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Hunger Artists: Appetite, Desire, and Self-Unmaking in Baudelaire, Colette, and Weil

by

Katharine E. Wallerstein

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Rhetoric

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Critical Theory

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Judith Butler, Co-Chair
Professor Anthony Cascardi, Co-Chair
Professor Suzanne Guerlac
Professor Ramona Naddaff

Fall 2019

Abstract

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This dissertation identifies and analyzes a tension between self-creation and decreation—the unmaking of self—within literary texts by three modern French authors: Charles Baudelaire, Colette, and Simone Weil. The tension I propose to focus on is symptomatic of a larger trend in modern art, literature, and thought. I will argue that each of these authors treats the body as a site of self-distancing and a surface on which subjectivity can be made and unmade through a manipulation of its space, shape, and dimensions. In particular, non-consummation, unfulfillment, and willful hunger, metaphorical or literal, figured as a reach toward non-being within life, marks an aesthetic, bodily language of plasticity in each that allows for an imagining of the self outside the bounds of the socially given. Each gestures toward the transcendence of bodily form, suggesting alternative acts of self-shaping within the conditions of modernity, directly engaging with the alienation, objectification, and deadening of the human senses, and the abjection of the body in the face of commodified existence and restrictive social norms. In taking distance from the body and its needs as material givens, each of these authors identifies non-being within life as a response to the conditions of subject formation in their world and as an opening onto other ways of being. Hunger and unfulfillment, the flattening and unfleshing of the body, non-consummation and self-consummation map the body as the location of self-undoing in the act of self- and world-making for each.

In memory of my father, who showed me the way.

For Layla, who accompanied me with wisdom and patience beyond her years.

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There is no right, or quiet, time in life in which to pursue a doctorate. I embarked on the project mid-life, with at times more on my plate than I thought humanly possible, but I never forgot how privileged I was to have landed where I did. The Rhetoric department at Berkeley, along with the Program in Critical Theory, has been a home for many years now, an extended family of colleagues, coworkers, mentors, and friends. My time there has been nothing less than a gift.

I am enormously grateful to my committee for their support of my work at every step of the way, and for their care and understanding as I navigated vicissitudes of life, loss, and sometimes overwhelming responsibilities along the way. Ramona you became a good friend and I am honored to be your colleague. Learning from you and teaching with you were highlights of my time at Berkeley. Suzanne your reflections on aesthetics, photography, and the sublime inspired so many of my own. I wish we had had more time. Tony, the talks in your office were some of the best. I always left with new questions, and excitement for next steps in my project. And Judith, you most of all, thank you. To have had the chance to work with you was a dream come true, and I discovered not only a great scholar, but an astonishingly generous human being. You took me by the hand more than once, and I pushed through at the end in large part thanks to you. I have enjoyed your humor, understanding, friendship, and example in kindness, compassion, and commitment – intellectual and political.

Thank you to my parents, Beatrice and Immanuel, for their incredible support and enthusiasm for my doctoral work. I grew up in the best of all possible worlds, one of books and ideas, intellectuals and movements, cultures and travel. Being the daughter of a scholar of great stature has nonetheless been a double-edged sword. Finding my own way has been both trickier, and more rewarding, than I ever imagined. My father left us barely four months ago, too soon to see me complete my degree, but close enough to know there would be cause for celebration. Thank you to Pablo for endlessly encouraging me, always believing in me, and standing by my side. Thank you to Patrick for his flexibility with childcare, schedules, and so much else. Thank you to my many wonderful friends, near and far, old and new, who lived and laughed with me along the way. Above and beyond all, thank you to my daughter Layla, who grew up with my books, papers, angst, and aspirations, and somehow turned out perfectly despite all. Layla you are my sunshine and my hope for the world. You can do anything, and will do everything better than I. You are my inspiration in every way.

Introduction

This dissertation identifies and analyzes a tension between self-creation and decreation—the unmaking of self—within literary texts by three modern French authors: Charles Baudelaire, Colette, and Simone Weil. The tension I propose to focus on is symptomatic of a larger trend in modern art, literature, and thought. I will argue that each of these authors treats the body as a site of self-distancing and a surface on which subjectivity can be made and unmade through a manipulation of its space, shape, and dimensions. In particular, non-consummation, unfulfillment, and willful hunger, metaphorical or literal, figured as a reach toward non-being within life, marks an aesthetic, bodily language of plasticity in each that allows for an imagining of the self outside the bounds of the socially given. Each gestures toward the transcendence of bodily form, suggesting alternative acts of self-shaping within the conditions of modernity, directly engaging with the alienation, objectification, and deadening of the human senses, and the abjection of the body in the face of commodified existence and restrictive social norms. In taking distance from the body and its needs as material givens, each of these authors identifies non-being within life as a response to the conditions of subject formation in their world and as an opening onto other ways of being. Hunger and unfulfillment, the flattening and unfleshing of the body, non-consummation and self-consummation map the body as the location of self-undoing in the act of self- and world-making for each.

The differences among these authors are significant. For Weil, the destruction of appetite and desire, along with the transcendence of the body through decreation, comprise the only possible responses to a world of suffering. It is in unmaking the self that the world might be remade. In Colette, figures of dandified lesbians and differently gendered personae deliver a visual map of social life on the margins, where women live between visibility and invisibility, and appear to slip in and out of the world, and in and out of form. For Baudelaire, aesthetic values of surface, flatness, withholding, unfulfillment, and externality serve the aims of a class of artistic and literary men—his "heroes" of modern life. The Baudelairian dandy's mode of melancholic withholding, or studied stillness, is a form of passionate containment that rejects the possibility of succumbing to hunger. The ways in which the tension between self-creation and decreation play out prove to be markedly different in each of the three chapters, and depend in part on the aspects of modernity to which each writer responds. The forms of unfulfillment as well as its ends vary from one chapter to the next, with different gender, social, political, and ethical resonances. Yet each author identifies a subjectivity, articulated in relation to a version of modernity, that can only be accessed through a withdrawal of bodily form, and a self-negation that constitutes the site of what each articulates as a distinctly modern existence; a form of negation, yet a way of life.

Hunger artists all, the figures of my study inhabit an aesthetic language of unfulfillment, negation, and self-distancing as the ultimate goal and only reasonable response to the world they live in. The term "hunger artist" is most commonly associated with Franz Kafka's 1922 short story by the same name ("A Hunger Artist"), to which I briefly turn in my conclusion. Starvation artists were in and of themselves a phenomenon in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[1] From medieval fasting saints, to idealizations

[1] See Vandereycken and Van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*.

of consumptive beauty, to nineteenth and twentieth century tropes of the "starving artist" or "starving poet," to abjected, anorexic fashion models of the present day,[2] "hunger artistry" has persisted, with much complexity, as a theme in occidental culture. This dissertation aims to tease out of some of the powerful resonances of this mode of aesthetic self-presentation, and mode of being, in the context of some of the self-alienating, abjecting, and deadening conditions of modernity responded to by each of the authors in my study. It is one theme among several, but the one that, as a vital self-unmaking within the context of self- and world-making, unites the rest.

Each of my authors identifies a subjectivity, articulated in relation to a version of modernity, that must be accessed through a withdrawal of bodily form; a self-negation as the location of existence. As a site of self-distancing, the body in these works is both a manifestation of critical thought and a work of art. As a site of self-dissolution, the body functions as a visual remnant of a self announcing its disappearance. And as an articulated shape, the body parodies the process of subject formation in reverse, insisting that we not look beyond the surface to find its depth. Together these modes of bodily being/non-being comprise an aesthetic that marks the self as a site of multiple distances, both inherent to self-consciousness and amplified by the historical, cultural, and economic developments of modernity. The impossibility of full self-presence, of fulfillment, shows the self as always at some distance from coinciding with itself. Of course, this formulation takes on different meanings in different historical periods. For instance, Marx describes alienation in a way that calls attention to the impossibility of consumption under property relations and, later, commodification. Marx writes about this deadened state of humankind: "So much does labor's realization appear as a loss of reality that the worker loses reality to the point of starving to death."[3] The commodity takes on a life that the worker does not have, but the commodity, or the object, becomes the vehicle of life. Whereas Marx in the early work would call for a return to a non-alienated subject, alienation becomes the critical mode for these modernist writers to explore available conditions of desire. For Jean-Luc Nancy, the very enunciation of the "I" requires a distancing of the self from the self, a distance at the heart of presence. My argument is that this distance is manifest in the spectacle of consumer culture that is a scene of consumption and the impossibility of consumption at once. Transposed in these works, to desire is to desire something that cannot fulfill, and thus to desire unfulfillment. As Oscar Wilde remarked, "A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied."[4] Desiring nothingness is a form of consumption. In this way, an engagement with hunger is an engagement with, and a making visible of, the abjection and the objectification of the human subject. In laying claim to self-estrangement as a location of the self by treating the body as that which can be flattened, voided, and denied, this aesthetic move also underscores what Jean-Luc Nancy points to as the "ex" in existence that is articulated in bodily spatial organization. The body is always ex-static, outside of itself, a mode of vital self-alienation.

My first chapter, "Ascetic Elaborations," concerns Baudelaire's writings on the "hero of modern life," in particular his representation and interpretation of the dandy of his day, an urban man with aristocratic affinities and affects whose presentation of self as

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[2] See my article, "Thinness and Other Refusals."
[3] Karl Marx, *Economic and Political Manuscripts*, in Tucker, 70-71.
[4] Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray*, 58.

art, as Baudelaire saw (and created) him, captured the essence of what Baudelaire considered to be the experience of modernity. In opening my dissertation, this chapter offers an initial study of treatments of the body, within modernist texts and artworks, as an object to be manipulated and objectified, as a surface on which identities can be drawn and erased, and as a space in which to elaborate a dialogue between absence and presence, being and non-being within the conditions of modernist subjectivity where the subject comes into being as both subject and object; or, as both subject and abject.

Appetite, shape, and non-consummation play out in various ways in Baudelaire's modern ideal. In his writings on modern heroism, Baudelaire disorganizes and dislocates dichotomies of interior and exterior, subject and object, such that each stands not in opposition to each other but as co-constituents in forces of hunger and desire that circulate through and exceed the limits of the body. The dandy's curated detachment and staged stillness of form, for instance, paradoxically references the eternal within the moment of being and recourses an infinite economy of signification. The dandy inverts the logic of the commodity, claiming his objectification and object-ness as a starting point. A seemingly inert object posing as life, he articulates a depth that can only be found on the surface, showing flatness to be anything but two-dimensional, and a *durée* that can only be accessed in the moment. At the same time, his ascetic elaborations of self marks a turn away from appetite and a dwelling in unfulfillment and abjection as the fundamental aesthetic principles of modernity as Baudelaire sees it. Similarly, the perpetual mourning of Baudelaire's "man in the black frock coat" exemplifies the unresolved mourning (melancholia) that the modern hero seeks to dwell infinitely within. Thin, ascetic, streamlined, the shape of the coat delineates the shape of the man, not only marking the aesthetic dimensions of his suffering, but the externalization of his soul and the location of depth on the visible surface. Boundaries between interior and exterior, subject and object, and even life and death are blurred and crossed in a visual and affective language of self-creation that claims and embodies the contradictions of perpetually unfulfilled desire and experience within commodity culture. Another version of Baudelaire's modern hero can be found in the suicide artist of Balzac's "The Wild Ass's Skin" (*La Peau de chagrin*), who, in effacing his form while transposing his life onto an object, a commodity that doubles as his own life, shows self-alienation and self-disappearance to be the fundamental aesthetic principles of modernist self-creation. Like the dandy, the suicide artist offers the spectacle of becoming-object as a form of non-consumption; a death that resides within life.

In my second chapter, "Veiled, Perishing, Deciduous: Women Between Presence and Absence in *The Pure and the Impure*," I offer a close reading of Colette's *The Pure and the Impure*, a quasi-journalistic chronicle of friends, acquaintances, and historical figures of the fin-de-siècle. Close in time to Baudelaire's Paris, and using, in places, a similar language of curated, dandified, self-containment, Colette's figures do not stage their spectacles in the privileged social world of Baudelaire's dandies, but from the margins and the demi-monde. Colette will wield reflections on self-unmaking and performance not as distanced, ironic reflections on being and identity but rather as the very conditions of survival. Her characters, lesbians, demi-mondaines, and female dandies live "perishing" on the margins, weaving in and out of visibility and invisibility in social worlds of their making in which the subversive potential of gender and erotic ambiguity, unlike in Baudelaire, find full expression.

Each persona in Colette's narration inhabits a world marked by a mobility of desire. Taking place in underground clubs, private homes, and opium dens, the book traverses a gamut of social spaces, settings, and women loosely tied together by what Colette terms "the senses." Challenging categories that fail to capture the mobility of desire, Colette foregrounds desire itself—dissipated, fluid, and multiple—as that which drives the lives of these women. Traversing time as well as space, Colette's characters make their mark through a spectral presence, in which truth, what she calls the "pure," is that which cannot be pinned down, identified, or satisfied. Each of her characters has a stake in maintaining their mystery and their ambiguity in the shape of their bodies, the shape of their desires, and in their physical presence. Renée Vivien appears and disappears in her house, fueled and impassioned by alcohol, starvation, and self-abjection, her surroundings an extension of her body, both disappearing her and exaggerating her. As do other characters in the book, she lives her life as theater, yet her spectacle was one of disappearance. La Chevalière's world of dandified ritual and form takes on ghostly qualities as an extension backward into a past that was already dying (the traces of an aristocracy that had already only survived through its affectations) and as a projection onto an imagined future. A "chimera," and full of longing, she is out of place and out of time within a setting (her home, her circle) staged and structured as a theater in which erotic truths can circulate. Charlotte's smoke and veils, Colette's own cross-dressings and undressings, and a cast of other characters float across the pages of the book, bodies mobile, shape-shifting, and porous. The reader is immersed in belongings marked by their outsiderness, of passions marked by their impossibilities, of food and drink that feed the senses but starve the body, of constant movement between the visible and the invisible. Colette takes up the themes of alienation, non-being, and hunger, and places them at the center of the lives of those who necessarily live precariously and tenuously. Rather than offer a tale of emancipation, the agency granted these women, whose desires cannot be contained by conventions of sex or gender, is one of ghostliness and perishing as an aesthetic mode of life.

Chapter Three, "Simone Weil: Hunger Artist" considers Weil's writings on decreation, hunger, and detachment from the material conditions of life. Weil's non-aesthetic approach to hunger, her commitments to philosophy and to political praxis, and her lack of explicit eroticism make her an odd fit with Colette and Baudelaire. Hers is an unmaking of the physical and psychic shape of the body not for the purpose of remaking the self, but of remaking the world. Baudelaire and Colette each invites us to understand a kind of dying within the time of life as the condition of self-conscious self-expression in their worlds. Weil's dialectic of dying while living is far starker, devoid of irony as in Baudelaire, and devoid of pleasure as in Colette, except for the eros of self-erasure itself. Weil's serious and sober reflections on the violence of the world and in the ways in which we are each, by virtue of being alive, implicated in its violence, the starkness of her writing and the starkness of her own self-starvation, which haunts the readings of her texts, are at the same time met by fantastical ideas that can only live in the realm of fiction. Weil, it can be said, goes all the way in articulating the contradictions of life, of modernity, and of embodiment by insisting on the impossible, and, through spaces of possibility opened up by her extraordinary words, achieving it.

Weil asks how we are to live in our bodies, whose need for food weighs us down morally and spiritually. In order to live in full commitment to life (God, the world), in

order to fully inhabit the "I," we must give it up. The "I" is inherently at odds with the body, and it is only in seeing that we cannot resolve hunger (bodily and psychic) with food, but rather that hunger *is* our food, can we achieve grace. Weil is doing something much more complicated than saying that we must forfeit life. She is noting that we must meet life's impossibility with the impossible: we must transform the weight of our bodies into that which is weightless. At times, for her this is through light, at others it is through eucharist (a becoming nothing just as God becomes bread) but always it is through affliction. She summons her reader to "the revelation that this nothingness is really the fullest possible fullness." The body is infinite in Weil, an infinity that she invites us to imagine and to live with. Open and spacious, or as Nancy will say, *spatial*, the body that Weil invents is one detached from material needs, a detachment she calls an attenuated form of suicide. Suicide and spectrality thus again appear as themes, and, as in Colette, this spectrality is marked by eros. The movement between embodiment and disembodiment in Weil's text, between self and God, and within hungering itself is, I argue, an erotic one. Hunger's movement of deformation and decreation is a movement of ecstatic energy for Weil, a movement of undoing within life continually fueled by the impossibility of its resolution.

Running through my project as a whole is a reflection on the mutually constitutive and mutually informing categories of aesthetics and subjectivity. Looking at the body as the site of subjective articulation through a set of aesthetic and affective languages, I have understood hunger and unfulfillment as one of the significant and enduring languages of modernist self-expression: a dis-embodiment as an exceeding of, while remaining attached to, bodily form; a de-creation as an unmaking of the self within life. These are languages that I see repeated across a range of visual and literary discourses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, discourses around non-consumption, thinness, and aesthetic modes of being that reflect, translate, and lay claim to alienations suffered. Weil's writings on decreation, while not overtly reflective of any cultural zeitgeist, provide a philosophical understanding of the psycho-somatic desire to unmake the self that resonates throughout my study. Even for her, hunger is an aesthetic language—aesthetic, ascetic, and ecstatic. Like the Deleuzian body without organs,[5] open to its full potential in ongoing "becomings," the bodies of this study are vast and locate themselves in the movement in between being and non-being (what Deleuze might call their "lines of flight"). Yet they are not so much becoming, as *un*becoming: their movements of desire, of life, are toward their *un*doing, their *un*being, their non-fulfillment, their decreation.

If the body is there where all cultural discourse and relations of power are written,[6] it is also there where critique, resistance, survival, and intention are molded into visible and affective form. If this study leaves many questions unanswered—in what ways is the language of self-abjection and active hungering a distinctly modernist one? What constitutes the modern?—it lays the groundwork for my own continued investigation into these questions and the many more engendered in the efforts

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[5] See *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*.

[6] See in particular Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality* Volume 1; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter* and *Psychic Life of Power.* For an overview of work on the body in French post-structuralist philosophy, see François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States.* See also *French Philosophy Since 1945*, edited by Etienne Balibar et. al.

represented in these pages. How can I speak of hunger without addressing poverty? Who has the privilege to use and craft hunger as a metaphor, and who does not? What would a deeper analysis between gender (in particular gender ambiguity), desire, abjection, and self-emptying look like? Can a feminist analysis of anorexia in women be complicated by analyses of hunger as craft, as agency, as vital mode of self location without sacrificing its fundamental critical framework? (Yes.) What dialogue might be further drawn out between modernity and modernism's focus on flatness and form, and in relation to theories of the anti-aesthetic, usually attributed to post-modernism?[7] What histories of the aesthetic as privileged mode of self-articulation might be useful to consider alongside this one? What additional conclusions would a deeper consideration of class, race, and colonialism in French and European history bring to such a study as this one? What would that of sexuality, sex, and gender discourses of the nineteenth century and fin-de-siècle? Can I speak of similar aesthetics of unfulfillment today? I believe I can, and I do. It is in part because I have so observed and been fascinated with the persistence of the "starving artist" in numerous, not always obvious, forms, as motif in certain cultural *milieux* today (mostly privileged, mostly white, mostly carrying certain cultural, if not class, capital) that I first looked back to early moments of its articulation. There is much more to be unpacked in this history.

[7] See Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic.*

Chapter One

Ascetic Elaborations: Baudelaire's Hero of Modern Life

"Fashion should thus be considered as…a sublime deformation of Nature…some kind of approximation to an ideal for which the restless human mind feels a constant, titillating hunger."

--- Charles Baudelaire[8]

"All aesthetic form is a specific displacement through which form contradicts the identity it declares."

---Jacques Rancière[9]

"De la vaporization et de la centralization du *Moi*. Tout est là."

--- Charles Baudelaire[10]

"L'homme moderne est un blasé."

--- *Le Décadent*[11]

This chapter treats of an aesthetics of appetite, desire, self-distancing, and self-attenuation and mutation in writings of Baudelaire on modern life, in particular in his figure of the modern hero.[12] We will see contradictions in his treatment of women and the treatment of gender and class more generally, and contradictions in who bears the title of hero of modernity. The themes that persist throughout, and around which I thematize this chapter, concern an asceticism inseparable from a decadence and fundamental to the articulation of subjectivity, where hunger acts as a force of disruption and dislocation of the shape and temporality of the self. Baudelaire variably depicts the hero of modern life as an artist, a dandy, the man of the crowd, and sometimes the city itself, categories he overlaps and sometimes collapses. For the purposes of this chapter I will be concentrating on the figure of the dandy, even when he may appear as the artist, such as in the case of Constantin Guy. Furthermore, if the dandy, for Baudelaire, is the quintessential hero of

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[8] Baudelaire, "In Praise of Cosmetics," *The Painter*, 33.

[9] From "Form and its Spirit" ("La Forme et son esprit" in *La Forme en jeu*), quoted in Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, 58.

[10] Baudelaire, *Mon coeur mis à nu.*

[11] *Le Decadent*, Anatole Bajou, editor, 1888.

[12] The term modern, as I am using it here, suggests an urban, literary and artistic class of individuals conscious of and reflecting in their works the times they live in. The modernity I am referencing refers to Western Europe, for which Paris, as Walter Benjamin and later David Harvey have argued, was an epicenter. See for instance Benjamin, *Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, and Harvey, *Paris: Capital of Modernity.* My dissertation situates itself within a European, and particularly French, modernist literary, cultural, artistic, and intellectual lineage.

modern life, the heroic modernity he represents is not limited to descriptions of him. Writings on the crowd, on the city, and on hashish, for instance, equally delineate the shaping and unshaping of bodies, borders, surfaces, and spaces of self such that the dandy, flâneur, painter, drug taker, and even the city itself stand in for each other in his writings. Indeed, in *The Painter of Modern Life*, an essay ostensibly about the dandyism of the writer and artist Constantin Guy, Baudelaire only directly addresses the figure of the dandy in three of the forty pages. In the same way, I will look beyond the figure himself in this chapter to passages and poems in which attention to surface, form, and self-distancing are elicited by Baudelaire's descriptions.

The heroic aspects of modern existence, are, nonetheless, most acutely depicted in his writings on the dandy, a figure he both observes and invents, one whose aesthetic forms and languages of self epitomize, for him, the meanings of modernity.[13] A white, male privileged misogynist *par excellence*, with the entitlements of white, European, elite[14] nineteenth century masculinity, Baudelaire's dandy nonetheless taps into and troubles, or exposes the trouble in, a set of questions around subjectivity and modernity, and an aesthetic language that expressed these troubles and that privileged the aesthetic itself as *the* language of modernist self-articulation. That is, if Baudelaire's notions of modernist subjectivity are imbued with a certain kind of masculinity, class, and culture, the aesthetic language that he develops to narrate the complexities, contradictions, and conditions of that ensemble form part of, and were formative in, a larger aesthetic of his time. The tensions and suspensions between being a subject and being an object, between presence and absence, distance and presence, fulfillment and unfulfillment, and the making and un-making of bodily shape emerge in Baudelaire as a set of aesthetic practices that repeat elsewhere—in Colette and Weil, for instance—with *différance*.[15] If Baudelaire crystalized a language of modern self-hood, and a set of reflections on and interventions in "modernity," it was one that drew on histories and interpretive schemes that exceeded his moment—both preceded and surpassed—histories and schemes that informed his contemporaries and successors as well, each drawing out different critical aspects of tropes of decadent asceticism, hungering for unfulfillment, and disappearance and dissipation as a form of presence.

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[13] Baudelaire's 1864 essay "The Painter of Modern Life" and Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly's book *Of Dandyism and of George Brummell* (1845) are considered the two early foundational nineteenth century texts on the dandy. Numerous books have been written about the dandy since. See, for instance, Ellen Moers' classic book, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (1960) and James Eli Adams' *Dandies and Desert Saints* (1995). It is only in recent years books on the dandy have included the female dandy as a figure onto herself (and not, say, as a lesbian, or a mannish woman, as found in numerous works on Paris in the twenties). Additionally, works have emerged that takes the dandy out of a strictly white, Western framework. For examples of both of these see, for instance, "Dandies: Fashion and Finesse in Art and Culture" by Susan Fillin-Yeh (New York: NYU Press, 2001).

[14] The dandy was not necessarily upper class. However he subscribed to upper class values of idleness and wealth, and to the mannerisms of the aristocratic class, a class he imagines himself preserving in a time of its wane. See Moers and Adams.

[15] Jacques Derrida's term denoting both a difference and a deferral of meaning.

The attitude of modernity

In a brief but important three pages in the middle of his article, "What is Enlightenment," Foucault describes modernity not as time period but as an attitude. To understand the modern individual's way of relating to contemporary reality, their *attitude* of modernity, he turns to Baudelaire, "for his consciousness of modernity is widely recognized as one of the most acute of the nineteenth century."[16] Foucault elaborates four qualities of this attitude. The first is the consciousness of the discontinuity of time, which was not merely a consciousness of "the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent," as Baudelaire famously wrote, but an adoption of a "deliberate and difficult attitude" with respect to this perpetual movement of time.[17] This attitude, crucially, "consists in recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it." The second also involves a consciousness of time, but now with an emancipatory edge: to grasp the moment for what it is, honestly, and only in this way to imagine transforming it. Third, "The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism," an asceticism he ties to the "complex and deliberate elaboration" of *dandysme*. Lastly, "Baudelaire does not imagine that these have any place in society itself, or in the body politic. They can only be produced in another, a different place, which Baudelaire calls art."[18]

What I wish to highlight from this summary is the following. First, that within his attitude of modernity, Baudelaire writes of a particular relationship to time-space, such that to be modern is to demonstrate the eternal within the temporary, what I will call the shape of self, and to transform it. Second, that the aesthetic language for this attitude is one of asceticism, and that this language of asceticism simultaneously reveals a decadence, embodied in dandyism. The dandy's theater of ascetic restraint, and the flatness of affect and surface shape of self that he performs, I will show, draw attention to the movement of life that surpasses the stillness of his form and upset the dichotomies of surface and depth, the moment and the eternal, and subject and object. Lastly, that, within the attitude of modernity, the way to imagine a different social order can only happen at the level of the imagination, or art. Here, however, I conclude differently than Foucault, who claims that for Baudelaire art does not penetrate the body politic but lives in a realm apart. I will argue that the dandy's, or, the hero of modernity's, art, on the contrary, acts in the realm of the political, as a commentary on subjectivity and commodification. The artist/dandy/hero of Baudelaire's text precisely elaborates a body politic.

Heroic Shape

For Baudelaire, famously, modernity is characterized by "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable."[19] Each age has its modernity, according to Baudelaire, for modernity is an attitude by means of which the properly modern are "harmoniously" clothed in the costume of their time, exhibiting every detail that marks their time as theirs and as new,

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[16] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 7.
[17] Baudelaire, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life*, 13.
[18] Ibid, 9.
[19] Baudelaire, *Painter*, 12.

"from costume and coiffure down to gesture, glance and smile (for each age has a deportment, a glance and a smile of its own.)"[20] The elements that constitute "the modern" in any given time period are transitory, but contain within them "the mysterious beauty" of human life, which must be "distilled" by the artist of modern life, whose task it is to do so.[21] If each age has its modernity, and its accompanying aesthetic system, the one that he was writing from within concerned him above all else. Baudelaire wrote at length about the specific beauty and "heroism" of his modern time, in Paris of the Second Empire, a beauty and set of aesthetic precepts most clearly distilled in a figure he calls the "hero of modern life," a figure who, again, is at times, and sometimes all at once, an artist, a dandy, and a flâneur. And if modernity is there where the ephemeral, fleeting, and contingent come into dialogue with the eternal such that the eternal can be found and felt within each fleeting moment and movement, capturing the eternal within the present instant, it is, for Baudelaire, within a given system of beauty that this attitude takes place shape. Nowhere is this aesthetic register of the temporal and the spatial within the "modern attitude" of his day elaborated more vividly than in Baudelaire's passage in the 1846 essay "On the Heroism of Modern Life" on the dark frock coat, which he calls "the necessary costume of our time."[22] The passage, which appears in his collection on the Salon of 1846, is one of his earliest articulations of the fundamental experience of modernity and the ascetic articulation of self elicited from its protagonists (so named by Baudelaire):

> As for the garb, the skin of the modern hero, although the time is past when every little artist dressed up as a grand panjandrum and smoked pipes as long as duckrifles, the studios and the world at large are still full of people who would like to poeticize Antony with a Greek cloak and a bi-colored vesture. And yet, has not this much-abused garb its own beauty and its native charm? Is it not the necessary garb of our suffering age, which wears the symbol of a perpetual mourning even upon its thin black shoulders? [*N'est-il pas l'habit nécessaire de notre époque, souffrante et portant jusque sur ses épaules noires et maigres le symbole d'un deuil perpetual?*] Note that the dress-coat and the frock-coat not only possess their political beauty, which is an expression of universal equality, but also their poetic beauty, which is an expression of the public soul—an immense cortege of undertakers…We are each of us celebrating some funeral.[23]

The beauty of the modern age, represented by the men's black frock coat, is a beauty of perpetual mourning, a mourning which the modern hero does not seek to resolve but rather to dwell infinitely within.[24] Mourning's temporal and spatial registers act together in this description of the articulation of modern experience, such that the experience of "perpetual" mourning, and the attention to the infinite in the celebration of "some funeral" takes on spatial dimensions in the form of the coat and of the wearer alike.

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Baudelaire, "De l'Heroïsme," *Salon de 1846*. Translation from Mayne, *Mirror*, 127-28
[23] Ibid, with my modifications.
[24] The historical context for this mourning is of course the Second Empire. See Benjamin's classic essay, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire."

But first, who is this modern hero? In this passage the modern hero is not merely the dandy or the artist, his usual ambassadors of modernity to whom he frequently attributes heroism, but the mass of bourgeois men whose blackened, streamlined forms compose an aesthetic and affective city-scape, a contemporary "public soul" that Baudelaire likens to a cortege of undertakers. First modeled by the dandies in England and then in France, by the 1830s and 1840s bourgeois menswear went from colorful to black, sober, and restrained. In 1850 the *Journal des tailleurs* remarked that formal menswear now consisted only of "un habit noir, un pantalon noir, un gilet blanc et un autre noir; une cravat noire et une autre blanche."[25] The masculinity of Baudelaire's heroes is one with ascetic designs aimed at de-naturalizing the body and crafting it as an object that can separate itself from its material needs, whether nourishment, labor (in the case of the dandy, whose vocation is to be idle), or love. Unlike Colette whose subjects, we will see, exhibit extremes of bodily detachment, death drives, and shape-shifting to express a sense of exile as modern women and as lesbians, and unlike Weil for whom the ascetic refusal of nourishment and fulfillment is a reach toward death within life as an act of determinately feminine selflessness, called for in the face of the atrocity of modern civilization, Baudelaire's self-distancing, death-driven, ascetic subjects are unequivocably presented as a masculine ideal. Heroes, they brave the modern world by mirroring its surface values, its commodification of existence, and its empty consummations. If they are able to "celebrate" loss, the death of some institution or another, the death of deep experience in the face of commodified surface pleasures—Benjamin's *erlebnis* rather than *erfahrung*[26]—and turn their mourning into heroic beauty, it is a beauty enabled by their ability to "take hold" of that which, for others—for working men, for most women—might simply oppress. Baudelaire imagined the embodied styles of these urban men as internalizing—somatically *claiming*—the new landscape of commodities offered up for consumption. In the deadened world of capital they ironically celebrated their object status, insisting upon a circularity of signification between subject and object, interior and exterior, organic and inorganic. More, the consumption of non-substantial satisfactions becomes, in his modern hero, the desire for non-consumption as, nonetheless, an active desire. The deadening force of life is turned into a desire for that death as a force of living. And the inanimate object becomes animated in order to express the inanimacy of the wearer, an inanimacy, a "beyond" life that is, at the same time, Freud will tell us, the very condition of living and its constant companion.[27] Accordingly, Baudelaire's equation of clothing with skin is an assignation of life and agency to the garb, which not only represents but acts, as it were, as the very fabric of the will. An expression of the soul of the individual and the collective alike, the black costume of Baudelaire's hero of modernity is invested with agency, and, as agent, seeks a rapprochement with death. The infinite time of mourning seen in this passage suggests not only a population marked by melancholy but also a population in touch with the eternal that precedes and succeeds temporary life. The temporary and the eternal

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[25]Harvey, *Men in Black*, 24. J. C. Flügel famously named this sartorial shift "the Great Masculine Renunciation," the sartorial result, he argued, of the revolution. See Flügel, *Psychology of Clothes.*

[26] Benjamin developed this distinction in numerous works, including in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." See *The Writer*.

[27] Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

don't merely co-exist here, they embed in the soul and in the very fabric of existence—the frock coat—so that living is an engagement with death on every level of the body, from the surface to the deep interior, or rather to that deep interior which is also external to the body—the soul. The fluidity between being and outside being, in the sense of body and soul, and in the sense of living being a celebration of mourning, mirrors the movement between exterior and interior where the frock coat is at once surface and depth.

The aesthetic language that links the garb and the wearer is, among other things, one of *shape*. The black, streamlined, stark costumes, no mere outer layer, form a continuous whole with the men who wear them, whose slight "thin-shouldered" narrow physique and somber demeanor are matched by the coats such that physical body, garb, and soul bleed into each other in a dialectic between object and subject, death and life. The blurring, reversal, and transversal of the boundaries between object and subject via an outer layer or a skin is a theme repeated throughout Baudelaire's writings on the modern hero, as we will see below in the discussion of *La Peau du Chagrin*.
The garb, both animate and inanimate, is emblem for Baudelaire of a special kind of depth that belongs to the experience of modernity, a depth that can only take shape in surface form. Foucault proposes that the nineteenth century saw significant changes in representation, and that, crucially, within those changes, signs were now ranged in a "newly differentiated space," one "that could be called depth (*profondeur*), as long as this is not taken to mean interiority, but on the contrary exteriority."[28] This new kind of spatiality is precisely the subject of Baudelaire's writing in this passage, where signification is inverted and depth is mapped onto the surface of the body such that the person-object that we see is simultaneously surface (an object) and depth (a subject). Baudelaire identifies this surface shape—flattened, streamlined—as the quintessential language of modern "man." No longer the voluminous, colorful garb of earlier times, the coat is slender and streamlined just as is the man who wears it. The coat and the man have become the same, at once a living human and a cut-out, outlined, two-dimensional figure. Thus the shape of subjectivity in this passage is the shape of an object, the shape of an image, as if drawn, and, at the same time, the shape of the eternal. In this way, the manifestations of Baudelaire's mourning, heroic, black-garbed men take place not only in the spatial sphere, but in the temporal one as well. To be truly alive to life in the modern era is, for Baudelaire's hero of modern life, to feel close to death, that which is either eternal, or non-time, depending on how one looks at it, and to celebrate it. This closeness to death is imparted aesthetically in the stillness and seriousness of the modern garb, which in turn embodies that which is eternal and immutable within the fleeting present. Art is the realm of critical interpretation as well as its simultaneous embodiment such that the subject is at once inseparable from the critical act of questioning/interpreting, and located in that distance inscribed by the act of interpretation, critique, art. It is not that this critique can "only" exist in art, and not in the "actual" body politic, but rather that "art" is precisely where these critical interrogations occur. The language of modernity is an aesthetic one for Baudelaire, played out on the visual field where spectatorial distance replicates the distance of the subject from itself and from its object. This is a distance both particular to the historical period of commodification and inherent to the articulation of the self. The dandy/artist/hero elaborates his life force as a series of surfaces to be

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[28] Ibid, 272-3.

observed—there is an implied distance from what is observed in all observation. For the dandy, the distance he takes from what is observed includes a distance he takes from others as he becomes an object to be seen and not consumed. The irony in modern man's *celebration* of "some funeral" further underscores the distance already implied by spatial aesthetics of the self as object.

Perinde ac cadaver

How do we understand what Foucault meant when he names this "deliberate, difficult attitude" in which the eternal is captured within the present that marks Baudelaire's modernity an "ascetic elaboration of the self" (*elaboration ascétique du soi*)? Baudelaire's man in the black frock coat celebrates a vast, distant, eternity within the material contingency of his life. It is not simply that the stark lines, color, form, and affect of the man in black present as ascetic. Nor is it just that the dandy's simplicity and perfection of his toilet border on the spiritual and stoical, as Baudelaire describes in a passage I will quote below. It is that the act of self-creation as utterly ascetic is an elaborate, decadent one, one which visually displays an excess of self and of will paradoxically *not* contained within the crisp clean outlines of the image of self presented.

Baudelaire calls this containment that is simultaneously an excess "passion." More than anyone, the dandy embodies and perfects this dynamic. For the perfect dandy, he explains, the question is not one of "immoderate taste for the toilet and material elegance." Rather "the perfection of his toilet will consist in absolute simplicity." Yet if simplicity is the outward mark of the dandy, Baudelaire continues, "what then is this passion" which makes of the dandy "so haughty and exclusive a sect?" He answers: "It is first and foremost the burning need to create for oneself a personal originality." It is "a kind of cult of the self"[29] which "borders upon the spiritual and stoical,"[30] a "kind of religion" whose "doctrine of elegance and originality…imposes upon its humble and ambitious disciples—men often full of fire, passion, courage, and restrained energy—the terrible formula: *Perinde ac cadaver*!"[31] *In the manner of a corpse*—this forceful wording, a play on the religiosity of the dandy's stoicism, underscores a dialogue with death, stillness, and non-being at the heart of the dandy's dialectic, touched on deceptively lightly by the his fanciful and ironic theater of the self.

The containment of passion, energy, and fire within an austere exterior does not, of course, signify its erasure. On the contrary, the dandy's self-discipline, like that of a stoic, traces an elliptical dialogue between emotion and form in which one always references the other. Consider this passage in which the dandy's stillness and coldness draw attention to the movement and heat within:

> The distinguishing characteristic of the dandy's beauty consists above all in an air of coldness which comes from an unshakable determination not to be moved; you might call it a latent fire which hints at itself, and which could, but chooses not to burst into flame.[32]

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[29] *The Painter of Modern Life*, 27.
[30] Ibid, 28.
[31] Ibid, 28.
[32] Ibid, 29.

The dandy's determination not to be moved takes the form of a determination precisely because he is holding emotion and movement at bay. Rather than kill his passion—or desire, hunger, appetite, life force—he holds it in suspension, in curated detachment, and in this way continues to reference it. Through a bodily, aesthetic language, he frames the self as an object that he can separate himself from, albeit never completely, and asserts his presence as a self-spectator by holding himself in suspension between form and movement, coldness and passion, exterior and interior, attachment and detachment. "Dandyism is a sunset;" Baudelaire writes, "like the declining daystar, it is glorious, without heat and full of melancholy."[33] As an art form, the dandy's melancholic self-presentation suggests a reflection and interpretation of those conditions of subjective formation that render the subject both object and abject. Yet the dandy claims his status as an object, and imbues it with movement in the form of passion, his "latent fire" in fact belying his stillness and suggesting a dialogue between still, absolute shape and the movement of time and potential.

Ironically it is a section on women and make-up that Baudelaire states in some of the clearest terms the relationship between artifice, self-objectification, and access to the eternal, in some sense (without saying it) granting women who use makeup "correctly" the status of dandy. Rice powder used to perfect the imperfections of the face to create an "abstract unity in the color and texture of the skin," he writes, "like that produced by the tights of a dancer… immediately approximates the human being to the statue, that is to something superior and divine."[34] He considers vulgar not the excessive use of makeup but rather the use of makeup in subtle ways, so as to imitate nature. Rather, "Maquillage has no need to hide itself or shrink from being suspected; on the on contrary, let it display itself, at least if it does so with frankness and honesty."[35] Deliberate and exaggerated artifice, equated with the stillness of a statue, reveal aspirations toward the eternal and the divine, while in the living body of the present. This is the privileged perspective of the dandy for Baudelaire—a title, it is inferred, exceptionally conferred to a small class of women who can elevate the artifice, but reserved for the most part for men.

With his theater of artifice, of slowness and detachment, Baudelaire's dandy shapes himself into an object for visual (distanced) consumption. A consumer object, deadened yet living, he would seem to parody the becoming capital of the worker, enacting the forces of deadening and objectification of the human, of the commodification of life. What he rescues in his portrayal, it seems to me, is desire. Taking hold of desire, or hunger, the dandy, because as non-worker he is in a position to do so, plays with these forces of spectacle and commodification with an agency that others—most women, most workers, most non-Europeans, most non-urbanites—lack. What he does in turning himself into an object for consumption, an object he himself dotes on, is to extend the logic of capitalist consumption as cannibalistic self-consumption. Simone Weil, we will see, will reflect on the same. For the dandy, the holding of the self in suspended distance as an *objet d'art* foregrounds the desire to consume, without the physical act of consumption. Hunger and desire are forces of the self that shape and unshape the physical and affective presentation of self.

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[33] Ibid, 26.
[34] Ibid, 34.
[35] Ibid.

Simultaneous to this play on the human as object and subject, as both living and deadened, dwells a rich commentary on representation and the real in his age. If, unlike the man in black, the dandy's black garb does not, in Baudelaire, reflect any democratic impulse—after all he is all about keeping, or at least performing, an upper class male privilege—there is in his theater an implicit critique of any notion of finality, any notion of absolute self, and by extension an affirmation of infinite possible self-shapings. Foucault has written that if the evolution of Western thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did much to lay the ground for a new set of techniques of interpretation, the nineteenth century, where Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, "by involving us in a task of interpretation that always reflects back on itself," "profoundly modified the space of distribution in which signs can be signs."[36] Beginning with [these] three men," he explains, "interpretation has at last become an infinite task." One might well ask for *whom* interpretation became an infinite task, and find in answering it that this statement did not apply to the conscious lives of most individuals of the time, or, even, of today. However, it seems to me that the shift in interpretation that Foucault argues marked the nineteenth century resonates with the inversions and circularities of signification of the commodity culture that Baudelaire so centrally engages in his prose. Interpretation, Foucault postulates, was now understood as a process that could never be completed, "for after all everything is already interpretation, each sign is in itself not the thing that offers itself to interpretation but an interpretation of other signs.[37] Furthermore, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, not only was there no longer an original signified, but "the sign becomes malevolent (*malveillant*) to the extent that the sign is already an interpretation that does not appear as such."[38] It strikes me not only that this reflects a certain truth about the disappearance of the "original" in the age of modern art, as scholars from Walter Benjamin to Rosalind Kraus will tell us,[39] and also by the same logic describes the commodity itself.

In his theater of the self, Baudelaire's dandy clearly reflects this circular economy of interpretation, and more, offers a commentary on the false nature of any claim to authenticity and true meaning. He flaunts himself as art and thrusts his subjectivity on the stage as theater, using the force of his exaggerations to reveal the absurdity of thinking that the shape of the self presented is anything more than art, in other words, an embodied interpretation. The dandy, in other words, appears to offer no other truth than his theatre. He is both subject and object, at once self-enclosed and external to any "I." Yet the object that he makes himself out to be, in its corpse-like stillness, barely masks, in Baudelaire's words, the latent fire, the movement of passion and energy that exceed the stillness of his form and shows its stillness, its absolute object-like shape, the dandy's very sign of self, to be misleading. No shape is ever absolute, he seems to really be saying; look how absurd it is to show that. Furthermore, in not only creating himself as an object that is

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[36] Foucault, *Marx, Nietzsche, Freud*, 272.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] As Rosalind Krauss writes : "as we have constantly been reminding ourselves ever since Walter Benjamin's 'Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' authenticity empties out as a notion as one approaches those mediums which are inherently multiple." See Walter Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, and Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths.*

asking to be visually consumed, but in *self*-consuming in his *culte du soi*, the dandy inhabits a constant movement of consumption such that fulfillment and completion are never possible. The dandy not only inverts categories of signification, he performs them on a constant loop, showing subjectivity to be theater, art, interpretation, giving form to something that has no shape other than the momentary while making that momentary form seem absolute in his crisp, clear, and exaggerated shape of self.

Hunger, Gender, Desire

The dandy ties his unsatisfied, unfulfilled desire—his hunger—to a controlled asceticism expressed in clear, clean lines of bodily form, dress, gesture, and affect. Men "full of fire, passion, courage, and restrained energy" cultivate themselves with the restraint and stillness of an object. The dandy's deliberate and overt emphasis on crafting himself as a surface, that which is seemingly solid and tangible, that which has *shape*, is in its exaggeration precisely a commentary on the inexistence of absolute shape or meaning. As caricature, his shape cannot, in other words, be read on the surface "at face value." His is a critique, via irony and contradiction, of the very notion that a definite subjective form, made visible as a surface, can ever be sustained.

The dandy's aesthetic practice, as I have suggested, might thus be understood as one whose purpose is to articulate a circulation of signification (about body, self, identity, and the social) without end or resolution, ironically delivered via its opposite: a carefully contained presentation of self as, precisely, a series of surfaces that signify, in a meaning hidden in plain sight, depth. In the clearness of the lines of his dress and the exactness of his manners, the dandy suggests a caricature of self, an exaggeration of what it means to assume an identity, and this caricature demonstrates the self as a series of surfaces, two-dimensional and objectified, crafted with great attention, that might be handled and tended to at a distance, but not consumed. His affectlessness is a suspension (but not negation) of desire. The dandy presents himself as pure art, against all that is "natural." But the nature-art opposition is used dialectically by Baudelaire, where art informs nature and nature takes shape as interpretation.

Even here, however, Baudelaire contradicts himself. If the suspension of desire indicates neither the negation nor the fulfillment of desire but its incompletion and unfulfillment such that it is neither submitting to its needs—"the natural"—nor dismissing them, elsewhere, in his personal reflections (his *Journaux Intimes*), Baudelaire isolates the dandy from bodily appetite, assigning the latter to the figure of "woman" to indicate all that he is not:

> Woman is the opposite of the Dandy.
> Therefore she should be regarded with disgust.
> Woman is hungry and she wants to eat. Thirsty, and she wants to drink.
> She is rutting and she wants to be screwed.
> Fine characteristics!
> Woman is *natural*—that is to say, abominable.
> Moreover, she is always vulgar, that is to say, the opposite of the

Dandy.[40]

The first thing that strikes the reader in this passage is its use of "woman" to define what the dandy is not. The dandy is defined in the negative, against all of "woman's" hunger—her desire to have her hunger fulfilled, along with her thirst, and her sexual desire.
So strong is that which the dandy refuses, epitomized by the figure of "woman," that the entire poem is devoted to her, such that she represents the uninhibited claim of appetite—his own—that the dandy must resist in order to craft. The Baudelairian dandy's self-creation relies on the denial of the flesh and its needs. He must contain his desires and hungers, desires and hungers which "woman," as a stand in here for purely voracious nature, cannot critically separate herself from and therefore contain. If in his section on cosmetics woman is granted an ambiguous agency and access to the dandified arts of self-creation, here she in granted none. Woman is hungry, and she wants to eat. She is thirsty and she wants to drink. She is randy and she wants to have sex. In other words, she represents the human who has bodily needs and desires and aims to satisfy them without inhibition. This is her vulgarity. For Baudelaire woman has no intellect, and no ability to critically distance herself through dandyism. Even in *Éloge du maquillage* woman is tied to her nature in that even as she adorns herself, she is unaware that she, like the child and the "savage,"[41] is giving proof of the immateriality of her soul. She "deforms" and *corrects* nature by adorning herself, but without any understanding that her natural state is repugnant, but simply because she had been told she must "in order to be adored."[42] In attempting to show woman to be uncritical in her self-adornment, however, Baudelaire contradicts himself: woman must understand her natural state to be repugnant and requiring modification if she is intent on "fixing" it to please others. Interestingly, as we have seen, in his description of her he comes close, in places, to assigning her the qualities of the dandy. Ultimately, Baudelaire admires and uses women's rituals of cosmetics to support his thesis on the poverty and vulgarity of nature and its lack of relevance as a goal or virtue for the modern hero, but the prime unit of analysis, the true modern hero is, for him, a man (who has privileged access to the unnatural world of artistic self-crafting). It is a further irony that, for Baudelaire, dandyism's *raison d'être* is to override the natural, which would only have us killing each other (nature "incites man to murder his brother, to eat him, to lock him up and to torture him…Nature can council nothing but crimes")[43] – a clearly masculine scene of

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[40] Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complets*, 677. Baudelaire, *My Heart*, 176 (Quennell translation, with my modifications).
[41] Baudelaire discusses "the savage" on several occasions in "The Painter of Modern Life," in relation to dandyism and to artifice, each time suggesting that, like the child and like woman, "the savage" uses artifice brilliantly, but without understanding its implications. In "In Praise of Cosmetics" he writes: "I am thus led to regard external finery as one of the signs of the primitive nobility of the human soul. Those races which our confused and perverted civilization is pleased to treat as savage, with an altogether ludicrous pride and complacency, understand, just as the child understands, the lofty spiritual significance of the toilet. In their naïf adoration of what is brilliant—many-coloured feathers, iridescent fabrics, the incomparable majesty of artificial forms—the baby and the savage bear witness to their disgust of the real, and thus give proof, without knowing it, of the immateriality of their soul." *The Painter*, 32.
[42] Baudelaire, *The Painter*, 33.
[43] Simone Weil, we will see, makes a similar argument.

bellicosity.[44] The dandy seeks to override one violent version of masculinity for a more inhibited and cultivated on. Even so, Baudelaire was unable to see the further implications of the gender of his male dandy, for in blending masculine and feminine attributes and in rejecting "nature," he unwittingly demonstrated the very irreality of categories of gender. Perhaps one of the things that this passage from his *Journaux Intimes* does is to forcefully claim the dandy as masculine while simultaneously revealing the absurdity of such a claim. Where Baudelaire had insights into dandyism's relevance to women, and women's relevance to dandyism, they nonetheless stood as reflections—however unintegrated into the larger argument—on the importance and eternal "truth" of artifice, and as such we the reader can integrate them into our reading of Baudelaire's astute commentaries on this domain.

In the passage from his *Journaux intimes*, reviled "woman" stands in for that non-reflexive existence that the dandy sets himself apart from. A reflexive existence, on the other hand, is one which does not give in to the vulgarity of bodily hungers. Baudelaire could have named this unreflexive existence, marked by its succumbing to hunger, "animal" or "child" among other terms. In choosing to name it "woman," Baudelaire sets up a dandyism not only defined by what it refuses, but as a form of masculine subjectivity. But what kind of masculinity is this? This is masculinity marked by its unfulfillment and its controlled containment of hunger and desire. If the dandy is not she who seeks to satisfy her hunger and needs, neither is it he who seeks to satisfy his. Baudelaire's dandy, his hero of modern life, is distinctly not all men. Hunger here is a privileged language of modernist self-possession, belong to a certain social class of artists, and a certain gender of men in that milieu. He whom Baudelaire heroizes as the epitome of modernity and of modern self-understanding is not a virile man.[45] He is one defined by his ascetic withholding and his refined senses, no doubt sharpened by the hunger that drives him. Hunger is the life force of his self, his very movement. In privileging it, in resisting satisfaction of all of his appetites, he remains attuned to his body but distanced from it such that he can craft and view it as an object rather than as an inseparable materiality, and in this way to be a critic. In dismissing the need to consume and fulfill rather than remain hungry, thirsty, and desiring, Baudelaire is privileging the dandy's hunger as a semiotic tool whose object is clearly not the location of a completed, final, materiality. My subsequent chapters will consider how Colette and Simone Weil each reveal complexly gendered femininities within the heart of their own asceticisms and hungerings. Yet if Baudelaire, by contrast, seems to write from a deeply heteronormative masculinity, for him as well, gender, and desire, are disturbed. His dandy might be understood as an ambiguous figure of gender, one rejecting and embracing both the masculine and the feminine, a hybridized gender whose desire for unfulfillment, for hunger, situates him as both privileged subject (he is able to do all of

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Baudelaire's version of the ideal modern man found resonance with his contemporaries. Hippolyte Taine, for instance, wrote that "ancient beauty was that of a body with muscles tensed for action. The modern age is that of a nervous man." Rancière, "Infinite Taste," 37. If this notion oversimplifies and even incorrectly narrates the evolution of masculine beauty in the West—effeminate masculinities, for instance, have appeared throughout the centuries—it reflects the perception of modern man understood by Baudelaire and his contemporaries.

this not on the margins, but in the center) and articulator of an unease with categories of identity as such, a subject compelled to articulate infinite movement—of desire, of self.

It follows that the movement of desire seen in Baudelaire's dandy is not one particularly aimed at attracting a mate: "If I speak of love in connection with dandyism," Baudelaire writes, "this is because love is the natural occupation of the idle. The dandy does not, however, regard love as a special target to be aimed at."[46] Desire, for the dandy, reflects back on itself and remains, more or less, within a world of men.[47] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously discussed "the immanence of men's same sex bonds" in nineteenth century English literature, and relationships of homosocial desire, power, and meaning in those narratives. Class, gender privilege, homosociality, and desire are similarly entwined in Baudelaire, whose dandy performs a certain femininity as well as a masculinity, a masculinity that is one of artifice and frailty, aristocratic in affect and intent (too refined to work), delicate. He is assertive in his misogyny just as he identifies the feminine as those urges *of his* that he must resist. The dandy's aristocracy too was a displacement of time and place, a theatrical, artificial performance of place and gesture of immobility in a time of transition (the dandyism of the second empire was, in Baudelaire's words "the last spark of heroism in times of decadence."[48]) Crucially, he aims not to resolve any of his contradictions of gender and desire, but to play them to their extremes, highlighting, in his careful curation of self, the very desires, needs, and appetites of the body that he purports to contain. In his asceticism, which he manages with precision, Baudelaire's dandy practices a ritual of self-denial that bears upon the desires of the body and holds them simultaneously in suspense and in intense engagement. There is an eroticism to these acts of suspension of desire, a halting of the process of sexual satisfaction where to be deliberately unfulfilled suggests a distance taken from satisfaction and a possible hinting at homo-satisfaction, that which cannot be overtly fulfilled, or more simply an erotic expression that will not be confined to normative assignations of any kind. The display of desire unfulfilled, packaged as affect and style in the dandy's theater of self is, again, "spoken" in and to a world of men. Woman primarily functions as the other within, as that foil against which the dandy identifies himself, allowing the dandy to enact and restrain the "appetite" of "woman" in himself and mask it in an aristocratic (non-natural) masculinity.

Appetite, however, vacillates between the feminine and the masculine in Baudelaire, in more ways than one. If not giving in to bodily hungers defines the dandy as not-woman, his leaving of appetite to express itself *as* appetite—through a manipulation of the shape, look, and affective presentation of the body as I will discuss at length below—marks, ironically, an engagement with the body's desires, that which, according to Baudelaire's compass, points toward the feminine. The dandy's openness of appetite, appetite's "unclosure," marks a troubling of both gender and desire, and suggests an engagement with the self's potentials and its lack of fixity. Similarly, if "woman" would seem from the poem above to represent coarse, vile materiality, devoid of the ability to take control of her body and its directions and desires, and incapable of aesthetic (critical) production own, she too can be seen to be part of a deeper reflection on form, self, and interpretation. She herself might also be seen, as Debarati Sanyal

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[46] *The Painter*, 27.
[47] Sedgwick, *Between Men*.
[48] *The Painter*, 28-9, translation modified.

suggests, as a “figure for figuration itself,” standing in for “an open-ended, semiotic drift.” Discussing Frederic Jameson’s observation that the difference between modernism and postmodernism is usually understood in terms of a “dissolution of reference,” Sanyal writes:

> This contradictory mapping of gender—as nature and as sign—opens a consideration of “woman” as placeholder for aesthetic modernism’s vexed relationship to reference. As Frederic Jameson has observed, the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is usually conceptualized in terms of a “dissolution of reference.” High modernist art still retains the vestiges of faith in categories such as nature, being, depth, and authenticity, even if such concepts are on the brink of disappearance. Under the conditions of postmodernism, however, melancholy alienation cedes to a poker-faced celebration of glossy surfaces and artifice. For Jameson, Baudelaire is at the threshold between modernism and postmodernism….[49]

Jameson’s argument that Baudelaire stands at that threshold seems accurate to me, if we consider the dandy’s merging of “melancholy alienation” with a celebration of surface and artifice. Yet, even more, as Sanyal further suggests, issuing a corrective to Jameson, Baudelaire demonstrates “the drama of modernism might have less to do with a vanishing point of reference than with staging the aesthetic and material conditions that produce the illusion of reference in the first place.”[50]

This is precisely what I wish to argue Baudelaire is doing. He shows the dandy to be making theater out of the idea of an originary reference, while also demonstrating that the sign in fact no longer points to anything concrete or pre-existing (the circularity of signs that Foucault discusses). He makes concrete subjective form into a kind of theater, and imbues that theater with a circulation of desire and hunger without resolving into satisfaction. The paradox presented by the dandy is that his demonstration of the instability of subjective form takes place through an overtly articulated physical shape, through an ascetic denial of appetite that inevitably returns the focus to the body, and as an ironic self-referentiality that perpetually returns critique to embodied experience. Reflecting on French modernist writing at large, Sanyal writes:

> The human body is a key locus in the self-reflexive turn of French modernism. Its explicitly figural production in literary texts illuminates some of the material conditions of the body’s inscription into form by social and cultural representations. The representation of bodies *through* this reflection on reference invites a reading of the ideological as well as aesthetic processes that make bodies ‘matter’ (the processes that materialize the body and invest it with meaning and value).[51]

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[49] Sanyal, 96.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid, 97.

Explaining her reference to Judith Butler's treatment of the performative force of discourse,[52] Sanyal elaborates on her argument that "the self-reflexivity or irony we associate with high modernism is an instance of literature reflecting on the power of its own discourse and its 'production' of reference," a "reflection on aesthetics" which "can in turn be situated within broader institutional and cultural practices that interpellate bodies and subjects. Mallarmé aimed to paint not the thing but the effect that it produces. I suggest….that Baudelaire paints not the thing but the effects that produce *it*."[53] Modernist texts that reflect on the power of their own discourse, Sanyal suggests, "map the poetic, economic, and cultural inscription of material bodies into form, thereby putting bodies in motion *and* texts on stage." I would add to this excellent formulation that, in this modernist literature, bodies are "put in motion" *as* motion, and are staged as texts, texts visually articulated as shapes. More precisely, the staging of bodies as motion—as, essentially, eternal movement—is paradoxically accomplished through a caricatured staging of shape as complete. It is not that the subject is free to eternally shape and re-shape itself. Rather, the subject's shape is always determined by contingent factors, and as such is always an imposition, a process that can never be entirely self-willed. Even the critical self-distance taken from the events of taking shape, of becoming-subject, which seems a site of greater agency, is itself historically determined. The dandy reflects the complexity and circularity of this question of self-determination, locating agency at shifting points in and on the figure of self that he presents.

Tableaux Vivants

Bodies in motion and as motion, I would suggest, are bodies crossed by energy, force, desire, that in that crossing exceed their own shape. This is precisely what the dandy presents in his theater of the self, in which his body is both *objet d'art* and, as such, inert, and the site of agency and movement. As he presents his body as an object he also enacts the simultaneous movement and stillness of desire and signification suspended, suggesting his subjective form to be arbitrary, mobile, and diffuse. Here it is useful to turn to Rancière, who suggests the term "rêverie" to describe a rift between thought and action that occurs in modernity such that action takes place as a force that circulates through and exceeds the form of the subject. "The world exceeds the field of action just as the subject exceeds the sphere of the will," Rancière writes, accurately I think.[54] Rêverie, for him, is that act of thought that takes this excess into account and offers another mode of action. It puts into question the boundary that the "organic model" poses between interior and exterior realities. It is thus where the modern poem, and the modern thinker, locates its/her/his field of action.

Indeed, in "On the Heroism of Modern Life" Baudelaire writes that the heroism of modern life, its beauty and its sublimity—"proving that our era is no less rich (*féconde*) than that of the ancients in sublime motifs"[55]—can be found in the spectacle of "thousands of floating existences" circulating in the boulevards of the city.[56] He paints a

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[52] See Butler, *Bodies That Matter* and *Excitable Speech.*
[53] Ibid, footnote 3, 234.
[54] Rancière, 38.
[55] Baudelaire, "Salon of 1846."
[56] Ranciere 38 ; Baudelaire, "On the Heroism."

city of bodies exceeding their form and their gravity, floating as if they were disembodied spectres. This relaxed imagery seems precisely an engagement with a new kind of action through a removal. The floating bodies are art, theater, an "enactment of self-exhibition," a flow of sensations that "give the spectacle of modern life the possibility of developing all of its virtualities."[57] As a world of spectacle, as theater, as art, Baudelaire's floating world, in which all types of "virtualities" seem possible, is one of unstable identities and of undefined circumferences. Writes Rancière: "The floating world is a world where the dividing lines (*lignes de partage*) between social identities are blurred, just as, in the painting of Delacroix, the line—at once framework and emblem of the representational order—is twice suppressed, first, according to the truth of the geometer, for whom each one contains a thousand others, and then, for the colorist, for whom it is never more than 'the intimate fusion of two colors'."[58]

In the Paris painted by Baudelaire, populated by "floating existences," expression takes place in a realm of art whose beauty is one of drifting, open-ended significations and potentialities: "The beauty of modern life is neither that of Achilles nor of Agamemnon," he writes in the Salon of 1846, but "a new and special" one.[59] Parisian life, he qualifies, "is rich in poetic and marvelous subjects. The marvelous envelops and saturates us like the atmosphere; but we fail to see it."[60] This "marvelous" force that is modern beauty is neither interior not exterior to the person but "envelops" her/him like the atmosphere. The world of image onto which the modern Parisian, exemplified for Baudelaire by the dandy, projects himself is one of movement between exterior and interior, between shape and potentiality. It takes shape as both a theater of motion and a photographic still. One might call this aesthetic of modernity a *tableau vivant*—evoking a surface, shape, and exteriority whose forms are nonetheless breathing, moving, and three dimensional. The marvelous, poetic, drifting beauty of Baudelaire's modernity suggests a sublime, "floating" distance at the heart of presence, while the borders of its inhabitants, its objects, its "social identities," like the lines of a Delacroix painting, are porous and blurred. The line is indeed "twice suppressed": made ambiguous through blurring and drifting outside of its borders, it draws attention to itself as that which defines a shape, a body, a self, and in so doing shows that definition to be an illusion. The line does not trace an object, but rather the shape of non-identity.

The action of being thus takes place in the pictorial frame for Baudelaire's dandy, within the distance of observation. The world the dandy inhabits exceeds the field of action, and the subject the sphere of the will, as Rancière phrases it, such that the hero performs himself as a set of mirrors and mirages refracting throughout his landscape. If all revolves around him—he is, after all, the ultimate in self-absorption—the "him" in question exists as a performance of both a living, breathing, hungering being, and as a still life. He is a *tableau vivant*, performed, displayed, observed, admired, and absorbed as a living commodity within the distance of consumer spectatorship, a distance built in to the very economy of his personal performance. Baudelaire's dandy, it might be said, inverts the logic of the commodity so that in producing himself as an object he is producing not the enlivened object that Marx decried, which resulted from the deadening

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[57] Ibid, 36.
[58] Baudelaire, "Salon of 1846," *Oeuvres Complets*, vol 2, 434, discussed in Rancière, 40.
[59] Baudelaire, "Salon de 1846."
[60] Ibid.

of the worker, but a seemingly inert object posing as life. Untouchable, cold, and illusory all at once, it is not so much that, in Baudelaire, the dandy enacts the human replaced by the object as much as he claims his objectification and object-ness as a starting point. This non-identity and non-being at the heart of subjecthood is of course one that relies on and flaunts its class and gender privilege. For Baudelaire, as we have seen, the dandy purports to be holding onto the vestiges of aristocracy in the time of its wane. But what, in fact, are those vestiges? They are gestures, poses, affects, styles, not necessarily attached to any particular body. They are prescribed, controlled performances of a self that exist only as art. Yet this art commands attention. It is one that, from within its structures of gender and class privilege, stands the very question on its head. While Walter Benjamin will conclude that the triumph of the inorganic power of the commodity resulted in the destruction of the organic model of the human,[61] Baudelaire suggests that in fact the opposition between organic and inorganic, subject and object need not be framed within a logic of opposites. Rather than replace the organic with the inorganic, the subject with an object, the internal with the exterior, Baudelaire disorganizes and dislocates those very dichotomies, such that what opposes the organic is not the inorganic, but rather life itself, or force, or desire, or hunger, however one words it, that "circulates through bodies, exceeds their limits, and disorganizes the very relation of thought to its effect."[62] Baudelaire's modern hero, acting within a general heroism of modern life as Baudelaire defines it, unmakes and unravels the distinctions between being and non-being in the very act of self-creation.

Consider the opening to Baudelaire's 1885 essay, "The Painter of Modern Life." He begins with a contemplation of fashion plates of women and men from the 18th century, musing that they contain the moral and aesthetic feeling of their time.. However, it not simply that fashion reflects a moral and cultural interior. Fashion's artifice ends up defining those very elements of humankind which one would have imagined to be "natural":

> The idea of beauty which man creates for himself imprints itself on his whole attire, crumples or stiffens his dress, rounds off or aligns his gesture, and in the long run even subtly penetrates the very features of his face. Man ends by looking like his ideal self (*ce qu'il voudrait être*).[63]

Style here is not a surface aesthetic reflection of an interior set of values and belongings. Rather it acts as its own force of the real, dictating the very features of the human face. The external thus exerts a force on the interior, determining its shape, with the ideal self that "man" aspires to being a surface production.[64] The surface does not just make the inside visible; it seems here to determine the inside's very being. A culture's ideals of beauty, Baudelaire suggests, penetrate the features of the face, and in this merging of fashion and features one reads a joining of surface decoration with inner biology such that that even facial features are no longer determined by nature, but by personal intent.

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[61] Rancière, 37.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Baudelaire, *Le Peintre*, 6. Man, here, refers to woman as well.
[64] In this section on the idea of beauty as reflected in fashion plates, Baudelaire seems to be speaking equally of woman and men. Artifice, here, seems to belong equally to both.

Nature is dislocated as the biological and the given, and it is through surface (fashion) that depth finally take shape.

Reflection on these plates, Baudelaire writes, "is in fact an excellent opportunity to establish a rational and historical theory of beauty….to show that beauty is always inevitably of a double composition" made up of "an eternal, invariable element, whose quantity is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be…the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions." Without the second element, he continues, "the first…would be beyond our powers of digestion or appreciation, neither adapted nor suited to human nature."[65] To arrive at thought (comprehension of beauty), he is suggesting, one has to go through art. Art is that which allows us to interpret the world, and to reimagine the self as neither stably subject nor object, but a movement between and beyond the two. The particular aesthetics of a given era, for women as well as for men, Baudelaire writes, allow abstract "beauty" to be incorporated and understood and digested in those ways. Yet, this notion of "digestion" of eternal beauty via a specific, historical, cultural lens belies an open-ended hunger, the suspension or limit of digestion. If the taste of a given age dictates that a nose should look a certain way, and the mores that a face should have a certain expression, the fact that "man ends up looking like his ideal self" suggests that there is a simultaneity and symbiosis, rather than a causal relationship, between the ideals of beauty/morality/culture of a given age and the embodiment of that beauty and those values on the physical body of the individual. In his writings on beauty Baudelaire unravels and reweaves notions of the biological and the cultural, the eternal and the temporary, such that art, as hunger, or appetite, is that which migrates between and across the two.

Illness and Appetite

Appetite, as a vehicle for creative movement in and out of the body in Baudelaire is often accompanied, in fundamental ways, by illness. The nineteenth century's romance with consumption, neurasthenia, and other "romantic" ailments is well known.[66] Nietzsche, moreover, wrote of illness as an act of transfiguration, necessary for philosophy: "A philosopher who has traversed many kinds of health, and keeps traversing them, has passed through an equal number of philosophies; he simply *cannot* keep from transposing his states every time in to the most spiritual form and distance: *this act of transfiguration is philosophy."*[67] Indeed, it is illness as a movement of reverie that traverses the body and the social that Baudelaire attributes to Constantin Guy, the dandy and "painter of modern life," to whom Baudelaire devotes much of his essay "The Painter of Modern Life." In the section titled "The Artist, Man of the World, Man of the Crowds, and Child" Baudelaire imagines Guy as the man of the crowd from an Edgar Allen Poe story:

> Do you remember a picture (it really is a picture!), painted—or rather written—by the most powerful pen of our age, and entitled *The Man of the Crowd*? In the

[65] "The Painter," 3.

[66] See, for instance, Clark Lawlor, *Consumption and Literature: The Making of the Romantic Disease*.

[67] Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 35.

> window of a coffee house there sits a convalescent, pleasurably absorbed in gazing at the crowd, and mingling, through the medium of thought, in the turmoil that surrounds him. But lately returned from the valley of the shadow of death, he is rapturously breathing in all the odors and essences of life; as he has been on the brink of total oblivion, he remembers, and fervently desires to remember, everything… Imagine an artist who was always, spiritually, in the condition of that convalescent, and you will have the key to the nature of Monsieur G.[68]

Baudelaire asks his reader to consider Monsieur G, or Constantin Guys, as an eternal convalescent, a condition that he also equates with a child's ability to see everything as new. He calls this state of childhood a state of inebriation. "The child sees everything in a state of newness; he is always *drunk*."[69] He continues:

> I am prepared to go even further and assert that inspiration has something in common with a convulsion, and that every sublime thought is accompanied by a more or less violent nervous shock which has its repercussion in the very core of the brain. The man of genius has sound nerves, while those of a child are weak. With the one, Reason has taken up a considerable position; with the other, sensibility is almost the whole being. But genius is nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will…"[70]

Guys is not a man of reason; he is a man dictated by his senses. The modern hero, as we have seen, is a man who is not filled with virility. Neither his physique nor his *esprit* are stable or fully realized. Baudelaire links his creative movement to that of the convalescent, who is neither ill nor well, but in the midst of the movement in between. Guys, the hero of modern life, the artist (though, Baudelaire tells us, he rejects the label as it is too limiting), as an "eternal convalescent," is a man of fluidity, movement, and transition. Baudelaire equates the state of illness with childhood's openness, its curiosity, and its unstructured, sublime state of "inebriation." Thus, the modern man, contrary to Kant's enlightened adult, is here resolutely not a man of reason who has reached his maturity. Guys holds a genius that stems from a child-like curiosity, a state provoked by illness. Baudelaire asks us to remember Poe's story, in which a convalescent sits at the window of a coffee shop, "pleasurably absorbed in gazing at the crowd, and mingling, through thought, in the turmoil of thought that surrounds him." His mind becomes his body; his illness provokes a hunger for experience. The turmoil of thought is also a turmoil of bodies—those of the crowd that he is gazing out at. Having been near death, he is now "rapturously breathing in all the odors and essences of life."[71] Guys is "always, spiritually, in the condition of the convalescent." Not only does illness produce rapturous curiosity, a hunger in other words, but this takes place in the condition of convalescence, when one is still in between illness and health. Illness is equated with rapturous appetite here, just as for Nietzsche it is equated with philosophical drive. In illness and in

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[68] Baudelaire, *The Painter*, 7.
[69] Ibid, 8.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid, 7.

convalescence alike the body is in a liminal, transitional state, epitomizing the state of movement across the borders of the body that the self always occupies.

The state of transition and lack of fulfillment or completion that is illness, and within which Baudelaire locates self-creation, is a temporal as well as sensory and mental state, one that desires not its resolution but its unfulfillment. Baudelaire clearly draws these connections between time, form, illness, and melancholy in his description of the dandy, of Guys, and in his poetry. His poem "A Une Passante" ("To a Woman Passing By") describes an encounter whose point is its unfulfillment, whose protagonists are dark, fleeting, in mourning, inebriated. The poem is infused with a longing and a movement of eros whose purpose is its unsatisfaction:

> The deafening street around me was screaming.
> Long, slim, in deep mourning, majestic grief,
> A woman passed, raising, with a delicate hand,
> The trim and hem of the flounces of her gown;
>
> Graceful and noble, with her statue's leg.
> And I drank, frozen like a madman,
> In her eye, livid sky where the storm breeds,
> The softness that fascinates and the pleasure that kills.
>
> A flash…then night!—Oh fleeting beauty
> Whose look made me suddenly reborn;
> Shall I not see you again but in eternity?
>
> Elsewhere, far from here! Too late! *Never*, perhaps!
> I know not where you flee; you don't know where I go;
> You, whom I could have loved, you who knew it was so.[72]

Like the mourning men of the first passages, the mourning woman here—again, like the men, long and slim—captures both the passing and the eternal, and does so through her physical appearance, in body and in dress. The dance of desire between the two characters is one of an encounter with no resolution, such that the story moves along lines of irresolution and unfulfillment. Just as their desire is to be unfulfilled, so it seems, is the woman's grief, which is presented not as something to be overcome but something to claim: the passerby is in *majestic* grief. The woman's pain here functions as an aphrodisiac for the writer. It is his poem and his experience that is relayed. Hers appears as he images it. Yet the desire he writes of is for her pain. The poet is elevated and energized by the lack of possibility of anything fulfilling, conclusive, or happy between him and the woman. According to Benjamin, Proust admired "A Une Passante" for the fulfillment "spared" its hero and heroine, and drew from it his own character of Albertine, whose pallor and sickliness showed illness and unhealthiness to be connected to depth of experience:

[72] Translation from Elissa Marder, *Dead Time*, 81-82.

> [Proust] gave his later echo of the woman in mourning, which appeared to him one day in the form of Albertine, the evocative caption "La Parisienne." "When Albertine came into my room again, she wore a black satin dress. It made her look pale, and she resembled the type of fiery yet pale Parisian woman, the woman who is not used to fresh air and has been affected by living among the masses and possibly in an atmosphere of vice, the kind that can be recognized by a certain glance which seems unsteady if there is no rouge on her cheeks." This is the look—even as late as Proust—of the object of a love which only a city dweller experiences, which Baudelaire captured for poetry, and of which one might not infrequently say that it was spared, rather than denied, fulfillment."[73]

Benjamin identifies here a relationship between time, durée, illness, and unfulfillment. The "pale but fiery" Parisian woman's consumptive look is the result of intense, sensual living, the kind of living—at night, without sunlight, through vice—that is satisfying because it is *un*healthful rather than healthful. If this poem is about unfulfilled desire (for the particular male protagonist he writes of) as the vehicle of the city dweller's experience of eros, so it is also about the location of the infinite—never ending, never complete—time within the temporary moment of the encounter… Benjamin insists that "familiarity with Baudelaire must include Proust's experience with him," an experience that ties together Bergson's "actualization of the *durée* which rids man's soul of obsession with time" with *Les Fleurs du mal*.[74] Baudelaire offers us the *durée* within the moment. In "A Une Passante" we read the movement of time as it transverses particular bodies, moments, and encounters. While Benjamin concludes that in these moments (here and in other works) Baudelaire is writing about the inability to experience lying at what he calls "the heart of rage,"[75] I think it is more accurate to say that he is writing about intensity as an emotion and experience accessed through and within a distance from it, and placing *that* experience (a kind of presence in the experience through a distance from it) at the heart of his modernity. Distance taken from experience *is* the experience, for the man in this poem. It has its own durée, its reverie, its languor, its flow. Benjamin says elsewhere that "in the spleen, time becomes palpable; the minutes cover a man like snowflakes."[76] The sense of slowness, elongation of the moment, and of *barely touching* (snowflakes touch but ever so lightly) engendered by *spleen* suggest deep experiences of a kind of being that is unattached, or barely attached, to objects and particulars. This is not the experience of the commodity. Benjamin argues that Baudelaire writes about *Erlebnis* (the momentary and vibrant experience of an event) rather than *Erfahrung* (a more enduring life experience), giving the former the weight of the latter. I would qualify that he takes the commodity experience and steers it toward a new kind of depth, a depth of surface presentation—which would include fleeting encounters and momentary pleasures—a surface that contains within it a distance from fulfillment, that is, a hunger that aims not to be satisfied, so that both the infinite and the eternal are always present in the moment. Depth is to be found on the surface in Baudelaire, just as durée is to be found in the moment.

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[73] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 180-1.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid, 184.
[76] Ibid.

What Makes a Suicide Modern?

Thus illness, hunger, mourning, unfulfillment, and distance together define the self-consciously modern urban experience of desire for Baudelaire, primarily for men (but not all men), and together these comprise for Baudelaire the particular kind of beauty that belongs to his age, a beauty he identifies as heroic. Baudelaire first developed his ideas on art, aesthetics, heroism, and modernity in his Salon of 1846 essay "De l'héroïsme de la vie moderne." In this short piece, Baudelaire announces that before addressing questions of heroism and modernity he must first discuss beauty:

> Before trying to distinguish the epic side of modern life, and before bringing examples to prove that our age is no less fertile in sublime themes than past ages, we may assert that since all centuries and all peoples have had their own form of beauty, so inevitably we have ours. That is in the order of things.
>
> All forms of beauty, like all possible phenomena, contain an element of the eternal and an element of the transitory—of the absolute and of the particular. Absolute and eternal beauty does not exist, or rather it is only an abstraction skimmed from the general surface of different beauties. The particular element in each manifestation comes from the emotions, and just as we have our own particular emotions, so we have our own beauty.[77]

Beauty, Baudelaire tells us, is comprised of both the eternal and the transitory, the absolute and the particular. What is transitory and particular, the manifestation of beauty in a given era, comes from what Baudelaire identifies as emotions, that which, as we have seen, is elicited by a set of norms, values, and aesthetics in a particular historical era. The ancient world, for instance, according to Baudelaire, was one of "a robust and martial form of life, a state of readiness on the part of each individual," a readiness which "gave him a habit of gravity in his movement, and of majesty, or violence, in his attitudes[.] To this should be added a public splendor which found its reflection in private life. Ancient life was a great parade. It ministered above all to the pleasure of the eye, and this day-to-day paganism has marvelously served the arts." Depicting the past in paintings was easy to do, Baudelaire explained, for all of its pleasing pomp and majesty. Yet, Baudelaire sets out to show, modern life has its epic side too, and is "no less fertile and sublime" than earlier eras.

In order to illustrate modern beauty and sublimity, Baudelaire, strikingly, turns to the subject of suicide. Benjamin saw suicide "the quintessence of modernity," a response to the exhaustion faced by the modern individual in the face of modern life, causing them to take refuge in death. "Modernity must stand under the sign of suicide," he wrote, "an act which seals a heroic will that makes no concessions to a mentality inimical toward this will. Such a suicide is not resignation but heroic passion. It is *the* achievement of modernity in the realm of the passions."[78] It is for this reason, Benjamin suggests, that Baudelaire, in a brief but important few lines, turns to the subject of suicide in his

[77] Baudelaire, *Salon*, my translation.
[78] Benjamin, *The Writer*, 104.

"classic passage devoted to the theory of the modern."[79] Yet if Baudelaire tapped into a penchant for narratives of suicide as integral to modernist aesthetic sensibility, his suicidal hero was less an active agent of a singular, passionate death (that marked his life as heroic or unique) than of a diffused, distributed one marked by an openness and a hungering rather than by closure. Here are Baudelaire's words:

> Except for Hercules on mount Oeta, Cato of Utica, and Cleopatra, whose suicides are not modern suicides, what suicides do you see in ancient paintings? In all pagan existence, doomed to appetite, you will not find the suicide of Jean-Jacques, or even the strange and marvelous suicide of Raphaël of Valentin.[80]

In this passage, Baudelaire answers the question "what is modern beauty?" with "what is modern suicide?" We have already seen his discussion, in this same essay, of the funereal black frock coat, expressive of "the public soul," together celebrating death. Here Baudelaire does something even more interesting: he not only equates death with beauty, a particularly modern kind of beauty, but he equates death and beauty with the refusal of appetite. Just as he would write about the dandy's refusal of satisfactions in life, remaining hungry, thirsty, and desiring, so he suggests that suicide, self-directed death, in the modern era (presumably, like the dandy's hunger, primarily the domain of men) partakes in the same language of unfulfillment, of suspensions of and dis-connections from the desires of the body.

In this passage, Baudelaire clearly identifies pre-modern paganism with appetite, this implicitly identifying modernity with the check on appetite. What, however, is exactly meant by appetite? Earlier we saw that hunger was equated with the controlled suspension of desire. Hunger, in his diary passage, belonged to those men—dandies—who were able to resist bodily urges. Here appetite takes on a different connotation than the earlier hunger. Appetite is a hunger in the positive, or a desire to sustain oneself through the fulfillment of one's hunger. The heroes of the ancient Greco-Roman world, it would seem, hungered for fulfillment. This hunger, however, Baudelaire suggests, was imposed on them. They were destined to it. Baudelaire seems to suggest that the ancients, in lacking a certain modern notion of free will, were doomed to fulfill their bodily needs (*vouées à l'appétit*). With modern free will, Baudelaire suggests, comes a cultural system, comprised of the particulars of emotions and beauty, within which a turn away from appetite, a turn away from self-fulfillment, and a turn toward death are its fundamental aesthetic principles. Baudelaire was neither historian nor scholar of the ancients, but the accuracy of his historical analysis does not matter. What matters is the story he is telling about modernity, in which he suggests that once choice is introduced, one might choose to not have an appetite; to not hunger for fulfillment. This non-appetite is the modern prerogative, the choice of suicide. Again, the modern here presumes the ability to make such a choice, hence, a man (and likely not a woman) of a certain economic liberty or, if not, then of a certain social (artistic, literary) class. The ancients were doomed to appetite because of their lack of self-knowledge, Baudelaire seems to be saying, and the agency of the moderns leads them to suicide. The former had appetite for life; the latter had appetite for death, even within life.

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[79] Ibid.
[80] Baudelaire, *Salon*, my translation.

The heroes of the ancient Greco-Roman world, in Baudelaire's telling, had no choice but to be hungry. They were *burdened* with appetite (as are, presumably, all women). Appetite that seeks to be satisfied, we have seen, is for Baudelaire the opposite of the modern man. Whether contemporary woman or ancient hero, they who seek to satisfy their appetite, he seems to suggest, are they who have no ability to critically distance themselves from their selves.

A second set of features distinguishing classical from modern suicide becomes evident in a footnote explaining the paragraph above:

> The first [Heracles] kills himself because the burning of his robe becomes intolerable; the second [Cato] because he can no longer aid the cause of liberty; and that voluptuous queen [Cleopatra] because she has lost her throne and her lover; but none of them destroy themselves in order to change their skin in view of metempsychosis.[81]

Here Baudelaire suggests that, first, in the case of the classical heroes, their suicide resulted not from a desire to die, but from the loss of something crucial to their lives without which they cannot live, without which they lose their wholeness, their unity of self. Just as they didn't question or deny their appetite, so they didn't question or deny their wholeness. On the contrary, they died when that perceived unity and wholeness of being, that fulfillment of appetite, was lost. "None of them," he specifies, "destroy themselves in order to change their skin." In the "strange and marvelous suicide of Raphaël of Valentin," on the other hand, suicide occurs precisely through a changing of skin. Here the self is conceived not as unified but as transgressible, with physical and psychic borders that shift and transmute between a skin and a skin, between a human and an object, so that there is never any question of human wholeness, completion, or fulfillment, but rather of dissipation, hungering and constant decomposition in the service of life.

La Peau de chagrin tells the story of Raphaël de Valentin, who, wanting to commit suicide, is diverted from his plans by the gift of a magic skin that will grant any wish. He is warned that with each wish granted (and it turns out, even wishes felt but not articulated, for the skin will anticipate his desires) the skin will shrink, and when it has shrunk to nothing, he will die. Raphaël choses to put his life in the hands of the magical skin, trading his own skin (his life, and his agency) for that of the ass. In turn, the skin comes alive as a talisman, only to shrink itself to death just as Raphaël's life disappears. Like Raphaël's transmutable life, the ass's skin is an object whose own ontological status is shifting: it was once alive as part of a creature, then dead, and now alive again as a talisman that takes over the "skin" of Raphaël. The lines between animate and inanimate, object and subject, commodity and life are multiply transgressed such that Raphaël's death suggests the ultimate act of self-creation. Put otherwise, in order to live he unravels his life, one desire at a time, such that in creating the life he desires, in articulating and attaining that with which he identifies (money, possessions, love), he is simultaneously unmaking that life. His "strange and marvelous suicide" refers not to a single act, but to a long drawn out dramatization of a subject-object dynamic such that the subject is

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[81] Ibid.

determined by its own objectification, which it desires, in which art dictates life, and in which the reach toward life is simultaneously a reach toward death.

The tale, and Baudelaire's reaction to it, portray self-estrangement and self-destruction alike as *the* modern acts of self-relation or reflexivity. The life of the protagonist is not only transposed onto the life of the skin such that simultaneous to the process of transposition there is a process of self becoming object and commodity/art dictating life (it is important to the story that the talisman is found in a market full of exotic commodities), the external dictating the internal. More, the commodity-object (the skin) receives its power from vain desires by its user for surface pleasures. The economy at play between Raphaël and the skin is one of externalities, where the movement between Raphaël and the skin is one from surface to surface, and through this surface volleying, Raphaël's humanity—his depth, his soul—takes and loses shape in a process that elaborates on his alienation from his own bodily skin. It appears at once on his surface and on the talisman's. It is in both places and in neither, and ultimately is secondary to the value of the trickster, shallow skin itself (both his and the ass's). Life exceeds the borders of the body, and the self is displaced from the locus of the individual, on multiple fronts in this story.

If classical suicide drew its splendor from preserving and completing a totality of image, as Baudelaire's passage and footnote would suggest, modern suicide would seem to radically call into question the relationship of self to one's own skin. Modern suicide, exemplified in the text of *Peau de Chagrin*, epitomizes the modernist migration of self from self, the externalization and distancing of self-subject from self-object, and the focus on the tension and passion of that movement in between. Suicide, as a giving up of the "I," occurs within an equation in which the "I" is seeking, in life, to give itself up, to become the "not-I." This is what Simone Weil will call decreation, which for her, as I will show, will be the antithesis of self-creation. Baudelaire's hero Raphaël de Valentin, on the other hand, unmakes his life, reluctantly, in a reversal of self-creation that nonetheless stakes a claim on embodiment: holding on to desire and to flesh, the imminent end of physical life for him is experienced as painful loss. His self-unraveling, unlike Weil's, was in the service of self-making, and this is why his heroism, for Baudelaire, was spectacular, and exhibited the ultimate in modern beauty: it dramatically delivered the deep contradictions of modernist self-creation in which to be is to be external to oneself as object, and thus (some version of) dead within life. It is this which marks the "particular passions," a passion for the not-I within the I, for the object within the subject, for surface, art, and object as the actual/only/truthful site of depth. How is an individual to stake a life for themselves in the spectacular world of the commodity? By reflecting their own object status as a mark of creation.

Valentin's suicide is not the romantic one of Goethe's Werther or Chatterton, a kind of suicide that even the narrator of the story, in the opening scene, views as "generic and overdetermined."[82] Jared Stark notes that suicide "becomes justified…not on the basis of its rationality or necessity, not as proof of autonomy or as an act of self-sacrifice, but rather to the extent that it represents a new, original act—to the extent, one might even say, that it is no longer simply recognizable as suicide... To attest to new conditions under which death takes place, one must die in a new way."[83] If death had become a

[82] Stark, 80.
[83] Stark, 82.

finality in the age of science, the artist of modern life—that man for whose privileged position it is to have a critical self-distance—proposes that it, too, can be made into art, an art that lives beyond the limits of the body. Nothing is immune from the world of objectification, which the artist tasks himself (for he is male, here) to show is not a world of commodified experience which can be reflected back on itself as art, but which, rather than reflecting the deadening of life, takes that death and turns it into the ultimate truth of life. So, again, re-invoking Rancière: the refutation of the organic model is not the triumph of the inorganic (death); rather, it is life as power that circulates through bodies, exceeds their limits, and disorganizes the very relation of thought to its effect. The suicide of Balzac's hero—which takes place through a slow process of transmigration between a human and an object, one which was once part of a live being (an ass), which invents a strange communication between the skin of the hero's body and a disembodied skin, which unfolds in the context of a commercial exchange—offers readers a death that performs the circulation and disorganization of forces that comprise, for Baudelaire, the modern heroic self. Benjamin wrote about death's sequestration to the hospital or the sanitarium, a sequestration that may not be merely a "secondary effect" of bourgeois society but rather "its subconscious main purpose." He links this to the demise of storytelling—the telling of the story of one's life that happens in death.[84] Perhaps modern suicide, as an act of artistic will, refutes the mandates of "bourgeois society" that death (presumably no longer something modern human is comfortable with without an afterlife) be hidden away. Perhaps, on the contrary, the art of suicide precisely performs the task of communicability appropriate to the modern world. When Benjamin writes that "modernity must stand under the sign of suicide," a suicide that "not a resignation but a heroic passion," he is still locating a definitive agency, the mark of the modern hero, in the act. Rather, suicide here, like the modern artist and dandy, gives voice to an altered, circular, disembodied and re-embodied "floating" signification of self. Stark further suggests that "modern suicide…paradoxically bears witness to its own sequestration. Whereas bourgeois modernity seeks to hide the dying from sight, suicide produces a mark or trace that indicates, without being able to make known or visible, an event that insistently transmits the event of its own erasure."[85] In this reading, too, suicide performs a task of communication against the grain of the invisibility forced upon it. Rejecting the notion that that the organic life of a person is finite and discrete and entirely disappears in death, the suicide artist rings the two into one and the same dialogue between being and non-being, interior and exterior, whole and part that marks the reflective modern experience. Neither a return to pre-science notions of life eternal nor a rejection of the finality of death, the artist of modern life invents/reflects a language in which modern death, as part of modern life and belonging to its same system of interpretation, is to be understood within its concepts of endless circularity of signification. The distance between self and not-self is one traversed in death just as in life. If death leaves no body and no soul it still leaves a story, a trace of a life, and as such, there is, for the Baudelairian hero, a modern way to die.

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[84] Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 150–51. Discussed in Stark.
[85] Stark, 85.

Shape, Stillness, and the Movement of Non-Being

Flat death

I have discussed the ways in which the relationship between death/non-being or suspended being, aesthetics, and desire feature centrally in Baudelaire's texts on modernity. For my concluding sections, I will elaborate on specific questions of art, for it is here, as I claimed at the start, that the body politic is made and unmade in Baudelaire's modernity. In my discussion of the passage on the back frock coat, garb of the modern hero, I suggested that the outlined, streamlined figures of this passage suggest a drawing, and I will say more on this below. The flatness of the form of the coat, the flatness of the shades of black and grey, the flatness of the overall affect and aesthetic simultaneously, I further propose, suggest a photograph. A photograph is flat and two-dimensional and yet mirrors a three-dimensional world. It encompasses the three dimensional within the two, and the eternal within the moment of capture. It freezes time while also making something immortal, eternal. A photograph also does not return the gaze. The garments that don't shout back at you, the dandy who in being unreactive would seem not to want to elicit attention, their surfaces all the while speaking volumes of depth—these are creations of the self as photographic art. In becoming a photograph, in becoming flat and streamlined, black and grey, the artist of modern life offers a measured interaction with the speed of modern life so as to recapture the eternal within the city's perpetual movement. In so doing, he offers a critical, aesthetic language which disorganizes the movement of signifier and signified that identifies the subject as one observed, displayed, identified, and (ironically) clearly formed.

In enacting a photographic still, I would further suggest, the artist of modern life performs the photograph's own performance of death. Roland Barthes offers a reading of the history of death through the photograph. Photography emerged in the nineteenth century along with the invention of history, the decline of religion, and what Edgar Morin calls the "crisis of death."[86] "Death must be somewhere in a society," Barthes writes, "if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion…; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life. Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. Life / Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print."[87] If the photograph itself performs a site of death as it intrudes within life, the dandy—the ultimate man in black takes the photograph and its two-dimensions (in conversation with a third) out of the frame and into his lived body, performing at once the distance between the photograph and the viewer, and the photograph and life, and inscribing photographic life/death into his language of self. A certain circularity of signification thus takes place in the dandy's theater, where life is identified as much with death as with living, and with the external, two-dimensional object as with the living, three-dimensional flesh.

At play in Baudelaire's hero of modern life is nothing less than what it means to be human. The modern individual for Baudelaire seeks no inner truths, but rather self-

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[86] Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (English version), *92*.
[87] Ibid.

invention. Surface creation is the only depth that matters. There is no "liberation" from object-ness to be had or to be pursued, but rather an acceptance of the object-state of the human, and an ironic celebration of it. Again—it bears repeating—the distance taken by Baudelaire's heroes in order to observe and comment on the production of subjectivity depends on their privileged ability to do so. It is only because he is unconfined by gender, class, or social status that the dandy-hero is able to access an ironic self-distancing. Nonetheless, in that irony reside serious questions: what is a human, what is a self, what is a social and economic subject? The body remaking itself as flat, not-quite-human, neither alive nor dead, or something that is not natural and that has to be invented has a longer history within the modern era, one that preceded photography. The fascination with the automaton, in the early years of scientific dethroning of the heavens and grappling with the place and meaning of the human, was precisely a grappling with questions of what differentiates natural human from machinic object. Similarly, *tableaux vivants* of the same era explored the dialectic between stillness and movement, flatness and depth, object and subject.[88] At the same time, during this same period, technological developments and science were suggesting that the human could be something both other than eternal, and other than human. The dandy's aesthetic explorations, seen through Baudelaire, should be understood as following and residing within this historical lineage and context, and as an articulation of the aesthetic elaboration of these questions as they evolved and emerged in his own time; reflections on the subject as object in a world of a rapidly expanding commodification of life.

Lines of Non-Identity

In the discussion of Baudelaire, we pointed to the importance of the surface as a site of vitality and self-division. In the field of art history, of course, flatness has been a central characteristic of modern art.[89] T.J. Clark argues that around the time of Manet a certain skepticism around the nature of representation in art set in in a primary way. This led to a stress on the materials used to create illusions and likenesses, as well new ideas as to what form representations should take.[90] Furthermore, uncertainty became a value in its own right, and even an aesthetic. Literal presence of surface, whether through flatness of representations or in transparency of and focus on materials used, supplanted representation, which was no longer to be trusted. Flatness could furthermore be seen as an analog of "the popular," and it could signify modernity and its photography, its two-dimensional posters and prints. "Painting would replace or displace the Real…for reasons having to do with the nature of subjectivity, or city life, or the truths revealed by higher mathematics." Finally, the unevenness of paint and brokenness of surface, as in Cezanne's work, could be understood as standing in for the unevenness of seeing, "the actual form of our knowledge" itself.[91] Flatness, Clark insists, was one of the forms that

[88] For a treatment of *Tableaux Vivants* as slow art, see Arden Reed, *Slow Art*.
[89] See such classic texts as: Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitch" (Partisan Review, 1939) and "Toward a New Laocoon" (Partisan Review, 1940); Michael Fried's essays from 1961-1977 in *Art and Objecthood* (University of Chicago Press, 1998); and T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton University Press, 1984).
[90] Clark, *The Painting*, 10.
[91] Ibid, 13.

modernist art took, and must be understood within a substantial set of questions and qualities with which it was at play**.** Flatness, in other words, was anything but two-dimensional, but rather a set of metaphors and engagements with the conditions, structures, and epistemologies of modern life.

Along with his photographic self-presentation, the dandy, through his asceticism, might be understood as an illustration, a set of two-dimensional lines; a shape made of careful, clear, outlines; a surface and an outline of an object being presented as a self. As noted above, Baudelaire wrote extensively on Delacroix, admiring the ways in which he merged line and color, interpreting the "strange mysterious quality…of our age…It is the invisible, the impalpable, the dream, the nerves, the *soul*; and this he has done…with no other means but color and contour…"[92] When the line is erased and blurred, as it is in Delacroix, it becomes a place of ambiguity and overlap between different objects, and as such place of non-identity. The extreme two-dimensionality of design and poster art at the time, in art nouveau and later art deco, on the other hand, conveyed extreme shapes, extreme identity, an enclosure of form. Baudelaire was writing at the beginning of the age of poster art, of mass-produced lithographs by artists such as Jules Cheret, and soon Toulouse Lautrec, whose two-dimensional figures flaunted their outlined and caricatured two-dimensional shape. In their irony and caricature these poster artists undermined the supremacy of the very (overtly defined) forms they were displaying. The display of self exhibited by the dandy parallels and emerges alongside the flat poster art of the time. As theater, it is a caricature, and as caricature, it presents an ironic body of lines.

I am suggesting, in other words, that we consider the dandy's caricature of shape as a drawing. To present a shape is to suggest that it has no capacity to open and transform. Yet to present oneself as a shape, emphatically and with exaggeration, is to open up a dialogue on shape-making as an act, and not a given. One is always being born and one is always exhibiting one's being. There is never any final truth, but rather interruptions of shape that claim to "be" something. In the case of the dandy that something is akin to both an outlined drawing and a snapshot, a falsely static moment that belies its participation in a constancy of movement. Baudelaire draws a figure who, in his self-definition, is not seeking to exhibit any truths, nor any finalities of identity or form, but rather to exhibit form's impermanence. The truth of the dandy's caricatured, exaggerated self-presentation is a truth of incompletion rather than completion, of tension rather than fulfillment of form, self, or desire. The distance inscribed within this presentation of self as art object is further underscored by the distance between subject and object that spectatorship demands (where the spectator is both the dandy himself, looking at himself, and another looking at the dandy). The dandy demands to be consumed as an object, and consumes *himself* as object, but the act of consumption appropriate to the task is one of hungering rather than satisfaction. The economies of looking and hungering combine in fundamental ways in Baudelaire, nowhere more acutely than in the figure of the dandy, whose clearly delineated and polished form demands to be consumed, even as the spectatorship this consummation requires can only take place through a distance. The object can never be "had"; it can only be desired. In the next chapter, I will consider how a similar dialectics between form and infinitude, asceticism and decadence can be found in Colette's world of women dandies, *demi-mondaines*, and decadents. In the context of her writings, these figures or characters do

[92] *The Painter*, 44.

not assume center stage in the field of vision, but oscillate on the boundaries of the visible. In this way, they carry a different set of personal, social, and political resonances. Close in time and in space to Baudelaire—Paris of the nineteenth century—Colette, however, will reflect on self-unmaking and performance not as distanced, ironic reflections on being and identity but rather as the very conditions of survival on the margins, changing the sense of gender and desire along the way.

CHAPTER TWO

Veiled, Perishing, Deciduous, Starved: Women Between Presence and Absence in *The Pure and the Impure*

"To live without happiness, and not to waste away from it, that is an occupation, almost a profession."
- Colette

"…la sensualité, "toujours prête…à jouer l'affamée"
- Colette

The Pure and the Impure, Colette's self-described finest work, and "the nearest I shall ever come to writing an autobiography,"[93] takes the reader on a walk through the erotic lives of historical figures of her era, women and men, whose desires and expressions were, for the most part by necessity, built on the outskirts of society.[94] Lesbians and other-gendered figures, each an acquaintance, friend, or one-time lover, are drawn and narrated such that the reader understands not only their own erotic and subjective landscape, but the social one to which they belong. Colette describes her subjects as "restless ghosts unrecovered from wounds sustained in the past when they crashed headlong or sidelong against that barrier reef, mysterious and incomprehensible, the human body."[95] At once deeply within the sensual conditions of being and alienated from normative assignations of sex, gender, and desire, Colette describes a population who find themselves through their alienation and through the impossibilities of adhering to an identity. The dissatisfactions, pains, self-denials, and various exiles of the personae the book lays out before us form the very sites of their self-creation. Above all this is a book about the prescience of bodily desires, desires liberated from attachment to objects in favor of what Julia Kristeva, in her book on Colette, calls "an immersion on the infiniteness of the world"[96] where "the sensual traverses all without prejudice" and sensuality is "perpetually absorbing and being absorbed by the body."[97]

The historical landscape in which the women in Colette's book lived and loved was one in which questions of women's gender and desire were widely being debated and discussed. The new woman, the *garçonne*, the figure of Sappho, rediscovered and reinvented, form the cultural-historical setting for Colette's book, whose chronicles takes

[93] Quoted in Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh*, 389.

[94] Carolyn Dean notes: "Colette's famous and complex portrait of lesbianism in *Le Pur et l'impur*…remains the standard account of lesbianism during this period…Colette's book was acclaimed some two decades ago by feminist literary critics because, unlike other narratives, Colette presumed not only the possibility of female sexual selfhood but of lesbian sexual subjectivity as well." 199-200.

[95] *The Pure,* 19; *Le Pure*, 21.

[96] Kristeva, *Colette*, 11.

[97] Kristeva, "De Claudine," 45. My translation.

place between the late 1900s and the first world war, a period of shifting categorical and conceptual borders, and one in which women's desire both gains visibility and finds its voice within a certain invisibility in an underworld of clubs, private parties, and codes of behavior. Carolyn Dean suggests that lesbian sexuality in particular was made visible "only by insisting on its indecipherability…[They] affirmed rather than stigmatized [their] sexuality by rendering it opaque."[98] Colette's "investigations" into multiply and complexly gendered and eroticized women, moving between visibility and invisibility, thus mirrored a subject matter that also lived in the "real." More than anyone else, Colette produced a language—what she calls her "alphabet"[99]—within which the sensual could be thought, and written. What concerns me in this chapter are the ways in which that language, which both invents and translates her subjects, and thus exists in the realm of the literary and in the realm of history, accesses the notions of hunger and abjection in a self-making that is simultaneously a self-unmaking. Colette liberates the senses from the physical body, gender expression from any inherent "real," and object-oriented love from desire. Hunger, unhappiness, anorexia, abjection, self-erasure—this is the language through which Colette accesses the "truth" of the making of self in these women, a truth that is not located on the inside, but in acts of feeling that shift, expand, and multiply locations of the self in their expression.

As does Baudelaire, Colette's descriptions of her subjects and their affective, erotic states center on the shapes, borders, and plasticity of their bodies. Lines within and between bodies, and between bodies and society, as in Baudelaire, are blurred and traversed. Similar tensions between asceticism and decadence play out for her, similarly accessed through the aesthetic. Baudelaire wrote of modernity's heroes, suggesting they had a strong understanding of the object-status of the (primarily male) human, and accordingly manipulated their bodily shapes and affective presentations such that movements between internal self and external surface, between subject and object, and between shape and time were ways of expressing the vexed nature of both time and of being in the modern metropolis. His protagonists elaborated ascetic, unfulfilled selves in order to celebrate life's funerals. His dandies, artists, and heroes formed, for him, the perfect articulation of modernity's particular beauty. Even woman occasionally had her place, though more often than not the world he spoke of predominately belonged to men. Yet, if Baudelaire wrote of the melancholy of the dandy, of illness and suicide and of negative states of being, it was all in service of an agency that locates the selves he writes of—his "heroes"—at the heart of new social order, in all of its confusions and contradictions. Baudelaire, one might say, writes of figures who have a place in the social order, even as they think of themselves outside of it, presenting a symbiotic dialogue between internal and external that ultimately serves to locate a place for his heroes at the very center of the beautiful, funereal, modernity they inhabit, whose landscape of signification they uniquely reflect and interpret. Colette's subjects are not heroes. They do not occupy a place at the center of a social order, even within their own communities of exile. If they use a similar language of decadent asceticism it serves not to heroize them but to sustain their liminality as social subjects.

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[98] For a detailed account of discourses around lesbian sexuality during this time, see Dean's chapter "The Making of Lesbian Sexuality," in *The Frail Social Body*.
[99] In *La Naissance du Jour*, quoted in Kristeva, *Colette*, 2, footnote 2, 439.

In understanding *Le Pur et l'Impur* it is important to consider an earlier title. The book was at one point called "Ces Plaisirs qu'on nomme, à la légère, physiques"—"these pleasures that we so lightly called physical." This is a book about the senses and their weight. The senses constitute, on the one hand, the real protagonists, the real *substance* of her story—bodies and situations are merely vessels for them to move through. The weight of being is borne by that which moves through bodies, not by the bodies themselves, which, in this sense, are "light." Yet if the senses are privileged over any individual body or self, the bodies and selves of her book have an equally important story to tell. Veiled, layered, masked, of shifting and uncertain shape and dimension, they tell a story of women whose physical and psychic realities, as gender and sexual non-conforming women, necessitated a self-exile and a movement between visibility and invisibility, legibility and illegibility. Colette takes the liminality of their lives and the precarity of their membership in any society other than the ones of their own making as the baseline social and psychic landscape for her narration of hungers and passions delivered and circulated between and beyond borders of bodies, space, and time. Hers is a language of erotic being simultaneously in, despite, and because of the conditions of living in the world that they do; if not an emancipatory tale of sexually knowing women, still, and perhaps more potently, Colette delivers a narrative and creates a language that disrupts the binaries of self and other, identity and being, body and environment, historical time and imagination such that her characters speak to us simultaneously as bound by a social order that relegates them to the margins and renders them invisible and at the same time complexly, tenuously, in acts of self-disappearance and time-space mutation, as unattached and free from those very constraints.

The Veils of Charlotte

The book opens with the narrator, "Colette," a novelist and journalist, on a visit to an opium den as an observer.[100] Likening it to a covered market, she describes its lush, made-to-order exotic interior: "draped with Chinese embroideries, the rather slapdash kind made in China for the export trade, the designs large but rather pretty all the same. A grand piano, some flat little Japanese mattresses, a phonograph, and potted azaleas accounted for the rest" ["tendu de ces broderies que la Chine execute pour l'Occident, à grand motifs un peu bâclés, assez belles. Le reste n'était qu'un piano à queue, secs petits matelas du Japon, phonographe et azalées en pots.][101] Such a sensual, otherworldly beginning, in a location for made for consumption—of opium, and of an exotic world, in a space likened to a market—sets the stage for the explorations of the book. The author thus introduces, in the first sentences of the book, the themes that will permeate its pages. The reader is invited into a setting pervaded by mystery that announces itself as artifice: embroideries clearly made for export to the west, pre-fabricated for exotic experience, which therefore cannot be seen as "authentic." What matters is not where the truth of any

[100] Colette is both author and character in her book, and the line between the two is not necessarily clear, as the book is presented to the reader as a kind of journalistic reporting, and Colette herself calls it something close to an autobiography. Yet, it is ultimately a creative work, and so, unless otherwise specified, when I write of Colette while discussing the text I am referring to her as a character within it, and not as author.
[101] *The Pure*, 3; *Le Pur*, 7.

mystery lies but the circulation of mysteries and unknowns which seek neither to be deciphered nor grounded in any material truth or body. Second, sensual descriptions are initially attributed to the setting, and not to any individual, suggesting right away an extended line of feeling beyond the human body. As she sat down on the mat allotted to her, "quite expecting to be bored," Colette "watched the opium smoke wastefully and sluggishly streaming upward to collide, as if regretfully, with the glass panes of the skylight. Its black, appetizing aroma of fresh truffles or burnt cocoa bestowed upon me patience, optimism, and a vague hunger." ["Bien préparée à l'ennui, je pris place sur mon petit matelas individuel, en déplorant que la fumée de l'opium, gaspillée, d'envolât lourdement jusqu'aux verrières. Elle s'y décidait à regret, et son noir, apéritif parfum de truffe fraiche, de cacao brûlé, me donna la patience, une vague faim, de l'optimisme"].[102] Sluggish, wasteful, and regretful, the smoke takes on human properties of laziness and luxuriance. The opposite can immediately be imagined. A person smoking opium might themselves become smoke-like—wispy, languid, evaporating. Inside the doors of the opium den, people transform. An acquaintance she had seen on her way in, dressed in a dinner jacket, appeared moments later in an embroidered kimono, "displaying the affected ease of the opium smoker" ["une aisance d'intoxiqué"].[103] If she describes the aroma of the smoke bestowing upon her feelings of well-being, she suggests right away that the state of her acquaintance, now donning the suit of the opium smoker, was one of forced affect. On the one hand the smoke weaves through person and environment, erasing boundaries between them, a sensual movement of unification which does not offer itself up to deciphering. The smoke, as sensuality that does not adhere to any particular object, stands in for a kind of pure truth, the only one that will reverberate throughout her book. On the other, the culture of the den was also one of artifice, and smoking was "a tranquil if rather base pleasure, a pleasure prompted only by a certain kind of snobbishness, a spirit or bravado, a curiosity more affected than real…." [« un plaisir tranquille, un peu bas, un plaisir inspiré seulement par une certaine forme de snobisme, l'esprit de bravade, une curiosité plus affectée que réelle….»].[104] Like the wall hangings imported from the East, the visitors to the den perform their mystery without trying to conceal their performance.

The dual register of the den—one of sensual dissimulation and one of artifice—was most acutely embodied by Charlotte, a woman whom Colette encounters there, initially through her voice, heard singing in a "furry, sweet, yet husky voice that had the qualities of a hard and thick-skinned velvety peach" ["une voix feminine, cotonneuse, rêche et douce comme sont les pêches dures à gros velours…].[105] Having been stopped short, Charlotte is soon singing another tune, an orgasm she fakes to please the boy she's with, the boy who had bid her to stop singing, so that her own pleasure is twice held at bay. In the second instance, Charlotte holds back, preserving her orgasm from the cannibalistic economy of love in which to love is to offer oneself up to another to be consumed. Instead, she sublimates and preserves her pleasure, in a purity "both autoerotic and world erotic" unbound to a receiving body, but rather an extension of the self into the

[102] *The Pure*, 3-4; *Le Pur*, 7.
[103] *The Pure*, 4; *Le Pur*, 8.
[104] *The Pure*, 5; *Le Pur*, 8.
[105] *The Pure*, 6; *Le Pur*, 10.

world.[106] Charlotte's voice reveals both truths and lies, her own desires and those of her lover. Her lovemaking is a performance just as was her song. What is pure, or truthful, in her, is preserved in acts of withholding from her lover, an act of guardedness that is simultaneously a diffusion. Shrouded in veils, she performs her mystery as mystery, deflecting attention from any singular vision of self, her agency is one of a woman veiled, blurred, and diffuse.

When Colette first sees her, after only having heard her two "performances," she is, in fact, pulling a veil down to her chin. The two share a taxi, and in the car Charlotte—whose name Colette is not even sure is her real one—comes in and out of the light: "The faint light of the meter now lit up, from time to time, the face of the woman, who was unknown to me except for her first name, true or false, 'Charlotte'."[107] Charlotte comes in and out of focus throughout this chapter and the next, whether through her voice, her face, or her scent, described throughout as without location or grounding, without clear shape, always slightly blurry. Like her voice she is in soft focus, never sharp. Her body is round, youthful, "despite" her 45 years.[108] Everything about her is sensual. If the men of the opium den donned robes and self-important affected airs, Charlotte's falsities present as sad. Seductive, skilled in "passionately maintained dupery, the unrecognized feat of valor that expects no reward"[109] self-denying, melancholic (her coat is gray-green, as is the staircase to her house), and old fashionedly feminine—Colette compares her to a Renoir—she is, she asserts, not free. As Charlotte is dropping Colette off in the early hours of the morning, on their way back from the opium den, she exclaims "Oh, madam, the dustmen are at your door. Do you mind their seeing you arrive? No? How nice! Freedom is a wonderful thing. But as for me….I'm not free"[110] Why exactly she is not free we are not told. The point is rather that, as the character in the book who most suggests conventional, bourgeois femininity, she is, at the end of her night out, bound by conventions of home or marriage. Yet, if Charlotte is a typical woman, typical woman is both more, and less, than what you see. The veiling and unveiling of "truths" of gender and desire is a theme that permeates the book. Charlotte, who opens the book, is there to tell us that everything is a pose, including the very mysteries that veils hint at covering. The "truth" for Colette, we will see throughout the book, is never innate. It is not something that can be covered up, and it is not something that belongs to particular bodies. It is, rather, and simply, desire, unattached to particular bodies, objects, or situations. Thus Charlotte introduces another theme as well: the primacy of the senses, and their detachment from both bodies and satisfactions. The individual person, for Colette, is a site not of identity, not of clear gender or sexuality, but only of desire. Sensuality is associated with desire, hunger, even starvation, but never with fulfillment, and is itself the subject in this book: "Sensuality … always ready to play the starved one" ["…la sensualité, "toujours prête…à jouer l'affamée"][111] she writes. In a later exchange, Charlotte wearily asks, "But what is the heart, madame? It's worth less than people think. It's quite accommodating, it accepts anything. You give it whatever you have, it's not

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[106] Kristeva, *Colette*, 300.
[107] *The Pure*, 11; *Le Pur*, 13-14.
[108] *The Pure,* 11; *Le Pur*, 13-14.
[109] *The Pure*, 18; *Le Pur*, 20.
[110] *The Pure*, 13; *Le Pur*, 16.
[111] My translation; *Le Pur*, 152.

very particular. But the body…Ha! That's something else again! It has a cultivated taste, as they say, it knows what it wants. A heart doesn't choose, and one always ends up by loving. I'm the living proof" ["Mais qu'est-ce que c'est le cœur, Madame? Il vaut moins que sa réputation. Il est bien commode, il accepte tout. On le meuble avec ce qu'on a, il est si peu difficile… Le corps, lui… À la bonne heure! Il a comme on dit la gueulle fine, il sait ce qu'il veut. Un coeur, ça ne choisit pas. On finit toujours par aimer. J'en suis bien une prevue."][112] She adds that women friends "never dare to confess to each other what they really and truly lack," and that she is grateful therefore for Colette's ear—Colette precisely not being a friend. Love is lack for Charlotte, and when Colette replies "Madame Charlotte, do you ever try to find the thing you 'really and truly' lack?" she retorts with "I'm not that simple-minded, madame, nor that shameless. What I lack—I simply do without….[W]hen one knows something really well, having once possessed it, then one is never completely deprived."[113] Her lover, a boy, senses that he cannot fulfill her, and it throws him into a rage. Charlotte admits to Colette that that which she lacks is not so much beyond reach as beyond civilized: "…I'd be much more ashamed of the truth than of the lie. Just imagine, madame…if I were to let myself go like a fool and not even know what I was doing or saying…. Oh! I can't bear the idea!"[114] ["Mais j'aurais honte de la vérité à còté du mensonge. Voyons, Madame, figurez-vous… M'abandonner comme une imbécile, ne plus seulement savoir ce qui vous échappe en gestes ou en paroles…. Oh! Je ne peux pas supporter cette idée-là.][115] The lack that cannot be filled is presented as both the cultural condition of womanhood—as author, Colette's desires were always for female emancipation even as she rejected any label of feminist—and the inherent condition of sensual being. In refusing to sacrifice her pleasure by giving it away to the boy, Charlotte holds on to an unsatisfied hunger, claiming to be ashamed of it—begging the question of what is performed and what is not—while also affirming that she *knows* her desire, that it is precisely that which she will not give away to satisfy anyone's expectations of couple-intimacy. Her sensuality is her power, and however conventional a view of "woman" this is that Colette has created, she manages to place Charlotte in a counter-narrative in which her feminine secrets and sexual appetite alike traverse the boundaries of the conventions that she is bound to, her senses the truest location of her self.

In hinting at the "truth" of her desires to Colette, Charlotte blushes and enters a quasi-orgasmic state, appropriately not achieving it: "in agitation she turned her head from side to side on the white cushion, her lips parted, like a woman threatened by a paroxysm of pleasure."[116] ["Elle tournait de côté et d'autre sa tête sur le cousin blanc, agitée, la bouche entrouverte, comme une femme que le plaisir menace.[117]] Threatened, but not succumbing. When Colette comments on how beautiful she looks Charlotte pulls back, blocking Colette and herself alike from that which is stronger than the heart, that which would exceed and extend the self into the world:

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[112] *The Pure*, 22; *Le Pur*, 24.
[113] *The Pure*, 23; *Le Pur*, 25.
[114] *The Pure*, 24.
[115] *Le Pur*, 25.
[116] *The Pure*, 24.
[117] *Le Pur,* 25.

> With a few words she barred me from the domain that she seemed to so arrogantly to despise and which bears a red and visceral name: the heart. She also barred me from the cavern of odors, of colors, the secret refuge where securely frolicked a powerful arabesque of flesh, a cipher of limbs entwined, symbolic monogram of the Inexorable…In that word Inexorable, I gather together the sheaf of powers to which we have been unable to give a better name than 'the senses.' The senses? Why not *the* sense? That would offend no one and would suffice. *The sense*, dominating the five inferior senses, for let them venture far from it and they will be called back with a jerk—like those delicate and stinging ribbons, part weed, part arm, delegated by a deep-sea creature…[118]

The senses—inexorable, unyielding, unable to be captured into a single body—are what Charlotte holds at bay. Unfree, restrained by conventions named and unnamed, Charlotte nonetheless knows her pleasures, even if she only hints at them through song and mimetic performance. Each vignette in the book "unveils" the inexorable as it plays out in the lives of these fin-de-siècle and early twentieth century women. In Charlotte's case, the senses, semi-concealed, are so powerful that they emit from Charlotte's eyes as "red sparks," sparks which, at the end of the night, as she prepared to go, "left her large eyes as she pulled down a fine veil over her face before going out."[119] [l'étincelle double, rouge, quitta ses larges yeux lorsqu'elle tendit un tulle fin sur son visage, avant de sortir.[120]] The chapter ends with Colette's reflection on this veiling over of desire, marking it as a beginning and an end, and thus as both and neither, as an endless loop in which the book will dwell:

> How many shadows still conceal her…It is not for me to dispel them. When I think of Charlotte, I embark upon a drifting souvenir of nights graced neither by sleep nor by certitude. The veiled face of a woman, refined, disillusioned, knowledgeable in deception, in finesse, is a suitable preface to this book which will treat sadly of sensual pleasure."[121]

Sensual pleasure is both fully present in Charlotte—her eyes not only sparkle, but they *spark*—and concealed. She carries knowledge of fulfillment in her ("when one knows something really well, having once possessed it, then one is never completely deprived") but keeps it to herself. It is something that can only exist as loss for her, and that loss, more than any actual present source, is the source of her ecstasy. Whereas she fakes orgasm with the boy, whom she loves, she reveals her true ecstatic state to Colette, whom she hardly knows, in the moment of explaining how shameful it would be to share her true pleasure. The book, we are told, will "treat sadly of sensual pleasure," because the force of pleasure is simultaneously one that requires a relinquishing of any claim to happiness. The senses, as a movement between pleasure and unhappiness, and between pleasure and unfulfillment, is offered to us, in the end which is also a beginning, in the image of a veil.

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[118] *The Pure*, 24-25; *Le Pur*, 25.
[119] *The Pure*, 26
[120] *Le Pur*, 27.
[121] *The Pure*, 26. Translation modified. *Le Pur*, 27.

Androgyny: Colette, Margueritte, La Chevalière

If Charlotte's veils, literal and metaphorical, cover and reveal a conventionally feminine woman—round of body, face like a Renoir—matching a more or less heterosexual inclination, the other figures in the book, those to whom I now turn, assume androgynous profiles, striking poses, shapeshifting, and establishing conditions of being within various forms of removals and refusals consonant with their social marginalization.

Vexed when a potential male lover (a "Mr. X") rejects her for being too masculine, Colette confesses to the reader that for a change, secretly, she had wanted to be "completely a woman."[122] This confession—in a book of confessions—opens up onto a long reflection on gender multiplicity and ambiguity, a "genuine mental hermaphroditism which burdens certain highly complex beings"[123] and the artifice required to present oneself as one, the other, or multiple. Telling her not to be upset, her friend Marguerite Moreno offers: "Why don't you just resign yourself to the fact that for certain men some women represent a risk of homosexuality?"[124] This can be taken two ways. Does a masculine woman upset a heterosexual man by suggesting that he too could be more than just masculine? Or does it mean that a woman with some masculinity may be homosexual? Either way, it upsets Mr. X's perceived or desired order of gender. "If what you say is true," Colette replies to Marguerite, "who will realize that we are women?"["qui nous tiendra pour des femmes?"] "Other women," her friend affirms. "Women aren't offended or deluded by our masculine wit." ["Seules les femmes ne sont ni offensées, ni abusées par notre virilité spirituelle."][125] What makes a woman, Colette suggests, is whatever she chooses to make it. Other women, particularly other women who also pose a homosexual "risk," are not confused by shifts or multiplicities of gender expression, behavior, or feeling.

Colette uses the opportunity of the affront to her womanhood to muse more deeply about masculine women. If their "hermaphroditism" comprises their mental make-up, it does not necessarily have any bearing on their physical body unless deliberately, aesthetically, attended to. After their talk Marguerite takes a nap, and Colette notes that, as she sank into sleep, her "strong, sexless features softened a little."[126] Nonetheless, with her shorn hair, and breasts and stomach hidden—in other words, through surface modifications—she maintained her masculine look, resembling a combination of Chimène and Le Cid, "closely united in the sleep of a single body."[127] This allusion refers not only to Marguerite's crossing of masculine and feminine but of other boundaries as well. The character of Chimène in Corneille's *Le Cid*[128] can be understood as a "metonym for theatricality straddling 'the realms of acceptability and unacceptability, of

[122] *The Pure*, 62; *Le Pur*, 57.
[123] *The Pure*, 62; *Le Pur*, 57.
[124] *The Pure,* 63, translation modified; *Le Pur*, 58.
[125] *The Pure*, 63; *Le Pur*, 58.
[126] *The Pure*, 66; *Le Pur*, 59-60.
[127] *The Pure*, 67; *Le Pur*, 61.
[128] First performed in 1636.

public and private, of reassuring authenticity and manipulative dissimulation'."[129] To compare Marguerite to her, and simultaneously to le Cid, is to suggest a multiplicity, inversion, and fluidity of gender and of desire. As Chimène, she loves Rodrige (whom La Chimène also wants to kill—thus love even here is never happiness). As le Cid she loves herself, and, further, as "author" of her "character," is director of the theater of her life. Thus a sleeping Marguerite, in her "true" state, reveals a multiplicity of objects of affection and of perspectives on the self, as well the whole range of meanings entailed by theatricality—truth and lies, the real and the artificial, the private and the public.

From Marguerite's truth of multiplicities, Colette, taking an equally distant, observing stand, turns to her own. Before describing her appearance, as she did Marguerite's, she first, significantly, describes her role as observer. This distance is initially inscribed through another, her friend Damien (adding distance to distance):

> Damien was the first to designate, in a word, my place in the scheme of things. I believe he assigned to me the place of a spectator; he felt I should have one of those choice seats that allow the spectator, when drunk, to rush out on the stage and, duly staggering, join the actors and take part in what is going on.[130]

Colette is a spectator who participates in her own spectacle. As chronicler, journalist, and observer, she stands apart from herself and reviews (re-views) her own performances, along with those of her compatriots. And of course, as author, she is meta-spectator of Colette observing Colette. Throughout the book she assumes a calm, steady tone. In a book about sensual pleasures, and, we shall see, ravenous sexual hungers and extremes of experience, her distance sets a tone of reserve and remove from within the events described, as if to establish a steady and equal field on which actions (in which, as Damien points out, she might join in), desires, and identifications might come and go. This recounting of Damien's designation is immediately followed by this reflection:

> I was not long deluded by those photographs that show me wearing a stiff mannish collar, necktie, short jacket over a straight skirt, a lighted cigarette between two fingers.[131]

Both spectator and spectacle, in commenting on this picture of herself she inscribes a distance between herself and the representation of her, a representation which showed her in drag, performing a persona that, she asserts, should not be read as being more true than any other performance she might give. She not only objects to the "truthfulness" of the picture, but to the notion that there is any truth at all to who she is. The photograph, in which an overt performance of dandified masculinity—posed and poised, she clearly is standing for the camera—has been, we are to understand, taken to represent some truth about her. In fact the photograph is a great confounder of truth. As two-dimensional object, it is not real but claims to represent the real, a real which in turn refers only to a

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[129] Jane Tylus, "Theorizing women's place: Nicholas Poussin, the Rape of the Sabines, and the early modern stage," *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater*, edited by Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson 99-116.
[130] *The Pure*, 68, with my modification. *Le Pur*, 61-2.
[131] *The Pure*, 69 ; *Le Pur,* 62.

temporary moment in time. It furthermore contains the double valence of past, when it was taken, and present, for which it was made to be seen. A portrait, in particular, exaggerates the dimensions of self-presentation. Its hyper-reality even further underscores its fiction, clearly crafted to invent a "true" subject whose frozen form inscribes a life narrative that exists only in the telling. Colette states that she was not deluded by the photographs of herself in mannish *habits*, introducing not only the question of identity as fiction, but of self-unity as fiction as well. She stands apart from herself to comment on herself, a self that is already overtly staged as performance.

To further stress her point about the craft and fiction behind the creation of a legible subject, and a legible gendered subject in particular, Colette immediately follows her comment on the photographs with:

> Certainly I turned on them a less penetrating look than did that arrant old demon of painting, Boldini. I saw him for the first time in his studio, where the gown of a big unfinished portrait of a woman [portrait d'une femme inachevé], a satin gown of blinding white—peppermint-lozenge white—violently caught and flashed back all the light in the room.[132]

The crafting of female masculinity[133] and that of female femininity stand juxtaposed. The French provides a double meaning: "portrait de femme inachevé(e)" means "unfinished painting," but it can also mean "portrait of an unfinished woman." The gendered subject, or rather object, is literally crafted by the painter Boldini, who paints a portrait of a woman *as* woman, fully signified in pure white, a gown we will see in "real life" is dull and lifeless, without no particular spark of meaning, a gown which even itself had to be invented as feminine, fresh, bright:

> An empty gown, lackluster, not quite white, was posing for him on an armchair. It was from that dull gown that he was creating on the canvas, stroke by stroke, the whites of cream, of snow, of glaze paper, of new metal, the white of the unfathomable ["les blancs d'abîme"], and the white of bonbons, a tour de force of whites…[134]

The white—blinding, brilliant, snow-like, cream-like, and any other number of versions of purity of color—overtly signifies a female purity and mystery—"the white of the unfathomable" or even "of the abyss" ["d'abîme"]—that we know to be fictional even before Colette reveals the true color of the dress, lifelessly resting on the chair. This same Boldini, so eager to invent pure womanhood on his canvas, accusingly names, frames Colette (who clearly does not signify pure womanhood to him) as one who stages differently-gendered womanhoods, where what is accusation-worthy for him is as much the act of performance as what she performs:

> "Are you the one," he said, "who puts on a dinner jacket in the evening?"
> "I may have done so, for a costume party."

[132] *The Pure*, 68, translation modified. *Le Pur*, 62.
[133] For a historical study of "masculinity without men" see Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*.
[134] *The Pure*, 69-70; *Le Pur*, 63.

> "You're the one who plays the mime?"
> "Yes."
> "And you're the one who goes on stage without tights? And who dances—*così, così*—quite naked?"
> "I beg your pardon! I've never appeared naked on any stage. It may have been said, and said in print, but the truth is…"
> He was not even listening…
> "My, what a proper young lady we are," he murmured, "what a proper young lady we are! [Bonne petite bourgeoise…Bonne petite bourgeoise…]"[135]

His contradiction—he too, through his art, invents a gender fiction—is met by Colette's own conflict about how her gender is perceived. In the scene with M. X she was distressed at not having seemed woman enough for him. And when Baldini, who fabricates womanhood with his paintbrush in different shades of white, asks if she is the one who dresses in men's clothes, and performs onstage half-naked (two quite different acts of self, performing gender and desire in states of dress in the one, and undress in the other, among other differences), she again defends her womanhood. Like Mr. X, Boldini dismisses her womanhood, accusing her through sarcasm of being anything but proper, anything but pure, all the while himself needing to invent, with his paintbrush, a purity that does not exist outside out of the canvas. Colette sees the lies of the painting—a woman on a pedestal, divine, pure, white—for what it is:

> I remember that my dog Toby trembled against my legs; he already knew more than I did, certainly, about the misshapen divinity who was leaping about there in front of us…[136]

Colette's objections to M. X and to Boldini are that they do not recognize that she can be "woman" to their "man," sexually, while also being everything else—masculine, cross-dressing, actor, mime, exhibitionist. If she wants to be seen as desirable in a feminine way, she does not consider that contradictory to any other mode of being. As Boldini went back to his painting

> The "proper young lady," offended, took dignified leave, adjusted the knot of a mannish necktie that had been imported from London, and went away, looking as much as possible like a bad boy, to rejoin a strange company of women who led a marginal and timorous life, sustained by an out-of-date snobbishness.[137]

Colette reclaims her mannish ways as she departs to join friends for whom the theatricality of being is understood, and where to be a woman is not to be wholesome, not to be wholly feminine, or even female, and not, certainly, to be an image in white for a man to consume with his gaze or more. This "strange company of women," marginal, snobbish, and out-of-date and, specters from another time, presents the only "true" and "pure"—the "pure" or her title—society in book. In their marginality, spectrality,

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[135] The Pure, 68-9; Le Pur, 62.
[136] *The Pure*, 69; *Le Pur*, 63.
[137] *The Pure*, 68; *Le Pur,* 63.

crossing of time, class, and gender, exile, and invisibility to the larger world they form a social body whose borders, parameters, and situation in both time and space demonstrate a kind of viability only possible through the unmaking and reshaping of various boundaries of the socially given and of self-articulation.

Repeating the question and answer, "Who would take us to be women? Why, women," Colette qualifies that they alone are not fooled—that is, not fooled by exterior dress and manners, not because they hold lies but because they do not hide truths. Truth lies in the fact that there is no pure underneath, nothing under the veil, nothing under the mannish clothes but a woman who cannot be reduced to a single identification. Plural and changeable in her erotic appetites, objects of desire, and gender expressions, Colette's androgynous heroines claim customs and identifications out of place and time. Marginalized and spectral in their almost invisibility to the outer world—an invisibility they self-enforced by wearing a cloak over their menswear in order to avoid harassment by the police[138]—they use a dying language of dandyism and upper-class affectations, not insincerely but rather "without hypocrisy":

> With such distinguishing marks as pleated shirt front, hard collar, sometimes a waistcoat, and always a silk pocket handkerchief, I frequented a society perishing on the margin of all societies. Although morals, good and bad, have not changed during the past twenty-five or thirty years, class consciousness, in destroying itself, has gradually undermined and debilitated the clique I am referring to, which tried, trembling with fear, to live without hypocrisy, the breathable air of society. This clique, or sect, claimed the right of "personal freedom" and equality with homosexuality, that imperturbable establishment…. The adherents of this clique of women exacted secrecy for their parties, where they appeared dressed in long trousers and dinner jackets and behaved with unsurpassed propriety.[139]

The narrative lands on this "perishing" society of women, a perishing that provides, in a sense, the grounding for all of the book's character studies. Here, dandified women of aristocratic descent along with other women who found structure and identification in the language of this dandyism and its upper class culture inhabit a world that echoes one that already signified decadence and decline, the dandyism of the second empire that we saw in Baudelaire, and, as we saw in chapter one, one that offered a set of contained and structured formulas through which to express a sensuality and hunger that distinctly and deliberately exceeded the confines of that containment. In repurposing the language of dandyism, not least its gender ambiguity, these women gave meaning to a historical movement *après la lettre*, and in so doing drew out its latent and radical potential to disrupt an entire order of social categories and experience.

The breathable air and freedom these women sought was to be found in a borderland between present and past, and in their place at the margins of society, a liminal location accompanied and magnified by their temporal displacement. If Baudelaire's dandy also navigated a certain border between past and present, his place in society was not in the margins. For Baudelaire he was the picture boy of modern living, his refinements and withholdings reflecting a self-imposed hunger as the ultimate act of

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[138] *The Pure*, 70; *Le Pur*, 63.
[139] *The Pure*, 70-71; *Le Pur*, 63-4.

being modern, but it was, in fact, an act of privilege. Playing oneself as lifeless object was possible only if one has a solid, living, subjective place in society. On the other hand, the language he tapped into was the same language that Colette's women, already relegated by society to unfulfillment, employed a few decades later. *Perishing* on the margins of society, it might be said that they succeeded in the aspiration of the dandy better than the dandy himself. Baudelaire wrote that dandyism is a sunset, "without heat and full of melancholy."[140] For Colette, we will see below, the androgynous woman has the *obligation* never to be happy. Happiness would undermine her integrity and her truth, which is one that states that she cannot have the fulfillments that society designates as proper but is also one that says that she mustn't desire those normative fulfillments. In occupying a zone between outside and in, and between masculine and feminine, she uses dandyism's tools of detachment and withholding to simultaneously establish her liminality and her presence. In using the signs of the dandy, signs which, I have argued, circulated as desire between self and outside with the purpose of not completing the cycle of signification, and of not fulfilling desire, the dandies in Colette's book take up the movement of desire unfulfilled through, beyond, and between bodies presented as precisely defined in shape and detached in affect, parodies of upper class-ness and of manhood. But the status conferred by such manhood is out of reach for these women. In parodying men, men who are already melancholic and are already seeking unfulfillment, Colette's androgynous women ironically fulfill the true meaning of dandyism's lack of joy. Themes of fluidity between body and outside, pure and impure, asceticism and decadence, withholding and excess permeate this book about erotic drives. Most fundamentally, the drive, Colette makes clear, is never to be happy. It is, rather, always a reach toward something other than happiness, other than self-fulfillment, and other than acceptance into the social order, as a place closer to truth, or to purity, by way of that which society designates as impure. In an aesthetic, bodily language of invisibility and other kinds of visibility, of absence and/as presence, "true" living is accessed through the negative, unhappiness, and the void.

To elaborate further on this marginal society of androgynes, Colette turns to La Chevalière:[141]

> At the home of the best-known woman among them—the best known and the most misunderstood—fine wines, long cigars, photographs of a smartly turned-out horseman, one or two languorous portraits of very pretty women, bespoke the sensual and rakish life of a bachelor. But the lady of the house, in dark masculine attire, belied any idea of gaiety or bravado. Pale, without blemish or blush, pale like certain antique Roan marbles that seem steeped in light, the sound of her voice muffled and sweet, she had all the ease and good manners of a man, the restrained gestures, the virile poise of a man.[142]

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[140] *The Painter of Modern Life*, 26.

[141] La Chevalière is widely acknowledged to be based on Mathilde de Mornay, known as "Missy," who was Colette's lover of six years. The name La Chevalière is likely a reference to the transgender Chevalier d'Éon (1728-1810).

[142] *The Pure*, 71; *Le Pure*, 64.

La Chevalière is presented as the epitome of this subculture of aristocratic, cross-dressing women—women who "wore monocles, white carnations in their buttonholes, discussed horses competently, and took the name of God in vain"[143]— and the feminine women who accompany them. In this world of gentlemanly manners and restraints, La Chevalière is introduced as a woman, though her identifications are immediately named as masculine—horsemen, portraits of desirous women. Colette compares her to a bachelor and to a poised man. La Chevalière's "butch" androgyny is carefully tied to affective restraint, a restraint that, like Baudelaire's dandy, simultaneously indicates a decadent excess. Both her attire and her self-presentation "belied any idea of gaiety or bravado" and yet her house, filled with "fine wines, long cigars" and "languorous portraits of very pretty women" betrayed a "sensual and rakish" lifestyle. A dual action is at play in this lesbian world simultaneously flourishing (with sex, parties, and nightlife) and perishing (and not just perishing, but perishing on the margins of *all* societies), the body's pleasures spread out onto the surroundings, an emancipation of desire within a setting of utmost reserve, precision, and withholding of emotion, and a withholding of joy without which, for Colette, this androgyny cannot be fully affirmed. Colette not only ties La Chevalière's restrained, pale demeanor to the decadence of her surroundings, but to her own androgynous seductiveness as well, an androgyny which is much more than an ambiguity of masculine and feminine: it is a state of suffering, sadness, and melancholy, claimed and inhabited, just as in La Chevalière's home, as pleasure. Colette evokes a sublimity, a powerful "seraphic suffering" in this androgyny:

> The seduction emanating from a person of uncertain or dissimulated sex is powerful. Those who have never experienced it liken it to the banal attraction of the love that evicts the male element. This is a gross misconception. Anxious and veiled, never exposed to the light of day, the androgynous creature wanders, wonders, and implores in a whisper … There especially remains for the androgynous creature the right, even the obligation, never to be happy. If jovial, the androgynous creature is a monster. But it trails irrevocably among us its seraphic suffering, its glimmering tears….It is always La Chevalière that I think of. It was she who most often bruised herself in a collision with a woman – a woman, that whispering guide, presumptuous, strangely explicit, who took her by the hand and said: "Come, I will help you find yourself …"[144]

The "androgynous creature" does not seek to be fulfilled, happy, or healthy-looking, and certainly does not seek to "find herself," as the misguided young lovers who approach La Chevalière assume. Of all of Colette's characters in the book, the androgynous woman as epitomized by La Chevalière is the closest to her ideal of purity. She is true to her unhappiness and to her longing. She does not seek to be fulfilled or complete. Wandering, she does not seek to be found. Pale, she seeks to remains indoors, veiled, unseen to the world outside of her underground, perishing one. To the woman who offers to help her "find" herself La Chavalière retorts, "I am neither that nor anything else, alas. What I lack cannot be found by searching for it."[145] Hers is a "melancholic alienation" (as

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[143] *The Pure,* 75, *Le Pur,* 68.
[144] *The Pure*, 79-80; translation modified; *Le Pur*, 71-2.
[145] *The Pure*, 80, *Le Pur*, 72.

Sanyal writes) like that of Baudelaire's dandy, and, like his, it is through this affective refusal, matched with an ascetic simplicity of form and manner, that she locates her fire (her *seraphic* suffering). Her pallor and her nervousness likewise recall the ailing, nervous, but passionate figures of the previous chapter. Colette recourses a similar language of decadence in order to depict dual actions of withdrawal and/as self-assertion, and of alienation and/as self-location.

Unlike Baudelaire's figures, Colette's fully engage in the life of the flesh, even if not directly. Their eroticism, dissimulated across bodies, objects, and location, is explicitly central to their being. Even La Chevalière, whose preference Colette writes lies with a greater celibacy, is libidinally situated in her environment. Colette understands everything about them to be about erotic, to be an engagement with the world through the senses. Theirs is an engagement through pain and loss, dressed up, in the case of the dandified androgynes, in a removal that reflects an actual exile. The dandy's engagement in the world in Baudelaire is, I have suggested, a commentary on the emerging commerce of 19th century Paris and the object-state of the individual, a commentary made from the point of the view of men who are able to step back from their lives and look, and a point of view whose critical eye and pen seek to give shape to the experience of men in the metropolis. Colette's women can afford no such critical remove. Their "removal" is a theater that reflects their actual position on the margins, and their unhappiness, in this sense, is both more believable and more readable as political.

The temporal and spatial mobility, the various acts of veilings, ephemeralities, and disappearances through which Colette's figures establish their presence in the world are unusually articulated by La Chevalière herself in a moment in which she reflects on her position within her own *milieu.* La Chevalière's melancholy, we are told by Colette, in part emanates from her romantic solitude. Because of her more platonic inclinations, Colette explains, she never found a lasting love relationship:

> Restless and uncertain in her pursuit of love, she searched … for what she never found: a settled and sentimental attachment. For more than forty years, this woman with the bearing of a handsome boy endured the pride and punishment of never being able to establish a real and lasting affair with a woman. It was not for lack of trying, because she asked for nothing better or worse. But the salacious expectations of women shocked her very natural platonic tendencies, which resembled more the suppressed excitement, the diffuse emotion of an adolescent than a woman's explicit need.[146]

Thus, even as the center and anchor of a social world, this woman who is not of one body, time, moment, gender, or age is solitary in more ways than one. Her solitude and stillness, in her perfected, streamlined attire and contained affect, among the bustling, erotic movement of the social world around her functions not only spatially and aesthetically but temporally as well:

> "'All the same,' the solitary woman sighs at times, "I must not complain, I shall have been a mirage."[147]

[146] *The Pure*, 77; *Le Pur*, 69.
[147] *The Pure*, 81; *Le Pur*, 72.

In this telling, La Chevalière's lack of fleshly pleasures is more of a "beyond" the flesh, and a beyond this life, nearing a Freudian "beyond the pleasure principle" where the erotic drive to be is necessarily also a drive to not be.[148] La Chevalière lives in a time that is at once past (aristocracy), present, and future (she will be remembered), a fluid temporality whose vehicle is both affect—her solitude, her melancholy—and an out-of-time stillness. Like Colette in the photograph, she is posed and poised in an image created for posterity, one that harkens back to a number of pasts—the past of her present, seen in the future, the past that she is invoking in her aristocratic dandyism, and the past of "before life" that is a past of non-being: her mirage is in this way a living death. In using the future anterior she is placing herself outside the realm of one over the other, occupying a space across time and a subjectivity that belongs nowhere and everywhere at once, refusing the logic of opposition as well as that of linear narrative time in which meaning reveals itself as itself. La Chevalière's self-described lack of time figures a resistance to social structure and form, and to identification itself. She self-presents without borders of time, gender, eros, or identity, refusing even the hope of love's affirmation in a self-constituting negation within which living, for her, is made possible. Thus she seems to exemplify Lee Edelman's wager that "turning the force of queerness against all subjects, however, queer, can afford an access to the *jouissance* that at once defines and negates us," a queerness that, further "sever(s) us from ourselves" proposing a nothingness that she likens to Lacan's "truth," "where truth does not assure happiness, or even, as Lacan makes clear, the good. Instead it names only the insistent particularity of the subject, impossible fully to articulate and 'tend[ing] toward the real.'"[149] As a queer subject (*avant la lettre*)—self-positioned as unhappy, unmoored, and out of time, as well as asexual, differently desiring (she is gratified when a young man calls her "mon père"), and gendered a dandified masculine— La Chevalière presents a mode of existence whose commitments are to those feelings, senses, and social bonds that defy positive identification and tangible demarcations, and that defy a merely affirmative and forward-looking present. In this way she similarly illustrates what Heather Love identifies as a relationship between a queer melancholia and an antimodern modernism, where the queer subject calls upon its painful past as conditional to her/his present-future, and a queer modernity is one that turns its characters of out contexts and away from a narrative of progress, insisting instead on its "backwardness" and its abjections.[150]

Disidentifications, invisibilities, and negative positionings of both the self and social thus mark an assertion of presence in life for La Chevalière and her circles. Within her present she is exiled but also grounded in a home and in her lesbian world. Living but also perishing, she is flesh and blood but, as icon (and therefore also object), also an illusion. Present and absent, already dead and never having been real, she is all the while the "realest," "purest" in her self-truth of them all. La Chevalière as chimera refracts throughout the subculture formed around her, "uneasy women, haunted by their solitude," for whom she "served as the ideal."[151] Not able to be visible in the larger society, within

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[148] For a deeper consideration of the Freudian death drive and queer subjectivity, see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.*
[149] Ibid, 5.
[150] Love, *Feeling Backwards*.
[151] *The Pure*, 81, *Le Pur*, 72.

their own world they carry that invisibility and its loneliness even as they are visible to each other. They are thus at once together and alone, visible and not. Accordingly, their language of gender and desire is one which continually masks and unmasks, veils and unveils its truths, truths which Colette repeatedly suggests can only be located in the realm of the sensual. In her out-of-timeness, La Chevalière finds a language for her gender-variance and desires which similarly do not belong to any set of discernable categories. In "ghosting"[152] La Chevalière, Colette as author acknowledges the vulnerability of gender and desire non-conforming women who live by their own truths, truths which are just as fragile: as mirage, La Chevalière is available as image and fantasy for future generations of gender- and erotically-non-conformist women, her identity open to interpretation and lacking definition in her own time. As one commentator suggests, "what if we noted the extent to which indefinition and incomprehension may have served people like Mathilde/Max de Morny, allowing them to practice genders and sexualities instead of claiming identities?"[153] Another suggests that La Chevalière's female masculinity made lesbian sexuality visible but only by insisting on its decipherability.[154] Indeed, as mirage, La Chevalière will have been the image of the perfect female gentleman—one who may also be read by scholars as transgender, butch, lesbian, and/or queer— and simultaneously an image of gender illegibility and incommensurability with available categories. Her "I will have been a mirage" speaks to her present as much as to her future anterior. Vaporized, filtered through historical lenses, she crosses eras, representing an aristocracy that was already dying at the time of her upbringing (she is, we are told, actual aristocracy, as was Mathilde de Mornay) and that lives on spectrally through the mirage of manners and formalities that she, and others like her, keeps up. Her mirage is one of dress and gesture, of signifiers that unite and carry a culture of women in a realm both real and imagined, present and past, their aristocratic longing and loss standing in for their gender melancholia, that loss and contradiction inherent within their self-articulation. In "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification," Butler considers Freud's analysis of melancholy as "the unfinished process of grieving…central to the formation of the identifications that form the ego" in conjunction with his remark that "'the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego,' not merely a surface, but 'the projection of a surface,'" to add that this melancholic, bodily ego is also a gendered ego.[155] Butler further asserts that drag performance is both the refusal and incorporation of an ungrieved loss, "one which reiterates a gendered idealization and its radical inhabitability."[156] La Chevalière's cross-dressing and inhabitation of masculine customs, attire, and affects, her drag performance *as that projection of a bodily surface* through mirage, out of time and displaced in multiple senses, precisely does not signify a gender identification but rather an assertion of being grounded in desires with neither clear temporal nor clearly legible social attachments. Her indecipherability and temporal displacements in this way, it can be said, suggest an inhabitability—as an aristocratic masculine woman—that doubles as,

[152] Amin takes up this term first used by Gayle Salamon in *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010). Amin, "Ghosting," 129.
[153] Amin, "Mirage," 129.
[154] Dean, 201.
[155] Butler, *Psychic Life*, 132.
[156] Butler, *Psychic Life*, 145.

coincides with, and depends upon an uninhabitability, indeed, on an ephemerality and ghostliness that serve as precondition to her being.

La Chevalière, in this way, can be seen to ground not only a subculture of women who transgress the boundaries of historical time and its (accordant) social identities, and in so doing assert presence via an absence, and life via a negative space of being, but to ground the book as well. In each she functions as a paradoxically embodied, grounded, physical presence in a world of floating, unattached desires, neither fully embodied nor fully disembodied but both at once. Her counterpart in the subsequent chapter, Renée Vivien, will offer another version of this most central thread in the book, where to "truthfully" be is to be ghostly, in a state of disappearance and non-being, and where sensuality and desire, that which is at the heart of purity, is perpetually diffused, absorbing and being absorbed by the body, which itself slides between presence and absence, subject and object, such that, as Kristeva aptly writes, "disidentified, transferential, this body…is everywhere and nowhere."[157]

Renée Vivien: Deciduous, Voluptuary

Whereas La Chevalière's concession to other-worldliness comes from a paradoxical grounded-ness and assuredness in who she is, in a quiet, accepting form of suffering, Renée Vivien's emanates from a constant, exhausting search for intensity. More than any other character in this book, she comes the closest to literally dramatizing hunger as that drive toward death within life, a location of life within its unmaking as reflected in a diminishment of shape that is a persistent current of this dissertation. Similarly, Vivien's mobility of bodily form allows her to disappear and reappear, veil and unveil herself and practice bodily absence as presence more acutely than any other character in the book, even if she does not sport an actual veil, like Charlotte, or self-designate as a chimera, as does La Chevalière.

The historical figure of Renée Vivien was an English expatriot poet who lived and wrote in France and, in 1909, like Weil in the next chapter, starved herself to death at the age of 32.[158] Vivien came to represent a certain fin-de-siècle lesbian decadence and was known, among other things, for her literary group later dubbed "Sappho 1900," founded with her then-lover Natalie Barney.[159] The figure of Sappho, in the fin-de-siècle, came to embody all the cultural fantasies joining female sexuality with otherworldliness and death.[160] If these fantasies of abjected, deathly, sexuality—think, in particular, of "the

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[157] Kristeva, "De Claudine," 45. My translation.

[158] Born Pauline Tarn in London in 1877, she moved to Paris at 21, where she wrote in French under the pseudonym Renée Vivien.

[159] Vivien became one of the best-known figures of "Paris-Lesbos" at the turn of the century. See Albert, *Renée Vivien à rebours* and *Lesbian Decadence*; DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho*, and Marks, "Sappho 1900."

[160] See, for instance, Bram Djikstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* for analyses of and feminist critiques of decadence and lesbian decadence in particular. Regarding the renewal of interest in Sappho in the 19th century, Nicole Albert suggests that Sapphism entered the field of art with Gustave Courbet's 1864 painting *Vénus poursuivant Psyché de sa jalousie/ Venus Pursuing Psyche Out of Jealousy* (or *Venus and Psyche*). Albert, xviii. Joan DeJean, in *Fictions of Sappho, 1546-1937* (Chicago

lady of the lake"[161]—were male, and very arguably misogynist, Vivien, Barney, and others claimed them as agentic means to an erotic, mobile bodily location at once within and outside of social expectations of female sexuality, complexly drawing upon and replicating in positive terms, as Carolyn Dean notes, "the cultural fantasy of an intrinsically volatile, elusive, annihilating sexuality."[162] Taking on Sappho as muse, myth, and self, Vivien claimed and elaborated on a myth of a sexuality that lingers between embodiment and disembodiment and, as fiction, must be staged and performed, which Vivien did in her writing as in her life. In Vivien's poems, one scholar notes, "Sappho appears disembodied, and her voice is heard only through its absence…When she inhabits a body it is that of a dying woman. 'Wrapped in thick black veils,' or 'not revealing her face,' she is dressed in her own mourning clothes and becomes, like her poem, a shadow ready to disappear…"[163] As another scholar notes, "Baudelaire had already described her 'mornes pâleurs' but in her poetry and her various translations, Renée Vivien went even further and turned her idol into a diaphanous woman, crowned with violettes, Renée Vivien's favorite flower."[164] "'Sappho 1900' was no voluptuous beauty, but rather ethereal and androgynous."[165]…Renée Vivien for instance talks of her 'virginal body,' and Natalie Barney about her 'ephebian hips.'"[166] What makes Vivien such a lively subject for Colette, and the subject of the literary representations of many others as well—there have, as one scholar notes, been many Renée Viviens[167]—is

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University Press, 1989), writes "The progressive aestheticization of female homosexuality culminated in a fiction of Sappho as the alter ego of the male decadent outsider." Quoted in Dean, 181. Nicole Albert argues that starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the figure of Sappho went from being one of a dignified, heterosexual if manly poet to one of a sexually depraved lesbian. After 1880, in fact, the word Sappho came to mark not only lesbian sexual desire, but perversion among all women. Albert, 97. Carolyn Dean writes that in most of the novels written about Sappho or simply about lesbianism in the nineteenth century, "lesbianism is either associated with upper-class women seeking stimulation of already overwrought nerves or with the depravity of oversexes working-class women, especially prostitutes, whom Dr. Alexandre Parent-Duchâlet had associated with lesbians in his comprehensive 1836 work on prostitution." Dean, 182.

[161] Tama Lea Engelking writes: "The 'Ladies of the Lake' haunted the imagination of nineteenth-century artists and writers. The Pre-Raphaelites in particular were fond of depicting beautiful, often crazy, preferably dead or dying women, associated with water. These women surfaced in their works as Ophelia, the Lady of Shalott, Elaine, and also from Arthurian Romance, Vivien, or the Lady of the Lake. Ophelia in particular was a subject no nineteenth-century artist was seemed able to resist. Her popularity extended into the new century where representations of the mad heroine on stage, on canvas, and… in book and magazine illustrations, reached a broader audience than ever before." Engelking, "Renée Vivien and the Ladies of the Lake," 262.

[162] Dean, 201.

[163] Albert, *Lesbian Decadence*, 38. Poems quoted are Vivien, "Dans un Verger" and "La Mort de Psappha."

[164] Violets were a typically flower of decadent and symbolist paintings, seen on figures such as Ophelia and other resurrected heroines and symbolizing otherworldliness and death.

[165] Albert, "Renée Vivien," 90.

[166] Ibid.

[167] See Elaine Marks, *Sappho 1900*. Carolyn Dean argues that, despite their differences, all of the writings on Vivien by women writers of the era "transformed the dominant and negative construction of lesbians' elusiveness into an affirmative valuation of lesbian sexuality. Repudiating tropes of maternity and masculinity, they replicated in positive terms the cultural

precisely that she lived her life as a cultural fantasy, fully inhabiting tropes of female decadence and asserting an over-the-top performativity of that subjectivity, while, not least, flaunting her visibility as a lesbian. A "lightening rod for discussions about lesbianism and feminism…from the end of the nineteenth century through the interwar period,"[168] Renée Vivian, Colette writes at the beginning of chapter 5, had many "fans."[169] Vivien combined an unapologetic visibility as a sexual woman with an overt performance of her life as art and as myth (both of which, we will see, as a character in Colette's book, she articulated through *in*visibility and physical self-diminishment), suggesting a life lived in the moment, on the surface, as a life connected with cosmic depths. As reinvented by Colette in *The Pure and the Impure*, she plays this dynamic to an extreme. More, she embodies the inversions and circularities of signification that define the decadent, modernist "attitude" of Baudelaire, laid out by Foucault, while bringing out the gendered meanings embedded within that attitude. She wraps herself up in the stereotype while, through various excesses (of affect, dress, sexuality, general behavior, lifestyle) establishes a critical distance, ensuring that she be viewed as theater. Her life is indecipherable from theater, to the point where in preparing to participate in a Tableau Vivant of, appropriately, Lady Jane Grey awaiting her execution, she starves herself to near death. The tableau, which I will discuss further below, echoes Vivien's own theater as described by Colette, living every moment as an erotic dive toward death.

Colette's portrayal of Vivien opens with an observation of her artifice, an artifice that, like Charlotte's, we are asked by the character to believe but invited by the author to see through. More accurately, Renée Vivien's performance of self asks to be believed while giving the viewer/reader everything they need to see through the performance. For Colette, her physical features, behavior, and poetry all combine into a portrait of innocence both affected and convincing:

> If I were to publish the correspondence of this poet who never ceased claiming kinship with Lesbos, it would astound only because of its childishness. I stress this very particular childish quality, which strikes a false note—dare I say a note of obvious insincerity? The charming face of Renée Vivien reflected only a part of that childlike quality, in the rounded cheek, soft and downy, in the innocent upper lip...A bright smile constantly lit her eyes….There is not a single feature of her youthful face that I do not vividly recall. Everything in it bespoke childishness, roguishness, and the propensity to laughter. Impossible to find

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fantasy of an intrinsically volatile, elusive, annihilating sexuality. In their homages to Vivien, they reiterated the nonreferentiality of lesbian sexuality already implicit in the dominant cultural narratives (critics' difficulty tying lesbianism to conventional gender distinctions), but did so to create a multidimensional rather than reductive image of same-sex love: love that defied gender norms even as it drew on them for its expression; that refused to hide itself even as it repudiated the principle of absolute revelation; love located simultaneously within and outside the parameters of medical taxonomies; love that paradoxically proclaimed itself through its own erasure." Dean, *The Frail Social Body*, 201-202.

[168] Dean, 201.

[169] *The Pure*, 83.

> anywhere on that face...any sign of the hidden tragic melancholy that throbs in the poetry of Renée Vivien.[170]

Renée Vivien's childishness (which, Colette suggests, would astound a contemporary reader more than her lesbianism), reflected not only in her letters but in the very features of her face, veils and belies her sadness. The sweetness of her physical attributes, Colette suggests, more than contradicted her interior darkness: they deliberately masked it—an "obvious insincerity." If Charlotte wore a veil to suggest hidden depths that were not there, Renée Vivien needed none. Her face tripled as biologically, "truthfully" given, as veil, and as falsity. That her innocent face and child-like letters are racked with "obvious" insincerity speaks to her knowing participation in the theater of decadent, romantic clichés, detailed, we will see below, in Colette's account.

If Colette could see through Vivien's guise, there were two domains of her life to which Colette claims to have had no access: "the cause of her sadness, and her method of work."[171] Vivien maintained a secrecy about both, and when caught "curled up on a divan...scribbling with a pencil on a writing pad propped on her knees" she "always sprung up guiltily, excusing herself, murmuring, "It's nothing, I've finished now…[172] The picture emerges of a self-effacing Vivien, one who deliberately affects a shroud of mystery, and one whose "genuine" inner anguish drove her to self-protective seclusion. The ambiguity of and movement between the realness and fakeness of her mystery, surface exteriority and inner depth, visibility and invisibility, and appearance and disappearance echo throughout the subsequent pages in three areas, each of which themselves repeat the movement across these divisions: her surroundings, her body, and her behavior. In wondering where she works, for instance, Colette comments that "The vast, dark, sumptuous, and ever changing flat in the avenue du Bois gave no hint of work."[173] The flat, like Vivien, was dark and secretive. Furthermore, it veiled and unveiled its belongings:

> Except for some gigantic Buddhas, all the furnishings moved mysteriously: after provoking surprise and admiration for some time, they had a way of disappearing…[174]

Like her, her belongings aimed to "provoke" rather than to convey depth, and, like her, they appeared and disappeared, as if to maintain their mystery. Not only did her surroundings echo Vivien's own disposition, but they enveloped her, obfuscating divisions between body and house, veiling the veiled woman and blurring borders of self and surroundings in a structure that exhibited/externalized a dark interiority:

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[170] *The Pure*, 83-4; *Le Pur*, 75-6.
[171] *The Pure*, 85; *Le Pur*, 76.
[172] Ibid.; *Le Pur*, 77.
[173] Ibid.; *Le Pur*, 76.
[174] Ibid.

> Among the unstable marvels, Renée wandered, not so much clad as veiled in black or purple, almost invisible in the scented darkness of the immense rooms barricaded with leaded windows, the air heavy with curtains and incense.[175]

Not so much dressed as veiled—in French "better than dressed" (mieux que vêtue)—Vivien heavily dramatizes her liminality. At an early dinner at her place, Colette describes being "suffocated with the obscurity" and "mistrustful"[176] of the strange food and powerful imported alcohols. Colette reflects that she is unable to feel close to Vivien, a fact that she attributes to the sadness and darkness of her friend and her home. Upon entering Vivien's house, Colette writes:

> I would confront...the air which, like stagnant water, slowed down my steps, the odor of incense, of flowers, of overripe apples. It is an understatement to say that I was stifled in that gloom. I became almost wickedly intolerant there, yet never wore out the patience of the gossamer angel who dedicated offerings of lady apples to the Buddhas. One day...I was nauseated by the funereal perfumes and tried to open the window: it was nailed shut. What a contribution such a detail is, what a flourish it adds to the theme already rich! What a quantity of lurid gleams and glints of gold in the semi-darkness, of whispering voices behind the doors, of Chinese masks, of ancient instruments hanging on the walls, mute, only vaguely whimpering at the banging of a door beneath my heavy hand. At Renée's I could have wished to be younger, so I could be a little fearful. But impatience got the better of me and one evening I brought an offending, an inadmissible big oil lamp, and plumped it down, lit, in front of my plate. Renée wept big tears over this, like a child—it is only right to add that she consoled herself in a like manner.[177]

Like Charlotte, Vivien veils herself, and, by extension, her house, in mystery, and, even more than Charlotte, in affectations so extreme that, like the dandy, they draw attention to their own performance. Vivien's "childishness"—itself an affectation—plays out in the dramatic staging of her home which she creates as a living theater, detailed to perfection with every "oriental" exoticism and by-the-book decadent, bohemian décor—overstuffed furniture; rooms dark and enclosed so as to suggest dark night, with stagnant, stifling air; "exotic" Buddhas; "funereal" perfumes; rotting fruit; sounds of ghostly whispers; unplayed instruments that we might imagine covered in cobwebs; all presided over by an otherworldly, "gossamer angel." It is as if she were a living nineteenth century symbolist painting (again, a *tableau vivant*), balancing between life's movement and death's stillness. In Colette's telling, Vivien's life is a stage, and she is always in character, her surroundings co-creating, extending, and magnifying her person. (The lamp so offends because it threatens to interfere with the performance.) Colette's comment on the window nailed shut—"what flourish it adds to the theme, already rich!"—underscores the overt drama being played out in the house. The drama is one in which the body is emptied, unmade and made ghostly, and extended into her home, itself a "body" which is both closed (windows nailed shut, dark and stuffy) and spacious—capacious enough to hold

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[175] *The Pure*, 85; *Le Pur*, 77.
[176] *The Pure*, 86; *Le Pur*, 77.
[177] *The Pure*, 88-9; *Le Pur*, 79-80.

and circulate essences of life and death, essences which take the form of the senses (sight, odor, sound, touch). Furthermore, Renée's house is overstuffed while she is underfed, as if she had emptied herself out onto the house, so that the latter holds the weight, and weightiness, of her being. Like the talisman that takes on, and takes, the life of Raphaël de Valentin, Vivien externalizes herself onto inanimate matter, becoming more and more disembodied and invisible in the process, diffusing not only her life, but her death, such that the economy of movement between her body and her surroundings is one of dying: the flowers are dead, the air is stale, the fruit is rotting, the windows are nailed shut like a coffin. Clad in purple or black (colors of death and mourning), moving through the gloom, she makes herself part of the furniture and it part of her so as to vanish within it, at once highly visible (the extraverted, bohemian character) and "gossamer," invisible, disappearing into, blending into, her house, just as the objects in her house disappeared too.

Colette thus writes Renée Vivien as an overtly literary, artistic creation, a life invented as tragedy, the epitome of decadent self-expression and the various withdrawals, disappearances, and asceticisms that accompany it. Colette, the character, is unimpressed by Vivien's moribund theatricality, jesting she wishes she could be younger in order to believe it, Colette reflects, "The alcohol...the thinness...the poetry, the daily Buddha... And that's not all. What is the dark origin of all this nonsense?"[178] Her poetry was as affected as her persona:

> May I be excused for having included as an element of 'all this nonsense' the word 'poetry.' Renée Vivien had left a great many poems of unequal strength, force, merit, unequal as the human breath, as the pulsations of human suffering. The cult of which they sing arouses curiosity and then infatuation; today they have disarmed the indignation of even the lowest kind of moralists—and this is a fate I would not have dared to promise them if they had lauded only the love of Chloë for Daphnis…In addition, Renée's work inhabits a region of elevated melancholy, in which the *amies*, the female couple, daydream and weep as often as they embrace. Admirably acquainted with our language, broken to the strict rules of French meter, Renée Vivien betrays her foreignness….by exuding her Baudelairism in the years 1900-9, which was rather late for us."[179]

Vivien's poetry, like her dress, demeanor, and surroundings, was overdone and overwrought: *too* Baudelairian, too late. Yet while Colette goes to great lengths to enumerate, and criticize, Vivien's exaggerated performance (in life and in writing) of life as a lesbian decadent, she nevertheless betrays a tenderness toward Vivien in her invitation to the reader to experience the depths of her melancholy and suffering, even with its visibility as performance. Just as Renée Vivien herself asks us to believe her unbelievable (because exaggerated) theatricality, so Colette too asks us to both disbelieve but understand the Vivien's own signifying logic. Colette embeds a commentary on performance and the real within her "journalistic" accounts, and with Vivien, who plays out an already scripted dynamic between ascetic withholding/suffering and decadent

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[178] *The Pure*, 96; *Le Pur*, 86. The comment about the Buddha refers back to a few pages earlier, when Vivien told Colette that she buys a Buddha every day. *The Pure*, 95; *Le Pur*, 85.
[179] Ibid.; *Le Pur*, 86.

excess, she slyly reveals her use of clichés to get at something resembling truth. And if truth, for Colette, lies in the movement of eros, in the hunger of desire and not in any finite bodies, clear identities, or relationships, then we might read Vivien as the ultimate embodiment of that "disembodied" hunger.

Vivien's circulation of mysteries, secrets, and truths carried on to her death. Close to death, in "spells of giddiness," in "the aurora borealis of starvation… enfeebled, she became humble and was converted. Her paganism was so little rooted in her…"[180] Whether her conversion to Catholicism exhibits a moment of clarity or a hallucinatory mental state is unclear. Colette carefully positions her conversion within a continued circulation of myths and mysteries that, true to the flow of senses and desire beyond the limits of the body that Colette made the subject of her book, continue even beyond the life of the body. Dead,

> she carried off with her more than one secret, and beneath her purple veil, Renée Vivien, the poet, led away—her throat encircled with moonstones, beryls, aquamarines, and other anemic gems—the immodest child, the excited little girl who taught me, with unembarrassed competence: "There are fewer ways of making love than they say, and more than one believes…"[181]

She left life as she lived it - in regalia that suggested mystery so unsubtly as to not be taken seriously, and yet, at the same time, that reflected Vivien's "truth": that she lived her life as art, true to her decadent idols, while demonstratively revealing a symbolic economy of circulatory migrations between interior and exterior, excess and asceticism, presence and absence, being and non-being, art and life as the aesthetic language of her milieu. The transmigration of Vivien's emaciated and starved body onto "anemic" stones that, like Raphael's talisman, mirrored and held her evaporating life, her body shrouded in a veil the color of the otherwordly violets she surrounded herself with, inviting her transition into another world, all suggest an extension of Renée Vivien's theater beyond her own life.[182]

Self-Disappearance, *Tableaux Vivants*

If Baudelaire admired Raphaël de Valentin's suicide by gradual disappearance and saw him as the ultimate modern hero, Colette's Renée Vivien, it might be said, demonstrated what such a life and death looked like and what meanings it bore for a woman, indeed, what gendered meanings self-disappearance entails and what manner of presence self-disappearance accomplishes. Colette provides a language for women's sensual subjectivity built on an essential diffusion of substance, a diffusion that establishes a female giving away of oneself as the sacrificial rite of female sexuality (the book begins, after all, with Charlotte's forfeited orgasm in order to please her lover). Like

[180] *The Pure*, 101, *Le Pur,* 91.
[181] *The Pure*, 102; Ibid.
[182] It's of note that the "real" Vivien "took care to turn her own life into mythology, one built upon a motif of disappearance, with poems of her own death." Gayle Levy, "J'ai été très amusé(e)," in Nicole Albert, *Renée Vivien à rebours*, 129.

a phantom, Vivien not only disappears amid her house but also disappears her body, emptying herself, making her body light, ghostly, thin, un-nurtured, and lethargic:

> Her lithe body devoid of density languishly drooped as if beneath the weight of her poppy-flower head with its pale golden hair...[183]

Diminishing the mass of her body, narrowing her shape, reaching for nothingness, Vivien's anorexic self-diminishment is clearly tied to a self-effacing/self-destructive feminine selflessness:

> She was constantly giving things away: the bracelets on her arms opened up, the necklace slipped from her martyr's throat. She was as if deciduous. It was as if her languorous body rejected all fleshly form.[184]

Yet this giving away of one's flesh, whether Charlotte's orgasm/non-orgasm, Margueritte's Le Cid, La Chevalière's mirage, or Renée Vivien's shedding of bodily dimensions, cannot simply be read as gendered self-sacrifice. The lives of these women, penned by Colette, are the lives of marginalized women, forced to sacrifice for the simple fact of being women, of being lesbian, of being visible as desiring subjects. But the dissipation and pliability of form, the layers of allusion in veils (Charlotte), in photographic performance (Colette), in paintings (Boldini's painting of woman in white), in crossings of masculine and feminine form (Marguerite Morneo), in tailored suits and apparitions (La Chavalière), in otherworldly costumes and countenance evocative of a symbolist painting (Renée Vivien), all create for the reader displays of self-location through bodily unmoorings, so that self-display, if clearly visible, is one of a "truth" in artifice that can be taken away, or else through a self-disappearance and spectrality. Colette writes her characters with a fluidity between visibility and invisibility, each in a constant performance of self-disappearance at the crucial moment of self-articulation.

And what, then, of the exaggerated nature of Renée Vivien's decadence, her exaggeration of an already exaggerated trope of decadent female sexuality? Colette draws on, and draws out, Vivien's excessive theatricality to simultaneously illustrate the decadent excess of Vivien's ascetic self-denials, the centrality and circularity of hunger, consumption/self-consumption in the decadent paradigm, and, crucially, the complexity of the feminine at the center of it all: sensual beyond the self, pliable ("ployant") and sacrificial—giving away the very dimensions of her body, a rejection of fleshly form is here a rejection of the feminine form, streamlining its curves to the point of two-dimensional object-hood. (It is worth noting that Briffault translates "Son corps ployant refusait tout relief de chair" as "It was if her languorous body rejected anything that would give it a third dimension.") Yet this is no mere portrait of feminine martyrdom. There is an essential agency at play in this portrait of Vivien's, an agency, crucially, of the body. "It was as if" her malleable body *rejected* its fullness of shape. Her *body* chose to divest itself of accessories that added to its mass. Renée Vivien's body-driven agency in destructive, starving (starving her body of fullness, of curves, of food, of health), self-sacrifice, is exactly what elicits Colette's critique of her, causing her to say at the end of

[183] The Pure, 85; *Le Pur*, 77.
[184] *The Pure*, 86, modified translation; *Le Pur*, 77.

the chapter that "I am hostile to people who are consumed. Voluntary consumption always seems like a sort of alibi to me. I'm afraid there is not enough difference between the habit of voluptuousness and, for example, the cigarette habit."[185] She joins Vivien's sexual appetite with her lack of self-care, so that the Renée Vivien who sheds all fleshly fullness in acts of ascetic self-denial is the same as one who will dive into so many sexual rendez-vous that Colette will call her "Madame How-many-times"[186] In this way, even within her dislike of Renée Vivien's lack of reserve, Colette identifies a potent language of female erotic self-dispersal within which an alternate sensual-social space of living is invented and inhabited by the characters in her book. Renée Vivien's voracious sexual appetite is accompanied by an unmaking of the fleshly form and an extension of it, a drawing out and thinning of its shape as it extends itself onto the world. Importantly, Colette also suggests a consumption of nothingness. In naming her sexual excesses "consumption" and then comparing that consumption to the consumption of cigarettes Colette identifies an act of consuming nothingness. To smoke is to consume a non-substance, and to draw sustenance and pleasure from that nothingness. Renée Vivien's erotic, bodily excess is doubly associated with consuming nothingness: first by equating it with smoking, and, later, by suggesting she seeks to satisfy her sexual hunger by diving into a deathly abyss, calling her voluntary consumption a "misplaced curiosity based on "…trying to find out here, on this side of death, what lies beyond the grave." She continues:

> Voluptuaries, consumed by their senses, always begin by flinging themselves with a great display of frenzy into an abyss. But they survive, they come to the surface again. And they develop a routine of the abyss: "It's four o'clock…At five I have my abyss…" It is possible that this young woman poet, who rejected the laws of ordinary love, led a sensible enough life until her personal abyss of half past eight in the evening. An abyss she imagined? Ghouls are rare.[187]

Colette's Renée Vivien dove full throttle into nothingness, emptying herself entirely, giving away all that she had—her sex, her body, her layers of jewels, her bodily dimensions—to the point of death. Colette identifies in Vivien a marriage of decadent excess and ascetic self-diminishment that resonates throughout her book to different degrees. Each character in one way or another is produced with a flesh that is permeable, diminishable, the site not of a material body as much as of a collection of senses (moving between bodies, animate and inanimate) whose function is both to extend the body into the world and to dissipate it beyond the constraints of historical time and place. In this way, Renée Vivien's shedding of bodily dimensions and erotic death drive should not just be read as gendered self-sacrifice, even if that was among the stereotypes that she played into and played up. Rather, her pliability, diminishment, and dissipation of form, like Charlotte's layers of illusion in veils, Colette's photographic self-distancing, and so on, is there where Colette locates the truth of these women- a truth that she calls a "purity" and that exists only within and in dialogue with the impure—that is, that is located within their marginalization as sexual women.

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[185] *The Pure*, 102.
[186] The Pure, 98; *Le Pur,* 88.
[187] *The Pure*, 103; *Le Pur,* 92.

In expanding the reach of the senses beyond the body, and among bodies and locations, animate and inanimate, Colette decenters and reframes an emancipated pleasure as one detached from the self, detached even from the couple, and rather "immersed in the infiniteness of the world." A perpetual sliding permeates her writing, a sliding and a porosity between self and other, woman and man, animate subject and inanimate object, an "extravagance of sensuality" continually absorbing and being absorbed by the body. "Food, surroundings, individuals, interminglings—the sensual traverses all without prejudice. Desire is not focalized on sexual organs, or rather, all organs are sexual organs.[188] For Kristeva, the body in Colette—at once her own body, the body of her writing, and the bodies in her writing—is in a constant state of movement, and becoming, where becoming is a state of unmaking and reshaping, diffusion and absorption:

> Exquisite, inhuman, frenzied, maniacal, ferocious, contagious? The writing of Colette imposes this paradoxical body upon our reading and our desires: a body that must be called metaphorical, in perpetual blooming thanks to its osmosis with Being, via writing. Without sexual identity, neither human nor other, friends amalgamated across all identities, embracing them all, the Colette-body constantly transforms itself, interchanging roles, dissolving divides and barriers, and expands, incommensurable, to the dimensions of the cosmos itself. It would be a cosmic body, in effect, if the cosmos were a transfer of energies, of elements, of provisional states.[189]

In its constant, metaphorical, state of transformation, Colette's bodies allow for an articulation of the non-essentiality and non-identificatory in gender as in desire, shapes of being that Colette frees with her pen: "To write! To be able to write! That means … unconscious scrawls, pen doodles around an ink spot that nibbles at the imperfect word, claws at it, surrounds it with darts, adorns it with antennae, with paws, until it loses its readable word shape and, transformed into a fantastic insect, takes flight as a fairy-butterfly."[190] Kristeva proposes that Colette's "alphabet of the world is an alphabet of feminine pleasure." There is "no emancipation of women without a liberation of women's sexuality, which is fundamentally a bisexuality and a polyphonic sensuality: that is what Colette continually proclaims throughout her life and works, in a constant dialogue between what she calls the 'pure' and the 'impure,' describing herself from the outset as a 'mental hermaphrodite.'"[191] Colette manages a dislocation of desire from the bodily organs while at the same time making the body, as a body extended beyond itself, the agentic element of life. In *La Retraite Sentimentale*, Colette writes "My body…is more intelligent than my brain. It feels more acutely, more completely than my brain. When my body thinks…everything else falls silent. At those moments, my whole skin has a soul."[192] Bodily senses are the "soul" of life for Colette; sensuality, rather than that

[188] Kristeva, "De Claudine," 45.
[189] Kristeva, 45. My translation.
[190] Colette, *La Naissance du Jour*, quoted in Kristeva, Colette, 3.
[191] Kristeva, *Colette*, 11.
[192] From *La Retraite Sentimental*e, quoted in Kristeva, *Colette*, 241.

which differentiates and defines a person, is that which allows them flexibility and movement in the world.

Hunger and Self-Consumption

Love (or lust) for all of Colette's characters in *The Pure and the Impure*, is a state desirable unhappiness, one equated with a diminishment of self, a deliberate undernourishment, or unmaking of form as the flesh is given away. In a letter to a friend while writing the book, Colette wrote that "in the little book I am grinding away at…I speak of certain beings who are 'alluring voids.'"[193] Judith Thurman, in her biography of Colette, suggests that Colette writes of "famished creatures—lovers and rivals of both sexes in every combination" who "seek to master their voracity" either by "recovering an illusion of wholeness through domination" through sadism and seduction of both sexes, or through "defensive self-starvation: asceticism, celibacy, anorexia, but most commonly masochistic submission." "This voluntary privation," she concludes, "feels superior to the original hunger of the infant, which was suffered helplessly."[194] It is not clear to me that her characters seek wholeness. I think, rather, that they dwell deliberately and "fully" within their lack of fulfillment, in the hunger and self-starvation she speaks of. If she writes of "famished creatures," self-starving, ascetic, or celibate, their deliberate withholdings and refusals of fulfillment do not mark a search for wholeness but an affirmation of wholeness's lack. Wholeness, in this book, cannot exist within an individual. The only whole is the ubiquitous hunger and desire that have no loyalty to particular bodies but around which bodies form and shape themselves. "Inexorable" eros is the only "whole," "real," or "pure" element in the lives of these women. It is that which both unites and disrupts individuals. It is also that which, loosely, fluidly, but surely, binds together communities. Desire, however, is not fulfillment, nor is it hunger for fulfillment. It   Thurman calls this book an "ode to emptiness,"[195] but I think it is rather an ode to hunger and all that the desire for hunger touches on: consumption, self-consumption, non-consumption, self-starvation, asceticism, and through all of these, a rejection of identity and of object-oriented desire in favor of an immersion into the infiniteness of the world.

Like Weil in the next chapter, Colette associates object-oriented love with cannibalism. "Is not receiving happiness from another being," she asks, "choosing the sauce with which one wants to be eaten?"[196] Weil's solution will be to unmake, to "decreate" the self through affliction and starvation, before it can be forcibly unmade by others. Colette's is to live fully within the realm of the senses, refusing "happiness," or love: "To live without happiness, and not to waste away from it, that is an occupation, almost a profession," she writes.[197] Importantly, as I have suggested, this privileging of the sensual is, for her, a mode of self-dissipation. The senses, as hunger that seeks only to keep moving, to keep hungering, and to touch on all the world, are what drive the ego in Colette. It is in their dissipated existence that she locates agency, rather than in any "I."

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[193] Thurman, Secrets, 539, footnote 40.
[194] *The Pure*, xvi.
[195] Thurman, xviii.
[196] Quoted in Thurman, xviii.
[197] Colette, *Mes Apprentissages*, quoted in Kristeva, *Notre Colette*.

Likewise, if Weil, as we will see, associates self-consumption via self-wasting with the building of a new world, the various self-*dissolutions* of Colette's characters allow them to resituate themselves within an alternative sociality. This is a sociality that cannot fully exist in actual time and space but rather exists in the interstices of historical time and in social spaces predicated upon their opaqueness if not invisibility, and similarly defined not by clear boundaries of self and other, by this body and that body, but rather by appetite and erotic drive.

It is these very questions of self, shape, and detachment that Judith Butler and Catherine Malabou investigate in "You Be My Body for Me: Body, Shape, and Plasticity in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit."[198] For Butler, Hegel posits the body as something "redoubled, occurring elsewhere," calling into question "whether the body is a finite particularity or, rather, *only* a finite particularity, or some kind of vexed relation." And, "to think of the body as a vexed relation," as Butler and Malabou do together in this piece, "is to suggest that it is of the structure of the body to be outside itself."[199] It seems to me that Colette writes of the body precisely as this vexed relationship, creating bodies that are neither fully within themselves nor entirely outside themselves, their detachments, with the ecstatic meanings of detachment,[200] reshapings, and re-framings of themselves in relation to what they are not: complete, fulfilled, self-sufficient, individual, or identitarian, each locating their sensual drive within the refusal to be this body for that person, or this body for that reason, a refusal that is also a diffusion of sense and self outside the bounds of the "I."

Discussing the problem of the body in Hegel, Butler and Malabou both question "how to understand the relation between life, shape, and self-shaping." They ask:

> Must the self remain attached to itself to shape itself? Must the self detach from itself to shape itself, and how are we to understand the resulting "plasticity" (Malabou's term) as a figure for absolute knowledge, but also, clearly, in relation to the body: to be this being here and to be that being elsewhere, partially both and fully neither, as the essential condition of becoming?

Colette advances a language of self-articulation that seems to answer affirmatively to these questions. The women in her book create themselves not as contained selves with desiring bodies but as beings articulated around a mass of intangible senses rather than tangible flesh, defining their desires around voids rather than objects, resulting in an essential plasticity and mobility, and a perpetual becoming that, crucially, manifests a concurrent impossibility of simply being an "I" in and of itself. And hunger, in particular, provides a central metaphor in their perpetual divestment of bodily mass, shape, and attributes from self, and in the mobility of desire.

Psychic hungering, hunger as metaphor, hunger as deliberative, affirmative, self-diminishment figures centrally in each writer of my study. And if the fault-lines of Weil's map of eating/being eaten, self-disappearance via self-consumption, and world creation

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[198] "You Be My Body for Me: Body, Shape, and Plasticity in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit." *A Companion to Hegel*, edited by Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur. (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011)

[199] Ibid, 611.

[200] Ibid.

through decreation the self (we shall see) are in some ways markedly different than Colette's, the two share, and share with Baudelaire, an articulation of the self in the modern world of surface consumer pleasures and the becoming-object of the human that directly engages similar paradigms of deliberate hunger, self-diminishment, consumption and self-consumption, and the remaking of the social. Hunger, in conjunction with illness and abjection, as the movement and shifting of bodily shape and mass figures in all three of the authors of this study, and, I would suggest, as part of a certain language of modernity. In each, presence can only be recoursed through a language—aesthetic and bodily—of asceticism and emptiness. Renée Vivien's movement of life pivots on an ascetic self-emptying that is also an excess. This seems as true for the historical figure of Renée Vivien as for Colette's literary rendering of her, a distinction which, again, is not a clear one, as Renée Vivien self-created herself as decadent art/literature simultaneous to others' representation of her. This slippage between art and nature, between copy and original, present in Renée Vivien as in Colette's depiction of her through the actual remove of literature**,** further underscores how the overt demonstrability of the decadent/ascetic dualism refers not only to a mode of self-articulation whose excessiveness hinges on an emptiness or absence, but to a placing of the self in the world where a resistance to the boundaries of identifiable subjectivity and sociality requires an emphatic refusal of the borders of bodily singularity. Questions of dimension and flatness are at the center of the dynamic of Renée Vivien, as painted by Colette, and at the center of the book. Vivien at once makes herself small and large, visible in her bold outfits and invisible. She sheds layers of her body, shape-shifting, receding, refusing excess, long-lined like one of the Erté prints that would have adorned graced magazine covers of her time, devoid of dimension so that jewelry slips from her body.

In her theater of self, one of self spilling out of and emptying of self, Renée Vivien employs as props not only home, furniture, and décor but food as well. Like descriptions of her home, descriptions of abundant, exotic, decadent spreads of food and drink fill the chapter on her:

> A low table, from the orient, offered a pell-mell assortment of les hors d'oeuvres—strips of raw fish rolled upon glass wands, fois gras, shrimps, salad seasoned with sugar and pepper—and there was a well-chosen Piper-Heidsieck champagne brut, and very strong cocktails…[201]

Yet this excess is there to mark an emptiness, for it is food that Renée Vivien will never touch, preferring instead non-nourishing drinks, resembling deadly poisons:

> Among the beverages that she raised to her lips was a cloudy elixir in which floated a cherry harpooned on a toothpick. I laid a hand on her arm and cautioned her.
>
> "Don't drink it."
>
> She opened her eyes so wide that the lashes of her upper-eyelids touched her eyebrows.

[201] *The Pure*, 86; *Le Pure*, 77.

> "Why not?"
>
> "I've tasted it," I said, embarrassed. "It's….it's deadly. Be careful, it tastes like some kind of vitriol."
>
> …
>
> "But these are my own cocktails, *ma pehtith Coletthe*. They are excellent."
>
> She emptied the glass at one gulp, neither gasping nor blinking, and her rounded cheek kept its floral pallor.
>
> I did not notice that evening her almost total abstinence from food, but later on I discovered that she subsisted mainly on a few spoonfuls of rice, some fruit or other, and alcohol—especially alcohol. During this first evening, nothing could dispel the uneasiness engendered by the strangeness of the place, bound to astonish a guest, the semi-darkness, the exotic foods on plates of jade, vermeil, or Chinese porcelain, foods that had come from countries too far away.[202]

Food, rather than being equated with nourishment, is obscure, dangerous, undigestible. Colette writes later that she was "suffocated with the obscurity, mistrustful of the unfamiliar fire of Russian, Greek, and Chinese alcohols, I scarcely touched the food.…"[203] Food, in Vivien's dining room, excessive and decadent, was to be looked at but not eaten (a theme we will further revisit in Weil); an excess meant to engender a withholding. Hunger inscribes a distance in this chapter, abstention a form of consumption, René Vivien's non-eating her form of nourishment, aided by the consumption of poisonous liquids. Within this display of exotic, untouchable food, and cloudy, highly intoxicating beverages, Vivien moves about, wispy, ghost-like, dramatizing non-consumption: "From one marvel to another Renée moved, uncertainly, already detached, and showing the indifferent self-effacement of a guard in a museum."[204] Vivien asks to be watched in her theater of self-wasting; or rather Colette asks that we watch Vivien asking to be watched, magnifying and adding levels of remove to Renée Vivien's dramatization of ghostliness, bodily unmaking, and a hunger only for self-wasting.

One evening, Vivien "exceptionally" wore a white gown. Without warning, she nodded off, or fainted, lifeless in her chair. When she came to she resumed the argument "she had left for the fleeting death from which she had returned fired with a such a strange and absent (égarée) frenzy."[205] Like the consumptive who gains energy in her last breaths, Vivien's "fleeting death" produced a fire in her, but one marked by an affect of loss (the French "égarée" meaning "lost" or "strayed"). Colette must have been deliberately drawing on the trope and mythology of the consumptive here, always romantically suffering and dying, with self-wasting bodies, intensely feeling life with an immediacy filtered through the distance of impending death.[206] Indeed Vivien must have

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[202] *The Pure*, 87; *Le Pur*, 78-79.
[203] *The Pure*, 86, *Le Pur*, 77.
[204] *The Pure*, 90; *Le Pur,* 80.
[205] *The Pure*, 91, translation modified; *Le Pur*, 81.
[206] See Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor,* on consumption as the symbolic illness of the nineteenth century. Sontag argues that tuberculosis left a legacy of metaphors, up through, at the time of her

been drawing on it as well. Colette dresses Vivien in white, to emphasize, among other things, her ghostliness—perhaps, as well, her purity in being true to her performance—suggesting her disappearance and, indeed, "temporary death." A set of parallels are drawn here between the earlier woman in white painted by Boldini, the lifeless gown that he paints, and the gown worn in flesh and blood by Renée Vivien, a gown and a scene which presage her actual death, and, more to the point, illuminate deathliness as a mode of life for Vivien. Both Boldini and Vivien create artistic fictions of womanhood, his an offensively pure virginal woman, accessed through an impure, not-so-white gown, hers an equally fictional art of "pure" childlike wonder, accessed through an "impure" relationship to her body—wasting it through drink and starvation, and through acts of sexual submission both excessive and unfulfilling.

Whatever truths are conveyed by Renée Vivien are always conditional on their non-adherence to a self as self-entity. Rather, their meanings emerge in affect and eros always described as external to Vivien even while belonging to her. Once when running off to meet a lover who may or may not have been imaginary, she told Colette that her life was in danger, as she was to be at the sexual mercy of this woman. This is one of the few occasions in which Colette uses a language of frankness to describe words coming from René Vivien's mouth. Speaking of the lover she fears, Vivien confesses: "With her I dare not pretend or lie, because at that moment she lays her ear over my heart."[207] It seems that this lover, whom Colette suspects is imaginary, represents that which is true in René Vivien, as expressed through her sexuality, which here, is equated with death, and as externalized onto another. The part of Vivien that does not lie is still couched in a tale:

> I prefer to believe that this detail and the "danger," which both, alike, seem to have been borrowed from P.J. Toulet's Monsieur du Paur, were conceived under the influence of alcohol. Perhaps, even, the exhausting Lesbian lover never existed. Perhaps, invisible, she owed her strength, her quasi-tangibility to the last effort, the last miracle of an imagination which, getting out of hand, brought forth ghouls instead of nymphs.[208]

Renée Vivien's erotic drive is most "truthfully" articulated through fiction. Her erotic imagination, articulated through a drama of sexual danger, brought forth "ghosts" instead of "nymphs." Colette, again, describes Renée Vivien's altered state much like that of the consumptive, who, in a tubercular last gasp of life, lives most fully at the brink of death. All that is "true life" in Renée Vivien, which for Colette can only be a truth of the senses, exists within a space-time map where feelings, drives, and erotic attachments are external to, removed from, and/or exceed the individual to whom those desires attach.

Renée Vivien's drama of a living death are most strikingly presented/brought to the fore in her preparation for an actual theatrical performance. Ten days before she was to perform in a tableau vivant where she was to play Lady Jane Grey on the executioner's block, Vivien discovers she has gained weight. That night, she left a note for her friends announcing she was going to disappear for ten days to lose the pounds she had gained:

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writing, twentieth century women's fashions. For my own arguments along these lines, see Wallerstein, "Thinness and Other Refusals."

[207] *The Pure*, 101; *Le Pur*, 90.

[208] Ibid.

> She kept her word. We heard later on that she had spent the ten days at the Pavillon Henri IV in Saint-Germain. In the mornings she drank a glass of tea, then walked in the forest until her strength gave out. Then she drank more tea, this time with alcohol added, and went to bed in an almost fainting condition. Next day it began all over again. She had the inexhaustible strength of unbalanced people [la force inépuisée des extravagants.].[209]

Her ascetic abstinence, clearly a behavior of "extravagant" excess, was that which was required to play, even more perfectly than in her own life, the role of a suffering, martyred woman. In the painting being enacted, "Le Supplice de Jane Grey" ("The Execution of Lady Jane Grey") by Paul Delaroche (1833), Jane is dressed in white, with pale skin, red lips, and golden red hair. Like the woman in Boldini's painting, she has been conjured as feminine purity. Her eyes are bandaged as she is guided toward the executioner's block. At sixteen, she has a full, womanly body. Vivien nonetheless felt she needed to starve herself so that she could stay below 52 kilos,[210] playing the role in fact not so much as Lady Jane Grey, but as herself. Following her self-exile, she returned, "hollow eyed" ["l'orbite creuse"], played Jane Grey, "her hands tied, her bowed head revealing a white nape, her fair hair flooding out on the block."[211] Afterward, she fainted backstage, "a victim of…alcohol poisoning, aggravated by starvation and some drug or another"[212] Vivien looked and embodied the part of someone approaching their death, someone for whom death was already upon them in life. The theater of playing Jane Grey was indistinguishable from the theater of her own life, only allowing her a literal stage on which her enactment could not be misread as anything but drama. Playing the part, as herself, in the suspended motion of a tableau vivant, allowed an attentive, pointed epitomization of Vivien's frenzied hungering for extremities of experience that approached death. She prepared for this epitomic moment by starving herself, emptying and diminishing her body, taking it to a different state of being ("the aurora borealis of starvation") between life and death. Perhaps, one can imagine, reading Colette, that in this scene she felt she possessed herself, for a fleeting moment, in the mimicked holding on to a body that was about to be given away, dramatizing, in this way, the inherently fraught nature of subjectivity: prior to being oneself, one is external to oneself. And, in articulating the self, one is simultaneously giving the self away.[213] Drawing out that moment of suspension between movement, eros, and life on the one hand, and stillness and death on the other is the work of the tableau vivant whether its subject matter is an execution or not. As an art form the tableau vivant reproduces in life an object-representation of life, thus mimicking the mimicking of life. Its layers of remove are palpable in the living, breathing stillness of the bodies on stage. Frozen, they are clearly neither lifeless figurines nor painted figures on a canvas, but live people, asking you to watch them pretend to be objects—again, objects that mimic life.

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[209] *The Pure*, 93; *Le Pur*, 83.
[210] *Le Pur*, 83.
[211] *The Pure*, 93; *Le Pur*, 84.
[212] *The Pure*, 84; *Le Pur*, 94.
[213] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Vivien's drama of self-dissolution and starvation accomplishes several things. On one level hers is an overly demonstrative show of decadence, and of decadence's theatrical "death drives" where pallor, illness, and physically diminished states form the language of passionate living, an aesthetic movement, I suggested in chapter one, that emerged as part of a discourse on the abjected and objectified nature of subjectivity in the "modern" world, one in which preemptively identifies as abjected, and, one which also preemptively claims status as an object. Not only a commentary on subjectivity, this aesthetic language also performs a circularity of signification, so that dichotomies of subject-object, original-copy, ascetic-excessive, internal-external, and surface-depth are mobilized, by the artist and writer, as loops within a circular economy of interpretation. The very title of Colette's book suggests an antonymic pairing that will shape the narrative, one that will instead deliver a dismantling of the oppositions between the two words, establishing their mutuality and occasional sameness and interchangeability.

This aesthetic language of abjected hunger that does not seek to be satisfied, by no means an invention of the 19th century, had been mobilized and reinvented by Baudelaire around his nervous, ailing heroes as a mark of modern, for the most part, and even fundamentally, male, greatness. If it drew from movements and histories of asceticism and modes of self-denial, the end of nineteenth century saw a crystallization of a particular version of this language, one that references the industrialized consumer modernity of its time. One scholar asks, "Did the fin-de-siècle see the emergence of a *faminine* writing?" ["La fin de siècle a-t-elle vu l'émergence d'une écriture faminine?"][214] Colette, writing in the wake of Baudelaire, in the wake of romanticism and decadence's perfections of this language within an urban universe that belongs to men, mobilizes a language of bodily disappearance and emptying that speaks to the lived experiences of women whose assertions, erotic and other, could not be contained within the subjective structures offered to them. If these women, as women, already inhabit their disappearances, diminishments, denials, and invisibilities from within the marks of a gender that already assumes those very diminishments, Colette shows that this language of self-denial, diminishment, and, with Renée Vivien, starvation, also holds within it an affirmation of will. Lacan suggests that anorexia, rather than "not eating," be understood as "eating nothingness." This active turn is essential for understanding hunger and starvation as it is deployed by Renée Vivien and other figures in this study. Nothingness, as Simone Weil will most fully illuminate, provides a nourishment that neither food not love can supply. It is not a happy nourishment. But it is one that feeds a number of movements and porosities between self and the world that are otherwise foreclosed by fulfillment.

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[214] Meuret, *L'anorexie*, 37.

Chapter Three
Simone Weil: Hunger Artist

The secret of our misery lies in the fact that certain things enter into us and certain things go out from us. Food. Attachment.

- Simone Weil[215]

In my previous chapters, I considered the shape and space of the body in a modernist aesthetic that focuses on surface and flatness, the oscillation between the visible and the invisible, and unfulfillment as the driving aim of desire. I addressed the ways in which a self-negating self-consciousness becomes the *echt* expression of modern selfhood in Baudelaire, one that found expression in decadence and ascetic elaborations of self. Curated detachment and self-negation played out its erotic potential in Colette with an entirely different set of stakes and social resonances. In this chapter I will consider Simone Weil, for whom the relationship between unfulfillment and self-(dis)location took on deep religious, overtly political, and personal significations. For Weil, crucially, the historical moment of Europe of the 1930s demanded an acute set of responses: workers' struggles and political movements in which she took part; the absurdity and tragedy of the first world war and of the approaching second; the rise of Hitler. That said, my focus in this chapter is less to elaborate on Weil's response to her specific era as much as to examine her particular version of a self defined by its exteriority, struggling to find its non-identity within the alienating conditions of subjectivity.

If this is a study of aesthetics, subjectivity, and unfulfillment, each of my chapters thus far has had its own tone, in large part following the genre of text I am analyzing. With Weil the material, and the stakes, are quite different. If the reigning ideology in literary criticism has, for the past half century, been to separate author from text,[216] an approach I have adhered to in my previous chapters, Simone Weil presents a case in which such separation is not only extremely difficult, but would diminish any reading of her work. Hers seems to me a case of a life lived on the page, her decreation an emptying out of the body into her text; her writings on affliction mandates she appeared to obey in her own life. The question is as much whether Weil created herself in the image of her writing as whether the writing reflected any "outside" reality. Weil was many things—a writer, a teacher, a fighter, a philosopher, a mystic, a woman. Were Weil the volunteer on the Spanish front lines, and Weil the teacher, and Weil the organizer, and Weil the writer one and the same? In life she was, by all accounts, clumsy and awkward. Her writing is strong and pointed. Yet the world of her writing is a world that she reflected and enacted

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[215] Weil, *Notebooks*, 247.

[216] The classic text being Roland Barthes's essay, "The Death of the Author" (1967). It is worth noting that Barthes himself began to diverge from his treatise in his final, unpublished, works on Proust, in which he writes of a more complex circulation between Proust, his writing, and photographs. See Kathrin Yacavone, "Reading through Photography: Roland Barthes's Last Seminar "Proust et la photographie," and Suzanne Guerlac, "Little Cuts in Time: Photography and the Everyday."

in her life, which unfolded as a drama of self-starvation, withholding, and a hungering desire for something bigger than herself, bigger than a body and bigger than a singular life. Inasmuch as she writes of and *wills* the dissipation of the human body, the different realities of self and world, writer and written, and reader and author must, to a certain extent, necessarily all be understood to bleed into each other. For this reason, while this chapter considers the philosophy, ethics, mysticism, and aesthetics presented in her texts, Weil the writer has a presence as well.

My chapter on Simone Weil is framed by aesthetic and affective considerations of her hunger and her desire to reach a state of pure affliction, and, through it, detachment from the life of the body, or from what she refers to as "gravity." Weil's spiritual poetics can be seen as mappings of a disappearing shape, as lines and forms of a starving body that seeks to unravel and remake its life as non-matter. Considered this way, Weil's creative labor make her something akin to a hunger artist, one whose work is her afflicted and diminished body—the body she writes of, paralleled in her own—as the domain of a self both hungry for unfulfillment, and starving to reinvent what form a self might take. If Baudelaire and Colette's figures epitomized the dialectical relationship between decadence and asceticism, between self-aggrandizement and self-diminishment as a displacement and reframing of the boundaries of subjectivity, Weil's writings on asceticism suggested that the conditions under which self-possession might be attained within the conditions of her time were through its own destruction, or as Weil will call it, "decreation." Indeed, "man's indisputable revolt against himself," Foucault's words for describing one of Baudelaire's passages,[217] that self-alienation so central to the modernist ethos which found literary and artistic expression in deliberately and excessively abjected and diminished conditions of the body, combined with a simultaneous play with the form, borders, and dimensions of its physical shape, was precisely Weil's terrain of religious, philosophical, and political exploration. For all the ways in which she can be tied to traditions of mysticism, of sublime experiences of self-denial, and of the self-starvation of female mystics, for all of the ways in which she seems like a relic from another time, Weil might also be understood as utilizing a language of self-negation and self-disappearance that resonates with aesthetic languages of modernity in which the self is located through a negative relationship to the form it assumes—or is asked to assume.

Weil was more than just a religious philosopher who happened to live when she did. Even as her modes of self-denial were medieval and older—asceticism and self-starvation toward Christian ends—her questions reflected twentieth century thinking about the commodity and the worker, about political struggles and the possibilities of greater economic equality. She was a unionist, an anarchist, a social critic, and a political philosopher, heir to Kant, Hegel, Marx. She was a schoolmate of Simone de Beauvoir (although the two apparently disliked each other) and a contemporary of Albert Camus. It has been suggested by several scholars that Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was influenced by *Waiting for God*.[218] Weil was part of a historical moment, and her attention to God and her elaborations on the topic of subjection to God, a God whom, she wrote, "exists only in nothingness,"[219] should be understood within it. To philosophize and to pray were

[217] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 9.
[218] See, for instance, John Dunaway, "Estrangement and the Need for Roots: Prophetic Visions of the Human Condition in Albert Camus and Simone Weil," 35.
[219] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 20.

part of the same movement toward nothingness for her: "'To philosophize is to learn to die'… 'to pray is like a death.'"[220] Her task as a thinker was to understand the nothingness at the heart of all presence, and to claim it with a force equal to that of the social, political, economic, and military enterprises and orders that constituted false fulfillments that belied their emptiness. If she turned to ancient Greece in *The Iliad: Poem of Force,* she did so to understand the operations of force in her immediate world, one of war brutality, of workplace struggles in the factories and on the fields, and not least, of rapidly rising fascism. Her philosophy and her suffering were embedded in and grew from the social and intellectual conditions of early twentieth century Europe, even as they responded to what Weil understood as age old struggles emerging from the contradiction between what she considered our nature—the fact that to eat we must kill, and to love we must consume and incorporate that object which is outside ourselves and thus, also to kill it—and our moral reaches. The refusal of food, comfort, and care was for her the moral and spiritual obligation of her time, the contradictions of which her texts narrowly balance on. In her own life she succumbed to the inevitable death that comes from such withholdings. She died in England in 1943, having fled Nazi-occupied France, at the age of 34. Though she had contracted tuberculosis, the cause of death was listed as self-starvation.[221]

In his preface to the original 1949 edition of *l'Enracinement* (*The Need for Roots*), Albert Camus went so far as to call Weil "the only great mind of our time." It is worth taking a moment to look at how her work resonated with Camus's own work, and to how each approached an affirmative notion of alienation, emptiness and detachment as an opening toward liberation and truth. In his essay on both writers, John Dunaway suggests that Weil's analysis of the crisis of modern culture that appears in *The Need for Roots* closely corresponds to the stories in Camus' *Exile and the Kingdom* (1957). Not only do both write of the need to be rooted in a collectivity, but they both, Dunaway argues, treat estrangement and exile as a beneficial state. Similarly, the main character of *The Stranger*, Meursault, is "a martyr to the constraints of an untruthful, unjust world."[222] Unable to tell anything but the truth, he is condemned in a courtroom after admitting to not feeling grief at his mother's funeral. Weil, in her first section of *The Need for Roots,* "The Needs of the Soul," names the need for truth as "more sacred than any other need."[223] To locate truth, she insists, one must look to emptiness, detachment, and death:

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[220] Ibid.

[221] From an early age, Weil showed a difficult relationship with food. When she was six months old, Weil's mother, still nursing her, had an attack of appendicitis. Weil's health declined at that point, and Weil referred to that time in her writings as a time of poisoning, which, she believed, made her a failure. When she was dying she wrote to her parents that "whatever nostalgia I…feel for the yolk of eggs and vegetables and fruit which I didn't eat at five months and which could have imparted today such an accelerated rhythm to my work of covering sheets of paper which no one will ever look at….I would rather have had a mother like mine…in spite of inadequate milk." As Judith Van Herik put it, "one can understand how longing, disgust, rage, and pain might have become associated with nourishment in her earlier years." Her brother André would later write that she would not eat food that had been touched by others, nor would she eat any food that was not perfectly fresh and flawless. Many foods in fact repelled her, and her refusal to eat was a lifelong habit. See Van Herik, *Looking*.

[222] Dunaway, 36.

[223] Weil, *The Need for Roots*, trans. by Arthur Willis, 36.

"To love truth," she writes, "means to endure the void and, as a result, to accept death. Truth is on the side of death."[224] Meursault, in turn, is exalted just as he is rejected by the world.[225] And when he approaches his execution he does so with a "tender indifference to the world"[226] that resonates with Weil's reflection that, like Christ, we must empty ourselves of the world:

> 'He emptied himself of his divinity.' To empty ourselves of the world. To take the form of a slave. To reduce ourselves to the point we occupy in space and time—that is to say, to nothing.
>
> To strip ourselves of the imaginary royalty of the world. Absolute solitude. Then we possess the truth of the world.[227]

Weil advocates for absolute detachment—from caring, from nourishment, from desire for anything but the destruction of the desire for attachment—in other words, from the desire for self. Only in reducing ourselves to raw being will we possess being's truth. Weil rejected all "consolations" usually sought through religion, including the belief in immortality. To detach oneself from care about compensation, or returns on one's deeds, to destroy oneself and embrace the void so that one can no longer be destroyed from the outside, to sacrifice the *I*—that is the only way to gain deliverance in this world in which we are bound to be destroyed by forces external to ourselves. By first destroying ourselves from the inside we protect ourselves against the inevitable destruction that will come from the outside:

> Nothing in the world can rob us of the power to say "I." Nothing except extreme affliction. Nothing is worse than extreme affliction which destroys the "I" from outside, because after that we can no longer destroy it ourselves.[228]

In destroying one's own "I," in reducing the self to nothing, Weil believed, life can be fully accessed without interference or deterrent. *It is in the self-destruction of the "I" that the "I" fulfills itself.* If Weil reaches for nothingness as the destruction and death of the self, the resulting emptiness that remains is that self, as God, as *the everything*, that is at the heart of life. The self finds its truth in its own self-destruction. There is a dual movement to this self-destruction. It should first be seen as an act of moral agency: let me kill myself before I can kill you; and, let me kill myself before I can be killed by you and in this way refuse to succumb to the economy of force. Secondly, in advocating self-destruction, Weil asks that we re-enact the deadening processes and self-alienating processes of subjectification as a way of facing head on the contradictions of the heart of our humanity.

Like Camus, Weil contemplated the senseless violence and brutal force of the world around her. And, like Camus she contemplated its absurdity, its lack of poetry, its

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[224] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 11.
[225] Dunaway, 39.
[226] L'Étranger, 179, quoted in Dunaway, 39.
[227] Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 12.
[228] Ibid, 26

idolatry of the object. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus finds meaning (perhaps both ironically and seriously) and even joy in the thankless, endless task that Sisyphus is condemned to undertake. It is in giving over to the meaninglessness of his life and to simply being—which is the same, in some ways, as being dead, for simply being a physical body with no desire for anything more is an abdication of life as a desiring human being—that Sisyphus, Camus argues, finds happiness. Weil and Camus's writings about the abdication of the self resonate strongly with each other, and with the historical moment in which they lived. For Weil, the abdication of the self was the only way out of the weight of the world, the way out of its "gravity" and into its "grace" as we will see below. This death of the self can happen on two registers, for Weil: "Two ways of killing ourselves: suicide or detachment."[229] If detachment and/as suicide is the ultimate act of truth for Weil, so, too, for Camus, it represents the ultimate choice of the philosopher. In *Sisyphus* he famously wrote that "there is only one really serious philosophical question, and that is suicide. Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy. All other questions follow from that."[230] Finding meaning in self-abasement and in the extreme physicality of existence is what each advocated: Weil in her writing as in her life (through self-imposed hunger, migraines that she refused to treat, physical labor far too strenuous for her frail body, and other forms of affliction), and Camus's Sisyphus through harrowing endless exertion where relief and joy in the relief come not from the relief from the labor, but through the knowledge that the pain will start all over again. Desiring the destruction of desire for anything but the unfulfillment of desire, was to Weil and Camus alike the only true condition of living in an age whose spirit was itself one of destruction. Each locates an agency in claiming self-destruction before it can be imposed on them. Stephan Skrimshire, in his essay on the two thinkers, suggests, furthermore, that "[t]he more contentious idea that unites these writers… is the belief that the absurd somehow provides the opportunity and the resources for social transformation, and for affirming a common good in the face of nihilism."[231] If Camus called for social action "*sans appel*," without appeal to God, Weil similarly called for action in the face of a God marked by his[232] absence and in the reality of a life where compensatory justice can never alleviate suffering. For both, the destruction of the "I" through suicide or through its equivalent in life—affliction—marked the path toward transformation of the social.

Like Baudelaire and Colette, Weil approached the contradictions of being and living in the world in which she did through a language of bodily space and shape, where the body is an infinite surface, porous and open to other shapes and possibilities, and where presence, bodily and psychic, takes place through a fundamental absence, and life through death. Weil writes of a self whose self-distance and whose self-affliction (which, crucially, she refers to as an attenuated version of death), each the articulation of an "I" that can only truly exist in renouncing itself, is that which is required in order to reconstruct a world of selves no longer alienated from their own being or from the being of others. Weil reaches for a state of pure lightness, and pure light, in which no externalization of desire is required, a state which cannot literally exist within the life of a

[229] Ibid, 15.
[230] Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus."
[231] Stephan Skrimshire, 297.
[232] God takes the masculine form in Weil.

human body (food would be self-generated, as with plants), but which she nonetheless approached with effort and reverence. The fact that it cannot exist is just as important as her desire for it. Weil weaves through the ambiguities and contradictions of selfhood while affirming the possibility of agency in the creation of a more perfect world—an agency which can only be realized in the process of self-abdication. Her psychic "decreation" and physical shrinking of that shape which holds the self closely accompany her writings on the impossibility of living truthfully except in state of affliction and detachment:

> Human life is impossible, but it is only affliction makes us feel this.
> …
>
> *The good is impossible.* But man always has enough imagination at his disposal to hide from himself in each particular case the impossibility of good…Man's imagination at the same time prevents him from seeing "how much the essence of the necessary differs from that of the good"…
>
> Desire is impossible: it destroys its object. Lovers cannot be one, nor can Narcissus be two. Don Juan. Narcissus. Because to desire something is impossible we have to desire what is nothing.
>
> Our life is impossibility, absurdity. Everything we want contradicts the conditions or the consequences attached to it, every affirmation we put forward involves a contradictory affirmation, all our feelings are mixed up with their opposites. It is because we are a contradiction—being creatures—being God and infinitely other than God.
>
> Contradiction alone is the proof that we are not everything**.** Contradiction is our wretchedness**…** [W]e do not invent our wretchedness. It is true. That is why we have to value it. All the rest is imaginary.
>
> Impossibility is the door of the supernatural. We can but knock at it. It is someone else who opens.
>
> It is necessary to touch impossibility in order to come out of the dream world.[233]

Weil's caution that we understand that what is necessary is not the same as what is good is a call to accept the absurd, impossible, contradictory condition of life *and to adopt it as our very mode of living*. The "dream world" she references is the one in which the impossible is *not* taken seriously. It's the one in which we delude ourselves into thinking that eating is resolution to hunger, literally and metaphorically. Rather, eating kills the hunger, and kills that which we hunger for, that which we desire. We must therefore live as if we do not need to nourish ourselves from the outside. I will discuss in my next section her admonition that our only fault, the fault to which all others are reducible, is that we cannot feed on light. This is, of course, on one level, crazy. Yet it is in this

[233] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 94-95.

language, in this madness, that Weil is able to locate the impossible contradictions of self. To be me I must consume you. And, to be me, to know I am me, I must also begin outside of myself—the first lesson of modern philosophy. Via her writing and via her life, Weil "exceeds the logic of noncontradiction" that Judith Butler talks about and which I will discuss further below, a logic "painful, dynamic, and promising,"[234] and in so doing, delivers the possibility and promise of a self yet to come.

Her demands that we feed on light and detach as if to the point of suicide (and, in her own life, *in actuality* to the point of suicide), is very much in service of life—of her life, of social life, of all life. In her anorexia and in her willful physical suffering, in her elaborate thoughts on the self and the world, written in sparse, often stark words, Weil translates spiritual yearnings and social and political philosophy into ideals of weightless bodies, fueled by their hunger, made inhabitable through their affliction. Weil's gift is such that there is an almost indistinguishable flow between her ideas and her life as it appeared, which allow for impossible ideals to take shape as actions. In writing as in life she metabolizes, *alchemizes* hunger into nourishment, her asceticism and self-affliction expressions and acts of the metaphorical and literal shape of the self undoing itself to remake the world. This is her hunger artistry.

Gravity

The struggle at the heart of the snippets of writing that constitute *Gravity and Grace* is that of how to escape gravity. How does one escape the weight of the body? How does one, quite simply, escape the *body*? "Two forces rule the universe," Weil writes, "light and gravity." Gravity, as a force of nature, is, in an analogous manner also what controls what Weil calls "the movements of the soul." All except for one, and that is grace.[235] Gravity, as that which draws the soul downward, is that which debases us and keeps us from grace. "Everything we call base is a phenomenon due to gravity. Moreover the word baseness is an indication of this fact."[236] If, as embodied beings with weight and mass, we must obey laws of gravity, and if gravity is that which keeps us from grace, then it follows that we cannot peacefully inhabit our bodies and be conscientious beings at the same time. If we are to strive for consciousness of our lives, as self-reflective humans concerned with the common good, then, for Weil, we must accept that the "I" is inherently at odds with the body.

Gravity is to Weil the source of all our distress as self-conscious beings, all of our baseness, and all of our faults. Jean-Luc Nancy, too, reminds us that the body is the ultimate weight, "the extremity of the weight sinking" from its fall.[237] The body is "sunk into itself…pulled…so far down that it can't be distinguished from its own weight." The body, that body which we have invented as always already fallen, is, quite simply, he writes, "agony stripped bare."[238]

How then to contend with this body, this burden, this source of all of our agony? The answer, for Weil, is to detach from it and to transform it from an organism that

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[234] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 17-18.
[235] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 1.
[236] Ibid, 2.
[237] Nancy, *Corpus*, 7.
[238] Ibid.

requires nourishment from the outside to one that can nourish itself. Rather than gaining energy from external sources—by eating animals and plants, by breathing air, by desiring people, human needs which nonetheless debase us—we must generate our own energy by feeding only on light, just as a plant does through chlorophyll. Consider the following consecutive passages:

> The source of man's moral energy is outside him, like that of his physical energy (food, air etc.). He generally finds it, and that is why he has the illusion—as on the physical plane—that his being carries the principle of its preservation within itself. Privation alone makes him feel his need. And, in the event of privation, he cannot help turning to *anything whatever* which is edible.
>
> There is only one remedy for that: a chlorophyll conferring the faculty of feeding on light.
>
> Not to judge. All faults are the same. There is only one fault: incapacity to feed upon light, for where capacity to do this has been lost all faults are possible.
>
> 'My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me.'
>
> There is no good apart from this capacity.
>
> To come down by a movement in which gravity plays no part…Gravity makes things come down, wings make them rise: what wings raised to the second power can make things come down without weight?
>
> Creation is composed of the descending movement of gravity, the ascending movement of grace and the descending movement of the second degree of grace.
>
> Grace is the law of the descending movement.
>
> To lower oneself is to rise in the domain of moral gravity.
> Moral gravity makes us fall towards the heights.[239]

What, first, does she mean by this injunction to feed on light? In biology, plants are known as autotrophs—organisms that make their own food from sunlight, through the process of photosynthesis. In other words, in an entirely self-sufficient process, they create their own food, and then metabolize it. The only thing external to the plant is sunlight, which has no mass. It is easy to see the appeal for Weil. In photosynthesis energy is drawn—not even taken, but *drawn, traced, yet invisible,* spectral, turned into nourishment, rather than taking mass (food) and turning it into energy. Plants feed on energy, on light, in a process of absorption rather than digestion. Light penetrates borders, showing the boundaries of the body of the plant to be permeable, transgressable, in an energetic dialectic with light. Weil, in turn, writes of a body that is porous,

[239] Weil, Gravity and Grace, 3-4.

transparent, and open.

Not insignificantly, autotrophs are at the base of every food chain. Thus in addition to desiring the lightness and emptiness of a life form that self generates by absorbing light, Weil, too, must have identified with the baseness of these organisms. To be eaten rather than to eat is the only role available to the autotroph. It demands nothing, and only gives.

As she will repeat in different ways throughout her work, rather than consuming what we desire—food, love, nourishment—Weil wants us to look at it, and feed on the energy of the desire as desire, even if she recognizes the impossibility of this task. “Perhaps vices, depravity, and crimes are almost always or even always in essence attempts to eat beauty, to eat what we must only look at. Eve began it.”[240] Can we look at the apple, and gain sustenance from seeing its beauty, energy, and truth rather than eating it, which will destroy it? Weil balances on this question and asks that we take it seriously as the ultimate contradiction of life. Only in facing and living this impossibility – not eating yet staying alive - can we live truthfully.

In *Waiting for God*, Weil gives the following commentary on the prayer that begins “Give us this day our daily bread”:

> We are beings who continually draw our energy from outside, for as we receive it we use it up in effort. If our energy is not daily renewed, we become feeble and incapable of movement. Besides actual food, in the literal sense of the word, all incentives are sources of energy for us. Money, ambition, consideration, decorations, celebrity, power, our loved ones, everything that puts into us the capacity for action is like bread. If any one of these attachments penetrates deeply enough into us to reach the vital roots of our carnal existence, its loss may break us and even cause our death. That is called dying of love. It is like dying of hunger. All these objects of attachment go together with food, in the ordinary sense of the word, to make up the daily bread of this world. It depends entirely on circumstances whether we have it or not. We should ask nothing with regard to circumstances unless it be that they may conform to the will of God. We should not ask for earthly bread.
>
> There is a transcendent energy whose source is heaven, and this flows into us as soon as we wish for it. It is a real energy; it performs actions through the agency of our souls and our bodies.[241]

Every kind of reward and every kind of satisfaction of a need constitutes a degradation of energy. In accepting emptiness rather than fulfillment of our desires, we open ourselves up to the nourishment of God’s “supernatural bread.” Weil uses this term to mean pure, life energy, untainted by greed. She wants us to understand that we can never completely attain this state. We need to eat, therefore we need to kill. And we need to unify through love, therefore we need to destroy the other. But if we can give ourselves over to bare, honest life and its accompanying affliction, then our reach for the clearly impossible may transform into an opening onto another kind of possible, a different kind of subjectivity: a

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[240] Weil, *Waiting for God*, 27.
[241] Ibid., 147.

world of grace. “Gravity makes things come down, wings make them rise: what wings raised to the second power can make things come down without weight?” And how do we make ourselves weightless? Through what she calls the second movement of grace, which we can only achieve by lowering ourselves to the point of death within life. In asking us to do the impossible – to renounce our gravity so that we might find a non-gravitational return from the outside to within, a transport of life through light rather than through food, she is asking us to seek the void so that we may fill it with imagination. This is what she meant by decreation – imagining an unmaking of ourselves so that we can remake the world.

To deny one’s own weight, for Weil, is to feel the weight of the world. To deny one’s weight is to feel the weight of subjection, of oneself, of workers, to the conditions of work and of life. Weil ate sparsely and poorly, in solidarity with the poor and with the workers, and as a way of refusing any mediation between herself and God. To feel the weight of the world, she needed to feel her own emptiness, through affliction. Yet affliction, she would insist on several occasions, is not suffering. It is that which allows us to access that place of being which we do not think possible, that which is the real which lies outside the self and yet also at the heart of the self.

In her article, “Looking, Eating, and Waiting in Simone Weil,” Judith Van Herik suggests, additionally, that “food is harmed when we receive it but light is not, for we cannot grasp, keep, or change it.” Weil “examines the relationship between light, eyes, the sun, and food with minute care. If the point is to rise, one must live on light.” [242] This is precisely what plants do—they absorb light in order to rise. Weil marveled at all in nature that can not be eaten (that is, consumed, incorporated, or killed), and can only be touched, at a distance, with the eyes. Of the stars she wrote “those marvelous, brilliant, inaccessible objects, at least as remote as the horizon…which we can neither change nor touch, and which, in turn, touch only our eyes, are what is furthest away from us and closest to us.”[243] When one refuses to eat (or touch, or be touched, by food, by objects, by people) and instead engages in attentive waiting (*attente*), in a stillness, fueled, paradoxically, by willful hunger, one makes oneself available to grace, which “represents our chlorophyll.”[244] The lack of food, in other words, becomes fuel for a fulfillment through nothingness. Yet rather than a closed circuit it is one which opens the self onto the possibilities of a better world (or God), one only reachable in baring the body and soul down to its most basic desiring state, which is a state of openness and potential.

It is in the energetic stillness of detached, attentive waiting, emptied of food, that distance and fulfillment, looking and eating, can become one. The stillness of a body that engages the energetic forces that make being possible is a stillness that engages the contradiction of subjective form, and in this engagement makes room for other types of form to take shape. This is the essence of what I identify as her hunger artistry. For Weil, to remain hungry for food is to hunger for the potential of our world and to make oneself available to it. “If we want only the absolute good,” she wrote, we will find it only with

[242] Judith Van Herik, *Looking, Eating, and Waiting in Simone Weil*, 75.
[243] Pétrement, *A Life*, 415.
[244] Weil, The notebooks, II, 368, quoted in Van Herik, 75.

"the revelation that this nothingness is really the fullest possible fullness."[245]

Death is the Body of Existence/The Infinite Body

Early in his essay-book *Corpus,* Jean-Luc Nancy states the premises of his inquiry: that the body, as such, is a particular invention of Western culture, and that, furthermore, the body not only had to be invented, but *insisted* upon. This insistence is for him encapsulated by the Christian *Hoc est enim corpus meum*: for this is my body.

> *Hoc est enim*… …We could never finish modulating the variants of this phrase (at random: *ego sum*, the nude in painting, the *Social Contract*, Nietzsche's madness, the *Essays*, the *Nerve-scale*, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi," the head of Louis XVI, engravings by Vesalius or Leonardo, the voice—of a soprano, a castrato, etc.—a thinking reed, a hysteric, the whole fabric, finally, from which we've been woven….). *Hoc est enim* … can generate the whole *corpus* of a General Encyclopedia of Western Sciences, Arts, and Ideas.[246]

Yet in creating the body of God, of the absolute, as the ultimate of bodies, we have created a body (the body that we seek to be) as that which we cannot see or touch. We thus have anxiety about it, and need to seek assurance. For the body, *this* body we have created, "is certitude blown to bits."[247] The "certitude blown to bits," furthermore, is itself the condition of the body that we invented. That is, there was no whole being that then became uncertain as it took the shape of a body. The self that came into being through the history of Western thought, epitomized by Christianity, Nancy is saying, was one of a body that was always already uncertain, unstable, and even unreachable and unfulfillable. Scholarship on the social construction of the body and the fraught and unstable nature of the self has been abundantly addressed by scholars over the past several decades. On a psychoanalytic level, the formation of the ego is a process not of becoming whole, but of coming to terms with its lack of wholeness, and with a loss that becomes incorporated into the very self that claims a presence. Hegel and Nietzsche each showed how the "inner" life of consciousness is fabricated by power, and how power is anchored in subjectivity. Foucault elaborated on how power forms the subject from out outside and from within. Freud announced that the ego is foremost a bodily ego, one that comes into being through an incorporation of loss. And, in *The Psychic Life of Power,* Butler, drawing on Foucault, Freud, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Althusser, reveals the ways in which psychic life is generated by the social operations of power, an operation both concealed and fortified by the psyche it produces. In other words, power is not internalized by an existing subject, but rather, the subject comes into existence *through* power, as an ambivalent effect of it. My study is precisely about the self turning on the self, demonstrated on the surface and through the plastic form of the body. I will return to Butler below.

If the self comes into being through uncertainty and contradiction, and if the body is ultimately untouchable as a real thing (like the self, it is not a-priori), its uncertainty as

[245] Ibid.
[246] Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Corpus,* 5.
[247] Ibid.

an entity is also, Nancy would say, its infinity. All bodies are the bodies of the divine, of the infinite, Nancy suggests; all bodies are in this way "open." In his essay "On the Soul" (an essay on the soul in which, appropriately, the body figures centrally, just as the soul does in "Corpus" for both are, in a sense, material—as physical bodies, as souls-egos-selves that inhabit particular bodies, and immaterial—as embodied selves) he writes:

> …when we talk about the body we talk about something entirely opposed to the closed and the finite…the body is the open.[248]

As embodied selves, Nancy maintains, we inhabit not a closed space but an open one within that closure. This body we created, this body that is the body of God, both our body and not our body, both here and not here, with and within us, both us and not us – this body, following this line of contradictions, is not solid, not actually a thing. This body exists only in its openness. On the contrary, *the body is open only insofar as it has closed borders* - those we've created. It is open in that the universe exists inside it; it is open in that the I that names it and creates it exists both within and outside of itself. "The body" will always exceed whatever form we imagine it to take. It is God/the outside/the eternal, and can never be God, for it is just me, and you, and our present. This is its openness; this is its conundrum. The body, as infinite, is, too, the body of death, just as death is, as Nancy says, the body of existence:

> Bodies aren't some kind of fullness or filled space (space is filled everywhere): they are *open* space, implying, in some sense, a space more properly *spacious* than spatial, what could also be called a *place*. Bodies are places of existence, and nothing exists without a place, a *there*, a "here," a 'here is," for a *this*. The body-place isn't full or empty since it doesn't have an outside or an inside, any more than its parts, a totality, functions, or finality….In…thousands of…ways, the body *makes room* for existence (no "a priori forms of intuition" here, no "table of categories": the transcendental resides in an indefinite modification and spacious modulation of skin).
>
> More precisely, it makes room for the fact that the essence of existence is to be without any essence. That's why the *ontology of the body* is ontology itself: being's in no way prior or subjacent to the phenomenon here. The body *is* the being of existence. *How best to take death seriously*? But also: *How are we to explain that existence isn't* "for" *death*, but that **"**death" is the body of existence, a very different thing. There's no "death," taken as an essence to which we've been consigned: there's the body, the mortal spacing of the body, registering the fact that existence has no essence (not even "death") but only ex-ists.
>
> In the span of its lifetime, the body is also a dead body, the body of a dead person, this dead person I am when alive. Dead or alive, neither dead nor alive, I *am* the

[248] Ibid, 122.

> opening, the tomb or the mouth, the one inside the other.[249]

This infinite body, this body of death, *this body whose existence is first and always an external condition*, this body that is at once full and empty and simultaneously neither – this is the body that Simone Weil makes her life work. It is this tension between closed and open, between finite and infinite, which is also the tension inscribed within the desiring cycle of Freud's death drive discussed in the last chapter, that Colette's figures struggle with, appropriately with both flatness and the "fullness" of passion, as if demonstrating to their fullest capacity the ongoing tension between the two in the business of being and becoming. For Weil, as for Colette, the force and struggle of the self as a body is something that cannot be quieted or resolved. And for Weil, as for Colette, the distress of being is something to express through an extreme condition of the body and "soul." Weil's struggle for being, of course, takes on a starkness and, ironically, *weight*, that Colette's does not. Her pared down body was literally one starved of food. Its lightness was both its emancipation from mass, and, in the intensity of the experience and impact of its affliction, its heaviness.

Weil addressed the fiction and the centrality of the idea of the body as that emptiness or vastness around which we organize our lives while struggling to contain ourselves within it. She understood this problem to be the central one in our Judeo-Christian tradition, tracing it back to the Greeks, and tracing all moral failings to our inability to let go of the notion of our own mass. She did all she could to make herself as untethered to her physical form as possible, simultaneously recognizing the impossibility of the task. She wrote, as we saw, that our only fault is that our organism functions such that it requires food and nourishment from the outside in order to exist. In other words, our only fault is that we have human bodies with needs. If we could be weightless, formless, made of light and nourished from it, we would achieve grace. Weil wrote and lived on this difficult, impossible balance between formlessness and weightlessness, on the one hand, and the enclosure of form, on the other, an enclosure and, to her, imprisonment, that she felt that we are responsible for. But how, really, can we be responsible for being human? How can we feel shame at our hunger, our desires, our needs? How can we ever feel good about being alive if we are only ever measuring ourselves against an absence—the absence of God with an absent body? If the logic in this is circular, its circularity is, too, the argument. The world we live in—with an absent God whose unknowable body is the ultimate one, and with our bodies which weigh us down by virtue of being needy—is both an enclosure, in which we are doomed to be unfulfilled morally, sensually, and philosophically unless we give up *being*, and the material with which we can unravel and reweave our lives. Such is Weil's notion of decreation, a term she defines, simply, as "to make something created pass into the uncreated," and which, in one passage, she differentiates from destruction, which she explains is "to make something created pass into nothingness," a "blameworthy substitute for decreation."[250] Decreation implies a binding to creation just as it does a binding to the uncreated, an engagement of the life that exists in death and the death that exists in life without distraction or comfort. Destruction, she suggests, implies a total negation without

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[249] Ibid, 15.
[250] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 34.

any attachment to creation, life, God, the universe.[251] Nothingness, Weil wishes to show, is on the contrary not without substance. All of her writing reflects on this one fundamental concept. In our affliction, in our acceptance of the infinite void as that substance which fills us and in our renunciation of all other satisfactions and fulfillments, we live the space of nothingness that is the very substance of life. Affliction and abasement are ways of accepting our non-existence, and are those paths through which we come into contact with unadulterated, truthful living.

> Relentless necessity, wretchedness, distress, the crushing burden of poverty and of labour which wears us out, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, disease—all of these constitute divine love. It is God who in love withdraws from us so that we can love him. For if we were exposed to the direct radiance of his love, without the protection of space, of time and matter, we should be evaporated like water in the sun; there would not be enough 'I' in us make it possible to surrender the 'I' for love's sake. Necessity is the screen set between God and us so that we can be. It is for us to pierce through the screen so that we can cease to be.
>
> ....Everything which is grasped by our natural faculties is hypothetical. It is only supernatural love that establishes anything. Thus, we are co-creators. We participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves. [252]

It is in the void that we find ourselves, in the distance between God and our self. In refusing food, comfort, and other satisfactions—in other words, in remaining in the void rather than filling it— we locate the fullness of God, in His distance, as our true "I." Only in this location of the self within its own emptiness, Weil suggests, can we participate in the creation of a world worthy of human potential.

Affliction

It should be noted that Weil is somewhat inconsistent in her use of the term "destruction." Elsewhere she talks of the destruction of the self as that to which we must strive. Still, the point she is making in differentiating decreation from destruction in the passage quoted in the section above is essential to her thought, even if her terminology shifts in different passages. And the key to Weil's decreation, as the undoing of life while remaining bound to it, is affliction, which she called an "attenuated equivalent of death":

> Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain. If there is no complete absence of physical pain there is no affliction for the soul, because our thoughts can turn to any object….[P]hysical pain, and that alone, has the power to chain down our thoughts."[253]

Yet affliction, she insists on several occasions, is not suffering. It is what allows us to

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[251] Ibid.
[252] Ibid, 32-3.
[253] Weil, *Waiting for God*, 68.

access that which do not think possible, that which is the real which lies outside the self and yet is also at the heart of the self. To submit to affliction, to submit to the equivalence of death of the body, is to give up the self in order to find the truth in the self, which is, for Weil, God:

> We possess nothing in the world—a mere chance can strip us of everything—except the power to say 'I'. That is what we have to give God—in other words, to destroy. There is absolutely no other free act which is given us to accomplish—only the destruction of the 'I'.[254]

In this frequently cited passage Weil writes of the giving up of a self to God within life. In extracting the self from the lived body she is articulating a separability of the self from the self, a distance that is always there within the "I" in relation to the "I." Much like Hegel's demonstration of the paradoxical necessity of an initial externalization of self prior to self-consciousness, Weil identifies the self-distance at the heart of presence. She asks that we confront this paradox by feeling the "I" simultaneously as that which one possesses and as something alien to and outside of one's life, present in that which she calls God. Weil refuses any pretense to a fulfillable, complete, or satisfying life of the self, preferring instead to dwell in the affliction of the unattainability of what she sees as self-unity (here, perhaps, diverging from Hegel) and, by pushing her state of affliction to its extreme to face the truth of the non-existence at the heart of existence, or the distance at the very heart of presence, as Nancy names it.[255] The God to whom Weil wishes to sacrifice her "I" himself exists only in his absence, embodying the dual nature of existence as death at the heart of life, as absence at the heart of presence, of the infinite at the heart of the finite.

It is important to note that Weil very carefully does not define or confine her thought within the traditional structures of Christian ritual, thus making God more akin to something of the universal presence of death and the eternal within the self and within all life. She refused the mediation of both priest and church, and, as we saw, decried any notion of an afterlife. To Weil, the world, immaterial and vast, is more sacred a reality than human life, material and bound by its mass. She writes of freeing humans from their self-centered attachments so that they might access the grace of that world, which can never be touched, seen, or accessed, except as a void. "The void is the supreme fullness," Weil writes, "but man is not permitted to know it."[256] This world, this void, is what Weil calls God. Lissa McCullough states it clearly and, I believe, correctly:

> The name 'God' is only a convenience for speaking about this fundamental insight concerning reality. In Weil's thought, God is never a reified concept of dogmatic religion, but a naming of reality that becomes increasingly all-pervasive and experientially certain as the dogmatic idea of 'God' is dissolved as unreal. Only when all idolatrous preconceptions and illusions concerning 'God' are revealed to be false does the hidden God emerge, the God encountered in the void./ Indeed, the void is Weil's primary image of God as the inexistent ground

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[254] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 26.
[255] Nancy, "Eating Well," 103, in *Who Comes After the Subject.*
[256] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 23.

> for all existence.[257]

Weil approaches God as the void from which life emerges and to which it returns in the moment of death, with no afterlife, no rewards, nothing other than nothingness:

> We must completely accept death as an annihilation. The belief in the immortality of the soul is harmful because it is not within our power to visualize the soul as really incorporeal. Consequently, this belief is, in fact, a belief in the prolongation of life, and takes away the practical use of death.[258]

Weil demands that we take our responsibility to the world seriously, and not look to rewards such as the afterlife to compensate for our actions. However, it is in our nature to seek compensation. We do it in the very affirmation of the "I." To truly contribute to the world, and to truly contribute to the creation of a different world, we must let go of the greed made manifest by our bodily needs, and accept the void, the true nothingness that created us and beckons us back, as our only nourishment. She calls this "supernatural bread."[259] Weil offers a self that reaches its true state only in relinquishing desire for any identification, fully being by inhabiting its nothingness. She describes a production of the self in which the self is that which is given up, and, further, as that which, in its true state, is always already given up. She describes not just the location of a self external to the self, but the very process by which the self is understood to *be*, or otherwise said, the process of becoming, to be an active distancing within the heart of presence. "God"—or the infinite, or nothingness, or the Freudian "*beyond* the pleasure principle," or the energy of the universe—who him/her/itself exists only in absence, is that force, that vast *space* within which any "I" takes momentary shape. The "I," and all form, contains the infinite within, and, at the same time, remains external to itself and to the shapes its self might take. In her desire to be part of the creation of a world in which the conditions of alienation no longer exit, Weil insists that we contend with the baseness of the process of claiming oneself as a self in the first place.

For Weil, dwelling in a state of affliction, psychic and physical, was an unmediated link to the vastness and infinite space of God, or creation. The decreation she wrote of required an abdication of desire for self-possession and a complete surrender to the rawness and afflicted state of being. In this way, the "I" might unravel its tight hold on itself and open up to the infinite potential (moral and social) of the world. The abdication of the "I" was for Weil opening up of the borders of the body, and a giving it over to some kind of anonymity and emptiness. In shrinking the body through self-starvation and denial of physical needs, she suggested, one can made oneself vast.

Decreation

All that made up the personal was, for Weil, an obstacle between the self and truth:

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[257] Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: an Introduction*, 2.
[258] Weil, *Notebooks*, 492.
[259] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 7.

> For glass, there is nothing better than absolute transparency. For a human being there is nothing more than to be nothingness. Every value in a human being is really a negative value. It is like an opaque stain on glass."[260]

The opacity of the stain on glass is the opacity of the body; the body is the stain on the purity of existence. Weil wished with intensity to get rid of everything that made the body a body, so that it might be a porosity for light to pass through. Transparent, luminous, weightless, this body could nonetheless never be shapeless. For it had to have the shape of the "I" in order to give itself over to God and make room for the eternal. "God can love in us only this consent to withdraw in order to make room for him."[261] To live is, quite simply, to fall short of God's love, or, to fall short of our true potential. Thus to live while seeking God's love, while seeking wholeness and truth, is to desire disappearance, a disappearance written on the surface of the body and in the body of her writing. Short of death, Weil could only enter the world as co-creator by writing herself in it with invisible ink. She imagines transparency as true presence, a presence so pure that its absence could fill the world with new possibility:

> The presence of God. This should be understood in two ways. As creator, God is present in everything which exists as soon as it exists. The presence for which God needs the co-operation of the creatures is the presence of God, not as Creator but as Spirit. The first presence is the presence of creation. The second is the presence of decreation. (He who created us without our help will not save us without our consent. Saint Augustine.)[262]

Or, again: we participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves. Anne Carson sees Weil's decreation as an erotic triangle with lines of force connecting a self, God, and the whole of creation.[263] There is an erotics to disappearance, Carson suggests, a force of desire behind the movement away from form. In fact the very Greek word for ecstasy, "ekstasis," she points out, means "standing outside oneself."[264] Weil's mystical desire to access the eternal, her social concerns with the everyday, her dismay at the lack of immediacy and poetry in the world around her, and her anorexia and self-affliction, none of which cannot be disentangled from the other, map lines of desire around absence and around a distance which is always there. Weil hungers for God, a God whose presence is marked by his absence and makes herself hungry in order to do so. In making room for God she diminishes herself by opening the closure of the body, by withdrawing her "I" and *enacting* identity's identicality with its own withdrawal. Her withdrawal and efforts toward self-diminishment through the refusal of food, of physical comfort, and of interpersonal nourishment and fulfillment of all kinds were an expression of her life force and of her thoughtful place on the circular path of desire and unfulfillment where, nonetheless, we live and expect to be fulfilled. Weil's self-abjection was a kind of sublimity. Weil's hunger and desire for God was also necessarily a desire for his absence,

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[260] Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 354.
[261] Weil, *Ibid,* 401.
[262] Ibid, 38.
[263] Anne Carson. *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (NY: Vintage Books, 2006), 168.
[264] Ibid, 161.

since he could only be that. And, if God is at the center of the human heart, to feel his absence is to feel our own distance from our selves.

Christ/Gender/Desire

What of this question of erotics and decreation? Weil, a self-starving religious woman, might seem to easily fit into a genealogy of ecstatic, Christian, female self-sacrifice. And in some ways she does. The history (and enterprise?) of self-starving female mystics is rife with gendered boundary crossings and complexly traversing desires.[265] But inasmuch as Weil can be seen as reanimating a particular kind of Christian mode of being, and making it relevant to her time, it must be mentioned that longing, ecstasy, suffering, desire, abjection, gender ambiguity and androgyny, a matrix she embodies, have gone together in the writings, imagery, and mythology of Christianity and Christian female devotion since the early middle ages.

Religious scholars in recent years have revealed homoerotic underpinnings in writings by and about woman mystics. Bynum famously argued that Christ's bloody side nurtures and feeds just as do Mary's breasts.[266] This erotic and gender-transgressive reading of Christ was taken further by Karma Lochrie, who argued that his bloody wound is genitalized and associated with the vulva. Both cite Raymond of Capua's *Life* of Catherine Siena (1327-80):

> With that, he tenderly placed his right hand on her neck and drew her towards the wound on his side. 'Drink, daughter, from my side,' he said, 'and by that draught your soul shall become enraptured with such delight that your very body, which for my sake you have denied, shall be inundated with its overflowing goodness. Drawn close in this way to the outlet of the Fountain of Life, she fastened her lips upon that sacred wound, and still more eagerly the mouth of her soul, and there she slaked her thirst."[267]

Christ, here, is synonymous with desire. More, the desire was for a Christ at once male and female. Reading a holy androgyny as well as a holy ecstasy in the writings of and about medieval women suggests that the grounds of Christian mystical experience were anything but heteronormative. Amy Hollywood writes that "the fluidity and excess that characterize discussions of divine desire may work to undermine the seemingly unquestioned supremacy of heteronormativity within medieval Christian culture (a

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[265] See, for instance, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) and Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). See also works by Karmen McKendrick, Amy Hollywood (1982).

[266] Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*.

[267] Bynum, *Holy Feast* and *Jesus as Mother,* 172; and Karma Lochrie, 'Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies' in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality,* ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: university of Minnesota Press, 1997). Amy Hollywood, "Sexual Desire, Divine Desire; Or, Queering the Beguines" in *Towards a Theology of Eros,* p. 118 and ftnt3.

heteronormativity itself also often seen within devotional language and imagery)."[268] How are we to understand the highly erotic imagery used by late medieval writers to describe the soul's relation to Christ in relation to human sexuality, she asks? The body in Weil, as in these texts, is both a vessel and an object, gendered both a suffering feminine and a cross-gendered masculine. Excessive and abundant in its affliction and in its self-emptying, Weil's decreation reflected both a highly gendered notion of self-sacrifice and a well-tread religious language both androgynous and erotic. Decreation, as an unmaking of the self and of the body, singular and social, is not meant to recreate new bodies, with new borders. On the contrary, it is meant to unleash the force of desire and hunger *as* desire and hunger, as, in fact, love that exceeds the singular body. Affliction is, for Weil, the force of that opening.

In her discussion of the heart iconographies in Christianity, Karmen McKendrick argues that these hearts:

> are those of bodies beyond the norms of human bodies, passionate (in many senses of the Passion) beyond the norms of human passion. Outraged, suffering, unrequited, and yet, astonishingly, insufficient. As the wounds remain unhealed even when the body miraculously rises, so too the demands of divine desire push beyond the options of satiation, that 'closure' supposedly sought by all emotion-stricken human beings.[269]

Christ's open wound, as a mark of his suffering and love for humankind, endures even after his body is no more, as a symbol of the non-closure of the human life. The endlessly suffering and endlessly giving heart exceeds the body of the man, Christ, showing at once the insufficiency and the insatiable character of the human body:

> This inexhaustible self-consumption of the heart, so far in excess of the conspicuously finite possibilities of human love, suffices to burst the boundaries of the body yet retains the nature of the inarguably corporeal.[270]

Christ is the body in excess of itself. And the heart, McKendrick shows, is a part of the body that is at once a fragment (only a part of the body), and in excess of the body. To follow Christ, to be like Christ crucified, as Weil wished ("I have to be like God, but like Christ crucified" she wrote[271]), was to be in excess of one's body, through one's love and through one's suffering. It was to be both part of and more than the whole, but in neither one complete. It was to exist in a state of woundedness, suffering, incompletion, insufficiency and excess. It was to be a form at once unfinished and in excess of itself.

McKendrick suggests that the gender fluidity of Jesus, and between him and Mary, is simultaneously a fluidity of interior and exterior.

> Christ's divinely androgynous body invites entry; Mary's immaculately sinless

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[268] Hollywood, 121.
[269] Karmen McKendrick, *Word Made Skin: Figuring Language at the Surface of Flesh*, 123.
[270] Ibid.
[271] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 68.

body exteriorizes—gives birth—without being entered….

The Word, as Nancy might have it, and McKendrick suggests, is exscribed into the world as flesh: "everyone's flesh, with word within."[272] Christ, vulnerable, abandoned (My God, why hast though forsaken me?) is exscribed onto the bodies of believers as abandoned, but an abandonment that is also an abundance; an abandonment, Nancy suggests, "that is an opening on to an excess of possibilities."[273] The transgression of bringing the sacred into the profane world is, fundamentally, an exceeding of the self.

The experience of Christian passion, too, is one of a fluidity between the exterior and interior of the self. The Word itself describes both a passivity and a being acted upon by an external force, and an active, internal response. Yvonne Sherwood writes that the word *passion* "allows the subject at its center to function as subject and object both at once."[274] Passion describes the state of being a recipient of an action or an affliction that moves from outside to within, and it also describes something forceful that emanates from within that "exceeds and overruns you."[275] Auerbach has argued that Christianity absorbed the stoic sense of passive passion as the enemy of active life and inaugurated a news sense of passion as the *consummation* of life.[276] Christian devotion is imbued with the simultaneity of subject and object, interior and exterior, in the figure of Christ himself, in the experience of passion, in the representation of the body. Citing Kristeva who writes that the realm of the sacred is the realm of borderline and fragile states of subjectivity, Sherwood infers that the power of Passion lies in its ability to gesture towards our experience "as both subjected subject and sovereign subject (like a god)."[277] If the crucifixion is the utmost confinement and the utmost liberation, Weil's desire to be like Christ crucified is fundamentally an engagement with the forces that subject, in order to undo them. Butler writes that "the body exceeds and disempowers, overruns and disciplines the very idea of subject."[278] Weil's diminishing and exceeding of the body, as dissolution of form, as movements of decreation, as ecstatic acts of standing outside the self should be seen as a direct confrontation of the forces of subjectification.

The only way to be close to the infinite, for Weil, is to feel its absence in the necessary materiality of our bodies, a materiality that must be experienced as affliction. God, the infinite, and the infinite, impossible body, can only exist in us, in this life, as pain. To think one could be anything else would be a violence equal to the violence of living. To deny the body, for Weil, was the only possible logic. "Human life is impossible," Weil wrote in *Gravity and Grace* (and acutely impossible at the time of her writing), "but it is only affliction which makes us feel this."[279] Affliction, an attenuated version of death, provided Weil's drive for life. Affliction falls on us by chance; she used

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[272] Ibid, 127.
[273] Nancy, "Abandoned Being" in *The Birth to Presence*, 36-7. Quoted in McKendrick, 129.
[274] Yvonne Sherwood, "Passion—Binding—Passion" in *Toward a Theology of Eros*, p. 169.
[275] Ibid.
[276] In "Passio as Passion" trans by Martin Elsky, *Criticism* (Summer 2001), cited in Sherwood, 170.
[277] Sherwood, 171; Kristeva, "Reading the Bible," *New Maladies of the Soul,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 115-26.
[278] Butler. *Bodies That Matter*. 90-91.
[279] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 94.

the *Iliad* to show this. All are subject to the tragedy of force; all imprisoned by its effects. Force denies us our soul and turns us into objects, into corpses. There are strong parallels between her thinking about the deadening of the person under social conditions of force, and Marx's historical theory of the worker, who, too, is turned into a corpse. Marx, in fact, likens the abjection and loss of self that the worker suffers under capitalism to a starvation:

> On the basis of the political economy itself…we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production….So much does labor's realization appear as a loss of reality that the worker loses reality to the point of starving to death."[280]

Weil, one can say, literalizes the condition of the worker. She takes it upon herself to embody the worker's metaphorical starvation. In *choosing* affliction, she allows herself not to be abased by any affliction that might be inflicted upon her. Further, in relinquishing self-care and nourishment, and in thus denying her body its fulfillment of shape, Weil gives herself over to a timelessness which, Hegel tells us, is the condition of our assuming shape at all. Her self-reflections on the "I" and on God elaborate on the movement of desire within the Hegelian notion that momentary form contains infinite time within, where the containing always also infinitely supersedes, exceeds the moment:

> *Essence* is infinity as the *supersession* of all distinctions, the pure movement of axial rotation, its self-repose being an absolutely restless infinity; *independence* itself, in which the differences of the movement are resolved, the simple essence of Time which, in this equality with itself, has the stable shape of Space."[281]

To live is to be in a constant tension between momentary form and infinite time, and, for Weil at least, and I believe, as well, for Colette, that to assume any shape is a violence. For Weil this is because to live is to be outside of God; for Colette, perhaps, it is because to live is to dwell within the impossible contradictions of sociality and its demands for clear legibility. I think, too, that the reverse can be said about each. Human shape is the site of violent self-alienation for both, and both show this alienation, this tragic tension between time and form, to be a vitally generative one, a vehicle to nothing less than full existence.

Anorexia

The question of anorexia haunts writings about Weil. In my next sections I will focus on Weil's self-starvation. I have no wish to make claims on whether or not she suffered from *anorexia nervosa*, the neurotic disorder as defined by Freud. However, we do know that she had a complex and vexed relationship to food from a young age. Already at the age of 5 she was repelled by food that had been touched by others, and to

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[280] Karl Marx, *Economic and Political Manuscripts*, in Tucker, 70-71.
[281] Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, #169.

describe that repugnancy she talked not of the food disgustingness, but of her own.[282] A roommate of hers, installed for a year in 1931 by Weil's mother to supervise her eating and to make sure that basic life necessities were taken care of (she knew her daughter to be negligent in this domain), wrote that "Simone would only eat absolutely fresh food of the highest quality. For her, eating was more of a chore than a pleasure; she was…disgusted by anything that was not absolutely flawless."[283] These and other anecdotes by family and friends do suggest that Weil was repelled by food and by the interpersonal nourishment it represents. There is no question that she exhibited a rigidity and refusal of any happiness and emotional fulfillment in regards to food and nourishment. In this and in other ways she seemed to fit the profile of the anorexic. I do believe that her refusal of food as an adult had something to do with a psycho-personal disturbance (but that disturbance is not necessarily a negative term here; to the contrary) that found expression in her religious and political philosophies, and so I am deliberately choosing to use the term anorexic in relation to her. However, I use it without the "nervosa." As one scholar put it, "to call anorexia a neurosis is to suggest the answer to its enigma."[284] And, I would add, to its power. Women's refusal of nourishment can and must be looked at through frameworks far less restrictive and far less male-centric than Freud's, which condemns the anorexic to neurotic repetition of past trauma and the underdevelopment of sexuality.

I quite agree with Judith Van Herik when she writes:

> I am persuaded that Weil expressed an experience which was similar to that which anorexic girls express. But she also transformed it. She did not think of good and evil, purity and contamination, and truth and falsehood simply in terms of the body, let alone simply her body. Even her most private writings express a spirituality of great beauty, power and terror, and a struggle which is not self-concerned like the struggle of anorexics finally is. Weil used her sensitivity to see through the human condition. She worked to exhaustion not only because she needed to, but also to understand the relationship in factory life between machines and souls, and in peasant life between the sun, food, and labor. She reflected on bodies as things in order to comprehend the laws of war and force; she reflected on her own impurity in order to conceive of a mechanics of divine perfection; she reflected on affliction brought about by necessity in order to understand how it is possible to love an absent, silent God in the midst of the horrors of our century. The anorexic remains locked in a prison of fantasized and enacted self-manipulation and cannot communicate to others that aspect of the human situation to which her special sensitivity it attuned. If Simone Weil was imprisoned, she sent messages from there that train her reader to see what she sees. She made of her affliction a skill like mathematics that she applied to the construction of an

[282] Pétrement, *A Life*, 11. (Discussed in Van Herik, 63.)
[283] Ibid, 81.
[284] Branka Arsic, "The Experimental Ordinary: Deleuze on Eating and Anorexic Elegance," 35.

"architecture in the soul."[285]

Weil's non-eating was the "form" she took to express a deep and productive politics, a reflection and embodiment of the sheer struggle of existence in the world around her. If she was more able to do this than someone else because of a personal or psychological dissatisfaction (or more) with nourishment, that was as much her gift as her burden.

Deleuze, unsurprisingly, sees the anorexic as the ultimate body without organs, whose continuum of intensities (void and fullness) is necessarily political.[286] In a Deleuzian framework, anorexic desire disassembles the body machine, disturbing the socially imposed order of the everyday. Weil's reorganization of the body into a form that no longer borders on the external so much as transverses it, might well be understood in this sense as Deleuzian, and I think there is value in thinking alongside that model. I think Deleuze falls short, however, when he sees anorexia as "a political system, a micropolitics" whose purpose is "to escape from the norm of consumption in order not to be an object of consumption oneself."[287] Weil, to the contrary, wishes to be consumed – by God, quite explicitly, as well as, implicitly, by herself. Hers is precisely a deconstruction of the dialectic of consumer/consumed, interior/exterior that Deleuze repeats in the above equation.

In her book *Aliens & Anorexia*, inspired by Weil, Chris Kraus suggests that anorexics are trying to conceive of a life outside of themselves, not as self-loathing self-denial, but as a state of "porousness" and "malabsorption" (both physical conditions of anorexia) in relation to society and its expectations, in relation to the world.[288] If Weil wished to step outside of herself, it was not only as her own self but her self as a surrogate for all those who suffer in life as it was, which was a life of surrogates. In a passage both Benjaminian and prefiguratively Baudrillardian, Weil wrote:

> The relation to the sign of the thing signified is being destroyed, the game of exchanges between signs is multiplied by itself and for itself. And the increasing complication demands that there should be more signs for signs…We have lost all the poetry of the universe… Money, mechanization, algebra. The three monsters of contemporary civilization. Complete analogy. Algebra and money are the essential levelers.[289]

Weil wished to open the universe up to poetry once again, to transform (trans-form) her body and dismantle the boundaries between self and God, and, in a sense, to decreate the social order itself. Denial of her body was an affirmation of existence, of ex-istance as the distance embedded in the heart of the self and the act of being. For Weil, whose acts of hungering were as political as they were spiritual, to disappear the self, to deny one's gravity, was to find oneself in the infinite freedom and weightlessness of God. Anorexia, chemically, results in a malabsorption of nutrients and a porousness of the linings of the

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[285] Judith Van Herik, "Looking, Eating, and Waiting in Simone Weil," 84. Weil quote from: *First and Last Notebooks*, 208
[286] "Dead Psychoanalysis: Analyze," 109-111, in Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*.
[287] Ibid, 110.
[288] Kraus, Chris. *Aliens and Anorexia*, 159.
[289] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 152.

body's organs. This can and should be understood metaphorically in the context of my dissertation. For Weil, the only way to participate in this flawed world, in which fulfillment takes shape as the morally bereft desire to seek compensation for one's actions and for one's sufferings, is to refuse its nourishment, to malabsorb, to "decreate." She enacted this decreation, undoing her body, shedding her gravity and her weight, in a reach for the grace that is a better world. If the God she hungered for by making herself hungry was absent, her desire for him was also a desire *for* his absence. And if God is at the center of the human heart, as she wrote, then to feel his absence is to feel the absence at the heart of our own presence.

Eating God, Becoming Nothing

Weil felt that to be fully alive she must relinquish the individual shape of her body to the infinite one of Christ through her hunger and her suffering. She wrote, in so many ways, that we nourish ourselves with our affliction. She fed herself only with hunger, and, interestingly, spoke of eating only in relation to reading: "I only read what I am hungry for at the moment when I have an appetite for it, and then I do not read, I *eat.*"[290] Not only does nourishment not come by way of food, but even then it is sparing. The distance between God and one's self, which Weil embodies in her denial of food, is a distance taken from her own materiality that at the same time dwells within it in the deeply physical experience of hunger and pain. This simultaneous presence and distance from one's own materiality, and from God, together, can be found as well in the Eucharist. For Weil, Christ's completeness in the Eucharist happens only in his distance from the object itself. She observes that Christ's presence in the Eucharist is "more complete inasmuch as it is more secret," that is, hidden, unattainable. Ann Astell, in her chapter on Weil in *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages*, suggests that the greater the distance of Christ, the greater the potential for intimate closeness.[291] And for Weil, she writes, "the Eucharistic transubstantiation that makes bread no longer bread, changing its very substance, leaving only its appearance, is…the perfect *decreation*, a model for her own longed-for, total conformity with Christ crucified and risen, in both 'gravity' and 'grace,' affliction and beauty."[292] Decreation is an abdication of life, a becoming nothing, which is just what happens when receiving the host in the Eucharist, according to Astell's interpretation of Weil. Weil writes: "We must become nothing right down to the vegetative level; it is then that God becomes bread."[293] In becoming flesh, Christ becomes nothing. In sacrificing himself for humankind, he empties himself. So Weil wishes to do in self-sacrificing for God. To fully be him, she has to become nothing, and eat nothing, and yet, this eating nothing is a nourishing. Her emptying is a fullness; it is the fullness of God, who is, at the same time, full only in his absence. The complex matrix of food, emptiness, and desire that we find in these reflections on the Eucharist, Astell points out, extend as well to the cenacle, which Hegel called a "love feast" that "hovers between a common table of friendship and a religious

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[290] Weil, *Waiting for God*, 27.
[291] Astell, *Eating Beauty*, 229.
[292] Ibid, 231.
[293] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 36.

act," a hovering that "makes difficult the clear expression of its spirit."[294] This "hovering" within the love feast is the very movement between embodiment and disembodiment, an erotic tension between outside and inside, between self and God, between hunger and satisfaction that Weil navigates. More, she hovers not only between emptiness and fullness, but within the tensions of emptiness itself. She desires hunger, as an action, and as a stillness. She wishes for hunger as an act of emptying, but that emptying is itself a movement. Hunger unsatisfied is pure energy for Weil, the kind of pure energy that allows one to not be human even as we inevitably are. "Hunger; we imagine different foods; but the hunger itself is real; we must seize hold of the hunger."[295] Hunger is the closest we can get to pure energy, still tethered to our body but moving through and across its borders. Hunger stands in for the infinite, for Weil.

Nothingness and Nourishment

The Christian body, the body of Western culture, is, Nancy writes, a foreign one, foreign to the old (pre-Christian) world, and foreign to the "me" who is conceiving it:

> *Ego* enunciated is instantly detached from *ego* enunciating, precisely because it's the *same*, and hence *ego*: it's an identity withdrawn, identified as withdrawn, identical to its withdrawal. It withdraws at the point of its own contrariety: wherever *corpus* declare (itself) as "ego," *ego* enters into contrariety, being countered by a *self* that confronts its *self*, with *corpus* becoming the matter-obstacle of this contrariety (and the very site of its declaration). The ob-jected matter of the sub-ject. This is why there is no "proper body," just a reconstruction. Either it's just an "extending of itself," and too early for the "proper," or it's already caught in this contrariety, already too late. *But* corpus is *never properly me.*
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> …*Hoc es enim corpus meum:* it's an impossible appropriation…"[296]

The enunciation of the "I" in Nancy's version of that exteriorization that occurs in self-identification makes of it an object foreign to itself. *Corpus*, the "I" and "the body," confronts itself as a stranger and as an object. Just as there is no "I" prior to an external recognition of that "I" prior to its formation, nor is there "a body" prior to its recognition. There is no body proper, just a continual reconstruction of the idea of the body as object, and further, as *foreign* object, both "me" and "never properly me."

If the body, in its invention, is from the start an object foreign to itself, it will become even more so under the conditions of developing capitalism and the alienation and extreme becoming-deadened-object of its work force, just as, as Marx famously argues, the object takes on life.

As foreign object, as object alien to itself, the body is therefore also that which can be consumed, both in that it can be used, and in that it can be eaten – eaten by the machine, by the system, by the other, by God, and by itself. But the body as absence can

[294] Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, 248, quoted in Astell 234.
[295] Weil, *Notebooks*, 28.
[296] Nancy, *Corpus*, 29.

only be consumed as emptiness, an emptiness which both leaves one wanting and which fulfills. These are the thoughts at the heart of the Christian doctrine of the Eucharist, and at the heart of a tangle of bodily denials which place food and nourishment as undesirable fulfillments of one's supposed bodiliness:

> The body proper, the foreign body: *hoc est enim* displays the body proper, makes it present to the touch, serves it up as a meal. The body proper, or Property itself, Being-to-itself *embodied*. But instantly, always, the body on display is foreign, a monster that can't be swallowed. We never get past it, caught in a vast triangle of images stretching from Christ musing over his unleavened bread to Christ tearing open his throbbing, blood-soaked Sacred Heart. This, this…*this* is always too much, or too little, to be *that*.[297]
> …..
> The anxiety, the desire to see, touch, and eat the body of God, to *be* that body and *be nothing but that*, forms the principle of Western (un)reason. That's why the body, bodily, *never happens, least of all when it's named and convoked.* For us, the body is always the body sacrificed: eucharist.
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> If *hoc est enim corpus meum* means anything, it's beyond speech. It isn't spoken, it's excribed—with bodily abandon.[298]

All talk about the body as food, the body of Christ, and the affective excesses of the suffering body is haunted by the question of gender. Nourishment is associated with the mother - eating with the mother and eating the mother. A refusal of food is at once a refusal to eat the other, a refusal of femininity, and a claiming of the feminine as sacrifice, a kind of sacrifice that is at once a void and a fullness. Mothers sacrifice their bodies as food and yet remain whole. To refuse food as an affirmative act of seeking sustenance through nothingness is, among other things, a dwelling in a feminine place of erotic dissolution and creation. The body sacrificed and the body consumed is necessarily a feminine body, though the feminine itself crosses many borders, and many bodies. As discussed above, the feminine, the erotic, suffering, and food weave together in all forms of complexity within the Judeo-Christian tradition and certainly traverse Weil's thoughts and life.

The Body as Infinite Surface/ Touching the Body of Death

Nancy suggests that it is not a question of signifying the body as absence or presence, but rather a matter of seeing the body as existing "on edge, at an extreme limit," one that, he says, "comes to us from the greatest distance," from a horizon which itself is "the body's multitude, approaching."[299] Bodies don't "take place" in matter. Nor do they take place in discourse. Rather, "they take place at the limit, *qua limit*—external border, the fracture and intersection of anything foreign in a continuum of sense, a

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[297] Nancy, *Corpus*, 5.
[298] Ibid.
[299] *Corpus*, 9.

continuum of matter. An opening, discreteness."[300] Rather than signifying the body, Nancy has us touching upon it. And writing, all writing, is a touching that is a touching upon the body. When we write, says Nancy, we touch upon extremity.[301] If writing did not touch, were not touching, it would, he suggests, simply be reporting or summarizing. More specifically, writing touches upon the body "*along the absolute limit* separating the sense of the one from the skin and nerves of the other. Nothing *gets through*, which is why it touches."[302] Writing, as a body, is a surface. It is neither outside nor inside the text, but *is* the text as it exists as a limit, border, edge, an "outward edge *that nothing closes up."[303]*

Weil's writing, and/as her body, can be understood in this way as infinite surface, both edge and an eternal opening. She writes of her self as an extension of the world, her life and pen each an embodiment and together the body that she has conjured up that is neither mind nor matter but energy, excess. Weil's writing, like her life, expresses the eternal through the ascetic. The extreme leanness of her language allows the reader to experience the vastness of the person, and, crucially, how closely and deliberately she walked the borders of life and death. Weil allows us to experience her own decreation, as if we could imagine a human self literally existing as non-matter.

That her body, her life, and her writing were one was expressed in the following reflection by Suzanne Guerlac:

> I must say right from the start that, before reading Weil, I never had an experience of reading where the experience of death – of the concrete event of a singular death – haunted my reading of every word. It does so in a particularly compelling way because her writing is so lean. Here death seems to adhere to the bare bones of her sentences and lodge itself within the utter simplicity of her images – bread and hunger, for example – that refract across the registers of politics, ethics and religion. There is no need for persuasion here and no need for discursive demonstration. No need for poetry and no need for prose. It is a writing of sheer attention, one that performs a non-ironic distance as if her words adhered to her gaze.[304]

In one of her journal entries, Weil had copied the following fragment from Heraclitus: "'Mortals are immortals and immortals are mortals, living each other's death and dying each other's life.'" She followed with a comment: "To live the death of a being is to eat it. The reverse is to be eaten. Man eats God and is eaten by God."[305] In his article on Weil's "cannibalism," Alec Irwin remarked that she herself was dead a year and a half after writing these lines, "consumed" by mycobacterium tuberculosis—that disease that

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[300] Nancy, *Corpus*, 17b.
[301] Ibid, 9.
[302] Ibid, 11.
[303] Ibid.
[304]Suzanne Guerlac, "Mysticism and Morality: Weil and Bergson," Keynote address at the XXXI annual American Simone Weil Society Colloquy, Berkeley, Graduate theological Seminary, May 6, 2011 (unpublished).
[305] OC VI.2.,454, cited in Alec Irwin, "Devoured by God: Cannibalism, Mysticism, and Ethics in Simone Weil." *CrossCurrents* 51/2 (Summer 2001): 257-72.

seems to eat up the body resulting in severe wasting, hence its early name of "consumption"—weakened and advanced by her own self-starvation, which was in fact listed as the cause of her death.[306]

Self-Consumption

Weil's consumption was an ironic and fitting end to a life lived in self-consumption (the anorexic body eats turns to itself for food). It is fitting, too, that though she died in a tubercular state, the cause of death was listed as suicide by self-starvation. It is as if her tuberculosis emerged as the final, perfect manifestation of her cannibalistic self-annihilation. If it almost seems as if her whole life was a dedication to the possibility of this perfect death, the death of self-consumption, she did everything she could to live that death as an offering to God and to the world *within* her life. Affliction, decreation, detachment, refusal of food, all of which are "attenuated versions" of death, are all relinquishings of what she called the vegetative life:

> A candle is the image of a human being who at every moment offers up to God the continuous internal consumption by burning which constitutes the vegetative life.[307]

Weil looked unflinchingly at the brutality of the cycle of life. We kill in order to live, and when we love we destroy the object of our affection in the very act of incorporating her/him into our heart. We are violent, cannibalistic beings, Weil says in so many words, made of edible, vegetative matter, and we live within a violent world, represented by a hungry, cannibalistic God. In choosing to self-consume rather than consume others, we have a chance to disturb the economy of killing on which we rely, that economy which leaves us prone to living only by a force, as she wrote so elegantly about in *The Iliad*, "in the face of which human flesh shrinks back."[308] Force determines that we live as the walking dead, objects rather beautiful beings. Weil demands that we confront our murderous nature, and, while we cannot escape the cannibalistic nature of our hunger, we can refuse to satisfy it, by "looking" rather than eating. Even as she writes this, Weil recognizes the tragedy that we cannot truly do so within this life:

> The great sorrow of human life is that looking and eating are two different operations. Only on the other side of the sky, in the country inhabited by God, are they a single operation. Children, when they look for a long time at a cake and take it to eat almost with regret, yet without being able to stop themselves, already feel this sorrow. Perhaps vices, depravity, and crimes are almost always or even

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[306] Ibid. The relationship between tuberculosis, anorexia, and self-consumption is a fascinating one that deserves further consideration. In *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment*, Maud Ellmann touches on the subject in a brief discussion of the simultaneous emergence of consumption, vampirism, and the starving artist.
[307] Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 350.
[308] Weil, "The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force," 1.

> always in essence attempts to eat beauty, to eat what we must only look at.[309]

To preserve beauty in the world, to preserve the good that we destroy every time we satisfy a hunger, we must turn our hunger on ourselves. Hunger, too, is the daily reminder that our will is not free. At the most fundamental level of existence, there is the need for food, which keeps us enslaved. This makes us violent and destructive of other living beings. Food is "the irreducible" Weil wrote in one notebook entry. Irwin points out that Weil frequently recopied the passage from *the Iliad* in which Niobe, grieving for her dead child, shifts her focus to her own body's need for food when hunger sets in. "And she thought of eating, when she was tired of tears."[310] Weil, Irwin suggests, sees this passage as illustrating the morally corrupting fact of hunger in how it binds humans to greed. As long as we hunger and aim to satisfy that hunger, we shall never achieve grace. For Weil hunger is a metaphor for our greed, for our desire to consume and to receive. We are attached to these desires which are also our hunger, and they weigh us down, morally. In attempting to make herself weightless, in offering her flesh to God via self-consumption, Weil dwells in the baseness of what it is to be human, enacting and fulfilling the paradox of hunger. She *exaggerates* and *wears* the gravity of her body, appropriately paradoxically by making it weightless. Weil inhabits unfulfillment, affliction, and abjection, (de)composing her body, and *the* body, as both empty and spacious, a conduit for an energy differentiated from force that is neither reducible to the body nor separable from it.

Our ego needs are like our bodily needs. We desire objects and we desire others as objects to satisfy these needs, to fill our voids. Weil calls these drives and desires "cannibal love." For Weil we are this way not just because we have made ourselves into selfish human beings, though this she does think, but because in fact this is what it is to be human. We eat other life, literally and metaphorically; keeping the "I" alive requires it. "We love someone," Weil writes, "that is to say, we love to drink his blood."[311] To talk about eating is to talk about violence, but it is also to talk about the transformation of a substance. Writes Irwin:

> It is this transformative aspect Weil will seek to bring forward in her analysis of the human condition from the point of view of eating as sacrifice and sacralization. For Weil, the key to a sacramental transformation of human existence is a shift in our self-positioning and practice within the economy of feeding and consumption: from the eaters we have always "naturally" striven to be, we must become the eaten; instead of predators, prey. Yet in Weil's system of paradox and inversion, to become food means the opposite of passive victimhood. To be eaten -- eaten in the right, sacralizing way -- signifies an increase of power and efficacy, a release of creative energy for the common good. Cannibalism won't go away; but its consequences change radically when the victim enters consciously, willingly into the process, investing it with a sacrificial character. Under these conditions, Weil argues, reversing its status as the visible mark of human enslavement, the violence of eating would become an instrument--the

[309] Weil, *Waiting for God*.
[310] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 30.
[311] Weil, *Waiting for God*.

> decisive instrument--of spiritual liberation and positive moral change.[312]

Irwin sees Weil transforming her hunger from a hunger to eat into a hunger to be eaten, and in so doing reversing and transforming the economy of eating from an economy of enslavement to one of potential liberation. Weil breaks the cycle of violence, so to speak, by turning against herself. If Weil reverses the sign of hunger as the sign of desire for that which we must incorporate into ourselves to be alive, she is also showing the self as agent to be a self that requires movement outside of and beyond the borders of the body, energized and freed by that movement which occurs, nonetheless, within the confines of embodied life as it.

As discussed above, Weil's ideas of self-emptying and self-offering as food to God show strong similarities to the writings and practices of medieval Christian women mystics. Caroline Walker Bynum has shown how women such as Hadewijch and Catherine of Siena, in their self-starvation, wrote of eating and being eaten by Christ. In her poem "Love's Seven Names," for instance, Hadewjch wrote: "…love's most intimate union / Is through eating, tasting and seeing interiorly./ He eats us; we think we eat him,/ and we do eat him, of this we can be certain."[313] Early modern Christian mystics, as women, were able to access a language of body as food that allowed them a privileged movement between self and God. Eating, as incorporating, and being eaten, as giving life, have a long history in Christianity, and in Western culture, as a dynamic female desire to sustain life through a transference and inversion of hunger from the hunger to eat to the hunger to be eaten, and from the urge to satisfy one's hunger to the urge to feel it most acutely. If early modern mystics lived in a world in which God was know to represent a meaningful totality, however, Weil's 20th century one knew no such God, and the difference is an important one. The inauguration of the contemporary Western world saw the death of God as ultimate authority, and an understanding of the self, as Marx would have it, as self-alienated, and as Hegel before him had it, as constitutively unhappy, and in which "an absolute negativity of the Absolute appears to constitute all experience of this world and its consciousness of itself."[314] The very notion of a self to give up to God in Weil's world was not the same as that of early modern women, who lived in a time whose system of interpretation was one of clear resemblance and similitudes, in which, Foucault tells us,

> the theory of the sign and the techniques of interpretation were based on a perfectly clear definition of all the possible types of resemblance, and they formed the basis of two…distinct types of knowledge: *cognitio*, which was the transition…from one resemblance to another and *divinatio*, which was knowledge in depth…All these resemblances manifest the consensus of the word that grounds them; they are opposed on the simulacrum, the false resemblance, which is based on the dissension between God and the Devil.[315]

The evolution of Western thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a

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[312] Irwin, 262-3.
[313] Quoted in Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1987), 156.
[314] Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, 4.
[315] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," 270-1, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*.

suspension of this system of interpretation based on certainty. The world that emerged, inaugurated by Hegel, was, according to Nancy:

> in every respect, the world of exteriority from which life withdraws, giving way to an endless displacement from one term to the next that can neither be sustained nor gathered in an identity of meaning. Never again can this displacement regain the movement of a transcendence that would raise it toward a supreme signification. It knows the possibility of a 'death which has no inner signification,' that is, the possibility of the death of signification itself….[316]

It is precisely because "the world undergoes itself as a world of separation" that its experience takes the form of the "self," a form that is both a relation and a movement. It is in separation, Hegel shows us, that the self has consciousness of itself, and the experience of this consciousness.

The violent and Godless early twentieth century gave birth to Weil, she who inverted the eating/feeding economy of the body, she who suspended desire for fulfillment and instead turned to desire as energy, hunger as fuel, she who wished to live a death within life. As a philosopher, she must be understood within its context. Hegel famously wrote that "the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself."[317] Weil asked that we endure and maintain ourselves within devastation, and seek truth in some form of dismemberment, but not in the service of finding oneself as much as in the service of giving oneself over to an infinite body that can never be whole.

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[316] Nancy, *Hegel*, 3.
[317] Hegel, *Phenomenology*, Preface, 19.

Conclusion

Hunger and the Self Turning on Itself

In "Stubborn Attachment, Bodily Subjection: Rereading Hegel on the Unhappy Consciousness," Judith Butler draws attention to the ways in which Hegel anticipates Freud's theories of self-abasement in subject formation. Looking at his transition, in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, from the "Lordship and Bondage" section to the one titled "The Freedom of Self-Consciousness: Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness," Butler discusses how "freedom is resolved into self-enslavement" and various forms of self-beratement.[318] If Hegel anticipates Freud, so does he Nietzsche's critique of "moralized man" in *Genealogy of Morals*—man whose instinct for freedom is "pushed back and repressed, incarcerated within and finally able to discharge and vent itself only on itself"[319]—as well as Foucault's subsequent theory of *assujetissement*, or "subjectification," whereby the formation of the subject is subsequent to the subject's self-subjugation. Foucault showed that the subject comes into being through and alongside its subjection to power, incorporating the power that subjugates it, and, paradoxically, comes to desire that very subjection *as* freedom. Expanding on Foucault (and Hegel and Nietzsche before him), and drawing on Althusser's classic street scene, whereby an individual is interpolated as a subject by *turning* in response to the call of the police officer ("Hey, you there!"), Butler suggests that the psychic action that occurs in the inauguration of the subject is precisely that of the turn—on oneself, against oneself:

> [P]ower that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity. The form this power takes is relentlessly marked by a figure of turning, a turning back upon oneself or even a turning *on* oneself. The figure operates as part of the explanation of how a subject is produced, and so there is no subject, strictly speaking, who makes this turn. On the contrary, the turn appears to function as a tropological inauguration of the subject, a founding moment whose ontological status remains permanently uncertain.[320]

Thus not only is the subject inaugurated into its subjectivity through a negative relation to the self, but because of that impossible situation whereby the self only comes into being through that initial turn on itself, the subject as such can never be resolved into a complete, certain, "full" status. This non-resolution, this permanent state of impossible, and the negative self-relation behind it find condensed expression in the figure of the hunger artist, both as an imaginary, tropological figure of European modernity and within a "real" aesthetic and philosophical place which I've tried to suggest Simone Weil

[318] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 31.
[319] Butler, 32-33.
[320] Ibid, 26.

occupies.

Hunger Artistry

In different ways, each of my three chapters considers an engagement with these very psychic conditions of subjectivity that Butler identifies. What I am terming hunger artistry is in some ways this turn made manifest. In *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance*, Patrick Anderson argues that self-starvation, as a performative act, is a staging of the event of subjectification: "self-starvation stages the event of *subjectification*: the production of political subjectivity in the context of subordination to larger institutional and ideological domains."[321] Anderson, using Freud's death drive and Heidegger's concept of being-toward-death, suggests what he calls a "politics of morbidity: the embodied, interventional embrace of mortality and disappearance not as *destructive*, but as radically *productive* stagings of subject formations in which subjectivity and objecthood, presence and absence, life and death intertwine."[322] This analysis is apt when talking about actual self-starvation. If one considers hunger less literally (and in the case of Weil both the literal and the symbolic apply), but rather as a cultivated unfufillment, one might modify the formulation to state that hunger stages and *engages* the event of subjectification such that it simultaneously highlights the self-oppression of the regime of subjectivity and the liberatory potential within the act of self-negation. For Simone Weil, hunger and affliction are means to *de*subjectification. Her aim is to unmake, unshape, undo. Yet, as she so starkly states when she equates detachment with suicide ("there are two ways of killing oneself"), the subjective unmaking that she writes of is meant to take place *within* life. This living death is not, she states with utmost clarity, a destruction. This is a crucial point. Decreation is, in this sense, a destruction of the subject in order to extend the subject into an infinite social, and as such has a constructive resonance. It is at once liberatory, visionary, and impossible. This impossibility, however, is not a nihilism. Weil insists that we dwell in the most difficult of all negations in order to be closest to the truth, refusing all food except that which will allow us to become nothing, and to understand nothingness as the truest form of fullness. She asks that we be alchemists, transforming hunger and self-disappearance into the fullest kind of presence. Given that she did not believe in any life after death, her invitation to suicide (detachment) within life must truly be seen as an engagement with, and commitment to, transforming the world of the living.

Consider briefly the figures of the hunger artist in our cultural imagination. There's the Byronic, starving poet. There's the consumptive, and the neurasthenic, pale, ailing, and withdrawn into an inner force. There are the bodies of the decadents, women and men, feeding on cigarettes and nightlife; there are aesthetes and the dandies, drained of affect and warmth, as we saw in the first chapter. Hunger artists make the body hungry (and ill) in order to hunger. I am compelled by similar actions of self-negation as world-creation, made not only visible but visceral in the presentation of abjected and un-nurtured bodies, enlivened psychically through physical unfulfillment and self-destruction, through, in fact, a Freudian death drive whereby it is the void that precedes and births life, and so it is to that which we continue to reach. In so doing, so too are

[321] Anderson, *So Much Wasted,* 3.
[322] Ibid.

these hunger artists offering a vision of the very contradictory processes of subjectification, where, in Butler's words, "the subjection of desire requires and institutes the desire *for* subjection,"[323] while also paving the paths for alternative subjectivities. The figures of my study all answer the following problematic, posed by Butler in the introduction to *The Psychic Life of Power*:

> What would it mean for the subject to desire something other than its continued "social existence"? If such an existence cannot be undone without falling into some kind of death, can existence nevertheless be risked, death courted or pursued, in order to *expose and open to transformation* the hold of social power on the conditions of life's persistence? The subject is compelled to repeat the norms by which it is produced, but that repetition establishes a domain of risk, for if one fails to reinstate the norm 'in the right way," one becomes subject to further sanction, one feels the prevailing conditions of existence threatened. And yet, without a repetition that risks life—in its current organization—how might we begin to imagine the contingency of that organization, and performatively reconfigure the contours of the conditions of life?[324]

Butler explains that it is precisely through acts of repetition, actions which risk life and court death, that a reorganization of subjectivity and social life becomes possible. What I have addressed in this dissertation are not the daily unconscious acts of repetition through which we come into meaning and into identity, but overt and conscious repetitions of these processes and deliberate exaggerations of those acts, behaviors, borders, and surfaces which constitute and identify the subject, and which constitute and identify the subject as an object, deadened. This self-consciousness of the oppressive forces that invent and regulate the self as subject both reveal the violence of those forces, and reveal the necessarily incomplete project of becoming and thus the opening that it offers towards alternative subjectivities and socialities. Hunger, hungering, self-starvation, and self-abjection draw attention to the body as the surface on which identities/subjectivities are violently written. In enacting themselves as vast, void zones of non-life, in gesturing toward death, hungry self-abjecting bodies reveal that the desire and drive for self-negation through the conscious repetition of the drama of subjectivation allows for the possibility of reconstituting the self and the social body as something else. Hunger and self-abjection dramatize the psychic effects of power on the subject in the process of subject formation, and turn that process back on itself. "If subordination is the condition of possibility for agency," Butler asks, "how might agency be thought in opposition to the forces of subordination?"[325] This dramatization, this staging of the act of subjectification through hunger might be seen as a dramatization of that very irresolvable ambiguity at the heart of subjection that Butler talks about, and in that staging, in that repetition of the drama of subjectification in which the subject turns on itself, an additional turn might be said to occur:

> The subject might yet be thought as deriving its agency from precisely the power it

[323] Butler, *Psychic Life,* 19.
[324] Ibid, 28-29.
[325] Ibid, 10.

> opposes, as awkward and embarrassing as such a formulation might be….If the subject is *neither* fully determined by power *nor* fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both), the subject exceeds the logic of noncontradiction, is an excrescence of logic, as it were. To claim that the subject exceeds either/or is not to claim that it lives in some free zone of its making. Exceeding is not escaping, and the subject exceeds precisely that to which it is bound. In this sense, the subject cannot quell the ambivalence by which it is constituted. Painful, dynamic, and promising, this vacillation between the already-there and the yet-to-come is a crossroads that rejoins every step by which it is traversed, a reiterated ambivalence at the heart of agency.[326]

The very ambivalence by which the subject is constituted gives the subject a kind of leverage with which to move beyond the confines of self while necessary staying tied to it. The pushing of the boundaries of the body in the figures of my study, as a way of pushing the boundaries of subjectivity, and the manipulations of its own contradictions as a way to refashion what a body, self, and subject might look like, can all be read within the framework of Butler's analysis.

In Kafka's 1922 short story, "A Hunger Artist," to which I turn by way of conclusion, the protagonist starves himself as entertainment for others. He (and his starvation) is kept alive by the public gaze; it is the gaze he needs, not food. He shows himself to be an object and alive only as an object. Importantly, he also reveals the condition of the humanized object and the objectified human: neither can be said to be fully realized. Kafka's hunger artist is paradoxically an object in motion, wasting and shrinking every day, yet simultaneously suspended. The aim is not to die, but to stay in that almost-never arriving state of near death. The hunger artist balances the Marxian conditions of the objectified human and the enlivened object and wraps them into one, revealing their mutuality and their process: his wasting is the very condition of his life; his "aliveness" is conditional on his emptying of his life form. The other condition of his life is of course that he be consumable by others. That the artist is in a cage, furthermore, serves not only to demonstrate his less-than-humanity—like a lion in a cage, he is a low-life there for others to consume as entertainment (the entertainment furthermore being his own self-consumption)—but also underscores the confinement that is the very condition of our emergence as a subject in the first place.

Kafka's hunger artist lives according to his consumability. When he ceases to be an object of consumption, an object of the gaze, he dies. His selfhood, a parody of the self-consuming, self-destructive process of subjectification, is forfeited the moment in which he is no longer consumable. His art is an art of self-erasure. His visibility is his disappearance. His life is contingent on the desire of others to metaphorically eat his sacrificial flesh.

Maud Ellmann, in *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment*, writes that "self-starvation is above all a performance. Like Hamlet's mouse-trap, it is stated to trick the conscience of its viewers, forcing them to recognize that they are implicated in the spectacle that they behold." Even if the anorexic body "seems to represent a radical negation of the other," says Ellmann, "it still depends upon the other

[326] Ibid, 17-18.

as spectator in order to be *read* as representative of anything at all. Thus its emaciation, which seems to indicate a violent rebuff, also bespeaks a strange adventure in seduction.[327] Ellmann points out that in the Hunger Strike of 1981, "it was not by starving but by making a spectacle of their starvation that the prisoners brought shame on their oppressors and captured the sympathies of their co-religionists."[328] Weil's starvation can less quickly be called a spectacle. Unlike hunger strikers whose actions were intended for a public, hers were not, or not exactly. If her politics were more akin to those of the Irish hunger strikers than to Kafka's hunger artist, her self-immolation as expression of the condition of the self-subject were quite close to the latter. In her extreme self-denial and adamant desire for destruction of the "I," marked by its visibility in the body, Weil demonstrates, in life as in writing, the intimate connection between the two. On the one hand, the strength of hunger strikers is the visibility of their wasting. Their cause rests on an image and on a turning of the body into a surface on which their politics are inscribed. Kafka's hunger artist, on the other hand, is always already an aesthetic object, and if his self-as-art is not announced as political, in its unveiling of the processes of subjectification and its implication of the viewer in that process, it is. Furthermore, the hunger artist demonstrates, via performance, via art, the negative condition of being on which the existence of the self is predicated, a condition that takes on significant proportions when read in the context of modernist commodification and flattening of form and experience, and, too, in context of the political climate of early twentieth century Europe and its marginalization, victimization, and outright destruction of populations. Hunger artistry combines this demonstration with an opening of the body onto the eternal, inverting and transgressing its borders and mass, making itself vulnerable and available to other shapes of being. Weil's decreation, as a radical undoing of self and reach toward suicide within life; Colette's spectral, shape-shifting women performing dramas of subjectification while engaging in sensual lives that exceed time, place, and bodily form; Baudelaire's withholding dandies, engaged in rituals of self-objectifying artifice, and suicide artists slipping out of their skin and into another: these are all forms of hunger artistry. All are figures of disappearing selves making visible and claiming the forces of power and oppression that constitute each, while laying claim to that hunger, that force of life, that can neither be satisfied nor contained.

[327] Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists*, 17.
[328] Ibid.

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