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**The Text at an Impasse: Authorial, Representational, and Structural Boredoms in Selected
Works by Gautier, Flaubert, and Gissing**

A Dissertation Presented

by

Ashar E. Foley

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

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Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

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The Graduate School

Ashar Foley

We, the dissertation committee for the above candidate for the
Doctor of Philosophy degree, hereby recommend
acceptance of this dissertation.

**Robert Harvey – Dissertation Advisor
Distinguished Professor and Chair, Cultural Analysis and Theory**

**Sandy Petrey – Chairperson of Defense
Professor Emeritus, Cultural Analysis and Theory**

**Adrienne Munich
Professor, English**

**Patricia Meyer Spacks
Edgar F. Shannon Professor Emerita, English
University of Virginia**

This dissertation is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Dissertation

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Théophile Gautier, Gustave Flaubert, and George Gissing deploy tropes of bored readers and writers and dilatory narrative structures in order to register their ambivalence toward the shift from sponsorship of the arts to a literary marketplace. In contrast to popular eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of the mood as sign of bad character, intellectual deficiency, or elitism, my chosen novelists posit boredom as a site from which to assess and critique their roles in culture. I begin with the problem of boredom's possibility in a literary text: boredom must be dispelled a priori for writing and reading to take place, making it the writer's duty to solicit his reader and the reader's duty to be solicitous. Gautier's epistolary *Mademoiselle de Maupin* neglects both duties, however: the writer, d'Albert, writes only his boredom, while the reader who would alleviate it, the titular Mademoiselle, breaks the bonds of her own boredom and exits the novel in search of a livelier story. Her departure topples the anticipatory structure erected by d'Albert's letters, and recapitulates the move in French romanticism from an emphasis on mood

to the popular romantic mode adopted by a growing number of non-traditional commercial writers, of whom *Mademoiselle* is emblematic. My second chapter discusses Flaubert's writing practice in relation to boredom's movements of withdrawal, stasis, and eventual reengagement. *Madame Bovary's* experiment with language as dead, malleable object reflects Flaubert's belief that boredom had made of him "a phantom that thinks." I then trace Flaubert's reemergence from phantomhood throughout *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, a work that parrots contemporary discourse. My final chapter asserts George Gissing's indelible place in British realism, as his work recreates the tones and textures of middle-class experience, particularly the experience of boredom as fostered by mass culture. *New Grub Street's* and *In the Year of Jubilee's* characters' boredom marks them as sympathetic, as crucially sensitive to and critical of their environment. Gissing's psychological portraiture distinguishes him as cultural critic, of both his day and days to come.

I dedicate this thesis to Alice and Ray Browne—
Your mentoring, generosity, and kindness continue to let the light in.

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List of Abbreviations

Chapter 1

JF *Les Jeunes France*

MM *Mademoiselle de Maupin*

Chapter 2

BP *Bouvard et Pécuchet*

MB *Madame Bovary*

Chapter 3

NGS *New Grub Street*

IYJ *In the Year of Jubilee*

Acknowledgments

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Introduction: Whence and Why Boredom (and Why Not?)

Behold the nineteenth century: the ascendance of fossil fuels, telegraphy, photography, telephony, phonography, train travel, electric light, improved sanitation, exploding population, the fall of monarchies, the rise of the bourgeoisie, the collapse of empires, the spread of empires, the massacre of native peoples, the formation of disciplines, detective fiction, auto-didacticism, vaccination, utopian communes, urban planning, environmental conservation, two Napoleons, one Victoria, the Salon des Refusés, the Hausmannization of Paris, Wagner, *The Communist Manifesto*, labor strikes, slavery's decline, serfdom's abolition, financial panics, the development of mass and global culture. Exciting, tumultuous, and troubling times to be alive; a century of political, financial, industrial and cultural revolution; an era with no end of things to splendor in, rally against, and struggle for. And yet: one is bored.

Taking up this seeming discrepancy as its originary occasion, this dissertation examines the presence of boredom in a selection of nineteenth-century novels by the French and British authors Théophile Gautier, Gustave Flaubert, and George Gissing. Whereas my investigation is in agreement with cultural theorists, most notably those of the Frankfurt School, that boredom dovetails with capitalism, I do not deploy my three chapters in the service of a focused social, historical, or cultural critique. Instead, I allow my chosen authors' textual uses of boredom to frame discussion of the greater historical, social, and cultural transformations that foster boredom's emergence. Nineteenth-century authors bore witness to drastic shifts in literary production, accessibility to print materials, and literature's role in society as patronage of the literary arts gave way to the literary marketplace and the popular press, and as literacy spread to a wider range of people. Such changes necessitated a reconsideration of the relationship between writer and reader as writers confronted a new, non-traditional readership, and as readers were

presented with commercial literature. This reconsideration is indicated by the presence of boredom, both in—in the sense of narratively and structurally—and of—in the sense of the author's own boredom—the text.

My study centers on selected novels by Gautier (*Mademoiselle de Maupin*, 1835-6), Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*, 1853; *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, 1881), and Gissing (*New Grub Street*, 1891; *In the Year of Jubilee*, 1894) because, in the course of my readings in nineteenth-century fiction, I found that these texts either featured bored characters or were themselves boring to read—but pointedly and often charmingly so, and in a way specific to each author. In scene, scope, and/or pace, these texts provide a counterpoint to the works most often evoked as exemplary of the period. If asked to describe nineteenth-century society as depicted in contemporary French and British fiction, one might first invoke panoramic scenes of industry and teeming life as found in the novels of Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens, and Émile Zola: loud and sooty steam engines, belching factories, humming department stores, crowded city streets, sweaty theaters, and ballrooms stuffed to capacity with the abundantly indebted denizens of the *grand monde*. What does not come as quickly to mind, and indeed what seems antithetical to the great activity and upheaval of the century, are more quiescent scenes in which characters are listless, vacant, and utterly bored. While Balzac, Dickens, and Zola specialized in the creation of climbing characters and bustling, overheated worlds, Gautier, Flaubert, and Gissing constructed novels with less lively settings and more listless personages. Eugène de Rastignac's climb to the top of the Parisian social and political ladder and *Oliver Twist*'s misadventures in London's criminal underworld have their counterpoint in *Emma Bovary*'s dull days in the French provinces, and in the failed and unconnected literary men of Gissing's *Grub Street*.

Not only do my selected authors put boredom to narrative use, they do so in order to write, more or less reflexively, about reading and writing. Certainly, they are not alone among their contemporaries in this choice of subject matter: given the revolutions then ongoing in literary production and education, it follows that many nineteenth-century novels and short stories feature the representation of and character relationships to reading and writing. Promising to alleviate boredom, leisurely reading in fiction more often leads to discontent with one's life—a life that, especially for the female reader, in no way resembles the lives on the page. Emma Bovary again serves as the paradigm: her yearning for love and the city, and her boredom with her mediocre husband are prepared from an early age by a regimen of popular novels and romantic philosophy. She, like so many other readers depicted in nineteenth-century literature, confronts her own life with a set of expectations derived from popular texts. Conversely, while writing is an activity which serves the realms of society, leisure, and business, many fictional works portray writing as a repetitive, futile, dull, or thankless pursuit. The figure of the stultified writer proliferates in the form of the bored clerk in the short fiction of Gogol and Melville and in Flaubert's last novel; in the lovesick poet desperately in search of a mistress in Gautier's first novel; or in the starving writer, loyal to his or her art but forced to write for the market, as encountered in several novels by Gissing. My chosen three authors in particular seem to be in want of a reader or a specific kind of connection that is denied them in the various realms of business, private life, and literary production. All of these examples in fiction indicate an unlikely self-reference issuing from the text: Does the text indeed 'out' itself as a potential cause of the reader's or writer's dissatisfaction and boredom, or does the text's self-reference point beyond, rather than at, itself?

My three authors in particular seem to pose this question, for, in addition to representing the bored, their novels enclose narrative structures that recapitulate the expanded, suspended, and flattened time of bored experienced: a character's conventional course of self-development suddenly and inexplicably relapses into torpor and complaint, with stultifying consequences for the plot; dream-worlds of reverie and dull patterns of the everyday mutually interrupt one another, until the characters' exhaustion or demise brings the novel to a close; and characters refuse—often inexplicably—the actions that the conventional exigencies of plot require. As Peter Brooks, writing specifically of Flaubert, states in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, such moves suggest a deliberate attempt on the part of the novelist to write an anti-novel, or fiction that "works to disappoint our expectations of drama and coherence" (177). The structures of these novels frustrate rather than affirm meaning, climax, resolution, or even character unions: in them, "[t]he binding, totalizing work of Eros" that we come to expect from the tradition of Fielding, Dickens, or Sue, "seems to have reached a halt" (Brooks 178). Through narrative and structural evocations of boredom—by deploying boredom's failure or refusal to deliver—Gautier, Flaubert, and Gissing each make a larger statement about what the novel is expected to deliver, and by whom.

That boredom fails to deliver—and that this failure thwarts the "work of Eros" otherwise present in the novel—raises the question of the recipient and her expectations. In some sense, boredom is present in the reading and writing of a text, but as limit-case: the writer must be interested enough to write and to address his reader, and his reader must find his text interesting enough to read. In *Boredom: A Literary History of a State of Mind*, Patricia Spacks posits boredom's necessity to these two interrelated activities, stating that "The ideal dynamic between writing and reading depends in part on boredom as displaced, unmentioned, and unmentionable

possibility" (1). Similarly, Jonathan Culler asserts that "[B]oredom is a literary category of the first importance," since it is "the background against which the activity of reading takes place and which continually threatens to engulf it" (20). Boredom is what binds in the "contract" between reader and writer; it binds, however, through a concerted effort by both parties to expel it from the experience of reading and writing. Yet I am interested in the ways that boredom *persists* in the text, in how it functions when it is more than a possibility. Gautier, Flaubert, and Gissing are exemplary here, not in that they pose boredom as a challenge to their readers, but that their works foreground this challenge by allowing boredom to linger in the text even and especially as they take up reading and writing as their subjects of representation.

Accordingly, my methodological approach combines close textual analysis of my selected primary texts with attention to the paratexts—letters, journals, histories, and essays—in which their authors position their work in relation to the developing literary marketplace, a changing society, and emerging critical literary discourses. My readings focus on the imagery of boredom (the tangential, the slow, the vacant), on the narrative modes or methods that often support such imagery (anti-climax, repetition, irresolution), and on the relationship of boredom in and of the text to representations of reading and writing. Theoretically, I lean on the definitions and conceptions of boredom set out by Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, Adam Phillips, and Patricia Spacks, and on the narratological work of Roland Barthes, Peter Brooks and Jonathan Culler. Freudian and Winnicottian psychoanalysis as well as Frankfurt School thought on the relationship of commercial culture to human life provide the main theoretical models for my own thoughts on boredom and literature. A practicing psychoanalyst, Adam Phillips rethinks D.W. Winnicott's notion of the holding pattern through boredom, theorizing the mood as a necessary suspension of external stimuli that promotes the child's independent

formation of desire. In this state, “the child needs the use of an environment that will suggest things without imposing them” (Phillips 74). By this model, boredom is a state from which one emerges—indeed, for Phillips, emergence is what distinguishes boredom from the experience, more common to adult life, of waiting. Whereas boredom can be formulated as “the wish for a desire,” waiting is always waiting on or for something (Phillips 68). Waiting ends when the awaited object turns up; boredom ends when the bored individual becomes “‘brave enough to let his feelings develop’ in the absence of an object” (Phillips qtg Winnicott 78). Winnicott and Phillips thus conceptualize boredom as a rehabilitative and even empowering undergoing, a preparation for experience and being in the world. Siegfried Kracauer's theorization of boredom puts a similar emphasis on boredom's preservative powers, but is less optimistic about what follows. Decrying the absence of a (cultural) environment “that will suggest things without imposing them” in his essay, “Boredom,” Kracauer describes our “permanent receptivity” to the demands of commercial media, demands that prevent us from being alone with ourselves and that contribute to the feelings of atomization and fragmentation often attributed to the subject of modernity (332). One's primary defense is to be bored: “But what if one refuses to allow oneself to be chased away? Then boredom becomes the only proper occupation, since it provides a kind of guarantee that one is, so to speak, still in control of one's own existence” (Kracauer 334). Keeping the empty fascinations of mass culture at bay by means of self-seclusion, one can attain a “radical” boredom that ends in bliss—at least, almost. In a tongue-in-cheek conclusion, Kracauer states that his boredom doggedly remains boredom: all that it yields is a boring “bagatelle”—namely, his essay on boredom (334). To connect bliss and boredom with the text, I appeal to Barthes, for whom the text that yields bliss is the one that is read less carefully, its narrative skimmed according to the reader’s whim and anticipation of its “boring” passages (11).

Barthes contends that the kept contract between reader and writer, or the "dialectics of desire" between the two parties, allows the reader her boredom by granting this textual play. Rather than being expelled, boredom is necessarily in play in any reading—it is the right of the reader to attend to what she enjoys and neglect what she does not; the writer, then, must court her interests, to ensure that she enjoys as much as possible. Another way to examine how boredom functions in a text, then, is to examine how desire functions in it. Jonathan Culler and Peter Brooks each approach the novel with particular attention to how desire functions in narrative: in *The Uses of Certainty*, Culler looks to Flaubert's own bouts of reverie and stupefaction for the origins of his emphasis on collapse, bewilderment, and boredom in *Madame Bovary*, thereby providing a model for my own attempts to look at author and work in tandem; thinking through plot as an embodiment of competing drives, Brooks traces desire and its refutation in a collection of novels. Culler and Brooks both fruitfully demonstrate how the novel—its textual as well as its extratextual underpinnings—hosts forces that divide it against itself, much like the bored subject. Twentieth-century theorists of boredom therefore mark the mood as site of ambivalence and potentiality, displeasure and critique, stasis and drive. This theorization stands in marked contrast to mainstream eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses, which, as Patricia Spacks illustrates, link boredom to idleness and weakness of character. Because my nineteenth-century primary texts do not reject the bored in representation or the boring in structure, they lend themselves to fruitful investigations along the lines of the twentieth-century theorizations they seem to prefigure.

My study distinguishes itself from previous literary studies of boredom in its focus on the mood as a way of thinking through the changing contract between readers and writers in the nineteenth century. Existing studies of boredom in literature consider it as a literary theme, a

problem in modernity, and a modern counterpoint to the more traditional subject of ennui, often taking as their starting point Reinhard Kuhn's 1976 study, *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature*. Kuhn's work looks at ennui in literature, from Homer to Modernist writers like Virginia Woolf, but subsequent scholars of this subject focus on the taxonomy of ennui that he lays out in his preface and introduction: here, Kuhn excludes the common and fleeting phenomenon of boredom from the metaphysical and transhistorical condition of ennui in which he is interested. Whereas Kuhn tentatively identifies ennui as "the state of emptiness that the soul feels when it is deprived of interest in action, life, and the world [...], a condition that is the immediate consequence of the encounter with nothingness, and has as an immediate effect a disaffection with reality" (13), he describes the boredom felt by the housewife, the train passenger, and the student in the lecture hall as "temporary," "dependent almost entirely on external circumstances" (6), and as "a superficial and vague disquiet" rather than a metaphysical ailment (9). Later scholars of boredom depart from Kuhn's dismissal of the mood as "hardly worth serious study" (6) and "a problem for the psychologist" rather than for readers of literature (7). As outlined in Patricia Meyer Spacks' *Boredom: A Literary History of a State of Mind* (1995) and Elizabeth S. Goodstein's *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (2005), the problem with this hierarchical distinction is its rejection of the value of studying the everyday in literary texts. Spacks argues that the study of boredom as a theme offers essential insights into the moral and ethical economies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels as well as nineteenth-century subjects. It is precisely toward everyday conduct that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century moral imperatives to individual industry and attention are directed. Furthermore, boredom and interest shift, as the nineteenth century advances, from states that one is admonished, respectively, to discourage and cultivate in one's self to personal "categories of

interpretation" (Spacks x). Whereas what was "interesting,"—which, like "boring," came into common usage at the end of the eighteenth century—originally denoted the generally acknowledged importance of the thing so described, the word came to signal what was personally significant or pleasing (Spacks xi).¹ A society without recourse to categories like "interesting" and "boring" would "invoke categories other than those of feeling to assess their experience," be they familiar, civic, or theological (Spacks 9). Such a society would tend to accept its condition in life as *fait accompli*, and infer from individual boredom a poverty of the subject rather than a poverty of the object. This shift is momentous, with important (and interesting) ramifications not to be ignored by literary study: works of literature, too, could either be taken up as interesting or legitimately denounced as boring—a disconcerting prospect to any writer (like Gautier, Flaubert, and Gissing) who found greater spiritual kinship with centuries past than with their own time. In her more recent and philosophically-based study, Elizabeth Goodstein objects to Kuhn's ahistorical notion of ennui as both an idea in literature and part of the human condition, citing his neglect of the ways in which history has changed human existence, and, by extension, how understandings and representations of ennui have also changed. Rather, we should not fail to observe that boredom emerges in the nineteenth century "both as the disaffection with the old that drives the search for change and as the malaise produced by living under a permanent speed-up" (Goodstein 1). As we see in Kracauer's discussion of the mood, the twentieth century's further speeding up of this "permanent speed-up" causes boredom to take on yet another aspect, that of self-preservation against culture's atomizing forces: whereas boredom is best opposed to interest in the nineteenth century, its

¹ In his *Commonplace Book* of the late 1880s, George Gissing records his own observation of the changing usage of the interchangeability of the words "interest" and "amusing": "E. [Edith, his second wife] always uses the word 'amusing' to mean 'interesting,' even when the interest is quite serious. If, as I suspect, this is common among the London vulgar, how significant!" (52).

antithesis becomes distraction in the twentieth. If the increase of and change in literary representations of boredom arise from great historical change, it follows that one can observe historical change through the presence of boredom in literature, as well as how boredom's expression penetrates and transforms the novel itself. Boredom is thus highly relevant to the study of the novel and of literature of the nineteenth and—though it goes beyond the scope of this study—twentieth centuries.

I say boredom because, for my part, the distinction between ennui and boredom is difficult to define and even harder to maintain. Whereas I assent that ennui could be used to denote the transhistorical malaise of the human condition while boredom is specific to recent centuries (confirmed by the *OED*), it would be a tedious exercise to parse, in the discussion of a text, where boredom abates and ennui emerges, and vice versa. Kuhn himself bungles the maintenance of this, his own, distinction: in his brief discussion of the (female) suburbanite, an exemplar of one who is bored rather than suffering from ennui, Kuhn writes that her condition is "caused by a forced inactivity of the mind," resulting in depression and neuroses so grave that it proves to be without a "foreseeable or inevitable end but death" (7). Her boredom originates

in a tension between the need for mental activity and the lack of adequate stimulation.

The unconscious goals, aspirations, and ideals are maintained in this state of boredom, but the ability to reach them is interfered with by the repression of these true goals and the rejection of substitutes that all seem either inadequate, as in the case of television entertainment, or prohibited, as in the case of adultery." (Kuhn 7)

One would think we are describing the unfortunate Emma Bovary, whose condition—self-described as "a kind fog she had in her head" (Flaubert, *MB* 102)—finds pointless expression in

adultery, and, eventually, in death. But no: the suburbanite's is "a primarily medical problem with which we shall not deal" (Kuhn 7). Whereas Emma Bovary "suffers from a metaphysical malady, [...] the latter only feels a superficial and vague disquiet. It is this difference in dimension that makes of the one a great literary figure and of the other an undistinguished and uninteresting representative of a group" (Kuhn 9). I suspect that Kuhn bestows ennui and not boredom upon Madame Bovary simply because she is the subject of a novel, and by the illustrious Flaubert. But, as my study shows, novels are written on subjects that Kuhn would describe as boring rather than *ennuyeux*: the acute apathy of one who has no reason to suffer (*Mademoiselle de Maupin*), the boredom of the student in the lecture hall (*Bouvard et Pécuchet*), the deadening boredom of routine labor (*New Grub Street*). Furthermore, I do not believe that such distinctions are fruitful, particularly since the gap in significance between "minor" boredom and "major," metaphysical ennui can be understood in terms of a continuum, or as a gap in intensity or frequency. To take the paramount case of Emma Bovary, one might argue that, since her malaise ends in the tragedy of her suicide, she can in no way be described as merely bored. But a lifetime of "mere" boredom, and of the disappointments continual boredom inevitably visits upon the bored (particularly when the bored in question is a nineteenth-century, middle-class woman), can reasonably be imagined to culminate in suicide. Therefore, though my study makes reference to plural boredoms in reference to the mood's various intensities, frequencies, and occasions, I do not distinguish between ennui and boredom.

However, if we do briefly retain Kuhn's distinction between an ennui endemic to the human condition and a boredom endemic to the last few decades, I hold that boredom is, perhaps paradoxically, the more interesting affect. While Kuhn posits boredom's inferiority in its temporary nature, its "moodiness," we must consider Adam Phillips' statement that "Moods [...]"

are points of view" (68). According to this formulation, we understand that boredom—though it does take the form of withdrawal and suspension of engagement—is nonetheless an orientation. Kracauer depicts boredom as the result of self-preservation and thought—or at least, a moment's respite from the voracious world in which to write an essay. Benjamin likewise describes the mood as a place of tranquil retreat:

Boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream. We are at home then in the arabesques of its lining. But the sleeper looks bored and gray within his sheath. And when he later wakes and wants to tell of what he dreamed, he communicates by and large only this boredom. For who would be able at one stroke to turn the lining of time to the outside? Yet to narrate dreams signifies nothing else. (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 105-6).

By Benjamin's poetic formulation, boredom communicates the solitary topos of its own undergoing. It is the time of experience and not its content, as well as the place in which its undergoer listens to his idiosyncratic dreams. It is a warm blanket, a tender blankness, and therefore remains in danger of being filled and closed, its importance overlooked. Benjamin thus evokes boredom as a rare and endangered animal, "the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience," in his essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." Discussing the decline of storytelling with the advent of "information"—instantaneous, globally-sourced, statistic-laden communication—Benjamin describes boredom as the perfect condition of listening, the mode of encountering (and eventually of being able to recount) another's dreams in addition to one's own: "If sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation. Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in

the leaves drives him away. His nesting places—the activities that are intimately associated with boredom—are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well" ("Storyteller" 91). The activities to which Benjamin refers are those that only require physical rather than mental labor: craftwork, like weaving and spinning. The laborers listened to stories as they worked, the lessons of which were much more obscure, much more like puzzles, than the blunt information on offer by the growing mass media. To listen to a story in such a state of suspended thought or interest—a state of blank undergoing—is to be able to repeat the story later. With the rise of automation and the mass migration of rural labor to the cities, such communities of listeners—brethren in boredom—began to decline: "This is how today [the community of listeners] is becoming unraveled at all its ends after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship" (Benjamin, "Storyteller" 91).

"The Storyteller" poses a contrast to the picture of boredom's historical appearance I have so far been painting by way of Spacks. Spacks' argument that boredom arises in the late eighteenth century is well-documented, and certainly the mass entertainment cultures of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries both recognize their audiences' power to reject their offerings by deeming them boring. Benjamin, on the other hand, evokes boredom's gradual disappearance from the human scene with the rise of industry. Both accounts—boredom's rise and deployment as an evaluative mood; boredom's decline as the blank time of unoccupied experience—have a place in my study and are examined by my chosen texts. As individuals, including the nineteenth century's massive number of new readers, were empowered by boredom's emerging "category of interpretation" to reject what bored them, writers, faced with the new realities of the literary marketplace and its arbitrating readership, either used their texts to examine this new

evaluative category, or wrote their own longing for the disappearing boredom of Benjamin's description.

In his first novel, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835-6), Théophile Gautier considers a growing non-traditional readership by examining the role of boredom in the relationship between a writer and his implied reader. Its narrative is structured by the limited and repeated demands of its protagonist, the bored aristocrat d'Albert. His many letters to his friend Silvio proclaim first his boredom, then his desire for a mistress. As if conjured by his desire for her, this mistress appears, corresponding not only to d'Albert's careful descriptions of his ideal woman, but also to the profile of the readership emerging at the time of the novel's publication: she is a young woman of the middle class, bored with her lack of opportunities and her heavily bowdlerized education, and yearning for adventure in reading as well as in life. Tiring quickly of d'Albert, who believes his boredom to be his most attractive quality, she quickly brings the novel to an end with her own leave-taking. By pairing this novel with Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*, I contend in my first chapter that boredom is indeed a possibility in the dynamic between reader and writer, taking hold when the writer neglects to hold back his own voice so that others may sound in the space of the text. By investing too much in the presence of his own voice, an author risks becoming frigid, undesirous of company—namely, his reader's company. To be without desire, psychoanalyst Adam Phillips tells us, is to be bored. But whereas the bored subject eventually reestablishes a connection to the world about him, the author of the babble text—the text without writing, without desire for a reader, the text that is not a space created but a voice that *does go on*—sees no need to reconnect. In the absence of genuine solicitation, d'Albert's reader, Madelaine, becomes a writer, authoring herself into new existence (she is, incidentally, disguised as a man), mirroring the diverse array of individuals who, in the nineteenth century,

took up their pens to address a growing reading public. Her response to and rejection of d'Albert's text reflects a broader turning point, that which occasioned Gautier's preface to the novel. In this preface, Gautier expresses his ambivalent position between outmoded classicism in literature and the commercialization of the press and the literary marketplace. The changes to which Gautier was responding had their counterpart in literary representation: Rancière describes the corresponding changes in what he calls the "distribution of the sensible," or in the realm of what could be represented and how. French Romanticism, of which Gautier was a member of the vanguard, was the site of breakup for longstanding artistic and social hierarchies, allowing new subjects to be represented and new subjects to read and write these representations. The novel that follows Gautier's preface can be read as a "reading" of romantic authorship and readership, as the novel seems to take up the questions paramount to the change in the distribution of the sensible: What unprecedented voice is heard over the prevailing political and aesthetic order? How does this voice disrupt the orderly narrative and representational schemes that had excluded it? *Mademoiselle de Maupin* thus explicitly stages the redistribution of the sensible, a site in which the popular makes itself heard and, in doing so, reveals and disrupts, *in media res*, the prevailing hierarchies of representation and exclusion with which the novel begins in the voice of d'Albert.

Gautier's countenance of the new readership was rather brave, given that these were the same readers who neither bought nor read his poetry, forcing him to turn novelist and, one year later, commercial journalist. Gustave Flaubert, on the other hand, wrote against this readership, approaching his prose with the deliberation, attention, and agony of a poet. As we read in his letters, Flaubert was notoriously bored—with life, politics, vulgarity—and wrote to escape his boredom and what bored him. In my second chapter, I posit that this boredom reveals the

underlying structures of Flaubert's writing as well as his particular approach to style. I link the boredom in subject and structure of Flaubert's first and last published novels, *Madame Bovary* and *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, to what have generally been identified as his contributions to literature: the effacement of a central point of view, the emphasis on writing as an aesthetic object, and the democratization of the novel's proper subject matter. I take as my starting point Flaubert's declaration that ennui had made him into a thinking phantom—"Do you know ennui? Not that common, banal ennui that comes out of idleness or illness, but that modern ennui that gnaws one's entrails and, of an intelligent being, makes a walking shadow, a thinking phantom"²—using it to locate, in Flaubert's two novels, boredom's three "movements" of dissatisfaction, removal, and reemergence, which I have glossed from both Benjamin and Phillips. I connect Flaubert's self-proclaimed ennui-driven ghostliness to what Dominick LaCapra has called his "dual style," or his alternation in narration of "proximity and distance, empathy and irony." If indeed moods are points of view, as Adam Phillips asserts, we must ask what point of view the *écrivain ennuyé* occupies. Throughout my reading of *Madame Bovary*, I pose the questions, Is it possible to write from the position of no desire, without producing the babble text? How does boredom manifest stylistically and structurally in the text? I trace Flaubert's lack of interest in his alternation of lyricism and vulgarity, the upshot of which is stasis. Ultimately, *Madame Bovary* is a static book, about nothing. In the chapter's third movement—reemergence, I focus on Flaubert's strange use of intestinal imagery, found in his early proclamation of phantomhood as well as throughout his correspondence. Whereas Flaubert's *ennui moderne* presumably afflicts an age, his repeated referral to his *entrailles* as the seat of his ennui, passion, disgust, and future writing projects is idiosyncratic and therefore has the potential to reveal something about the writing "*de mes entrailles*" that Flaubert wrote of

² Letter to Louis de Cormenin, June 7, 1844. My translation.

wanting to do. Flaubert's deliberate confusion in his correspondence of the two meanings of *entrailles*—the entrails and the womb—points us to his love of Rabelais and, as Bakhtin has argued, Rabelais' use of the lower bodily stratum and degradation. Through Bakhtin, the Flaubert-Rabelais connection yields greater insights into the possibility of a democratic vision in Flaubert's work. I discuss how Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* uses the trope of readers and writing to elaborate an idea of community, farcical though it is. It is this last novel that gives us the third movement of boredom, reemergence, and a sense of Flaubert's (still idiosyncratic) engagement with the discourse of his time. Is there hope for the reader, according to Flaubert? Or does he sentence his bourgeois reader to Emma Bovary's hideous fate? I argue for the positivity of Flaubert's planned ending to *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, tying it to the constantly building communal vision of the grotesque as well as to Rancière's essay on Flaubert and democracy, from *The Flesh of Words*. If *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is a satire, it is in part because the discourse it hinges upon is stupid, but also because the dominance of atomizing, algorithmic bourgeois discourse makes any sort of communal dream into a farce by contrast. Flaubert stated that he wanted to write a novel the readers of which would not know if they or the author were in on its joke. While the dream of communality—and radical communality—that is glimpsed in the novel is often the butt of the novel's grand joke, there is still something valuable and resilient in that dream: even when the dream takes refuge in nostalgia ("to copy as in the old days") it is nonetheless alive.

No such hopeful vision exists in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891) or *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894), as Gissing both resented having to write commercially and possessed a certain nostalgia for Classical Greece and its high esteem of the arts. Though long overlooked by courses in and readers of nineteenth-century literature, George Gissing is an important figure in

British letters of the late part of the century: in some ways bearing greater affinity to the French realists than to his own literary compatriots, his work aims to recreate the tones and textures of middle-class life, and the experience of boredom as fostered by a consumer economy and mass culture. Rather than flagging a moral failing or customary privilege, boredom provides Gissing's characters a moment for reflection upon their discomfort within capitalist society. Guided by my own boredom in the research process, this chapter looks at the way in which heavily biographical studies of Gissing's work overlook its significance to the nineteenth-century British novel. I then move on to Gissing's critical writings, which likewise distinguish him as significant among his contemporaries. By the 1880s, Henry James and other authors were beginning to challenge their audiences with literary innovation. British letters had entered into a troubling and mature phase in which a novelist's significance no longer coincided with popularity. The narrowness of the reading public's taste was, of course, encouraged by the narrow venues of publication, such as the circulating library and serial publication of novels in periodicals. The sense that the audience had to be up to the writer's challenge was gaining ground, however. The particular challenge Gissing posed to British readers was his approach to realism, more in the vein of French naturalism given his penchant, as stated in his letters to his brother Algernon, for "things that *happen* [over] things that are *plotted*" and for impartial narrative technique (Gissing, *On Fiction* 57). Gissing's prescription for realism is significant in its opposition of the genre to commercial literature and its aims. Taking the boring—and boredom—as the subject of his representations is therefore an apt embodiment of his approach to realism, an approach that necessarily eschewed the commercial. It is in his novels, however, that his ideas about realism, the state of literature, and the latter's ramifications for culture are most thoroughly explored. Gissing's lack of range allowed him to have a depth in his investigations into middle-class life

that few other contemporary authors could boast. His descriptions of his characters' boredom—often related to the tedious work of reading and writing—show Gissing's realism to be of a psychological and not merely documentary quality. Detailed psychological portraiture, and the psychology of boredom in particular, mark Gissing's sympathetic characters in *New Grub Street* and *In the Year of Jubilee*—even when, as in the latter novel, the narrator proves grindingly grumpy toward and occasionally disapproving of his protagonists. But by taking up the moments where Gissing's narrator is most intrusive, unpleasant, and even misogynistic, I do the important work of tackling the author's unlikeableness that so much of Gissing Studies tries to evade by directing his readers to his biography.

I have selected these authors because they describe boredom's relationship to their craft, as well as to the commercialization of this craft, in their novels. Though boredom, literary art, and commercial culture may seem like a fruitless mix, far from it. Rather than conclude, like the soon-to-be-disillusioned Lucien de Rubempré of Balzac's *Illusions perdues*, that the arts can only be “all cooked up!” when undertaken in the midst of commercial culture, the characters in my selected texts assess and compose themselves in a suspended moment, indulging—as do their authors—in the boredom that their society disdains but that is necessary for the arrival of a real, albeit delayed, epiphany (Balzac 280). Boredom, in the end, is about reemergence in the world, and of trying to tell of what one dreamed while removed, temporarily, from it. Boredom is thus key to persistent dream, and in this way bears an affinity to reading and writing. Words on the page seem inert and withdrawn, obscuring the individuals behind their production as well as those who have and will read them. Jacques Rancière states in *The Flesh of Words* that reading and writing—the “excursions of the word”—are “a matter of finding, like Plato, beneath words and resemblances the power by which words are set in motion and become deeds” (4). Boredom

is part of this innervating (though at times enervating) power, prerequisite to the excursions of the word but whose traces can be found in the text and which point beyond it to future excursions and possible deeds. If the text is to offer the reader any epiphany other than the short-lived satisfaction of reading and of *mimesis*, it must preserve the traces of the text's origin, of the "groundless ground" that is opposed to the stiffness of the eventual word on the page (Rancière 150). By groundless ground, Rancière refers to the equality of all things under representation, brought about by the experimental wills of writers to represent and of readers to read. My readings investigate the operations of boredom at the historical, structural, and representational levels of the novel, affirming boredom as a strand whose task is to link the text with life.

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Chapter 1: Reading, Writing, and Boredom in Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*

I. The Rules of the Game: The Possibility of Boredom in Reading and Writing

Can boredom be thought of as a strategy for reading? To its initiates, boredom entails listlessness, a troublesome lack of focus and desire, a total experience that can't be parceled out to share in other activities. How might this state be part of the process of narrative formation, such as that which occurs between narrator and reader during the latter's perusal of the former's novel? When we think of the reasons to read, fiction in particular, occupying time is paramount: we read so as not to be bored. Such is the utility of summer reading, airport literature, and—the latter's nineteenth-century precursor—railroad literature. By the logic of this utility, the book exists to facilitate the passing of time spent waiting, traveling, and leisuring. Thus, Mallarmé describes the popular function of the book as an "interception" between reader and empty time, duly "offering itself to the hand gloved for far places, the hand of the woman who quickly chooses a book in order to place it between her eyes and the sea" ("Displays" 25). Reading in this context is not for the primary purposes of learning, working, or devotion, and presupposes no particular aim other than to distance the reader from his surroundings: reading as diversion. It is precisely this kind of reading that was encouraged by the serialization of novels in newspapers and the publication of more affordable editions of books, sold or lent at either end of the traveler's destination. But while this kind of reading and this kind of literature serve definite purposes independent of what is read, we can't necessarily conclude that the reader is as inattentive to the narrative as he is to his surroundings. The question remains, then, as to the possibility of boredom's role in reading.

Taking on this question, Patricia Meyer Spacks first discusses the necessary role of interest, which she posits as boredom's opposite, in both writing and reading: she states, "The ideal dynamic between writing and reading depends in part on boredom as displaced, unmentioned, and unmentionable possibility" (1). The writer promises to interest his reader, while the reader demands to be interested, and this relationship makes up the contract between the two (Spacks 2). Citing Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*, Spacks says the reciprocal relationship between writer and reader forms the "dialectics of desire"—dialectics subject, of course, to dissolution if the reader fails to be sufficiently interested and seeks pleasure elsewhere. Turning to the cited passage, we see that this dialectics is the writer's aim, a harmonious union with the reader he imagines. Wishing to make possible this ideal union, the writer writes.

Écrire dans le plaisir m'assure-t-il—moi, écrivain—du plaisir de mon lecteur?
Nullement. Ce lecteur, il faut que je le cherche, (que je le 'drague'), *sans savoir où il est*. Un espace de la jouissance est alors créé. Ce n'est pas la 'personne' de l'autre qui m'est nécessaire, c'est l'espace: la possibilité d'une dialectique du désir, d'une *imprévision* de la jouissance: que les jeux ne soient pas faits, qu'il y ait un jeu. (Barthes, *Plaisir* 11)

[Does writing in pleasure guarantee—guarantee me, the writer—my reader's pleasure? Not at all. I must seek out this reader (must 'cruise' him) *without knowing where he is*. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader's 'person' that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an *unpredictability* of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game. (Barthes *Pleasure* 4)]

The chance to attain a perfect union with an imagined reader urges the writer on; he records his desire for the reader in the text, as text. The site of bliss created here is the anticipation of the reader's pleasure in reading this particular work. But the reader's person is not necessary: so described, the planning for a "dialectics of desire" precedes the reader's experience of the text, as the channels of access to this site are generated by the writer himself. Can it be said, then, that the dialectics of desire is not exactly reciprocal? If the reader demands to be interested, what demands are placed, in turn, on the reader? What, if anything, can the reader offer in turn? And if the attainment of a perfect union between the two requires that their boredom be a displaced, unmentioned, and unmentionable possibility, what can be said of boredom's *possibility* in this union, nevertheless?

We must address our questions to the implied author of the text, of which Barthes' is a more speculative imagining than that laid out by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. For Booth, who prefers the language of contracts to the language of coitus, the reader's role is one of polite cooperation: "The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement" (Booth 138). The reader must be pliant, cultivating a bevy of "selves [she] is willing to become"³ and renounce the "pleasures of finding one's prejudices echoed" in order to meet the reader's demands (Booth 138, 139). The reader must be prepared to agree with the author, to present her very best, most readerly self—and never the "often very different self who goes about paying bills, repairing leaky faucets, and failing in generosity and wisdom" (Booth 138). The reader must not fail to answer the writer's basic demand to be read and to please. But, as Barthes points

³ For reasons that will become more apparent as the chapter progresses, I will refer to the author as "he" and the reader as "she," unless the text under discussion presents an instance in which it becomes illogical to do so.

out, this encounter's outcome is far from certain—there is no guarantee, a dialectics of desire is merely *possible* (as is boredom), and the game has yet to begin. This is to say that the writer's appeal can still fail; the reader can still be bored if the author has not taken care to “*drague*” [“cruise”] her, to figure out what she wants. The possibility of the reader's refusal, as well as the motivation it provides for the writer to perform, is part of what, for Barthes, makes the text a potential site for bliss. We must ask, How can the reader refuse the author's demands? What are the limits of her pliancy? And again, What is boredom's role in reading, other than a sign that the reader may soon put the book down? Does boredom have a *positive* role in the relation between reader and writer, a way in which it prolongs reading or deepens reading pleasure?

Booth states that the reader refuses the writer's demands when she simply can't agree with them, such as when the reader must take on a self that is “fundamentally incompatible” with her own values, rendering her unable to read “without smiling when [she] should be panting, scoffing when [she] should be feeling awe” (138). This is not so much a problem with the author's craft as with the fact that it demands of the reader a self that she cannot be, or that she cannot manufacture without discomfort. The reader cannot be brought in line with this text, and will surely continue smiling and scoffing until she puts the book down. Flaws in the writer's craft, on the other hand, can be detected by the reader when she is not allowed any room to be out of line. Here, Barthes conveys a reader's reaction to a flawed or deficient writing: “On me présente un texte. Ce texte m'ennuie. On dirait qu'il *babille*. Le babil du texte, c'est seulement cette écume de langage qui se forme sous l'effet d'un simple besoin d'écriture [...]. Écrivant son texte, le scripteur prend un langage de nourrisson: impératif, automatique, inaffectueux, petite débâcle de clics [...]” (Barthes, *Plaisir* 11-12) [I am offered a text. This text bores me. It might be said to *prattle*. The prattle of the text is merely that foam of language which forms by the

effect of a simple need of writing [...]. The writer of this text employs an unweaned language: imperative, automatic, unaffectionate, a minor disaster of static" (Barthes *Pleasure* 4-5)].

Believing it the reader's role to be pliable, the writer offers an unpliant text—one that not only does not guarantee the reader's pleasure, but that neglects to consider it. Of course, some authors intentionally withhold or assault their readers' pleasure through various means (discontinuity; repetition; experimentation in language, punctuation, narrative structure, narrative voice, etc), effectively foregrounding language and the experience of reading while prohibiting casual modes of reading, such as that of the vacationer described by Mallarmé. The avant-garde practices of Modernist, Surrealist, and Postmodernist authors often privilege form over function and content, challenging their readers to submit to considerable displeasure and disorientation in order to experience the text. But such instances are not the cases of neglect described above by Barthes, in which the writer fails to properly "*drague*" or proposition the reader, taking it as a given that she will offer herself up, that she will be interested, so long as the writer conveys the story well. With regard to avant-garde texts, it is understood that the reader must often sacrifice her own comfort in order to engage a literary object that does not agree to uphold narrative convention—here it is part of the "contract" between reader and writer that the work may not have narrative as its aim. But with regard to the babbling text, though the writer *is* eager to convey the story well, he conveys too much: the "imperative" nature of the author's writing has to do with his zeal to express exactly what it is he means and why, so that "la signification est *excessivement* nommée" ["signification is *excessively* named"], imposing "une plénitude serrée du sens, ou, si l'on préfère, une certain redondance, une sorte de babil sémantique [...] marqué par la peur obsessionnelle de manquer la communication du sens" (Barthes, *S/Z* 85-6) ["a dense platitude of meaning or, if one prefers, a certain redundancy, a kind of semantic prattle [...] marked by the excessive fear of

failing to communicate meaning" (Barthes, *S/Z* 79)]. According to Barthes, what the babblers misunderstands is that meaning is not wholly up to him, and is not a mere matter of telling and assertion. Unlike Booth's implied author, he does not anticipate the "likelihood of crippling disagreement with the reader," which then must be smoothed over by skillfully "mak[ing] his rhetoric in itself a pleasure to read" (Booth 179). Both the reader's ability to interpret and her desire to be pleased are ignored. However, in order that "il y ait un jeu" ["there can still be a game"] both parties must be allowed to have stakes, and both parties must be allowed to play.

The writer need not be careless, of course, but he must *care less* about making himself perfectly understood. As far as the game is concerned—the game that is the dialectics of desire between reader and writer, the erotics of the text—play, and not perfection, is the desired goal. The reader, too, must loosen up as she brings herself to the selves with which she approaches the text; she must not worry too much about what the author thinks she should know, or about his intended meaning. For to be too attentive a reader is to risk being bored, to be no longer reading: "Lisez lentement, lisez *tout*, d'un roman de Zola, le livre vous tombera des mains" (Barthes, *Plaisir* 23) ["Read slowly, read *all* of a novel by Zola, and the book will drop from your hands" (Barthes *Pleasure* 12)]. Here, at last, we see how boredom is not to be banished from reading and writing, as it is clear from Barthes' observation that boredom and attention can go hand-in-hand, acute attention to the text leading quickly to lack of interest. Yet boredom also haunts the other end of the spectrum of attention: even when, uninterested, we lay aside a text, Barthes tells us that our implicit complaint

n'est pas simple. De l'ennui (devant une oeuvre, un texte), on ne se tire pas avec un geste d'agacement ou de débarras. De même que le plaisir du texte suppose toute une production indirecte, de même l'ennui ne peut se prévaloir d'aucune spontanéité: il n'y a

pas d'ennui *sincère*: si personnellement, le texte-babil m'ennuie, c'est parce qu'en réalité je n'aime pas la demande. (*Plaisir* 43)

[is not simple. We do not escape boredom (with a work, a text) with a gesture of impatience or rejection. Just as the pleasure of the text supposes a whole indirect production, so boredom cannot presume it is entitled to any spontaneity: there is no *sincere* boredom: if the prattle-text bores me personally, it is because in reality I do not like the demand. (*Pleasure* 25)]

From this passage, we glean two observations. First, although the insufferable nature of the babbling text is due in part to the author's own self-satisfaction and negligence, Barthes, along with Booth, also suggests that it is due to the expectations of the reader—expectations, evidently, that she brings with her to the game of the text. Just as the dialectics of desire results from successful play between reader and writer, both share the culpability when such dialectics does not come off: flaws in the writer's craft as well as the reader's refusal of her author's demands result in the babble of the text. Second, it seems that boredom is a very real possibility in play in the desired dialectic between reader and writer, acting as the reader's most powerful bargaining chip—her greatest *enjeu*, or stake⁴—in the game that can still be between reader and writer. The possibility of boredom is what guides the reader to find that place between too fervently (and unfruitfully) heeding the author's potential demands, reading every word of the text, and rejecting the text on the grounds that it demands what she is unwilling to give. Boredom bookends our activity and engagement with the book: when we find that our interest is unsolicited or unappealed to, when our desire is out of play, we say that we are bored. Boredom, thus, can serve as a marker of our desire, since desire—and pleasure—is where our boredom is

⁴ But also meaning literally "in play."

not. If the best, most pleasurable reading takes place on either side of, or in-between, boredoms, then we may say that boredom operates alongside a reading rather than resulting in a reading put aside. If there can still be a game, the parameters of that game are set by the possible boredom and negligence of the reader and of the writer, who, as Spacks points out, must have been interested enough to write (1).

II. Can There Still Be a Game?: The Authorial Obstacle

"Writing," as Barthes conceives of it, only exists in the space of play ("Le texte que vous écrivez doit me donner la preuve *qu'il me désire*. Cette preuve existe: c'est l'écriture" (Barthes, *Plaisir* 13-4)) ["The text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*. This proof exists: it is writing" (Barthes, *Pleasure* 6)]. Not only must the author be interested enough to write in order to create this space, but he must also hold himself back, making room for the other by creating a "second self" more impassive than his first flesh-and-blood self. In short, he must wipe the sweat from his presumably impassioned, romantically overworked brow and put on his poker face. His discourse becomes one of many discourses that constitute the world of the fiction, so that the text provides what Barthes calls "failles" or faults—in the sense of both epicenters and flaws—through the various contradictions among and varieties of discourses (*Plaisir* 14-5).⁵ It is at the fault line, the likely site of eruption, that the erotics of reading is possible: neither one side of the line nor the other, neither one discourse nor the other, is inherently pleasurable, but rather "c'est la faille de l'une et de l'autre qui le devient" (Barthes, *Plaisir* 15) ["it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so" (Barthes, *Pleasure* 7)].

⁵ For theories of the structure of authorial discourse in the novel and the role of this discourse in the fictional text, see M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, and Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, in addition to *Le Plaisir du Texte*.

But another, extratextual fault line exists: there can still be room in the book for both of the author's selves, should he choose to present both. The preface provides the venue by which an author may more directly address his readers before leaving them to the fiction, in which his voice is (ideally) diffused by those of characters and narrators. If, as Booth says, the author's half of the contract between reader and writer is to create a "second self" to which the first self cannot be traced, then the preface exists as a space just prior to that contract in which the first self may speak. If, however, the author's second self is that which allows for play, which refrains from the undisguised and undiluted demands with which the first self blithely addresses an audience, then what can we say about a reader's relationship to a preface? And in what relationship do the polemical possibilities of the preface, the opportunity it presents for the first self to hold forth on what he perceives as issues of importance, stand with regard to the author's fiction? Can it be that all bets are off where the preface is concerned?

At this point I turn to my primary text of consideration in this chapter, Théophile Gautier's first novel, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835-6). The novel is loosely epistolary, consisting of the letters of a bored chevalier, desirous of a mistress, to his friend Silvio; the letters of an upper middle-class woman, desirous of a lover as well as an escape from her life's gendered restrictions, to her friend Graciosa; and a few chapters in which a narrator, presumably the compiler and arranger of these letters, describes and comments on plot actions. Despite the novel's scandalous debut, its preface is better known to today's readers: written a year and a half prior to the novel's publication,⁶ it is often referred to as the manifesto of the romantic doctrine of "l'art pour l'art," a doctrine rendered all the more urgent by the continued lack of state

⁶ Thus, Derrida's observation in *Dissemination* that a novel's foreword or preface recreates the intention to say *after* the text has been produced does not apply in this instance (7). Nor does this particular preface, as I will discuss below, say very much about the text that is to follow.

sponsorship for the arts, the rise of the commercial press, and the attendant demands by journalists and political theorists for an art that was didactic, moralizing, and otherwise celebratory or nurturing of bourgeois notions of Man's progress. Together with Gautier's famous observation that "L'endroit le plus utile d'une maison, ce sont les latrines" (Preface to *MM* 23) ["The most useful place in the house is the toilet"⁷ (Preface to *MM*)], the following passage demonstrates his argument that, though art inadvertently serves as a means to multiple practical ends, art itself can have no purpose:

[J]'aime mieux les choses et les gens en raison inverse des services qu'ils me rendent. Je préfère à certain vase qui me sert un vase chinois, semé de dragons et de mandarins, qui ne me sert pas du tout, et celui de mes talents que j'estime le plus est de ne pas deviner les logogriphes et les charades. Je renoncerais très joyeusement à mes droits de Français et de citoyen pour voir un tableau authentique de Raphaël, ou une belle femme nue [...]. Je consentirais très volontiers, pour ma part, au retour de cet anthropophage de Charles X, s'il me rapportait, de son château de Bohême, un panier de Tokay ou de Johannisberg [...]. Quoique je ne sois pas un dilettante, j'aime mieux le bruit des crincrins et des tambours de basque que celui de la sonnette de M. le président. Je vendrais ma culotte pour avoir une bague, et mon pain pour avoir des confitures. – L'occupation la plus séante à un homme policé me paraît de ne rien faire, ou de fumer analytiquement sa pipe ou son cigare. (Preface to *MM* 23-4)

⁷ Here I have made a slight emendation to Helen Constantine's translation, changing "lavatory" to "toilet," from the French "latrines."

[I prefer things and people in inverse proportion to the services they render me. Instead of a certain useful pot, I prefer a Chinese one decorated with dragons and mandarins, which is no use to me whatsoever; and the talent of mine I am proudest of is my inability to guess logogriphs and charades. I should be quite happy to renounce my rights as a Frenchman and a citizen to see an authentic picture by Raphael, or a beautiful naked woman [...]. For my part, I should readily agree to the return of that cannibal Charles X if he brought me back a hamper of Tokay or Johannisberg [sic] from his castle in Bohemia [...]. Though I am no dilettante, I prefer tambourines and a screechy fiddle to the sound of the President's bell. I would sell my trousers for a ring, and my bread for jam. The most appropriate occupation for a civilized man seems to me to be to do nothing, or to reflect upon life as he smokes his pipe or cigar. (Preface to *MM* 23-4)]

Amending Horace, Gautier asserts that the purpose of art is to delight and delight, if indeed art must be said to have a purpose: Beauty, and not the correction of society's ills by way of edifying examples, is the end of Art.

Thus informed by the author's preface, can it be said that the reader is primed to read the novel that follows according to the specified evaluative criteria—that the reader knows, or is at least instructed, not to bring any notions of the proper and improper in art to Gautier's text? In her essay, "Pure art, pure desire: changing definitions of l'art pour l'art from Kant to Gautier," Margueritte Murphy points out that Gautier had practical as well as philosophical reasons for presenting his aesthetic thus to his reader: prior to the publication of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, he had filed a defamation suit against *Le Constitutionnel* for alleging his depravity following his publication of an article on Villon (Murphy 154). The suit was dismissed in court, leading

Gautier to publicly defend himself in his preface, as well as to defend in advance a potentially controversial first novel. Yet, with the exception of the essay's final paragraph, in which Gautier imagines a flamboyant medieval alternative to quietly and cheaply advertising *Maupin* in the newspaper, no specific mention is made of the novel or the reader's eventual encounter with it. The last paragraph aside, this preface could have been published separately as a polemical treatise.

Nevertheless, later readers, farther removed from the immediate circumstances of the preface's construction and publication, continue to read the novel in its light (or shadow). For Murphy, the novel can be read as "a sort of psychomachia of competing theories of the aesthetic," in which the protagonist's desire for ideal beauty and the imaginary women who answer that desire illustrate the debate between the preface's stated sensualism (by which the artist prefers the excessive to the practical or moral), and the spiritual-moral idea of beauty (by which the ideal is related to the divine, and can only be approached, and not realized, through art) promoted by neo-Classical philosophers like Victor Cousin, himself loosely interpreting Kantian ideas that had been disseminated in academic circles.⁸ Through d'Albert's character, Gautier parodies the sensualist stance of his own romantic school, while the androgynous Théodore/Madelaine represents "a more serious and unsettling subversion of conventional mores" in that her very androgyny stands for the purest and most universal (because loved by both d'Albert and Rosette) beauty (Murphy 160). In *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, Mary Gluck reads the form of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* as offering a solution to the problem, taken up in the Preface, of the role of art and the artist in

⁸ In addition to Murphy's article, See Gene Bell-Villada's *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology and Culture of Aestheticism, 1790-1990*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1996. Bell-Villada discusses in-depth the transmission of Kant's aesthetic philosophy in France just prior to and during the Bourbon Restoration, as well as its implementation in Romantic and later iterations of "Art for Art's Sake."

modernity. Citing an 1845 dramatic review by Gautier, Gluck points to his valorization of the melodrama as a vital form whose "spirit could be perpetually rediscovered and adapted to the exceptional experiences and fantasies that contemporary life presented to the vigilant observer" (Gluck 58). Reading the novel as a melodrama, Gluck presents its protagonist as one who is driven, in the style of that genre, by his obsessive and elicit passion, here for beauty. After a night of lovemaking with his ideal other, d'Albert is reborn as an aesthetic hero. Thus initiated "into the secrets of absolute beauty, he could become the spokesman of the truths of art and creativity in a secular and utilitarian world where these had become alien realities" (Gluck 60). Qualifying this statement, Gluck cites Gautier's conclusion to his Preface, in which he describes advertising his first novel in a newspaper "entre les ceintures élastiques, les cols en crinoline, les biberons en tétine incorruptible" (39) ["among the elastic belts, the crinoline collars, the babies' bottles and durable teats" (37)]. Gluck argues that, through preface and novel together, Gautier affirms that both the artist and the market act as determiners of cultural relevance and value (63).

To be clear, I am less interested in the nature of prefaces than I am in the relationship of authors and readers to a text. I contend that the preface presents a chance for the author's voice to come through undiffused into other discourses, to lay bare his motivations for writing, and to reveal in less coded ways how and why he intends to appeal to his intended, his reader. Both Murphy's and Gluck's readings of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* trace the arguments of Gautier's preface throughout the novel that follows. However, this approach to a novel via its preface limits the ways in which one may read the text, as it attempts to access the work of the author's "second self" by keeping in mind the proclamations of the first. The emphasis placed on the author, the reader of novel and preface is subsequently ignored, as is the fact that prefaces can tell us as much about their readers as about their authors. In her introduction to the Penguin

Classics edition of *Maupin*, Patricia Duncker similarly states that Gautier's 1834 preface is "essential to the book, because it tells us, as modern readers, what kind of audience awaited Gautier," revealing "public expectations and prejudices, very different from our own, which characterized some of the first readers of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*" (xv). In contrast to the readings made by Gluck and Murphy, I propose a reading of Gautier's first novel that keeps his reader in mind: having asserted the reader's role in finding what interests her as she reads, and having referred to Barthes' observation that textual gaps or faults yield reading pleasure, I would like to temporarily lay aside the *Maupin* preface in order to read the novel alongside another preface, also by Gautier—that to his earlier collection of short stories, *Les Jeunes France: romans goguenards* (1833). Here, Gautier parodies the relationship between author, preface, and main text by taking on the persona of an overly anxious author, exploiting the opportunity to directly address his audience by giving instructions on how to properly enjoy his book. This persona chattily addresses his reader ("mon cher monsieur ou ma belle dame") ["my dear sir or my beautiful lady"]⁹, whom he would like to believe reads prefaces, "pour l'honneur de votre esprit et de votre jugement" (Gautier, Preface to *JF* 23) ["for the honor of your wit and judgment"]. But for his editor, who requires a pretext for the table of contents, this author would gladly have the preface take up the whole book. As a compromise, he proposes placing the preface immediately before the table of contents, thus allowing the reader to make up his own novel¹⁰: "sa fiction vaudrait probablement mieux que la réalité, et d'ailleurs il est plus agréable de faire un roman que de le lire" (Gautier, Preface to *JF* 24) ["her fiction would probably fetch more than the reality, and besides it is more agreeable to write a novel than to read one"]. What would result is a book consisting entirely of publisher's addenda, conceding the task of literary artistry

⁹ All translations of *Les Jeunes France* are my own.

¹⁰ In French publications, the table of contents appears at the end of the book; thus, Gautier's persona would like his book to have preliminary content (preface) and concluding content (table of contents) only.

to the purchaser's imagination. But if the task of writing a book is really more enjoyable than reading it, why would the author prefer not to write? This move suggests the author's feelings of inferiority about his own writing (which could not possibly be as interesting to the reader as the reader's own), as well as a desire to please the reader (which, in his case, means giving her as little to read as possible).

As the preface goes on, one comes to understand the multiplicity of anxieties that Gautier's authorial persona harbors concerning the reader's encounter with his writing. The author continues to coax his reader away from the stories that follow the preface, hoping to convert her to his deviant "système" of only reading prefaces, tables of content, dictionaries, and catalogues. The reasons for doing so, he argues, are logical and manifold: "C'est une précieuse économie de temps et de fatigue: tout est là, les mots et les idées" of the author, "sa pensée la plus chère" (Gautier, Preface to *JF* 24, 25) ["It's a precious economy of time and energy: everything is there, the words and the ideas" of the author, "his most cherished thoughts"]. One does not have to read the rest, having "le germe" of the author's idea in the preface and "le fruit" in the table of contents (Gautier, Preface to *JF* 24). Thus convincing the reader to disregard his writing, the author saves her from the proverbial tedium of watching the grass grow. Boredom, then, seems to be one possibility this author-persona takes some pains to deny his reader—the writer's "words and ideas" contained in the fiction can be peremptorily condensed in the preface, sparing the reader further effort.

But still the reader continues to approach the text. Failing to deter her, the author has recourse to other tactics: he reaffirms the importance of the preface—and thus of his own presence—but as a means of building suspense, of setting the scene, and of delaying gratification:

Il en est des livres comme des femmes: les uns ont des préfaces, les autres n'en ont pas; les unes se rendent tout de suite, les autres font une longue résistance; mais tout finit toujours de même... par la fin. Cela est triste et banal; cependant que diriez-vous d'une femme qui irait se jeter tout d'abord à votre tête? Vous lui diriez comme le More de Venise à Desdemona:

..... à bas, prostituée. (Gautier, Preface to *JF* 24)

[There are books like women: the first have prefaces, the others do not; the first give themselves away all at once, the others launch a long resistance; but all finish in the same manner... by the end. It is sad and banal; nevertheless what would you say of a woman who, by way of introduction, would throw herself at your head? You would say, as did the Moor of Venice to Desdemona:

.....Down, strumpet! (Gautier, Preface to *JF* 24)]

Though the rendez-vous always ends in the necessarily disappointing satisfaction of desire, the preface provides the difference between a book that is read quickly and carelessly (with only "la fin" in mind) and one that is savored before it is devoured, a mistress trained in the slow art of seduction. One should not abuse the book, carrying it quickly to his bedside and dirtying its pages with his fingers, but rather allow one's self first to be charmed by its preface:

La préface, c'est la pudeur du livre, c'est sa rougeur, ce sont les demi-aveux, les soupirs étouffés, les coquettes agaceries, c'est tout le charme; c'est la jeune fille qui reste long-temps à dénouer sa ceinture et à délayer son corset avant d'entrer au lit où son amoureux l'attend.

Quel est le stupide, quel est l'homme assez peu voluptueux pour lui dire:

Dépêche-toi! (Gautier, Preface to *JF* 25)

[The preface is the prudery of the book, it is its blush, it is the muted confessions, the stifled sighs, the coquettish teasing, it is all its charm; it is the young girl who waits a long time to undo her girdle and unlace her corset before getting into bed where her lover is waiting.

Who is the idiot, who is the man so unsensual that he would tell her: Hurry up!

(Gautier, Preface to *JF* 25)]

By supplying a preface, then, the author all but guarantees the most pleasure possible for the reader with the book. By delaying the reader's eventual encounter with the text, the preface preserves some mystery, checking the reader's impulse to speed straight to the end. Besides, so often the text disappoints, just as "le corset et la chemise dissimulent souvent une épaule convexe et une gorge concave" (Gautier, Preface to *JF* 25) ["the corset and the shirt often fail to conceal a convex shoulder and a concave throat"].

Yet here, too, the author's apology for the preface aims to delay the reading of the book that follows, as well as the reader's encounter with its narrative, seemingly inevitably "triste et banal." The pleasure of the text is guaranteed only by the reader's sustained lack of access to it; what is savored by the reader are the author's words and ideas rather than encountering the fiction he has created. Accordingly, all that needs to be read is the preface, "sa pensée la plus chère." Sensing the failure of his attempts to keep the reader to this narrowly specified course, the narrator of Gautier's preface launches into a paroxysm of loquacity:

Seulement je profite de l'occasion pour causer avec vous, je fais comme ces bavards impitoyables qui vous prennent par un bouton de votre habit, monsieur; par le bout de votre gant blanc, madame, et vous acculent dans un coin du salon pour se dégorger de toutes les balivernes qu'ils ont amassées pendant un quart d'heure de silence. En honneur, ce n'est pas pour autre chose. Je n'ai pas grand'chose à faire ni vous non plus, je pense. (Gautier, Preface to *JF* 25-6)

[Only I profit from this occasion to chat with you, I am like these pitiless gossips who take you by the button of your coat, sir; by the end of your white glove, madame, and corner you so as to spew forth all the nonsense that they have accumulated during a quarter of an hour of silence. Upon my honor, it is for no other reason. I have nothing much else to do and neither do you, I think.]

It becomes all too clear: the author declares that what we want in reading is himself, his ideas, leaving unacknowledged the reader's experience of the text (his or her "choses à faire") still to come. And indeed, the author's argument has some merit to it: if a reader reads to know the author's most cherished ideas, then why venture beyond the preface? Why not convert to his suggested system of reading only prefaces, tables, and catalogs? By pummeling the reader with such arguments, Gautier challenges his readers to reject the author's proposed system as deficient, and to insist upon their readings of and reactions to the text despite mounting protest from an increasingly desperate authorial persona. Besides, by insisting on the importance of his role as overseer of the *amour* between reader and book, this persona quickly wears out his welcome, his overly present voice striking the reader's ear as obnoxious and undesirable.¹¹ His

¹¹It is interesting to linger on the authorial persona's designation of the prefaceless book as "prostituée," since it lacks the "pudeur" of the preface to slow its advances with its reader. Given the nature of the author's anxiety,

continued presence will only kill the mood—which, the reader suspects, has been his aim all along: rather than fearing his reader's failure to take the appropriate care with his wares, the author worries the reader will fall in love and abscond with them—leaving both author and his "système" terribly neglected. The last recourse for an author so anxious to be heard is his outflowing of language, "à faire noire trois ou quatre cents pages blanches qui ne l'ont pas mérité" (Gautier, Preface to *JF* 26) ["to needlessly render black three- or four-hundred white pages"]: he creates the "petite débâcle de clics" that is the babbling text. This text, as Barthes says, is in need of writing; yet writing, as Barthes also says in "The Death of the Author," "is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin," "the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (page). The insufferable, clinging presence of the author must be cast away before writing can begin, before a reading can take place, before a text can be produced. Only then will the reader's boredom and pleasure—illicit activities hitherto precluded by the author's frigidity—be in play, and play across the text.

III. "Beaucoup de choses sont ennuyeuses": The Authorial Obstacle, Continued

Frigidity is indeed a potential problem for an author. Having written in *S/Z* that every narrative has desire at its origin, in *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes contrasts desirous narrative to the babbling text, which is "en somme un texte frigide [...], avant que ne s'y forme le désir, la névrose" (12) ["then a frigid text [...], until desire, until neurosis forms in it"]. The text without desire is a blank, a "petit débâcle de clics" which results from the presence of only a single voice, the imperious voice of the author. Having everything it could want in itself, this text neglects to

however, one might speculate that the book is designated "prostituée" due to the unsanctioned pleasure it gives to its reader (then again, prostitution in Paris had been highly regulated since the turn of the century...).

acknowledge or solicit the reader's wandering curiosity (for surely the reader's curiosity inclines only toward the author's most cherished ideas!).

While the text without desire asserts itself as a totality, the subject without desire keenly senses the poverty, in himself or the world (or both), which prevents him from directing his energies outward. Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips identifies this temporary lack of desire in the subject as boredom, a "state of suspended anticipation in which things are started and nothing begins, the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire" (68). Drawing on Winnicott, and thus primarily concerned with childhood boredom, Phillips argues that this sustained lack of desire is a developmental achievement for a subject learning to be independent.¹² Both analysts propose that as the subject negotiates his budding independence, boredom acts as an affective cocoon from which he is eventually summoned by his feelings to reengage with his environment and the objects therein. The time spent in boredom is often agonizing, as the manner by which the subject will reengage—toward what object or what project he will ultimately turn—is unknown. Yet boredom, in its very diffuseness, "makes tolerable for him the impossible experience of waiting for something without knowing what it could be," and in fact serves as a "defense against waiting," since waiting presumes that one has already committed to a desired object of some kind (Phillips 77, 76). The importance of boredom lies thus in the subject's ability to exist, for a time, without an orientation towards anything in particular. Only in this state of deferred desire, in the absence of an object, can he learn to be "'brave enough to let his feelings develop' [...] and by doing so commit himself, or rather, entrust himself, to the inevitable elusiveness of that object" (Phillips 78). Phillips describes boredom as a "developmental achievement" because on each occasion the

¹² Phillips accordingly identifies boredom as one of several kinds of "holding environments," a concept developed by Winnicott.

subject discovers, in relation to an external stimulus—what Winnicott calls the "transitional object"—the internal capacity to overcome his own detachment: by allowing his interests to emerge from a signifying restlessness, the subject realizes his own independence as well as that of the "interesting" object or person.

Applying Phillips' schema to Barthes' babble text, we find some productive similarities. Most strikingly, Barthes' choice of "babil" (translated to English by Richard Miller as "prattle") refers to the pre-linguistic utterances of babies, or "nourrissons" in Barthes' text: children still at the breast, whose relationship to the world/mother is primarily narcissistic (*Plaisir* 12). Barthes reinforces this connection, describing the language of "ce texte-babil" as the result of "les mouvements d'une succion sans objet, d'une oralité indifférenciée, coupée de celle qui produit les plaisirs de la gastrosophie et du langage" (*Plaisir* 12) ["the motions of ungratified sucking, of an undifferentiated orality, intersecting the orality which produces the pleasures of gastrosophy and of language" (*Pleasure* 5)]. The narcissism of the babbling text, the dominance of the author's voice and thus of his meaning, prevents the text from making overtures to its reader: just as the world/mother does not yet exist for the infant in its primary narcissistic stage, the reader does not exist for the author of the babble text. The way a non-babbling text expresses desire for this reader is, again, through writing: "Le texte que vous écrivez doit me donner la preuve *qu'il me désire*. Cette preuve existe: c'est l'écriture" (Barthes, *Plaisir* 13-14) ["The text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*. This proof exists: it is writing" (Barthes, *Pleasure* 6)], the Kama Sutra of language. A multiplicity of codes and speakers present in the text, "writing" emerges as the author recedes (or "dies"); the single voice is displaced by a polyphony, acknowledging and inviting the reader's capacity to navigate them herself. Desire, in both the case of the individual and the text, forms the link to the waiting world or reader.

Though both the babbling text and the bored individual can be described as "blanks" in their incommunicativeness and isolation, one crucial dissimilarity remains: if reestablishing a connection to the world is always the problem (and solution) for the bored subject, it is not so for the self-satisfied babbling text. It is certainly boring ("Ce texte m'ennuie. On dirait qu'il *babille*"), but its absence of desire does not register as a deficiency—the babbling text does not contain, as Phillips says, a "wish for a desire." The danger this frigidity presents for the text and its narrative is clear: if desire is the thing that invites a reader, then a text which manages to exist without desire offers its reader very little and will eventually drop from her hands. I argue that Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, while not a babble text itself, contains such a text, as well as a bored subject who attempts to read it.

While boredom as lack of desire abounds in this novel, Barthes' claim that every narrative has desire at its origin holds true, as it opens with the desire for writing itself: a man named Silvio, entirely absent save for his role as addressee, has asked for a letter from his friend, the Chevalier d'Albert. D'Albert obliges, with the caveat that he has nothing to write. Lacking excitement or variety in his life, he can only relate the boredom that permeates it so thoroughly that even his dreams are monotonous. Such a letter can hardly be fresh or interesting, but, d'Albert reminds Silvio: "Tu l'auras voulu" (Gautier, *MM* 43) ["It is what you have asked for" (Gautier, *MM* 40)]. Besides, boredom is not wholly disagreeable to d'Albert: certainly he is horribly bored, "mais d'une manière tranquille et résignée, qui ne manque pas d'une certaine douceur que je comparerais assez volontiers à ces jours d'automne pâles et tièdes auxquels on trouve un charme secret après les ardeurs excessives de l'été" (Gautier, *MM* 41-2) ["but in a quiet and resigned fashion which is not wholly disagreeable to me. I could compare it to those pale, warm autumn days whose subtle charms we relish after the violent heat of summer" (Gautier,

MM 39)]. A studied aesthete, the beauty of subtler human experiences is not lost to him, especially when the boredom apparently points to previous "ardeurs excessives."¹³ While d'Albert complains that his days in no way resemble the strange novels he "devours," and though his valet has seen more of the world than he, his boredom—like his peculiar readings and his valet—serves as a mark of distinction. Even in a later letter, when he reports engagement in a bustle of activities that most would equate with "living," d'Albert is sure to add, "je ne prends pourtant pas autant de part à ce mouvement que l'on pourrait le croire. —L'agitation est très peu profonde, et à quelques brasses on retrouverait l'eau morte et sans courant; la vie ne me pénètre pas si facilement que cela" (Gautier, *MM* 248) ["this bustle does not affect me as much as you might think. My agitation is only skin deep, and with a few strokes you would soon reach still, stagnant water. Life does not penetrate my being as easily as all that" (Gautier, *MM* 224)]. Thus it would seem that d'Albert, though bored, has no desire to be otherwise, and indeed considers active engagement with others and the world a kind of self-betrayal.

However, d'Albert's letters yield more than a dull chronicle of his eventless life—surely *not* what Silvio has asked for. As Adam Phillips states, boredom ends with the advent of desire, and it becomes clear, to d'Albert as well as to his reader, that he possesses desires of his own after all. First, d'Albert confesses his desire to confess ("Aussi je serai exactement vrai, —même dans les choses petites et honteuses; ce n'est pas devant toi, à coup sûr, que je me draperai" (Gautier 43)) ["So I shall tell you the unadulterated truth, even the petty, embarrassing details. I shall certainly not try to hide anything from you" (Gautier, *MM* 41)], and then his ultimate desire, a mistress. This latter desire reveals itself gradually, initially emerging "[s]ous ce linceul

¹³ The "ardeurs excessives" of the French text is more ambiguous than Constantine's translation to "violent heat of the summer"; the English "ardors" would be a better translation, as it is closer to the French both in spelling and in meaning, denoting both heat and passion or eagerness.

d'ennui nonchalant et affaîssé" (Gautier, *MM* 43) ["from under this pall of gloom and despondency" (Gautier, *MM* 41)] in the form of a nervous energy. D'Albert describes intense spells of neurotic behavior in which he roams the streets disheveled, keenly aware of the sense of yearning which has imposed itself suddenly upon his life. Yet if Silvio were to ask him what ails him, he would hardly know how to respond: just as he hurtles through the streets toward no particular destination, he tells Silvio "Je n'ai pas d'espérance, car, pour espérer, il faut un désir, une certaine propension à souhaiter que les choses tournent d'une manière plutôt que d'une autre. Je ne désire rien, car je désire tout [...]. —J'attends, —quoi? Je ne sais, mais j'attends" (Gautier, *MM* 45) ["I do not hope; for in order to hope you need to hope *for* something, for things to turn out one way rather than another. I desire nothing, because I desire everything [...]. I am waiting for something—but for what? I do not know. I am merely waiting" (Gautier, *MM* 42)]. Waiting pays off: in the absence of any forced distractions, d'Albert's feelings develop, as described by Phillips and Winnicott—occasionally "l'idée se précise davantage" (Gautier, *MM* 46) ["takes on more substance" (Gautier, *MM* 43)], acquiring the shape of a beautiful woman whom d'Albert might find waiting for him one day at his home, or meet by chance several times at church or the theater. The essence of d'Albert's fantasy lies not only in the presence of this woman, but also in her sudden materialization, seemingly in answer to a desire of which d'Albert had not yet become conscious while in his default state of complacent melancholy.

According to Winnicott's account, boredom is dispelled once the subject's interest inclines toward a present or merely possible object, and activity resumes: D'Albert identifies a mistress as the thing he most desires, and the narrative of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is set into motion. Accordingly, the desire that Barthes locates at the origin of every narrative is not static: "[p]our produire du récit, le désir doit cependant *varier*, entrer dans un système d'équivalences et

de métonymies; ou encore: pour se produire, le récit doit pouvoir *s'échanger*, s'assujétir à une économie" (S/Z 95) ["To produce narrative, desire must *vary*, must enter into a system of equivalents and metonymies; or: in order to be produced, narrative must be susceptible of *change*, must subject itself to an *economic system*" (S/Z 88)]. Every narrative raises the questions, What is the narrative worth? For what can it be exchanged? In exchange for his request for a letter, Silvio receives the tale of d'Albert's ennui and longing. But what will d'Albert receive for his narration? Who will be a third trader in this economy? To whom will d'Albert reach out, now that desire has seemingly replaced his boredom?

As his first letter goes on, one senses that d'Albert no longer writes primarily for Silvio, but for another, dearer reader. The only way to move this reader, to prove that he desires her, is through writing; the only way to determine her contours is through description:

Elle a vingt ans, —pas plus, ni moins non plus. —Elle n'est plus ignorante, et n'est pas encore blasée [...]. —Elle est d'une taille moyenne [...]. Quant à son embonpoint, elle est plutôt grasse que maigre [...]. Elle est blonde avec des yeux noirs, blanche comme une blonde, colorée comme une brune, quelque chose de rouge et de scintillant dans le sourire. La lèvre inférieure un peu large, la prunelle nageant dans un flot d'humide radical, la gorge ronde et petite, et en arrêt, les poignets minces, les mains longues et potelées, la démarche onduleuse comme une couleuvre debout sur sa queue [...]: —un caractère de beauté fin et ferme à la fois, élégant et vivace, poétique et réel; un motif de Giorgione exécuté par Rubens. (Gautier, *MM* 54)

[She is twenty years old,¹⁴ no more, no less. She is not uneducated but is not yet a woman of the world [...]. She is of middling height [...]. As to her size; plump rather than thin [...]. Blonde with black eyes, a fair complexion, a blonde with the colouring of a brunette, and a rosy, sparkling smile. She will have a rather wide bottom lip, eyes that are limpid pools, a small rounded bosom, thin wrists, long dimpled hands, and she will sway when she walks, like a snake walking on its tail [...]; the kind of fine, firm beauty which is both strong and elegant, real and poetic at the same time. A Giorgione painted in the manner of Rubens. (Gautier, *MM* 50-1)]

She will be neither a virgin nor a widow, nor married nor a mother. She will have tasty tears, will wear only silk, and will be extremely rich, as befits her beauty. D'Albert knows her voice, her footstep, and even affirms that "il est impossible qu'elle n'ait pas un des cinq ou six noms que je lui ai assignés dans ma tête" (Gautier, *MM* 54) ["It is impossible for her not to have one of the five or six names I have given her in my imagination" (Gautier, *MM* 50)]. Above all, and d'Albert takes care to mention this first, she must be literate:

Je me soucie assez peu de faire épeler l'alphabet d'amour à de petites niaiseries [...]. Je préfère les femmes qui lisent couramment, on est plus tôt arrivé à la fin du chapitre; et en toutes choses, et surtout en amour, ce qu'il faut considérer, c'est la fin. Je ressemble assez, de ce côté-là, à ces gens qui prennent le roman par la queue, et en lisent tout d'abord le dénouement, sauf à rétrograder ensuite jusqu'à la première page. (Gautier, *MM* 51)

¹⁴ Another emendation to the translation, which gives this fantasy woman's age as "twenty-six" when the French states "twenty."

[I care little for teaching the ABC of love to silly young girls [...]. I prefer women who can read fluently, you reach the end of the chapter more speedily. And in everything, but especially in love, what you have to consider is the end. In that respect I am rather like those who go to the last part of a novel and read the ending first; it is safe, then, to go back and retrace your steps to the first page. (Gautier, *MM* 48)]

Being fluent readers ourselves, we shall skip to the end of this tale to meet d'Albert's reader, who, from the novel's title alone, we always knew would come.

After several trials and errors, d'Albert takes a lover, though not the lover suggested by the title—thus the novel "blocks" the solution of its enigma, or the reaching of its climax, by giving a false answer (Barthes, *S/Z* 54). He vacations with this lover, whom he refers to as Rosette,¹⁵ in a country cottage, planning eventually to break himself free of the relationship. A friend from Rosette's past arrives—the gallant Théodore de Séranes—and d'Albert is stricken: but for one significant exception, Théodore is in every way the mistress whose contours he has outlined in poetry and prose. After much thought and several letters to Silvio, d'Albert's resistance gives way to paeans to the ancients and the tortured declaration, “'j'aime un homme!” (Gautier, *MM* 184) ["I am in love with a man!" (Gautier, *MM* 166)]. This is yet another snare for Gautier's reader: we learn from a set of letters appearing later in the text, written by a woman to a confidante named Graciosa, that Théodore is none other than the writer and titular Mademoiselle de Maupin who has left home in men's garb to find a man worthy enough to call her lover, if such a one exists. A performance of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, in which

¹⁵ The name is both a marker of the fact that she wore pink when they first met, a diminutive, inferior version of the later Rosalinde (Barsoum 34), as well as the name of a dog he once had and loved.

Théodore plays the cross-dressing Rosalinde to d'Albert's Orlando, encourages d'Albert to confess his love in a letter to him (which the novel's narrator does not reproduce in the text); Théodore responds by appearing to d'Albert as Rosalinde, confirming d'Albert's suspicion that Théodore is really a woman. Rosalinde makes passionate, repeated love for the first time to d'Albert, then again to the smitten Rosette (although the narrator impishly claims uncertainty of this latter event), and then disappears forever, writing to d'Albert that, had she stayed, he would have become as bored of her as he was of Rosette or his best horse.

How can it be that d'Albert would tire so soon of his ideal, his dear reader? As a writer, surely d'Albert differs from the babbling preface persona of *Les Jeunes France* discussed in the previous section: rather than admonish "le stupide" who would speed to the climax of a novel and neglect the full charm of the author's prose, d'Albert asserts the supreme importance of "la fin," always reading it first. Though both describe the affinity between reading and sex, the preface writer indefinitely delays reader pleasure in order to prolong his own, while d'Albert wants to stage his reader's pleasure as quickly as possible. However, unlike the preface narrator, who seems anxiously aware of and eager to detract from his authorial deficiencies, d'Albert's efforts to please his reader derive from his confidence that her pleasure will dovetail with his own. But, as we have already noted alongside Barthes, to write in pleasure does not guarantee the pleasure of the reader. Certainly, d'Albert has described his ideal lover to himself and to Silvio, but does preparing a list of mandatory attributes count as anything like writing, the Kama Sutra of language?

It may be that d'Albert's problem, and the problem that the novel stages and explores, is one of contact with his reader. Previous studies of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* have remarked upon its unconventional style, observing that the lengthiness, almost unilateral address, and

arrangement of its letters inhibit rather than facilitate communication among characters and between text and reader. Jean-Marie Roulin notes that both d'Albert's and Madelaine's letters are longer than what is traditionally demanded by the epistolary form, which generally follows "une esthétique de la brièveté, du changement du point de vue; elle se construit sur le jeu des lettres et de leurs réponses, dialogues aux répliques différées" (32) ["an aesthetic of brevity, of change in point of view; epistolary form is constructed on the play of letters and their responses, dialogues of delayed refutations" (my translation)]. Gautier's evident manipulation of the epistolary form, Roulin argues, underlies his characters' difficulty in finding the proper medium and style for the expression of their nascent identities. Additionally, the novel's many instances of reflexivity—letters dispatched to absent correspondents by writers who seem to write only for themselves, conversations between characters reproduced in the text as play dialogue, a stage play's revelation of Théodore's true identity—all "souligne[nt] une irréparable séparation entre le sujet et le monde" (Roulin 33) ["underline an irreparable separation between subject and world" (my translation)]. Marlène Barsoum explains the function of the overly long letters as that of "autoanalysis," a means by which characters, d'Albert in particular, are able to read themselves rather than bear news to their addressee. This intently reflexive structure is occasionally broken up by the novel's narrator, whose tongue-in-cheek observations make up the sixth, seventh, and sixteenth chapters. This narrator necessarily clarifies the relationship between d'Albert's and Madelaine's letters, describing from a third-person perspective the characters' interactions and reactions. Thankfully, Barsoum writes, these intrusions "brin[g] about a move from a descriptive structure (discours) to a narrative structure (récit)," and offer a voice that "pretends to share in the reader's ignorance regarding the fate of his characters" (24). Otherwise, d'Albert's letters comprising nine of seventeen chapters, the novel's reader is largely limited to d'Albert's visions

of the ideal, his pinings for Théodore/Rosalinde, and his philosophical excursions on aesthetics, beauty, and their disparate incarnations within paganism and Christianity. In brief, d'Albert makes no earnest overtures toward either his or Gautier's reader, a deficiency rendered prominent by the amiable contrast of the narrator. This narrator, Barsoum asserts, recognizes and shares the reader's growing fatigue with d'Albert's romantic imagery, his long-windedness, and his inaction, establishing a rapport with the reader which d'Albert's writing fails to achieve. Barsoum lingers on the narrator's playful derision of d'Albert's suffering in chapter sixteen—here, the narrator describes d'Albert as he contemplates his options in the absence of a reply to his first love-letter to Théodore:

Il songeait à se jeter dans la rivière, mais l'eau lui semblait bien noire et bien froide, et l'exemple du cygne ne le persuadait qu'à demi; à se brûler la cervelle, mais il n'avait ni pistolet ni poudre, et il eût été fâché d'en avoir [...]. Il finit par s'arrêter à quelque chose de beaucoup plus affreux... à écrire une seconde lettre.

O sextuple butor!

Il en était là de sa méditation, lorsqu'il sentit se poser sur son épaule—une main—pareille à une petite colombe qui descend sur un palmier [...].

La main était emmanchée au bout d'un bras qui répondait à une épaule faisant partie d'un corps, lequel n'était autre chose que Théodore-Rosalinde, mademoiselle d'Aubigny, ou Madelaine de Maupin, pour l'appeler de son véritable nom.

Qui fut étonné? —Ce n'est ni moi ni vous, car vous et moi nous étions préparés de longue main à cette visite; ce fut d'Albert qui ne s'y attendait pas le moins du monde.

(Gautier, *MM* 360-1)

[He contemplated throwing himself into the river, but the water seemed to him very cold and black, and the example set by the swan went only halfway to persuading him; he thought of blowing his brains out, but he had neither pistol nor gunpowder, and he would have been annoyed had he had any [...]. In the end he did something much more dreadful than that: he wrote a second letter.

Six times a fool!

He was exactly at that point in his meditations when he felt a hand alight on his shoulder, just like a little dove descending on a palm tree [...].

The hand belonged to an arm which was joined to a shoulder whose body was none other than that of Théodore-Rosalind, Mademoiselle d'Aubigny or Madelaine de Maupin, to give her her proper name.

Who found this surprising? Not you or I, for both you and I have been most painstakingly prepared for this visit. It was d'Albert, who was not in the least expecting it. (Gautier, *MM* 325)]

Just as d'Albert's letters are referred to by the narrator as "affreux," Gautier's reader welcomes their interruption by a mischievous narrator: events which heretofore have been reported in utmost sadness and gravity by d'Albert are here presented with some distance and levity.

Barsoum reads this passage as an instance in which "Gautier mocks not only his characters but makes fun of his own writing style, thus drawing the reader's attention to it" and establishing "a 'fiction d'un discours,' a complicity between reader and writer, thus assuring continuity in the novel by their mutual presence and mutual assistance" (25). With a jubilant pun ("nous étions préparés *de longue main*"), the narrator gives a nod to the ability he shares with the reader to

correctly identify "la main" on d'Albert's shoulder, and acknowledges the narrative continuity of this event as the anticipated outcome of previous events. In this way, Gautier the author seeks out his reader and "[u]n espace de la jouissance est alors créé," (Barthes, *Plaisir* 11) ["A site of bliss is then created" (Barthes, *Pleasure* 4)] a space where the reader's experience and desire are addressed and where play and pleasure are made possible.

Such insertions are indeed made necessary (and welcome) by d'Albert's negligence towards Gautier's reader. But with regard to his own reader, and in answer to my earlier question, How could d'Albert tire so soon of his ideal reader, Madelaine? I argue, similarly to Marlène Barsoum, that d'Albert never writes explicitly for this reader in the first place. Though he values "la fin" of a narrative, the climax of the sensual encounter between reader and writer, he is all too assured that whatever he writes, and who he is, corresponds to what the reader desires. His writing thus serves as a means of articulating (to himself) the complex nature of his feelings and experiences, with the implied hope that this writing, void of outward address or solicitation, will appeal to another. Unable to rouse himself to a sustained plan of action by which he might attract a mistress, d'Albert extols the attractions of isolation and inaction; here, he compares himself favorably to the vulgar majority of young men:

Il est vrai que ces espèces encombrant les salons, font la roue devant tous les soleils et sont toujours couchées au dos de quelque fauteuil, tandis que moi je reste à la maison, le front appuyé contre la vitre, à regarder fumer la rivière et monter le brouillard, tout en élevant silencieusement dans mon coeur le sanctuaire parfumé, le temple merveilleux où je dois loger l'idole future de mon âme. (Gautier, *MM* 49)

[These creatures really clutter up the drawing-rooms, showing off in front of every star, and are always lying around in some armchair or other; whereas I stay at home, my face pressed to the glass, watching the mist rise from the river and the fog thicken, and building in my heart the perfumed sanctuary, the wondrous temple where I shall one day place the idol of my soul. (Gautier, *MM* 46)]

While he admits elsewhere that passivity is not a winning strategy for courtship, the breeding and education of desirable young ladies preventing them from taking the lead, d'Albert values his boredom as evidence of his superiority of mind and sensitivity of soul—in short, as evidence of his desirability. And if d'Albert is desirable, it should follow that others will find him out.

Earlier in his first letter to Silvio, d'Albert elaborates:

J'espère, J'aime, je désire, et mes désirs sont tellement violents que je m'imagine qu'ils feront tout venir à eux comme un aimant doué d'une grande puissance attire à lui des parcelles de fer, encore qu'elles en soient fort éloignées. —C'est pourquoi j'attends les choses que je souhaite, au lieu d'aller à elles [...]. —Un autre écrirait un billet le plus amoureux du monde à la divinité de son coeur, ou chercherait l'occasion de s'en rapprocher. —Moi, je demande au messager la réponse à une lettre que je n'ai pas écrite [...]. (Gautier, *MM* 46)

[I hope, I love, I desire, and my desires are so strong I am convinced they will pull things towards them just as a powerful magnet attracts iron filings even from a great way off. That is why I wait for the things I long for to come to me instead of my going towards them [...]. Another man would write the world's most passionate love letter to his heart's

desire or would try to engineer some occasion when they might meet. Yet I ask the messenger to give me a reply to a letter I haven't written. (Gautier, *MM* 43-4)]

Wishing for a response to a letter one has not yet written accords nicely with Phillips' formulation of boredom as "a wish for a desire," and, going further, wishing for the fulfillment of a desire one has not yet conceived. But while d'Albert may be "brave enough to let his feelings develop" from boredom to desire, it is questionable whether he is equally brave in attaining that which he claims to want. Unlike the bored-to-interested child described by Phillips, for whom becoming interested involves the recognition of both his own autonomy and that of others and his environment, d'Albert cherishes an implicit belief in his own omnipotence; now that he has discovered his own desire, so must the world. The independence of the objects or persons of his interest are obscured by his description of them as so many "parcelles de fer," ineluctably drawn by the strength of his yearning.

No passage in the book better details d'Albert's commitment to boredom than the opening of Chapter XI, d'Albert's eighth letter to Silvio:

Beaucoup de choses sont ennuyeuses: il est ennuyeux de rendre l'argent qu'on avait emprunté, et qu'on s'était accoutumé à regarder comme à soi; il est ennuyeux de caresser aujourd'hui la femme qu'on aimait hier; il est ennuyeux d'aller dans une maison à l'heure du dîner, et de trouver que les maîtres sont partis pour la campagne depuis un mois; il est ennuyeux de faire un roman, et plus ennuyeux de le lire; il est ennuyeux d'avoir un bouton sur le nez et les lèvres gercées le jour où l'on va rendre visite à l'idole de son coeur; il est ennuyeux d'être chaussé de bottes facétieuses, souriant au pavé par toutes leurs coutures, et surtout de loger le vide derrière les toiles d'araignée de son gousset; il

est ennuyeux d'être portier; il est ennuyeux d'être empereur; il est ennuyeux d'être soi, et même d'être un autre; il est ennuyeux d'aller à pied parce que l'on se fait mal à ses cors, à cheval parce que l'on s'écorche l'antithèse du devant, en voiture parce qu'un gros homme se fait inmanquablement un oreiller de votre épaule, sur le paquebot parce que l'on a le mal de mer et qu'on se vomit tout entier; —il est ennuyeux d'être en hiver parce que l'on grelotte, et en été parce qu'on sue; mais ce qu'il y a de plus ennuyeux sur terre, en enfer et au ciel, c'est assurément une tragédie, à moins que ce ne soit un drame ou une comédie.
(Gautier, *MM* 231)

[Many things are tiresome: it is tiresome to have to pay back money you have borrowed when you have become used to the idea that it is yours; it is tiresome to have to make love today with the woman you loved yesterday; it is tiresome to go visiting at dinner time and discover the owners went to the country a month before; it is tiresome to write a novel and even more tiresome to read it; it is tiresome to have chapped lips and a pimple on your nose the very day you are going to see the idol of your heart; it is tiresome to wear ridiculous boots, which split wide open and gape at the ground beneath your feet and it is especially tiresome to have nothing at the bottom of your pocket behind the spider's webs; it is tiresome to be a porter, it is tiresome to be an emperor, it is tiresome to be you or even anyone else; it is tiresome to travel on foot because your corns hurt, on horseback because you make your backside sore, in a carriage because a fat man is sure to use your shoulder as a pillow, on a ferry boat because you get seasick and vomit your insides up; winter is tiresome because you shiver, and summer because you sweat; but the most tiresome thing in the whole world, in heaven or in hell, is without any doubt whatsoever a tragedy—unless it be a comedy or a drama. (Gautier, *MM* 209)]

D'Albert's concluding observation on drama segues into an account of his staging of *As You Like It*, a play belonging to the fantastical category of theater which he likes very much. More important to analysis of d'Albert's character, however, is what has preceded, in earlier chapters, his catalog of the boring: this letter comes three chapters after d'Albert's angst-ridden confession of love for a man, and immediately follows the first letter written by Madelaine/Théodore to Graciosa, in which she recounts a night spent at an inn where her yearning to lose her virginity to a young horseman is checked at the last possible moment by obstructive bedclothes. As both principal characters (and perhaps even the novel's reader) have been worked into emotional and sexual fervor at various points prior to Chapter XI, d'Albert's return to the bored mode in which we first encountered him is striking, and even disappointing. If boredom is not an implicit stake in the game of desire between reader and writer, but is rather the preferred default mode of one of the parties, then there can not be a game, or at least not a game with an even playing field, with equal stakes for each player. Though d'Albert's text attempts to describe his desire for a mistress, his prose turns repeatedly to his own difference from and superiority to other men, to his own desirability, and to his own comfort in dissatisfaction. Ultimately, his text inscribes his preference for boredom rather than his desire for others, his lack. Even his yearning, which would ordinarily signify lack, signals for d'Albert its impending gratification: the guarantee of the existence of his imagined ideal, and of this ideal's complicity with his desires. D'Albert's text is, accordingly, a babbling text, participating not in the "perversion" of neurosis that forms the kernel of writing, but in simple, unilateral demand (Barthes, *Plaisir* 12).

IV. Producing the Text: The Beautiful Reader

Though d'Albert is limited to his demands, it is only fair to say that Gautier structures his novel around these demands. As mentioned above, the title alone assures us that a young woman by the name of "Maupin" will appear on the scene, and we can infer from the problem posed by d'Albert's pining, unrequited even by the ravishing Rosette, as well as by the expectations set by his exacting description of her attributes, that her appearance will provide the necessary referent and absent object. I argue, however, that d'Albert's demands upon his reader are thus belabored in order to render all the more strident the ways in which this reader fulfills and defies them. The titular mademoiselle is able to do so because she is a better reader—more attentive to details and more widely read—than d'Albert had envisioned. As evidenced in her smashing performance as Rosalinde, she is a reader of drama, and even occasionally plays a character. Here, she writes to her friend Graciosa of her most irksome role, but a role that she has long studied and assumed: “Nous autres [women], notre vie est claire et se peut pénétrer d'un regard. [C]e que nous faisons n'est un mystère pour personne [...]. Notre affaire principale, c'est de nous tenir bien droites, bien corsées, bien busquées, l'oeil convenablement baissé, et de surpasser en immobilité et en roideur les mannequins et les poupées à ressorts" (Gautier, *MM* 211) [“For us women, life is straightforward and can be taken in at a glance [...]. What we do is no mystery to anybody [...]. Our main business in life is to stand up straight, laced and corseted, our eyes suitably cast down, and to outdo stuffed dummies and marionettes in our stiffness and our immobility” (Gautier, *MM* 190)]. From this statement, one gets the impression that she has been closely studying d'Albert's prose. Her womanly charm lies partly in her ability to please the eye, to live in two dimensions, a Giorgione painted in the manner of Rubens. Indeed, d'Albert has written to Silvio that women are “des tableaux qui n'ont pas besoin de cadre” [“pictures which require no framing”], more

convenient than statues because one has to walk around a statue in order to get the full effect, “ce qui est fatigant” (Gautier, *MM* 200) [“which is tiresome” (Gautier, *MM* 181)]. Each woman that has paraded before his imagination has been a doll, “un hochet plus intelligent que s’il était d’ivoire ou d’or, et qui se relève lui-même si on le laisse tomber à terre” (Gautier, *MM* 194) [“a toy, more intelligent than one made of ivory or gold and which gets up again all on its own when you let it fall” (Gautier, *MM* 175)]. Despite Wayne Booth's assertion that “the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement,” the limitations of d'Albert's projections of his perfect mistress in no way guarantee that Madelaine will be satisfied by d'Albert, or that she will agree with the image of her he has created. For such a reader as Madelaine, endless evocations of Pygmalion and Galatea become tiresome.¹⁶ His visions are rather conventional, to which he himself admits in true romantic style. Describing his first meeting with his ideal mistress, he writes to Silvio that he will first see her “par un beau coucher de soleil [...], une pièce d'eau où se joue le cygne familier” (Gautier, *MM* 55-6) [“in the evening; there will be a beautiful sunset [...], a stretch of water with the familiar swan” (Gautier, *MM* 51-2)]. She will appear at a window of a chateau “mélancholiquement appuyée sur le balcon” [“leaning over the balcony in an attitude of melancholy”], will drop her glove, and d'Albert will return it with a kiss. Witty conversation, dinner, and a night of love ensue. “Tu vois qu'il n'y manque rien,” d'Albert reflects, “et que tout cela est parfaitement absurde” (Gautier, *MM* 56) [“Well,” d'Albert reflects, “there we have the complete picture and, as you can see, it is arrant nonsense” (Gautier, *MM* 52)].

¹⁶ “Cependant il y a quelque chose de grand et de beau à aimer une statue [...]; et qu'on ne peut espérer raisonnablement un second prodige pareil à l'histoire de Pygmalion”; “Je dégage bien en idée la svelte figure du bloc grossier”; “Elle resta donc sans aucun voile, ses vêtements tombés lui faisant une espèce de socle, dans tout l'éclat diaphane de sa belle nudité” (Gautier, *MM* 140, 249, 365-6) [“However, there is something fine and noble about being in love with a statue [...]; and you cannot reasonably expect an extraordinary thing like the story of Pygmalion to occur more than once”; “I can easily imagine what the slender form looks like in the coarse slab”; “So there she remained with nothing to hide her, in all her diaphanous, glorious nakedness, with her garments lying all around her forming a sort of pediment” (Gautier, *MM* 126, 225, 330)].

D'Albert's text is as deficient and boring to Madelaine as her own social confinement. Since she aims to read for pleasure, we must ask how d'Albert's prose fails to supply it. If the text of pleasure is the one in which the writing seeks out the reader by creating a "site of bliss" open to "the possibility of a dialectics of desire," an exchange, then the text of boredom must be like an old fogey directing his monologue at the nearest living person. Here, a previously quoted passage from *Le Plaisir du texte* evokes Madelaine's situation: "On me présente un texte. Ce texte m'ennuie. On dirait qu'il *babille*. Le babil du texte, c'est seulement cette écume de langage qui se forme sous l'effet d'un simple besoin d'écriture" (Barthes 11-12) ["I am offered a text. This text bores me. It might be said to *prattle*. The prattle of the text is merely that foam of language which forms by the effect of a simple need of writing" (Barthes 4-5)]. According to this passage, it can be said that d'Albert *écume*, or foams, rather than writes. Surely he is a poet, a master of description, a critic who in nineteenth-century style (though this is a novel shakily set in the seventeenth century) describes one art form (woman) with the terms of another (painting, sculpture). But maybe it is this proliferation of language that Madelaine finds so unexciting: a canvas, a Giorgione, a goddess, a golden automaton—such imagery is the tired foam of conventional prose, and this Venus refuses to be born out of it. She has read this book before. The writer may protest, however, that "La beauté (contrairement à la laideur) ne peut vraiment s'expliquer: elle se dit, s'affirme, se répète en chaque partie du corps mais ne se décrit pas" (Barthes, *S/Z* 40) ["Beauty (unlike ugliness) cannot really be explained: in each part of the body it stands out, repeats itself, but it does not describe itself" (Barthes, *S/Z* 33)]. The only way to evoke beauty in writing is to refer to other objects, and so beauty is always accompanied by "l'infini des codes" (Barthes, *S/Z* 41) ["an infinity of codes" (Barthes, *S/Z* 34)]. But in d'Albert's case, what we have is not an infinity of codes, but the same rigid aesthetic code—that of

Pygmalion—repeated again and again: as a consequence, when she arrives in the text, Madelaine is pigeonholed as “*déjà-écrit*,” already-written, prefigured by descriptions of a painting, a statue, a story (Barthes, *S/Z* 40). This babbling text leaves no room for her desire, for a dialectics of desire, a space of bliss. Barthes takes on the point of view of this all-too-determined reader:

Vous vous adressez à moi pour que je vous lise, mais je ne suis rien d’autre pour vous que cette adresse; je ne suis à vos yeux le substitut de rien, je n’ai aucune figure [...]; je ne suis pour vous ni un corps, ni même un objet (je m’en moquerais bien: ce n’est pas en moi l’âme qui réclame sa reconnaissance), mais seulement un champ, un vase d’expansion. (Barthes, *Plaisir* 12)

[You address yourself to me so that I may read you, but I am nothing to you except this address; in your eyes, I am the substitute for nothing, for no figure [...]; for you I am neither a body nor even an object (and I couldn’t care less: I am not the one whose soul demands recognition), but merely a field, a vessel for expansion. (Barthes, *Pleasure* 5)]

Here, the “I” is the reader created by the writer within the babbling text, and not the reader who shows up to read. In our case, Madelaine is she who comes to read, as well as she who reads to come. This text, as we have said, fails to excite her; satisfied with its own voice, it does not wish to hear hers at all.

She for whom life is largely forbidden chafes at the text which has already written her, called her by a hundred different names, and, when she craves to live freely in the world, turned her into a stiff dummy. In the place of such a text, Madelaine would rather “renvoyer le référent à l’invisible [...], affirmer le code sans en réaliser (sans en compromettre) l’origine” (Barthes, *S/Z*

41) ["refer the referent back to the invisible [...], affirm the code without realizing (without compromising) its original" (Barthes, *S/Z* 34)]. As a writer, she is much more terse than d'Albert, and becomes terser with experience. She writes to Graciosa that, whereas her first letter may have been rife with detail, subsequent letters will not be: "comme je n'étais jamais sortie, la moindre chose me semblait d'une importance énorme" (Gautier, *MM* 276) ["The slightest thing seemed to me enormously significant then, as I had never gone out before" (Gautier, *MM* 250)]. Likewise, in contrast to d'Albert's laborious description and dissection of his production of *As You Like It* (in which he pores over the subtleties of Theo's performance as a woman, its confirmation of his suspicions regarding his gender and amorous feelings for d'Albert, the suitability of the title's ambiguity to the current situation, etc), Madelaine writes briefly and irreverently, "Une comédie que nous jouâmes et dans laquelle je parus en femme le décida complètement. Je lui fis quelques oeillades équivoques, et je me servis de quelques passages de mon rôle, analogues à notre situation, pour l'enhardir et le pousser à se déclarer" (Gautier, *MM* 355) ["A play we were in, where I appeared as a woman, was the deciding factor. I made eyes at him a little suggestively and made use of a few passages in my part which were analogous to our situation to draw him out and force him into declaring himself" (Gautier, *MM* 321)]. And finally, under her pen, d'Albert's tortured communication to Madelaine becomes "une longue lettre, très pindarique, où il m'expliquait fort au long ce que je savais mieux que lui" (Gautier, *MM* 355) ["a long and very Pindaric kind of letter in which he expounded to me at great length what I knew better than he did" (Gautier, *MM* 321)]. Perhaps taking her cue from d'Albert's complaint that he is unproductive, "non par stérilité, mais par surabondance" (Gautier, *MM* 248) ["not through sterility but through superabundance" (Gautier, *MM* 224)], Madelaine

sheds superfluity and ornamentation—both feminine attributes—in order to ensure the production of her own text.

The desire at the origin of Madelaine's narrative, the wish that draws her out from her own boredom, is to no longer lead a life dictated by the social oppression and aesthetic conventions that limit ladies' experience to the niceties of the drawing room, and their representations to images of purity and/or perfection. Madelaine would like to learn something new—surely, she reads for pleasure, but, feeling that a traditional young ladies' education “se passe [...] à nous empêcher d'apprendre quelque chose” (Gautier, *MM* 212) [“prevent[s] us from learning anything” (Gautier, *MM* 191)], her pleasure lies now in self-instruction. Burning with a righteous desire for knowledge, Madelaine decides to become a man, and, as such, will write her own “trionphante biographie” (Gautier, *MM* 311). This is the writing that needs to be written, as she announces when she tells Graciosa, “Hélas! les femmes n'ont lu que le roman de l'homme et jamais son histoire” (Gautier, *MM* 210) [“Women, I am sorry to say, have only read the novel, and not the true history, of men's lives” (Gautier, *MM* 190)]. From her own desire for a new literature, she has inferred that other women share her discontent. More incredibly, her own experience of stifling social convention has enabled her to imagine that men also lead one life in polite society and another in the company of men. From her *fauteuil* she has observed that “Tous, les jeunes comme les vieux, me paraissaient avoir adopté uniformément un masque de convention, des sentiments de convention et un parler de convention lorsqu'ils étaient devant les femmes” (Gautier, *MM* 208) [“Both young and old, they all seem to be adopting a uniformly conventional mask, conventional sentiments and a conventional tone of voice when they were in the presence of women” (Gautier, *MM* 187)]. Convention's insistence on appropriate and predictable signs and surfaces must be undone, and so she trades the skirt for breeches, the

bodice for the doublet. Shedding one's habit marks a different and perhaps more robust kind of imagination than d'Albert can claim: Madelaine observes that he can not confess his love to her in person because for him "il est difficile de parler d'amour à quelqu'un qui a les mêmes habits que nous" (Gautier, *MM* 355) ["it is difficult to talk about love to someone who is wearing the same sort of clothes" (Gautier, *MM* 321)]—a statement rendered all the more empathetic by the fact that she herself, dressed in a woman's nightgown, has no trouble making love to Rosette during her last night at the cottage.

Whereas d'Albert's access to education in the arts, religion, and ancient philosophy ultimately prohibits him from action or creation, Madelaine gains new knowledge through a process of reduction, by casting away that which had previously determined her. As a man, she learns that men are not all monsters, that her horror of them was "poussée au dernier degré d'exagération" by her own ignorance, that many of them are "d'excellents garçons de très joviale humeur," and that, while cruel, "il y a souvent bien de l'amour dans leurs invectives" (Gautier, *MM* 338-39) ["totally exaggerated," "are good sorts, very jolly and sociable," "their insults are often mixed up with a fair amount of love" (Gautier, *MM* 305)]. This is not to say that she excuses their coarseness—she still despairs of finding a suitable male mate—but she is not above feeling a certain joy in being one of the guys, especially if such a way of being affords her the opportunity to develop and pursue her desires. She writes of her newfound freedom to Graciosa:

[S]i je n'avais pas pris cette résolution, folle en apparence, mais très sage au fond, de renoncer aux habits d'un sexe qui n'est le mien que matériellement et par hasard, j'eusse été fort malheureuse: j'aime les chevaux, l'escrime, tous les exercices violents, je me plais à grimper et à courir çà et là comme un jeune garçon; il m'ennuie de me tenir assise les deux pieds joints, les coudes collés au flanc, de baisser modestement les yeux, de parler

d'une petite voix flûtée et mielleuse, et de faire passer dix millions de fois un bout de laine dans les trous d'un canevas; —je n'aime pas à obéir le moins du monde, et le mot que je dis le plus souvent est: —Je veux. (Gautier, *MM* 288)

[If, for example, I had not taken this decision, which may seem crazy but is basically sensible, to give up the clothes of a sex which is only mine materially and fortuitously, I should have been miserable. I love horses, fencing, all violent exercise, I enjoy climbing and running around everywhere like a boy; I get bored sitting with my feet together / and my elbows tucked in, keeping my gaze lowered, talking in little fluted, honeyed tones and pushing a piece of wool ten million times through the holes in a canvas. I am not in the least partial to doing what I am told and the words I repeat most often are 'I want.'

(Gautier, *MM* 261)]

Unlike Phillips' overscheduled patients who claim that they are "not allowed to be bored" by their parents, young ladies in Madelaine's position are not allowed to be interested: understood as desirable or desired, they are nevertheless forbidden from desiring (Phillips 70). Thus, the male sex becomes synonymous with desire and the action and participation it presumes.

It would seem from the above passage that wisdom, *sagesse*, also pertains to manhood, as Madelaine reflects that it was very wise to divest herself of the "habits"—both in the French sense of clothing and in the English sense of routine behaviors (*habitudes* in the French)—of a young lady because such habits don't suit her independent and curious nature. She laments, too, that her ladies' education features many conspicuous gaps, indicated by the anatomy models whose anatomy is "très vague et très esquivée," ["very vague and imprecise"] or the Grecian gods who appear excessively clothed, leaving little to "enflammer l'imagination" (Gautier, *MM*

212) ["fir[e] the imagination" (Gautier, *MM* 260)] of a schoolroom full of girls. Yet Madelaine's particular wisdom and curiosity is sharpened by her experience as both man and woman—an experience which in turn resulted from the process by which boredom, in time, gives over to interest and finally to action. This new wisdom is perhaps why she has some tenderness for d'Albert, whom she correctly reads as an incorrigible romantic, forever shuttling between his hope for a dazzling ideal and the reality that precludes it. While she cannot love d'Albert, she is capable of seeing his merits and offers this nuanced observation of him to her confidante:

Il n'a pas tout, mais il a quelque chose; —ce qui me plaît en lui, c'est qu'il ne cherche pas à s'assouvir brutalement comme les autres hommes; il a une perpétuelle aspiration et un souffle toujours soutenu vers le beau, —vers le beau matériel seulement, il est vrai, mais c'est encore un noble penchant, et qui suffit à le maintenir dans les pures régions.

(Gautier, *MM* 356)

[He does not have everything, but he certainly has something. What I like in him is that he doesn't aim at brute satisfaction like other men. He is constantly aspiring to, and always striving towards, what is beautiful; material beauty, it's true, but that is still a noble leaning, and enough to keep him in the realm of the pure. (Gautier, *MM* 322)]

Indeed, Madelaine's habitation of both genders leads her to abandon a binary manner of thinking according to which men are either disgusting or angelically heroic.

Madelaine's conviction that “la jupe est sur mes hanches et non dans mon esprit” (Gautier, *MM* 288) [“The skirt is around my waist, not my mind” (Gautier, *MM* 260)] indicates her embodied understanding of the impermanence of signs. D'Albert has a similar awareness in that he repeatedly experiences the failure of words to bring about an ideal, but while this slippage

makes d'Albert gloomy, it is the source of Madelaine's liberty: dressed as a woman, she is received by others as a woman, and, dressed as a man, received as a man. Neither set of clothes perfectly suits her, however, and she comes to imaginatively occupy a site between the two poles. She writes to Graciosa,

S'il me reprend jamais fantaisie d'aller chercher mes jupes dans le tiroir où je les ai laissées, ce dont je doute fort, à moins que je ne devienne amoureuse de quelque jeune beau, j'aurai de la peine à perdre cette habitude, et, au lieu d'une femme déguisée en homme, j'aurai l'air d'un homme déguisé en femme. En vérité, ni l'un ni l'autre de ces deux sexes n'est le mien [...] — je suis d'un troisième sexe à part qui n'a pas encore de nom: au-dessus ou au-dessous, plus défectueux ou supérieur: j'ai le corps et l'âme d'une femme, l'esprit et la force d'un homme, et j'ai trop ou pas assez de l'un et de l'autre pour me pouvoir accoupler avec l'un d'eux. (Gautier, *MM* 352)

[If I ever take a fancy again to go and look out my skirts in the drawer I left them in, which I very much doubt, unless I fall in love with some handsome young man, I shall have trouble getting rid of this habit, and instead of being a woman disguised as a man, I shall seem like a man disguised as a woman. The reality is that neither of these two sexes is mine [...]. I am of a third, separate sex which does not yet have a name; higher or lower than them, inferior or superior. (Gautier, *MM* 318)]

Though at times uncomfortable, Madelaine has the option to occupy a third position, one that allows her to name herself anew everyday. It is this position, too, which leads her to reject d'Albert's ultimately unimaginative (and boring) prose. In the light of her recent experiences, Madelaine as reader can no longer accept or fulfill the demands of his text. She is waiting for a

new language, or the renewal of language with a new idiom, a new genre. The desire that puts an end to Madelaine's boredom, that compels her to venture independently into the world, is the desire to write—as she herself wrote to Graciosa, she is currently at work on her own biography. Having been so long and dear a reader, perhaps she will be more attentive to the needs of readers of her own.

Her first reader, by necessity, is d'Albert. After a night of love-making with both d'Albert and Rosette, Madelaine decides to leave the two of them forever to continue her adventure.¹⁷ The last letter in *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is thus hers to d'Albert, in which she says goodbye, and that they will probably never see each other again. D'Albert, she knows, favors writing in which expectations are established and then quickly fulfilled. Recalling his expectation for the reader to proceed quickly to the end of the story, for “en toutes choses, et surtout en amour, ce qu'il faut considérer, c'est la fin” [“And in everything, but especially in love, what you have to consider is the end”], Madelaine speeds to the end of their affair with her pen: just as he has grown weary of Rosette and his favorite horse, he will grow weary of her: “Je vous entends d'ici vous écrier très galamment que je ne suis pas de celles dont on se dégoûte. Mon dieu! de mois comme des autres” (Gautier, *MM* 370) [“I can hear your chivalrous cry from here that I am not the kind you tire of. But you would of me, for heaven's sake, just as much as of anyone else” (Gautier, *MM* 334)]. Of course, this is neither the end that d'Albert expected, nor the one that he wished to read. Having reached the end of their story, Madelaine does not retrace her steps, but steps away, perhaps into a historical romance like what Gautier (and, more

¹⁷ As well as her *aventure*, which, in French, carries the meaning of “affair” or “fling”: Madelaine explains in some detail her plans to relocate and find another lover, one who will not grow tired of her with time.

precisely, his editor) had originally intended *Mademoiselle de Maupin* to be.¹⁸ Madelaine does not write like d'Albert, preferring to play with and topple expectations rather than gratify them. Knowing that words have only a tenuous purchase on the things they describe, Madelaine likes to turn them against themselves: in reference to d'Albert's earlier statement that "la monstrueuse Chimère [...] était un animal d'une composition simple auprès de moi" ["The monstrous Chimera [...] was a simple animal compared with me"], she chides him, "Combien sont morts qui, moins heureux que vous, n'ont pas même donné un seul baiser à leur chimère!" (Gautier, *MM* 240, 372) ["How many have gone to their graves less happy than you, who have not given their chimera one single kiss!" (Gautier, *MM* 217, 336)]. Indeed, in response to d'Albert's previous aside that women do not understand poetry "étant elles-mêmes la poésie ou tout au moins les meilleurs instruments de poésie" (Gautier, *MM* 195) ["since they are themselves poetry or, at the very least, the best instruments of poetry" (Gautier, *MM* 176)], Madelaine asserts herself as both muse and artist, d'Albert's creative chimera, whose one kiss is a kiss off.

To deter d'Albert from trying to find her, Madelaine writes to him, "nous somme quittes: — je vais de mon côté et vous du vôtre, et peut-être que nous nous retrouverons aux antipodes" (Gautier, *MM* 371) ["We are quits. I am going one way, you another, and perhaps we shall meet up again in the Antipodes" (Gautier, *MM* 335)]. This is a very slim "peut-être," for, as long as d'Albert continues his struggle between the earth and the heavens, as long as he cannot emerge from himself, he can neither "marcher ni voler" (Gautier, *MM* 240) ["walk nor fly" (Gautier, *MM* 217)]. Madelaine, who now inhabits a position somewhere between curious and disgusted, man and woman, masculine and feminine, writer and reader, can negotiate the path between one antipode and another, a thesis and its antithesis. By bringing several antitheses together in her

¹⁸ See Richard Grant, *Théophile Gautier*. Grant speculates that Gautier was too obsessed with identity for the detachment necessary to write a historical story with many characters, in the style of Sir Walter Scott (34).

person, Madelaine disrupts the pendulous preoccupations of d'Albert's text, and questions the naturalness with which it endows the classical aesthetic conventions it deploys.¹⁹ Initially the reader of his fantasies, Madelaine furnishes a commentary on d'Albert's text by taking his words and condensing them, refuting their claims, and appropriating them for her own use. The living, playful text she constructs points to d'Albert's tortured romantic poetry and prose, turning it on its head. Her commentary comes to an end in her letter to d'Albert, concluding the novel by asserting a final reversal: Madelaine is now the writer, while d'Albert is left to read.

V. From Reader to Writer: The Part of "the Part with No Part"

Beyond the narrative of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, abruptly ended by Mademoiselle's departure, we are invited by her declarations to imagine a new quest: journeying in disguise, she searches for a man worthy of her love, a text that does not predetermine its "dear reader" as an immaculate Galatea, but that invites her to play, to produce, to participate in the "dialectics of desire," the site of bliss in the text. D'Albert's discourse, as we have said, cannot guarantee her bliss, and Madelaine notes that she will not be able to guarantee his: D'Albert's text being a babble text, a bored and boring text, there is little room for bliss before boredom eventually overtakes both reader and writer. Once Madelaine (correctly) speculates that d'Albert's boredom is, for him, an end in itself, and once she decides that she herself is bored, this twofold boredom

¹⁹ "Le commentaire, fondé sur l'affirmation du pluriel, ne peut donc travailler dans le 'respect' du texte [...]; le travail du commentaire [...] consiste précisément à *malmener* le texte, à lui *couper la parole*. Cependant, ce qui est nié, ce n'est pas la *qualité* du texte (ici incomparable), c'est son 'naturel'" (Barthes, *S/Z* 21-2) ["The commentary, based on the affirmation of the plural, cannot therefore work with 'respect' to the text; [...] the work of the commentary [...] consists precisely in *manhandling* the text, *interrupting* it. What is thereby denied is not the *quality* of the text [...] but its 'naturalness'" (Barthes *S/Z* 15)].

brings the narrative to a close, in the form of a polite rejection. The book finally drops from the reader's hands, and a new book—the adventure Madelaine has yet to write—is taken up.

However, we must not overlook the ways in which Madelaine finds her pleasure, albeit briefly, in d'Albert's text—or rather, how she finds her pleasure amid her displeasure in d'Albert's text. Experienced reader as she is, Madelaine is more than capable of navigating the boredom bubbling (or babbling) over in d'Albert's demands and self-assessments to find something of interest. Indeed, if boredom is, as I have previously argued, the boundary of desire, then it can also serve as a marker of bliss and a useful tool for reading. "[B]oredom is a literary category of the first importance," Jonathan Culler writes, since it is "the background against which the activity of reading takes place and which continually threatens to engulf it" (20). This threat requires that the reader "recognize the potential sources of boredom in a work and the different rhythms of reading which can be used to neutralize them" (Culler 20). While Madelaine rejects d'Albert's Pygmalion-esque discourse, something in it stirs her to action. It is the contradiction, what Jacques Rancière calls a "connection stretched to the limit," between d'Albert's evocations of woman and Madelaine's own lived experience that summons her from her *fauteuil* and her boredom, and catapults her into the world (108). Though contradiction was not the relationship d'Albert had planned to have with his reader, this was the relationship that nevertheless obtained, opening a space for desire in the text. As Barthes writes, "la possibilité d'une dialectique du désir" ["the possibility of a dialectics of desire"] is that of "une *imprévision* de la jouissance" (*Plaisir* 11) ["an *unpredictability* of bliss" (*Pleasure* 4)]: a writer can never be sure of what his reader will take pleasure in, and this is a necessary condition of the game between the two. The reader's bliss may vary from text to text, and from one reading to another. Barthes describes this caprice when he writes, "Ce que je goûte dans un récit, ce n'est donc pas directement son contenu

ni même sa structure, mais plutôt les éraflures que j'impose à la belle enveloppe: je cours, je saute, je lève la tête, je replonge" (*Plaisir* 22) ["what I enjoy in a narrative is not directly its content or even its structure, but rather the abrasions I impose upon the fine surface: I read on, I skip, I look up, I dip in again" (*Pleasure* 11-12)]. He characterizes this pleasure as a passive *dérive*, or drift, that occurs "chaque fois que *je ne respecte pas le tout*, et qu'à force de paraître emporté ici et là au gré des illusions, séductions, et intimidations de langage, tel un bouchon sur la vague, je reste immobile, pivotant sur la jouissance *intraitable* qui me lie au texte (au monde)" (*Plaisir* 32-3) ["whenever *I do not respect the whole*, and whenever, by dint of seeming driven about by language's illusions, seductions, and intimidations, like a cork on the waves, I remain motionless, pivoting on the *intractable* bliss that binds me to the text (to the world)" (*Pleasure* 18)]. Eager to cast off typically feminine traits, Madelaine is unfaithful, in reading as in love. Though she eagerly responds to d'Albert's invitation to appear in the text, her masculine appearance reflects her own fancy; it is this selective way of reading that enables Madelaine to pursue her pleasure as the heroine of an adventure novel, rather than as the divine Galatea at the center of d'Albert's melancholy soulscape.

Madelaine's newfound bliss also connects her, as Barthes says, to the text and to the world. In her case, it is important to note that this connection was largely unprecedented: a woman of low gentry abandons the text of her own gendered confinement in order to write her own adventure, a triumphant biography. In the process, she upsets the text that d'Albert had laid out for her, substituting her own nascent narrative for the former narrative's predictable conclusion. It is possible, I argue, to read Madelaine's arrival and reading and writing abilities as an implication of a broader turning point. Her courtship with d'Albert (and its failure) provide a reflection on the changing nature of writing and the relationship of writers to their readers in the

mid-nineteenth century, following the July Revolution. In order to investigate this change, I wish to return once more to Gautier's preface to the novel, which, Patricia Duncker reminds us, tells us about the readers who awaited its publication.

But first, we should pause in consideration of the events that gave rise to this preface, making yet another connection between text and world. Growing dissatisfaction with the oppressive Bourbon Restoration had its counterpart in letters in the February 25th, 1830 premier of Victor Hugo's *Hernani*, at which the shaggy, young proponents of a new modern art championed their cause against the classicist upholders of traditional French poetics. Gautier, then a budding romantic author whose presence at the premier in a bizarrely tailored and conspicuously red velvet waistcoat was a spectacle in itself, later described the evening as "the greatest event of the century, since it represented the inauguration of free, youthful, and new thought on the debris of old routine" (qtd in Gluck 26-7). The premier's symbolic importance was evident even prior to the 25th of February: though the play was to be performed at the Théâtre français, a mainstay of neo-classicism, it was known that Hugo had boldly refused to hire professional clappers, who were usually neo-classicist and whose polite clapping was audibly different from their sincere ovations. There was a need, then, to fill as many seats with the long-haired, flamboyantly-dressed, and reverent romanticists who referred to Hugo as "The Master" in order to drown out the inevitable hisses from the theater's regular patrons (Gautier, *A History of Romanticism* 139). In the days leading up to the debut of *Hernani* as well as during the four months of subsequent performances, one could see hordes of bohemians loitering around the Théâtre français, which had become both a gathering place and the front line of their battle for youthful play and liberty in art. Mary Gluck recounts that Gautier and his friends, among them Gérard de Nerval and Petrus Borel, kept up a coordinated effort to maintain high numbers

of supporters and loud applause at the performances (26); due to their efforts, “By all accounts, the commotion in the audience rivaled in interest and dramatic passion the actual play being performed on stage” (Gluck 26). But while Gluck asserts that the scandal of the clash between audience members eclipsed the expected scandal of the play’s innovations, Gautier’s reflections on the premier focus on the uproar over Hugo’s freer usage of language and plain speech. Reflecting at length on “The Battle of *Hernani*,” Gautier tries to explain to his reader, removed by almost a decade from the intricacies and urgencies of the debate, why the opening line of the play:

“Serait-ce déjà lui?—C’est bien à l’escalier
Dérobé—
(Can it be he?—It is surely at the private
Door--)”

had the effect of “a professional swashbuckler, [...] smacking the face of Classicism and challenging it to a duel” (Gautier 147). With this line, in which the beautiful Doña Sol awaits her lover, the bandit-king *Hernani*, Hugo announces his abandonment of the twelve-syllable alexandrine in couplets traditionally used in eighteenth-century French drama and poetry. His character speaks instead in a familiar manner and refers to a low object, the back staircase used by servants and, occasionally, by lovers. Gautier illustrates how Hugo’s challenge to dramatic form and content became the epicenter of an already intense debate, citing two reactions which immediately followed the performance: first, while a “Classicist admirer of Voltaire” denounces Hugo’s first line as careless and unacceptable, in which “Verse is smashed up and the pieces thrown from the windows!” a romanticist studying under the lithographer and painter Achille Devéria states that “the word *dérobé*, removed and as it were suspended beyond the line,

describes admirably the stair of love and mystery that winds in the thickness of the manor wall [...], full of sixteenth-century feeling, and reveals the deepest acquaintance with a whole vanished civilization” (148-9). We should note that it is highly probable that Gautier, characteristically tongue-in-cheek, humorously exaggerated these reactions—the “Classicist admirer of Voltaire” so soon forgets that, in his own day, Voltaire was controversial to the point of exile, and Devéria’s well-known erotic watercolors of lovers’ trysts betray the prurience of his apprentice’s fascination with the back staircase. Though Gautier somewhat reduces the seriousness of the debaters in order, perhaps, to appeal to a reader unimpassioned by ‘The Battle of Hernani,’ he is clear that “battle[s] raged for three days around [a] hemistich” and that the verse he characterized as “striking, virile, vigorous” was rejected by Hugo’s opponents as “trivial, familiar, improper” (Gautier 149, 151).

Given Gautier's leading role in the "Battle of *Hernani*," as well as his budding literary ambitions, it is fitting that he explicitly continued Victor Hugo's project to liberate art from notions of propriety in his own preface and first novel. As I have stated above, the preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is generally credited as the manifesto of the romantic doctrine of "Art for Art's Sake," as it refutes arguments for a "proper" art, or that art be proper for the purposes of public edification and example. Here, his thesis is stated most famously: "Il n'y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien; tout ce qui est utile est laid, car c'est l'expression de quelque besoin, et ceux de l'homme sont ignobles et dégoûtants, comme sa pauvre et infirme nature. L'endroit le plus utile d'une maison, ce sont les latrines" (Gautier, Preface to *MM* 23) ["The only things that are really beautiful are those which have no use; everything that is useful is ugly, for it is the expression of some need, and the needs of men are ignoble and disgusting, like his poor and infirm nature. The most useful place in the house is the toilet" (Gautier, Preface to *MM* 23)].

But rather than use his preface to dispute the exigencies of neo-classical form and convention, an aspect of Hugo's project in *Hernani*, Gautier addresses the growing press, the literary marketplace, and other entities and discourses that assign literature a use or exchange value as opposed to an aesthetic value. First, Gautier mocks the moralizing journalists, whose criticism of contemporary novels consists of warning readers to lock said novels away, for, should a "wife or daughter chanc[e] to open it, they would be lost" (7). Gautier also takes exception to the cries of these journalists for reform in the name of newly won democracy: novels of intrigue and ribaldry "might have enjoyed great success in the time of Crébillon [...] at the intimate little suppers of duchesses," allow these reviewers, "but now that we have purified our habits and the hand of the People has caused the worm-eaten edifice of the aristocracy to crumble," there is a need for a more didactic literature to suit a less decadent, suddenly expanded, and impressionable readership (7). Similarly, Gautier takes on the "utilitarian gentlemen" whose sole literary criterion is that a work be somehow salubrious for the "poorest and most numerous classes" (20, 21). Gautier detects a more mercenary design behind the volume of these critics' objections—namely that such objections are easily written and sold to newspaper editors, pointing to the true material "use" of literature.

However, Gautier does not deny that he himself writes for monetary gain—indeed, as the scholar Gene Bell-Villada points out, it is significant that he argues for the artistic sovereignty of the novel rather than of poetry books, having found in recent years that the latter did not sell (Bell-Villada 54). While Gautier doesn't condemn writing for money, even alluding to the advertisement that he must put in the paper for his new novel, he does insist that beauty should be the sole aim of art. We recall the preface passage cited above, in which Gautier refutes all arguments that would put art in the service of utility, moral uplift, or the touting of France's

commitment to democracy, simply by stating his preference for ornamental vases to chamber pots, Raphaels to citizenship, and fine wines to relative political freedom. Certainly, if Gautier were to declare allegiance to any community or nation, it would be to one comprised of devotees of the beautiful.

Thus it would seem that Gautier's position is one of ambivalence: he will neither participate in staid conventions of classical French literature; nor will he happily contribute to a commercial and politicized art, more highly valued by the new industrial literary market than his own. Caught between old and new, Gautier and his contemporaries often adopted a defensive posture in which they asserted both the need for experimentation as well as the superiority of their work. Bell-Villada describes this posture as it emerged in the 1830s: since the non-commercial aims of these artists made for an art that was "objectively marginal to the dominant literary discourses, they subjectively transformed the unmarketability of their poetic gifts into what they saw as an aesthetic, spiritual, even moral asset" (50).

But certainly, French Romanticism was not a movement restricted to the culturally elite, nor was romantic ambivalence toward a changing world. In his important study of Popular French Romanticism, James Smith Allen locates the affinity between popular and canonical romanticism in this very ambivalence. Though popular iterations of French Romanticism eschewed the brooding, melancholy mood of the writers we now associate with the movement, they did adopt their mode: experiments in form, foreign and/or historical settings in novels and plays, plots speckled with intrigue and adventure, and a casual conversational style in essays and verse. Romantic experimentation on the part of a few writers reached a number of popular authors who then adapted their conventions to suit a wider readership (Allen 70). Such appropriations made for a romanticism that was "widespread and diluted" across many different

genres and for many different audiences, so much so that, by 1841 the word "romantic" had begun to refer to anything "vague and amorous" in addition to the movement itself (Allen 70, 50). These appropriations also signaled receptivity to the cultural ambivalence towards historical and literary changes more overtly expressed in elite romantic literature. As Allen states, "Much of the fascination of romanticism for many writers and readers in the nineteenth century must have derived from their complex feelings about the breakup of long established political, social, and spiritual hierarchies in France" (72).

Philosopher Jacques Rancière more specifically theorizes how these ruptures in political, social, and spiritual hierarchies manifested in the representational practices of Romanticism and later artistic movements. Rancière argues that literary Romanticism witnessed an unprecedented dissolution of the traditional artistic and social hierarchical organization of Western society, through radical changes in what he calls the "distribution of the sensible." In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière defines the distribution of the sensible as a "regime of visibility," a system that "establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts"; these parts are in turn delimited by "a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution" (22, 12). For instance, Aristotle defines a citizen as one who has a role in both governance and in being governed; a previous distribution determines, however, who is and is not a citizen (Rancière, *Politics* 12). Likewise, Plato's statement that artisans are too busy with their work to govern the shared aspects of the community "reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed" (Rancière, *Politics* 12). The distribution of the sensible thus discloses who has access to governance and representation,

determining who and what "is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language, etc" (Rancière, *Politics* 12-13). It is the domain of politics to maintain the political and social order, to maintain the current operating distribution of the sensible, including the exclusion of those—like Plato's artisans—who have no part in governance or representation. As its title suggests, the distribution of the sensible inextricably links politics to aesthetics, as the political distribution of power and agency has direct consequences upon who and what is represented, both politically and aesthetically. As Rancière succinctly states, "Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time" (*Politics* 13).

But any functioning political order can be derailed when the excluded part of the whole—what Rancière calls 'the part with no part'—insists on its right to speak (Žižek 70). In his afterword to *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Slavoj Žižek explains that the kernel of this destabilizing act is "the empty principle of universality, of what Étienne Balibar calls *égaliberté*, the principled equality-in-freedom of all men qua speaking beings" (70). Rancière extends this principle to what he calls the "aesthetic regime of the arts," which alters and democratizes the distribution of the sensible throughout the Romantic movement. Just as the part with no part disrupts the prevailing order by asserting rights that can only be granted outside its bounds, the aesthetic regime of the arts "strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres" (*Politics* 23). Put another way, this regime no longer holds up the "mimetic edifice" of traditional Western art, according to which the subject to be represented dictates the genre and manner of the representation. Rancière explains further in *The Flesh of Words*:

According to whether one represented kings or burgers, shepherds or animals, one had to choose poetic forms belonging to different genres and implying different laws of composition. Different languages and tones had to be employed: from the noble unity of the tragic style where the maidservant expresses her low thoughts in the elevated style of her mistress to the picturesque diversity of the novel where each person speaks the language that matches his social status. (147)

The advent of aesthetic regime of art was at the heart of the scandal of Hugo's *Hernani*, in which Hugo parted ways with Classical French theater. To cite another passage from his account of the play in *A History*, Gautier further demonstrates the difference between Classical theater and Hugo's redistribution of the sensible, recalling that it was wholly unacceptable to the regular audience at the Théâtre français, a mainstay of neo-classicism, to hear a king speak and be answered thus:

"Est-il minuit? — Minuit bientôt": "Behold a king asking what time it is in the language of a commoner, and answered as though he were a clodhopper! Serve him right! If he had used a fine periphrasis, he would have been replied to politely, somewhat in this fashion:

'—l'heure

Atteindra bientôt sa dernière demeure. (*A History* 151)

The Battle of *Hernani*, then, can be understood as the battle between the prevailing aesthetic order and the deterritorializing forces that threatened aesthetic hierarchies of representation.

Aesthetic matters are always already political, Rancière reminds us. We must also ask, Who is the 'part with no part' who appears and who begins to speak in this disruption of political and aesthetic representational hierarchies? How does she wish to be included? Within the "aesthetic regime," not only did the arts cease to follow the "rules of representation that determined genres and modes of expression appropriate for one subject or another," but access to the arts was extended to those who formerly were excluded from artistic practice, lacking the traditional upbringing, education, and materials required to engage in it (Rancière 108). James Smith Allen accordingly points out that, comprising both high and low cultural representations, French Romanticism served as the site of breakup for longstanding social hierarchies—not least, the hierarchy separating a select group of authors and readers from less literary and less literate writing and reading public, nurtured by an industrialized literary trade. This breakup often proved a source of shock for the culturally elite: Allen writes that the "known" romantic authors—by which he means those still read and revered today—encountered an audience of unprecedented diversity whom they "did not always enjoy despite their intentions" (47). Given that this rupture was symbolically initiated by the battle of *Hernani*, Gautier's first novel provides an appropriate place from which to interrogate the navigations of an author devoted to a credo of artistic freedom but restricted by "a pressing need to live" (Sainte-Beuve 25). Accordingly, the novel that follows Gautier's preface-manifesto can be read as a "reading" of romantic authorship and readership, as the novel seems to take up the questions paramount to the change in the distribution of the sensible: What unprecedented voice is heard over the prevailing political and aesthetic order, and How does this voice disrupt the orderly narrative and representational schemes that had excluded it?

Unlike Sainte-Beuve's hand-wringing over the advent of "industrial literature" in his famous 1839 essay, or Flaubert's uneasiness with unexceptional people reading too many books, Gautier seems to occupy a non-reactionary position on newly fledged readers, particularly women. From his answer to warnings about impressionable female readers, we can infer that Gautier does not subscribe to a model of culture in which participation is merely passive, nor does he believe in inherent female innocence and vulnerability to corruption, stating in the preface to *Les Jeunes France* that the only morally significant vice of Man is the virtue of women (Gautier 33). Gautier's interventions in elitist discourse on the new reading public are embodied in the titular character of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, whom the novel stages as its primary reader. Madelaine is typical of the conception of the "majority of readers" emerging at the time of this novel's publication.²⁰ Of most concern to the socio-political order were women readers, who were thought to be especially in danger of succumbing to fiction's bad influences, of adopting loose morals, and of taking up writing themselves.²¹ Gesturing towards these societally-held beliefs, Gautier writes Madelaine as an avid female reader curious about sexual difference and experience. And yet, this is not a novel about a soon-to-be fallen woman, and indeed, d'Albert's profuse descriptions of a mistress invoke and invite this woman—the ideal—to enter into the narrative, and this invitation is not withdrawn once we see that she has abnormal ideas about gendered behavior. To be sure, however, in inviting his ideal d'Albert had no intention of inviting the 'part with no part,' a woman *qua* speaking being who demands equality with others—he does not expect (and to be fair, nor do we) that she will have plans of her own,

²⁰ This may be why she had no taste for poetry: echoing d'Albert's statement that in everything what you have to consider is the end, Madelaine complains that poets only think about "la fin des mots, et ne remontent pas plus loin que la pénultième [...]; ils sont plus ennuyeux que les autres" (Gautier, *MM* 342) ["the endings of words and they don't go any further back than the penultimate syllable [...]]. They are more boring than the others" (Gautier, *MM* 309)].

²¹ On this last point, see Sainte-Beuve's essay, "Industrial Literature."

that she will put aside the "true history of men's lives" in order to write her own "triumphant biography." But 'part with no part' she is, and her project to write her experiences requires her to leave the novel in search of them, derailing d'Albert's narrative as well as the socio-political order's demands that such women be punished or at least killed off in fictional representations.

Mademoiselle de Maupin, I argue, can be read as an explicit staging of the redistribution of the sensible, a site in which the popular makes itself heard and, in doing so, reveals and disrupts, *in media res*, the prevailing hierarchies of representation and exclusion with which the novel begins. Gautier's choice of model for Madelaine's character—the seventeenth-century opera singer and swordswoman, Julie d'Aubigny—fits uneasily within d'Albert's moody cerebral drama set almost entirely on the grounds of a rural chateau. Indeed, Gautier's editor had requested that *Mademoiselle de Maupin* be a historical novel based on d'Aubigny, with manifold characters and varying settings, in the popular mode of Sir Walter Scott. While Gautier did not meet his editor's demands, his injection of a popular romantic character into an otherwise highbrow, mood-based romantic novel—full of discourses on art, aesthetics, and philosophy—points toward the demands of a growing reading public, and even cedes to these demands as Madelaine's story becomes the dominant, more muscular one. Madelaine is certainly a disrupting presence, muddling the expected course of the narrative and abruptly ending the novel on her own whim. In this disruptive capacity, I argue that she is emblematic of what Jacques Rancière terms "literarity," the disordering power of the book, "a certain way in which writing makes a world by unmaking another one" (*Flesh of Words* 100). Partly responsible for the nineteenth-century crisis of *déclassement*, or the "misfortune of working-class bodies torn from their natural goals by the course of the letter and thrown by it into ways of wandering and misery, suicide and crime," this power diverted newly minted readers from their "natural" goals

of labor, housekeeping, and, I would add, feminine purity (Rancière, *Flesh of Words* 105). Confronted with the greater variety of and accessibility to literature made possible by an industrialized literary trade and a proliferation of newspapers, nontraditional readers were invited to read and to experience language that did not aim to be straightforward and practical. Madelaine's seminal encounter with d'Albert's fiction, her desire for discovery that begins in her drawing room and ends with her own "triumphant [auto]biography," encapsulates what Rancière means when he talks about the meetings of so many with the power of the book.

As for authors, Rancière outlines two possible stances they assumed in relation to literarity. One stance was that of the "virtuoso," the "magician-writer" who flaunted his full power over his characters, mocking them as well as the narrative into which he had placed them. This stance is evidenced in Cervantes' relationship to Don Quixote, Gautier's treatment of various romantic protagonists in his short stories, and Flaubert's portrayal of Bouvard, Pécuchet, and Emma Bovary. In this relationship, the author asserts his power in characters who are shaped and destroyed by their relationship to literature. The opposite authorial stance, however, is one in which the writer's creative mastery is openly checked by democratic literarity: Rancière states, "Then it is the hostage who takes the master hostage, who draws him in and encloses him in the island of the book to the detriment of his own book" (*Flesh of Words* 109). While the virtuoso affirms the aristocracy of art and thus of "Literature" over the popular, the author who *declines* virtuosity identifies with, or at least does not deny the necessity of, this new community of readers. Though *Mademoiselle de Maupin* was not a popular novel, Gautier admits the presence of this populace through Madelaine. Following the preface's assertion of the sovereignty of art and just preceding Gautier's employment as a journalist and critic for *La Presse*, the novel situates its author somewhere between the two authorial stances outlined by

Rancière. Though Gautier unreservedly declares his allegiance to the beautiful and its uselessness in his preface, his novel imagines one who, unable to make a similar declaration, nevertheless comes to read. Thus Gautier acknowledges a potentially untraditional reader, and invites her to play a part in the "dialectics of desire" between reader and writer.

VI. Conclusion

In Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, the game of boredom and interest between reader and writer is made explicit—indeed, it becomes the core of the novel's overarching narrative. Certainly, Barthes' theorizations of the dialectics of desire, of writers and readers who must care less about each others' demands, and of the disappearance—or "death"—of the author from the text, describes writing practice *after* the dissolution of the universal bourgeois point of view that Barthes traces in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* to 1848. In classical and romantic writing, what he terms the bourgeois periods, Barthes posits an ideological unity that gets expressed as a formal aesthetic unity: prior to the assertion of Literature over popular pablum, there was just one literature, one voice, and one point of view. As Jacques Rancière argues, a political order, unified or otherwise, will always be recapitulated in the concomitant system of aesthetic representation. Such a situation obtains, I argue, in the beginning of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, in which a lonely chevalier describes his ideal mistress, setting the stage for her to appear later in the novel, and almost exactly as he had imagined her—*almost* exactly, for it becomes rapidly apparent that *Mademoiselle* has a voice of her own, and is determined to pursue her own projects even at the expense of the discourse and the novel that called her into being. The expected arrival of her unexpected voice disrupts the rather solipsistic

point of view of the author, and diverts the narrative into another genre (popular adventure) than that which he had set out to write (moody romance). This conjunction and separation of reader and writer is staged against a background of shared boredom: the chevalier d'Albert is bored because his life lacks incident, and Madelaine de Maupin is bored because a woman's life is confined and, well, boring. It is this boredom that forms the parameters of the writing and reading that take place within the novel, of the encounter between d'Albert and Madelaine: d'Albert's boredom gives way to his thinking about a mistress, and Madelaine's boredom forces her out of her chair, into the world, and into (and out of) d'Albert's arms. It is this boredom, too, that points to the problem, and eventual overturning, of the status quo. D'Albert is bored—and continues to be bored well into the plot's many intrigues—because he is boring, because he mistakes his deficiency for superabundance and his narrow discourse for the only one that exists; Madelaine ceases to be bored when she no longer corresponds to d'Albert's (and thus the world's) idea of womanhood, and diverts the course of the novel away from its original "author." As limit-case, boredom points to the possibility of the dialectics of desire that is performed by d'Albert and Madelaine's courtship; this dialectics presages those to come throughout the nineteenth century, as a more diverse array of people took up their pens to address a growing public.

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Chapter 2: Flaubert's Boredom in Three Movements and Two Novels

I. Dissatisfaction

Retreating from the World, Killing the Novelistic

It is no surprise that the novels of one who famously set out to write "un livre sur rien" ["a book about nothing"]²² may be fruitfully discussed in terms of the boring. Gustave Flaubert's best-known character, Emma Bovary, is the epitome of the bored housewife and the inspiration for several novels by eminent European authors concerning similarly bored, similarly adulterous housewives in similarly tedious circumstances.²³ Flaubert's heavily citational final two novels, *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* (1874) and *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), feature principal characters who experience a panoply of temptations, distractions, and, in the latter novel, failed projects that ultimately amount to little more than *rien*. Jonathan Culler writes in *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* that, given their lack of any kind of familiar novelistic narrative structure, both of the late novels were "designed to be exasperating and incomprehensible," challenging the stamina of the reader to continue his reading (180). In subject and construction, Flaubert's novels depict and even induce boredom, leaving casual or first-time readers "likely to feel rather like Emma Bovary when, a few days after her marriage, she begins to suspect that she has been deceived and wonders what exactly in her brief experience is supposed to correspond to those grand words, 'bliss', 'passion', 'ecstasy', that she has oft heard repeated" in connection with

²² Letter to Louise Colet, January 16, 1852. All quotations of Flaubert's correspondence in the French were taken from the *Édition Conard* hosted online by either the Université de Rouen (<http://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance/>) or by *Wikisource: la bibliothèque libre* (<https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Wikisource:Accueil>). English translations of these quotations are either taken from the 1980 Francis Steegmuller edition from Harvard University Press or provided by myself, as indicated.

²³ Notably Champfleury's *Les Bourgeois de Molinchart* (1858), Leopoldo Aias' *La Regenta* (1884-5), Ernest Feydeau's *Fanny* (1890) and Theodor Fontane's *Effie Briest* (1896). Even at the time when Flaubert was composing *Madame Bovary*, the subject of adultery in the provinces was a tired subject. Dominick LaCapra writes in *Madame Bovary on Trial*, "Thus Flaubert's alchemical feat was to transform basely inartistic subject matter into a superlative work of art" (69).

Flaubert's painstakingly wrought prose (Culler 11). Turning to the reader's boredom, Culler asserts that it can serve as a useful literary category: along with Spacks, he states that "it is the background against which the activity of reading takes place and which continually threatens to engulf it" and, similarly to Barthes, he affirms that "[t]o recognize the potential sources of boredom in a work and the different rhythms of reading which can be used to neutralize them is to discover important facts about its structure" (19).

In this chapter, it is precisely this boredom in the subject and structure of Flaubert's first and last published novels that I wish to explore and link to Flaubert's greater contributions to literature as identified by theorists and critics such as Roland Barthes, Tony Tanner, Jonathan Culler, Dominick LaCapra, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jacques Rancière: namely, his use of language as a primarily aesthetic rather than communicative object; the effacement of a central authorial point of view; and the expansion of the novel's possible subject matter to include anything and everything under the sun, juxtaposing the trivial and the eternal, making possible the novel about nothing.

However, my approach to Flaubert's novels will differ significantly from those of the critics named above in one aspect. Anyone who studies Flaubert will quickly note that the pertinent body of scholarship is as much dedicated to the author's life as to his fiction. Undoubtedly, his lengthy and fascinating correspondence, collected from the age of nine to the year of his death in 1880, invites scholars to trace his development as a writer, so that many of the comprehensive works on Flaubert take his juvenilia as their point of departure.²⁴ Given that so many excellent studies of Flaubert exist in this mold, this chapter will not endeavor to emulate

²⁴ I am thinking here of Jonathan Culler's *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*, Harry Levin's study in *The Gates of Horn*, and, of course, Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Family Idiot*.

them. Rather than mining the correspondence for the insights into the oeuvre that it unquestionably provides, I wish to linger on a passage that appears prominently in all book-length studies of Flaubert, as well as in many studies of boredom and ennui in literature²⁵:

"Connaissez-vous l'ennui? non pas cet ennui commun, banal, qui provient de la fainéantise ou de la maladie, mais cet ennui moderne qui ronge l'homme dans les entrailles et, d'un être intelligent, fait une ombre qui marche, un fantôme qui pense" ["Do you know ennui? Not that common, banal ennui that comes out of idleness or illness, but that modern ennui that gnaws one's entrails and, of an intelligent being, makes a walking shadow, a thinking phantom"²⁶]. This observation, made at the tender age of twenty-four, is interpreted by scholars as both early indication of Flaubert's romantic influences and admission of his antagonistic relationship both to life and to literature. But this passage also provides a starting point from which to relate Flaubert's deep-seated, formative boredom to his contribution to the development—and indeed the modernization—of the novel.

The germ of Flaubert's approach to writing and the novel can be located in his post-romantic bohemian milieu, which, unlike the earlier generation of 1830, was steeped in an overwhelming despair and malaise that was not predicated on personal experience and values, but rather was brought on by overexposure to books (Culler 26). Misadventures in Parisian or other society were no longer required for the aspiring literati's illusions to be lost, nor was disillusionment the "possession of old age but something any child could acquire in idle hours in his father's library" (Culler 26). Thus, the second generation of bohemian writers came to maturity, not with the robust projects of predecessors like Gautier, who, at the opening of Hugo's

²⁵ In addition to the works cited in the previous footnote, see Reinhard Kuhn's *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* and Guy Sagnes' *L'Ennui dans la littérature française de Flaubert à LaForgue (1848-1884)*.

²⁶ Letter to Louis de Cormenin, June 7, 1844. My translation.

Hernani, boasted of "smacking the face of Classicism and challenging it to a duel" (Gautier 147), but rather, as Flaubert plaintively observed at eighteen, preferred to "se drape sur Byron, rêve de désespoir et se cadenasse le coeur à plaisir. C'est qui aura le visage le plus pâle et dira le mieux: je suis blasé" ["drape itself in Byron, dream of despair, and close its heart to pleasure. It's about who can have the palest face and most convincingly say: 'I'm blasé'"].²⁷ This second generation of artists perceived itself as having close to a universal set of experiences gained from unprecedented access to an abundance of literature. Furthermore, as Sartre and Culler have argued, this generation lacked the aristocratic conditions of their antecedents, rendering duels and other gallantry utterly ridiculous (Culler 27). What remained to their lot was simply to embrace their chronic malaise. Sartre observes in *The Family Idiot* that this position was specific to this generation, neurosis having formerly been considered useful to the artist only as impetus: "the writer writes *against his illness*, in spite of it, as Rousseau did, and not by virtue of it [...]. The point is that in integrated societies the psychoneurotic element, if it exists, is never regarded as the artist's aim, and even less as the reason for his art" (Sartre 34). Conversely, the artists of Flaubert's milieu faced the prospect of creation in a society culturally exhausted, divorced from tradition, and increasingly commercial; their works were thus created in and shaped by the particular neurosis of their time and environment.

Likewise, this collective pathology or *ennui moderne* provides the context for Flaubert's transformation of the novel, a transformation more aptly thought of as destruction. In *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Pierre Bourdieu observes that, since Flaubert's intervention, the history of the novel "may also be described as a long effort to 'kill the novelistic,' in Edmond de Goncourt's phrase, that is to say, to purify the novel of everything that

²⁷ Letter to Ernest Chevalier, 15 April, 1839. My translation. Culler refers to this letter on page 27 of *The Uses of Uncertainty*.

seems to define it—plot, action, hero" (241). Although we might include in this effort literary outliers like Rabelais, Cervantes, and Sterne (three of Flaubert's favorite authors), Flaubert's was the first of consistent, proto-modernist attempts to do away with the novel's traditional narrative structures, enabling Bourdieu to trace a line from Flaubert to the Nouveau Roman's "dissolution of the linear story" (*Rules of Art* 241). What is striking is that Flaubert set out to kill the novelistic through a "purificatory" emphasis on absolute style, bestowing upon the novel all the attention to language previously reserved for poetry (Bourdieu, *Rules of Art* 241). In what follows, I will outline how Flaubert's preoccupation with language does indeed "purify" the novel to the point of its own "death"—or, in other words, to the point of neglect of its traditional, primarily communicative concerns with plot, action, and character. Crucial to my larger project, I will demonstrate how Flaubert's boredom shaped this preoccupation in the writing of *Madame Bovary*. Finally, I will account for Flaubert's reemergence from boredom in his final but unfinished novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*: though we can and will trace the author's boredom throughout the content and prose style of his first and last novels, it is essential to observe that boredom is only boredom if it eventually abates. While he proclaims *ennui*, an interminable and existential malaise, as his foundational experience, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* indicates that there is something more than the author's boredom and reclusion embedded in his prose: namely, the desire to return to the world and to render the artistic underpinnings of this desire visible and unifying. By illuminating Flaubert's literary contributions according to the three movements of boredom—withdrawal, sustained lack of desire, and reemergence—I will show that boredom's disavowal of desire is the necessary precursor of the desire for expressive connection more typically associated with artistic creation.

II. Removal

Fantôme qui pense: Ghostly Views of Flaubert's Thinking Phantom

Though the young Flaubert insistently opposed himself to his prematurely blasé cohort ("que le bouchon saute, que la pipe se bourre, que la putain se déshabille, morbleu!" ["the cork should pop, the pipe should be stuffed, the whore should be naked, my god!"]),²⁸ his later reflections on youth and life in general carried the same weight of boredom and lethargy. Here, in his second year of work on *Madame Bovary* and five years after the epileptic fit that settled him on a solitary writer's life, Flaubert confides in his friend Maxime du Camp:

J'éprouve souvent une fatigue à périr d'ennui lorsqu'il faut faire n'importe quoi, et c'est à travers de grands efforts que je finis par saisir l'idée la plus nette. Ma jeunesse m'a trempé dans je ne sais quel opium d'embêtement pour le reste de mes jours. J'ai la vie en haine. Le mot est parti, qu'il reste! Oui, la vie, et tout ce qui me rappelle qu'il la faut subir.

[Often, when I am faced with doing no matter what, I am overwhelmed by weariness and am ready to die of boredom; and I grasp even the most straightforward idea only by dint of great effort. My youth [...] steeped me in an opiate of boredom, sufficient for the remainder of my days. I hate life. There: I have said it; I'll not take it back. Yes, life; and everything that reminds me that life must be borne. (*Letters* 147-8)]²⁹

As du Camp had earlier advised Flaubert to abandon the first manuscript of *La Tentation de saint Antoine* for work on a more contemporary and conventional subject, we may read reproach in the

²⁸ Letter to Ernest Chevalier, 15 April, 1839. My translation.

²⁹ October 21, 1851.

latter's complaints: Flaubert was not keen to start another project, nor was he keen to produce for a larger audience. But something did emerge from this bath in boredom, spleen, resentment for and removal from life. If, as Adam Phillips writes, "[M]oods [...] are points of view" (68), then we must ask, What authorial point of view issues from weariness, readiness for death, and cloudiness of thought? To begin to answer this question, let us return to the passage, cited above, from Flaubert's letter to Louis de Cormenin, in which he declares he has been scoured of his full and stable presence in the world, substituting the "fantôme qui *pense*" ["phantom that thinks"] for the more typical construction "fantôme qui *passse*" ["phantom that passes"]. And what sees the phantom that thinks? How and what does it write? What worlds and people does it create? In a letter to Louise Colet, Flaubert describes the vantage point of the insistently disinterested phantom:

il n'y avait rien de plus faible que de mettre en art ses sentiments personnels. Suis cet axiome pas à pas, ligne par ligne [...]. Tu verras comme ton horizon s'agrandira, comme ton instrument ronflera et quelle sérénité t'emplira! [...] Toi disséminée en tous, tes personnages vivront et au lieu d'une éternelle personnalité déclamatoire, qui ne peut même se constituer nettement, faute de détails précis qui lui manquent toujours à cause des travestissements qui la déguisent, on verra dans tes oeuvres des foules humaines.

[There is nothing more foolish than to put your own personal sentiments into your art. Follow this axiom step by step, line by line [...]. You will see how your horizon will expand, how your instrument will hum and what serenity will fill you! [...] You, disseminated throughout everything, your characters will live and, instead of an eternal

declamatory personality, which can't constitute itself straightforwardly, lacking precise details due to imitations that disguise it, one will see human crowds in your works.]³⁰

Flaubert's boredom-derived phantomhood enables him to see, all at once, the entire horizon of Emma's world as well as the characters living in it. But though he extols the clarity of the authorial vision posited in the absence of a central “declamatory personality” or narrator, this vision entails that characters are never viewed “nettement”—clearly, precisely, or distinctly. Writing that boredom prohibits his seizing “l'idée la plus nette,” Flaubert provides the link between his removal from life and his simultaneously ubiquitous and elusive authorial vision: the narrator brings the world into view as though through a filter, suppressing a sharp and stable image in favor of one more fluid. As closely as is possible, let us inspect these views as they appear in *Madame Bovary*, the plot of which is founded on Flaubert's own deep-seated boredom and the prose of which is Flaubert's most phantasmal.

One way in which Flaubert's ghostly vision becomes manifest is in the apparition of particulate, wavering objects and characters who disappear under scrutiny. *Madame Bovary* opens with one such object, making its opening scene one of the novel's most striking and strange. Just as the object at the center of this scene, Charles' Bovary's cap, is particulate and unassimilable, so, too, is the scene itself seemingly out of joint with both the story and the narration that follow. Here, a first-person narrator, who apparently narrates this scene and no other, explains how Charles Bovary begins his first day at a new school by failing to assimilate with his peers: “Nous avons l'habitude, en entrant en classe, de jeter nos casquettes par terre, afin d'avoir ensuite nos mains plus libres; il fallait, dès le seuil de la porte, les lancer sous le banc, de façon à frapper contre la muraille en faisant beaucoup de poussière; c'était là le *genre*”

³⁰ March 27, 1852. My translation.

(MB 48) ["We had a custom, on coming back into the classroom, of throwing our caps on the ground, to leave our hands free; you had to fling them, all the way from the door, under the bench, so that they hit the wall and made lots of dust; it was *the thing to do*" (MB 4)]. Not only does Charles prove ignorant of *the thing to do*, resting the cap conspicuously on his knees, but the cap in question defies description—which is to say, it invites no end of description:

C'était une de ces coiffures d'ordre composite, où l'on retrouve les éléments du bonnet à poil, du chapska, du chapeau rond, de la casquette de loutre et du bonnet de coton, une de ces pauvres choses, enfin, dont la laideur muette a des profondeurs d'expression comme le visage d'un imbécile. Ovoïde et renflée de baleines, elle commençait par trois boudins circulaires; puis s'alternaient, séparés par une bande rouge, des losanges de velours et de poils de lapin; venait ensuite une façon de sac qui se terminait par un polygone cartonné, couvert d'une broderie en soutache compliquée, et d'où pendait, au bout d'un long cordon trop mince, un petit croisillon de fils d'or, en manière de gland. Elle était neuve; la visière brillait. (MB 48)

[It was one of those hats of the Composite order, in which we find features of the military bear-skin, the Polish chapska, the bowler hat, the beaver and the cotton nightcap, one of those pathetic things, in fact, whose mute ugliness has a profundity of expression like the face of an imbecile. Ovoid and stiffened with whalebone, it began with three big circular sausages; then, separated by a red band, there alternated diamonds of velours and rabbit-fur; after that came a sort of bag terminating in a cardboard polygon, down at the end of a long cord that was too thin, a little cluster of gold threads, like a tassel. It looked new; the peak was gleaming. (MB 4)]

It is a hat made up entirely of seams, awkwardly asserting its presence before disappearing altogether: the narrator gives no clues as to what its existence, or the ridicule it invited, meant for Charles Bovary as youth or adult. It is an irritating, and, as Tony Tanner has argued, a purely literary object—"lisible [readable] but not visible"—demonstrating language's capacity to render what otherwise cannot be experienced (238). It is the object's form, and not its utility (we are not certain as to whether it has any) that perplexes, that confounds, and that displays—almost at the exclusion of everything else—the pride of its maker. It is an object that could only be made after language itself has been objectified, taken up as an aesthetic (pre)occupation beyond the social, the useful, and the communicative, but indeed still in tension with these functions. It is an object only possible in the afterlife of language, and an afterlife occupied by the author as thinking phantom.

This afterlife was the aftermath of the nineteenth century's political and aesthetic upheavals. In *Writing Degree Zero*, Roland Barthes discusses the specifically literary consequences of decades of revolutionary events, dating the "death of language" from about 1850. The years up to and following 1850 witnessed great movements of peoples throughout Europe, the birth of industrial capitalism, and the fragmentation of French society into various antagonistic classes, conflicts that could only be reflected and refracted in literary language (Barthes 60). Barthes identifies literary language prior to this point as "Classical writing," which "could have no sense of being a language, for it *was* language, in other words it was transparent, it flowed and left no deposit, it brought ideally together a universal Spirit and a decorative sign without substance or responsibility; it was a language 'closed' by social and not natural bounds" (Barthes 57, 3). As French society fragmented into dissenting political classes, this bourgeois universal Spirit gave up the ghost, allowing a flood of divergent voices, purposes, and attitudes

toward language to invade the literary body. "It is at this moment," Barthes writes, "that modes of writing begin to multiply" (60). Literary language ceased to function as the bones, muscle, and connective tissue that blithely and steadily animated ideas into narrative. Once a cadaver, the literary body took on an unstable character in relation to the writer's task, occupying the uncanny space between magical and inert object. Barthes writes that, during this period,

literary form develops a second-order power independent of its economy and euphemistic charm [...], existing both as dream and menace.

This is important: literary form may henceforth elicit those existential feelings lying at the heart of any object: a sense of strangeness or familiarity, disgust or indulgence, utility or murder. (3-4)

Consequently, the writer's problem becomes whether to identify with or reject the Classical writing that had traditionally prevailed, along with the bourgeois ideology that had created and upheld it. The writer finds him- or herself wavering between language's traditional socio-historical functions and its new status as pliable but slippery object, as well as between historical circumstances and his or her attitudes toward them.

Flaubert's removal from life can thus also be understood as a removal from the aims and conventions of Classical writing: often pinpointed as ushering in modern literature, Flaubert considered himself, like modern literary language, thoroughly deceased. Before discussing how Flaubert's remove stood in relation to literature, let us ask how it stood in relation to the political and literary past. In addition to being blasé from an overabundance of literature, Flaubert and fellow artists of his generation had to be creative in a climate of cultural exhaustion, loss of tradition, and growing commercialization—a prospect made grimly definitive by the capitalistic

and martial determinations of the Second Empire. It is apt, then, that Flaubert opens his novel in a schoolroom, ever the scene of regulation and acculturation, and that he straightaway destabilizes it with the appearance of an object that mirrors—but in pure style—its imbecility. Returning to Charles Bovary's cap, we observe with Tony Tanner the critique of bourgeois society implicit in its impossibly motley construction: "with the absurd miscellaneousness and unvisualizable overabundance of signs [the cap] operates [...] as the representative object of the kind of bourgeois culture Flaubert was writing about," a culture that tended to suppress difference, to enculturate that which was averse to its aims of industry, enrichment, and scientifically-driven progress (240). Charles' classmates act in this suppressive capacity, loudly mocking his ignorance of their practice of throwing their (more conventional) caps against the wall. Once Charles becomes both familiar and familiarized, he will have been assimilated from the nameless *nouveau* of the classroom into the *nous*, a narrational pronoun that itself disappears after the first chapter (Tanner 240). The cap, however, remains unassimilated and unassimilable, its sheer strangeness leaving a mark on the novel. Tanner states, "Such an object, and all that it implies, instead of making for a clarification and enrichment of consciousness, works to produce its confusion and obfuscation" (240). With this cap, then, Flaubert wastes no time in marking his departure from the straightforward, traditional functions of Classical Writing, approaching instead a more purely literary use of language.

Lawrence R. Schehr similarly remarks upon Flaubert's appeal to *genre* and analyzes the schoolroom scene as his break with the novelistic tradition of subjective narration. Here, the word *genre* indicates not only the fashionable nature of students' cap-flinging, but also "the method of description itself: 'nous étions à l'étude...nous avons l'habitude' ["We were at prep.... We had a custom"]. If this is read as a self-referential statement, 'genre' appears to be the genre

of the subjective narrative, that is to say, the novel up to the point of the writing of *Madame Bovary* (Schehr 21). The writers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as well as those who followed—Stendhal, Balzac, and Hugo, for example—employed, if not the popular "je" of eighteenth-century fiction, "a collective 'nous,'" in their narration (Schehr 22). Thus, the narrations of Stendhal and Balzac had more in common with those of eighteenth-century novels than with that of *Madame Bovary*. Schehr concludes, "Neither writer had managed to write an objective text. 'C'était là le genre'—that was the genre that we threw on the floor, throwing 'we' with it, and raising a lot of dust in the process" (22). Charles' cap rises from the dust as a symbol of the new, troubling the reader's vision like a mote in the eye and announcing its break with previous literary technique.

Even as it takes the everyday as its subject, the novel "sur rien" is thus not about nothing, but about nothing that could be experienced in life, or hitherto in fiction. The writing that comprises such a novel practices the obfuscation, fragmentation, and impossible configuration of everyday objects as well as characters; its writer, the thinking ghost purged of substance, presents the world to his reader through the cerebral and abstracted medium of style, one sentence at a time. Several scholars have outlined, explicitly or otherwise, the ways in which Flaubert's bored phantom haunts his style and vision. Dominick LaCapra has discussed what he calls the "dual style" of Flaubert's mature writing, crafted through a play between presence and absence, or "modulations of proximity and distance, empathy and irony, in the relation of the narrator to characters and other objects of narration" (118). In this way, conventions of description are both met and thwarted by the narrator's ambiguous attitude toward them. Here we may recall Barthes' observation that the writer after 1850 feels both a sense of "strangeness or familiarity, disgust or indulgence, utility or murder" toward the language he must use to convey

his thoughts, a language that no longer conforms to purely communicative purposes (3-4). One effect of these modulations is that the characters in the novel, in this case the novel *Madame Bovary*, are given in fragments to the reader and to each other, through the mixed observations of narrator and characters. Tony Tanner likewise points out that Emma never wholly appears, but is reduced through detailed description to "morsels," bits or bites distributed among the various (and mostly male) characters' perceptions. For example, as was the case with the young Charles, Emma's clothing—a blue merino dress with three portentous flounces—is described before her name is given. Indeed, this emphasis on “personal effects” over the person him- or herself is typical of Flaubertian description, such that characters are presented as locii of accumulation. Tanner writes of Emma that in “oppositions and minglings of textures and elements, [she] was, effectively, incubated, and in different forms they will determine the shape of her subsequent life” (237, 349).

Characters are similarly unable to see themselves and others as wholly constituted. Drawing upon Roy Pascal's concept of "narratorial usurpation" in free indirect style, La Capra writes that these bits are conveyed with language that "clearly goes beyond the capacities of a character and may ironically inflate desires and dreams to an uncomfortably excessive extent," effectively "steal[ing] the scene from the character's own consciousness" (145). The characters' observations are intermingled with those that must be attributed to the narrator's more complete vision, resulting in a struggle between character and narrator "for the possession of language or the right to describe a character, object, or impression," and producing "wrenching shifts" that upset the reader (LaCapra 146). In this way, a passage from the *Comices agricoles* scene, in which Emma's eyes are strangely described, presumably by Rodolphe, as "un peu bridés par les pommettes, à cause du sang, qui battait doucement sous sa peau fine" ["slightly constricted,

because the blood in her cheeks was pulsing softly beneath the delicate skin" (*MB* 126)] is succeeded by Rodolphe's silent question, "Se moque-t-elle de moi?" (*MB* 201) ["Is she making fun of me?"] (*MB* 126)].³¹ While Pascal notes that the placement of Rodolphe's question indicates him as the source of the observation, LaCapra adds that "there emphatically is uncertainty about whose impressions *and* language we have been absorbing," an uncertainty that is *compounded* by its implicit attribution to Rodolphe (Pascal 103; LaCapra 146). Is Rodolphe capable of or interested in making the curious observation of eyes as "bridé," slanted or hampered, by both cheekbones and softly pumping blood? And how, if at all, do such details suggest that Emma is mocking him?

In such moments, Flaubert's obsession with style, the sentence, *le mot juste*—in short, with the intractability of language—worries the integrity of the characters' observations—or, as Pascal states, presents "not only confusion but a threat to a very delicate nerve of the work" (111). Pascal further characterizes Flaubert's narration as an "exorcism," but, rather than banishing the troublesome spirit from the body or "nerve" of the work, it attaches itself more fiercely, "counterbalanc[ing] the world for which he felt such bitter distaste, [...] the hateful, inane world he evokes in his novels" (110). In other words, the characters' discourse is haunted, possessed by Flaubert's removed narration, his alternations between presence and absence, strangeness and familiarity. For example, how are we to see or know Emma when the narrator does not describe her face or thoughts to us at the moment when she first commits adultery? Rather, we see, hear, and feel through her: "Çà et là, tout autour d'elle, dans les feuilles ou par terre, des taches lumineuses tremblaient, comme si des colibris, en volant, eussent éparpillé leurs plumes. Le silence était partout; quelque chose de doux semblait sortir des arbres; elle sentait

³¹ This passage is discussed at greater length in both Pascal (102) and LaCapra (146).

son coeur, dont les battements recommençaient, et le sang circuler dans sa chair comme un fleuve de lait" (*MB* 230-31)" ["Here and there, all around her, among the leaves or on the earth, patches of light were trembling, just as if humming-birds, in flight, had scattered their feathers. Silence everywhere; strange tenderness coming from the trees; she felt her heart, as it began to beat again, and the blood flowing in her body like a river of milk" (*MB* 149)]. The first experience of adultery is given through a series of sensory impressions, while the body that hosts them is markedly out of the frame. And not only the body, but the story seems to have slipped away as well. As far as the plot is concerned, this is one of the most interesting scenes in the novel, and yet what makes it interesting is left undescribed. In an essay on what he calls Flaubert's "silences," Gérard Genette correspondingly observes that Flaubert often loses the narrative in favor of description, temporarily abandoning dialogue and action for quivering nostrils, yawning bystanders, and flowers nodding in the breeze. Even when these moments can be attributed to a character's own observation, we are struck by the excess of detail: the fullness and sharpness of Emma Bovary's daydreams particularly strike us as going "beyond general verisimilitude" (Genette 184). There is no perceivable difference, Genette argues, between imagined and "real" events in Flaubert's narration, and we often find ourselves following the narrator's fascination even and especially as it takes us away from plot action: to appreciate Flaubert is to appreciate these "musical moments when the narrative is lost and forgets itself in the ecstasy of an infinite contemplation" (Genette 196). Even the carriage scene in *Madame Bovary*, in which Emma gives herself to Léon while they are driven aimlessly through Rouen (and that drew the most objection from both editors of the *Revue de Paris* and led to the obscenity trial prosecution), fails to hold Flaubert's attention. Here, the narration provides an account of everything but what is going on in the carriage: the roads taken, the carriage's

cracking straps, old men walking in the sun, the confused coachman, and befuddled bystanding bourgeois witness to the vehicle's comings and goings, are described for a page and a half in great detail. That Flaubert neglects a frenzied and sultry part of his narrative indicates only one thing according to Genette: "this mobile love-making does not interest Flaubert very much, and suddenly, passing the hospital gardens, he thinks of something else [...]. The rest could wait. For us—need it be said?—this second of inattention saves the whole scene, because in it we see the author forgetting the curve of his narrative and *going off on a tangent*" (197). In this way, the most determining acts of Emma Bovary's life are shot through with Flaubert's apathy, and Emma's characterization is neglected in favor of representation in general.

How, then, is a character such as Emma Bovary to become *self*-possessed when the medium through which she appears, thinks, and acts is itself possessed by an apathetic narrator "disséminé en tous," including herself, her own body? Is there a way that Emma actively shapes and acts in a world, just as Flaubert writes that of his novel? Or is she merely more of the dead material of language that it is the writer's task to animate? Surely, Emma has a knack for making things appear and disappear according to her fancy, as in the scene at La Vaubyessard when she feasts her eyes upon the crapulous Duc de Laverdière:

Cependant, au haut bout de la table, seul parmi toutes ces femmes, courbé sur son assiette remplie, et la serviette nouée dans le dos comme un enfant, un vieillard mangeait, laissant tomber de sa bouche des gouttes de sauce [...]. C'était le [...] vieux duc de Laverdière, [...] et qui avait été, disait-on, l'amant de la reine Marie-Antoinette [...]. Il avait mené une vie bruyante de débauches, pleine de duels, de paris, de femmes enlevées, avait dévoré sa fortune et effrayé toute sa famille [...]; et sans cesse les yeux d'Emma revenaient d'eux-

mêmes sur ce vieil homme à lèvres pendantes, comme sur quelque chose d'extraordinaire et d'auguste. Il avait vécu à la Cour et couché dans le lit des reines! (*MB* 100-01)

[There, at the top of the table, alone among all these women, stooped over his ample plateful, with his napkin tied around his neck like a child, an old man sat eating, drops of gravy dribbling from his lips [...]. This was the [...] old Duc de Laverdière, [...] and he, so they said, had been the lover of Marie Antoinette [...]. He had led a tumultuous life of debauchery and dueling, of wagers made and women abducted, had squandered his fortune and terrified his whole family [...]; again and again Emma's eyes kept coming back to this old man with the sagging lips, as though to something wonderfully majestic. He had lived at court and slept in the bed of a queen! (*MB* 45-6)]

As LaCapra has observed, Flaubert makes use of a swift modulation of distance and proximity to transition from an objective view of the Duc to Emma's interior view; and Emma, by some authorial—or, at the very least, editorial—magic, makes the Duc's offenses and lack of table manners recede, leaving only those scant details that would suggest an illustrious past. There is something of Flaubert's alchemy in Emma's attempt to transform the inert, painfully unpoetic object of her experience into something worthy of a fairy tale or romantic novel. But Flaubert's swift modulation effectively sets straw next to gold, thwarting any chance of reader sympathy with Emma's daydream. In fact, much of the narrative of Emma's boredom and seduction moves along by means of these modulations, as when her dual contemplation of Léon's proximity and the “pâleur éblouissante” [“pale splendour”] of a radiant sun is abruptly contrasted with the sight of Charles, whose trembling lips, stupid face, and tranquil back explode into view to express “toute la platitude du personnage” (*MB* 160) [“all the banality of the man” (*MB* 94)].

Unlike the masterful writer Flaubert, Emma cannot animate her visions for very long—if indeed she manages to animate them at all—and they invariably end in collapse. Like Flaubert, Emma is unable to seize “l’idée la plus nette” of others, herself, and her situation, failing to see the world otherwise than particulate and ghostly through the glamors of imagination and dream. Also like Flaubert (who famously proclaimed “Madame Bovary, c’est moi”), Emma is unmoored by boredom and substitutes a series of views for the precise constitution of others. Despite the monotony of her affair with Léon, Emma continues to write him letters, for the simple reason “qu’une femme doit toujours écrire à son amant” (*MB* 379) [“a woman should always write to her lover” (*MB* 271)]. She writes, however, not to Léon per se, but to a Léon of the Composite order:

en écrivant, elle percevait un autre homme, un fantôme fait de ses plus ardents souvenirs, de ses lectures les plus belles, de ses convoitises les plus fortes; et il devenait à la fin si véritable, et accessible, qu’elle en palpait émerveillée, sans pouvoir néanmoins le nettement imaginer, tant il se perdait, comme un dieu, sous l’abondance de ses attributs. Il habitait la contrée bleuâtre où les échelles de soie se balancent à des balcons, sous le souffle des fleurs, dans la clarté de la lune. Elle le sentait près d’elle, il allait venir et l’enlèverait tout entière dans un baiser. (*MB* 379)

[as she was writing, she beheld a different man, a phantom put together from her most ardent memories, her favourite books, her most powerful longings; and by the end he became so real, so tangible, that her heart was racing with the wonder of it, though she was unable to imagine him distinctly, for he faded like a god, into the abundance of his attributes. He lived in the big blue country where silken rope-ladders swing from the

balconies, scented by flowers and lit by the moon. She felt him so near, he was coming and he was about to carry her away quite utterly with a kiss. (*MB* 271)]

Emma's writing recalls Flaubert's own in that it obscures the object at the same time as it conjures it, making a sort of phantom of the living Léon. In fact, Léon becomes a god, the ultimate phantom: never grasped "nettement," he is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, ubiquitous and elusive like Flaubert's disseminated authorial vision. Thus, Emma experiences her author's struggle with a language that fractures and exceeds the writer's will: rather than distinctly imagining her lover in order to convey desire for him, she creates a god, about to claim her in a sensual apotheosis. But mortals loved by gods come to bad ends; the dream of language coexists with its menace. Flaubert concludes the above passage with Emma's subsequent creative and spiritual deflation: "Ensuite elle retombait à plat, brisée; car ces élans d'amour vague la fatiguaient plus que de grandes débauches. Elle éprouvait maintenant une courbature incessante et universelle [...]. Elle aurait voulu ne plus vivre, ou continuellement dormir" (*MB* 379-80) ["But she fell quite flat again, broken; for these shadowy ecstasies wearied her more than any wild debauchery. She now experienced an incessant and universal lassitude [...]. She would have liked to stop living, or to be sleeping continuously" (*MB* 271)]. As the sight of Charles curtails Emma's meditation on Léon and the sun, a foundational lassitude dispels her creative ecstasy. Yet this latter collapse is not managed through a modulation of proximity and distance, but by Flaubert's own insistence, continuous throughout the novel, on the impossibility of perfected or sustained illusion: Emma's exhaustive and exhausting efforts to express an "amour vague" succumb to a different kind of *vague*, or wave, that of the foundational boredom her affairs and fantasies had served to obscure. Its presence is signaled by a low drone in various forms. After writing to Léon, Emma senses it as "an incessant and universal lassitude," but she

also describes “une manière de brouillard qu’elle avait dans la tête” [“a kind of fog she had in her head”] after the time of her marriage, and the prurient songs of Yonville’s blind beggar regularly carry “au fond de l’âme comme un tourbillon dans un abîme, et l’emportait parmi les espaces d’une mélancolie sans bornes” (*MB* 170, 353) [“to the very bottom of her soul, like a vortex turning over the deep, and it swept her out across the expanses of a boundless melancholy” (*MB* 102, 249)].³²

Though she is afflicted by the same ennui, seemingly, that Flaubert described in his letters—an ever-present boredom, waiting patiently beneath the surface of things to overwhelm the body and mind of its victim—Emma prefers various false escapes to Flaubert’s detachment and lack of affect. Indeed, faced with boredom, Emma is determined in all cases to find, or, more accurately, to manufacture the transitional object that will pull her back into the world and to life. In other words, Emma does harbor “the wish for a desire,” but rather than wait for her desire to form of its own, she prematurely substitutes for it a pastiche of objects and experiences sourced from novels, fashion magazines, and whatever is on offer from the aptly-named salesman, Lheureux. Her effort forestalls recognition of the poverty of self and world, both of which Flaubert explicitly addresses in his correspondence with regard to his own life. Returning to Adam Phillips’ essay, we understand Emma’s unease within boredom to be more typical of adults than is the thick and sustained feeling of “diffuse restlessness” that marks the child’s sensation of boredom (68). Something is lacking from adult boredom, experienced well after the individual has initiated and achieved his or her independence in relation to the world and to others. Phillips explains:

³² See Tony Tanner’s discussion of this fog, as well as of the recurrence of drones and *courbatures* in Flaubert’s novel in *Adultery in the Novel*; Lawrence R. Schehr also talks about the foundational drone, or *bourdon* in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* in *Flaubert and Sons: Readings of Flaubert, Zola and Proust*.

Clearly, we should speak not of boredom, but of the boredoms, because the notion itself includes a multiplicity of moods and feelings that resist analysis [...]. In that more ordinary, more fleeting, boredom of the child the waiting is repressed. The more common risk for the adult—less attended to, more set in his ways, than the child—is that the boredom will turn into waiting. That the individual will become 'brave enough to let his feelings develop' in the absence of an object—toward a possible object, as it were—and by doing so commit himself, or rather, entrust himself, to the inevitable elusiveness of that object. For the adult, it seems, boredom needs to be the more permanent suspended animation of desire. Adulthood, one could say, is when it begins to occur to you that you may not be leading a charmed life. (78)

In order to prevent this disenchanting "occurrence," Emma turns to the objects, usually more conceptual than corporeal, that abound in Flaubert's novel. Her problem is essentially one of trust: whereas Flaubert countenances the unstable nature of language (in, for example, his "modulations of proximity and distance"), Emma repeatedly entrusts herself to her fantastical objects, such as the blue-skied country, silk ladders, flowers, and moonlight that inform the composite notion of "lover" in her letters to Léon.

Her dependence on these notions extends even to that final notion of death, which, next to "lover," is perhaps the most charming transitional object Emma appeals to and to which she eventually succumbs. After Rodolphe rejects her last-ditch attempt to secure a loan from him, Emma runs in "un transport d'héroïsme" (*MB* 405) ["rapture of heroism" (*MB* 293)] to the pharmacist's where she seeks a mouthful of poison. One might argue that, in this act, Emma understands language's ambivalent comingling of "utility" and "murder"—utility because "Elle prétendit avoir besoin de tuer les rats qui l'empêchaient de dormir" (*MB* 406) ["She said she

needed to kill the rats that were keeping her awake" (*MB* 293)], and murder, of the self. But even this mouthful of poison is a "morsel," a partial conception of death, the pathos of which obscures acute suffering. Emma defers the abyss as she pursues her final fantasy, to commit suicide out of lovesick madness—or, more precisely, to die like Lucia di Lammermoor, the ill-fated heroine of Donizetti's romantic opera, which she had recently seen with Charles and Léon in Rouen. It is not until her final moments of life—after the opportunities afforded by the deathbed to play affectionate wife to a distraught husband, or to rediscover, under the priest's absolving touch, "la volupté perdue de ses premiers élancements mystiques, avec des visions de béatitude éternelle qui commençaient" (*MB* 417) ["the forgotten delights of her first mystical raptures, along with a dawning vision of eternal blessedness" (*MB* 303)]—that Emma reaches the limit of her power to enchant her world. Yonville's blind beggar greets her at this limit: as it wafts through the window, his familiar song recalls her originary melancholy, and the memory of his face summons the existential ugliness Emma made a life of denying.

While alive, Emma measures life by the fanciful distance she could place between herself and the faint sucking sound, the sound of her author's splenetic relationship with language, and with literary language's position in history. Her absolute failure to author her world is announced by her death, and by the ink-black substance that streams from her lifeless mouth, "comme un vomissement" (*MB* 426) ["like vomit" (*MB* 310)]. Though a dead thing, literary language has the power to bring to life, but to a purely illusory life. In declaring himself already dead, Flaubert also declared his immunity to illusions (those of investment, ambition, profession, politics); he then devoted his afterlife to creating pure illusions, at the mercy of which he subjected his characters. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, the power of writing lies precisely in this ability of the author to write the fates and failures that he himself avoids: discussing *Sentimental*

Education, he states, "Flaubert separates himself from [the protagonist] Frédéric, from the indetermination and powerlessness which define him, in the very act of writing the story of Frédéric, whose impotence manifests itself, among other things, by his inability to write, to become a writer" (25). The same can be said of Flaubert's relationship to Emma Bovary: by depicting the path of one who believes in illusions, Flaubert spares himself her fate. In the inky vomit that flows from Emma's mouth, we see the writer outpace the character, his illusion as illusion coming into full view.

*Être toujours mal*³³: Writing without Desire

Inky vomit, vomitous ink is all that Emma Bovary's boredom could finally make of itself. Nursed to maturity by the farmyard, the convent, and finally bourgeois married life, her boredom was indeed born of "la fainéantise ou [...] la maladie" that Flaubert refused as his own boredom's origin. Not only did the author malevolently invest Emma with credence in illusions, he also endowed her with the full weight of boredom as complaint. Though Flaubert certainly complained of his boredom, he understood it as foundational to his being and, more importantly, to his art. His boredom was productive rather than destructive, generative rather than terminal—and all the more so for his ability to imagine the dire directions in which boredom could lead a life, not to mention its capacity to take life altogether. I have argued in the previous section that one life so taken was Flaubert's own, his living, intelligent being turned into a thinking phantom, obsessed with an equally dead and thus endlessly malleable language. We now need to continue tracing Flaubert's boredom in his unique approach to prose, focusing on the way in which he

³³ Letter to Alfred le Poittevin, May 13, 1845.

managed his penchants for both the romantic and the vulgar in his writing of *Madame Bovary*. While, following Roland Barthes, I have stated that writing without desire risks producing the babble text utterly unsolicitous of its reader, Flaubert's prose presents an instance of desireless writing that nevertheless does not babble. Such an instance does as much as Flaubert's poetic treatment of prose to "kill the novelistic," paradoxically lending the novel a new life as it looks forward to the twentieth century.

Flaubert's perpetual boredom, his ailment that was not illness, was well-known in his time, and so it is no surprise that, late in the century, it became the subject for meditation of another self-proclaimed convalescent, Friedrich Nietzsche. While positing a necessary link between the body's suffering and philosophy in *The Gay Science* (1887), Nietzsche also identifies a connection between the complaints of certain artists and their meticulous approach to writing. Though Nietzsche does not mention Flaubert by name in *The Gay Science*, his description of the self-torturing and hateful writer suggests no other. Following this cue, I will allow Nietzsche to direct my thoughts on Flaubert for a few pages. In the section titled "What is romanticism?" in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche states that every philosophy and all art presuppose suffering and sufferers, and he divides the latter into those who suffer from life's penury and those who suffer from its fullness. Asking of every work of art, "[I]s it hunger or superabundance that has here become creative?" Nietzsche observes that the former type of sufferer creates by means of "the hatred of the ill-constituted, disinherited, and underprivileged, who destroy, *must* destroy, because what exists, indeed all existence, all being, outrages and provokes them" (*The Gay Science* 329). The sufferer who, like Flaubert, holds *la vie en haine*, wishes "to turn what is most personal, singular, and narrow, the real idiosyncrasy of his suffering, into a binding law and compulsion—one who, as it were, revenges himself on all

things by forcing his own image, the image of his torture, on them, branding them with it" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 330).³⁴ Nietzsche did indeed have Flaubert in mind when describing the resentful sufferer, proven by his 1888 revision of the passage for its appearance in *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. In this later compilation, Nietzsche further illuminates his distinction between life's sufferers by contrasting Goethe, for whom "overflow of vitality was creative," with Flaubert, whose defining creative force was hatred:

Flaubert, a new edition of Pascal, but as an artist with this instinctive belief at heart: *'Flaubert est toujours haissable, l'homme n'est rien, l'oeuvre est tout'* He tortured himself when he wrote, just as Pascal tortured himself when he thought—the feelings of both were inclined to be 'non-egoistic.'... 'Disinterestedness'—principle of decadence, the will to nonentity in art as well as in morality. (67-8)

According to Nietzsche, Flaubert's complaint entailed his sense of being worthy of contempt. And in fact, what occasioned Flaubert's letter to du Camp (cited above) was his own uncertainty and self-effacement regarding the publication of *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, of which he wrote "dans la question la plus important peut-être d'une vie d'artiste, j'en manque complètement, je m'annule, je me fonds, et sans efforts, hélas! [...] Les objections pour et contre me paraissent également bonnes" ["in what is possibly the most important question in the life of an artist, I'm completely lacking, I cancel myself out, I make myself disappear, and without effort, alas! [...] Objections for and against seem equally good to me"³⁵]. Flaubert's self-contempt and lack of conviction flattened the world in which he had to make decisions, rendering him an almost indifferent observer to the fate of his work. The disinterestedness Nietzsche detects in Flaubert's

³⁴ These sufferers are taken up by their "romantic pessimism," which Nietzsche associates elsewhere with Christianity and *ressentiment*, in opposition to the Dionysian impulse that embraces the overfullness of life (Nietzsche *The Gay Science*, 331 n126).

³⁵ My translation.

work was prefigured by his premature weariness of life, or "precocious boredom" as Jonathan Culler has put it—a boredom based not on abundant experience but on the sense that all options have been exhausted already and are thus equally null.

Two factors, then, make up Flaubert's disinterestedness: one, as Nietzsche observes, is Flaubert's hateful self-negation by which he desires to remove himself from his work; the other, according to Culler, is Flaubert's formative experience of the world as null, empty, and boring. Before it is possible to make sense of this author's profound and dual negation, a host of questions arises. First, we must pause over the multiple possible senses of "disinterest," particularly in the nineteenth century. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the noun "disinterest" had meant impartiality, lack of bias, or something against the interest or advantage of parties concerned.³⁶ The word most often referred to the absence of personal categories of experience in transaction, in endeavor, or in the evaluation of objects and experiences. What one's disinterest or impartiality allowed to come to prominence was the interest or importance of the public realm, the task at hand, or the value of something independent from its relation to its evaluator. But just as the sense of the word "interesting" changed in the late eighteenth century from a thing's communally agreed-upon importance, to its importance in relation to the individual evaluator, the Oxford English Dictionary states that the sense of "disinterest" also changed in the late nineteenth century to denote absence of interest. I maintain that it is useful here to discuss Flaubert's disinterest in both senses—the sense of impartiality and the sense of being uninterested—so long as we ask, How can such dually-conceived disinterest, which bears affinity to both melancholia (poverty of self) and mourning (poverty of world) by Freud's formulation, concert itself to take form in prose? How can hatred be expressed through

³⁶ "disinterest." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. 2014. Web. 7 Jul. 2014.

impartiality? As I have stressed in the previous chapter, writing entails no small amount of effort and sustained interest: to cite Patricia Meyer Spacks, "The act of writing implicitly claims interest (boredom's antithesis) for the assertions or questions or exclamations it generates" (1). It follows, then, that one must command a presence through one's interest, which is an orientation toward the world. How then are the positions of disinterest and boredom, in which all options are equally null, expressed through a process that is goal- and intention-driven?

For Nietzsche, Flaubert transforms his disinterest—his impartiality—into the total subordination of his prose to style, a praxis often discussed by literary critics in terms of "objectivity": thus the "real idiosyncrasy" of Flaubert's suffering becomes the "binding law and compulsion" of his work. Indeed, we have lingered over Flaubert's statement that "il n'y avait rien de plus faible que de mettre en art ses sentiments personnels," suggesting that "objectivity" consists in the exclusion of asides, evaluative verbs or other cues as to the author's personal values or judgment of his characters' actions. But in an earlier letter to Louise Colet, Flaubert confides that the success of *Madame Bovary* will be measured by the extent to which he can *balance* his personal affinities and irritations with the world rather than deny them altogether: "toute la valeur de mon livre, s'il en a une, sera d'avoir su marcher droit sur un cheveu, suspendu entre le double abîme du lyrisme et du vulgaire" ["The entire value of my book, if it has any, will consist of my having known how to walk straight ahead on a hair, balanced above the two abysses of lyricism and vulgarity" (*Letters* 157)].³⁷ The two abysses of lyricism and vulgarity, which he elsewhere refers to as the "grands vols d'aigle" and the "animalités de l'homme" ["grand eagle flights" and the "animal side of man" (*Letters* 154)]³⁸ coexist as much in Flaubert as they do in Yonville l'Abbaye, where Emma's flights of fancy are continually dispelled by her

³⁷ March 20-21, 1852.

³⁸ Letter to Louise Colet, January 16, 1852.

provincial environs and the limitations of her cohort. Therefore, Flaubert's disinterest or objectivity does not consist of the approval or disapproval of character actions, or of the omission of a larger moral system (such as is found in the novels of British authors like Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot) in which these actions are situated. Rather, Flaubert's lyrical and vulgar literary impulses are quite clearly expressed, but are attributed to characters and rural life. In this way, the author is truly "disséminé en tous," as distanced from his fictional world as he is from his personal sentiments. If Flaubert does present his point of view, the reader can detect it only generally: invoking Flaubert's disinterested phantomhood, Pierre Bourdieu accordingly writes of *Madame Bovary* that its author cryptically resides "in this narrative with no beyond, in this narrative that recounts itself, in the irreconcilable diversity of its perspectives, in the universe from which the author has deleted himself but remains, like Spinoza's god, immanent and coextensive with his creation" ("Flaubert's Point of View" 562).

Accordingly, as we read *Madame Bovary*, we find lyricism and vulgarity to be organic to characters and location, ever-present, and constantly at odds with each other. We have already seen the lyrical and the vulgar comingling, for example in Flaubert's description of the Duc de Laverdière, in which the latter's gravy-smearred visage is swiftly paired with his glamorous reputation. In this instance, the vulgar eludes Emma's vision and is presented only to the reader. Yet Emma does struggle internally with the vulgar, and its suppression of her attempts to romanticize her life. In an instance only briefly mentioned earlier, Emma's blissful admiration of the sun while on a walk in mixed company is interrupted when Charles enters her field of vision, shifting her attention from the firmament to her husband's trembling lips and stupid face—"toute la platitude du personnage." Switching to the calming contemplation of Léon's blue eyes, "plus limpide et plus beau que ces lacs des montagnes où le ciel se mire" (*MB* 161)

["more limpid and more beautiful than the mountain lakes that mirror the sky" (*MB* 94)], Emma again finds her reverie abruptly halted, this time by Homais, screaming at his child. Such intrusions come to mark the diminution of her powers to imagine herself out of her circumstances, for example when she vainly seeks to preserve her fading romance with Rodolphe: "leur grand amour, où elle vivait plongée, parut se diminuer sous elle, comme l'eau d'un fleuve qui s'absorberait dans son lit, et elle aperçut la vase" (*MB* 241) ["now their great love, in which she dwelt immersed, seemed to dwindle beneath her, like the waters that vanish into the bed of the river, and she could see the mud" (*MB* 158)]. Flaubert sutures the lyrical and the vulgar together across space and time as well, not leaving their juxtaposition solely to physical proximity or to their coexistence in the awareness of a single character, as is the case with the previous three examples. Léon's study of Emma's melancholy air—"Elle était si triste et si calme, si douce à la fois et si réservée, que l'on se sentait près d'elle pris par un charme glacial, comme l'on frissonne dans les églises sous le parfum des fleurs mêlé au froid des marbres" (*MB* 168) ["She was so sad and so calm, so gentle and yet so shy, that by her side you felt under the spell of a frosty charm, just as you shiver in church at the scent of the flowers mingling with the feel of cold marble" (*MB* 99-100)]—is pushed up against Homais' impersonal appraisal of Emma, made at a later point in time and in an undetermined location, as talented enough to be the wife of a sub-prefect. Even Homais, the novel's mainstay of bourgeois vulgarity, has his bubble burst occasionally: Homais announces Charles' seemingly successful operation on Hippolyte's club foot by writing a celebratory article for *Le Fanal de Rouen*. Breaking into their bedroom late one night, he excitedly reads aloud to Charles and Mrs. Bovary. In the text, his paean to science, recorded in a newspaper column, is concluded by another announcement from the panicked Mère Lefrançois that Hippolyte is dying from gangrene:

'Honneur donc aux savants généreux! honneur à ces esprits infatigables qui consacrent leurs veilles à l'amélioration ou bien au soulagement de leur espèce! Honneur! trois fois honneur! N'est-ce pas le cas de s'écrier que les aveugles verront, les sourds entendront et les boiteux marcheront! Mais ce que le fanatisme autrefois promettait à ses élus, la science maintenant l'accomplit pour tous les hommes! Nous tiendrons nos lecteurs au courant des phases successives de cette cure si remarquable.'

Ce qui n'empêcha pas que, cinq jours après, la mère Lefrançois n'arrivât tout effarée en s'écriant:

—Au secours! il se meurt!... J'en perds la tête! (MB 250-1)

[Glory to the noble men of science! Glory to those unwearied spirits who consecrate their nights to the amelioration or indeed the solace of their fellow creatures. Glorious! Thrice glorious! Shall we not cry aloud that the blind shall see, the deaf shall hear, and the lame shall walk again? But everything that fanaticism once pledged to the chosen few, science now accomplishes for the whole of mankind! We shall keep our readers regularly informed of the progress of this remarkable cure.]

Just five days later, this did not stop Mère Lefrançois from turning up scared to death and shouting:

—Help! He's dying! It's driving me mad! (MB 165)]

Flaubert's irony is palpable: far from consecrating his night to the solace of others, the designated "savant généreux" is tucked in bed, oblivious of the utter lack of solace or contentment that preoccupies his bedmate. And whereas Homais' overblown rhetoric announces once and broadly

Charles' genius, the subsequent thud of Hippolyte's prosthetic limb throughout Yonville will recall his ignorance.

In all of these examples, the vulgar seems to win out over the lyrical, having, as it were, the last word. Indeed, the novel's last line, "[Homais] vient de recevoir la croix d'honneur" (*MB* 446) ["[Homais] has just received the Legion of Honour" (*MB* 327)] literally crowns vulgarity king, and just after the novel's last breath of lyricism is exhaled by Charles, who is choked to death "comme un adolescent sous les vagues effluves amoureux qui gonflaient son coeur chagrin" (*MB* 446) ["like an adolescent from the vague amorous yearnings that swelled up in his aching heart" (*MB* 326)]. Given this pattern of vulgarity surmounting the lyrical, it is difficult to argue that Flaubert balanced these two impulses like a tightrope walker suspended between abysses, and that his disinterest was disseminated by and expressed in this suspension. Instead, his characters' experiences seem to be relentlessly negative—balancing between a double abyss, certainly, but a double abyss of vulgarity and death. Louis Ulbach, one of *Madame Bovary's* initial outside readers, consequently objected that the novel was too "cynical in its negation of everything" and feared that its publication would give Napoleon III's censors a reason to suppress the *Revue de Paris*, the publishing organ of which he was editor (qtd in LaCapra 22). Flaubert's hatred of the world, his eagerness to express its absolute poverty, appears to trump his hatred of self and the attendant practice of effacing himself from his writing.

Though vulgarism operates as the pessimistic negation of lyricism in *Madame Bovary*, we must understand that optimistic lyricism was the reigning mode of bourgeois discourse. And though Nietzsche places Flaubert with those artists who cling to rather than emerge from their suffering "*newborn*, having shed one's skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate

taste for joy" (*Gay Science* 37), one must align novelist with philosopher regarding their opinions and characterizations of bourgeois culture. In the preface to *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes:

How maliciously we listen now to the big county-fair boom-boom with which the 'educated' person and city dweller today permits art, books, and music to rape him and provide 'spiritual pleasures'—with the aid of spirituous liquors! How the theatrical scream of passion now hurts our ears, how strange to our taste the whole romantic uproar and tumult of the senses have become, which the educated mob loves, and all its aspirations after the elevated, inflated, and exaggerated! (37)

Nietzsche and Flaubert shrink alike from the cacophony of bourgeois lyricism, and each sets himself the task of dismantling it. Flaubert's method entails the creation of characters whose lyrical inclinations repeatedly yield to the intrusion or realization of the vulgar. Nowhere does Flaubert's approach jibe as well with the (anti-)sentiments expressed in Nietzsche's preface to *The Gay Science* as they do in *Madame Bovary's* famous *comices agricoles* scene, in which the "spiritual pleasures" of Rodolphe and Emma's courtship conflate and compete with the "elevated, inflated, and exaggerated" affect of the fair.³⁹ Here, Flaubert demonstrates his literary praxis of disinterest as a kind of balancing act between the lyrical and the vulgar, so that one does not supersede the other.

Certainly, the famous *comices* scene in part repeats the pattern we have previously traced, in which vulgarity interrupts high-minded or romantic sentiments and intentions. Rodolphe's efforts to court Emma are frustrated by the goings-on of the fair: his references to his poetically suicidal thoughts are broken up by Lestiboudois, dragging chairs from church to fairgrounds;

³⁹ Additionally, looking forward to *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, we can easily see Flaubert putting the word "educated" in scare quotes, as Nietzsche has done.

Emma's implications to Rodolphe that he is free to do as he likes are exploded by cannon fire and panicked spectators; and eventually Rodolphe interrupts his own overtures by talking back to the Town Counselor's address. The ceremonies underway, Rodolphe pits his own romantic lyricism (admittedly a convenient and thus temporary posture in his case), not against intrusions of the vulgar, but against the bourgeois lyricism of the ceremonies. The Counselor's discourse on provincial dedication "à l'amélioration commune et au soutien des États, fruit du respect des lois et de la pratique des devoirs" (*MB* 211) ["to the amelioration of the common life and to the buttressing of the state, fruit of respect for the law and the habit of duty..." (*MB* 133)] is rebutted by Rodolphe's equally trite but romantically-derived definition of "devoir": "c'est de sentir ce qui est grand, de chérir ce qui est beau, et non pas d'accepter toutes les conventions de la société, avec les ignominies qu'elle nous impose" (*MB* 211) ["To feel what is great, to cherish what is beautiful, that's what duty is! Not to accept every one of society's conventions, with all the ignominy they inflict upon us" (*MB* 133-4)]. Each discourse intrudes upon the other, competing for Emma's attention as well as for that of the narration. The narration displays its disinterest, obliging both discourses by temporarily ceasing to report them as direct speech and by presenting them together in a single paragraph:

Ainsi, l'éloge du gouvernement y tenait moins de place; la religion et l'agriculture en occupaient davantage. On y voyait le rapport de l'une et de l'autre, et comment elles avaient concouru toujours à la civilisation. Rodolphe, avec madame Bovary, causait rêves, pressentiments, magnétisme. Remontant au berceau des sociétés, l'orateur vous dépeignait ces temps farouches où les hommes vivaient de glands, au fond des bois. Puis ils avaient quitté la dépouille des bêtes, endossé le drap, creusé des sillons, planté la vigne. Était-ce un bien, et n'y avait-il pas dans cette découverte plus d'inconvénients que

d'avantages? M. Derozerays se posait ce problème. Du magnétisme, peu à peu, Rodolphe en était venu aux affinités, et, tandis que M. le président citait Cincinnatus à sa charrue, Dioclétien plantant ses choux, et les empereurs de la Chine inaugurant l'année par des semailles, le jeune homme expliquait à la jeune femme que ces attractions irrésistibles tiraient leur cause de quelque existence antérieure. (*MB* 216)

[Accordingly, praise of the government played a lesser role; religion and agriculture were rather more in evidence. They were shown the relation between them, and how they had always contributed to civilization. Rodolphe, with Madame Bovary, was talking dreams, premonitions, magnetism. Reaching back to the birth of human society, the orator depicted for us the barbaric era when men lived on acorns, deep in the woods. They had shed their animal skins, put on clothes, ploughed the earth, planted the vine. Was this for the good? Monsieur Derozerays asked himself this question. Beginning with magnetism, little by little, Rodolphe had got as far as affinities, and, while the chairman cited Cincinnatus at his plough, Diocletian planting his cabbages and the emperors of China bringing in the New Year by planting seeds, the young man was explaining to the young woman that these irresistible attractions had their origin in some previous existence. (*MB* 137)]

Shuttling between dueling discourses, the narrator subtly collapses their differences. Though the passage stresses the earthly-ephemeral binary present in the two sets of speech (man's savage beginnings are juxtaposed with his dreams; cabbages contend with the concept of animal magnetism), and though it is true that, serving their respective purposes, Derozerays emphasizes man's distance from his origins while Rodolphe keeps them in close view, both speakers seek to situate and thus justify their intentions in the larger context of the history of Man. Rodolphe's

musings on dream, premonition, and magnetism, though perhaps more entertaining to "la jeune femme" than Derozerays' paean to agriculture, are no less persuasive speech: proper understanding of the innate attractive and psychic forces that guided our "existence antérieure" should lead us to view them more favorably as they work upon our lives today, and at this very (intimate) moment. Both men, in addition, deploy idealistic rhetoric in the service of rather modest aims: Derozerays wishes to awe the townspeople long enough to dole out medals for superlative service, farming practices, and manure cultivation; Rodolphe wishes to seduce Madame Bovary. Indeed, Flaubert, in full ironic mode, dovetails Derozerays' mention of the ritual planting of seeds with Rodolphe's thinly-veiled sexual advances.

Not only does the fair intrude upon the two secluded lovers, but Rodolphe's use of natural imagery also spills into the descriptive narration of the gathered crowd—or, to speak archaically, the vulgar. Just as Rodolphe and Emma have found each other "'comme deux fleuves qui coulent pour se rejoindre'" ["like two rivers irresistably converging"], and her trembling hand in his is "comme une tourterelle captive qui veut reprendre sa volée" ["like a captive turtle dove that strives to take wing again"], Flaubert writes that a sudden breeze flutters a nearby table cloth as well as the bonnets of the spectating peasants below, "comme des ailes de papillons blancs qui s'agitent" (*MB* 216, 217) ["like the wings of white butterflies flitting about" (*MB* 137, 138)]. Like the two lovers' fingers which "se confondirent" by the end of this scene, the *comices agricoles* and Rodolphe's idealism intertwine with and confound one another. Ultimately, Flaubert's narrative strategy of juxtaposition and deflation teases out the radical similarity of the two discourses as well as their futility to achieve their aims: the speeches all read and awards all awarded, "chacun reprenait son rang et tout rentrait dans la coutume" (*MB* 219) ["everyone

resumed their stations and everything went back to normal" (*MB* 140)]; Rodolphe returns Madame home in two brief sentences.

And what about Emma? A battle is waged for her interest, but which discourse does she choose as her captivator? One could argue that the high-flown nature of each is equally suited to her romantic sensibilities, cultivated from an early age. Here, Flaubert offers his reader a rare look into her thoughts, revealing that she pays attention to neither. Instead, the scent of Rodolphe's pomade recalls the Viscount who waltzed with her at La Vaubyessard. Half-closing her eyes in the act of smelling, her gaze falls upon a coach raising dust on a distant road—the same coach that had often brought Léon to her from Rouen. Flaubert writes, "Elle crut le voir en face, à sa fenêtre; puis tout se confondit, des nuages passèrent; il lui sembla qu'elle tournait encore dans la valse, sous le feu des lustres, au bras du vicomte, et que Léon n'était pas loin, qu'il allait venir..." (*MB* 214) ["She thought she saw him over the way, at his window, then it was all a blur, clouds went past; it felt as if she was still turning in the waltz, under the bright chandeliers, on the Viscount's arm, as if Léon were not far away, was going to come..." (*MB* 136)]. Lost in memory, Emma is temporally, spatially, and emotionally absent from the moment at hand, registering neither Rodolphe nor the fair.⁴⁰ She, like Flaubert—as Gérard Genette has observed—indulges in her "boredom, indifference, lack of attention, forgetfulness," neglecting a nascently erotic part of the narrative for tangential reverie (200). Thus Flaubert showcases his dual disinterest, not only in the inattention characteristic of himself and his protagonist, but also in discourse's failure to effect change—here, specifically, to move this protagonist to sympathy and compliance with either of its sources. Both the *comices agricoles* and the real narrative

⁴⁰ See Elissa Marder's *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity* and Lawrence Thornton's "The Fairest of Them All: Modes of Vision in *Madame Bovary*" for more thorough discussions of the problematic ways in which Emma Bovary relates to time and remembered experience.

event of the *comices* scene, Rodolphe's advances, come to nothing, at least not immediately. Of course, in time, Emma's association of the faces of men she has admired with Rodolphe's presence works out in the latter's favor. But it is not words that accomplish Emma and Rodolphe's coupling; rather, it is Rodolphe's subsequent and prolonged absence. Flaubert writes that six weeks pass before he reappears at Emma's doorstep, the events of which are outside of the text, a blank. All we know of Emma's feelings and resolutions during this time is contained in her sudden pallor at the sight of Rodolphe, which he understands as proof that "son calcul avait été bon" (*MB* 223) ["his scheme had worked" (*MB* 143)]. Gaps, things unspoken, solitude—all these things accomplish what the multiplied rhetoric of the *comices agricoles* scene could not.

Returning to Nietzsche's repudiation of popular romantic sentiments, perhaps we should reevaluate our quickness to pair him with Flaubert, who, it seems, does not listen maliciously to the big county fair boom-boom, but rather, like Emma, hardly listens at all. Somewhat contrary to Nietzsche's analysis, Flaubert is not interested in having the romantic triumph over the vulgar or vice versa, nor does he wish to negate self and world in the name of a crushing self-hatred. Though distanced and ghostly, Flaubert is present in his art through his fascinations and distractions: instead of removing himself from the page, he directs the narration and occasionally diverts it from the narrative. Not only are Flaubert's lyrical and vulgar impulses put into some kind of balance by their co-presence and mutual cancellation, but narrative event and sheer description seem to be of equal importance to a diverted and diverting narrator. Flaubert's fictional world is thus flattened: old men walking in the sun are as in focus as principle characters and main events, and La Vaubyessard is just as present as the amorous Rodolphe. This radical equivalency is the result of Flaubert's lifelong boredom and world-weariness, and

reflects the second movement of boredom in which the bored subject finds no object inviting over all others, no thing that solicits his interest and pulls him back into engagement with the world. Flaubert's praxis of disinterestedness resists the power of the world to carry him out of himself: he will not include his personal sentiments in his fiction, nor will he differentiate in description between the principle and the trivial. For Flaubert, the transitional object is an impossibility—insofar as he writes, he does so from boredom. Unlike Nietzsche, who, at the beginning of *The Gay Science*, proclaims the unexpected end of his convalescence, the "saturnalia of a spirit who has patiently resisted a terrible, long pressure [...] and who is now all at once attacked by hope, the hope for health, and the *intoxication* of convalescence," Flaubert is resolved never to leave the sick bed (32).⁴¹ His writing, in the ways I have described, reflects the state (and stasis) he inhabits.

And yet, Flaubert's prose does not babble as does d'Albert's narration in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. Though Flaubert's narration repeatedly sets vulgarity and lyricism at odds with each other, thwarting a sense of progression or argument, play is preserved in this ambivalence: the reader's uncertainty—or, as Jonathan Culler writes, the reader's disorientation—in relation to the novel's point of view is Flaubert's signature invitation to the game. Without unequivocal cues as to how one should feel about Flaubert's characters, the reader is left to form her own inquiry into what his novel wants. In the ambiguous instance of *Madame Bovary*, this inquiry turns back upon itself; not given a clear message or moral, the reader must ask what she wants from the novel. The novel's 1857 obscenity trial dramatized the reader's uncertainty, with the defense taking the conservative position that the narrator is a "fully reliable guide" to the story of Emma Bovary's "deserved punishment," and the prosecution countering that Emma's fall was not hard

⁴¹ As Sartre argues in *L'Idiot de la famille*.

enough, the author's intentions of "'seduction of the sense and of sentiment'" going undiminished by his heroine's death (LaCapra qtg Pinard 34). In his study of the trial, Dominick LaCapra observes that, though defense and prosecution disagreed on the "moral" of the story, both "assumed the clear-cut subordination of literary to established social and religious norms," so that the novel's acquittal hinged upon whether its representations were found to be in contempt of bourgeois values (209). Both sides also assumed a direct correlation between the novel's moral status and authorial intent, character witnesses and biography being as or more crucial to the defense's case than close reading of the novel (LaCapra 35). Yet the fact that the book was put on trial testifies to the reader's uneasy position vis-à-vis its narrator, an uneasiness that was acted out by the two lawyers on the case. LaCapra argues that, while contemporary readers read in *Madame Bovary* either confirmation or contempt of middle-class mores, he reads the author's ambivalence, placing it at the core of the novel's "disorienting nature" (59): "I would offer the speculation that the larger cultural context that induces or facilitates the widespread use of free indirect style at least in the form it takes in Flaubert is one wherein the writer is fairly definite about what he rejects in the larger society (for example, 'bourgeois stupidity') but relatively uncertain and clearly undogmatic about viable alternatives" (140). LaCapra links Flaubert's precarious position in his own society to his development of dual style, which aims to "employ or refer to more traditional elements on one level and to sound them out or play havoc with them on other levels" (59). The "modulations of proximity and distance, empathy and irony" Flaubert deploys thus refer not only to modulations of access to characters' inner speech and other narrated objects, but to the narrator's play between presentation and rejection of the mores that constitute speaker and object. Far from babble text, Flaubert's prose reproduces his own ambivalence through narrational style and invites the reader to find her own

position in relation to it.⁴² His boredom is neither self-satisfied, nor is it the content of the writing; rather, it is present in the narrator's dizzying aptitude for distance from that which it represents.

Before moving on to the ways in which Flaubert's last novel looks past this boredom toward a kind of reengagement with the world, it remains briefly to ask how Flaubert's disinterests work to "kill the novelistic." We could similarly ask how it is that Flaubert kills *Madame Bovary*, for in this novel, reader and characters alike confront the futility of words to create meaning and render experience. Emma's lover Rodolphe makes this point most clearly when he observes, "la parole humaine est comme un chaudron fêlé où nous battons des mélodies à faire danser les ours, quand on voudrait attendrir les étoiles" (*MB* 265-6) ["human speech is like a cracked cauldron on which we knock out tunes for dancing-bears, when we wish to conjure pity from the stars" (*MB* 177)]. Far from bringing out a desired state of things, dream-laden language often thrusts Flaubert's characters up against the paltry, the monotonous, or, in Emma's case, the abyssal; the inadequacy of language corresponds with the mobility of Flaubert's narrator, by turns melded with the character's inner aspirations and positioned to see the blatant unworthiness of their objects. We recall that, able to write only to a Léon "of the Composite order," Emma lapses into a state of not wanting anything, a situation in which language no longer has a clear role or direction. In this recurring scenario of desiring and coming to the end of desire, Flaubert subverts the traditional novel's project to identify energies and direct them toward a goal, carried out in the novels of Balzac. Whereas Balzac's characters stand as ruthless paradigms of success in an age of change, André Malraux observes that

⁴² Hence *Madame Bovary*'s continuing controversial nature when it comes to reader response: I, for example, find the book in turns darkly humorous and heartbreaking, whereas my former professor, Jeremy H. Smith, has always been appalled by its cynicism.

Flaubert's characters are conceived in the mode of failure: "Madame Bovary become mistress of the Château de la Vaubyessard [...] is a novel by Balzac," but Madame Bovary able to imagine this alternate life for herself yet unable to even begin to obtain it is, distinctively, a novel by Flaubert (qtd in Brooks 176). Peter Brooks links Malraux's insight to that of Marcel Proust, who found in Flaubert's obsessive style a means of de-dramatization and de-novelization, for if "[t]he Balzacian novel is constructed precisely on a dramatic, even a theatrical, model, by which will and action are plotted toward major 'showdowns,'" or scenes in which characters articulate the conflict at hand and their interests in it, the Flaubertian novel eschews confrontation in its plot and articulation by its characters (176). Brooks sees in this dedramatizing practice a challenge to the novel's "traditional readability," as "No longer can the reader espouse the protagonist's desire, no longer can he read in the forward-moving expectation created by the force of that desire. The binding, totalizing work of Eros seems to have reached a halt" (178). *Madame Bovary*, it turns out, is not a love story. Nor is it a "paradigm of organization," what Jonathan Culler contends is the traditional novel's main offer to its reader (qtd in Brooks 177). Rather, Flaubert offers paradigms of collapse, as the futility of language reveals itself to be the foundation of his narratives. Nothing Emma Bovary tries to conjure stays conjured; like Flaubert's representation of Emma as anthology of flounces, hair, and veins beneath skin, her own collection of lovers, daydreams, and debt refuses to constitute a life. Things fall apart in the entropy of Flaubert's ennui: *Madame Bovary* truly is a novel—and barely a novel—about nothing.

III. Reengagement

Les Attaches puissantes: Writing Reemergence, Writing Reading

Flaubert's authorial beginnings are steeped in the "opium" of ennui. Slow to emerge, the writing is perfected and polished, a masterpiece of detached narration, the vision of a thinking phantom. Such beginnings bear a closer resemblance to the ultimate end, death.⁴³ It is therefore fitting that Flaubert's end, his final work, inclines toward abundance and life—in short, toward beginnings. But not just the beginning of boredom, or the movements of dissatisfaction and withdrawal. Rather, Flaubert's final work points to an affective state that obtains both before and beyond boredom, that of engagement. In his last and unfinished novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Flaubert demonstrates his desire, not to shun society, but to bring it close by adopting its preoccupations. Concomitantly, the novel reveals another aspect of Flaubert's relationship to writing: counter to *Madame Bovary's* emphasis on the crafted and controlled sentence, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* repetitively and even manically narrates the subordination of craft to the zeal for expression. Through the subjects of his narration—two Parisian clerks who unsuccessfully spend their retirement trying to enact what they read—Flaubert elaborates an idea of community only negatively present in his first novel. *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, farcical though it is, shows its author in boredom's third movement. Here, Flaubert does not sentence his readers to a hideous fate à la Emma Bovary, but situates them within a constantly unfolding communal vision. If *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is a satire, it is in part because the discourse it explores—atomizing, algorithmic, and bourgeois—is stupid, and because its dominance renders any sort of communal dream into farce by contrast. While the dream of communality—and radical communality—

⁴³ See also Peter Brooks' related discussion of Flaubert's propensity in *Sentimental Education* for having his characters "run through the trajectory of desire, to discover its eventual cooperation with the death instinct" (185).

glimpsed in the novel is the butt of its grand joke, this joke comes at the expense of discourse and leaves intact the value and resilience of that dream. Even when the dream takes refuge in nostalgia and repetition, as when Bouvard and Pécuchet decide to copy as in the old days, it is nonetheless alive.

Thus far, we have associated Flaubert's preoccupations and prose style with ennui, self-loathing, hatred of the world, disinterest, disillusionment, distance, death, and collapse. How is it possible, then, to add communality, and the associated terms equality and democracy, to this list of associations? Democracy in particular seems to present the most difficulties, as it refers to a state of things not only terrestrial, but also aspirational, participatory, and cooperative. Referring to Melville's *Bartleby* as well as to Flaubertian style, Jacques Rancière similarly asks in *The Flesh of Words*, "[H]ow can one make a difference in the political community with this indifference?" (163). Rancière replies by paraphrasing Flaubert himself: the radical indifference that insists "there are no beautiful or ugly subjects, no reasons to prefer Constantinople [to] the dampness and history-less dullness of the French hinterland" undoes Classical hierarchies of representation and signification previously in place in the arts (*Flesh* 147). Even the adulterous wife of a country doctor is admitted into the realm of the visible, as is the dust on the road that takes her to her lover, the reflection of the grass in his well-polished boots, and the manure that sullies their shine. Far from proving him dead, Flaubert's indifference distinguishes him as an author of "democracy in literature," as does his refusal of a central narrative viewpoint (Rancière, *Politics* 14). Despite his protestations of ennui and apathy, Flaubert's cultivated equality as indifference betrays his investment. Rancière elaborates in *The Politics of Aesthetics*: "This equality of indifference is the result of a poetic bias [...]. Yet what is this indifference after all if not the very equality of everything that comes to pass on a written page, available as it is to

everyone's eyes?" (14) We concede that Flaubert's lust for details over plot, his making impossible objects out of disparate pieces, and his equal estimation of Constantinople and the hinterlands—all of which arise from his foundational boredom—also work to distinguish his prose as nurturing ground for a radical aesthetic egalitarianism. But, as we have observed, the upshot of all this equality, at least insofar as *Madame Bovary* is concerned, is entropy, distance, and death—hardly words we associate with democracy. Lest we accuse Rancière of extrapolating too much and too optimistically from Flaubert's aesthetic disinterest, we should return to the novelist's early correspondence.

Once more, let us take as our starting point the early letter in which Flaubert proclaims his ennui-inspired phantomhood, for it is here, too, that we glimpse something of the writing he wished to do as he neared the (true) end of his life: "Connaissez-vous l'ennui? non pas cet ennui commun, banal, qui provient de la fainéantise ou de la maladie, mais cet ennui moderne qui ronge l'homme dans les entrailles et, d'un être intelligent, fait une ombre qui marche, un fantôme qui pense." In addition to the disembodied *ennui moderne*, Flaubert refers to its curiously embodied location, the *entrailles*. Whereas the conventional topos of artistic and other kinds of beginnings is indeed the *entrailles*, or the womb, Flaubert invokes the *entrailles* throughout his correspondence in another locus and sense—the entrails—casting them as the seat of his emotive and creative capacities. This idiosyncrasy demands augury: we must ask, What are the implications of a work staged in the entrails? How, if at all, can the novel be understood in comparison with the entrails' emotive and material expressions? And in what ways does this peculiar imaging of literary creation address Flaubert's particular malady that was not a malady, his boredom? As we shall discover, Flaubert invokes his entrails as a means of attachment rather than of removal. Accordingly, by examining Flaubert's figurative idiosyncrasy, we will move

closer to an understanding of what Jacques Rancière calls his poetic bias. More urgently, we will see how Flaubert, whose worlds and characters typify incompetence and irrelevance, reveals the promise of humanity. In this way, we will come to understand how Flaubert makes something out of (out of, in the sense of exodus as well as in the sense of “from”) his inexorable ennui.

Looking further into his correspondence, we see that Flaubert's *entrailles* house his love as well as his ennui: love for music, antiquity, beauty, the insignificant, his mother, and, for a time, Louise Colet. Intimacy and trust are expressed by exposure of the entrails, and a passionate quarrel between himself and Louise is described accordingly: "On ne se rencontre qu'en se heurtant et chacun, portant dans ses mains ses entrailles déchirées, accuse l'autre qui ramasse les siennes" ["We never meet without colliding with each other and each, holding their entrails in their hands, accuses the other who is busy gathering up their own"].⁴⁴ The entrails additionally serve as a reliable barometer of Flaubert's disgust, recoiling at *idées reçues* and the ill-defined concept of "bonheur," or freezing at mentions of "gloire," "le bon goût," and in reaction to endless and boring dinner parties.⁴⁵ Conversely, what cannot be found in the entrails is suspect, artificial, and forced. Flaubert writes ruefully to Louise Colet of the work of writing *Madame Bovary*: "Ce livre, tout en calcul et en ruses de style, n'est pas de mon sang, je ne le porte point en mes entrailles, je sens que c'est de ma part une chose voulue, factice" ["This book, all calculation and stylistic ruse, is not of my blood, I don't carry it in my entrails, I sense that it is, on my part, a forced and false thing"].⁴⁶ While the writing of this novel plods painfully along, Flaubert foresees a possible future work, "un plan de mes entrailles," for, "quand j'écris quelque chose de mes *entrailles*, ça va vite" ["a plan from my entrails"; "when I write something from the

⁴⁴ Letter to Louise Colet, end of October, 1851. My translation.

⁴⁵ Letter to Louise Colet, April 24, 1852; letter to Emmaneul Vasse, April 5, 1846; letter to Louise Colet, November 7, 1847; letter to Louis Bouilhet, September 4, 1850; letter to Louise Colet, end of December, 1847.

⁴⁶ May 21-2, 1853. My translation.

entrails, it goes quickly"]], albeit less carefully written.⁴⁷ It is clear: Flaubert refers to his entrails in the way that one typically refers to the heart, brain, head, and spirit—as the origin of melancholy, love, sincerity, wrath, and weariness.

In this capacity, the entrails invite more provocative, less trite observations on the work and love of writing than do the heart and head. We can expect good (or at least different) things to come whether the mind is clear or the brain is storming, and it is a joyful occasion when the heart is full or when it runneth over; the entrails, happily, do not invite similar expressions in French or English. While the heart, mind, and brain abound in figurative articulations of production, the entrails produce, literally and inevitably. By their very nature, they resist figuration—that is, they resist appropriation into figures of language, defined by Gérard Genette as the gaps between words and their meanings (32). With the exception of the idiomatic "il n'a pas d'entrailles" (the English equivalent of which is, interestingly, "he is heartless"), references to the entrails in either language include its function as digestive and evacuative organ. The English "guts" connotes something less immediate but still quite embodied, namely a primitive form of sensation, comparable to that of the annelid (from the Latin *anellus*, meaning little ring or anus⁴⁸) and other similar forms of life. A "gut feeling" (*réaction viscérale*) is an intuition or "hunch," and having "guts" implies having courage: both figurative invocations of the gut refer to instinctual responses that precede or supersede rational thinking, and with it the ability to produce metaphor and other figures of speech.⁴⁹ Though the more abstract "guts" is often a suitable translation for Flaubert's emotionally-charged use of *entrailles*, his imagery, deployed more than once, of viscera exposed and then gathered up in humiliation, vividly and specifically

⁴⁷ Letters to Louise Colet, November 22, 1852 and August 26, 1853. My translation.

⁴⁸ "annelida." *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. Web. 16 Nov. 2011.

⁴⁹ In French as in English, courage is colloquially embodied slightly below the guts, in the "couilles" or testicles.

conjures the corporeal organ.⁵⁰ Thus I contend that Flaubert chooses on numerous occasions to both house and articulate his acute irritations, beloved sensations, and artistic aspirations in and through an organ that has little precedent, in common parlance, for doing such figurative work.

Though the entrails lack a strong or lengthy record where rhetoric is concerned, they still indicate, beyond their literal definition, an attitude, choice, and intention on the part of the writer (Genette 32). Flaubert gives some indication as to his attitude, choice, and intention behind his invocation of the entrails a little over two years after the author's epileptic crisis and subsequent self-dedication to art. He writes to his friend Emmanuel Vasse: "En plaçant ma vie au-delà de la sphère commune, en me retirant des ambitions et des vanités vulgaires pour exister dans quelque chose de plus solide, j'avais cru que j'obtiendrais, sinon le bonheur, du moins le repos. Erreur ! Il y a toujours en nous l'homme, avec toutes ses entrailles et les attaches puissantes qui le relie à l'humanité" ["In placing my life beyond the common sphere, in retiring from ambitions and vulgar vanities to a more solid existence, I have believed that I could obtain, if not happiness, at least rest. Error! There is always something in us, with all our *entrailles* and the powerful attachments that link us to humanity"].⁵¹ While Flaubert has departed from the "sphère commune" to a more solid realm governed by boredom, he finds that it is only a partial departure and remains connected to humanity by the entrails and other unspecified attachments. If we compare this passage to his earlier statement to Louis de Cormenin, we see that both describe almost antithetical attitudes: the first, to Cormenin, expresses Flaubert's spectral existence, his seemingly permanent removal from life; the second, to Vasse, confesses the failure of this

⁵⁰ See Elizabeth A Wilson's essay, "The Brain in the Gut" from *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*. Wilson argues that the expressive properties of the enteric nervous system (also called the "brain of the gut" and "the second brain") are overlooked by the medical establishment. Not only can the enteric nervous system "express" in the medical sense of the term, in which an "expression" is an act or product of pressing out, but it also contains "'actual' mechanisms for relating to others" and thus "one of the most important means by which the outside world connects with the body" (Wilson 34, 45, 43-4).

⁵¹ April 5, 1846. My translation.

removal to be total. Both attitudes are felt keenly in the entrails. In choosing an organ that has no common figurative usage—or no gap between word and meaning—Flaubert also indicates his sense of immediacy in relation to the external world, and to the epoch afflicted by “cet ennui moderne.”

If the entrails serve as a sign of Flaubert's attachment, however reluctant, to his world, then it is significant that he describes *Madame Bovary* as incredibly difficult to write, a work that he did not carry in his entrails at all. As earlier stated, Flaubert characterized the novel in progress as “pas dans ma voie naturelle,” composed “tout en art, en ruses,” an excellent disciplinary exercise in which his own feelings, particularly his disgust “des sujets à milieu commun,” were withheld from the page.⁵² The work's absence from the authorial entrails coincides with the author's praxis of disinterestedness, expressed most successfully, I have argued, in the utter stasis of the *comices agricoles* scene. Here, no results are produced in either *Madame Bovary* or the crowd of onlookers, despite the multiplied efforts of Rodolphe and *comices* officiators to awe, persuade, seclude, and seduce their respective listeners; concordantly, neither the lyrical nor the vulgar strains of Flaubert's thought gains dominance, and both are expressed by other characters so that their attachment to the author is obscured. Jonathan Culler connects Flaubert's personal removal from his prose to the novel's transition from communicative to aesthetic object that began in the early nineteenth century. Unlike poetry, in which language is organized in a way that is distinguished from the organizations of everyday speech, the novel has traditionally taken part in a “communicative compact” that guarantees the author's direct address to the reader: “Indeed,” Culler writes, “the strength of the assumption that a text is the voice of an author who desires above all to communicate meanings for which he

⁵² Letters to Louise Colet, November 22, 1852; August 26, 1853.

accepts responsibility is shown by the various subterfuges to which Flaubert's predecessors resorted—the conventions of the epistolary novel, the fiction of a manuscript discovered in the secret drawer of an abandoned desk"—in order to narrate events for which authors most certainly would not want to be held responsible by their readers (14). The first generation of Romantics challenged this communicative compact by asserting their essentially inexpressible emotional lives through a measured practice of composition.⁵³ In this manner, literature became an index of an emotion, rather than a means through which the artist communicated his own emotions to a sensitive reader. "Flaubert," Culler writes, "transferred this Romantic agony to the creative act itself and thereby called into question the notion that made literature a communication between author and reader and made the work as set of sentences referring to a shared experience they did not express" (13). Rather than merely "introducing gaps" in the communicative compact, Flaubert "attempted to ensure that the novel was truly *written*," that it made no definite statement nor took any distinct position that could be traced back to its author (Culler 15). Culler echoes Roland Barthes, who, in *Writing Degree Zero*, makes the sweeping observation that, following Flaubert's self-negating emphasis on form, "the whole of Literature, [...] became the problematics of language," a move that "finally established Literature as an object" (Barthes 3,4). Such can be said, surely, of *Madame Bovary*, the work that Flaubert did not feel in his blood, that he did not write in his voice, and that he did not carry in his entrails, but that surely was, as Flaubert speculated, "un tour de force qu'admireront certaines gens" ["a *tour de force* that certain people

⁵³ Though we may not associate the Romantics with "measured" compositional practices, Graham Robb reminds us in *Unlocking Mallarmé* that, despite the Romantic challenge to Classical language and forms, these writers were by no means improvisational or disorderly in their methods. Robb cites Poe's essay, "The Philosophy of Composition," as one of several contemporary attempts "to discredit the Romantic cliché" of inspired, instantaneous creation (5).

will admire”], a beautifully crafted literary object, and in large part due to its effect of distance from its author.⁵⁴

Certainly, Flaubert’s methods of distancing himself from the narrator’s point of view are present throughout his *oeuvre*. But, if *Madame Bovary* is an exercise in removal, boredom, and meticulousness, then what of the work that Flaubert *did* carry in his peculiar seat of the self? In what ways do the style and subjects of his craft embody the effusive, communicative, and messy attributes of the entrails? Before turning to *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, let us pause over this question. Even as he wrote *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert revealed the literary implications of the organ’s function in his imaginary, not only as the idiosyncratic attachment to his personal emotional and artistic investments, but also as the means of expressing the undisclosed world and of revealing the already immanent. We return to the passage in the correspondence paraphrased by Rancière:

Si le livre que j'écris avec tant de mal arrive à bien, j'aurai établi par le fait seul de son exécution ces deux vérités [...]: d'abord que la poésie est purement subjective, qu'il n'y a pas en littérature de beaux sujets d'art, et qu'Yvetot donc vaut Constantinople; et qu'en conséquence l'on peut écrire n'importe quoi aussi bien que quoi que ce soit. *L'artiste doit tout élever*; il est comme une pompe, il a en lui un grand tuyau qui descend aux entrailles des choses, dans les couches profondes. Il aspire et fait jaillir au soleil en gerbes géantes ce qui était plat sous terre et ce qu'on ne voyait pas.

[If the book I am writing with so much difficulty goes well, I will have established by the sole fact of its execution these two truths [...]: first that poetry is purely subjective, that there are no beautiful subjects in literature, and that Yvetot is as worthy as

⁵⁴ Letter to Louise Colet, May 21-2, 1853. My translation.

Constantinople; and that as a consequence one can write well about anything, be what it may. *The artist should raise up everything*; he is like a pump, in himself he has a big hose that descends to the bowels of things, in the deepest layers. It sucks up and sprays, in great sundrenched showers, that which was flat and invisible under the earth.]⁵⁵

In this passage, we recognize one of *Madame Bovary's* governing principles, that even provincial adultery, one of the most boring subjects in the world according to Flaubert, is worthy of representation. But Flaubert also records the indomitable impulse of expression and its ability to get at what is ordinarily hidden from view. Language, the artist's material, does not promise to resolve itself into the meticulously crafted, wholly aesthetic objects—again, like Charles Bovary's cap—that defy the social, the useful, and the communicative. Rather, it is explosive, messy, and beyond the artist's control. Examining this passage more closely, we see that the writer possesses a *tuyau*, or hose, which descends from his innards to the "*entrailles des choses*" or "bowels of things," as in the phrase *entrailles de la terre*, or bowels of the earth. Like a pump, the artist forces air through his *tuyau*, so that the bowels of things yield their previously hidden treasures in "*gerbes géantes*," great (fecal) sprays that glisten in the sun, available to all eyes.

As *entrailles* also means womb and *couches* is a shortened form of *accouchement*, or childbirth, this passage also suggests a more common trope of artistic creation. Flaubert's vivid evocation and deliberate conflation of excretion and birth recalls the work of Rabelais, author of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and possibly Flaubert's greatest influence. We are particularly reminded of the giant Gargantua's strange nativity, in which he is initially mistaken for "quelques pellauderies assez de mauvais goût" (Rabelais 48) ["some rather ill-smelling excrescences" (Rabelais 52)] emitting from his mother's underside; the flow of excrement—the product of her

⁵⁵ Letter to Louise Colet, June 25-6, 1853. My translation.

overindulgence in tripe—is stopped by an astringent elixir with the consequence that “tous ses larrys tant furent oppilés et resserrés” (Rabelais 49) ["all her sphincter muscles were stopped and constricted" (Rabelais 52)]. The child, unable to emerge from his mother's nether sphincters, crawls up through her veins and is born from her ear. As in Flaubert's imagery, Rabelais raises the mischievous giant of his novel from the "*couches profondes*" into the light of day, accompanied by violent intestinal spasms; both occasions are described positively as the creation of literature or the beginning of life. In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin extensively relates what he calls the "material bodily lower stratum" of the grotesque body to the affirmation of birth, life, and connection to others in general. Since this zone is the most unclean, undesirable, and unmentionable part of the body, it is deployed in the hijinks of Carnival to displace and degrade the hierarchies that obtain throughout the rest of the year. The lower bodily stratum therefore evokes an alternate order in which the low is brought high and the high low. Though Rabelais' affirmations of birth, life, and connection belong specifically to Medieval and Renaissance contexts of popular Carnival culture, we see similar thematics at work in both Flaubert's characterization of authorial creation and in that creation itself. Here, Bakhtin describes the imagery and function of the grotesque body:

The grotesque body [...] is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body [...]. This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus [...]. [I]t is within [all these convexities and orifices] that the confines between bodies and between body and world are overcome [...]. (317)

The body's hyperbolization in grotesque imagery is, Bakhtin argues, "deeply positive," its limits transcending the individual to merge with the similarly hyperbolized, incomplete, and becoming bodies of others (19). The function of this hyperbolization is the expression of a universal connection to others, to "the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable" (Bakhtin 19). The ubiquity of exposed genitals, defecating sphincters, and ill-smelling excrescences in the carnivalesque grotesque signals not only the degradation of the personages involved, but also their regeneration. Certainly, Bakhtin explains, to degrade is to bring low or kill, but with the aim of improvement or abundance: "To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving" (21). What Rabelais conveys is the abundance and connection to human life of the *entrailles des choses*—with *entrailles* undoubtedly carrying the double meaning of womb and entrails. Flaubert works this impulse into his desire to represent all subjects, grand and humble alike, with the same revealing attention—an attention that, paradoxically, arises from his boredom with conventional hierarchies of representation and, I have argued, from his boredom of life in general.

But in one respect, the connection of Rabelais' imagery to Flaubert and his work falters: Flaubert had little tolerance for the people or popular movements. In fact, "the people" was one notion for which Flaubert claimed to have "fort peu d'entrailles parce qu'il en est, lui, totalement dépourvu" ["few entrails because it itself is totally bereft of them"].⁵⁶ Surely we would expect as much from a self-proclaimed ghost, disdainful and bored of "la sphère commune" from which he

⁵⁶ Letter to Louise Colet, September 26, 1853. Translation mine.

removed himself in order to craft beautiful sentences. However, even the most bored individual must return to the world, emerging from his boredom into action, or, as Benjamin observes, "to tell of what he dreamed" (106).

It is this impulse to reconnect, despite or as the upshot of one's boredom, that Flaubert addresses when he describes the artist as extension of the earth. Where this impulse holds sway in Flaubert's final and unfinished work, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, the "plan de [s]es entrailles" or the closest thing that he, in his fastidiousness and seclusion, could achieve. Unlike *Madame Bovary*, this novel's primary focus is "les lieux communs, les locutions banales" ["the commonplaces, the banal expressions"] that, by Flaubert's method, ordinarily had to be purged from the narration.⁵⁷ Centered upon two retired clerks' infatuation with contemporary scientific, medical, religious, literary, and philosophical discourses of their day, the novel inevitably showcases Flaubert's preparatory reading of over 1500 books, and, indeed, a significant portion of the narrative is composed of passages copied directly therefrom. Flaubert himself wrote that he wanted to give the somewhat disconcerting impression of being as fascinated with nineteenth-century discourse and just as unable to understand or act upon it as were his characters, and so put himself through the same ordeal of reading and (failed) understanding that he inflicted upon them (Trilling vii). In his letters, he writes of exhausting his budget on books, reading incredibly difficult material, and, after full days of such work, of becoming incredibly bored and disheartened by it all. Likewise, the novel progresses by a series of failures: Bouvard and Pécuchet move from one project to another, each inspired by his exposure to discourse. They fail at mastery in every instance because they are too eager, and, what amounts to the same thing, too stupid. But, as Jonathan Culler points out, the discourse they wish to master is also stupid,

⁵⁷ Letter to Louise Colet, August 26, 1853. My translation.

for "social language is itself stupid [...]. Language, in short, is part of the practico-inert: a set of objects with which man plays but which do not speak to him" (165).

Lawrence Schehr states in *Flaubert and Sons: Readings of Flaubert, Zola and Proust* that the author's main aim for his final novel was the recapitulation of just this aspect of bourgeois language, a language he refers to as the "sociolect of mid-nineteenth-century France" (30).

Though countless authors wrote within the bourgeois sociolect of their time, none had taken it as their object. Returning to Roland Barthes' argument in *Writing Degree Zero* that the revolutions of the first half of the nineteenth century fractured the bourgeois universal spirit into multiple voices and attitudes, we see that Flaubert's project in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* encapsulates the author's position in a newly post-monocultural context. Barthes speculates:

the ideological unity of the bourgeois gave rise to a single mode of writing, and that in the bourgeois periods (classical and romantic), literary form could not be divided because consciousness was not; whereas, as soon as the writer ceased to be a witness to the universal, to become the incarnation of a tragic awareness (around 1850), his first gesture was to choose the commitment of his form, either by adopting or rejecting the writing of his past. (2-3)

With the diversification of attitudes toward the bourgeois universal (one attitude being the Flaubertian escape into ennui), literary endeavors became concerned with "the problematics of language," writers finding themselves in a position to either "acknowledg[e] or repudiat[e] [their] bourgeois condition" (Barthes 3, 61). As Schehr observes, Flaubert was especially concerned with bourgeois language's un-selfconscious address to and endorsement of the "they,"

evident in the inseparable nature of Bouvard and Pécuchet's speech: after the two clerks become friends, they begin to speak as one person, their names

fusing into one noun, 'Bouvard-et-Pécuchet,' which is the name for 'they'—the 'they' of 'they say.' 'They' are no particular beings who verbalize their thoughts in an idiolect; no style belongs to them, and thus, no markers, quirks, or obsessions (and no power as well). They are less mirrors of each other than mirrors of their society's most basic function, its language: they are copyists, blotters (*bouvards*) of the language that surrounds them. Simply put, there is no specific *parole* but only a *langue*. (30)

The 'they' indicates the sociolect's taking itself for the universal (but after the necessary historical conditions have ceased to obtain), and thus its failure to acknowledge individual dissension or alternate ways of being. With delicious subtlety, Flaubert repudiates this feature of the sociolect in *Madame Bovary* by situating the self-assured language of bourgeois universality in a milieu of those unable to understand it: such is another function of the *comices agricoles* scene, in which the deaf and elderly Catherine Leroux receives a medal of honor for a lifetime of domestic service. Having performed her service perfunctorily as a livelihood, neither in the expectation of glory nor with the idea of working toward the greater good, she is justifiably confused and frightened by the pomp of the awards ceremony: "intérieurement effarouchée par les drapeaux, par les tambours, par les messieurs en habit noir et par la croix d'honneur du Conseiller, elle demeurait tout immobile, ne sachant s'il fallait s'avancer ou s'enfuir, ni pourquoi la foule la poussait et pourquoi les examinateurs lui souriaient" (*MB* 219) ["inwardly terrified by the flags, by the drums, by the gentlemen in frock-coats and by the councillor's Legion of Honour medal, she stood quite still, not knowing whether to step forwards or to run away, nor why the crowd were pushing her on and the judges smiling at her" (*MB* 139)]. The discrepancy

between the smiling bourgeois in control of the festivities and the peasant woman subjected to them is made plain at the close of the chapter, with Homais' review of the fair for *Le Fanal de Rouen*. Here, bourgeois language invests the events with a gravity to which Flaubert has already given the lie; he writes, "Le père embrassait son fils, le frère le frère, l'époux l'épouse. Plus d'un montrait avec orgueil son humble médaille, et sans doute, revenu chez lui, près de sa bonne ménagère, il l'aura suspendue en pleurant aux murs discrets de sa chaumine" (MB 222) [*Fathers embracing their sons, brothers brothers, husbands their wives. Many a one showed his humble medal with pride, and no doubt, once home again, at his fair wife's side, will he hang it, weeping the while, upon the plain walls of his cottage*] (MB 142)], words that ring false when we remember Catherine Leroux's resolve (denounced by Homais as "fanaticism") to give her own medal to the curé in payment for masses.

It would seem from my examples that *Madame Bovary* is also an exercise in "les lieux communs, les locutions banales," whereas I have indicated that this conception of Flaubert's project is more fruitfully applied to a reading of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Both novels engage bourgeois language in the mode of critique, and both feature the failures of their protagonists to enact visions founded either in such language or in its alternatives. Indeed, the two clerks' proneness to failure, such that even a carefully read and imitated experiment does not produce the promised results, would seem to put them at risk of succumbing to the void that opens beneath Emma Bovary. Unlike in *Madame Bovary*, however, it is precisely the wayward results, the manner in which objects and language retain their inertia and defy discourse, that give Bouvard and Pécuchet the most pleasure. The true joy of the novel is its occasional, often accidental revelation of an underlying, universal interrelation. Pécuchet stumbles upon this interrelation when, failing to understand or implement the programs in his gardening manual, he

instead becomes an extension of it: “Quelquefois Pécuchet tirait de sa poche son manuel; et il en étudiait un paragraphe, debout, avec sa bêche auprès de lui, dans la pose du jardinier qui décorait le frontispiece du livre. Cette ressemblance le flatta même beaucoup. Il en conçut plus d'estime pour l'auteur" (BP 51) ["Sometimes Pécuchet pulled his manual out of his pocket, and studied a paragraph, standing with his spade beside him in the same pose as the gardener adorning the frontispiece of the book. He even felt very flattered by the resemblance" (BP 54)]. Similarly, watering his flowers, the retired clerk indulges in a fantasy of affiliation: "À mesure qu'elles verdissaient sous l'eau qui tombait en pluie fine, il lui semblait se désaltérer et renaître avec elles. Puis, cédant à une ivresse, il arrachait la pomme de l'arrosoir et versait à plein goulot, copieusement" (BP 38) ["As they became green, under the water descending in a fine rain, he felt his own thirst slaked and seemed to be born again with them. Then, giving way to a kind of intoxication, he took off the rose from the spout and poured out a copious flood" (BP 45-6)]. Pécuchet's delight in watering echoes the “gerbes géantes” with which Flaubert imagined writing as a means of revealing—not, as in *Madame Bovary*, a churning and melancholic vortex, but life. Certainly, watered "à plein goulot," Pécuchet's flowers rot in their beds, but rot is as welcome as verdure since both outcomes are part of a single, unending process by which potentialities are disclosed and liberated. Fittingly, one of the clerks' most ambitious projects is a great compost heap in which to manufacture enough manure for all the crops surrounding their newly acquired farm. Pécuchet's vision of a manure engine is one of the most beautiful in the book:

Pécuchet fit creuser devant la cuisine un large trou, et le disposa en trois compartiments, où il fabriquerait des composts qui feraient pousser un tas de choses dont les détritiques amèneraient d'autres engrais, tout cela indéfiniment, et il rêvait au bord de la fosse,

apercevant dans l'avenir des montagnes de fruits, des débordements de fleurs, des avalanches de légumes. (BP 29-30)

[Pécuchet had a large hole dug in front of the kitchen, and divided it into three compartments, for making composts which would make a lot of things grow, whose waste matter would bring along other crops, supplying further fertilizer, and so on indefinitely. He went into a reverie at the side of the pit, visualizing future mountains of fruit, floods of flowers, avalanches of vegetables. (BP 40)]

Pécuchet's reverie is preposterous if tantalizing in its cyclical harmony—the fruit, flowers, and vegetables are exciting prospects, but not as exciting as the fertilizer they will eventually become. Certainly, the clerks' pleasure wanes when the crops fail and the two become carried away with the notion that everything dead is compost. But their failures outgrow themselves, and, like the ever-becoming grotesque body theorized by Bakhtin, give way to an alternate idea, a further pursuit, and another surprising and strange result. What matters, and what makes the book worth reading, are such moments when Bouvard and Pécuchet become lost in dreams that inevitably take them back to the *entrailles des choses*, or to the zero ground in which objects and language are at the height of their unruliness in relation to one another.

The most striking example follows upon the clerks' loss of faith in Cuvier, which is to say their loss of (a paradigmatically bourgeois) faith in Man's claim to the top of the order of creation. At several points in the novel, Bouvard and Pécuchet come across contradictory arguments in their chosen field of study, with the result that they abandon rather than negotiate that field. Reading a simple *feuilleton* on the subject of the teaching of Geology, the two encounter an argument that contradicts Cuvier's theories of development and extinction, theories

they had enjoyed “comme une féerie en plusieurs actes, ayant l’homme pour apothéose” (*BP* 132) [“like an extravaganza in several acts, with man as its apotheosis” (*BP* 88)].⁵⁸

Consequently, Cuvier ceases to appear to them “dans l’éclat d’une auréole” (*BP* 115) [“in the radiance of a halo” (*BP* 96)], man loses his central place in their imagining of Creation (referencing Flaubert’s own rejection of a central narrator), and their misfortunes in archaeology increase until Bouvard declares he no longer believes in the mineral kingdom:

'Je n'y crois au règne minéral! puisque des matières organiques ont pris part à la formation du silex, de la craie, de l'or peut-être! Le diamant n'a-t-il pas été du charbon? la houille un assemblage de végétaux? –En la chauffant à je ne sais plus combien de degrés, on obtient de la sciure de bois, tellement que tout passe, tout croule, tout se transforme. La création est faite d'une manière ondoyante et fugace; mieux vaudrait nous occuper d'autre chose!' (*BP* 121)

[‘I don’t believe in it, this mineral kingdom! Since organic matter contributed to the formation of flint, chalk, perhaps gold! Weren’t diamonds once carbon? Coal a collection of vegetable matter? If you heat it up to I forget how many degrees you get sawdust, so that everything decays, crumbles, changes form. Creation is put together in such an elusive and transitory fashion; we should do better to take up something else!’ (*BP* 99)]

While the “ondoyante et fugace” nature of matter seems to bother Bouvard, it is clear that what pushes him to the breaking point is the protean character of knowledge and the futility of mastering it all, down to the temperature at which things turn to sawdust. Exhausted by the

⁵⁸ Here I have altered the English translation, upon the advice of Robert Harvey. While Krailsheimer translates *féerie* to “fairy story,” the French must be understood in the sense of a spectacle or, as Dr. Harvey points out, an “extravaganza.”

realization that he had devoted no small amount of study to an outmoded paradigm, Bouvard calls it quits with archaeology. Pécuchet is not as troubled as his friend, however; while Bouvard recovers with a nap, his counterpart takes the opportunity to drop into another reverie:

Une lisière de mousse bordait un chemin creux, ombragé par des frênes, dont les cimes légères tremblaient; des angéliques, des menthes, des lavandes exhalaient des senteurs chaudes, épicées; l'atmosphère était lourde; et Pécuchet, dans une sorte d'abrutissement, rêvait aux existences innombrables éparses autour de lui, aux insectes qui bourdonnaient, aux sources cachées sous le gazon, à la sève des plantes, aux oiseaux dans leurs nids, au vent, aux nuages, à toute la nature, sans chercher à découvrir ses mystères,— séduit par sa force, perdu dans sa grandeur. (*BP* 121)

[A border of moss ran along the edges of a sunken lane shaded by ash trees, with gracefully quivering tops; angelica, mint, lavender, gave off warm, spicy smells; the atmosphere was heavy; and Pécuchet in a kind of daze dreamed of the countless beings scattered around him, the buzzing insects, the springs hidden beneath the grass, the sap in the plants, the birds in their nests, the wind, the clouds, the whole of nature, without trying to discover her mysteries, charmed by her strength, lost in her grandeur. (*BP* 99-100)]

It is in this moment, with nothing else to do—indeed, undone by doing—that Pécuchet is able to imaginatively occupy the hidden springs of life that Bouvard had just finished denouncing. It is perhaps *only* in this way—"sans chercher à découvrir ses mystères"—that such springs, the *entrailles des choses*, can be grasped if not understood.

The clerks' reveries, though far outnumbered by their experiments in the novel, point to what most intrigued Flaubert about art and language. Citing Flaubert's assertion that the highest thing in art is to induce reverie, Jonathan Culler explains that Flaubert's idea of reverie did not consist of flights of the imagination, but rather of working hard at something without understanding it: "One thinks of the hours the young Flaubert spent staring at his law books, taking nothing in, understanding nothing, because he was merely reading sentences, contemplating them, and finding them stupid" (174). While his law books' definite purpose is the education of law students, Flaubert rejected this purpose, choosing reverie over understanding. "Reverie, then," Culler writes, "is the result of contemplating the object under another aspect, denying or failing to reach the purpose which would integrate it. Treating potentially purposive objects as mere material stimuli, reverie rejects understanding and seeks stupidity" (174). The errant point of view that rejects understanding and purpose is one born out of boredom: in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Flaubert transfers his undiminished boredom to the clerks who, eager to retire from the monotony of clerical work, decide to move to the country where their pursuit of knowledge will be unfettered. Likewise, Lawrence Schehr links the clerks' penchant for reverie to their obsession with learning and naming—or with mastering bourgeois discourse: the two are more interested in parts than in systems (their library is as much of a cluttered mess as their failed garden) so that everything they attend to presents itself as "ondoyante et fugace" (35). In short, everything under their well-meaning, inquisitive gaze takes on the murky aspect of compost, the homogeneous ground of failure, reverie, and further pursuits, and thus ensures the continuation of the novel's cycle of abandonment and attachment, a cycle that recapitulates their initial abandonment of their livelihoods.

In contrast to the clerks' continual return to and emergence from revealing reverie—the mode of encounter with the *entrailles des choses*—is bourgeois discourse, which, like the more successful “man of science” Homais, tries to obscure processes and objects through “official” practices of labeling, categorization, and promotion. Flaubert elucidates these practices nowhere better than in *Madame Bovary's comices agricoles* scene, and so I will return to the novel once more. Here, the town officials use their speeches to complicate the process of turning grain into bread:

Et qu'aurais-je à faire, messieurs, de vous démontrer ici l'utilité de l'agriculture? Qui donc pourvoit à nos besoins? qui donc fournit à notre subsistance? N'est-ce pas l'agriculteur? L'agriculteur, messieurs, qui, ensemençant d'une main laborieuse les sillons féconds des campagnes, fait naître le blé, lequel broyé est mis en poudre au moyen d'ingénieux appareils, en sort sous le nom de farine, et, de là, transporté dans les cités, est bientôt rendu chez le boulanger, qui en confectionne un aliment pour le pauvre comme pour le riche. (*MB* 212)

[And what should I be doing here, gentlemen, demonstrating to you the usefulness of agriculture? Who is it that provides for our needs? Who is it that furnishes our sustenance? Is it not the farmer? The farmer, gentlemen, who, impregnating with unwearied hand the teeming furrows of our countryside, brings forth the corn, which, once crushed, is turned to powder by means of cunning engines, issues thence under the name of flour, and, from there, conveyed to the cities, is swiftly delivered to the baker, who confects from it a nourishment for rich and poor alike. (*MB* 134)]

First, we must observe that the *comices* official Lieuvain's speech gets off to a strange start, acknowledging the superfluity of its own premise: Why should the fair officials lecture about the "utility" of agriculture, as though its usefulness is disputed or under attack? But Lieuvain's justification is the fact that agriculture *is* useful—are not our nutritional needs met? Since agriculture is self-evidently useful, then one is completely justified in restating, and in a persuasive fashion, its usefulness. It follows that we must thank our farmers, who set in motion the almost mystical process whereby seeds become equitably distributed nourishment. And this process is mystical, just as the medal ceremony was, in Homais' report, exceedingly emotional for all involved. However, this mysticism operates entirely at the level of language: grain becomes flour, not just through the physical process of pulverization—itself obscured by the more glamorous "moyen d'ingénieux appareils"—but through a procedure of renaming ("en sort sous le nom de farine"). According to M. Lieuvain, the baker performs the final act of transformation with the verb "confectionner," to form or fabricate, implying a multi-step, delicate, or complicated process. Certainly, making bread does require a multi-step process, but it is also a very old process of which most people—and certainly most members of the *comices* audience—would have had some experience. We can even imagine that some members of the *comices* audience had the total experience of pounding grain into flour, making the flour into dough, and baking the dough into a loaf of bread. The aim of Lieuvain's language, however, is to conceal this process, to perforate its sequence with obfuscatory gaps, to remove it from the realm of everyday actions in order to give it the character of specialized knowledge, decodable only to the designated experts who have dedicated their lives for the purpose. The body of knowledge thus formed is then given back to the multitudes in the form of sustenance, "pour le pauvre comme pour le riche."

Although Bouvard and Pécuchet are just as beholden to this discourse as the *comices* audience, they exceed it as their stupidity takes them beyond absorption to action. In his essay, “The Fantasia of the Library,” Michel Foucault discusses their stupidity in terms of belief, elevating them to the status of saints in a world wholly discursive:

For these two simple men, to be tempted is to believe. It is to believe in the things they read, to believe in the things they overhear; it is to believe immediately and unquestioningly in the persistent flow of discourse. Their innocence is fully engaged in this domain of things already said [...]. They repeat, for the modern world, the experiences of Job; stricken through their knowledge and not their possessions, abandoned by science and not by God, they persist, like him, in their fidelity—they are saints. (107)

Ezra Pound makes a related but contrary observation in a 1922 essay, in which he links faith in “the persistent flow of discourse” to the multitudes: comparing Joyce's *Ulysses* to *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Pound writes that Leopold Bloom is, like the two copyists, “the basis of democracy, the man who believes what he reads in the papers” (qtd in Trilling ix). These multitudes, the “basis of democracy,” are the *peuple* for whom Flaubert had “fort peu d'entrailles parce qu'il en est, lui, totalement dépourvu.” A merely discursive entity, the *peuple* are imaged in Flaubert as those constituted and addressed by the *comices* speech, their mouths “se tenaient ouvertes, comme pour boire [les] paroles” (*MB* 213) [“hanging open, as if to drink up [the] word” (*MB* 135)]. However, Flaubert adds to his tirade against *le peuple*: “Il y a un cœur dans l'humanité, mais il n'y en a point dans le peuple, car le peuple, comme la patrie, est une chose morte” [“There is a heart in *humanity*, but there isn't any in *the people*, because the people, like the

motherland, is a dead thing”].⁵⁹ Humanity, however, is a live thing, and, linking Flaubert’s statement to Foucault’s, to make something of one’s suffering from one’s belief in discourse is to elevate one’s self from the discursive receptacle of *le peuple* to the more active *humanité*. Certainly, Bouvard’s and Pécuchet’s mouths do their fair share of hanging open, awe being the starting point of each new venture. And it cannot be said that they are, as Tony Tanner says of *Madame Bovary*’s Catherine Leroux, producers of something and thus “connected with the decline of the values and virtues and way of life” of earlier eras (296). Nor can they be favorably compared to their fellow villager and jack-of-all trades Gorju, whose effortless adoption of poses and practices deepens the clerks’ sense of failure.⁶⁰

Rather, their strange enactments of discourse—always a sort of copying that inadvertently parodies the original—both liberate objects from discursive frameworks and involve the surrounding community, placing the clerks somewhere between the passive thralldom of *peuple* and the productive heart of *humanité*. Their every attempt at systematization resolves in a breakdown of the system; but, as Schehr observes, the system—and thus the discourse—is not the point. Or rather, it is its undoing that is the point. Taken more with labeling than with learning how to garden or neglecting the organizational system of the Paris library to marvel at its number of volumes, for example, the clerks repeatedly “fragmen[t] everything they touch into too many irrevocable pieces” (Schehr 45). In part, the novel’s humor

⁵⁹ Letter to Louise Colet, September 26, 1853. My translation.

⁶⁰ Gorju, like *Madame Bovary*’s Catherine Leroux, reminds the reader of the ordinary world of work and experience that subverts the antics of Bouvard and Pécuchet. Gorju first appears as a beggar, an out-of-work tramp begging for a drink at the end of the clerks’ garden. His subsequent appearances attest to a series of transformations, and in all of them he is employed, followed by women, and/or looking dapper. He is always where Bouvard and Pécuchet want to be, always in the middle of things, always seemingly at ease, or appropriately (politically) agitated. Gorju has *real* work to do, real know-how, and, following Peter Brooks’ discussion of the relationship of *fabula* to *syuzhet* in *Reading for the Plot*, we observe that his doings belong to the novel’s story rather than to its plot. Gorju’s appearances recall the story undercurrent against which the narrated plot “events”—here, the barest of events—are put into perspective or relief.

resides in the slow accumulation of these pieces—the exploded still, the Renaissance chest, Pécuchet’s beloved coconuts—such that no thing ever completely disappears, nor has it an easily identifiable use-value. Indeed, the clerks have a knack for keeping unwanted things around, for example the statue of St. Peter, acquired during their days of collecting artifacts for their museum. Having worn out its welcome, the statue finds its way into the compost pit, where its fragments later provide material for Pécuchet’s solemn contemplation as he pursues a monastic lifestyle. Again, we see that objects, divorced from their utility, serve the purpose of reverie. Schehr argues that the clerks’ dual penchants for labeling and disorganization reflects Flaubert’s view of language as “a totalizing myth, the myth of logocentrism” which he exposes by “allow[ing] nothing but disarray and dispersal of the objects and of the language he seeks to use to describe them” (37-8). In Bouvard and Pécuchet’s hands, everything turns to an unnameable mess: theirs is a process of decomposition, the opposite of the process by which the *comices* officials produce obfuscation by reproducing discourse. Schehr continues, citing Sartre’s point that “‘words wreak havoc when they come to name what had lived unnamed.’ Systematization (or the attempt at systematization) tends to unleash, or even create, entropy” (38). In their attempts to mimic the discourse that claims to organize their world, Bouvard and Pécuchet end up tearing that world apart.

Not everything falls apart, however: their boredom dispelled in an array of ill-advised, ill-executed projects, Bouvard and Pécuchet inevitably attract the attention and intervention of their community. However the two retirees would like to conceive of themselves as scientists isolated in their lab, they very much carry out their experiments within society, in the same space as their quizzical servants, under the eyes of their plentiful neighbors. These actors offer third perspectives, with the effect of checking the clerks’ enthusiasms and of returning them to a kind

of common ground—a counterpoint to the pull of discourse. Finding a stray dog, the two clerks dream of an array of (uncontrolled) experiments: they could inject it with phosphorous, enclose it in a bell-glass, make it breath gas, feed it poison. Thinking that these tests might be too unpleasant, they attempt to magnetize steel through contact with the dog's spinal marrow: "Bouvard, refoulant son émotion, tendait sur une assiette des aiguilles à Pécuchet, qui les plantait contre les vertèbres. Elles se cassaient, glissaient, tombaient par terre; il en prenait d'autres, et les enfonçait vivement, au hasard. Le chien rompit ses attaches, passa comme un boulet de canon par les carreaux, traversa la cour, le vestibule et se présenta dans la cuisine" (*BP* 84) ["Repressing his emotion Bouvard held out some needles on a plate to Pécuchet, who stuck them against the vertebrae. They broke, fell on the floor; he took more and pushed them in hard, at random. The dog broke its bonds, shot like a cannon-ball through the window, across the yard and vestibule, and turned up in the kitchen" (*BP* 76)]. Flaubert allows the narration to be directed by Bouvard and Pécuchet's interest, describing their emotion, concentration, and failure of execution. It is not until their servant, Germaine, sees the dog in the kitchen that we understand its condition: "tout ensanglanté, avec des ficelles autour des pattes" (*BP* 85) ["covered in blood, with strings round its paws" (*BP* 76)]. The inhumane nature of their aimless experiment is made clear only with the presence of a third point of view, here given in Germaine. Similarly, a later episode, in which the two journey to Villers in search of a mastodon, ends in their apprehension by the townspeople. In their frenzy to remove what they think are sponges, shells, crocodiles, and the vertebrae of other sea-going animals from a cliff side, they fail to notice the approaching constable and the customs officer. The officials' arrival coincides with a partial collapse of the cliff, the result of Bouvard and Pécuchet's excavation of what turns out to be a ship's mast. A crowd of street children in tow, the two retirees are escorted to an inn where

the innkeeper looks solemnly on, a mason demands that his tools be returned—at which point we realize that Bouvard and Pécuchet had blithely stolen them on their way to the cliff—and another gentleman, wearing a military decoration, sets them free. By scrutinizing their actions and reclaiming their tools, this small crowd of people effectively forces the narrative to zoom out of the narrow point of focus designated by Bouvard and Pécuchet's attention and activity—a practical check to their zeal for the discourse *du jour*. Whereas the two clerks think the real story is in the cliff's surface, as well as in the text or discourse that made that surface relevant, the townspeople of Villers insist on their own interests and well being, bringing the strangers away from the cliff and back into town. The people of Chavignolles, Bouvard and Pécuchet's own town, find themselves making similar interventions. While the townspeople are alternately scandalized and amused at what they learn of the clerks' activities by looking into their garden or questioning their servants, they are quickly annoyed and alarmed when the two transport their attention from their own backyard into the town and private residences. Bouvard and Pécuchet generally upset their fellow townspeople by hypnotizing their turkeys, suggesting that man is descended from fish, asserting the virtues of Buddhism over those of Christianity, and adopting the children of convicts without managing to improve their character. When the two are besotted by Haussmannian ambitions to improve Chavignolles, a means to "se signaler par une œuvre qui éblouirait leurs concitoyens" (*BP* 389) ["oblige their fellow citizens to respect them, while astonishing and dazzling them" (*BP* 280)], the townspeople see all too clearly how the clerks' current obsession corresponds to the official bourgeois discourse of the second empire, "car enfin l'autorité se rangerait peut-être à leur avis" (*BP* 390) ["perhaps the authorities would follow their opinion?" (*BP* 281)]. By the novel's conclusion, the villagers have seen the clerks go through so many transformations (almost as many as the day-laborer, Gorju) that they greet them with a

warning: "Allez donc, farceurs! n'essayez pas de nous en remonter" (BP 381) ["Off with you and your jokes! Don't try to teach us" (BP 275)].

Foiled in their schemes to replicate discourse, Bouvard and Pécuchet are continually returned either to the *entrailles des choses* at the heart of their reveries or to the heart of *humanité* in the form of community intervention. In either case, they prove themselves to be inept teachers: all their reading and “copying” in its various forms amounts to nothing, which, Flaubert would say, is all that discourse ever rightly amounts to. Fittingly and positively, the clerks are forced to acknowledge that “Ainsi tout leur a craqué dans les mains” (BP 388) [“In this way everything fell apart in their hands”⁶¹] at the novel’s provisional conclusion. While others have read in this conclusion the ultimate announcement of Flaubert’s cynicism, I contend that he provides a compromise among all the impulses at work in the clerks’ doings and the world in which these doings occur. Their resolution to “*Copier comme autrefois*” (BP 400) [“to copy as before” (my translation)⁶²] is, as Michel Foucault writes, a copying “prolonged without end, without illusion, without greed, without sin, without desire” (109). Whereas end, illusion, greed, sin, and desire pertain to discourse and to the clerks’ former appropriations of it, finally the two take up copying with full recognition of its emptiness. We are not surprised by this ending—indeed it is heralded all along by the novel’s many lulls, in which Bouvard and Pécuchet contemplate their last failure and anticipate their next pursuit. Toward the novel's beginning, the two are incredibly resilient, needing only a page or a chapter break to plunge into

⁶¹ Whereas A.J. Krailsheimer translates this sentence to “Everything calms down” (BP 288) in the Penguin edition, I have substituted my own translation, as it is more faithful to the original French as well as more in line with Flaubert’s themes of entropy and fragmentation.

⁶² Here the Krailsheimer translation in the Penguin edition states “become copyists,” leaving out the clerks’ acknowledgement of returning to a former state. It is crucial for the novel’s humorous (and boring) nature that the clerks come full circle in their pursuits, and that this circularity is acknowledged by the text.

another field⁶³; as the novel goes on, however, they are interrupted and discouraged, and new projects take some time to form.⁶⁴ Indeed, what Reinhard Kuhn says of François Rabelais in *The Demon of Noontide* could just as well apply to Flaubert: “When the constant motion of the Rabelaisian discourse is arrested, an abyss of lethargy suddenly opens up. This single incident suffices to make the reader suspect that the void was always there, hidden from his eyes only by the constant dance of the words, by the whirl of activity, by the seemingly endless enumerations” (88-9). The abyss, in *Madame Bovary* as here, is what is most true in Flaubert’s universe. That the clerks are able to embrace the abyss is their triumph, their best use of language, and their best compromise among their will to copy discourse, their penchant for emptying it of meaning, and their community’s desire to be undisturbed by its implementation. Flaubert’s planned resolution to his last novel thus accommodates three sets of desire: his own, that of the obsessed clerks, and that of the community. In this way, Flaubert manifests his ineluctable sense of *les attaches puissantes* without compromising his equally ineluctable belonging to ennui, the force that exposes the world’s many somethings as chimerical nothings.

IV. Conclusion

In imposing the three movements of boredom over Flaubert’s first and last published novels, I hope to have illuminated how his construction of the text incorporates his dueling inclinations toward removal and reengagement, as indicated in his early correspondence.

⁶³ For example, Chapter Two, in which their canning yields rotten food and their still explodes, concludes with Pécuchet’s suggested explanation, “C’est que, peut-être, nous ne savons pas la chimie!” (BP 72) [“Perhaps it is because we don’t know any chemistry!” (BP 68)]; Chapter Three opens with a reading in Regnault’s course in chemistry.

⁶⁴ See the end of Chapter Eight, in which a long period of depression culminates in an unsuccessful double suicide attempt.

Flaubert's ennui runs throughout his development of focalization and fragmentary descriptions, and is present in his construction of a "disinterested" narrator who vacillates between constructive lyricism and destructive vulgarity, and between impartiality and negation. Perhaps despite himself, Flaubert demonstrates his sense of the ineluctable *attaches puissantes* through the exercise in bourgeois discourse that is *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Knowing the discourse to be a farcical illusion (itself a lesson of ennui), we readers are nonetheless invited to subscribe to the unity of its address and to the idea of humanity that, Flaubert wrote, kept him from total seclusion. Whereas Emma Bovary's attempts to render dream into language open a fatal abyss, Bouvard and Pécuchet manage to embrace this same abyss when, finally, "tout leur a craqué dans les mains." "*Copier comme autrefois*"—to copy without aim or illusion, as Foucault argues—is to subvert discourse by acknowledging what they have been doing all along: nothing. In this final plan, Bouvard, Pécuchet, and Flaubert himself have come full circle: from boredom, to withdrawal, to reemergence and activity, and again to boredom—feverishly to copy as before, when they were bored of copying. One could easily begin the novel again, for what has been accomplished? Only a theme and its variations, temporary escapes through activity from the novel's essential ground—Flaubert's own struggle with writing, ennui, reverie, stupidity, and attachment. Putting his first and last novels side by side, like scribbling clerks at a desk specially made for two, we see the struggle of the phantom with his entrails, the impulse to recede entangled in the fibers that descend ineluctably back into the earth, to the center of things.

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Chapter 3: George Gissing's Dullness by Design

I. An Argument for George Gissing

Commenting on the state of George Gissing studies in 1970, literary scholar and historian Peter J. Keating observes of the late-Victorian author that "few writers of comparable stature can have been rediscovered so often to such little effect" ("State of Gissing Studies" 393). And indeed, after several decades of scholarly studies of his work and a steady stream of reprinted novels and newly published documents, it is curious that George Gissing's work and life remained unknown to most readers throughout the heyday of Gissing studies in the 1970s and 80s, and was seldom then included in the reading lists of Victorian or nineteenth-century literature courses. Though it has begun to be corrected in the last couple decades, such an omission is a severe oversight, as few other Victorian writers, late or otherwise, focused more deeply or viscerally on the growing low and lower-middle classes of London and its suburbs. While it is true that Gissing's focus is limited to this subset of Londoners, and while his representations are often excessively colored by his own experiences and attitudes, his work recreates the detail, tone, and textures of what was becoming the representative experience for more and more Britons, and that would become the representative experience for many individuals in the developed world in the coming decades: namely, the experience of boredom, the product of a nascent consumer economy and the attendant empty fascinations of mass culture.

Certainly, Gissing is not the first in British letters to depict boredom, but he may be the first to divorce boredom from moralistic programs of representation. His attention to boredom's presence in daily life—as well as to the increasing mediocrity of art and the public sphere—

should earn him a permanent position in the study of the transition from Victorian to Modernist British literature. Gissing's criticism of industriousness sets him at odds with his eighteenth- and early-to mid-nineteenth-century predecessors. Earlier, more staidly Victorian novels like Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852-3) and Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) assign to boredom negative qualities like moral flaccidity and reckless indifference, locating the mood in privileged yet dissipated characters. In Gissing, however, boredom does not act as a veneer under which characters, like Dickens' Lady Dedlock, suffer in silence, or, like Eliot's Grandcourt, hide their quite active, manipulative agendas. Instead, boredom is a genuine affect, prevailing in his protagonists or otherwise sympathetic characters as a telltale of their authenticity—of their refusal to celebrate and reluctance to participate in a society that values profits, entertainment, and ambition over thought, beauty in art and nature, and the cultivation of human relationships. As a mood, boredom's presence suspends the pace of Gissing's narratives, providing characters a moment for reflection upon the mismatch between their temperament and their situation, and, more broadly, between human life and capitalist society.

More than merely laying out his own woes in novel form, Gissing structurally and descriptively evokes (and, we might add, induces) the boredom that saturated the lived experience of Londoners at the turn-of-the-century. Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891) and *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894) confront their readers with representations of boredom, seemingly incidental to the plot and often grueling to read; in them, however, we attend to the heart of the lifeworld Gissing was driven to recreate in prose: in short, we attend to what makes his fiction distinctive in its context, important to an understanding of its time, and persistent in the mind of its reader. I have chosen the first novel for the way in which it overtly treats boredom as a self-preserving approach to atomizing popular culture, and the second because its representations of

boredom are more subtle and less programmatic. In each instance, boredom is involved in Gissing's thinking about the urban culturescape, and the myriad opportunities it presents—for better or worse—for individuals to come into contact with advertisements and other forms of visual and print culture. Accordingly, one would not recommend these novels for the usual purpose of passing the time; indeed, the standard reader may find that Gissing's work *prolongs* the time. But in this prolonging, one is made to share in the writer's exhaustion with culture, the conditions of literary production, and the work of writing itself. I will delay discussion of the novels in order to first discuss the failure of early to middle Gissing studies to look beyond author biography to the heart of what makes his work significant, then move on to outline both the changing state of critical discourse on literature in Gissing's time and Gissing's contributions to it. Gissing's opposition of Realist fiction to popular and commercial interests, an opposition he communicated most viscerally in his work through representations of boredom, deploys traditional forms of social critique while anticipating the pessimistic cultural criticism of the twentieth century, impelling us to reconsider his work as important to a thorough understanding of the aims and techniques of the Victorian and Modernist novels.

II. All Apologies: The State of Gissing Studies

I propose to discuss at length and in depth the ways in which Gissing's exhaustion with his historical and cultural moment exhausted and bored him. But first, and if the reader will indulge my own expression of exhaustion and boredom, I will first take up the heavily biographical bent of early and middle critical discourse on Gissing's work. While biographical criticism is no longer the exclusive or even dominant tendency in Gissing studies, it having given

way to more diverse textual, historical, and feminist explorations, it remains a formidable bulwark to any scholar wishing to take up this author as her subject. I say formidable bulwark: formidable because not seldom tedious; bulwark because—as I will demonstrate—its stress on the necessity of biographical knowledge of Gissing discourages the access of those who would approach his work for other reasons, or who know (or care to know) little of the author’s life. Gissing’s biographical critics labor under the assumption that what is most interesting about the often boring novels they attend to is the rather sensational life that produced them; in doing so, however, they miss what I contend is most interesting and important about the author. In addition, since Gissing is arguably one of the lesser talented and narrow of his contemporaries, the longevity of the biographical strain in Gissing Studies provides a glimpse into why scholars and readers have kept returning to him. It occurs to me that biography is a sort of mask for the real reasons for continuing to read Gissing, of which there are several and which include reasons beyond those advanced in my own thesis. And so, while this set of Gissing studies is neither the most current nor pertinent of critical responses to Gissing’s work, I spend some time attending to it here. Given that this dissertation is about boredom, I also wanted to take a moment expressing my own: my experience researching and writing this chapter has in some ways mirrored the triphasal boredom I attribute to Flaubert’s own experience and prose: reading one biographical account after another, I became steeped in an opiate of boredom that challenged my former certitude of my interest in Gissing; forging ahead, I arrived mysteriously at the point at which I no longer felt that I needed to read—at the point at which I no longer felt that I needed to be bored—and reemerged to write the undergoing, my ideas of Gissing’s value strengthened by the contrast that I can now say was fruitfully provided by earlier biographical critics. I preserve this experience here by first presenting, in the properly Gissingesque spirit of grumpiness, what

challenged, through boredom, my intended investigation of Gissing's critical and fictional works—and certainly, what strengthened these investigations as well as made them possible, as the biographers behind Gissing Studies have kept Gissing's works from irreversible obscurity by keeping them in circulation and in conversation.

Traditionally, critical and scholarly work on Gissing has approached questions of the context, importance, and persistence of his work through his life: to discuss his writing has been at once to discuss his biography, leading the scholar John Peck to conclude that the author "is a remarkably popular novelist with academics who want to write about something other than novels" (144). One foresees this thrust of Gissing criticism as early as Henry James' review of his 1897 novel *The Whirlpool*, when James refers with characteristically willful imprecision to the "individual manly strain" of the novel, and confesses, despite its faults, that it "makes me with an almost nervous clutch quite cling to him" ("London Notes" 443, 438). There is something in the work, James seems to say, that compels us to look beyond it at the man. Gissing's death in 1903 opened the way for more clinging still, as friends, family, and fellow writers began to define his life in comparison with or contrast to the lives he depicted in his novels. In a 1906 article for *Nineteenth Century*, Austin Harrison remembers his former teacher as a hair-shirted intellectual, nurturing his own misery out of a sense of superiority to the common throng. And yet, Harrison adds, "A gentler nature, a more delightful companion than Gissing never existed" (32). Similarly and for the same magazine, Gissing's sister Ellen assented to the prevailing description of her brother as "embittered egoist," self-alienated by his ability to see "more deeply into life than his fellow-men" but with an equally deep sense of responsibility, independence, and love for family (17). In each account we note a tension that would become endemic to Gissing criticism, expressed here at the intersection of acknowledgement of Gissing's

flaws and the critic's admonition that we disregard neither author nor oeuvre because of them. Henry James succinctly summarizes this tension when he writes in his review, "For this author in general, at any rate, I profess [...] a persistent taste—a taste that triumphs even over the fact that he almost as persistently disappoints me" ("London Notes" 438). The disappointment these early critics felt is at the root of their critical apologies for the work and its author and, we shall soon see, at the root of the biographical bent of Gissing studies as a whole.

Though James confesses to "quite clinging" to Gissing, he does not plunge into Gissing's life as did many of his early and later critics and scholars, sometimes at the cost of any formal, thematic, or theoretical analysis.⁶⁵ This practice of reading Gissing's novels as autobiography taking shape at the turn of the nineteenth century had become institutionalized in Gissing studies by the 1970s: one biographical novel based on Gissing's life and several biographies and critical studies had been published—though none, Gissing scholars are quick to point out, was an adequately exhaustive study.⁶⁶ The sustained furor in Gissing studies for biographical criticism is clear in scholar John Halperin's claim in his 1977 article "How to Read Gissing" that "To read his books without a detailed knowledge of his biography is to read blindfolded. The critic who attempts to deal with Gissing's fiction phenomenologically or from a narrow structuralist

⁶⁵ As early as 1906, Harrison refers to this tendency when he states that his own father's steady employment of the author as his children's tutor invalidated the "story of Gissing starving in a garret and cellar, swinking all day and night with lard and dripping for his nourishment and the wooden boards for his pillow"—a story that resembles almost exactly the life of Gissing's Naturalist writer Harold Biffen in *New Grub Street* (26). Ellen Gissing's choice for her article's title, "George Gissing, a Character Sketch," indicates her shared assumption that readers regarded Gissing's novels as accurate autobiographical portraiture.

⁶⁶ Robert Morley's *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* (1912) was loosely (and, many have pointed out, inaccurately) based on his friend George Gissing's life; biographies and critical studies include Frank Swinnerton's *George Gissing: A Critical Study* (1912), Mabel Collins Donnelly's *George Gissing, Grave Comedian* (1954), Jacob Korg's *George Gissing: A Critical Biography* (1965), Gillian Tindall's *The Born Exile* (1974), Adrian Poole's *Gissing in Context* (1975), and John Goode's *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction* (1978). For an overview of the trajectory of Gissing Studies, see John Halperin's essay, "The State of Gissing Studies," originally published as an appendix to his *Gissing: A Life in Books* (1987) and updated on the web by Peter Morton at <http://mural.uv.es/grewar/ggcritic01.html>. As I write this chapter, renowned Gissing scholar Pierre Coustillas has just published the third of his three-part biography of George Gissing, *The Heroic Life of George Gissing*.

approach has little chance of understanding him" (58). Statements like this inevitably point back to their writer's territorial impulses; we might excuse the reader who is content to read Gissing's novels blindfolded, despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that "No English novelist put more of his own life into his novels than George Gissing" (Halperin, "How to Read" 58). It is encouraging, however, that Halperin acknowledges the more recent theoretical opposition to his staunchly biographical critical stance, since he fails to acknowledge the earlier New Critical interventions against attributing textual meaning to authorial intention of the mid-twentieth century. Still, we find Halperin's rationale for the biographical bent of Gissing studies to be thin. Can it not be argued that every novelist must draw heavily upon "life" if he is to fill the pages of a novel? Moving forward in the history of literary criticism from Sainte-Beuve to Henry James, we find that the latter puts precisely this point forward in his essay "The Art of Fiction." Responding to Walter Besant's lecture of the same title, James qualifies Besant's statement that a fiction writer must have experience and write only what he himself has experienced:

Experience is never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. (James, "Art of Fiction")

James allots much more to "life" than simply what one has lived through, and better for the novel if the novelist takes this view as well. Surely, Gissing's novels abound in attitudes, situations, and circumstances nearly identical to his own: men miserably married to women below their status and education; writers exhausted by tedious and unremunerative literary work; and

individuals displaced by their education from their native class but unable to ascend the socio-economic ladder.⁶⁷ Yet to insist that all readings of Gissing must first and foremost attend to this correspondence risks overlooking the author's more remarkable powers of attention, of rendering the implicit, and, as James writes, of "be[ing] one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" ("Art of Fiction").

The scholar or critic who limits himself to biographical readings is bound to the exercise of finding the author in the character and the character in the author. Take the case of Jacob Korg in his introduction to Gissing's long-unpublished *Commonplace Book*: at the time of the book's publication in 1962, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903) was held to be Gissing's "best-known book" (Korg, Introduction 11). Korg accordingly identifies his purpose in introducing and editing the work as one of finding analogies from one piece to the other: "Critics have often warned that the Ryecroft Papers are not autobiographical, but the *Commonplace Book*

⁶⁷ In order to do justice to John Halperin, and to avoid writing my own biographical overview (customary to shorter pieces on Gissing), I will reproduce Halperin's sketch of the author's life here:

Gissing's father was a pharmacist, an amateur botanist, and a dabbler in local politics—an intelligent and sensitive man. Gissing's mother was apparently less sympathetic—religious, narrow, unimaginative. Born in Yorkshire in 1857 into this lower-middle-class family [...], the future novelist received a classical education at a local school and at fourteen was awarded a scholarship at Owens College, Manchester. After doing brilliantly there and passing the matriculation examination for London University, Gissing was expelled from the Manchester school for stealing money. He had become romantically entangled with a young prostitute, Nell Harrison, and wanted to help her. He was sent to prison at hard labour for a month and of course had to abandon any idea of a university career. After this he spent a year in America teaching, writing, and nearly starving to death. When he returned to London he took up with Nell again, and married her in 1879—despite the fact that he had probably contracted syphilis from her several years earlier. Gissing lived with Nell until 1883, by which time her promiscuity and her alcoholism with its attendant incipient lunacy had destroyed his small stock of peace of mind. He left her, and lived alone for the next seven years (Nell died in 1888). By the late 1880s Gissing's writings were beginning to earn enough for travel abroad; still, he never realized enough from them—even during his years of comparative comfort in the mid-1890s—to relax for long, or to stop working for more than a few weeks at a time. In 1890 in a fit of loneliness he picked up Edith Underwood, a working-class girl, married her in 1891, and lived with her until 1897, when her bouts of violent temper and her inability to run their household exasperated him beyond recall. Once again, he left his wife. The marriage had produced two sons. One lived with Gissing's sisters in Yorkshire; the other stayed with Edith until 1902, when she was institutionalized (he then joined his brother; Edith died in 1917). Gissing spent his last years in France in a common-law union [...] with Gabrielle Fleury, the French translator of *New Grub Street*, and seeking a climate congenial to his weakening lungs. He died in 1903, of pneumonia, in France. ("How to Read" 58-9)

shows that they are, to a greater extent than it has hitherto been possible to determine, an accurate expression of Gissing's views" (Introduction 11). Korg proceeds to point out which of Gissing's observations are voiced by Henry Ryecroft, which differ from those of Ryecroft, and which seem to have undergone considerable alteration of tone or conclusion before their commitment to print in *Ryecroft*. Korg explains that this exercise is important because *Ryecroft* marks a late, more indulgent stage of Gissing's work, in which his signature struggle between Victorian didactic and personal motivations begins to favor the latter over the former. "The Ryecroft Papers," Korg concludes, "are a reversal of the balance, and a yielding to long-suppressed ambitions": a work in which a single character with a single voice unites what would otherwise be a set of unrelated essays (Introduction 11). But while Korg cites Gissing's own hope that *Ryecroft* will not be received as thinly-veiled autobiography ("The thing is much more an aspiration than a memory"), and though Gissing records in his *Commonplace Book* the criticism that his scope is limited to personal experience ("The 'Pall Mall Gazette,' in a general review of my books up to 'Thyrza' says [...] that I have no imagination, but can only describe things I know [...]. –Noteworthy, these utterances"), Korg does not remark upon his application of a method with which Gissing was familiar and which he did not appreciate (Korg, Introduction 11; Gissing, *Commonplace Book* 55). Korg's zeal to equate biography and diegesis both disregards the author in whom it claims an interest and ignores *Henry Ryecroft* as a fictional text.

Though I cite Halperin and Korg as particularly strident cases, their overweening advocacy and use of biographical criticism is par for the course of Gissing studies. It remains for us to ask, What is it about Gissing's work that solicits—and for such a sustained period of time—a critical approach that routes itself through the events and circumstances of his life, thus missing

what makes Gissing's work truly compelling—his creative attention to the material and emotional fabric of his lifeworld, and, for my purposes, to boredom in particular? Despite Halperin's claim, it is not enough of a justification that Gissing wrote what he experienced, for, if we adopt James' view, one can expect nothing else of a writer: a writer lifts experiences more or less from life, so that, of every literary work, we may remark on the intensity or moderation of verisimilitude. Writing one's experience is a necessary rather than a novel or innovative approach to creating fiction, and thus should not itself garner critical attention for any author in particular. Additionally, some writers—Franz Kafka for example—regularly escape reductive biographical analysis simply because they choose to depict their lifeworld with an accuracy that is more emotional or psychological than material.

James inadvertently foresees the biographical anxiety singular to Gissing studies through the 1970s when he professes "a persistent taste" for the author "that triumphs even over the fact that he almost as persistently disappoints" ("London Notes" 438). Disappointment provides the unspoken subtext of the divide in Gissing Studies, detailed by Peter J. Keating. To read Gissing is undoubtedly to read the work of a failed though frank novelist. Keating explains, "It does not take many pages of a Gissing novel for the reader to realise that he is less likely to be immersed in a fictional world, than to be forced into a direct confrontation with the author" ("State of Gissing Studies" 393). And yet despite the pain (and disappointment) of this confrontation, readers have continued to read and study Gissing to the present day. Keating offers that it is this disarming *mélange* of failure and frankness—and we might alternately refer to the latter as Gissing's "individual manly strain" along with James, or "vitality" along with Robert Shafer⁶⁸—

⁶⁸ See Shafer's "The Vitality of George Gissing," reprinted in *George Gissing: Critical Essays*, edited by Jean-Pierre Michaux. Shafer argues before Keating that, though Gissing was "almost always a very imperfect, and always a

that explains Gissing's persistence. Unlike James and Shafer, the majority of Gissing critics and scholars are unable to view the author in the light of both attributes together, focusing either on failure or frankness so that "Gissing tends to be sacrificed between the two" (Keating, "State of Gissing Studies" 393). Gissing scholarship is accordingly divided into two basic groups, "those who regard him as a one-, or at the most two- or three-, novel author, whose interest is that of a cultural phenomenon rather than a living artistic force; and those who, in Pierre Coustillas's words, read one of his books, are seized by contagion, and fall to reading any other Gissing volume they can lay their hands on" (Keating, "State of Gissing Studies" 393). Scholars in the former group point out Gissing's weakness as an artist and are content to set aside *New Grub Street*, *The Odd Women*, and perhaps *The Whirlpool* before committing the rest of his painfully wrought *oeuvre* to the dustbin of Letters. Convinced that readers are perpetually in the dark about Gissing, the latter group (often redundantly) devotes its energies to the continual "rediscovery" of his work and biography: the one must be read alongside the other in order for either or both to strike an appropriately resounding chord with the reader. But just as Gissing's penchant for writing his troubles and irritations into his novels is "[s]o absolute, so painful at times," so is these scholars' belief in the remedial and endearing powers of biographical detail (Keating, "State of Gissing Studies" 394).⁶⁹

Unsurprisingly, a critical approach devoted to the defense of a writer's limitations is itself limited and limiting: not only is the reader restricted to viewing each Gissing novel or story as

very limited artist, with a small canvas, with not many colours," he nonetheless numbers among those 19th-century English novelists who wrote for and about more than their own time (41). I cite this passage at greater length below.⁶⁹ Indeed, even the leading and cordially-mannered Gissing scholar, Pierre Coustillas, betrays this belief in his notation to the 1970 reprint of *Isabel Clarendon*, to the effect that, in Keating's estimation, the edition is over-edited: "Surely someone buying this edition does not need a 'biographical notice of the author' apart from the information contained in the introduction; a similar sketch of the editor; notes to identify Thomas Otway or Mudie's, or to inform him that, 'The character of Mrs. Kingcote is obviously inspired by the novelist's mother'; and an advertisement for C. C. Kohler's Dorking Bookshop, the commercial nerve centre of the Gissing revival" (Keating, "State of Gissing Studies" 394).

though it were a kaleidoscopic elaboration of its producer,⁷⁰ but such a restriction exacerbates these texts' weakness by outlining their already evident biographical connections. To read Gissing is to confront Gissing the man, as Keating stated. Of course, biography and biographical criticism supply interesting supplements to the fiction—as Coustillas suggests, referring to Gissing's scrapbook, they "testif[y] in what manner his realism fed on facts and jottings which were revived with singular appropriateness at the artist's call and, once used, became invisible parts of the narrative web" ("*New Grub Street between Past and Present*" 134-5). Since Gissing did not write critical essays on his own or others' writing processes, it is understandable that scholars look to his letters and "jottings" for insight into his craft.⁷¹ Thorough knowledge of his biography is unnecessary, however, to its understanding or interpretation. Though distinctive, Gissing's conspicuous practice of repeatedly fictionalizing his experiences and grievances is also an aspect of his weakness and threatens to diminish the reader's encounter with his texts to a resemblance-hunting game. So observed Virginia Woolf in a brief essay on the late-Victorian author, calling him "one of those imperfect novelists through whose books one sees the life of the author faintly covered by the lives of fictitious people. With such writers we establish a personal rather than an artistic relationship" ("George Gissing"). To the detriment of the novel, Gissing "use[s] personal suffering to rivet the reader's sympathy and curiosity upon [his] private case"; because the novel is not general enough in its approach to representation, we fall to "capping the resemblances" between character and author—not entirely unpleasant, for "a little glow of satisfaction comes over us, as if novel-reading were a game of skill in which the puzzle set us is to find the face of the writer" (Woolf, "George Gissing"). But this is a stunted way of

⁷⁰ Accordingly, Coustillas writes, "There is no such thing as autobiography pure and simple in the narrative; whatever elements of it found their way into the melting pot of Gissing's imagination are widely scattered among characters, settings and situations" ("*New Grub Street between Past and Future*" 130).

⁷¹ Jacob and Cynthia Korg edit one such project, *George Gissing on Fiction* (1978), a collection of excerpts from Gissing's correspondence, largely to his brother Algernon, on the subject of writing and selling fiction.

reading which, when deployed repeatedly and exclusively, is both boring and negligent of what the novels have to say more generally about the time in which they were produced, despite their immediate limitations in scope.

Keating argues that these limitations help point us to Gissing's broader importance as a writer of his era. Though he gives no concrete examples to substantiate this claim, he offers a provocative observation on Gissing's continued relevance: "In his strengths and weaknesses he appears to embody many of the most important aspects of late Victorian England, and therefore to offer a much needed entrance into that neglected period. No other contemporary novelist (however better a novelist he may be) will do as well" ("State of Gissing Studies" 394). Woolf, however, *does* elaborate upon this point of Gissing's lasting contribution to fiction: what strikes the reader as "petty and personal" in Gissing also fosters "one ray of singular penetration," that of Gissing's uneasy mind, ever turning over the events of its day ("George Gissing"). Gissing, then, is a novelist remarkable in his ability to "mak[e] his people think," and "to think is to become complex; it is to overflow boundaries, to cease to be a 'character', to merge one's private life in the life of politics or art or ideas, to have relationships based partly on them, and not on sexual desire alone (Woolf, "George Gissing"). The impersonal side of life is given its due place in the scheme"—the side of life that grapples with the time in which it is lived (Woolf, "George Gissing"). Indeed, rather than fashionable plots brimming with love and society intrigue, Gissing gives us

a gleam of recognition that Darwin had lived, that science was developing, that people read books and look at pictures, that once upon a time there was such a place as Greece. It is the consciousness of these things that makes his books such painful reading; it was this that made it impossible for them to 'attract the subscribers to Mr. Mudie's Library'.

They owe their particular grimness to the fact that the people who suffer most are capable of making their suffering a reasoned view of life [...]. (Woolf, "George Gissing")

The aperture is small, but through it we see recreated in the minutiae of urban British lower-middle class existence the textures and tones of that existence—detail that most of Gissing's contemporaries chose to exclude, certainly, but that makes his contribution all the more singular and thus all the more significant.

My aim is not to be insensitive to the highly focused methods favored by British and French Gissing scholars, nor is it to denigrate those who have devoted their careers to restoring Gissing—the man and the work—more fully to academic and non-academic awareness. My initial notice of Gissing would not have been possible without their efforts, nor would this project. I do however wish to put to rest, at least in this instance, a critical perspective eager to treat the work as the author's direct communication about himself, or as "an accurate expression of [his] views" (Korg, Introduction 11), especially when the work's apparent autobiographical sources should challenge the critic to find alternate and less expected veins of discussion. If the work truly demanded this and only this approach, we would find ourselves dealing with an inferior because babbling text. It is high time we gave George Gissing the man—whom we know suffered frequently from physical and mental exhaustion—a rest. We may benefit from and even delight in biographical additions to Gissing's novels, but we do not need the former to grasp the latter's relevance. As Keating concludes in his review of the 1970 edition of *Isabel Clarendon*, "Gissing cannot go on being rediscovered indefinitely: sooner rather than later he must be allowed to stand alone" ("State of Gissing Studies" 394-5). What rediscovery attempts to obfuscate, I believe, is the abiding fact of Gissing's unpopularity, mentioned by Woolf in the above passage: in his own day as in ours, his stress on the mundane renders him tedious to the

average reader. As I have suggested, Gissing's particular strain of dullness is by design, making it a necessary part of any history of British Realism. Accordingly, I wish to examine his work in the context of the literary debates ongoing in Great Britain in the 1880s and 90s so that we may better perceive the ways in which he "stood alone," in the sense of distinguishing himself, as writer and thinker in the Realist tradition as well as in his literary milieu.

III. Gissing in Context: Fiction and Its Discontents

In the year 1882, the playfully designated "Dean of American Letters," William Dean Howells, opened what Henry James would later call the "era of discussion" with an essay on the writing of none other than Henry James. In this essay, titled simply "Henry James, Jr." after the manner in which James signed his own contributions to periodicals, Howells contends that James' success in these periodicals was due chiefly to a discerning magazine staff. "But with the readers," Howells writes, "it was another affair. The flavor was so strange that, with rare exceptions, they had to 'learn to like' it." Even when readers did genuinely like it, as was the case with "Daisy Miller," their acceptance was facilitated "through the confusion of his point of view with his private opinion" (Howells). And yet readers sensed this confusion. Howells further describes the uncomfortable and unaccustomed slippage they experienced between James' characterization and what they felt was his intention:

This confusion caused the tears of rage which bedewed our continent in behalf of the "average American girl" supposed to be satirized in Daisy Miller, and prevented the perception of the fact that, so far as the average American girl was studied at all in Daisy Miller, her indestructible innocence, her invulnerable new-worldliness, had never been so

delicately appreciated. It was so plain that Mr. James disliked her vulgar conditions, that the very people to whom he revealed her essential sweetness and light were furious that he should have seemed not to see what existed through him.

Readers "accepted" James when they believed—mistakenly, Howells argues—that the narration's portrayal of characters coincided perfectly with the author's own estimation of character conduct and condition. It was shocking that the subject of such careful and delicate portraiture should also be the subject of what seemed to be an author's scorn, evidenced in Daisy's death by "Roman fever" after imprudently accompanying an Italian acquaintance to the Coliseum. Like Daisy Miller, James was guilty of infidelity to custom, except that, in James' instance, the custom was literary. "In other words," continues Howells, readers "would have liked him better if he had been a worse artist—if he had been a little more confidential," if he had been, like mid-Victorian authors Charles Dickens or William Makepeace Thackeray, careful to provide the direct and guiding narration that readers had come to expect from decades of tradition in British fiction. James' strength and innovation, however, lay in "character-painting" and in "leav[ing] us to our own conjectures in regard to the fate of the people in whom he has interested us" (Howells). Howell's support of an author who broke with so many long-held literary conventions—and indeed who would have been a "worse artist" for not doing so—sparked a critical backlash in Great Britain⁷² as conservative critics rallied to defend the Victorian novel. As Mark Spilka summarizes in his exploration of the "'Art of Fiction' Controversy," Howell's essay identified James' innovations in fiction as "eschewing incident, or story, for the analysis of character; as eschewing commentary and the sympathetic depiction of character for impartial

⁷² Howells' essay was first published in *Longman's Magazine*, a London monthly. There was little fervor at this time for critical literary discussion in the States, much to Henry James' and others' dismay. See Spilka, "Henry James and Walter Besant: 'The Art of Fiction' Controversy" in *NOVEL*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Winter, 1973): 101-19.

presentation; and as favoring open endings over closed ones" (110). To demand otherwise, that an author maintain the handholding that disallowed the use of ambiguity or distance for artistic effect, amounted to childishness. British literature had passed into a decidedly more mature phase.

It is no revelation that this mature phase of British fiction, in which readers were asked to "learn to like" some of the authors of their day and, conversely, in which these authors were not guaranteed a mass readership for their work, was the beginning of what came to be known as the Modernist movement. Writers, like Henry James, who were intensely interested in experimenting with literary form and in taking up new subjects found themselves without the audiences more or less guaranteed to mid-Victorian writers like Dickens, Thackeray, and Eliot. Citing Ian Gregor's study, *The Moral and the Story*, Mark Spilka states that, whereas successful mid-nineteenth-century novelists "shared conventions with their readers and found techniques to convey them, [...] modern novelists have had to invent techniques so as to create conventions for their readers: 'For the former the problem was to keep an audience; for the latter it is to find one'" (118). That a writer's literary significance and innovation would not coincide with popularity was a new and, as Allon White suggests, disturbing trend. In his work on George Meredith, Joseph Conrad, and Henry James, White argues that all three writers' careers were troubled by the notion that they were "too intellectual to be popular" with an increasingly divided reading public: "This is no novelty to us, for whom the divorce between a mass culture and high culture is a familiar lament, but at the end of the nineteenth century, with the examples of George Eliot and Dickens so close to memory, it was a puzzling and sometimes distressing phenomenon" (White 32). The discerning magazine staff who selected the work of "modern" novelists for publication, as well as these works' laudatory reviewers, often explained lack of popularity by

the public's faulty taste. But public taste, as Howells seems to suggest in his article on James, is nurtured—and sometimes blunted—by convention. If readers found James' fiction to have a "strange flavor," it was because they had never tasted such a thing before.

Certainly, the venues available for the publication of fiction in Britain accounted for at least some of the narrowness of the reading public's tastes. The circulating libraries, and in particular Mudie's Select Library, demanded the triple-decker novel form which it bought in bulk from publishers from the 1840s until 1897. Mudie's and other circulating libraries profited from the sale of subscriptions to its collection, as well as from the resale of books some months after their initial publication and release. Since they were the principal buyers of the expansive triple-deckers, they exercised control over the subject of and degree of "candor" in published novels with their purchasing power: in his social history of the English novel, Peter Keating points out that "[t]he adjective 'select' in Mudie's title had been carefully chosen to reassure timid subscribers that they had nothing to fear from the books they ordered" (*Haunted Study* 24). While the libraries occasionally targeted novels for banishment from their collections, the threat of unsold books proved a more effective means of censorship, influencing publishers' decisions about what to publish and authors' decisions about what and how to write. Especially since it was the libraries—and not the publishers or authors—that were blamed for the occasional scandalous novel in the hands of the public, it was in the former's interest to keep "authors, readers and publishers tied into an extremely stable and predictable structure of expectation about novels and novel-reading from the 1840s to the 1880s" (White 31).

Reader tastes and expectations played an equally if not more active role in the shaping of serially published fiction. It is well known that subscriptions to publications rose and fell with the popularity of the novels serialized within them, and that authors as well as editors were aware

of and tried to manage these fluctuations. In his critical study of Charles Dickens, Gissing cites the famous—or rather infamous—example of *Martin Chuzzlewit* as a novel whose seriality is perhaps the only form that can be distinguished in its otherwise "shapeless," incoherent, and improvisational plot, pieced together in order to counter flagging subscription rates (54). In the most egregious of such counter-moves, Dickens sends the titular protagonist to the United States knowing very well that "however thoroughly assured an author may be that he is doing his best, a falling-off in the sale of his work must needs cause him grave mental disturbance; nay, that it must prompt him, as a matter of course, to changes of plan and solicitous calculation" (Gissing *Charles Dickens* 77-8). Perhaps peering through the same "door leading to a bookseller's small back room" that Sainte-Beuve hinges to every instance of "Industrial Literature,"⁷³ Gissing observes that the mid-Victorian novelist "is to write in short, with an eye steadily fixed upon his publisher's sale-room" (Sainte-Beuve 26; Gissing, *Charles Dickens* 78). Accordingly, Dickens' American gambit paid off; subscriptions to *Martin Chuzzlewit* increased as Chuzzlewit's ship set sail. Couching this same effect of serial publication in more amicable terms, William Makepeace Thackeray described the author-reader dynamic as a "communion," "something continual, confidential, something like a personal affection" that resulted in the more or less immediate response of writers to their public's demands, even, as Gissing observed, if it meant postponing or altogether scrapping the formers' carefully-laid plans (qtd in White 40).

Writers who wanted to retain their public (and their income) in the mid- and late-Victorian periods thus had to offer something new while respecting convention and propriety, which meant observing Mudie's and other libraries' "select" criteria, pleasing readers with surprise plot twists, and avoiding the construction of, as Wilkie Collins put it in an 1872 article

⁷³ "In all the majestic works and variously extended careers of the Bossuets, the Fénelons, the La Bruyères, in those of Montesquieu or Buffon, you cannot see a door leading to a bookseller's small back room" (Sainte-Beuve 26).

for *The Gentleman's Magazine*, "a tissue of absurdity and contradiction, involving such an obvious inconsistency as hardly to entitle it to a passing allusion" ("Art of Novel Writing" 391). Little had changed in over a decade when Alexander Innes Shand described the thin and contradictory line the writer walked when trying to court his public: "His reputation may stand the strain of an occasional feeble story, but he dare not take a succession of liberties or make a series of mistakes. He must have a certain versatility, for the public is capricious" (29). Readers, it was thought, would suffer a mediocre author before an experimental one. Wilkie Collins formulated the attendant concerns of the literary elite, stating that authors who aim to "gratify the tastes and inclinations of a particular class" through flashy devices wrote novels that "as a rule possess a literary value comparatively low, and are, with some exceptions, not ranked among standard works" ("Art of Novel Writing" 391). The circulating libraries were also implicated in the stagnant state of the nation's fiction: though readers could expect Mudie's to uphold standards of convention and propriety, quality was another issue. Critics pointed to both the libraries' constant need for new material and the vanity presses that published new writers' works at the writers' own cost. Since both practices flooded the fiction market with inferior material, it was often argued that the overall quality of British fiction would be higher in a purchase- rather than a rental-based reading market; the former would yield a smaller output of more cheaply priced, single-volume novels. Unless the system was changed, argues Shand, "some future annalist will have to write the history of the decline and fall of English fiction" (28).

Implicit in these writers' critical comments is the lament that catering to both audience demand and the venues that supply it detracts the most from the novel's literary status, not to mention the status of the novelist. It follows that, in order for novels to be regarded as literature, the distance between a work and its audience had to be widened. While most authors could not

afford to completely disregard the consumers of their fiction, the sense that readers needed to pull themselves up to the serious writer's level was gaining ground⁷⁴—whether the idea was couched in terms of a collective cultural effort, culture defined by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* as the "pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know [...] the best which has been thought and said in the world" (Arnold 5); or framed as a demand that the philistines (also an Arnoldian term) be made to suffer through what is good for them (Leavis, whom I discuss below); or an insistence that readers learn to like what at first appears strange (Howells). Indeed, many critics noted, such had been expected in the past, when a (smaller) reading public had fewer but more challenging choices.⁷⁵ By the turn of the century, literature was no longer primarily held to be a matter of instruction, delight, or even escape, but, as Howells points out, a matter of "pursuit and not the end," and of dominant artistic rather than moral purpose—there was room, then, for the designedly dull and blatantly boring writing of George Gissing.

Though generally considered to be Victorian in style and narrative technique, George Gissing shared Howells' rather modern view of literature's function, one that bore a greater

⁷⁴ As tastes slowly changed, and as readers became accustomed to literary challenge, it sometimes behooved writers in their late careers to have consistently spurned a popular audience. Such was the case for Browning's career: "It was," Keating writes, "to Browning's credit that he had for so long been unpopular as well as difficult. This served to dissociate him from conventional Victorianism" which became the target of criticism around the turn of the century (381).

⁷⁵ Q. D. Leavis highlights this point in her important though occasionally acid study, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), in which she charts the long decline of the English reading public since the eighteenth century. Leavis argues that nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers, so much more numerous and less sharp than in centuries prior, had never been asked to develop their palettes, being instead "accustomed for two centuries to have the writer smooth the way for us. For the next thing that one notices is how much less was done for the common reader by the Elizabethan popular writer or dramatist than by the modern popular author or journalist" (*Fiction* 86-7). We will leave Leavis' ahistorical concept of the "popular" aside to emphasize her point that the Modernist Virginia Woolf has more in common with the eighteenth-century novelist Laurence Sterne than she does with one of her best-selling contemporaries, as neither Woolf nor Sterne pandered to reader expectations or emotions (*Fiction* 235). But while Sterne had a ready homogeneous readership ("[he] wrote for the best, because it was the only, public" (Leavis, *Fiction* 157)), Woolf could only hope to attract an audience to her style and particular set of concerns.

affinity to French Realist approaches to literature than to high-Victorian convention and social purpose. Indeed, many of Howells' appraisals of James can be applied to Gissing, whose major and later novels were likewise more exploration than statement, took up moral issues without resolving them, and favored character portraiture and mood over event and place. However, aside from a lengthy and robust critical study of Dickens, published in 1898, and prefaces to reprinted editions of Dickens' novels,⁷⁶ Gissing wrote very little criticism or commentary on the state of literature: indeed, the only anthology of his writing on fiction, *George Gissing on Fiction*, consists primarily of excerpts from his letters to his brother and aspiring novelist Algernon rather than critical articles. In one letter to Algernon, Gissing shows his preference for the methods of narration used by the French naturalists, advising that his latest book should "deal rather with things that *happen* than things that are *plotted*"⁷⁷; in a later letter, Gissing more explicitly advocates impartial narrative technique: "[T]he less you think about analysis, the better and more acceptable work will you do. Let the reader analyse character and motive, if he be capable of it; do you simply present facts, events, dialogue, scenery. The rest will surprise you [...]" (Gissing, *On Fiction* 57, 63).⁷⁸ Of the novels of Thomas Hardy, Gissing states, "The people are always busy about something or other—often wretched trivialities, but it is astonishing how much interest can attach to the paltriest affairs if only they be vividly presented" (*On Fiction* 63).⁷⁹ It was not lost on Gissing that "happenings," lack of character analysis, and "wretched" albeit vividly portrayed trivialities would fail to attract a wide readership—given that Algernon was aiming to write for a living, and given that he often suffered from a worse poverty than did

⁷⁶ Collected in *The Immortal Dickens*.

⁷⁷ August 3, 1889.

⁷⁸ July 25, 1891.

⁷⁹ Jacob Korg points out that Gissing later contradicts his advice to Algernon, urging him to "deliberately construct what is called a plot" when he saw that Algernon had little knack for writing the "simply human situations" he had earlier advocated (*On Fiction* 73-4).

George Gissing, the older brother's proposals seem insensitive. However, Gissing's suggestion that more subtle representations make for "better and more acceptable work" speaks to his sturdy belief that the nation's literary woes could only be alleviated by the writers themselves. Only a supply of high-quality, intelligent (and perhaps even dull) fiction will nurture reader's demand for it.⁸⁰

The critical pieces Gissing did publish demonstrate his forward-looking attitude regarding the possibilities open to literary representation, as well as his conviction that the farther a writer is removed from commercial concerns, the better his art will be. Like James' succinct declaration in "The Art of Fiction" that "the only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel [...] is that it be interesting," Gissing's qualifications for fiction are few, suggesting his equal openness to variety of technique and content.⁸¹ In an 1895 piece, "The Place of Realism in Fiction, written for a symposium on Realism in *The Humanitarian*, Gissing states that "art, in the sense of craftsman's skill, without sincerity of vision will not suffice [...]. It seems to me that no novel can possess the slightest value which has not been conceived, fashioned, elaborated, with a view to depicting some portion of human life as candidly and vividly as is in the author's power" (Gissing, *On Fiction* 84-5). Even Charles Dickens, whose fiction many critics in Gissing's day—including occasionally Gissing himself—began to view as antiquated, overly stylized, and parochial in his social and moral intentions, had sincerity of purpose and

⁸⁰ Gissing caught fire for expressing this rather reasonable opinion in a letter published in the *Pall Mall Budget*, December 19, 1884. In response to Gissing's statement therein that readers can mark the places where Thackeray "knowingly wrote below the demands of his art to conciliate Mrs. Grundy," the author of an unsigned article, published in *Punch* on January 3, 1885 retorted, "We regret that Gissing cannot get the reading he likes, except by going back to more conscientious days; and we do not wholly love Mrs Grundy. But we like her taste in books better than Gissing's. We will do all we can to help you to your desired celebrity, Gissing, though we care not to be gissing who can have brought you up" (Coustillas and Partridge, *Critical Heritage* 73).

⁸¹ Contrast James' and Gissing's brevity and lack of rules for writing with the long-winded, self-contradictory, and limiting rules of fiction composition put forward by Walter Besant in his own lecture titled "The Art of Fiction," delivered at the Royal Institution in April 1884.

vision for Gissing: writing in an age when "the English character seemed bent on exhibiting all its grossest and meanest and most stupid characteristics," Dickens did not compose characters that were "mere forms of fantasy" but accurately recorded the peculiarities and outlandish individualism of an otherwise "ill-defined order of English folk" (*Charles Dickens* 9, 12). Had his characterizations not been truthful, Gissing argues, they would not have persisted in the popular imagination. Where authors err in realistic representation is in deforming their art to order. Dickens' major flaw as a writer was not his courting of middle-class sensibilities, as Gissing saw it, but his affinity for popular narrative forms, and plays in particular. Dickens "planned a narrative as though plotting for the stage. When the necessities of intrigue did not weigh upon him—as happily was so often the case in his roomy stories—he could forget the footlights; at the first demand for an 'effect', gas and limelight are both turned on. Cannot we often hear the incidental music?" (Gissing, *Charles Dickens* 47-8). In other words, Dickens was not boring enough, the pathetic mode of narration demanded by popular theater overriding the well-wrought story and characters drawn from life.

As we might assume from his emphasis on truthfulness of representation, Gissing's literary and critical interests belonged to Realism; furthermore, Gissing opposes Realism, not to Romance or Symbolism as did many of the literary conversations at the time, but to the commercial. Here he concludes "The Place of Realism in Fiction" with a broad conception of Realism's purpose:

Realism [...] signifies nothing more than artistic sincerity in the portrayal of contemporary life; it merely contrasts with the habit of mind which assumes that a novel is written 'to please people,' that disagreeable facts must always be kept out of sight, that

human nature must be systematically flattered, that the book must have a 'plot,' that the story should end on a cheerful note, and all the rest of it. (85-6)

Gissing considered it possible for the late-nineteenth-century artist to be happily free of mercenary concerns, stating that, in contrast to Dickens' day, "public opinion no longer constrains a novelist to be false to himself. The world lies open before him, and it is purely a matter for his private decision whether he will write as the old law dictates or to show life its image as he beholds it" (*On Fiction* 86). In his own practice, Gissing rather bravely dismissed the question of popular appeal, as his stubborn lack of business acumen⁸² as well as his subject matter, repeatedly rejected by publishers as too grim for library subscribers, often dictated that he work on the edge of poverty. For better or worse, Gissing all but guaranteed that he would have no public opinion to constrain him by taking an anti-commercial stance in his art.

Realism was, for Gissing, the artist's best hope for artistic freedom. His understanding of realism as a non-commercial mode⁸³ positioned Gissing to record what Adam Phillips refers to as the more "quiescent," less spectacular states—particularly boredom—through which a growing middle class experienced the world, and through which it experienced the world most of the time. In lieu of critical articles, Gissing's later novels did the work of exploring the expanding possibilities of literary representation in relation to social and economic changes. The

⁸² Jacob Korg reports that, in the first six years of Gissing's literary travails (in which he wrote five novels and published four), he made a total profit of £57 (*On Fiction* 39). After an unsuccessful attempt to collect royalties from the badly-selling *Thyrza* (1887), Gissing continued to sell his work outright to publishers, earning a one-time payment of £150 for *New Grub Street* and thus "ignoring not only the financial potential but even the message of his own book" (Keating, *Haunted Study* 18). Facing hardship, Gissing hired a literary agent in order to place *Born in Exile* (1892) and in 1894 joined the Society of Authors, a proto-union for writers founded by Walter Besant (Gissing, *On Fiction* 74, 77).

⁸³ Certainly, Gissing was not the sole novelist to take this position: scholars like Ian Watt and Terry Lovell have observed that novelists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries wished to garner artistic seriousness for their work through verisimilitude and truth claims. By writing the "true story" of individual lives, authors like Fielding and Defoe hoped to distinguish their work from commercial entertainment. As Lovell writes, this "desire for respectability may therefore have been a powerful determinant of the emergence of conventions of realism in the early novel" (7).

depth to which these novels explore the state of literature and its ramifications for culture extends to the affective lives of commercial and "serious" writers, and to those of the readers that contemporary fiction produced. As Gissing's career progressed, his novels had less recourse to the polish of plot, or to the conventional mechanisms that relieve deserving characters of their economic and social concerns, more tediously and obsessively presented in Gissing than in the work of his contemporaries. This depth is achieved in part by sacrificing expanse: Robert Shafer accurately characterizes the novelist as

almost always a very imperfect, and always a very limited artist, with a small canvas, with not many colours—and those not the most striking or vivid—with a blunt pencil which sometimes failed to do his bidding, and with an eye which saw truly only a few kinds of people, and which saw during the greater part of his career predominantly the more grim and misery-provoking aspects of existence. (41)

Gissing's representations are limited to the drab set of colors, individuals, and situations that he himself experienced for most of his life as an emotionally and financially struggling writer, yet his lack of imaginative range strengthens the overall sense of loss—both personal and cultural—that sets his oeuvre apart as "clinging," "virile," and strangely "contagious."

One perceives this loss most keenly through comparison of Gissing to the more fulsome and popular Dickens. In *Unsettled Accounts: Money and Narrative in the Novels of George Gissing*, Simon J. James asserts that, while both authors shaped characters to their prevailing socio-economic conditions, Dickens invested his characters with a pictorial completeness, "as if they existed autonomously; a character is portrayed in terms of their clothing or their surroundings because such a description 'fits' them. Such is the liberality of Dickens's imagination that there is narrative energy to spare to 'colour in' his descriptions beyond the

indicial conveying of necessary information" (31). Gissing's characters, in contrast, "are worn down by the petty contingencies of everyday economic life, so his narrative vision appears limited by a deliberate poverty of imagination, which almost exclusively denotes meaning in a specific register" (S. James 31-2). Northrop Frye provides a similarly abundant view of Dickens' novels, identifying their central conflict as one generic to New Comedy that pits an "obstructing" society against a "congenial" one, or the way things are—corrupt, bogged down in bureaucracy, subject to family feuds and separations—against the way things should be; the latter improbably wins out at novels' end due to an energy in Dickens that "insists, absurdly and yet irresistibly, that what is must never take final precedence over what ought to be" (69). Of Gissing's characters, we know their incomes, their diets, their education, their preferred reading material, and the cost and location of their lodgings, all of which indicate and unite them ineluctably to their circumstances, like stones in a drowning man's pocket. Though his sympathetic characters might imagine themselves in alternate circumstances, Gissing seldom offers a glimpse of their lives outside the contexts of material or emotional want. The contrived plot mechanisms Gissing disliked were a function of Dickens' desire to reform his nation, and his ability—given his popularity, the ubiquity of his voice in lectures and periodicals, and the relatively unified reading public of the mid-century—to do so. By contrast, Gissing's mood was not as optimistic, nor was his late-century readership as large and coherent: as Q. D. Leavis, citing Thomas Seccombe, puts it, "Poor Gissing was sliding down the hill which Dickens and his robust contemporaries had climbed in such high spirits [...]: 'In the old race, of which Dickens and Thackeray were representative, a successful determination to rise upon the broad back of popularity coincided with a growing conviction that evil in the real world was steadily diminishing'" ("Gissing and the English Novel" 184).⁸⁴

⁸⁴ If we read Gissing's comments on Dickens' relationship to his time, we may infer that Gissing understood the

Gissing felt himself to be carrying on a Realist tradition of which Dickens was a founder, but without his will to reform, his "liberality of imagination," or his public. What remained to Gissing was a Realism that addressed these losses, a fiction that chronicled the impossibility of summoning the optimism or potentialities of earlier decades. Where Dickens' richly varied world plays host to good and evil, and where he insists on the good's ultimate triumph, Gissing's world is one in which questions of good and evil have long since been replaced by more narrow concerns: namely, how to maintain one's integrity in the modernity forged by capitalism and democratization. For Gissing, "evil" was not the poverty, unsanitary conditions, and systemic lack of Christian virtue that it was in Dickens' novels. Rather, it had a banal and secular character, and was firmly entrenched as consumerism, the inanity of mass culture, universal education, development and pollution of natural spaces, the decline of traditional gendered roles, and the chaining of one's quality of life to income earned. In *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams qualifies the epithet often assigned to Gissing, "the spokesperson of despair," by arguing that he not only takes up the "true conditions of the poor," as did the high-Victorian masters, but also that he is "the spokesman of another kind of despair: the despair born of social and political disillusion" endemic to the Interregnum, or the years between the Victorian era and the contemporary era.⁸⁵ Gissing indeed chose not to buck the despair of his time, his later works delving into the often crushing and seemingly inevitable economic realities of middle-class life. Accordingly, we might agree with György Lukács' observation of late-nineteenth-century realists

depleted character of his fiction as the proper response to depleted times. Of Dickens' flamboyant, obsessive, and unyieldingly eccentric characters, Gissing wrote that such people were common in the harsher decades of the mid-nineteenth century, as "education had not set up its grindstone for all and sundry; and persons esteemed odd even in such a society abounded among high and low [...]; nowadays he would have to search for them amid the masses drilled into uniformity" (*Charles Dickens* 13-14). Gissing here refers to what he perceived as the ramifications of the 1870 Elementary Education Act, which provided for the schooling of English children from the ages of five to twelve, and which financed the creation of board schools for the purpose.

⁸⁵ Which, in 1958, Williams designated as post-World War I.

that their disdain of the popular and refusal to oppose "the destruction of the completeness of the human personality [...] through an excessive culture of the momentary mood" reflect their submission to the atomizing forces of capital, dooming fiction to inferiority (6). By this account, Gissing's fiction of despair, bearing telling resemblance to his own life, is the mere mechanical reflection of capitalism's tedious reality.

Leavis, Williams, and Lukács qualify Gissing's as a fiction of diminishment, a downhill slide into the depths of despair, a beacon of the decline of great literature. For Lukács in particular, late-century Realism is stagnant in relation to the Realism written prior to the June Rebellion of 1848: the latter—limited, for Lukács, to works by Balzac and Stendhal—focused on the dialectic between individual actors and the emerging capitalist society that confronted them; the former reduced to depicting a society whose unity was dissolving, and average characters who act without pattern (91). Realism of the late century is therefore in part an extended exercise in documenting stasis. But, as boredom demonstrates, stasis is often the result of unresolved and irresolvable tensions. Beyond the grim, often defeatist nature of his prose, Gissing nonetheless used fiction to sound the tensions he saw in society and experienced himself, including the desire for marriage versus the desire for personal and economic freedom, the need for women's education versus the decline of women's traditional roles, the urge to produce art versus the necessity of earning an income, and the inanity and possible danger of the urban crowd versus the thrill of taking part in it.⁸⁶ As we shall see, Gissing's novels also display a tension between the exigencies of their plots and the characters who resist gratifying them. This resistance, fleeting though it may be, indicates a dynamic analytical process: Gissing's unease in

⁸⁶ See John Spiers' introduction to his edited collection *Gissing and the City: Cultural Crisis and the Making of Books in Late Victorian England*, as well as Richard Dennis' "Buildings, Residences, and Mansions: George Gissing's 'prejudice against flats'" and Luisa Villa's "Gissing's *Saturnalia*: Urban Crowds, Carnavalesque Subversion and the Crisis of Paternal Authority," collected within. Villa's essay in particular provides an interesting analysis of Gissing's ambivalent representation of crowds as both carnivalesque and dangerous.

his own society is made palpable in his protagonists, whose boredom provides extended moments in which to assess the origins of their displeasure, and to refrain from the actions or decisions necessary to the plot's progression. I hope to show that, while *New Grub Street* illustrates utterly the sources of Gissing's frustrations with culture, the narrative of *In the Year of Jubilee* is both driven and postponed by moments in which the protagonist reflects on this culture and decides whether she should be, as Siegfried Kracauer states, "as thoroughly bored with the world as it ultimately deserves" (332). The milieu in and of which Gissing wrote, as well as his particular attitude toward it, enabled him to examine boredom and other forms of discontent—and, by extension, average human experience in the West under capital—in a way that was distinctive and that cannot be overshadowed by the larger literary names and better known works of the period.

IV. Societal Tension, Textual Boredom: Gissing's Proto-Modernism as Cultural Critique

New Grub Street

The realist mode, according to Gissing, went against the incentives and expectations of the Mudie's market and its analogues. It was the stance of the artist against the commodification—and democratization—of an art form. However, realism was often accused of being utterly devoid of imagination. In "The New Naturalism," an 1885 essay in *The Fortnightly Review*, critic W. S. Lilly makes just this argument, citing as his prime example of boring realism a "faithful" stage adaptation of Zola's *Nana*. Lilly writes that "Reality was the great law which the playwright proposed to follow, and it is not exactly imagination or sentiment that seasons the talk of the *lupanar*. 'On s'ennuyait à crever,' observes M. Zola, in his account of a famous

supper given by his heroine. M. Busnach [the adaptor], in this respect, as in others, had kept faithfully to his original” (240-1). Realism was boring precisely because it overly relied on the visual and its replication, stagecraft according to Lilly’s complaint having given itself over to “*costumiers*, mechanics, and others whose function it is to speak to the eye” rather than to the powers of suggestion (241). Lilly here takes the Platonic rather than the Aristotelian view of mimesis, in that such efforts, both dramatic and literary, are “mere copying—a transcript of facts,” yielding a picture of life that only succeeds in being less than the original, rather than an instance of *poiesis*, the making of something new (242). Man surrounded by his things, and reduced to this only, exclusively promotes his bestiality, making of *l’humain*, in Lilly’s refrain of lament, *la bête humaine*.

Though Gissing and Lilly agreed that democracy and commercialization were rendering the arts more crude and less subject to the guiding censor of the “higher self,” Gissing did not link realism to a decline in the quality of contemporary art (Lilly 252). As we have seen, in his own critical writing, Gissing contrasts realism to the conventional “tricks for pleasing the ignorant and the prejudiced,” and claims the creed that Lilly excoriates, stating that the novelist should “take himself as seriously as the man of science; be his work to depict with rigid faithfulness the course of life, to expose the secrets of the mind, to show humanity in its eternal combat with fate [...] [n]o matter how hideous or heartrending the results” (“The Place of Realism in Fiction” 84). While he admits that one approach to this mode of writing is the “choice of vulgar, base, or disgusting subjects; whence the popular understanding of the term *realist*,” Gissing holds that the twofold criterion of merit in fiction writing is fidelity to one’s artistic conscience and candid depiction of some aspect of human life (“The Place of Realism in

Fiction” 84).⁸⁷ In Gissing’s appeal to rigid faithfulness, exposure of the mind’s secrets, and the supremacy of fate, Lilly would perhaps retort, as he does in response to Zola, that he “has supplied the most pregnant illustration known to me in literature that ‘the visible when it rests not upon the invisible becomes the bestial’” (251); he would accuse Gissing of subjecting his characters to what C. J. Francis, writing about Gissing’s work, calls the “doctrine of necessity” in realism, according to which “constant adversity,” in the form of environmental and hereditary obstacles, “will eventually diminish virtue” or otherwise bring characters to untimely ends—as do, for example, the inexhaustible demands of the literary marketplace speed on the death of *New Grub Street* protagonist Edwin Reardon (85). In other words, Lilly and similarly-opinioned critics would have accused Gissing of representing man as the plaything of fate, or as no less vulnerable than animals to the vagaries of environment.

Under the headings of bestiality and the boring, Lilly’s essay unites the contemporary phenomena of democracy, literary naturalism, and the scientific mania for vivisection then in vogue. But both C. J. Francis and Lilly are and would be too quick, respectively, to dismiss Gissing’s characters as the victims of overdetermined circumstance. As I have indicated, Gissing’s work does not simply aim for correspondence with the world, nor does it result in artistic objects inferior to and even more boring than the reality they represent, as Lilly insists realism’s reliance on the visual inevitably does. Certainly realism, Peter Brooks maintains in *Realist Vision*, is an intensely visual movement, concerned with seeing, registering, and describing: “The realist,” Brooks writes, “believes you must do an elementary phenomenology of the world in order to speak of how humans inhabit it, and this phenomenology will necessarily

⁸⁷ Gissing was interested in the common use of the word “realistic” as a synonym for “vulgar.” In his *Commonplace Book*, he records two such instances in popular periodicals of the day: “I observe that the word ‘realistic’ has, in journalistic language, come to mean simply ‘revolting’ or ‘painful’”; “‘The *realistic* description of this region is *accurate*.’ This is not mere tautology, you see. And again: ‘Here is an account, equally *realistic*, of a house in this blighted region’” (41).

mean description, detailing, an attempt to say what the world is like in a way that makes its constraints recognizable by the reader” (210). But these concerns are not absolute—that is to say, and as Brooks does say, realism is aware of the impossibility of its own purported project to “show everything.” Almost as if in response to Lilly, Brooks cites Zola’s *Nana* as she reads and rejects a novel about a prostitute: “As if one could show everything!” *Nana* cries in disgust, and rightly so, for “Zola can’t quite show everything [...] because the everything in this case is everything-and-nothing, the ‘petit rien’ that motivates everything,” namely *Nana*’s nude body, her sex, what it is about her that inflames others with desire and rage (127). Brooks continues with another observation of Zola that may be extended to the project of realism as a whole: “Zola’s prime motors and machines in his novels are elaborately detailed, patiently described, but in their essence unsayable” (128). Realism, Brooks concludes, is often more about presenting a system of representation than it is about the representations themselves. Realism points to the invisible as well as to the visible.

Accordingly, Gissing sets out to represent the middle-class world of London in detail, down to its street names, its denizens’ dwindling savings accounts, its posted advertisements. Yet what emerges more forcefully than the sheer fact of London is its affective texture—something invisible but nevertheless there. If we turn to an earlier statement by Gissing on the subject of craft, we read a slightly different iteration of his rationale for realism than that laid out later in “The Place of Realism in Fiction.” Gissing writes to his brother Algernon,

Philosophy has done all it can for me, and now scarcely interests me any more [...]. The world is for me a collection of phenomena, which are to be studied and reproduced artistically. In the midst of the most serious complications of life, I find myself suddenly possessed with a great calm, withdrawn as it were from the immediate interests of the

moment, and able to regard everything as a picture [...]. In the midst of desperate misfortune I can pause to make a note for future use, and the afflictions of others are to me materials for observation.⁸⁸ (qtd in Coustillas, Introduction to *George Gissing: Essays and Fiction* 22)

While his approach seems rather workaday—he looks at life as if at a picture, then writes it down—we read here something more nuanced: first, his disillusionment with positivist philosophies and socialism, both influences which he had lately abandoned, as well as his recent turn to the writings of Schopenhauer. After his first novels and early journalistic work, Gissing was not interested in seeing through deterministic philosophical orthodoxies in his fiction, what C. J. Francis and Lilly, in his criticism of Zola, maintain to be the hobbyhorses of realist writers. Second, and more importantly, we understand that what motivates Gissing are the “serious complications” and “desperate misfortune” in the lives of others as well as in his own life—and the drive to reproduce what it *feels* like to live in his contemporary world, rather than the drive to render it visually, in one-to-one correspondence with his observations. For Gissing, to “reproduce artistically” was precisely to attend to the affective structure, to what exceeds the purely visual—and indeed, the purely observable, the purely describable. Gissing, counter to Lilly, takes the Aristotelian view of representation and of what representation does.

Of course, one could also contend that what Gissing does is *exceed* the realist project with his attention to the affect-scape rather than the cityscape of late nineteenth-century London. John Peck contends just this in a rare formal analysis of *New Grub Street*, a novel many value exclusively for its sociological survey of London literary society in the 1880s. Though Peck agrees with Peter J. Keating that the novel is important for its self-reflexivity—it is a novel about

⁸⁸ July 18, 1883.

the business, labor, and heartache of writing and publishing novels—he finds even more noteworthy the fact that it contains “some of the best presented moments of inactivity in the whole of fiction” (148). Certainly, the novel is amply typical of its Victorian context: it discloses an interconnected world of characters (though all belong to approximately the same social class), many of whose great expectations are made or dashed by matters of marriage and inherited wealth, and all amid the bustle and grime of one of the great world cities. Yet occasionally the action slows, and ceases. Peck cites one scene in which Edwin Reardon, Gissing’s novelist protagonist, finds that, by sundown of another tedious workday, he has only managed to pen the words “Chapter III”: “Up until this point words have rattled forth confidently, but here we are confronted with the novelist with nothing to say. The formal originality is that Gissing has dared to present the sterility of so much of the process of writing by bringing the novel to a complete halt, so that the only encounter is between a man and a blank piece of paper” (148). As the novel’s pace slows and its scope narrows to the tempo and dimensions of this encounter, so the reader becomes aware of the grinding passage of time, the sluggish summoning of words to the author’s brain, and the dwindling of his resources, seemingly even as the hours pass. The spent writer’s sense of urgency and futility become palpable in this later but similar scene:

[T]here came a day when Edwin Reardon found himself regularly at work once more, ticking off his stipulated quantum of manuscript each four-and-twenty hours. He wrote a very small hand; sixty written slips of the kind of paper he habitually used would represent [...] a passable three-hundred-page volume. On an average he could write four such slips a day; so here we have fifteen days for the volume, and forty-five for the completed book.

Forty-five days; an eternity in the looking forward [...]. It would certainly not bring him a hundred pounds; seventy-five perhaps. But even that small sum would enable him to pay the quarter's rent, and then give him a short time, if only two or three weeks, of mental rest. If such rest could not be obtained all was at an end with him. He must either find some new means of supporting himself and his family, or—have done with life and its responsibilities altogether.

The latter alternative was often enough before him. He seldom slept for more than two or three consecutive hours in the night, and the time of wakefulness was often terrible. The various sounds which marked the stages from midnight to dawn had grown miserably familiar to him; worst torture to his mind was the chiming and striking of clocks. Two of these were in general audible, that of Marylebone parish church, and that of the adjoining workhouse; the latter always sounded several minutes after its ecclesiastical neighbour, and with a difference of note which seemed to Reardon very appropriate—a thin, querulous voice, reminding one of the community it represented. After lying awake for awhile he would hear quarters sounding; if they ceased before the fourth he was glad, for he feared to know what time it was. If the hour was complete, he waited anxiously for its number. Two, three, even four, were grateful; there was still a long time before he need rise and face the dreaded task, the horrible four blank slips of paper that had to be filled ere he might sleep again. But such restfulness was only for a moment; no sooner had the workhouse bell become silent than he began to toil in his weary imagination, or else, incapable of that, to vision fearful hazards of the future.

(Gissing, *NGS* 120-1)

I quote this passage at length to grant its cyclic presentation of anxiety full play. It is not the compounded facts of Reardon's lack of sleep, money, and will to do the work before him—all of which are plainly and frequently stated throughout the narration—that make the character of his inner and exterior life present to the reader, but their furious and repetitive mobilization: the incremental measurement of a day's work gives way to a tally of subsequent future earnings, which yields to a count of the weeks of rest and rent these earnings afford, which in turn is oppressed by the church clock whose chimes tell the closeness of the workhouse, Reardon's weariness of life, and the coming of the next day, when work resumes. In the midst and at the source of this turmoil, though visually absent because not descriptively present, is a man sitting at his desk or lying awake in the dark. This scene more generally evokes the experience, increasingly common to individuals in the West under capital, of the relentlessly dull necessity of relentlessly dull work, and extends this experience to a kind of work traditionally considered to be a craft rather than a trade. Whereas many a critic would attribute such scenes' formal airlessness and flat representational style to Gissing's own penury and limited talent, Peck asserts that "the novel itself, in its form, is the perfect illustration of the problems about novel-writing raised in the content of the novel [...], we understand Reardon through the experience of reading a work in which all the strains of writing a three-volume novel are in evidence" (147)—strains that have their source in the market pressures felt more or less universally by people of a certain class at the close of the century in Great Britain.

That form should enhance or follow from content is a modernist concern, as is the idea that the maker of the narrative is also its subject. Gissing's occasional collapse of his narrative into eddies of anxiety and doldrums stands out, not only against the conventionality of pace, plot, and characterization of the rest of the novel, but also against Victorian novelistic conventions as

a whole. Peck thus argues that *New Grub Street* is an experimental as well as a self-reflexive novel, more symbolist than Victorian realist.⁸⁹ London is comprised—of streets, traffic, buildings, parks, and fog, yes—but also of gray and draughty rooms and corridors. So many rooms and streets in a London that never sparkles or thrills with dark romance, that is full of aimless wandering or profitless sitting-still on the part of overworked, solitary characters. But what else could the metropolis be to the person who can afford only rent, and whose work to pay rent is abhorrent because tedious? Though *New Grub Street* is set in a world city, it gives the sense of never being able to access the city; in a novel about writing and publishing novels, one is conspicuously far away from the bustle of the publisher’s office. Similarly, John Goode observes that the figure of the consumer is notably absent from a novel about novelists and other writers, “for the over-whelming impression is of writers, reviewers and publishers caught in an ingrown struggle for a market which is divorced both from human effort and from human need” (131)—the effort and need seem to belong entirely to the producer, whose relationship to the market is precarious and remote, his viability far from guaranteed. Rather than articulate his principal characters’ relationships to their audience or their colleagues, Gissing often narrows his focus to the site (and often the *sight*, the act of staring at the page) of isolated and potentially fruitless intellectual toil, and so of boredom. *New Grub Street* is about production, yet set in a barren city, a contradiction that provides “a level of richness in the text which can be overlooked if one is too insistent on seeing the novel as a documentary account of literary London” (Peck 153). Peck contends that Gissing was writing something more avant-garde than the typical Victorian realist novel, though he did not understand the full extent of what he was doing: he was unable to explore, somewhat understandably given both publishers’ and libraries’ conventional

⁸⁹ Experimental, but not, as in the case of Zola’s *Experimental Novel*, based solely or primarily on documentation and objective observation.

demand for bulk, the effects paring down would have on his fiction. Gissing's loyalty to the documentarist realist mode is his conventionality and primary limitation; what distinguishes him as a realist, and what saves his writing from pure documentation, is his ability to imbue spaces, scenes, and portraits with affect.

Gissing's treatment of boredom in particular calls for closer scrutiny if we are to more precisely locate his work within the transition from Victorian to Modernist style and substance. Returning to Patricia Meyer Spacks' literary history of boredom, we are given a framework by which we might do so. Spacks traces boredom's evolution in literature from its unmentionability during the Enlightenment to its role as signal of a moral problem in the nineteenth century:

For eighteenth-century thinkers, the moral issue of boredom had concerned the obligation to interest oneself in the life beyond this world. Dr. Johnson's distaste for lethargy marked his conviction of individuals' responsibility to commit themselves to spiritual effort. To acknowledge even the possibility of boredom implies willingness to forgo such effort. Nineteenth-century writers, by contrast, conscious of the ways society forms and threatens the individual, located the moral problem of boredom firmly in the realm of daily experience, suggesting kinds of self-discipline necessary to withstand it and opposing to the flaccid state of disengagement the arduous cultivation of interest or endeavour focused not on the hereafter but on what comes to hand. (220)

Like his Victorian predecessors and contemporaries, Gissing situates boredom in the realm of daily experience and emphasizes its relationship to greater social ills; he differs, however, in that he does not articulate it as a moral problem. Surely, he acknowledges that great self-discipline may be required to withstand boredom's pull—more precisely, he acknowledges the *general*

sense that great self-discipline may be required to withstand boredom's pull. But he does not endorse the general sense, refraining from attaching a lesson to his evocation of boredom and its toll on mind and health. In this manner, he breaks from earlier authors like Dickens and Eliot, whose bored characters, as mentioned above, sport their boredom as masks and mantles until they die under its weight.⁹⁰ The absence of a lesson with regard to affect is all the more remarkable given that Edwin Reardon *does* succumb to boredom in *New Grub Street*: the tedium of writing proves too much to bear, he takes a lowly position as a hospital clerk and his wife leaves him out of shame, his health declines along with his earnings, and he dies. Or rather: there is a lesson, but it is not about the moral and physical danger of indulging one's anxieties, or that boredom marks the defeated or the boring. Gissing places the blame on societal valuation of the commercial, the now, and the new. Note how his narrator addresses a reader with typical Victorian expectations of character, motivation, and plot in this passage from *New Grub Street*:

The chances are that you have neither understanding nor sympathy for men such as Edwin Reardon [...]. They merely provoke you. They seem to you inert, flabby, weakly envious, foolishly obstinate, impiously mutinous, and many other things. You are made angrily contemptuous by their failure to get on [...]. But try to imagine a personality wholly unfitted for the rough and tumble of the world's labour-market. From the familiar point of view these men were worthless; view them in possible relation to a humane order of society, and they are admirable citizens. Nothing is easier than to condemn a type of character which is unequal to the coarse demands of life as it suits the average man [...].

⁹⁰ Relatedly, Jacob Korg in *George Gissing on Fiction* discusses Gissing's move away from earlier Victorian writers with regard to narrational style: "One of the critical issues of Victorian fiction concerned the value of extended commentary on the thoughts of characters and the moral implications of their actions which had been developed to its fullest by George Eliot. Gissing had adopted this practice in his first novels, but in the nineties a more direct, economical and objective style of narrative came into favour, and he saw the advantages of what he called a more 'dramatic' mode" (63).

You scorn their passivity; but it was their nature and their merit to be passive. (Gissing, *NGS* 425-6)

In a reversal more familiarly associated with the later half of the twentieth century, Gissing's narrator states that it is the drop-outs—the functional and affective misfits—who exhibit sanity, while the social order to which they respond is abnormal.

Certainly, this perspective was coming into being in the Victorian era, as better understanding of poor environmental and economic conditions and their effects on individuals emerged. But what is notable about Gissing's narrative aside in *New Grub Street* is that it assumes the implied reader does not share in his perspective and must be convinced that Reardon's problem is much larger than mere want of pluck. In other words, Gissing's narrator does not assume his audience to be ideologically in sync with his subject matter or its ramifications for contemporary life. Certainly, we can observe with John Goode in his introduction to the Oxford World's Classic edition of the novel that Gissing is staidly Victorian in his exploration of characters as they are affected by social, economic, and environmental change. But, as discussed in a previous section, and as Goode also points out, Gissing's assumed lack of reader sympathy for his characters shares in the sense held by many less popular, post-Victorian authors that "any transmission between the general public and serious writing was at an end" (Introduction xx). Gissing was certainly bourgeois in his high valuation of things like education, family, and work ethic, but he confronted a society structured so as to render the realization of these values difficult or impossible. Whether we look to revolution (Barthes) or Darwinism (Goode) for the cause of the disunification of the bourgeois point of view, we see that Gissing—in his use of symbolism and affectively-based realism—participates in the larger movement on the part of "serious" writers who "turned their backs on social representation and

tried instead to create a world apart (aestheticism), or a world opposed to the new reality (modernism)” (Goode, Introduction xx). Boredom is crucial to Gissing’s representation of the world and his opposition to it, and thus key to my claim that his later works are early instances of modernist literary representation.

For Spacks, the modernist turn with regard to boredom involves the mood’s presentation as “ethical sickness, its personal significance extending inevitably to the social but not only socially defined” (220). Such presentations first appear to Spacks in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, which she allies with modernist fiction for its use of boredom as a “common signifier of ethical crisis. No longer do the acts of refusal inherent in boredom necessarily mark moral inadequacy” (219). Rather, boredom’s inherent acts of refusal are ambiguously natured because they no longer presume a stably sufficient, coherent world. The titular Daniel is initially bored because he has yet to discover his life’s passion; he finds it later in the promise of a Jewish state, when his encounter with a Jewish woman reveals to him their shared heritage. The novel’s second protagonist, Gwendolen Harleth, has affected boredom for so long that she needs to learn how to show interest beyond mere self-interest. For both protagonists, their potential is neither guaranteed nor clear, and the polarity each experiences “of interest and boredom [...] elucidates the inadequacy of a social environment that no longer nourishes its participants” (Spacks 220-21). Daniel rejects the course his life first takes toward the world of gentlemanly privilege, while Gwendolen’s indulgent upbringing deprives her life of a direction other than toward marriage. Here Eliot’s approach to boredom shows her to be a proto-modernist, Spacks contends: no longer availing themselves of Victorian categories of moral failure, modernist writers raised questions about the causes and ramifications of boredom—questions like, “What does it mean to make assertion of boredom a register of discrimination, as I claimed Victorian novelists do? Can

boredom be a sign of virtue? Does it reveal its victims' mode of perception? In a society where everything is up for grabs, the nature of emotional response becomes an urgent matter. Modernist writing reflects that urgency" (219). Boredom is treated ambiguously here; its presence does not necessarily entail moral insufficiency, nor does it condemn its sufferers to death. Of course, and as I have mentioned above with regard to *Daniel Deronda*, Grandcourt's display of boredom as an ill-chosen marker of distinction is more typical of the Victorian notion of the mood: eventually, his commitment to boredom-as-superiority makes impossible any show of interest toward his wife Gwendolen—a fatal mistake if we consider that even the smallest amount of interest could have revealed the extremity of her aversion to him, an aversion that arguably costs him his life when, on their honeymoon yachting cruise, he falls into the water and drowns while she looks on, frozen by fear and the prospect of freedom. It is the class-based social environment that encourages and enables Grandcourt in his cultivation of boredom, yet it is also this society that is slowly being displaced—by industrial capital and its appurtenant social structures, certainly—but also by the sense that one is not confined to the path into which one appears to be born, for better or worse: both Daniel and Gwendolen discover that the genteelly boring lives they initially expect for themselves are not what they come to want or believe they should want. Both protagonists arrive at the rejection of boredom as only one aspect, and not the summation, of life. In Eliot's text, boredom thus presents more questions and looks forward to more possibilities than it forecloses—and, in doing so, points to a modernist reappraisal of the mood.

In Eliot's text, boredom continues to be a state to move out of, a phase in one's development toward ethical being in the world. As Spacks writes, "the obligation of attention to one another signifies the ethical" (Spacks 221); for Gissing, however, boredom is not what

forestalls the ethical. Rather, boredom signals the realization of the failure of capitalist society to bring about the ethical. Boredom, as we have seen in Gissing's narratorial aside in *New Grub Street*, is the default state of the meekly virtuous, those few who refuse or otherwise fail to be grabby "in a society where everything is up for grabs"—in brief, it is a substitute for the ethical, its placeholder. Accordingly, Reardon's recurrent sense of tedium in his work is related to his inability to clearly imagine his readers. Or rather, he can imagine them, but only in the context of his failure to communicate himself: worn out by the work of writing, he is no longer capable of a masterpiece, and the printed page obscures the pain behind its own production. "What hellish torment it was to write that page!" Reardon cries upon leafing through his latest published novel; "And to think that people will skim over it without a suspicion of what it cost the writer!—What execrable style!" (Gissing, *NGS* 201). Reardon mourns his lack of connection to his reader, a connection made impossible by circumstances that require he write beneath his intellect and talent. His wife Amy attempts to boost his confidence, asserting, "Yours is the kind of face that people come to know in portraits" and, referring to his latest novel's production values, "It doesn't look like a book that fails" (Gissing, *NGS* 198, 200). But from her comments, we understand Amy's idea of connection to be purely visual, based on mutable surface sheen, whereas Reardon's connections emanate from an immutable intellectual core. Reardon tells his wife he doesn't balk at producing sensational fiction for the sake of his reputation, but shrinks from "conscious insincerity of workmanship" (53); he hates his work not because he resents the public whose taste demands it, but because appealing to public taste entails dishonest self-presentation.

His friend and foil Jasper Milvain, on the other hand, is quick to affirm that writing is a trade, and is therefore deemed “A Man of His Day” by the narrator. Naming the distinctions between Reardon and himself for the benefit of his family, Jasper opens the novel by stating,

'He is the old type of unpractical artist; I am the literary man of 1882. He won't make concessions, or rather, he can't make them; he can't supply the market [...]. Reardon [...] sells a manuscript as if he lived in Sam Johnson's Grub Street. But our Grub Street of to-day is quite a different place: it is supplied with telegraphic communication, it knows what literary fare is in demand in every part of the world, its inhabitants are men of business, however seedy.' (Gissing, *NGS* 8-9)

When Milvain's sister Maud objects that his attitude will result in the churn of “worthless” material, Milvain coolly replies, “No; you'll probably make it worth a guinea or so” (388).

Literary men in Milvain's vein envision their audience, insofar as Gissing is concerned, all too clearly and opportunistically. This audience is thoroughly modern in its participation in the kind of “moral inertness” that Patricia Spacks attributes to T. S. Eliot's Doris in “Sweeney Agonistes”: “At least Grandcourt [...] demonstrate[s] highly developed consciousness. Grandcourt knows exactly what he is doing to Gwendolen [...]. Doris knows nothing, except that she needs distraction” (235). While Spacks asserts that characters such as Doris were “not imaginable fifty years before,” Gissing's *New Grub Street* abounds with them, though they are unnamed and faceless, the anonymous masses for whom one must write in order to have a chance at making a writer's living (235). For Gissing, the writer who successfully adapts to the mass audience is necessarily a contortionist, capable of disassembling and reassembling his goals, creeds, and styles to whatever plays well to audience demand. He accepts the very fragmentation his work fosters in culture by indulging his readers' taste for the trivial, the

diverting, and the short-lived. As fellow Grub Streeter of His Day, Mr. Whelpdale, says, the successful writer provides not substance but “bits of stories, bits of description, bits of scandal, bits of jokes, bits of statistics, bits of foolery” (460); otherwise, the reading public will lose interest. But uninterest, Gissing argues through Reardon, is the appropriate attitude toward the impoverished cultural environment, an attitude all the more crucial going forward as increasingly massive audiences are pandered to with an equally increasing array of diversions.

Gissing does not discommend bored, passive affect in *New Grub Street* as Dickens does in *Bleak House* or as Eliot does in *Daniel Deronda*—he does not present the mood as one that distances the individual from the human community. The human community is estranged from itself by its own social—which is to say, economic—order. Certainly, moralism is still present in Gissing, but not the moralism of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that would warn one away from the quirks, the singular deficiencies, of the self. In the face of the fracturing forces of economic necessity, the self is the only refuge, however feeble. Gissing uses representations of boredom as he “turns away from the moral realism of mid-Victorian fiction, to explore a more frightening, more impersonal world. In the next section, however, I will explore how Gissing softens his approach to boredom in a later novel, *In the Year of Jubilee*. In this work, written a mere three years after *New Grub Street*, Gissing values boredom in similar but more subtle ways: still a distinguishing feature of his protagonist, boredom is investigated and valued as an abiding potentiality and sign of depth rather than as a capitulationist position.

In the Year of Jubilee

One has greater difficulty in finding *New Grub Street*'s post-moral realism in Gissing's later novel, *In the Year of Jubilee*, though a similar use of affective states and symbolism obtains. For, in *Jubilee*, the narrator more frequently asserts himself as a corrective and often disapproving voice, so that the reader encounters the female protagonist's fleeting fascinations with culture—and, more generally, what women are alleged to be fascinated with—through notes of disdain. Peck observes that Gissing's narrators often do not harmonize well with his preference for lower- to middle-class subjects; consequently “the unfortunate result for Gissing is that he might appear to be an awful snob” (145). While it is true that Gissing's snobbery in *Jubilee* is grating, I contend that his use of boredom works against its censure. The result is a novel in which the tensions between tradition and popular culture are explored, in the narrative but also in the equally tense relationship of the narrator to his subjects. The former's disapproving and frankly intrusive voice is subsumed by the protagonist's emerging ability to contemplate her position in society and culture, an ability that is prepared for in states of boredom, inattention, and dissatisfaction with her milieu.

We will return to Gissing's grumpiness. First, though, we must discuss the ways in which boredom is not as overt a theme in *Jubilee*'s narrative as it is in that of *New Grub Street*. While *New Grub Street* deploys the mood to flag its protagonists' suffering and to provide a plot that is often emotion- rather than action-based, *In the Year of Jubilee* grants boredom only a fleeting and understated presence. In *Jubilee*, boredom and inattention occur conspicuously as the affective complement to reading: boredom either motivates or requires reading so that the diegetic reader may escape its fatiguing hold, or holds as the mode in which the diegetic reading takes place. In Gissing's late-century, middle-class Britain, the mood is no longer the scene of

distinction and crisis that it was for Gautier's and later Flaubert's characters; rather, it is a fixture of popular and especially domestic life, acknowledged as a wrinkle familiar to the fabric of the everyday, and thus—Gissing would have us understand—the regular occasion for a variety of diversions only too happily supplied by the burgeoning culture industry. Certainly, the Jubilee is the crowning diversion in *In the Year of Jubilee*, but the raucous vibrations of its masses and spectacles by no means drown out the subtler, sustained notes of common, often domestic leisure—the very notes with which Gissing tends to introduce his characters and with which he most comprehensively scores the spaces in which they move. His scenes of reading make legible life's subtler textures, inviting the extra-diegetic reader to think through mass culture's effects upon the acculturated reading subject. Gissing thereby invites his reader to reflect upon the character who reads, and upon the social, economic, and cultural grounds of reading.

Gissing extends this invitation immediately in *Jubilee*, opening it, similarly to *New Grub Street*, with a scene of morning reading. We are introduced to the lower-middle-class Peachey household, occupied by Arthur Peachey, the junior partner in a disinfectant-manufacturing firm; his wife, Ada; and her unmarried sisters Beatrice and Fanny French. Gissing characteristically qualifies the Peachey home with an account of its readers and their readings:

The only books in the room were a few show-volumes, which belonged to Arthur Peachey, and half-a-dozen novels of the meaner kind, wherewith Ada sometimes beguiled her infinite leisure. But on tables and chairs lay scattered a multitude of papers: illustrated weeklies, journals of society, cheap miscellanies, penny novelettes, and the like. At the end of the week, when new numbers came in, Ada Peachey passed many hours upon her sofa, reading instalments of a dozen serial stories, paragraphs relating to fashion, sport, the theatre, answers to correspondents (wherein she especially delighted),

columns of facetiae, and gossip about notorious people. Through a great deal of this matter Beatrice followed her, and read much besides in which Ada took no interest; she studied a daily newspaper, with special note of law suits, police intelligence, wills, bankruptcies, and any concern, great or small, wherein money played a part. (*IYJ* 5)

Legibility of this middle-class domicile lies in its reading materials: the head of the household values the display of presumably higher-brow volumes, indicating at least his grasp of the high cultural imperative to cultivate the self through reading. His wife, however, does not share his attitude, and, along with her sisters, typifies the products of what Gissing refers to as “sham education and mock refinement” (*IYJ* 7). Gissing explains that the ladies’ choice of reading material follows from their schooling at several “establishment[s] for young ladies” where they had pursued various pretensions—including the ability to say they had “‘done’ Political Economy” or “‘been through’ Inorganic Chemistry and Botany,” that they “could ‘play the piano’” and “‘knew French’”—with the upshot that “they used a finer accent than their servants, signif[ying] only that they had grown up amid falsities, and were enabled, by the help of money, to dwell above-stairs, instead of with their spiritual kindred below” (Gissing, *IYJ* 7). It is no surprise, then, that their “meaner” reading serves the dubious end of killing time rather than the more respectable ends of self-improvement and cultural exposure—ends that their educational programs neglected to advance as crucial to a fulfilled life—while show-volumes flag the family’s educational and thus class status—class status becoming increasingly a matter of the class to which one can demonstrate one belongs.

Accordingly, the Peacheys fit the common picture of respectability, and this picture’s duplicity gets at the heart of Gissing’s cultural anxiety. Especially for one as institutionally- and fervently self-educated as George Gissing, reading indicated cultural and moral improvement.

The Peachey's reading materials, however, trouble these associations by their fragmented, abundant, and disposable nature. Their variety—"a multitude of papers" in several genres—is remarkable, and yet Gissing concludes his catalogue of the Peachey's periodicals with "and the like," suggesting that the variety is only a veneer for the dull similitude that unites them under the heading of mass literature. Likewise, Gissing hints at the brevity of time each item requires, noting that Ada Peachey spends hours "reading *instalments* of a *dozen* serial stories, *paragraphs* relating to" all manner of subjects, "*answers* to correspondents [...], *columns* of facetiae," and gossip. Here Ada lends name and face to the mass readership characterized in *New Grub Street* as anonymous, her reading material resembles the "bits of stories, bits of description, bits of scandal, bits of jokes, bits of statistics, bits of foolery" described by Whelpdale: at no point do any of these items require sustained attention or further thought—stationary as she is, the reader is neither invited nor inspired to dwell within her reading and so moves on to the next of many pieces scattered about the living room. That the pieces are scattered renders tangible the sense that the material must be moved through ("Through a great deal of this matter Beatrice followed her"), and Gissing twice refers to Ada's use of reading as a sort of temporal vehicle, by means of which she advances through infinitely extensive domestic time ("wherewith Ada sometimes beguiled her infinite leisure"; "Ada Peachey passed many hours upon her sofa, reading instalments of a dozen serial stories"). Upward economic mobility—outwardly indicated in the Peachey's move from Camberwell Road to De Crespigny Park—is reinforced through a similar yet ongoing process of cultural movement, in both the singular "going through" of courses at young ladies' educational establishments and the continual rotation of mass literature through their home. Gissing's anxieties over the Peachey's reading habits are thus very much anxieties of class mobility and appearances, particularly concerning the ways in which class status

becomes unhinged from traditions of education and self-cultivation. Where reading should signify sustained attention—and this attention should signify a larger, sustained program of self-improvement and edification—the Peachey’s printed matter attests to their fragmented attendance to ephemera, which nonetheless proclaims itself as the product of cultivation and respectability.

Gissing anxieties over inattention—and his formulation of the Peachey’s shortcomings explicitly in terms of inattention rather than boredom—situates him firmly in his scientific-historical milieu. As Jonathan Crary contends in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, ideas of perception and its relationship to the subject had been shifting throughout the nineteenth century, finally undergoing a “generalized crisis” in its last two decades (2). According to Crary, ideas of perception shifted from a primarily optical, Kantian paradigm in which models of vision are “predicated on the self-presence of the world to an observer and on the instantaneity and atemporal nature of perception,” to one in which perception was understood to be “conditioned by physical and psychological temporalities and processes, provid[ing] at most a provisional, shifting approximation of its objects” (4). This shift places the onus of profitably directed attention upon the individual perceiver. Couple this new understanding of perception’s “provisional, shifting” hold of the perceived world with Gissing and others’ further mistrust of the average, quarter-educated yet upwardly mobile perceiver, and we have a degraded perceptual loop: a faulty perceiver directing faltering attention, thereby constructing a world of incongruities all the more haphazard because unperceived as such. Gissing describes several of his characters according in this confused state, none with more force of contempt than Samuel Barnby, an aspiring bourgeois and man-of-the-times. Gissing writes: “Save for Pilgrim’s Progress and Robinson Crusoe, he had read no English classic; since

boyhood, indeed, he had probably read no book at all, for much diet of newspapers rendered him all but incapable of sustained attention” (*IYJ* 214). Consequently, Barmby’s “mind was packed with the oddest jumble of incongruities” (214), such that it resembles their source—variety papers, “columns of facetiae,” serial instalments, and so on. Perhaps if Barmby (and, by extension, the Peacheys) could muster the inner resources to sit down with *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, or other hearty English classics, they would strengthen their aptitudes for paying attention and gird their minds with more coherent formulations of the world. Gissing’s complaint is perhaps not—at least, not in total—that naturally inferior people like the Peacheys ascend to middle-class respectability and bring their print trash with them; it is rather that the social (which very much includes the physical) environment is too poor and invested in the ephemeral to yield anything but rubbish. Hearty English classics are available for the taking to any reader desirous of them, but mass culture and its attendant emphasis on appearances and the current relentlessly subvert such experiences. It is in the mere inhabitation of culture that one risks internal incongruity, or separation from the anchoring attentional node traditionally understood as the self.

In the face of these brute environmental facts stands Gissing’s protagonist, Nancy Lord. While seldom explicitly critical of her cultural environment—she, too, lacks the distance and historical awareness required—Miss Lord exhibits a mix of observation and suspension of judgment and affect that contrasts both the avid consumption of culture practiced by the sisters French and the narrator’s critically aware voice. In an exemplary passage, Nancy rides the omnibus to the Jubilee celebrations; trying to avoid the conversation of Samuel Barmby, her parentally-appointed and long-winded chaperone, she reads the advertisements along the top of the vehicle: “Somebody’s ‘Blue;’ somebody’s ‘Soap;’ somebody’s ‘High-class Jams;’ and behold,

inserted between the Soap and the Jam—'God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoso believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' Nancy perused the passage without perception of incongruity, without emotion of any kind" (Gissing, *IYJ* 60-1). If we expect to find in Nancy a more alert and discerning reader than her female contemporaries, we will be disappointed. Rather, her consideration of the advertisements betrays a dual laziness: she attends to them such that their content can only be imperfectly narrated, and this lazy attention doubles as tactical inattention to her prospective suitor Barmby. She is not, in other words, of a mind with the all-too-attentive narrator, whose distaste for the juxtaposition of the commercial and the sacred is evident both in his hyperbole ("and behold") and in his subsequent observation of Nancy's emotionless and uncritical perusal.

Such observations infuse this scene of reading with the narrator's frustration and cultural anxiety. In them, however, we find something redeeming about Miss Lord and her negligence, as well as something that transcends Gissing's own dour attitude toward his historical moment. For, unlike the scene set in the Peachey household, this scene of reading features neither avid consumption nor passive reception. Rather than display reading as a means of escaping boredom, it shows boredom to be the mode in which reading takes place. What are the ramifications for Gissing of the latter sort of reading? To answer this question, we must first note that the two responses recorded in the passage—Nancy's negligent gaze and the critical gaze of the narrator—are not the gazes that the cultural environment wants. Where the advertisements wish to sell products and save souls, their incongruous relationship to each other and presence as background to an awkward social situation, prevent them from doing either. The narrator notices what Nancy does not—namely, the mutual contradiction of the messages: the eternal persistence of the soul versus the paradigmatically ephemeral announcement of

“Somebody’s something-or-other.” The tension created by this juxtaposition parallels that presented in Barmby, who, as the suitor preferred by Nancy’s father, stands as the customary path forward for a young unmarried woman as well as a reminder of her reluctance at its prospect. And yet, Nancy’s inattention demonstrates the possibility of living alongside these tensions while suspending their claims. Such is the fabric of the everyday: it is a fabric that worries the wearer but that can nevertheless be neglected, and thus pushed into the background with the proper (in)attention. In a situation such as Nancy’s, inattention becomes a resourceful ambivalence rather than (or in addition to) a sign of passivity, receptivity, and manipulability. While culture demands that we “move through” its forms in order to be legible as active participants, that we desire and undergo the appropriate transformations to meet these demands, inattention ignores (which, here, is also to say acknowledges) their presence. Nancy’s inattention works to preservative effect, successfully suspending the claims of suitor, advertiser, and proselytizer alike, thus granting herself a needful measure of quiet in a public space, as well as in anticipation of the Jubilee. In addition, this scene of reading contains a counter-narrative to that which positions woman as consummate consumer, and to that which presumes her highest goals in life to be marriage and family. Despite the narrator’s irritability, Nancy’s inattention shows, in sum, a measured because negligent response to societal and cultural hubbub, one more robust than the despair-inflected boredom of *New Grub Street*’s Edwin Reardon.

In other instances, however, inattention or distraction signal greater consideration of contemporary culture and its implications. Such states are central to the protagonists of Gissing’s novels of the middle class, and so the author introduces Miss Lord in one:

This afternoon—it was Monday—she could not occupy or amuse herself in any of the familiar ways. Perhaps the atmosphere of national Jubilee had a disturbing effect upon

her,—in spite of her professed disregard for the gathering tumult of popular enthusiasm. She had not left home to-day, and the brilliant weather did not tempt her forth. On the table lay a new volume from the circulating library,—something about Evolution,—but she had no mind to read it; it would have made her too conscious of the insincerity with which she approached such profound subjects. For a quarter of an hour and more she had stood at the window, regarding a prospect, now as always, utterly wearisome and depressing to her. (*IYJ* 12-13)

In contrast to the passage cited previously, Nancy's inattention is neither strategic nor performed in relation to another actor's moves; however, it does point out the ground of her particular socio-economic situation. A publicly-educated woman of the growing middle class, she stands as a representative figure of the era, an embodiment of the inherent complications of the issues Gissing takes up in the novel. Like the French sisters, Nancy fosters cultural pretensions that she in fact has "no mind" for. But unlike the French sisters, lack of ability is a source of concern for Nancy, a fact signaled by the object of her gaze—this depressing "prospect" is Camberwell, a dreary south London suburb and the place where, regrettably, she has spent most of her life. Between longing for the raucous Jubilee and aiming for self-improvement, wanting to stay indoors and weariness of place, Nancy complements the incongruity of this "bit of London which does not keep pace with the times" with her own ambivalence (Gissing, *IYJ* 13). Here as in the previously cited passages, ambivalence leads to stasis either emotional ("without emotion of any kind") or physical ("For a quarter of an hour and more she had stood at the window").

Again, Nancy's stasis is not passive but rather evidences the holding pattern she occupies in relation to the plot that is to come—or, what is very much the same thing, in relation to her position as a single, educated woman in late-nineteenth-century British society. As she stands at

the window, Nancy contemplates, or forbids contemplating, the changes in her life that will come and that clearly must come—clearly, because this is the scene and scene of reading that opens the novel, one in which the protagonist is first given as restless and bored, her familiar occupations and amusements no longer soliciting her attention. All that is familiar seems dreary, and yet her gazing at dreary prospects seems to put off the prospect of change suggested by the topic of her neglected book—“something about Evolution,” the narrator tells us through the haze of Nancy’s inattention. Whereas the Peacheys and Frenchs throw themselves into the social and economic transformations brought on by Arthur’s unmerited promotion, Nancy Lord is troubled by her own insincerity and inauthenticity should she pursue similar changes. Looking out at her bleak native environs, she longs for an advance in status and cultural mobility: indeed, this is what all of *Jubilee*’s characters are after in their various ways. However, the idea of transcending her environs gives her pause. In this scene of (not) reading, significantly, the protagonist is marked and identified not simply by her appearance at the novel’s inception, nor by her desire for social advancement, but by this pause at the threshold of advancement and change. It is in the pause—one that both postpones and brings on the plot—that Nancy is distinguished as the character closest to Gissing’s sympathy, or as having the greatest potential for garnering it.

Like her neglect of the autobus advertisements, the pause shows Nancy to be not quite melded to her milieu. Though the narrator is critical of Nancy’s seeming lack of criticality and attention, I contend that where the narrator flashes his disapproval—also where his protagonist seems to be indulging in a slack state of mind—is precisely where we must look for something redeeming in his characters and in his novel. Pushing past disagreeable, irksome, and often misogynistic narration is and should be recognized as crucial to the project of Gissing Studies.

Gissing is often boring, but, more to the point, he is hard to like—particularly in these moments when the narrator’s impatience betrays the author’s distaste for his historical and cultural moment. It is necessary, then, to countenance the unlikeable and the irritating from the beginning, and, rather than dismiss these features as evidence of Gissing’s artistic weakness, find to what more meaningful and recuperative insights they might point.

Let us proceed directly to the novel’s more challenging episodes, in which the narrator’s voice takes on its most intrusively critical tones. Even there, we may locate the protagonist’s potentiality. Though the narrator finds fault in Nancy’s moments of pause and neglect, he is much harsher, anxious, and exasperated when Nancy succeeds in “losing herself”—and all of her inattentional reticence—to her milieu. The first such instance occurs, predictably, in the throngs of the Jubilee. Surrounded by the crowd, Nancy’s enjoyment betrays neither ambivalence nor hesitation. Gissing writes, “Nancy forgot her identity, lost sight of herself as an individual. Her blood was heated by close air and physical contact. She did not think, and her emotions differed little from those of any shop-girl let loose. The ‘culture,’ to which she laid claim, evanesced in this atmosphere of exhalations. Could she have seen her face, its look of vulgar abandonment would have horrified her” (*IYJ* 68-9). Nancy, Gissing seems to say, should be ashamed of herself—and would be, were she in her right senses. Vulgar abandonment, or merging with the masses, obliterates for a time the middling capacity Nancy has demonstrated for thought, reflection, and remove, thereby distinguishing this capacity as important and present overall. Another, more subtle instance of the narrator’s displeasure occurs when he records Nancy’s reaction to her family’s increased material means. Her father appoints a housekeeper, freeing Nancy to pursue her own leisure with the Peachey family: “Thus, by aid of circumstance, had she put herself into complete accord with the spirit of her time. Abundant privilege; no obligation.

A reference of all things to her sovereign will and pleasure. Withal, a defiant rather than a hopeful mood; resentment of the undisguisable fact that her will was sovereign only in a poor little sphere which she would gladly have transcended” (Gissing, *IYJ* 96). In both instances, the author’s frustration flares at the total relinquishment of self to the overheated, unintelligent, and self-interested spirit of her time, a spirit too sickly to fulfill or fully animate its host. Her union with this spirit is fickle, for, even at the Jubilee, her “vulgar abandonment” to the crowd gives way to a powerful sense of towering above it as she scales a festival monument. There, “untouched by the voices of the past, and in the present seeing only common things [...], her senses seemed to make literal the assumption by which her mind had always been directed: that she—Nancy Lord—was the mid point of the universe” (Gissing, *IYJ* 104). Rather than meld with her surroundings, the narrator wishes that Nancy would harbor a sense of self not subject to the vagaries of circumstance—that she be one for whom “close air and physical contact” are no guarantors of frivolous conduct, or a precipitous prospect the instigator of megalomania. This wish is also a wish for her evolution: that she become better adapted and thus inured to the phantasmagorical nature of her cultural moment so as to be able to have more than a merely reactive life—more than the life steeped in and formed by culture, as typified by Samuel Barmby and the French sisters (Nancy, the narration tells us, wishes the same: “she wished to live, and not merely to vegetate” (Gissing, *IYJ* 14)). This is not to suggest that Nancy should pick up her neglected book on evolution, nor even that she be of a mind to read and understand it; Gissing trusts Nancy’s natural solitude and level gaze at the drear of Camberwell, and it is in these unremarkable attributes and instances that we invest as readers, and in which Gissing, however grumpily, invites us to read the potential of character and novel.

Gissing's novels, as Peter Brooks points out, are those of "middling experience," encompassing the rather unremarkable and often tedious lives of the majority of city-dwellers (*Realist Vision* 142). In *The Year of Jubilee*, the narrator's irritation with Nancy is directed at the middling character of her experience, but it is also the way in which her experience does not quite align with the middle that makes her important, as well as the fact that this margin of disalignment is slim. Nancy is not so very different from the people among her acquaintance, but she is different nonetheless. Her difference first manifests as a certain slackness of attention, a giving of herself over to her boredom—in brief, nothing terribly remarkable, or nothing that, on the surface, is radically different from the French sisters' engagement with their reading material. In contrast, however, Nancy's suspensions of engagement with others or with the plot's subtly present demands (that she vow to overcome her circumstances, that she entertain Barmby as a suitor) change during the course of the novel into desires that can be articulated, acted upon, and even inscribed into her own novel, significantly distinguishing Nancy from her cohort.

This cohort maintains an idea of mass culture in relation to which one is passive and receptive rather than active and critical. The Peacheys, as we have seen, allow mass print culture to order their time and define their interests, and Gissing provides further examples in the figures of Nancy's initially preferred suitor, Luckworth Crewe, and her friend, Jessica Morgan. Crewe is an entrepreneur scheming to cash in on the Jubilee celebrations; as he tells Nancy, advertising is the surest way to profit, but also the only way that humans learn what to do with themselves: "How could we have become what we are without the modern science and art of advertising? [...] Do you suppose people kept themselves clean before they were reminded at every corner of the benefits of soap? Do you suppose they were healthy before every wall and hoarding told them what medicine to take for their ailments?" (Gissing, *IYJ* 74). If we substitute Crewe's

claims about “modern science” for claims about man’s evolution, we see suggested a purely reactive model of human progress: man adapts to his environment’s demands upon him.

Nancy’s friend Jessica Morgan, on the other hand, nominally rejects contemporary culture, but as a means of falling in line with its imperative for social equality between the sexes. Another instantiation of the sort of literary “vegetation” that women practice with regard to their reading material, Jessica Morgan devours books in the hopes of entering University on her merits as a scholar. The narrator’s disdain is unambiguous:

She talked only of the 'exam,' of her chances in this or that 'paper,' of the likelihood that this or the other question would be 'set.' Her brain was becoming a mere receptacle for dates and definitions, vocabularies and rules syntactic, for thrice-boiled essence of history, ragged scraps of science, quotations at fifth hand, and all the heterogeneous rubbish of a 'crammer's' shop. When away from her books, she carried scraps of paper, with jottings to be committed to memory. Beside her plate at meals lay formulae and tabulations. She went to bed with a manual and got up with a compendium. (Gissing, *IYJ* 17)

The narrator is palpably disturbed that Miss Morgan, earlier described as “a ghost of girlhood, a dolorous image of frustrate sex,” has so completely traded her health and sexual potential for popular culture’s “jumble of incongruities” (Gissing, *IYJ* 16). Rather than preparing herself to fulfill the traditional roles of wife and mother—roles that Gissing himself perceived, and mourned, the loss of⁹¹—Jessica makes herself into the receptacle of fruitless bits of knowledge in

⁹¹ Gissing shares his sense of women’s proper path to something like social equality with men, at least insofar as education is concerned, in *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*. Referring to Dickens’ *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Gissing writes, “There are who surmise that in the far-off time when girls are universally well-taught, when it is the exception to meet, in any class, with the maiden or the wife who deems herself a natural inferior of brother, lover, husband, the homely virtues of Ruth Pinch will be even more highly rated than in the stupid old world [...]; that the

much the same way as Barmby and the French sisters. There is nothing in her description that shares in Gissing's own robust joy in learning, as exemplified by Reardon in *New Grub Street*—nothing of learning as a social language or positively transformative pursuit. Jessica's mania for accumulating facts is *deformative*, mere dogma, and, as such, quite seamlessly transitions by the end of the novel into denunciatory Christian evangelism.

Of course, Gissing's example in Jessica Morgan is frustrating if not infuriating to today's reader, for implied in it is that, were she a man pursuing the same goals in the same manner, she would be neither physically nor socially diminished. Rather, she would be, at worst, a self-satisfied idiot and "[wo]man of the times" in the style of Samuel Barmby. But neither person is desirable, as indicated by the narrator's scathing treatment of both. What is crucial to Gissing is the sense that the popular cultural sphere is not worthwhile because trivial, incoherent, and wrong-headed. Crucial, too, is his choice of a female protagonist who is contrastingly free of dogma and able to make decisions for herself without the external prompt of advertisements or other cultural ephemera—she barely takes note of them. Another objection to Gissing's contrast of Jessica Morgan to Nancy Lord is that it is certainly easier to think independently when one is free from financial woe, unlike Miss Morgan who serves as governess—a thankless and exhausting job in Gissing's novels—for the grandchildren of a dowager. Despite the fact that the narrator shows neither sensitivity to nor sympathy for Jessica's way of being, the reader may nonetheless understand that, dependent on none but her own meager resources, Jessica's financial desperation begets her fanaticism and blights her character. That her dire

lady of a hundred years hence will be much more competent and active in cares domestic than the average shopkeeper's wife today; that it may not be found impossible to turn from a page of Sophocles to the boiling of a potato, or even the scrubbing of a floor. When every spendthrift idiot of a mistress, and every lying lazybones of a kitchen-wench, is swept into Time's dust-bin, it may come to pass that a race of brave and intelligent women will smile sister-like at this portrait of little Ruth [...]; no startling innovation, no extravagant idealism, but a gentle insistence on the facts of human nature, a kindly glorifying of one humble little woman, who saw her duty and did it singing the while" (Gissing 192-3).

circumstances are present in the narration shows Gissing's material consciousness; by focusing on a more financially secure and thus empowered woman character, Gissing is more able to explore the attitudes and choices of an educated, independent woman of the middle class.

It is these aspects of Nancy's character that we might be tempted to ignore, however, when confronted with sentences infused with Gissing's notions of women's inherent irrationality, sentences like, "[Nancy] looked up, and commanded her features to the expression which makes whatever woman lovely—that of rational acquiescence. On the faces of most women such look is never seen" (Gissing, *IYJ* 413). It is certainly galling to entertain the idea that a woman's "loveliness" depends on the extent to which she seconds her (male) companion's statements, and more galling still that this remark precedes such unreflective male-centric observations of the relations between the sexes as, "Infidelity in a woman is much worse than in a man," and "True, I am your superior in force of mind and force of body. Don't you like to hear that? Doesn't it do you good—when you think of the maudlin humbug generally talked by men to women?" (Gissing, *IYJ* 414). These words are spoken to Nancy by Lionel Tarrant, the man she privately marries after their chance tryst results in her pregnancy. But while we may wish to reject such a character as chauvinist, or dismiss Gissing's protagonist for her acquiescence, we must consider the context of these statements, including what we have already discussed concerning Nancy's aptitude for boredom and the ersatz criticality it affords her in relation to both tradition and commercial culture. Nancy meets Tarrant through Jessica Morgan, as he is the grandson of her dowager employer and stands to inherit a fortune. His additional attractions, as far as Nancy is concerned, are his Oxford education and apparent refinement, in relation to which she feels—perhaps all too alluringly—inferior. Her sense of being a high-cultural imposter in his company, coupled with her inference that he enjoyed the attentions of women

below his station, lead her to seduce him while they both happen to be vacationing in Teignmouth. They marry, but their marriage is not made public and Nancy delivers the baby in seclusion. Tarrant's inheritance being much smaller than he had reason to suspect, he accepts a job offering in the Bahamas, leaving Nancy to support herself with money from her own inheritance. After a stint in the Bahamas, Tarrant moves to New York and ceases writing to her. Rather than slip into the depths of despair, Nancy comes to enjoy her independence, her sense of it shaped anew by Tarrant's departure and negligence.

Absence and negligence aside, perhaps there is something to Tarrant's later insistence that callous and sexist statements and behaviors are to be preferred over "the maudlin humbug generally talked by men to women," since the former make plain the emotional distance between man and woman, and, in this case, between husband and wife, father and mother. It is this plainness that refines Nancy's aptitude for remove and consideration into independent action. Once her baby is delivered and at her home in Camberwell, she is surprised to become "conscious of a personal freedom not unlike what she had vainly desired in the days of petulant girlhood; the sense came only at moments, but was real and precious; under its influence she forgot everything abnormal in her situation, and—though without recognising this significance—knew the exultation of a woman who has justified her being" (Gissing, *IYJ* 276). Life, Gissing writes, had a savor for her "independent of the timorous joy born with her child" (*IYJ* 276). She develops a habit of going for long walks, and makes a first and then a second attempt at a novel based on her fraught marriage to Tarrant. In the meantime, Tarrant returns from New York and reestablishes contact: he is ready to assume his duties toward her and their child—including making public their marriage—but with the provision that, for the sake of their mutual happiness, they do not live together. Nancy's entreaties for cohabitation are met with Tarrant's almost

religious conviction that cohabitation is the source of all marital woes. Though his position, when seen in the light of his notion of women's innate unreasonableness, strikes us as transparently self-serving, Tarrant's prolonged postponement of family life also throws Nancy upon her own already sturdy resources, reconfirming them. In the crucible of experience, she forms a solid perspective of her relationship to women's roles in society—one with broader reach and richer implications than the unconsidered, reactive empowerment induced by the dizzying heights of the Jubilee monument. Living independently, Nancy resumes work on her novel—lately put aside at Tarrant's gentle insistence that it is good, but only in “a private sense; a domestic sense” (Gissing, *IYJ* 427)—and begins to think in earnest about the inequitable limitations placed upon her sex. Though she can't help but believe that women are appointed by "Nature's law" to "be the slave of husband and children," she recognizes, however reluctantly, that money can change this circumstance; others can be hired to play the “slave” in her stead,

'and the thought has made me far more contented than I was at first [...]. Now, I have brains, and I should like to use them; but Nature says that's not so important as bringing up the little child to whom I have given life. One thought that troubles me is, that every generation of women is sacrificed to the generation that follows; and of course that's why women are so inferior to men. But then again, Nature says that women are born *only* to be sacrificed [...] [t]o think what they *might* have done in the best years of their life.'

(Gissing, *IYJ* 404-5)

Tethered to Gissing's own sense of woman's role in a changing society, this set of musings does not go as far as modern readers may require in order to concede the liberation of their speaker. However, we must not ignore Gissing's ability, as Virginia Woolf observed, to endow his characters with thought—to take his characters beyond the simplicities of character. To return to

Woolf's statement, "to think is to become complex; it is to overflow boundaries, to cease to be a 'character', to merge one's private life in the life of politics or art or ideas, to have relationships based partly on them, and not on sexual desire alone. The impersonal side of life is given its due place in the scheme" ("George Gissing"). Tarrant's emotional and financial unreliability, the growing availability of economic opportunities to women, and—most importantly—Nancy's critical relationship to her milieu and the quality of her mind make her into a character whose interests and occupations are much broader than "sexual desire alone," and as such are much immune to the "maudlin humbug" that would plague the female protagonists of other novels, *Emma Bovary* being the paradigm.

Nancy is immune to humbug, and open to many things else, even if her attention is on occasion mercifully deficient. It is this openness—or Gissing's construction, however crotchety, of Nancy as a thinking person—that enables her to "rationally acquiesce" to Tarrant's proposal that they live separately though joined in marriage. What he proposes is not the idealized, cohabitational, and romantic marriage of popular representation that Nancy has wanted, but the mutually independent relationship that she has come to want. In this passage, Tarrant lists the advantages of such an arrangement:

When you have friends of your own, social engagements, interests on every hand, I shall be able to go my own way without a pang of conscience. When we come together, it will be to talk of your affairs as well as of mine. Living as you do now, you have nothing on earth but the baby to think about—a miserable state of things for a woman with a mind. I know it is miserable, and I'm struggling tooth and nail to help you out of it.' (Gissing, *IYJ* 412)

Though it may be that Tarrant could use to have a “pang of conscience” or two about his past treatment of his wife and the mother of his child, what he wants is no less than what Nancy has already discovered she desires for herself.⁹²

Gissing depicts a strong female protagonist in a marital arrangement that challenge mores and grants women an unprecedented degree of freedom and self-determination—a marriage of marriage and mutual independence—even if he states the obstacle to such arrangements is the “fact” that women, on average, are unable to command themselves enough to be the intellectual and emotional equals of men. Above all, Nancy is independent, and in a novel in which the greatest peril to the individual is the loss of self—to cultural ephemera, to a lousy marriage partner, to various orthodoxies, or to the pursuit of status. Nancy’s proclivity for boredom, the subject of so much narrational censure, are what mark her nevertheless as beside and apart from the common fray. From the opening page, her boredom renders her more central to the novel—which is to say, more interesting—than those characters whose interests are pronounced, zealous, and shallow. Nancy’s disinterest discloses her potential in the widest possible sense, her ability to consider all things and to be permeated by none, and to remain autonomous, flexible, and thoughtful: a removed and stable point from which to observe and understand other characters and the world’s goings-on. As is evidenced in Gautier’s *Madelaine* and Flaubert’s accounts of his own creative process, boredom can operate as the promise of one’s own potential. Though Nancy will not become a cross-dressing Moll, nor (we assume) will she change the state of literature with her book, her potential is subtle, the guarantee of a thinking life. Thus Nancy is

⁹² It is perhaps this process of self-discovery that the passage following Tarrant’s proposal temporarily obliterates with its smug attribution of rationality to the male sex. But this is Gissing’s attribution, a not uncommon reaction for his time, and one that, as numerous biographical scholars have remarked, is in keeping with his own blighted romantic history.

able to make, as Woolf puts out, “a reasoned view of life” from her suffering as woman, wife, and mother (“George Gissing”).

V. Conclusion

Closing his chapter on representations of the nineteenth-century city in Balzac, Zola, and Gissing in *Realist Vision*, Peter Brooks lingers over a passage from the second half of *In the Year of Jubilee*, in which Nancy walks through outer London to clear her mind of her absentee husband:

It was one of those cold, dry, clouded evenings of autumn, when London streets affect the imagination with a peculiar suggestiveness. New-lit lamps, sickly yellow under the dying day, stretch in immense vistas, unobscured by fog, but exhibit no detail of the track they will presently illumine; one by one the shop-fronts grow radiant on deepening gloom, and show in silhouette the figures numberless that are hurrying past. By accentuating a pause between the life of daytime and that which will begin after dark, this grey hour excites to an unwonted perception of the city’s vastness and of its multifarious labour; melancholy, yet not dismal, the brooding twilight seems to betoken Nature’s compassion for myriad mortals exiled from her beauty and her solace. Noises far and near blend into a muffled murmur, sound’s equivalent of the impression received by the eye; it seems to utter the weariness of unending ineffectual toil. (Gissing 325-26)

“This is a poetry of the urban in a new key,” writes Brooks, as it presents the city as “the place of repetitive and unrewarding middle-class work” rather than of spectacle, animation, and amusement (147). Gissing’s lamps that stretch the street’s vistas into unpunctuated expanse, his

gloom that renders passersby undistinguished and innumerable, his simultaneous evocation of melancholy, infinity, and daily toil—all belong to the same gray mode of “Chacun sa chimère,” a prose poem by that other, more widely acknowledged poet of the urban, Charles Baudelaire. In this poem, an astonished narrator observes a similar scene, but a scene pared down to abstraction: “un grand ciel gris” [“a wide gray sky”] is barely differentiated from “une grande plaine poudreuse, sans chemins, sans gazon, sans un chardon, sans une ortie” (Baudelaire, *Le Spleen de Paris* 23) [“a broad dusty plain, no roads, no grass, not a thistle or a nettle” (Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil and Paris Spleen* 341)]; between *ciel* and *plaine* march a file of men, each one a beast of burden to a burdensome beast, the *chimère* or chimera of the title. At the narrator’s inquiry, he learns that none of these men knows where he is going, nor is irritated by the beast on his back. Just as Gissing’s “figures numberless” hurry past Nancy in silhouette, Baudelaire’s men plod on, “poussés par un invincible besoin de marcher” [“driven by an invincible need to go”], and where Gissing attributes a melancholy that is not dismal to this time between day life and night gloom, Baudelaire offers marchers whose “visages fatigués et sérieux ne témoignaient d’aucun désespoir” (*Spleen* 23-4) [“tired and earnest faces showed no sign of despair” (*Flowers* 342)]. Both scenes picture the grim promise of their own perpetuity, or perpetuity as such, by merging the movements of human actors—whom we are wont to think of as self-driven and aim-oriented—with environs expansive and gray. But these two poets of the urban part ways in their conclusions: whereas Baudelaire’s narrator’s initial impulse toward inquiry becomes submerged in the general oppression of what he witnesses (“bientôt l’irrésistible Indifférence s’abattit sur moi, et j’en fus plus lourdement accablé qu’ils ne l’étaient eux-mêmes par leurs écrasantes Chimères” (*Spleen* 24) [“soon an irresistible Indifference beset me, and I became more heavily oppressed than they themselves had been by the crushing Chimeras”

(*Flowers* 342)), Gissing's Nancy Lord and Edwin Reardon—if we may extend our discussion to the similarly gray nature of the city as it is pictured in *New Grub Street*—take up attitudes of refusal in response to the tedium of modern life. Put another way, their response *is* a response, and not, as in the case of Baudelaire's narrator, unification with the scene before them; rather than going gentle (or “Indifferent”) into that gray light, they find what is personally important through experience and reflection, and develop their own points of view, their own approaches to the great gray urban scene.

The world that Gissing knew and represented in his later fiction is an impersonal one, offering to its inhabitants either communal stupefaction or severe isolation. Neither offering makes a home of modernity or the modern city, nor restores the individual to the human community, perceived by Gissing as irreversibly lost to the ravages of capital. Though they are small alternatives, the alternatives Gissing proposes are aptly personal but strangely isolating: if the problem is formulated as the atomizing nature of modern society, then how is boredom—which I have been discussing as a temporary or even permanent form of withdrawal—a solution? To answer this question, I turn finally to “Boredom,” a brief but concise essay by a future (relative to Gissing) poet of the urban, the early-twentieth-century critic of the Frankfurt School, Siegfried Kracauer. Kracauer begins his essay by framing the problem of contemporary culture as one of no longer being able to be bored: “People today who still have time for boredom and yet are not bored are certainly just as boring as those who never get around to being bored. For their self has vanished—the self whose presence, particularly in this so bustling world, would necessarily compel them to tarry for a while without a goal, neither here nor there” (331). Kracauer diagnoses modern sickness as the disappearance—in the various graynesses of the work schedule and its supposed opposite, the relentless distractions of mass culture—of the self.

Similarly, Gissing's depiction of the urban scene, in which consumer attention is routed through an endless cycle of commercial ephemera, in which the call to conform is implicit in every mass-cultural offering, and in which the inability or refusal to participate entails loss of livelihood and social viability, reveals the individual—her defining constellation of desires—to be imperiled. A state in which desire is suspended, as Adam Phillips elaborates in "On Being Bored," boredom is a holding pattern in which the exhausted or overextended subject momentarily suspends engagement with the world at hand, finding in himself a means to reengagement or the justification for ultimate retreat. Kracauer continues that the modern world is rapacious, "much too interested for one to find the peace and quiet necessary to be as thoroughly bored with the world as it ultimately deserves" (332). In contrast, boredom guarantees in some measure, that one is "still in control of one's own existence," a guarantee native to the condition formerly known as the human condition, which featured a state of quietude "from which a fullness could sprout" (Kracauer 334, 332). Boredom is the individual's necessarily empty seat of potential, merely the promise of its own occupation, but that is violently overturned by capital's abhorrence of a vacuum: "Illuminated words glide by on the rooftops, and already one is banished from one's own emptiness into the alien *advertisement*" (Kracauer 332). Rather than dissolve into the world's work-weariness or be claimed by distraction, Kracauer advocates that one "stay at home, draw the curtains, and surrender oneself to one's boredom on the sofa" (334). It is only in this state of willful seclusion that one grapples with his self, which is to say, his boredom, his sense of not knowing what one should be doing, his "inner restlessness without a goal" (Kracauer 334). By Phillips' Winnicottian formulation, this method is the means by which a goal can be formed or seemingly discovered. And this is, perhaps, an optimistic formulation, according to both Kracauer's and Gissing's stands on the subject. For Kracauer, if one has the

patience for what he calls “radical boredom,” colorful and alternative worlds will come gradually into view: the soul will swell with a great passion, boredom will come to an end, and—Kracauer does not complete his vision. Instead, he states that the issue of boredom is perhaps no greater than an essay on boredom: “the great passion fizzles out on the horizon. And in the boredom that refuses to abate, one hatches bagatelles that are as boring as this one” (Kracauer 334). But an essay on boredom is still something—it is, if nothing else, a taking stock of the world as one experiences it. It is the occupation of a point of view that stands in an observational attitude with regard to society—much like the narrator of Baudelaire’s “Chacun sa chimère” or Gissing’s curmudgeonly narrator of *In the Year of Jubilee*.

In the world described, and indeed in the act of describing, the author sets himself critically apart. Rather than conduct the grand tour of society for a large and loving audience in the style of his Victorian predecessors, Gissing offers merely his point of view. But, with this point of view’s idiosyncrasy—all the more marked given the tradition from which it came—comes its greater remove, and with its greater remove its greater clarity. George Gissing was undoubtedly a man who lived the deprivations and consternations about which he wrote; more importantly, he was a writer with an acute criticality, able to see and represent the world, in which he and a growing number of his fellow late-Victorians moved, as fundamentally opposed to human attention, interest, and interaction. In this way, Gissing distinguishes himself, not only as a novelist, but as an urgently needed cultural critic, both of his day and of days to come.

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Conclusion: The Demon of Noontide

The socio-cultural findings of this study of boredom in literary representation have not diverged from those of more expansive histories of the effects of capitalism upon daily human life, or the spread of democracy in the Western world, or the extension of artistic representation to subjects previously thought too base to be represented. We are unsurprised, as the bourgeoisie succeeded in instituting its perpetual revolution, and as capitalism moved to eclipse other ways of imagining and organizing human relations in the West, that one of the sumptuous dispositions native to Romanticism underwent a significant revision as it passed into its Realist iteration, a mood of refusal and remove. From Gautier to Gissing, we have seen boredom lose its lavish quality and take on a grim and gritty character: while d'Albert's boredom is a luxury that, we understand implicitly, emanates from his untroubled aristocratic privilege, Gissing's characters' boredom is a symptom, a physical and emotional reaction to a society in which both the need for money and the effects of money (including its "special effects") are all the time felt and everywhere apparent. Whereas Gautier provides a humorous and obliging narrator to comment on d'Albert's folly, and uses his Preface to declare, in solidarity with his protagonist, that the use of art is its own uselessness, Gissing's fiction is characterized by its lack of humor, evidencing his deep dismay at art's having become a trade. The upheaval in the lives of Flaubert's characters—as well as its flip side, boredom—marks the midpoint of our trajectory and mirrors the upheaval native to the century that witnessed the bourgeois revolution and the rise of market forces. Solitary dreamers given to reverie and imaginative and physical luxury, particularly those tender souls we call writers and artists, suddenly had a harder time of things. A literary history of boredom—an emotional state which, Patricia Spacks demonstrates in her own such history, becomes part of the popular emotional repertoire in the nineteenth century—would be

impossible or glaringly remiss without observing these sweeping changes. Boredom in literature—be it deployed narratively or structurally—arises from momentous social, political, economic, and cultural shifts. But even though we can credit these shifts with boredom’s rise, the fact that boredom becomes a subject, subtext, and pretext of the novel is yet remarkable. The authors I have studied here wrote their boredom (Gautier), or wrote in order to escape what bored them (Flaubert), or used boredom in order to vent their frustration with an ever-commercialized, ever-atomized public realm (Gissing)—and each wrote, with greater or less implications for his own writing practice, against the background of the reality of the literary marketplace and its bourgeois readership. Each, in other words, found something boring about the demands put upon his craft or about the society in which he wrote, and this boredom and its expression were not mere passive acts. If literary boredom arises from great historical change, we can also say that boredom is one form that the observation of this change takes. Patricia Spacks accordingly describes boredom not as a mood of refusal or complaint, but as a “category of interpretation,” a kind of affective critical tool (x): a society without recourse to such a concept as boredom—such as that of Western Europe prior to the latter half of the eighteenth century—would “invoke categories other than those of feeling to assess their experience,” categories familial, civic, or theological (Spacks 9). A society without the critically deployable notion of boredom would tend to accept its condition in life as *fait accompli*. While boredom arises from historical shifts that put an end to the general sense of “the way things are” as given, boredom in turn isolates and magnifies these shifts in relation to its single and singularly moody trope. Boredom does important evaluative and critical work—it is, as a mood, a “point of view” to once more recall Adam Phillips’ statement, a point of view perhaps best marshalled in the formal artistic expression of the novel, but by no means restricted to it. In my concluding

thoughts on the work that boredom does, I turn to the way that this mood sees the century that gave rise if not birth to it, in both the novels I have explored as well as the critical points of view these novels anticipate. I will close by asserting the significance of these novels, not only in their grasp of their immediate protean epoch, but also in their bored affinity to critical discourses that emerged concomitantly and in the century ahead.

We have consistently encountered boredom as a registering and expression of perceived emptiness—even if, as in the outlying case of d’Albert, perceiving emptiness is a prized component of a character’s identity (“Beaucoup de choses sont ennuyeuses...” (Gautier, *MM* 231)). Whereas Gautier’s fault-finding with the status quo is diffuse, principled, and humorous, and while Flaubert finds fun in alternately enchanting and deflating pervasive mediocrity, Gissing consistently and stridently points to the world as barren. His expression of boredom often dispels illusion and magic—not to depict the lost illusions of Balzac, but illusions long-gone. We can therefore agree with Gissing critic Angus Wilson when he states that the suffering Gissing depicts, conveyed by “the ugly surroundings of [his] clumsy prose and in the cold light of his intellect which denies them all those distorting shadows, fascinating, Gothic and poetic, that the wild imaginations of Dickens or Dostoevsky lend to poverty, and without which there seems to be no distance put between us, the readers, and human misery,” is not the result of Gissing’s artistic shortcomings but of deliberate and purposive performance of the suffering at the core of everyday, modern life (123). Though I will later amend my agreement with Angus Wilson’s statement on the absence of “shadows” in Gissing’s prose, I will for the moment say that Gissing’s own boredom, enacted narratively and structurally in his novels, registers the misery of one who, finding himself in an impoverished world, can recall a better one from which he came—both historically and literarily. Boredom, evaluatively activated, is thus an affective

measure of the discrepancy felt between a grander past and a diminished present, a measure of the loss of shadow and thus of depth to everyday human life.

Let us pursue, for a moment or more, this imagery of emptiness and fullness, harsh light and softening shadow. By way of Wilson's chiaroscuro, we may link boredom's modern appearance to its older one, that of early Christianity's noonday demon. In particular, Gissing's descriptions of ugly surroundings, his clumsy prose, his necessarily critical intellect which eschews distorting poetic shadow, all are literary registrations of the noonday demon's modern manifestation. "Noon, after all, is often considered as a moment of crisis," writes Reinhard Kuhn; "The sun has reached its zenith, and the starkness of the shadowless world is as if deprived of its physical reality and laid bare" (43). Of course, as Kuhn tells us, the demon of noontide was conceived of as *acedia*—lack of care, but also interpreted as sloth or spiritual dryness—a millenium prior to the period with which our study is concerned, by the "Desert Fathers," fourth-century monks of the African desert who, most keenly at high noon, experienced the languor brought on by heat, fasting, and boredom as the Devil's attempt to distract them from the righteous life. With the advance of the nineteenth century, however, it is a figurative sun that evaporates reality—reality in its fullest sense, including both light and shadow, the religious and the secular, the concrete as well as the mysterious—distilling it to the bare facts and physics of money, of money's ability to extend or deny human life, growth, creativity, and happiness. As though in reference to the noontide demon and its sun-like power to render everything wizened and bare under equalizing rays, Marx and Engels likewise characterize the effects of capitalism as the advent of dryness, heat, and disillusionment: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is

profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind” (7).⁹³ One might rightfully protest that what Marx and Engels are describing—the end of feudalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie—is anything but boring: everything is overturned, liquidated, replaced, and the replacements “antiquated before they can ossify.” Nevertheless, the early Christian image of the noontide sun, far from irrelevant to the secular nineteenth century or to Marx’s and Engle’s imagery, is there revived to mark the loss, the seeming evaporation, of the categories formerly used to value experience. Just as boredom notes the impoverishment of the present relative to times past, the reemergence of noontide imagery acknowledges a desire for the past as well as radical separation from it. When the garden of human relations is reduced to a single, arid ground, boredom comes into play.

The demon’s temptations increase and diversify with the coming of the twentieth century, summoning writers and theorists of this period—and of mass media in particular—to take up boredom and the image of the noontide demon with fresh urgency. For example: refuting Hollywood’s demand that its movies adequately fill the empty hours of their spectators’ lives, filmmaker and essayist Raúl Ruiz pauses to contemplate the consequences of fleeing from one’s boredom, experienced by fourth-century monks as by modern man:

The monk is in his cell. He feels boredom coming on. He hears the footsteps. But he’s skeptical. He knows there’s nobody around. Still someone arrives. The monk knows that this apparition is an artifice, and he accepts it as such. The apparition offers to spring him from his cell and he says yes. He is transported to faraway lands. He’d like to stay, but it’s already time to go home. Back in his cell, he’s astonished to discover that

⁹³ As Sandy Petrey has brought to my attention, and as myriad sources second, the brevity and succinctness of perhaps the most famous line in *The Communist Manifesto*—itself an adaptation of a line in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*—must be credited to the translator’s elan.

traveling has only made things worse. He's even more bored than before and now his boredom has ontological weight [...]. Now every trip out of the cell, every apparition of his virtual friend, will make his melancholy more intense. He still does not believe in these apparitions, but his lack of belief is contagious. Soon the cell itself, his brother monks, and even communion with God becomes as an illusion. His world has been emptied by entertainment. Some one thousand two hundred years later, in France, Blaise Pascal, in the chapter of his *Pensées* devoted to entertainment, warns 'All the evil in men comes from one thing and one thing alone: their inability to remain at rest in a room'—be it for no more than an hour. So perhaps boredom is a good thing. (12-13)

We will shore up Ruiz's concluding suggestion that *perhaps* boredom is a good thing with the assertion that *indeed* it is a good thing! For what Ruiz depicts here is the risk of *not* being bored, of *not* resisting the attractions promised by the noontide demon, which divert us from the work we might accomplish whilst in the doldrums' depths. However unscintillating, boredom is the state of taking stock, of believing that there is stock to be taken; distraction, on the other hand, empties the world and deprives one of one's belief that it can be anything but empty. As Siegfried Kracauer suggests, distraction may provide a better antithesis to boredom—particularly with the emergence of mass entertainment—than attention or interest. In his updating of Pascal's message, Kracauer admonishes that one must make a regular practice of remaining at rest in a room, curtains drawn to the ravenous world outside. But for Kracauer, the stakes have changed from what they were in Pascal's day, or in the fourth century for that matter: while the fourth-century conception of *acedia* flags a faltering in one's duty to God, the boredom of modernity communicates the experience of the secular individual, now thrown upon his own evaluative and affective resources; and while Pascal's and even Ruiz's statements express a

transcendent truth of the human condition, Kracauer's illustration of modern life in "On Boredom" depicts twentieth-century man at the nexus of multiple spectacular assaults. It is all that an individual can do to keep himself intact in relation to the relentless incubi of mass culture.

Whereas these thinkers conceive of boredom and distraction in an oppositional relation to one another, Jonathan Crary, another theorist of the turn of the twentieth century and the latest and last I will consider here, contends in contrast that boredom, distraction, and inattention are neither separate from nor opposed to processes of attention, but that they were problematized as such parallel to the rise of the notion of a properly attentive observer. Citing Foucault, Crary states that nineteenth-century science, though keen to find in man a sovereign subject for whom full self- and world-knowledge were simple matters of mastery, failed to yield findings that would support "a full co-presence of the world and an attentive observer. Instead, the more one investigated, the more attention was shown to contain within itself the conditions for its own undoing—attentiveness was in fact continuous with states of distraction, reverie, dissociation, and trance" (45-6). Rather than proving the existence of an ideal state of attention, psychological study was forced to conclude that distraction can not be divorced from attentiveness—that "modern distraction was *not* a disruption of stable or 'natural' kinds of sustained, value-laden perception that had existed for centuries but was an *effect*, and in many cases a constituent element, of the many attempts to produce attentiveness in human subjects" (Crary 49). Efforts to produce attentive observers did just as much to produce distracted observers; attention was seen to flow naturally into distraction, and vice versa. Crary's words for Kracauer, then, would be that drawing one's curtains does nothing to keep distraction at bay—boredom will find its way to the window, distraction is merely the other side of boredom's curtain or coin.

Crary's interest in scientific discourse leads him to neglect a more qualitative discussion of the spiritual or post-spiritual malaise of the boredom-distraction cycle as it was coming to be keenly felt by growing numbers of people in the late nineteenth century. His findings find their place in my concluding thoughts, however, as they broaden and balance the conception of boredom that my sample of the literature of boredom puts forward. To return to our novels, we find that their literary representations of boredom do acknowledge Crary's boredom-distraction binary: in accordance with Crary's argument, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* shows inactivity giving rise to d'Albert's prized boredom as well as Mademoiselle's insistence on adventure; *Madame Bovary* oscillates with increasing violence between the facts of Madame's provincial life and the lives she glimpses in magazines, love stories, and her affairs with Rodolphe and Léon; more overtly than any other novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* charts the rhythm of boredom and desperate, fruitless activity; *New Grub Street* and, more subtly, *In the Year of Jubilee* posit characters whose boredom occurs in direct response to mass culture's violations of its characters' attention and intelligence. At the same time, however, each novel's representations also exceed the mere positing of a boredom-distraction binary to say something about how feelings of boredom, interest, distraction, and inattention register one's relationship to the world. As we have seen, our authors invest boredom with aesthetic, political, cultural and economic importance. While they might assent to Crary's argument about the cyclical flow of boredom into distraction into boredom, they would rightly counter that this flow is more than a simple matter of the human mind and its relation to the social-scientific discourse of self-possession and the acquisition of knowledge.

Rather, our authors seem to posit that one's character—her allegiances, values, economic status, and personal history—cannot be adequately described without an account of what she

finds boring, what interesting, and what particular shape the noonday demon takes when it comes calling. As much as boredom can be an expression of rejection and remove, it is also an expression of value. The bored individual never wholly or permanently withdraws from the world—even the Desert Fathers, avowedly self-sequestered as they were, engaged in the metaphysical and even physical work of bringing about God’s kingdom on Earth. To forego one’s own stock-taking and give over to the noonday demon is to subscribe to its world-lessering and melancholy spell, but never to emerge from one’s stock-taking is never to grant that the world (and one’s self) may yet be fully stocked, fully on offer. Each of my chosen authors is, I have contended, bored with some aspect of modern life: each engages, through the act of writing, in boredom’s multifaceted project of removal from, consideration of, and return to his fast-changing and discomfiting society. One writes in order to combat the perceived loss of stock, and thus the possible loss of stakes, in the world. By taking up the work of writing and/or the act of reading as subjects of inquiry, speculation and narrative, by problematizing these processes through attempts to write about them, each author records and, in his own way, rebels against the loss of shadow, mystery, and romance, to the literary scene and to life as a whole. The resulting works stand as responses to questions posed in the opening of this study: Why write under these conditions? How might one restore shadow to the desert of noontide?

For one last illustration of how these questions might be answered, let us return briefly to George Gissing, the author who I contend best because most starkly, most grimly renders the human scene as one governed by the modern demon of noontide—or, by Marx’s and Engle’s formulation, “naked self-interest” and “callous ‘cash payment,’” the liquidation of all categories of interpretation save those of economy (6). His texts jibe best with the critical historical discourses I have summoned in the previous pages, rendering overt and unmistakable what, I

believe, is implicit in Gautier and Flaubert. Of all our authors, Gissing is the one who made it his project to frame, through his use of boredom, a complaint singular to the nineteenth century. Since monetary metrics have replaced all other evaluative criteria, *New Grub Street* is perfect in its presentation of writing as the primary victim and mouthpiece of a lifeworld diminished, sublimated to mere supply and demand. Marian Yule, a character yet undiscussed in this study, spends her days with other hack writers in the Reading Room of the British Museum—or, as she calls it, the “Valley of the Shadow of Books”—researching her father’s planned essay topics in the regrettable role of his “machine for reading and writing” (Gissing 106). In a work-induced stupor, Marian fantasizes about the existence of a “literary machine” capable of assembling articles from scraps of other writing in a scene that comments, in her wish to be automated out of a job, on the numbing, repetitious nature of Grub Street work as well as on the insatiable demands of the market for ever more and often frivolous material. Not fully machine, Marian contemplates the consequences of her output:

When already there was more good literature in the world than any mortal could cope with in his lifetime, here was she exhausting herself in the manufacture of printed stuff which no one even pretended to be more than a commodity for the day's market. [...] To write—was not that the joy and the privilege of one who had an urgent message for the world? [...] She herself would throw away her pen with joy but for the need of earning money. And all these people about her, what aim had they save to make new books out of those already existing, that yet newer books might in turn be made out of theirs? This huge library, growing into unwieldiness, threatening to become a trackless desert of print—how intolerably it weighed upon the spirit!" (Gissing 106-7)

The trackless desert of print, unmarked by the traditional reasons for writing—the “urgent message,” the genuine communication—is all that Marian sees when she beholds both the shelves of reading material and her scribbling peers arranged about the Reading Room. Added to Marian’s horror of being a literary machine is her awareness of being a cog in still another, that of the press and the Reading Room, its annex. Her horror takes on a nostalgically spiritual tone: the fog creeping into the library obscures her fellow library-goers, so that a man walking in the upper gallery appears “a black, lost soul, doomed to wander in an eternity of vain research along endless shelves”; readers at “radiating lines of desks” become “hapless flies caught in a huge web”; and the dust from the stacks thickens the library’s gloom (107). Hell’s eternity of labor conveys Marian’s exhaustion; more implicitly, her imaging of Hell recalls both Milvain’s statement that the “divine afflatus” has nothing to do now with writing and Reardon’s sense that making a trade of art is an “unpardonable sin.” All that was solid has melted into air, all that is left is the bare Hell of literary piecework: in her act of stocktaking, Marian consciously marks the spiritual and personal invalidation of anonymous and badly remunerated toil, undertaken for everyone and no one in particular.

However, Marian, as with most of Gissing’s sympathetic protagonists, is unable to translate her stock-taking into action: she leaves literary life for a lesser (in comparison to her former Grub Street aspirations) position in a provincial library, a move that parallels that of fellow protagonist Edwin Reardon, who, as we have discussed, abandons authorship for low-paying clerical work. Because the novel pointedly aligns its definition of success with that of the market-driven literary world, both characters’ changes of position read as personal and professional failures. What counters this definition of success and failure is the novel *New Grub Street* itself: though a product of the very processes it deplores, the work critiques these

processes and, while often grim (and in contrast to my earlier seconding of Angus Wilson's comment that Gissing presents the world *without* recourse to the elaborate shadows of his literary predecessors), does occasionally labor to restore something of shadow to the sun-baked lifeworld, rendered so by capital. As we read in the passage above, Marian's vision of work under the joyless regime of demand and supply is supplanted by a vision more imaginative, even if no less bleak. And what if she, as Gissing chose to do, decided to write about the Reading Room as she experienced its effects on her well-being, as well as its implications for British society as a whole? We might point again to Pierre Bourdieu's observation that authors write the fates and failures they themselves avoid. We might say that Gissing is capable of putting down such reflections on the page, but Marian is not. Marian does indeed emerge from the Reading Room, but her emergence is framed as a retreat—indeed, we hear little of her at the novel's end beside the fact that she takes a librarian position in an obscure provincial town. Her withdrawal is permanent and, as such, non-narratable. Gissing, on the other hand, puts his malaise to good use, expressing it in novel form and submitting it to the world's consideration by means of publication. Like Gautier's falling in with the press, Gissing is bound by need of money to sell his writing; like Flaubert, he keenly feels the need to express what is in him to a larger audience, despite the diminution of this audience relative to audiences past.

In *The Intelligence of a Machine*, in the midst of an essay on the moving image's effects on the human perception of time, filmmaker and theorist Jean Epstein tangentially contemplates the subtle struggle between the universe's natural rhythms and man's attempts to harness them into reliably measurable units:

While the meridian lends itself, haphazardly, to a decimal division, the ellipse of the [sun's] orbit refuses to submit itself to the arbitrariness of this human contrivance. It imposes its own number of days and nights so tyrannically that, although this counting is wobbly and we haven't succeeded in fixing it, calendars must constantly adjust to it. At times, certainly, an hour of boredom appears to flow more slowly than an enjoyable hour, but these impressions, always confused and contradictory, are not enough to shake our faith in the inexorable fixity of the universal rhythm. (20)

It is true that the “inexorable fixity of the universal rhythm” cited here has remained unshaken (indeed, the twentieth century feels it with startling because long-neglected, long-denied force), but a new rhythm emerges in the nineteenth century to distract man's attention from its longstanding cyclical ebbs and swells—new rhythms, at the command of a different sun and unprecedented constellations, that work to excelerate production, development, communication, and revolution to the point of disorientation. But whereas the universal rhythm knows nothing to contradict it, the new rhythms introduced in the last two-hundred years give rise to their own counter-rhythm: boredom. Against the excelerations of change, Gautier, Flaubert, and Gissing pose boredom's counter-rhythm. Each in his works constructs an edifice to guarantee a shadow in the noonday desert, asserting, against disappearing myriad categories of value, boredom's “all-purpose register of inadequacy” (Spacks 23). Far from futile, this counterpose looks forward to things not as they are, but how they could be.

Boredom occurs at noontide, but, as Nietzsche's Zarathustra observes, noontide can also be a time of celebration. For noontide is a median, a time that looks forward and out as much as it looks back or takes stock—a time for “celebrat[ing] [one's] advance to the evening as his highest hope: for it is the advance to a new morning” (Nietzsche 102). Though their cries are not

quite those of Zarathustra's overman—indeed, Zarathustra would lump them in with the sick and resentful—these three authors ensure, through their respective literary deployments of their own boredom, that this noontide will not pass unmarked or unmarred by their critique, by their invitation to readers to agree with their refusal. Thus do they project and form a new community for the coming day.

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