).

Ultimately, Roquentin seems to resign himself as an object of existence. Objects no longer have this fearsome, absurd quality for him, as he had apprehended the truth of universal sameness. What remains is *ennui* - the fundamental, pervasive profound boredom that stems from the fact that he cannot do anything to locate himself in the world. He claims, calmly: “I am bored, that’s all. From time to time I yawn so widely that tears roll down my cheek. It is a profound boredom, profound, the profound heart of existence, the very matter I am made of” (p157). Roquentin’s existence is essentially meaningless; there is nothing one can do but yawn.

Thus, the role of objects in *Nausea*, apart from representing the separation of Roquentin from the mindless city dwellers, has much more metaphysical import. Even though he initially distinguishes himself from the other *salauds* and their hats, it seems that ultimately, he is no better than a hat himself – Roquentin’s agency as a man is threatened by his existential proximity to a mere object. Thus, objects serve to reveal, for Roquentin, the true “paste” and contingency of existence which induces in him his profound boredom and disillusion with his worthwhile presence as human being in the world. There

seems to be no escape, as his metaphysical impasse is grounded in his very physical being; what remains to be seen is if his knowledge will lead him to despair, or to search for another way out.

#### 1.4 Beckett's Objects: "Nothing to be Done"

The post-WWII Beckettian landscape is spare and sparsely populated, by people, objects and events, a stark contrast to the opulent set pieces of Flaubert and Baudelaire's cities, as well as Sartre's populated Bouville. Setting, location, and time are no longer presented with any certainty – the empty, desolate landscape of the stage alluding to the barrenness of interpersonal relations. In *Waiting for Godot*<sup>26</sup>, Vladimir and Estragon, the bowler hat-donning bums, wait fruitlessly for the elusive Godot in a stage setting that is stripped of everything but a single tree. The very paucity of objects infuses those that remain with stark presence and significance – on Beckett's stage, even a radish, a tree, or a boot takes on symbolic momentousness in the lives of the characters and their relationships with each other. Jean Baudrillard, in his introduction to *Le Système des Choses*, expounds on the social and psychological meaning objects hold for man:

*"Il ne s'agit donc pas des objets définis selon leur fonction, ou selon les classes dans lesquelles on pourrait subdiviser pour les commodités de l'analyse, mais des processus par lesquels les gens entrent en relation avec eux et de la systématique des conduites et des relations humaines qui en résultent."*<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, the characters in the play are constantly in contact with certain key objects – Vladimir and his hat, Estragon and his boot, Pozzo with his pipe and whip, and Lucky with his cumbersome load imposed by his master, Pozzo.

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<sup>26</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954). All subsequent references to *Waiting for Godot* are to this edition.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système des Choses* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1968), pp 8-9

Throughout the play, these objects are represented as irritating and superfluous, but the characters paradoxically (as always is in Beckett's world) seem to depend on them for distraction from the futility and boredom of waiting for a Godot who might never come.

Objects that grate upon the existence of man with their very presence in this play do not have the frightening agency that so tormented Roquentin. In the elemental world of Beckett, they irritate on a much more trivial level – Estragon cannot take off his boots, Vladimir keeps feeling something dislodged in his hat. They are constantly bothered by this; in fact, the play begins with Estragon's bleak pronouncement after failing to take off his boot: "Nothing to be done" (2); a sentiment mirrored and repeated by Vladimir soon after, as he fails to find something in his hat:

Vladimir: *...(He takes off his hat again, peers inside it.)* Funny. *(He knocks on the crown as though to dislodge a foreign body, peers into it again, puts it on again.)* Nothing to be done. (3)

Estragon's boots induce even more confusion in Act II, when the characters return to their spot the next day and Estragon does not recognize the boots that were presumably left there overnight. He thinks he "must have thrown [the boots] away", and that the ones left are of a different color. The boots, uncomfortable and undetermined, as well as the hat that is always vaguely uncomfortable, are signifiers of how the material world grates irritatingly upon man's existence. However, this trivial banality of annoying objects belies a much deeper malaise when one looks further into the significance of these objects that Beckett took care to choose for his sparse stage.

Anne Ubersfeld mentions in her study of the theater of Victor Hugo that “the object is the figure of the true connection between the heroes and the world... it underscores the fact that the true adversary of the hero is not another being or his own emotions, but a solid universe against which he collides roughly”<sup>28</sup>, an idea applicable too to the theatre of Beckett. Indeed, the everyday practicality of these objects actually understates their symbolic import in the play. The bowler hat that Vladimir (and, in fact, all the characters) wears, incongruous with his ragged, hobo’s clothes, suggests an intellectual faculty that he possesses, though it is a constant source of his irritation. Estragon’s boot, on the other hand, is down-to-earth, practical and ugly, the epitome of necessity that, likewise, annoys Estragon incessantly. Thus, the human relation to the higher, intellectual realm, as well as the earthy, practical one, are both manifested and undermined in *Waiting for Godot* through the metaphorical relation of objects to the characters. Their twin existences – one physical, one intellectual – are revealed as almost farcical by the very objects that people it.

Yet, the characters still demonstrate a need for the distraction of *things* in order to stave off their endless waiting. Vladimir and Estragon repeatedly use objects as a last ditch attempt to “pass the time” and to “give [them] the impression [they] exist:

Vladimir: What about trying them.

Estragon: I’ve tried everything.

Vladimir: No, I mean the boots.

Estragon: Would that be a good thing?

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<sup>28</sup> Anne Ubersfeld, *Le Roi et le Buffon* (Paris: Librairie Josi Corti, 1974), pp 588-589. My translation.

Vladimir: It'd pass the time. (*Estragon hesitates.*) I assure you, it'd be an occupation...

Estragon: You'll help me?

Vladimir: I will of course.

Estragon: We don't manage too badly, eh Didi, between the two of us?

Vladimir: Yes yes. Come on, we'll try the left first.

Estragon: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist? (77)

The repetitive action of trying on the boots, while ultimately futile, nevertheless gives the two hapless characters the pleasure of doing something, *anything*, to fill up the vast void of waiting that characterizes their existence. The repetitive quibbles over Estragon's shoes, as well as the vegetables (radishes and carrots), imply a habit – a manmade ritual – that results in the flimsy illusion of fruitful experience, providing a temporary distraction from the essential emptiness of their endeavor. In fact, their relationship seems to be conducted *through* objects – discussion of the boot takes up a good portion of the play.

The interaction between Pozzo and Lucky, too, seem to represent man's extreme dependence on objects to validate one's own existence. Pozzo is someone whose existence is characterized by a superfluous overabundance of *stuff* – a watch, a pipe, his glasses. More stuff is carried by his attendant slave, Lucky: "a heavy bag, a folding stool, a picnic basket and a greatcoat" (18). These objects indicate the petty worldliness of daily life – the watch an allusion to the human construct of time that is constantly undermined in the play, the pipe, glasses, picnic basket and greatcoat symbols of a vaguely bourgeois lifestyle. They are wildly incongruous within the play, yet to Vladimir, Pozzo with all his

material wealth “is all humanity”, an example of mankind’s preoccupation with things. Pozzo is blinded by the material, and lives out of “attunement” with existence; this is highlighted in Act II when he returns, with Lucky, blinded and diminished. Without being able to see his “goods”, Pozzo is left flailing and completely dependent on Lucky:

Pozzo: (*Clutching on to Lucky who staggers.*) What is it?  
Who is it?  
*Lucky falls, drops everything and brings Pozzo down with him. They lie helpless among the scattered baggage.* (87)

His identity, tied so closely to the things he owns (including Lucky), is left hanging. The human propensity to attribute meaning to things, without real meaning or cause, is here, like in *Sentimental Education*, mocked at – Pozzo is not bored precisely because he is not *waiting*, he is initially too distracted by what he surrounds himself with to do so. Lucky seems too to take on the role of a distraction, as an object through which Pozzo entertains himself and passes the time:

Pozzo: (*He jerks the rope. Lucky looks at him... He picks up the whip.*) What do you prefer? Shall we have him dance, or sing, or recite, or think, or – (40)

Indeed, Lucky is, to Pozzo, just another *object* that he owns. Lucky speaks only once the entire play, and for the most part is a submissive, inert, mute *thing* with no apparent agency (only with the help of another object – the thinking hat – does he start to speak.) The problem of Pozzo’s identity is inextricably linked to his slave, as Lucky’s is to his master’s. Neither can exist without the other – this

relation is dramatized by the object – the rope - that binds Lucky to Pozzo, a perverse umbilical cord that determines the existence of the being at either end. At this extreme of human relationships, where a bond conducted *through* objects segues into a bond that alienates, objectifies and at the same time *defines* the other, we see the hints of colonialism and the dangers of treating another as a *thing*. Beckett, after all, was a post-WWII writer. Pozzo's reliance of Lucky to distract him from boredom, as an object, indicates the danger of such a relationship. Yet, there is still a sense that Pozzo's reliance does not exclude a certain affection, a fact that redeems Pozzo slightly and prevents him from entering the realm of villain:

Pozzo: Guess who taught me all these beautiful things.  
(*Pause. Pointing to Lucky.*) My Lucky!... But for him all my thoughts, all my feelings, would have been of common things. (33)

He acknowledges his dependence on his object for enriching his existence, and is grateful. Thus, we can distinguish here Beckett's ambiguous portrayal of man's relationship with each other *through* objects and *as* objects – there is a dependence on the 'exploitation' of objects to distract one from the real emptiness of existence (for Pozzo, as well as Vladimir and Estragon). However, this dependence does not come without its problems – for Vladimir and Estragon, it is the persistent irritation of these objects; for Pozzo and Lucky, it is the danger of objectification and alienation of one from another.

A very Beckettian sleight of hand is apparent in the fact that all four characters wear bowler hats – they are paradoxically linked to and alienated



from each other by objects, yet this problem is universal, as signified by the object that links all of them. Yet, there does not seem to be a solution to this universal state of waiting, to emptiness, to the Godot who never appears. For Beckett, “a real understanding of human existence has to be based on a fundamental absence of meaning”<sup>29</sup>. Objects in *Waiting for Godot* serve to both illuminate and obscure this “absence of meaning” – the void that lies at the heart of human existence - through Beckett’s portrayal of them as the thin veneer of diversion that helps give his characters the “impression they exist”. In light of this impasse, therefore, it seems that Estragon’s words ring true: “Nothing to be done.”

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<sup>29</sup> Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2005) Trans. John Irons. Pg98

# CHAPTER TWO: TIME

## 2.1 Flaubert's Time: Repeating Revolutions

Flaubert wanted his *Sentimental Education* (hereafter referred to as SE) to be a “novel about modern life that will be set in Paris... the moral history of the men of [his] generation; ‘sentimental history’ to be precise”<sup>30</sup>. However, he was plagued by the problems he encountered in writing a history about events and people that he considered to be embodiments of futility and worthlessness ; it was difficult to write an entire novel about “nothing”<sup>31</sup>: “The subject, as I conceive of it, is profoundly true, but for that very reason, probably not very entertaining. Dramatic deeds are somewhat lacking; and the action is spread over too great a tract of time.” This goes too, for *Madame Bovary* – a book predicated on the internal distress of – to put it most bluntly – a bored housewife and her hollow attempts to transcend this boredom. However, it seems that the very fact that the events in his book span many, many years – “a great tract of

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<sup>30</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. Brumeau, Vol. 3, p. 409

<sup>31</sup> In his letters about *Madame Bovary* to Louise Colet, his confidante, he writes this: “What seems beautiful to me, what I s (Poulet) (Auerbach) (Brombert)ould like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external... a book whichin would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible.” (*Jan 12/14, 1852*).

time” - supports his underlying proposal that the *telos* of history, ultimately, comes to naught – in SE, it takes 30 years for Frédéric and Madame Arnoux to realize that their love was never, and cannot be, fulfilled. In short, it takes 30 years for nothing to happen. What profoundly disappointed Flaubert about existence was how the “modern conception of history as progress”<sup>32</sup> never seemed to fulfill itself. History, for him, had two registers – that of society, and of individuals – and his novels detailed the failure of each to successfully reach a meaningful end, degenerating instead into a series of repetitive spirals with the passing of time.

On the individual scale, Frédéric is a perfect example of the futile passing of time. The irony of *Sentimental Education* is that there *is* no education – the traditional notion of a *bildungsroman*, where the hero grows and progresses in his life over a period of time, is subverted here by Frédéric’s utter failure to transform his history into a convincing, emphatic present or future. Instead, his life seems to embody a “circular temporal structure implying a duration leading back to the beginning”<sup>33</sup>. Echoing the circulation of humans as objects mentioned in the previous chapter, this theme of temporal repetition and recurrence, too, starts off the novel, where Frédéric is depicted as returning *home*, leaving Paris to return to Nogent, his small, drowsy hometown in the suburbs of France. Moreover, these “homecomings” occur several times throughout the novel with no indication of personal growth or change. Flaubert also makes sure to

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<sup>32</sup> Goodstein, p. 5

<sup>33</sup> Victor Brombert, *The Hidden Reader*, (Harvard University Press, MA, 1988), p. 140

foreground Frédéric's personal stagnation against the definite linear progression of time by making explicit *exactly* how much time passes in the novel. In Frédéric's first return to Paris from Nogent, he languishes in his bourgeois boredom as a student, unable to muster up the courage to call upon Madame Arnoux. As a result, "*the days went by*, in the repetition of the same boring activities and the same habits" (SE, p30). At the end of this fruitless semester, as winter came to an end, he "started working for his examination, passed it without distinction, and then left for Nogent" (31). Again. Moreover, after this episode, his subsequent return to Paris and another failed attempt at getting closer to Madame Arnoux led to "*three months* of boredom. As he had nothing to do, his indolence intensified his melancholy" (SE, p72). Time passes but nothing "happens" in a traditional sense—at least nothing that is worthy of recounting in a novel.

While a reader might be inclined to blame Frédéric for his own failure to take charge of his life, thereby resulting in its lack of progression, Emma represents a figure who, even though she attempts to escape the repetitive banality of her suburban existence, is not able to do so. The texture of her existence is already characterized by the inescapability of heavy *duration*; Flaubert's use of the French imperfect tense (*l'imparfait*) in *Madame Bovary* emphasizes, on a stylistic level, the tedious monotony that characterizes the way Emma's life unfolds. The imperfect tense, in French, expresses an ongoing or prevailing condition, or a repeated action, signifying the passing of time itself in a dreary, ongoing process. For example, in the early parts of her marriage,

descriptions of Emma's dissatisfaction with her dreary life in Tostes are carried in the imperfect tense: "*Mais c'était surtout aux heures du repas qu'elle n'en pouvait pls, dans cette petite sale au rez-de chaussée, avec la poêle qui fumait, la porte qui criait, les murs qui suintaient, les pavés humides*" (MB, 56). It is thus that – as Erich Auerbach put it – “many moments of meaningless triviality let the weight of dull time be felt”<sup>34</sup>. What makes her situation terrifying is that even her attempts at transgression to find something *new* up repetitive and clichéd. Her first taste of sin with the jaded city-man Rodolphe, relieves her of her boredom for a while, but he gets bored of her and her platitudes because, ironically, of the repetition of mistresses in *his* life. Her ensuing quest for similar ecstasies in Léon, the hapless idealist, results, however, in similar disappointment. They get tired of each other: “She was as sick of him as he was weary of her. Emma found again in adultery all the platitudes of marriage” (MB, p231). In Emma's situation, time pulls a double whammy: it erodes desire – rendering her affairs stale and boring – as well as thwarts her attempts at change and “progress” in her life by reducing them to mere repetitions. All in all, Emma cuts a more sympathetic figure than Frédéric, because of her sincere attempts to take charge of her life – yet Flaubert still does not release her from her impasse. Time passes cruelly, frustrating her desires to transcend the ennui of her existence. As Georges Poulet writes in his meditation on time in Flaubert's works, “Repetition and immobilization are the unconscious metaphors by which the human mind both expresses and conceals

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<sup>34</sup> Erich Auerbach, *On the Serious Imitation of the Everyday*. From the Norton Critical Edition of *Madame Bovary* (W.W Norton & Company, NY, 2005), Trans. Kirk Wetters, p. 434

the nakedness of a void”<sup>35</sup>. Flaubert seems determined to portray existence as essentially empty – a “void” – with no hope of escape.

This, too, is true on the more historically specific register of modernity. In the larger world of the Paris in SE, time in all its modern exactitude is portrayed ruthlessly. Flaubert presents time in minute detail, emphasizing the Simmel-ian notion of the “universal diffusion of pocket watches”<sup>36</sup>, the dehumanized demands on the human in times of technologized progress. Throughout the novel, the reader is constantly reminded of exact times and dates: “At Mormans they heard the clock strike a quarter past one” (SE, 113); “Seven o’clock struck” (139). However, the irony in these pronouncements lies in the fact that they are almost completely superfluous – in the first instance, the striking of the clock does nothing but mark that fact that Frédéric’s carriage is in the middle of its route to Paris, while the second instance marks the time when members of the Marshal’s (Rosanette’s) party are waiting for the carriages to go home. Flaubert thus undermines the importance and significance of modernized time – the schedules its denizens are following are insipid, habitual, repetitive and just plain boring.

Flaubert’s distrust of the actual productiveness of modernity is portrayed ultimately in his treatment of the revolution in 1848. The word “revolution” takes on a new aspect in SE – along with the disillusionment and disappointment that plague the Parisians in the chaotic aftermath of the 1848 revolution, there is

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<sup>35</sup> Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time*, (The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1956), Trans. Elliot Coleman, (Prendergast) pg 256.

<sup>36</sup> Goodstein, p124

a sense that this is merely a repetition of the 1789 revolution, merely the turning of a wheel that goes nowhere. The absurdity of the revolution itself can be illuminated by the way Flaubert treats his description of the barricade during the insurrection: "*Une barricade énorme bouchait la rue du Valois. La fumée qui se balançait à sa crête s'entr'ouvrit, des hommes couraient dessus en faisant de grands gestes, ils disparurent*" (310). As Christopher Prendergast writes in his analysis of Flaubert's use of language, "that sentence may be said to resume the whole Flaubert story of 1848, in both content and structure"<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, the fact that the men "disappear", insubstantial and shadowy as ghosts, behind the smoke of their own gunshots, highlights the motif of lack of visibility, threatening both historical, narrative, and individual intelligibility and progression. How is progress possible when its very perpetrators are blinded by the fog they create for themselves? The progress of history itself is thus thwarted as it is being pursued.

Significantly, while History is being "made" in Paris, Flaubert's main characters – Frédéric and Rosanette – escape to the peace and quiet of Fontainebleau. In the forests, they discover huge rocks, representative of another time; this one geological, elemental and prehistorical: "These rocks became more and more numerous... merged together like the unrecognizable ruins of some vanished city. But the frenzied chaos in which they lay conjured up rather thoughts of volcanoes, floods, great unknown cataclysms" (352). The juxtaposition of ancient "cataclysms" (a *geological* revolution) with the ongoing

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<sup>37</sup> Christopher Prendergast, 'Insurrection', *Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, (Blackwell Publishers, MA, 1996), p114

fighting in Paris (a *political* revolution) makes the latter seem absurdly transient and foolishly insignificant. There is a time that transcends the short span of a human life, and outlives 'history' – a fact that seems to scare both Frédéric and Rosanette inexplicably: “Frédéric said that they had been there since the beginning of the world and would stay like that until the end; Rosanette turned her head away, saying that ‘it would drive her mad’ ... They hurried away, threatened by giddiness, almost panic-stricken” (352). In trying to escape the “making of history” – the violence of the insurrection – they come face to face with the fundamental, non-human representation of time, a conception that, as denizens of modernity, they are completely unfamiliar with.

Flaubert's characters, thus, are mired completely in the staid temporality of their lives. Unfortunately for them, they are portrayed as witless victims of their lack of self-consciousness – Frédéric and Emma live their lives without knowledge of how time – and life – is passing them by without them wresting value out of each moment, a desire that we see next in Baudelaire's poet. Flaubert is the privileged one who takes a step back to write about them, to condemn the futility of progress and its temporality. Thus, their repetitive and circular endeavors – be it political, social or personal – are carried out in vain without them having knowledge of the fact. All that pervades them is an inexplicable lassitude and helpless inability to change the facts of their situation. Frédéric, at the dog races, is suddenly “tired out, full of contradictory desires... he felt an infinite melancholy, a longing to die” (SE, p224). The “void” of existence that repetition tries to fill up rears its ugly head whenever the attempt



fails, pervading Flaubert's characters with ennui and lassitude. Time seems to pass for Flaubert's characters – as well as their society - without change, without growth, and without ultimate meaning.

## 2.2 Baudelaire's Time: *Souviens-toi!*

In Baudelaire's poems and prose poems, there is a prevailing awareness that time in modernity has a negatively democratizing effect: in the Parisian metropolis, everyone, rich or poor, is subject to the ruthlessness of the ticking clock that divides and compartmentalizes time into portions of productivity. Georg Simmel, elucidated this phenomenon thus: "The technique of modern life is unimaginable without the most punctual integration of all activities and mutual relations into a stable and impersonal time schedule"<sup>38</sup>. The experience of time, in Baudelaire's Paris, has morphed into a rigid, tightly planned agenda to which all must adhere, relegating man to a mere cog in the machine of modernity. However, this utilitarianism of temporality in modernity belies another, more profound aspect of time that torments Baudelaire – that of the accumulation of memories which fail to validate his past and hence, his existence. Man's attempt to quantify and control time fails ultimately to impart meaning to experience; in fact, it *exacerbates* this loss of significance in existence and underscores the dreadful persistence of mortality.

In 'The Clock', the last poem in the *Spleen and Ideal* section of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire presents the relationship between the modern quantification and inhuman ceaselessness of mechanized time with the ennui of the poet. The form of the poem (in six stanzas of four lines each) echoes the neat, rigid delineation of quantified time in the modern world, the "*trois mille six cents fois*

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<sup>38</sup> Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, (Sage Publications Ltd, London, 2000) p.177

*par heure*" (FM, 259) that a second occurs, without fail. For Baudelaire, it is the knowledge that the seconds are perpetually ticking by – perpetuated by the presence of the "*dieu impassible*" that is the clock - that removes all joy from life: "*Le Plaisir vaporeux fuira vers l'horizon... Chaque instant te devore un morceau de delice*". One tries to wrest value from each second, but is thwarted by the fact that time now exists in discrete fragments that, once gone, can never be recovered. The "Now" becomes the "Past" almost instantly, sucking life from the poet: "*Rapide, avec sa voix/ D'insecte, Maintenant dit: Je suis Autrefois,/ Et j'ai pompé to vie avec ma trompe immonde!*" The Clock taunts the humble man with his inability to pan "gold nuggets" from the "ore" of minutes; ultimately, the failure of the poet to create value out of time seems to be the root cause of his sense of ennui.

However, not all of Baudelaire's laments are colored simply by modernity. While the ennui described above arises from dissatisfaction with the new, functional notion of time, the poet is also tormented on a more fundamental level by the dogged persistence of memory, which the new notion of time just serves to exacerbate. In fact, the exhortations of the clock for man to "*souviens-toi*" [remember] is a cruel reminder for man to *remember* that time is passing him by, that night comes on and that it is "too late". In a sense, to obey the clock's demands to "remember" is, paradoxically, to look towards death: "*tout te dira: Meurs, vieux lâche! Il est trop tard!*" Man is not allowed to forget his mortality, and it is here that we see the notion of memory as time's helper in inducing ennui in hapless man.

The first line of the second Spleen poem foregrounds the poet's dismay with memory: "*J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans*" (FM, 253). The accumulation of memories throughout the passing of time renders them lifeless, meaningless souvenirs in the repository of his brain. It seems that to "remember", as the Clock exhorts, is to be weighed down by the heavy concerns of banal existence. His memories are described as insignificant clutter, the proliferation and collection of generations of dusty human artifacts: "*Un gros meuble à tiroirs encombré de bilans/De vers, de billets doux, de procès, de romances,/Avec de lourds cheveux roulés dans des quittances*". There is a sense that his memories – crammed and jumbled together in an anonymous heap – have lost their meaning, even though they might have been significant at some point of the poet's life. Love letters and a lock of someone's hair undoubtedly have sentimental value in one's personal history, yet in this dusty drawer of memories, they are decontextualized, losing their ability to correspond with one's remembrance of the past. Baudelaire's memories are, in other words, dead; his brain is "*une pyramide, un immense caveau,/Qui contient plus de morts que la fosse commune*".

As the poem progresses, it appears as if man himself takes on the superfluity of his memories – he calls himself an "old boudoir" containing unfashionable, dated dresses, withered roses, and faded rococo paintings<sup>39</sup>, unable to keep up with the passing of time. Hints of an aging sexuality and body – represented by the gendered significance of a boudoir – further intensify his

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<sup>39</sup> "*Je suis un vieux boudoir plein de roses fanées,/ Où git tout un fouillis de modes surannées,/ Où les pastels plaintifs et les pâles Boucher, Seuls, respirent l'odeur d'un flacon dédouché.*"

anguish at “remembering”. In the second stanza, the distinction between man and object is dissolved further – echoing the disillusionment with material objects elucidated in the first chapter. Man takes on the superfluity of the *things* that populate his memory; he is “*matière vivante*”, nothing more than “*granit entouré d’une vague épouvante*”. The correspondence between images of granite in the second stanza with his brain as “graveyard” further underscore the poet’s identification with the dead objects in his memory; it is as if the poet himself has become the physical accumulation and product of passing time. Thus, if his memories are “dead” and insignificant, then so is his existence in the world, which has become a wasteland – a “*Saharah*” – for him. Within this isolated existence, devoid of meaning both past and present, time thus “limps” by slowly, dragging the poet gradually along to his death. Days are endless and years a dull blur. The possibility of experience is effaced; the “*boiteuses journées*” [limping days] just serve to reveal the “*immortalité*” of ennui.

Thus, it appears that the perennial presence of memory reminds one of the temporality of existence that is nothing more than a succession of empty moments, exacerbated by the presence of the ticking clock. One is both accumulation of and prey to the mindless proliferation of one’s own past; escape from this damning, value-less progression of time is futile as one’s existence – as “*matiere vivante*” – is inextricably tied to one’s memories. In short, this impasse is what feeds Baudelaire’s ennui: even though he represents the ennui as modern – as the product of the banal proliferation of documents, wills and deeds - he emphasizes that it is rooted in memory, a perennial feature of the human

condition<sup>40</sup>. The flight to a state of forgetting – whether through acts of madness or self-intoxication - though desirable, is ultimately a useless foil against the pervasiveness of temporality – for the disillusioned voyagers in ‘The Travelers’, it is only death, as eternal forgetfulness, that will allow them to find something ‘new’: *“O mort... verse-nous ton poison pour qu’il nous réconfre... Nous voulons... plonger... au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!”* (FM, 335)

Ultimately, however, all is not grim defeat for the tormented poet in the modern world. “Remembering” does not always have negative connotations. In the distressing urban landscape portrayed in ‘The Swan’, memory seems to present a possibility of hope in a diminished world. At the beginning of the poem, the Classical figure of Andromache is invoked as his muse; his “remembrance” of her in the modern realm leads to a fecundation [*“a fécondé”*] of his *“mémoire fertile”*. The dismay of the poet at the changes (rendered by Haussmann) in Paris is assuaged by his ability to “remember” his poetic antecedents. The second stanza begins thus:

*“Paris change! Mais rien dans ma mélancholie  
N’a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,  
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devant allégorie,  
Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs”* (FM,  
269)

Even though the poet expresses melancholy at the changed state of his city, and memories of the past weigh him down like “rocs”, he is able to allegorize his city, to use his memory of the past to counter the temporality of the present by transmuting it to the eternal realm of poetry. Thus, while Baudelaire is

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<sup>40</sup> Goodstein, p230

eternally tortured by the insignificance of transiency and the incessant progression of time, he continues striving to render the experience of existence both salable and immortal. Memory, for him, can both be cause of and weapon against the ennui that time induces in man. His poetry – as we shall see in the final chapter – is his attempt to combat and transcend humanity’s ennui in the face of a meaningless, temporal, painfully mortal existence.

### 2.3 Sartre's Time: A Lukewarm Pool of Time<sup>41</sup>

The passing of time, in *Nausea*, is always foregrounded in the very form of the novel. Indeed, written in diary form, the novel implicitly signifies an obvious consciousness of time in its most utilitarian sense; the writing of the exact time and date at the beginning of each entry reminds Roquentin and the reader of elapsed time. This is the Time that Baudelaire rages against, the external, concretized concept of time that is compartmentalized into productive but meaningless portions; even Roquentin himself seems to paradoxically reject it while being entrenched in it: "Nothing happens while you live...Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition...you begin to add up hours and days: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. April, May June. 1924, 1925, 1926. That's living" (39).

This inevitable, linear passage of time hints at the genre of *bildungsroman*, where, for the hero, narrative progression of time results in an accumulation of experience and knowledge that builds on itself. However, individual growth seems to be absent in Roquentin's 'journey' – the more he becomes aware about the contingency and absurdity of his existence (as proven by his relationship with objects), the more apathetic and disinterested he becomes, sinking into a "profound boredom" near the end of the novel. I argue in this essay that it is Roquentin's propensity to exist in the instantaneous moment – isolated from past and future and, paradoxically, even the present – that leads to his inability

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<sup>41</sup> This is a reference to a blurb that Sartre wrote for the first French publication of *Nausea* (which does not appear in the English translations). In it, he refers to the phenomenon of nausea: "It is Nausea; it grabs you from behind and then one floats in a *lukewarm pool of time*." (My italics.) This can be found in *La Nausée*, (London: Unwin Critical Library 1991), 48.



to learn from, and take responsibility for, his existence. He is rendered the veritable anti-hero of the *bildungsroman*, as well as an existential anti-hero.

Before we proceed further, it would be pertinent here to explicate Sartre's own definition of how an existential hero should act within time. For Sartre, existing in the instantaneous moment is undesirable. Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness*:

“If we begin by isolating man on the instantaneous island of his present, and if all his modes of being as soon as they appear are destined by nature to a perpetual present, we have radically removed all methods of understanding his original relation to the past<sup>42</sup>” (BN 161).

An “original relation” to one's past - implying a healthy connection to one's memories - is desirable in Sartre's philosophy. This would help situate one in the present more concretely, as it is impossible for a consciousness to constantly try to create itself out of nothing. Sartre once wrote that “there is not one of our acts whose meaning and value we cannot still transform even now”<sup>43</sup>, implying both that the past does not fully inform or determine present consciousness, neither does it slide into oblivion leaving consciousness to continually discover itself from out of nothing. Present consciousness exists towards a future, by way of past<sup>44</sup>, yet Roquentin himself fails to apprehend this.

Moreover, in Sartre's speech, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, he stresses too the essentiality of the future for an individual: “Man is, before all else,

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<sup>42</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966)

<sup>43</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “John Dos Passos and 1919” in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, (New York: Collier Books 1955), Trans. Anette Michelson, p. 98

<sup>44</sup> Cam Clayton (2010). *Nausea, Melancholy and the (Sartre) Internal Negation of the Past*. *Sartre Studies International* 15 (2):1-16, p.4

something that projects itself into a future, and is conscious of doing so... and man shall attain existence only when he is what he projects himself to be – not what he would like to be”<sup>45</sup>. Sartre is saying here that the future is essential to man’s existence – one must project oneself into the future and take responsibility for future choices in order to define and substantiate his existence. The future here serves as the existentialist beacon to Act – one must constantly act in the present in order to create oneself.

However, Roquentin’s conception of time is one that prevents him from acting in the vein of an existential hero. He conceives of time as an entity *external* to himself; described in *Being and Nothingness* as “universal time”, which is the time of the in-itself (*en-soi*)<sup>46</sup>. The fundamental difference between Sartre’s idea of the *en-soi* and the *pour-soi* (the self-defining nature of the *for-itself*) is the difference between the universal, externally imposed, objective being and the subjective consciousness *of* being. Roquentin seems to live predominantly within instantaneous time, in the sense that the present is a “small, isolated, self-sufficient substance”<sup>47</sup>, disconnected from the past and the future. Time exists for him, in “moments” – “Each instant appears only as part of a sequence... I cling to each instant with all my heart... and yet I would not raise a finger to stop it from being annihilated” (37). For a character who values his subjectivity (the

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<sup>45</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007), Trans. Carol Macomber, p. 22

<sup>46</sup> Cam Clayton (2010). *Nausea, Melancholy and the Internal Negation of the Past. Sartre Studies International* 15 (2):1-16, p. 5

<sup>47</sup> Sartre critiques Camus for reducing temporality “to the pure intuition of the instant”. He says of *The Outsider*: “Each sentence is a (Homan)(Esslin)(Athanasos)present instant... the sentence has frozen. Its present reality becomes the noun. Instead of acting as a bridge between past and future, it is merely a small, isolated, self-sufficient substance.” Source: “*Nausea, Melancholy and Internal Negation*.”

fact that he is writing a diary supports this idea), he simultaneously functions within time as objectively imposed, precise, coordinates as well as apprehends the problems that attend to this notion of time: in an existence that is circumscribed by clock and calendar, Roquentin loses a subjective connection to the past and future.

For one, since the past is circumscribed so rigidly within “universal time”, his memories, to, take on the characters of the “instants” that are “annihilated” with their passing. Despite his rich history, having traveled the world, his memories gradually lose their luster and reality for Roquentin, becoming fragile and lifeless as “dead leaves”. There are times when he seems to lose his past while trying to recall it: “Now my past is nothing more than an enormous vacuum” (64). Even in trying to search his past, memory and imagination are indistinguishable: “I can search the past in vain, I can only find these scraps of images and I am not sure what they represent, whether they are memories or just fiction” (32). Roquentin feels untouched by the images he has retained of the past – each image, each instant, remains separate from him and has no claim upon his present self.

Moreover, the future too, unfolds uncertainly; Roquentin is not able to clearly delineate present from future. All is a vast present. While watching an old lady cross the street in a moment of intense boredom (“I give such a big yawn that tears come into my eyes”, 30), he describes how time appears to him:

“I *see* the future. It is there, poised over the street, hardly more dim than the present. What advantage will accrue from its realization?... She walks, she was there, now she is here... I don’t

know where I am anymore: do I *see* her motions, or do I *foresee* them? I can no longer distinguish present from future and yet it lasts, it happens little by little; the old woman advances in the deserted street. This is time, time laid bare, coming slowly into existence, keeping us waiting, and when it does come making us sick because we realize it's been there for a long time... She is going to turn the corner, she turns – during an eternity.” (31)

There is a sense here that the future approaches Roquentin instead of him approaching it; he is “kept waiting” for the future, and it “comes along”.

Moreover, the future does not seem to hold accumulative meaning, rather it is the mere extension of the perpetual present – it happens, “little by little”, almost without him noticing. The instantaneous present, with the lack of meaningful relation between each second, precludes the prospect of understanding the present from the future perspective, as well as the prospect of projecting a possibility into the future. In this sense, therefore, Roquentin is also disconnected from the future, as his conception of it is signified by his inability to *notice* it coming and take charge of it. Therefore, there is no possibility of his being able to plan ahead and to take responsibility for his future.

As the past and future hold no significance for Roquentin, he is thus isolated and abandoned in the present moment. Unfortunately for him, he is painfully aware of this fact: “... I was devoid of secret dimensions... I build memories with my present self. I am cast out, forsaken in the present... I cannot escape” (33). He is stuck and mired in the present, (and here we return to the image in the first chapter) in the “viscous puddle”, Nausea’s “lukewarm pool of time” that he associates with “*our* time”, human time. And in the present, he is confronted again with the *there*-ness of existence: The present is what exists,

and “all that was not present did not exist” – “things are entirely what they appear to be – and behind them... there is nothing” (96). The materiality and looming presence of things in the present serve to further undermine *his* existence, in the way objects do. Roquentin has no recourse to a self of the past or future to redeem himself from the dumb, material existence that surrounds him and threatens to efface his tenuous presence in the world. “Profound boredom” pervades him as a result, as he is doomed to living in the perpetual absurd, contingency of the present.

Ultimately, Roquentin seeks to escape his impasse in human time by fleeing to the abstract realm of Art where time seems to take on different properties. There are only two instances throughout the novel where he can be described as vaguely at peace: when he is listening to jazz, or at the very end, when he muses about the possibility of writing a “novel”. Within the musicality of jazz he finds a way to transcend “*our* time”: “there is another happiness: the narrow duration of the music which traverses our times through and through, rejecting it, tearing at it with its dry little points; there is another time” (21). Furthermore, through his novel, he hopes to inspire some meaning upon his past: “But a time would come when the book would be written, when it would be behind me, and I think that a little of its clarity might fall over my past. Then, perhaps, because of it, I could remember my life without repugnance... And I might succeed – in the past, nothing but the past – in accepting myself” (178).

In *planning* to write his novel, Roquentin is, for once, exercising his freedom to choose a future, to throw some light over his past. He wants to write

in order to escape the rigid instantaneity of his time and reconcile past, present and future. He believes that it is within the abstract aesthetic realm that transcends human time, that one can “wash [oneself] of the sin of existing” (177), just as he believes the female jazz singer has done through her singing. This way, he can “save himself” from the horrifying reality of existing only in the present. However, this flight towards abstraction is problematic – the reader is never able to confirm if the novel ever comes to fruition. (This will be dealt with in more detail in the final chapter.)

To conclude, in any case, Roquentin’s ennui in *Nausea* stems from his inability to reconcile the past, present and future into a coherent, temporal existence, and he ends up being abandoned in the present. Only the existentialist solution of taking charge of one’s actions to define one’s future, while looking to one’s past, seems to hint at attainment of some sort of peace, regardless of the final outcome. Roquentin is by no means the most inspiring *Bildungsroman* hero, but at least he has learnt something at the end.

## **2.4 Beckett's Time: Waiting for Nothing**

Time, in Beckett's plays, is painfully indeterminate. Unlike the mechanized clock of Baudelaire's urban metropolis that ruthlessly divides time up into strictly defined particles, there is no such explicitness in *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*. Time is no longer a function of the progress of modernity – Beckett's characters are not propelled forward by the advancement of civilization; rather, they seem to be mired (as in a lukewarm puddle of time) in a stasis where progression – in their individual existences as well as in the world around them – seems to be an impossibility. Beckett seems to be reacting to the immense absurdity of progress in that it has the potential to result in the devastation of not one, but two world wars. Thus, time, for Beckett, starts to take on a heavier, stagnant quality, wavering ambiguously between a tentative progression and a futile sluggishness. In the elemental setting of *Waiting for Godot*, for example, the only instruction regarding setting is that it is "A country road. A tree. Evening". The second part indicates simply that it is "Next day. Same time. Same place." The exactitude that a clock promises is never provided in the play – Vladimir and Estragon never seem to determine exactly where or when they are located. The same goes for the characters in *Endgame*, who exist painfully in a universe where it is always "gray" outside. When the blind, paralysed Hamm asks Clov what time it is, Clov replies vaguely: "The same as usual".

Beckett's refusal to specify a determinate time and location suggests a universality of human experience that transcends the petty roles the characters

occupy in the plays. They could be anywhere, at any epoch of civilization (or even post-civilization, in the case of *Endgame*), and they could very well be us. Moreover, this ambiguous conception of time in the plays – tenebrous and almost dream-like – could possibly be Beckett’s attempt to convey the idea that man can never really grasp time. The presence of clocks – invented by man, for man – makes no difference in the face of the looming, all-encompassing presence of time itself. While this is the antithesis to the Baudelairian lament about mechanized, democratized time, it appears that the characters suffer too under this elemental inability to quantify time. For them, time exists with a languishing lack of structure and form – an amorphous, unquantifiable mass that defies any attempt to control it. Indeed, they try: Vladimir and Estragon, Clov and Hamm indulge in numerous tricks to try to break time up into manageable portions, by telling stories, making up stories, distracting each other, engaging in witty repartee. Take, for example, the following exchange between Vladimir and Estragon, as they segue from arguing about radishes to Estragon trying on his boots that no longer seem to fit him:

Vladimir: What about trying them.

Estragon: I’ve tried everything.

Vladimir: No, I mean the boots.

Estragon: Would that be a good thing?

Vladimir: It’d pass the time. (*Estragon hesitates.*) I assure you, it’d be an occupation.

Estragon: A relaxation.

Vladimir: A recreation.

Estragon: A relaxation.

Though distraction works in the meantime, there is an overall sense of the absurdity and fundamental futility to their actions. Despite it being a



temporary “occupation” and “relaxation”, their attention diverts almost immediately to a song that Vladimir starts to sing. Their attempts to fill the void of time appear as slightly pathetic farce, simultaneously desperate and useless.

However, despite the uncertain representations of time, there is a very strong sense of the inevitability of time passing (and lost time) in Beckett’s plays. Time is an amorphous mass, frighteningly without form and substance, but something that exists nonetheless, passing man by with ruthless persistence. The sudden blossoming of the tree in *Waiting for Godot* is a good example of the inevitable, yet erratic passing of time that leaves the characters confused and disoriented:

Vladimir: But yesterday evening it was all black and bare. And now it’s covered with leaves.

Estragon: Leaves?

Vladimir: But in a single night,

Estragon: It must be the Spring.

Vladimir: But in a single night!

This progression of time does not leave the characters unscathed, either. One can intimate a gradual weakening of the characters as time passes – inconsistently – and they start to show signs of age. For example, Pozzo, on the first day (in the first act) a robust, domineering fellow, appears in the second act as a blind man completely dependent on his servant, Lucky, whom he was abusing the day before. Vladimir and Estragon, too, display signs of age. Estragon has problems standing, presumably because of the bad boots but also, it seems, simply because he is old. He dozes off pathetically several times, too, throughout the play:

Estragon: My feet! (*He sits down again and tries to take off his boots.*) Help me!

Vladimir: Was I sleeping, while the others suffered?... (*Estragon having struggled with his boots in vain, is dozing off again.*

*Vladimir looks at him.*)

Estragon is also the one who forgets, more so than the more-lucid Vladimir, what happened the previous day. As mentioned in the previous chapter (Beckett/Objects), Estragon seems to represent physicality and the body as evinced by his preoccupation with his boots that never seem to fit him – a reference perhaps to earthly, corporeal concerns. Vladimir, on the other hand, is irritated by his *hat*, which he constantly removes, “as though to dislodge a foreign body” (4). One could read this, to, as an indicator of his more cerebral role in the play. Thus, while physical manifestations of age can be detected in Estragon’s behavior more so than in Vladimir’s, Vladimir displays more resigned awareness of his situation. He is aware of the passage of time and the effect it has on man: “We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. But habit is a great deadener.” (105). He is tired and worn out by the futility of waiting, by the fruitless passing of time. Estragon whines about the inconvenience and discomfort of his situation, to be sure, but Vladimir is acutely aware of the fundamental despair that plagues him while he waits, endlessly: “I can’t go on.” (105)

This reading of their relationship has echoes in the main characters of *Endgame*. Beckett has been reported to have said that the blind, lame Hamm and his servant-friend Clov are really “Vladimir and Estragon at the end of their

lives”<sup>48</sup>. It follows that Hamm (the possible counterpart of Vladimir), is presented in a state of geriatric decline. He is blind, lame, and wears “a dressing gown, a stiff toque on his head... a rug over his knees, thick socks on his feet<sup>49</sup>”. Moreover, like Vladimir, he appears the more cerebral of the two – engaging in creative spinning of yarns to help pass the time. Clov, on the other hand, is physically better off (he can walk, but cannot sit), yet he is as dependent on Hamm as Hamm is on him, and is unable to leave.

In any case, the physical decrepitude of the two – their loss of capacity for locomotion – is juxtaposed cruelly against the relentless awareness of their selves, for whom time “can never have a stop”<sup>50</sup>. Martin Esslin, a Beckett critic, writes that “the more in Beckett’s works the material envelope decays and is stripped away, the more painful becomes the tension between the temporal and the infinite”<sup>51</sup>. If Vladimir and Estragon are young versions of Hamm and Clov, waiting patiently for Godot, there is still an element of hope and rational to their existence. Time stretches in front of them with the possibility of salvation and relief from their state of anticipation. However, in *Endgame*, Hamm and Clov are no longer waiting for anything, except death. The world outside is destroyed and “gray”, with no known living thing besides themselves and Nell and Nagg, much less the possibility of a “Godot”. Tellingly, the play starts with the word “finished”, setting the tone for despair and hopelessness:

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<sup>48</sup> Arthur N. Athanason, *Endgame: The Ashbin Play* (Twayne Publishers, NY, 1993), p.58

<sup>49</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (Found online at this address: <http://www.samuel-beckett.net/endgame.html>) All subsequent references to *Endgame* come from this source.

<sup>50</sup> Martin Esslin, *Mediations: Essays on Brecht, Beckett, and the Media* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 78

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 78

Clov: (*Fixed gaze, tonelessly*) Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. (*Pause.*) Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap. (*Pause.*) I can't be punished anymore.

Moreover, his allusion to the Sisyphean task of creating a "heap" out of grains of sand suggests the cruel absurdity of passing time – doing the same thing for so long only results in meager compensation. Clov seems already tired, and worn out, and frustrated, at the beginning of the play, with the futility of his existence.

Hamm, too, starts his first speech with – significantly – a yawn. While it represents dramatically his awakening from a deep sleep, the yawn could also symbolize the immense boredom (think back here to Baudelaire's *monster délicat*) that characterizes his existence. Hamm continues: "Can there be misery – (*he yawns*) – loftier than mine?... (*proudly*) the bigger a man the fuller he is. (*Pause, gloomily.*) And the emptier... Enough, it's time it ended... and yet I hesitate, I hesitate to... to end. Yes, there it is, it's time it ended and yet I hesitate to – (*he yawns*) – to end."

He realizes the emptiness of his existence despite having lived long ("the bigger a man"), yet he still "hesitates" to die. It appears that even in his awareness of the passing of time and his inability to fill the rest of his life with meaningful activity, he is inundated by a yawn – by oppressive boredom and lassitude at his temporality.

Indeed, the constant repetition of words and exchanges throughout the play emphasizes the sense of eternal, circular recurrence that excludes any sense of progress despite the obvious passing of time. For example, during the 85

minutes (approximately) of the play, Clov's "16 entrances and 16 exits are verbally challenged by Hamm 26 times"<sup>52</sup>. Temporality is made all the more tormenting here because the characters can't make the most of it – they spend most of their time repeating the same things again and again. Beckett's wicked sense of humor is apparent in the way he makes his characters pronounce judgment on themselves – twice, no less – as Clov and Nell both repeat their lament at repetition at different points in the play: "Why this farce, day after day?" As the Beckett critics, McMillan and Fehsenfeld, write in their analysis of his plays, "Time stands still on stage. Beckett's characters have only one desire, to escape the oppressive presence of time. But then boredom and weariness always gain the upper hand again, and point the tedious way to the "end" before their eyes."<sup>53</sup>

Beckett's characters thus seemed doomed to exist in the eternal present, in a sort of limbo from which they have no escape. Memory was a problematic abstract in *Waiting for Godot*, as Estragon could never remember what happened the day before, while Vladimir struggled to retain his certainty of his memories:

Vladimir: Wait... we embraced... we were happy... happy... what do we do now that we're happy... go on waiting... waiting... let me think... it's coming... go on waiting... now that we're happy... let me see... ah! The tree!

Estragon: The tree?

Vladimir: Do you not remember?

Estragon: I'm tired.

Vladimir: Look at it.

*They look at the tree.*

Estragon: I see nothing.

Vladimir: But yesterday evening it was all black and bare.

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<sup>52</sup> Athanason, p. 74

<sup>53</sup> Athanason, p. 75

It is precisely this lack of certainty in the past that makes repetition such a powerful time-passer ?? in the play. As the characters have no recollection of what happened in the past, they are doomed to repeat their actions, conversations and thoughts without realizing it. Even when they remember, however, there is no sense of relief or salvation from the eternal present. Estragon remembers, for once, that “yesterday evening [they] spent blathering about nothing in particular. That’s been going on now for half a century.” Vladimir then asks if he remembers “any fact, any circumstance”, and Estragon replies wearily: “Don’t torment me, Didi” (74). Despite Estragon’s memory of their inane conversation the previous day, he doesn’t remember specifics. Thus, “blathering” shall occur again, and again, melding into years of mindless, repetitive, undistinguishable chatter.

In *Endgame*, too, the past – and memory of the past – is presented as something insignificant; contrite, even. Nell and Nagg, Hamm’s immobile parents living in ashbins, reminisce about the past in a decreasingly enthusiastic manner:

Nagg: Do you remember –

Nell: No.

Nagg: When we crashed on our tandem and lost our shanks.

*(They laugh heartily.)*

Nell: It was in the Ardennes.

*(They laugh less heartily.)*

Nagg: On the road to Sedan.

*(They laugh still less heartily.)*

Their attempt to resurrect the past– with images of cycling in the Ardennes and rowing in Lake Como – seems trite, mechanical, and part of a

habitual pattern to efface the cruel present<sup>54</sup>, as can be seen from the decreasing volume of genuine laughter. Obviously, their memories do not seem to provide any solace or joy for them; and if good memories of time past do not serve to bathe one's existence in the warm glow of recollection, then the dismal present (especially in their case) is made all the more desolate and unbearable.

It is even worse for Hamm, who doesn't even know what yesterday means. And Clov, who hates the idea of it:

Clov: I oiled [the castors] yesterday.

Hamm: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!

Clov: (*violently*) That means the bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything any more, teach me others.

Furthermore, it seems that Clov's definition of "yesterday" is based on Hamm's definition, which he has forgot. They are tormented by the idea of yesterday because without it, their existence stretches out in an unyielding gray mass of nothingness.

The end of the play culminates in a stalemate. Clov stands at the door, wanting to leave but unable to, while Hamm stays where he is, ignorant of whether Clov remains or not. (Interestingly, the last word of the play is "remain" – a subtle reminder of how Hamm cannot do anything but exist in the eternal present.) It appears that this tableau is what embodies Beckett's ennui: the waiting in *Waiting for Godot* – that gradual spiraling towards death without

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<sup>54</sup> Sidney Homan, 'Endgame: The Playwright Completes Himself', *Modern Critical Interpretations: Endgame* (Chelsea House Publishers, NY, 1988) Ed. Harold Bloom (Flaubert, The Letters of Gustave Flaubert) (Flaubert, Letters about Madame Bovary) (Flaubert, Madame Bovary) (Bruneau), p. 134

having achieved any significant epiphany – culminates in the hopeless and helplessness of Hamm’s and Clov’s situation. They remain imprinted in our (the audience’s) memories as characters carrying out the endless farce of life. The past provides no solace, the future is a bleak, empty void, and the present is the incessant repetition of “the same inanities” (*Endgame*). Time weighs down on the characters, but they are powerless to fight its effects on their bodies and on their weary psyches. Living alienated in the present remains a force of habit. But habit, as Vladimir describes it, is a “great deadener”. A “deadener” does not imply death, per se, as Vladimir, Estragon and Hamm do not ultimately seek death wholeheartedly, but it implies something much more tormenting – living a dulled, *deadened* existence, stripped of meaning even as it progresses futilely towards a “tedious end”.



# CHAPTER THREE: THE ART(ISTS) OF ENNUI

## 3.1 Why Write?

Why write? Why bother to write when existence consists of meaningless revolutions and repetitions of things, people and history? Why write when time slips out of the poet's or artist's grasp and "*le Plaisir vaporeux fuira vers l'horizon*", leaving him gasping with horror, or when time passes without us noticing as we wait for something – anything – to fill the void. Why write when "*le ciel [est] bas et lourd*", when existence itself seems to be an earthly cage from which there is no escape, when even a tree root threatens one's worth as human being in the world? The fact is that Flaubert, Baudelaire, Sartre and Beckett, despite being the products of vastly different times and backgrounds, took the ennui that tormented them and transformed it into art. Their despair gave them the drive to create, transform, and even exalt the banality of their earthly experience - whether through Flaubert's hyper-aesthetic tomes of stylistic perfection, or the aesthetic-as-spiritual salvation of Baudelaire's poetry, or the humanistic grounding of Sartre's anti-hero or the tragicomic farce of Beckett's incapacitated characters.. In this chapter, I will attempt to elucidate further, and

more clearly, the impetus towards art and literature that propelled these authors in their respective epochs, attempting to answer the essential question: why write? That their literature had such different responses from the public – Baudelaire and Flaubert were sent on trial while Beckett and Sartre, in contrast, were nominated for the Nobel Prize – is testament to the very different ways the authors chose to react to their situations. Even taking into consideration the different historical contexts in which their works were received, the fact still remains that the works of the 19<sup>th</sup> century writers rebelled against the prevailing morality and mindsets, while the oeuvres of the 20<sup>th</sup> century soothed and even assuaged, in a sense, the weary post-war *zeitgeist*. Throughout this chapter, therefore, I will put the authors in conversation with each other, grappling with their various affinities and divergences in their texts, concluding finally with an analysis of the true import/purpose of the art of literature for the characters in the work, for the author, and for the audience.

### 3.2 19<sup>th</sup> Century: The Pessimistic I/Eye

As contemporaries living within a decisive period in French history, Baudelaire and Flaubert naturally had correspondences with each other – both in terms of epistolary exchange and similarities in their artistic concerns. Indeed, their concerns in their texts, as demonstrated in the previous chapters, display a certain coherence: the disillusionment with material, spiritual and human commodification in the city as well as the torment of worldly, mechanized time are symptomatic of the inability of the reality of banal, quotidian experience to live up to their conception of an imagined Ideal. Jean Bruneau once noted, “*Il n’y a nulle meilleure introduction à Flaubert que les Fleurs du Mal*”<sup>55</sup>, that the confessional style of Baudelaire’s poetry provides a good basis for elucidating the mindset of Flaubert himself, since he tends to retain a safe distance from his own characters. (One never attains an explicit judgment, sentiment, or point of view from the narrator of *Madame Bovary* and *Sentimental Education*.)

*Soup* would be a good metaphor at this point to illustrate their similar concerns. In *The Soup and the Clouds*, Baudelaire’s poet indulges in a mystical, otherworldly reverie: “I was looking out of the open dining room window contemplating those moving architectural marvels that God constructs out of mist, edifices of the impalpable” (PS, 91). His ascent towards the space where his spirit can “wander at ease... with an unutterable male delight... free from the futile strivings and the cares which dim existence to the realm of mist”<sup>56</sup> is rudely interrupted by his “beloved”, who shrieks at him to “eat your soup, you

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<sup>55</sup> Introduction to *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris, Seuil, 1964, vol. I, p. 9

<sup>56</sup> *Elevation*, from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, p. 14

damned bastard of a cloud monger". The ideal is beyond the grasp of the poet, who must return to mundane existence and the sickening reality of *soup*. This is echoed in *Madame Bovary*, where the "boiled beef" that Emma eats during her dinners with Charles induces in her "secret soul waves of nauseous disgust"<sup>57</sup> – the tedious everyday-ness of the meal is in direct conflict with her desires for the "elevation of the soul... ideas of the infinite, the ideal" (MB, 69). Emma's Romantic delusions towards the ideal are treated paradoxically with irony and compassion by Flaubert, who associated himself with the ill-fated housewife: "Madame Bovary, c'est moi". For both Flaubert and Baudelaire, therefore, the flight towards the Ideal was an escape for them (but whether this was entirely successful or not will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs) into a realm that was mutually exclusive from the life of boiled beef and soup. The artistic drive, for both writers, is tied to the attainment of a (non-religious) spiritual welfare that is a condition of not being tied down to the banality of worldly experience.

A closer analysis of their works will elucidate more clearly what the Ideal is for each artist. In one of the first few poems of the *Spleen et Idéal* section of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 'La Beauté', Baudelaire makes explicit the poet's search and dedication for the Ideal in art. The poem presents the perspective of the ideal creature of Beauty, who sits cold, distant and stern ("*Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris*") like a "*sphinx incompris*". She describes her breast as made

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<sup>57</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (W.W Norton & Company, NY 2005), Ed. Margaret Cohen, Trans. Eleanor Marx Aveling and Paul de Man, p. 56. Subsequent quotations will be from this edition, referred to by the letters 'MB'.

*“pour inspirer au poète un amour eternal et muet ainsi que la matière”*. Here, the materiality that Baudelaire so lamented in his other poems takes on a different dimension – love and desire for the ideal is seen as a ‘matter’ that is eternal and timeless. The ‘object’ of beauty is one that wipes out all worldly concerns, even that of time. The poets that worship at the altar of Beauty itself lose track of time and exist in an awed timelessness: *“Les poètes, devant mes grandes attitudes... consumeront leurs jours en d’austères études”*. Thus, the ideal is where the twin concerns of objects and time (as explicated in the previous chapters) converges for Baudelaire and where the possibility of eradicating, or transcending, Ennui is evinced.

Despite the almost hypnotized state of being that the poets take on in studying Beauty, there is a sense of futility in their task. Her austere perfection, immobile (*‘Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes’*) and pure (*‘J’unis un coeur de neige à la blancheur des cygnes’*), leaves no room for penetration and comprehension. Poets spend their days in mute contemplation of her on a pedestal, with no promise of attainment. The evident male/female dichotomy between the poets and Beauty signifies here a sense of frustrated (eroticized) desire – in front of the feminized figure of the Ideal, the poets seem to be rendered impotent. Their inability to consummate this desire for the ideal informs, in a sense, Baudelaire’s ennui. However, there seems to be a privileging of the poet’s role. In the final stanza of the poem, Beauty reveals her *pièce de résistance*:

*‘Car j’ai, pour fasciner ces dociles amants,  
De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles:*

*Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles!*

The fact that her eyes are *mirrors* – capable of reflecting the poet’s own image in them – suggest a certain narcissistic aspect to their dedication to art and beauty. The poets gaze at her, and at *themselves* gazing at her, seeing themselves in the eyes of Beauty. Baudelaire’s narcissistic poet worships beauty as a decadent, solipsistic ideal, yet it remains worship – he does not seem to be able to completely attain and possess her. In a sense, the poet is executing a sort of artistic masturbation.

This poem can now function as a platform for a discussion of Flaubert’s approach to art which was also, in a way, sexualized. In more than one instance, he likens the act of writing to a violent sexual encounter<sup>58</sup> that leaves him exhausted and spent. (The fact, though, that he actually seems to consummately satisfy his desire indicates his awareness of his potency as artist, setting him apart from the weakened Baudelairian poets.) Like Baudelaire, Flaubert had an almost Platonic conception of the artistic ideal, which for him, was Style. He agonized over the perfection of his art, without regard for earthly experience:

“What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together *by the strength of its style*... a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible... the finest works are those that contain the least matter; *the closer expression comes to thought, the closer language comes to coinciding and merging with it, the finer the*

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<sup>58</sup> In a letter to Louise Colet about the writing process of *Madame Bovary*, he writes: “I am in the midst of love-making... Now I have great pains in my knees, in my back, and in my head. I feel like a man who has -----ed too much (forgive me for the expression) – a kind of rapturous lassitude”.

*result. I believe the future of Art lies in this direction.*"<sup>59</sup> (My italics.)

In order to merge what he felt was the imperfect medium of language - that only produced clichés and platitudes<sup>60</sup> - with the abstract realm of ideas that he wanted to express, Flaubert invoked the use of Style - a way of writing that elevate his representation of reality in all its boring drudgery to a timeless work of art that transcended the "nothingness" of its subject matter. Style for him, from the "standpoint of Pure Art", was "in itself an absolute manner of seeing things". This "absolute manner of seeing" is apparent in *Madame Bovary*, in which Flaubert presents reality *as it is* while at the same time hinting at a higher, elevated perspective. This effect is attained through his use of *free indirect style*, wherein the omniscient narrator effaces certainty of his presence in order to enter the characters' consciousness and to enter their thoughts. The resulting effect is thus one of prevailing uncertainty - the reader sometimes loses ability to ascertain if the sentiment or judgment expressed belongs to the character or the narrator. The reader is simultaneously conscious of the narrator's presence and of his calculated detachment from the character - textual irony is hence allowed to blossom within this locus of uncertainty.

What follows will be an explication of an example of Flaubert's style and how, in converging realist description with attention to form, it functions as

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<sup>59</sup>Gustave Flaubert, 'Letters about Madame Bovary', *Madame Bovary* (W.W Norton & Company, NY 2005) Ed. Margaret Cohen, p. 300

<sup>60</sup> In describing Emma's inability to convey the depths of her feeling to her lover Rodolphe through her use of clichés, Flaubert writes: "The human tongue is like a cracked cauldron on which we beat out tunes to set a bear dancing when we would make the stars weep with our melodies." (MB, p154).

Flaubertian Art, as an “absolute manner of seeing”. In Part I, Chapter 6, Flaubert sketches Emma’s childhood in the convent. He describes the presence of an old maid who cleaned the linen every month at the convent, a sentimental biddy who devoured the sentimental novels of the time and imparted her Romantic yearnings to the young convent girls. Flaubert describes the stories she tells in a deadpan narrative style that, taken in itself, is not ironic *per se*: “She told stories... they were all about love, lovers, sweethearts, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely pavilions, postilions killed at every relay, *horses ridden to death on every page*, somber forests, heart-aches, vows, sobs, tears and kisses, little boatrides by moonlight, nightingales in shady groves, gentlemen brave as lions, gentle as lambs, virtuous as no one ever was, always well dressed, and weeping like fountains” (32). While Flaubert’s description of the excessive romanticism that goes on in these stories holds for us as readers an evident judgment upon the literature of the time, there is no present irony *in* this passage itself. It is pure, realist description.

However, we now move to an unveiling of Emma’s internalization of her romantic education later on in the novel, through the device of indirect free style. Emma, after having attended a ball held by petty royalty at Vaubyessard, is infused with a profound admiration and awe for what she thinks is Parisian life: “Paris, more vague than the ocean, glimmered before Emma’s eyes with a silvery glow... There were dresses with trains, deep mysteries, anguish hidden beneath smiles. Then came the society of the duchesses; all were pale; all got up at four o’clock; the women, poor angels, wore English point on their petticoats; and the



men, their talents hidden under a frivolous appearance, *rode horses to death at pleasure parties*" (50). (My italics)

From the second sentence onwards of the passage, free indirect style indicates Emma's voice. "Poor angels" is an indicator of the subjectivity behind the sentence – it is Emma who pronounces this, not the narrator. We also detect a repeated phrase – "rode horses to death" – except that this time, it is no longer a detached, empirical description. The fact that it is Emma's "voice" here, and that she is using the words that the old maid did, evinces a corrosive irony that Flaubert intended fully. Her reveries, as Jonathan Culler writes in his analysis of Flaubert's language, presented as products of the Romanticism developed earlier on in the book, enter "the domain of irony". The "absolute manner of seeing" is thus apparent here, in that there is no moral judgment on the narrator's part yet there is an overarching provocation for the reader to consider different ways of processing the sentences in the text – the reader is, in other words, an enlightened one. In other words, Flaubert's "*sphinx incompris*" – his ideal of his art - would be the stylistic mastery of his prose, in which the artist is "like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere"<sup>61</sup>.

Like God, Flaubert pronounces judgment on the incapacity of his characters to achieve the ideal in his novels. Also, like God, he believes himself to be above the fray of common human existence, safe in his ivory tower of artistic perfection. He invokes the graphic metaphor of a condom to represent his desire to remain untainted from the *betise* of society: "Let us always have a vast

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<sup>61</sup> Letter to Louise Colet (Dec 9, 1852) Online source: [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Gustave\\_Flaubert](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Gustave_Flaubert)

condom within us to protect the health of our soul amid the filth into which it is plunged”<sup>62</sup>. Withdrawing from society was Flaubert’s rebellion against the world; the only agony he is willing to undergo is that of Art. By relying on the usage of style, he can transcend the exigencies of mediocre language; even though Flaubert is still surrounded by stupidity and *betise*, he believes his privileged position as artist can propose to rescue him from the hopelessness that Emma apprehends.

This is where his greatest divergence from Emma reveals itself. Emma is portrayed as a bourgeois Romantic subject in a post-Romantic, progressively industrializing world. For her, Life cannot live up to Literature, and the vocabulary of *bliss, passion, ecstasy!* that she is equipped with is insufficient “to capture the inchoate depths of human feeling”<sup>63</sup>. What results from this failure to elucidate, or even comprehend, this painful tension is ennui and despair. All attempts on her part to escape ennui serve to throw her right back into it – the gap between reality and the ideal is too vast to bridge.

In this aspect, Baudelaire<sup>64</sup> resembles Emma more than he does her *maître* – he, too, was thrown back again and again into the macadam of existence in his attempt to transcend it. Like Emma, Baudelaire was unable to ascertain a concrete solution for escaping existence in a way that Flaubert, who was completely assured in his superiority to other members of society, did.

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<sup>62</sup> From *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert: 1830-1857*, translated and edited by Francis Steegmuller (Harvard University Press, MA, 1980), p. 210

<sup>63</sup> Goodstein, p. 208

<sup>64</sup> While distinguishing Baudelaire the man and his poet-narrators, it can be argued that the narrators of Baudelaire’s poems combine to create a picture of the contradictions and conflicts that Baudelaire himself felt about his art and aesthetics.

The explication of *The Bad Glazier* in the first chapter is a good example of the failure of the artist to transcend his spleen. The poet, existing disconsolately in the inescapable muck of his city (he notices the glazier “whose piercing and discordant cry floated up to [him] through the heavy, filthy Paris air”), searches for beauty and transcendence in this very mire. However, his attempts to look for it end in disappointment – he finds only clear glass panes, no colored ones to “make life beautiful” for him. His search for the Ideal serves paradoxically to render him conscious of the unattainability of this very ideal, as well as remind him that it is a very solitary search – the less privileged denizens of his society are unable to even comprehend or afford to “make life beautiful”. In a sense, Baudelaire himself did not exist in a vacuum, and his experience of plunging into the city – unsheathed - informed his search for the ideal. Unlike Flaubert, he was ultimately unable to separate Art from his painfully real experience in Parisian life – Baudelaire’s failure to escape from Spleen is linked inextricably to the presence of the glass salesman. Thus, in writing this prose poem, he is demonstrating awareness of the effect of the bored, privileged poet on the working class that might prove destructive and dangerous – the artist’s quest for the ideal and flight from ennui might prove in some ways tangential to, or even detrimental to society. Moreover, Baudelaire too displays consciousness of the fact that the less privileged members of society – the working class, the poor, the disenfranchised, the outsiders – simply have no chance or opportunity to even attempt to apprehend and search for Beauty, for the Ideal.

'La Fou et La Vénus' from *Paris Spleen*, written more than 10 years after *Les Fleurs du Mal* and 'La Beauté', displays Baudelaire's growing divergence from his younger dedication to the cult of Beauty and the Ideal, and his increasing concern with the denizens of the society he was mired in. Instead, he chose to portray his surroundings with realistic candor, resigned as he was to remaining part of the crowd [*la foule*]. This prose poem describes how a denizen of the city is despairing at the fact that he cannot begin to apprehend the ideal of Beauty – corresponding to 'La Beauté' in that both "portray the artist-figure facing the object of his cult"<sup>65</sup>. However, unlike the poets, this fool is definitely not the most artistic of men; he is described as a mass of irritating, superfluous trinkets and decoration whose 'art' is relegated to the realm of slapstick and base humor: "those voluntary buffoons who, with cap and bells and tricked out in a ridiculous and gaudy costume, are called upon to make kings laugh" (PS, 10). However, he is still able to perceive Beauty and aspire towards it. The *amour muet* that Beauty so inspires in the poets of 'La Beauté' is mirrored in this prose poem in the fact that it is the fool's eyes – and not his mouth – that bespeak his anguish at being so far from the ideal: "And his eyes say: "I am the least and loneliest of men, deprived of love and friendship, wherein I am inferior even to the lowest animals. Yet I, too, am made to understand and to feel immortal Beauty!" (PS, 10) Unlike the poets, however, Beauty's eyes are "implacable" marble<sup>66</sup>, excluding the fool from active participation in the search of the ideal. He is shut off from Beauty, who stands above him on an unreachable pedestal.

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<sup>65</sup> *Petits Poemes en prose, Edition critique*, Robert Kopp (Librarie José Corti, Paris, 1969) p205

<sup>66</sup> As opposed to the "eyes of eternal light" in 'La Beauté'.

The fool and the glazier are thus emblematic of the proletarian members of the city, the underappreciated denizens that actually work for a living. The narcissism and elevated position of the poet in 'La Beauté' can be contrasted with the no less genuine, yet futile yearning of the fool. Ennui, here, has been democratized. The poet no longer exists in a privileged position, away from the common multitudes, but is privy to (and part of) the larger, underlying inability of man in society to apprehend the ideal. Indeed, the observer-narrator in this prose poem, presumably the poet-figure, has taken on the detached role of observing someone else worship Beauty, instead of worshipping it himself. The poet, in his privileged position of detached observer, seems to display compassion and empathy for this "grief-stricken soul". In this prose poem, as well as in 'The Bad Glazier', the poet-figure is twice removed from beauty – the crazed poet in the latter poem searches for Beauty but is thwarted in the end. Thus, the presence of society's rejects seems to take more precedence in Baudelaire's later oeuvre than the search for the Ideal itself. This is not to say, however, that his desire for escape in an aesthetic Ideal was vanquished. It would be more accurate to state that Baudelaire's approach to art and Beauty was ultimately tempered by a critical social perspective, one that focused strongly on the fragmented urban reality of the city (especially apparent in his later work). His works, apart from elucidating the lack of Ideal in existence, spread out to include the other characters around him – the poet is no longer a privileged bourgeois figure. His position of detachment from the masses is what precisely allows him to make critical observations of the social malaises that

tormented him. Yet, he is still a denizen of the city – both a concerned and engaged social observer as well as a poet troubled by the role he plays in his surroundings. In fact, his ability to plunge into the crowds at will while keeping his individuality intact<sup>67</sup> is the crux of his second impetus to art: the distinct display of compassion and judgment that the poet displays in *Le Fou et la Venus*. As Ross Chambers notes rightly in his essay on Baudelaire's Paris: "The 'Parisian prowler' and 'man of the crowd' whose aloofness and melancholia, which enable him to *see* the problem that escapes others, also make him *part* of the problem he sees: an observant 'eye' indistinguishable from a socially embattled 'I'"<sup>68</sup>. Baudelaire is essentially a poet concerned with *morals*, morals not in the religious sense of the word, but moral in that he labors to represent the modern multitude around him – the disenfranchised, the poor, the exiled, the lost, among which he felt he, too, belonged. Indeed, he believes that "the puerile utopia of the school of *art for art's sake*, by excluding morality and often passion itself, was necessarily sterile"<sup>69</sup>. For him, the *subject* of his poems – be it the poet himself, or the characters he is sketching – never becomes invisible, subsumed by the shadow of Style. Ennui in existence – the disparity between earthly life for the poet and everyone around him, and the ideal – would remain ever-present for Baudelaire, while Art could only provide a partial, temporary escape.

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<sup>67</sup> 'Crowds', *Paris Spleen*, p. 20

<sup>68</sup> Chambers, Ross. "Baudelaire's Paris." *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire*. Ed. Rosemary Lloyd. Cambridge University Press, 2006, p102

<sup>69</sup> Charles Baudelaire, (*Euvres completes*, 2 vols. Ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliotheque de la Pleiade, 1975-6), (II, p26)

From what we have observed so far, Baudelaire seems more an incapacitated but compassionate poet, stuck in ugly existence but choosing to attempt to sublimate it into Beauty. Throughout his short, drug-addled, syphilis-stricken life, his potentially self-indulgent paeans to the Ideal were tempered by his awareness of, and empathy for, the necessary tedium of life, work and survival. If one had to classify him, I would say that Baudelaire was a disappointed Idealist, while Flaubert seems to have taken a more aggressively condemnatory stand: his works, while minimally empathetic (especially in *Madame Bovary*), are overall scathing attacks on (bourgeois) society. In fact, he famously said about *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, his unfinished final work: "It is a book in which I shall spit out my bile". Trapped in his hatred of his bourgeois milieu, Flaubert seems to miss out on characters such as Baudelaire's fool and glazier in his texts – so blinded is he by scorn of the bourgeois milieu in which he functions that these characters fall below his empathy. His intellectual and physical seclusion from society is symptomatic of role as eternal pessimist: ennui in existence is only escapable by extraction of oneself from this very existence. Flight to the abstract world of Style and Form is the only desirable platform from which one can pronounce judgment on the *bêtise* of man – but only man in the bourgeois realm.

In both cases, however, each author seems more an observer (and "eye") of society than a happily functioning member of it. Flaubert preferred to observe what went on around him and vented his spleen in his works, preferring a self-imposed isolation and alienation; Baudelaire, though occasionally sucked into in

the reality of experience against his will, exists mainly as a detached observer of and within the crowd. Ultimately, as observers and scribes of society, these artists were revolutionary in their approach to literature, but they were essentially *reactionary* in their approach to life. Their art, while detailing the emptiness of and dissatisfaction with the experience of reality, did not prescribe any practical possibilities of existence – an approach that was rejected and transformed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



### 3.3 20<sup>th</sup> Century: From Reactionaries to Revolutionaries

The catalyst of WWI and WWII opened up a whole new outlook for literature. The indescribable events of the wars threatened the very foundations of humanity and necessitated a reevaluation of what it meant to be human. Ennui in existence took on a much more heavy, elemental quality – the concerns of the 19<sup>th</sup> century of progress and development, where ennui was characterized by the hapless desires and despair of characters swept along in the rush of history, are subsumed by the sticky, stagnant, “viscous puddle” of existence, by the ponderous monotony of waiting and *remaining*. Previous concerns with Beauty, ‘art for art’s sake’, and the like were no longer the sole considerations of Art – with the destruction of faith in mankind came the destruction of ‘purposiveness without purpose’. Art now had to function within the realm of man, for man, instead of trying to distance oneself from the ennui of existence, under the beautifying aspects of Form, Style, and the Ideal. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the attempt of flight toward an abstract Ideal was not permissible – man is stuck in the puddle of existence and must learn to deal with it in any way he can.

Sartre himself scorns both Flaubert and Baudelaire for their hyperaesthetic methods of writing; Flaubert was a bourgeois hypocrite who condemned the very society he was benefitting from (Flaubert believed that all he had to do was to “practice high thinking in private and [he] could continue to enjoy [his] goods and prerogatives with a peaceful conscience”<sup>70</sup>), while Baudelaire was a masochistic fatalist, whose “failure in life was willed and

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<sup>70</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘For Whom Does One Write’, *What is Literature* (Harper & Row, Ny, 1978), Trans. Bernard Frechtman, p. 119

provoked by himself"<sup>71</sup> and whose poems "are like substitutes for the creation of Good which he had renounced. They reveal the gratuitousness of conscience, they are completely useless"<sup>72</sup>. The war and the Occupation in France had led Sartre to "an emphasis on choice, engagement, and activity"<sup>73</sup>; his work, *Qu'est que la littérature?* (What is Literature, 1947), questioned the role of a writer and *littérature engagée* (engaged literature) in society. To Sartre the committed existentialist, therefore, these authors were behaving 'inauthentically'; they were passive artists who retreated from the "vast fecundity" of existence, secure in their self-righteous sense of ennui and cultivated despair.

Indeed, already in *Nausea*, one of his earliest works, the flight towards the abstract, ideal world of art is presented as problematic. Roquentin can possibly be read as Sartre's representation of the Flauberts and Baudelaire of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose decision to put an end to his metaphysical impasse by writing a novel is presented ambivalently. At the end of the novel, Roquentin, wants to write a novel that would be "above existence", a creation that would immortalize him, in a sense, in the realm of the extract, just like the jazz sung by the "Negress" in the café:

"And there would be people who would read this book and say: "Antoine Roquentin wrote it," and they would think about my life as I think about the Negress': as something precious and almost legendary. A book." (178)

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<sup>71</sup> Wallace Fowlie, Introduction to *What is Literature*, p. xiii

<sup>72</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire* (New Directions Publishing, NY, 1967), Trans. Martin Turnell, p.70

<sup>73</sup> Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927-1961* (Cornell University Press, NY, 2005), p. 149

It remains uncertain whether Sartre really meant for his (anti)hero to search for personal meaning in the aesthetic realm - that human existence may be fulfilled by art - or that this was supposed to be taken ironically., That Roquentin actually *does, in fact* complete his proposed novel is never confirmed, further undermining the probability of ultimate validation of his existence. Critics have questioned Sartre's decision to allow Roquentin to conveniently solve his existential crisis by writing a novel; Iris Murdoch, a premier academician of Sartre sees the end of the work as incidental rather than central to the philosophical purpose of the novel: "The interest of *La Nausée* does not lie in its conclusion, which is merely sketched in; Sartre has not developed it sufficiently for it even to pose as a solution to the problem"<sup>74</sup>. Arthur Danto, another critic, does not see how Roquentin's "hyperaesthetic, precious view of art and artistic creativity"<sup>75</sup> at the end fits into Sartre's philosophy, least of all in the light of *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*

However, if we view Roquentin as a negative representation of the existential hero, as one who has apprehended existence in its horrifying, contingent nakedness yet does not know how to take action within it then we can distinguish here the crux of the paradigm shift between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, in that the aesthetic realm cannot function as a refuge from nothingness. In fact, Roquentin displays several similar traits to Flaubert (traits that Sartre himself criticizes in *What is Literature*) – both are bourgeois, both profess disdain for their milieu, but both fail to completely escape it. Moreover – and

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<sup>74</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist* (Glasgow, Fontana, 1967), p19

<sup>75</sup> Arthur Danto, *Sartre* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1967), p15

most significantly – both ultimately look to the aesthetic realm for salvation from the ennui of daily existence.

As established in the previous chapters, Roquentin is stranded in the state of profound boredom and ennui, between consciousness of the contingency of his existence and the debilitating inertia that prevents him from acting to validate this very existence. By the end of the novel, he has descended into utter impassivity and indifference, wanting to be rid of existence itself: “I find the same desire again: to drive existence out of me” (175). The only possibility of escape and relief for him is to be found in music, specifically the precise notes of jazz. The “band of steel, the narrow duration of the music which traverses our time through and through” (21) exists in an abstract universe, above and beyond that of man, of human time.

Thus, Roquentin envies the Negress and the Jew for playing and singing the jazz he listens to at the end of the novel, as they have “washed themselves of the sin of existing” (175), retreating from the slimy, thick, viscous fecundity of existence through the aesthetic realm of music. It appears that, for Roquentin, detachment from existence is desirable, while engagement in the world around him weighs him down with ennui. Deciding to write a novel at the end, therefore, is not an expression of the desire to return to the human world of action, but more as a means of preserving his abstracted role in the world and aiding his attempts to “achieve permanently the state of ataraxia that he experiences only in moments

of pure aesthetic contemplation”<sup>76</sup>. Indeed, the act of writing, for Roquentin, serves no other purpose than to stave off Nausea temporarily, promising no permanent solution to his debilitating metaphysical ennui: “The truth is that I can’t put down my pen: I think I’m going to have the Nausea and I feel as though I’m delaying it while writing. So I write whatever comes into my mind” (173).

Roquentin, it seems, resembles Flaubert in that both fail to translate their alienation from society into action; writing is for them a way of “forever escaping the necessity of acting”<sup>77</sup>. Instead of *acting*, Roquentin is *reacting*. The ending, therefore, instead of being an incongruous and convenient appeal to the aesthetic world for salvation, could be very well interpreted as Sartre’s acknowledgment that confounding life with art could be ineffectual, that aesthetic isolationism could be hopeless and futile. In short, art cannot simply be substituted for action.

Of course, as any discerning reader will argue: Roquentin himself is a figment of the imagination – he is a character in a literary novel. Why did Sartre himself, then, decide to write in the medium for which he criticized Roquentin? The answer can be found upon examination of the form of the novel. Significantly, it is written in the form of a diary – Roquentin, in writing his observations of daily life, is not creating a work of art, per se. Sartre has trapped his protagonist in diary form before he decides to flee to aesthetics, thus removing, in a sense, the literary aesthetic value of Roquentin’s words. Sartre is

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<sup>76</sup> McGinn, Marie. *The Writer and Society: An Interpretation of Nausea*, *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 37.2 (1997): 118+. *Academic OneFile*

<sup>77</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre. *The Family Idiot, Vol. 3* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 641 (My translation)

not escaping to an abstract, aesthetic realm in writing *Nausea*; he is not writing in quest of the Ideal. Roquentin, in writing selfishly for himself and to save himself, serves as a negative example of an existential hero. Indeed, according to Sartre, “there is no art except for and by others”<sup>78</sup>; literature is essentially written in the service of society.

Therefore, even though *Nausea* was written before WWII, and before Sartre’s increasingly politicized oeuvre, the seeds that would mature and grow are already sowed. The ambiguity of the ending of *Nausea* hints at the fact that young Sartre was aware that the idea of art as perfect isolation and escape from existence/society was faulty. Even if he didn’t know it at the time, art that “give society a guilty conscience”<sup>79</sup>, that emphasized action and commitment in society, would be the true validation for Roquentin as writer, existentialist and human being.

Interestingly, Beckett was composing several of his most famous works, including the trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnameable* and *Waiting for Godot* in Paris almost contemporaneously with *What is Literature*. Despite the similar external situations of the writers, as well as their points of departure for their works – in the sense that existence is predicated on nothingness – their proposed solutions for the apprehended ennui of existence are almost diametrically opposite.

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<sup>78</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Why Write?’, *What is Literature* (Harper & Row, Ny, 1978), Trans. Bernard Frechtman, p. 37

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, p.75

The Sartre of the immediate aftermath of WWII was obsessed with political engagement, and understandably so. In order to fulfill his definition of *la littérature engagée*, his perspective on prose was correspondingly practical. Prose is committed because it communicates, and all ideas can be communicated, or signified; it is “in essence, utilitarian”<sup>80</sup>. (Poetry he viewed as existing *outside* of language, as the words are used as objects rather than significations/means, which precludes poetry from communicating anything and being committed.) Language as was a reliable tool that, when used well, could be used to act and effect change in society.

On the other hand, Beckett viewed language as an arbitrary construct that is an obstruction to knowledge of existence. His post-WWII mentality pointed towards the absurdity of the human enterprise and searched for a way out of its apparent meaninglessness. As Oscar G. Brockett observed, Beckett, more than any other writer, “expressed the postwar doubts about man’s capacity to understand and control his world”<sup>81</sup>. One of Beckett’s biggest doubts regarded language and its arbitrary, contingent signification – as one of humanity’s most utilized construct, he doubted its real ability to actually allow one to communicate *meaning*. His novels trace the disintegration of language and self in the main characters, gradually eschewing conventional plot developments while questioning the real meaning of *meaning*; in the final book, *The Unnamable*, all that is left is the voice of the protagonist, with no indication of time or place. It ends with the bleakly hopeful line: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” Unlike Sartre, who

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 13

<sup>81</sup> Oscar G. Brockett, *History of the Theatre* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1968), p.650

wrote with full faith in the power of words, Beckett wrote to severely question our faith in them.

In both *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, the characters are left in a state of limbo. Time – and knowledge of it passing – is elusive; past and present are vague, hazy notions. Space (and things that inhabit it) irritates and confounds them. They are left with each other – and their dialogue is the only thing keeping them afloat and distracted from the reality of existence. Language, taken as independent entity, takes on added weight as the last protective veneer that the characters can cling to before the real core of existence, in all its meaningless nakedness, is exposed to them. As Lawrence E. Harvey writes in his critique of Beckett's art criticism, "the intellect and all its pomps, which all too often include language", is "part of the world of surfaces, itself a refuge of the faint-hearted or the unconscious from the terrors of the ultimate"<sup>82</sup>. It is here that the crux of Beckett's art comes to light: he attempts to strip existence of all its surface *divertissements*, its superficial layers of human constructs such as time, objects and language. He reorders reality and breaks down surfaces to reveal what lies underneath, regardless of the profound absurdity that one unearths. It is this profound meaninglessness that illuminates the underlying ennui that plagues his characters; as Vladimir puts it in a rare moment of lucidity: "We wait. We are bored. No, don't protest, we are bored to death, there's no denying it." (*Waiting for Godot*, 90)

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<sup>82</sup> Lawrence E. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett on Life, Art, and Criticism*, p.547



As a writer by profession and preference, it might seem incongruous that Beckett has chosen language as the main medium through which to confound one's notion of existence. However, it is paradoxically through consummate language play that Beckett is best able to attempt to convey pure meaning. In fact, one of the reasons he switched to writing in French from his native English was to become more disciplined and self-conscious in his works. Cohn posits that writing in French allowed him to "impoverish and weaken" himself and to "write without style or poetry"<sup>83</sup>. Beckett himself denigrates "Grammar and style", describing them scornfully to a friend that they are "just as obsolete as a Biedermeier bathing suit or the imperturbability of a gentleman. A mask."<sup>84</sup> It appears that the rigid rules and formalities of language, for Beckett, serve only to detract and obscure real meaning and significations.

Vladimir and Estragon are prime examples of those who cling on to language as their last bastion of support before ennui engulfs them. They indulge in word games - exchanging synonyms, repeating each other - so much so that meaning is lost, and all becomes idle, inane chatter. It seems that actual communication is moot, and each character is talking just for the sake of talking:

ESTRAGON: What do we do now?

VLADIMIR: While waiting.

ESTRAGON: While waiting.

*Silence.*

VLADIMIR: We could do our exercises.

ESTRAGON: Our movements.

VLADIMIR: Our elevations.

ESTRAGON: Our relaxations.

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<sup>83</sup> Ruby Cohn, "The Weakening Strength of French," in *Back to Beckett* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p.58-59

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, p.55

VLADIMIR: Our elongations.  
ESTRAGON: Our relaxations.  
VLADIMIR: To warm us up.  
ESTRAGON: To calm us down. (86)

In a letter written in 1937 to a friend, Axel Kaun, Beckett describes his own language as a veil which must be ripped apart to get to the (no)thing lying underneath. The void of language reflects the void of the world to which it claims to give access. From what we can glean from the passage above, the language of the characters is obviously an attempt to pass time and fill the void with words – if they stopped talking, existence would come swooping down on them, and they would have to be reconciled with the painful reality of waiting, to actually *think* about their (non)reason for being there:

Estragon: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.  
Vladimir: You're right, we're inexhaustible.  
Estragon: It's so we won't think. (68)

Then, several lines down:

Estragon: ... (*Long silence*)  
Vladimir: Say something!  
Estragon: I'm trying. (*Long silence*)  
Vladimir: (*in anguish*) Say anything at all! (69)

In contrast, however, to the formal, accepted representations of English that Vladimir, Estragon and Pozzo utilize in the play, is Lucky's "think" speech. While the others use language traditionally – and in so doing, using it as a 'veil' to divert themselves from existence – Lucky's speech is devoid of a recognizable form. Punctuation and grammar are absent from the string of words that seem at first glance to make no discernable sense. However, upon closer examination,

Lucky's words – simultaneously nonsensical and profound - have a vague, meta-correspondence that resonate with much more meaning than the words of the other three characters put together. Emancipated from the traditional limits of language, Lucky's "nonsense" is able to paradoxically undermine the convention of language as a bearer of "sense", and in so doing, undermine the fundamental bases of all other constructs – academia, religion, philosophy - utilized by a Western mindset. For example, interspersing the words "personal God with white beard" (45) with "quaquaquaquaqua" (*qua* itself being used commonly in philosophy as a Latin conjunction), in its irreverence and childish description, undermines religion as well as the institute of philosophy. Likewise, the "Acacacademy of Anthropometry" – with the transliteration of the French word "*caca*" and the nonsensical repetition of "popo" – undermines the field of academia and the dignified realm of anthropology.

Apart from undercutting the myth of mankind's progress, the solid presence of *words* in Lucky's think speech is also especially significant because it frightens the other three characters who are mired in the traditional mode of existence, who scramble to silence him. Lucky's language, stripped of all conventional structures, scares the others with its inroads into pure *thought* and self-reflection. Language is no longer merely a *divertissement*.

While it might be a tad simplistic to think that Lucky's message is *Beckett's* message, the fact remains that his language represents what Beckett sees as authentic: devoid of form, style, or grammar, stripped to its bare essentials and consequently displaying the tragicomic notion that the human

enterprise (which includes language) is, essentially, kind of a joke. A farce, if you will. Underneath all the institutions, extracurricular activities, religion and geographical boundaries; underneath the thick, comforting blanket of comprehensible language, there is really, nothing.

Lucky's sudden outburst of speech, seeming almost involuntary, encapsulates the dilemma of the Beckettian artist. The unfamiliar positioning of words in his speech emphasizes the foreignness of language, as an almost arbitrary "collection of concepts and sounds. Hannah C. Copeland writes in her analysis of Beckett that language is "particularly unsuited to the task of laying bare the truth – be it that of the human condition or that of the individual self. Language cannot serve as a tool for the discovery of new knowledge because it is nothing but a fabric created by old ideas and habit"<sup>85</sup>. Lucky's speech is a desperate attempt to express thought, but the inadequate form of language runs away with him and prevents mutual understanding. It even incites fear. Likewise, for the artist operating in the paradox of compulsion and impotence, he is compelled to use language while at the same time being incapable of making it work for him.

This frustration of the writer is mirrored in Hamm's desire to kill himself as a solution to the fatigue from trying to narrate, to tell a story that never materializes. Hamm, in his blindness and incapacity, has no choice but to continue speaking in order to exist – mirroring the role of the writer/artist:

**CLOV:**

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<sup>85</sup> Hannah C. Copeland, *Art and the Artist in the works of Samuel Beckett*, (Mouton & Co., The Hague, 1975), p. 202

Pah! You'll make up another [story].

**HAMM:**

I don't know.

*(Pause.)*

I feel rather drained.

*(Pause.)*

The prolonged creative effort.

*(Pause.)*

If I could drag myself down to the sea! I'd make a pillow of sand for my head and the tide would come.

**CLOV:**

There's no more tide.

*(Pause.)*

Significantly, there is “no more tide”. The artist is doomed to go on, to continue existing in his own consciousness (despite his attempts at evasion through storytelling), and to continue creating in an imperfect medium. Beckett once wrote that “to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail”<sup>86</sup>, and this aesthetic of failure is a common thread throughout his plays and fiction. As the nameless protagonist in *The Unnamable* says – “I can't go on. I'll go on” – lucid cognizance of failure, as well as the will to go on nevertheless, characterizes Beckett's approach to art and writing.

Paradoxically, this is what makes Beckett's art so optimistic; hopeful, even. Hamm narrates his stories in the wretched little room, to himself as much as to Clov, in order to “[have] a good guffaw, the two of us together”. In the face of meaningless despair, the process of the “prolonged creative effort” imposes a little meaning upon the emptiness of existence, which is ultimately better than

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<sup>86</sup> Samuel Beckett, “Three Dialogues” [Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit on Tal Coat, Masson, and Bram van Velde] in *Transition* 49, no. 5, 1949, pp. 97-103

nothing. Despite the ennui of their existence – alone in a dead world, trapped with each other – words still have the tenuous power to provide relief.

For Beckett, therefore, language, though fundamentally devoid of real meaning, still serves the purpose of helping us get along with one another. Even though Vladimir and Estragon, and Hamm and Clov, and Nell and Nagg, are presented as communicating in clichés, platitudes, and repetitive banter, there is an underlying sense of real love and compassion for each other. The bond of sympathy between Vladimir and Estragon prevents the audience/reader from viewing them as contemptible, ignorant non-artists, blind to the ennui of existence. Vladimir protects Estragon (“I wouldn’t have let them beat you”); Clov never leaves Hamm even though he tries numerous times. We remain to “give each other the impression that we exist”, and sometimes, that is enough. While Flaubert would scorn these characters – just as Frédéric was scorned - Beckett views them with compassion and empathy. In a situation where man has no more control over his destiny and is waiting for nothing, he recovers himself by “becoming acutely aware of those moments and qualities in his experience which time has revealed to have been most genuinely alive. In other words, looking for a *quality* of life rather than seeking for an elusive pattern or meaning in the whole”<sup>87</sup>. Thus, Beckett, in breaking down the veneers of existence to reveal the emptiness underneath, paradoxically serves to open up the possibility of instilling hope in man. Nothingness and futility is the fecund starting point

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<sup>87</sup> Tom F. Driver, ‘Rebuke to Nihilism’, *Critical Reception to Beckett*, (Greenwood Press, CT 1998), Ed. Cathleen Culotta Andonian, p. 146

from which a *something* – love, affirmation, compassion, art, a new language – can sprout and flourish.

In sum, despite Sartre's and Beckett's different perspectives on the role of language in literature, they had converging purposes in writing: to reveal existence as it is, whether it is the horrifying contingency of the self in a world where existence was both tree root and man, or the hollow emptiness underneath the pomp of civilization and language. They did not flee from this reality, as Flaubert and Baudelaire tried to do through their writing – Life and Literature were not as distinct as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; they seemed, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to merge. The artist-writer is also no longer the privileged figure, separated from the masses by dint of his heightened awareness of spleen and ennui in existence and his ensuing escape. Man, though left floating in this world, has to use the tools allocated to him to make sense of his existence in any way he can – by looking outward, outside himself. For Sartre, this was taking action, creating meaning, and being engaged in the society around him. For Beckett, this was looking for salvation in the relationship between oneself and others. Ennui is a default condition of human existence, and there is no excuse for being tortured by it. Validation, internal peace, and hope can only be achieved by full acknowledgment and acceptance of this fact. In this sense, Sartre and Beckett, in refusing to despair in the face of an indifferent, absurd, empty existence, are truly revolutionary in their own way.

## EPILOGUE: WHY READ?

My initial impetus for choosing the topic of my thesis was honestly a desire to explore the various ways ennui was represented in literature, with no greater purpose than to elucidate their different manifestations for different authors and no nobler impetus than curiosity. I wanted to explore the effects ennui had on its prey – under this persistent yet dull tedium that characterized life, under the weight of the Sisyphean stone, how does one go on living? Are the ensuing results pessimism, depression, inertia, or even suicide?

However, as I read more, I realized I was asking the wrong questions. The fact that ennui is represented at all in literature is proof of its positive potentialities. Despite Baudelaire's horror at the spleen of existence and Beckett's disillusioned, incapacitated characters, the fact remains that a literature has sprung out of this crippling negativity. The authors of Ennui obviously survived – and we know for a fact that none of them committed suicide. The question I began to ask, then, was: why write at all? I started to pay attention more to the nature of Literature itself and the implications it had for both its creator and audience, using Ennui as the departure point. Ennui as existential malaise, as disillusionment with the human condition in a godless



world, represents for me the most fertile wasteland from which Literature can spring. These authors professed – courageously – to search for (and find) the meaning of human existence through writing, through the “prolonged creative process”, even in the face of huge disappointment and devastation. For Flaubert and Baudelaire, creating works of art – being a God on earth, in a sense – was their refuge from existence. Sartre and Beckett insisted on creating one’s own values and meaning from the nothingness of existence.

The logical progression from this point would be, then: what are the implications for us? Not everyone is a writer, or an artist. How does the reader benefit from reading about ennui? Roland Barthes, in 1967, picks up where these writers left off and extrapolates the process of creation to the reader. In his essay, *The Death of the Author*, Barthes posits that writing “is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin”. Since “a text’s unity lies not in its origin [the writer] but in its destination [the reader]”, it is the reader’s responsibility to unite and condense the multiplicity of influences in any one text for *himself*. Hence, the “birth of the reader” comes at the cost of the “death of the author”. In short, the reader has to create his own meaning from the “tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” that constitutes the text.

Thus, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where ennui has morphed into something more like E-nnui, where human interaction has been proliferated on an abstract realm, and where friends can be made (or unmade) with the click of a mouse, these texts remain pressingly relevant. It is through the nothingness of past generations that we can better inform and combat the nothingness of ours - the

disillusionment of Baudelaire with a pervasive sense of isolation and alienation in the chaos of his city reflects the anonymity of the New York, Paris, Tokyo and even the cyber world today. The language that so bothered Flaubert – the meaningless, bovine language of progress and industrialization that Homais expounds – echoes the buzzwords ('Dynamism! Synergy!') of existing faceless corporations. Beckett's celebration of mediocrity allows us to be content while standing in the waiting line at a supermarket, reading a magazine stuffed full of the exploits of people more successful or famous than us. The collective discourse of ennui, therefore, instead of leading the way to the depths of despair, is what we can use to define our humanity – a universal humanity that is shared across time and space, no less.

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