Fictions of the Afterlife:
Temporality and Belief in Late Modernism

by

Alexander Ruch

Program in Literature
Duke University

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Kenneth Surin

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the period of late modernism (roughly 1930-1965) by attending to an understudied subgenre: fictions that depict the experiences of the dead in the afterworld. The project originated from my observation that a number of late modernist authors resorted to this type of writing, leading to the question of what made them do so. Such a project addresses the periodization and definition of late modernism, a period that has received relatively little critical attention until recent years. It also contributes indirectly to the study of European culture before and after the Second World War, identifying clusters of concerns around common experiences of belief and time during the period.

To approach this question, I adopt a situational approach. In this type of reading, I attempt to reconstruct the situations (both literary and extra-literary) of specific authors using historical and biographical material, then interpret the literary work as a response to that situation. Such a methodology allows me to ask what similarities between situations led to these convergent responses of afterlife writing. My primary objects are afterlife novels and plays by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Wyndham Lewis, Flann O’Brien, and Samuel Beckett.

I find that the subgenre provided late modernists with the literary tools to figure and contest changes in experiences of belief and time in mid-20th century Europe. The situation of modernism is marked by the loss of belief in the world, a failure in the faith in action to transform the world, and the serialization of time, the treatment of time as static
repetition and change as something that can only occur at the individual rather than the systemic level. While earlier modernists challenged these trends with the production of idiosyncratic private mythologies, late modernists encountered them as brute facts, leading to a shift in aesthetic sensibilities and strategies. Belief was split between private opinion and external submission to authority, and change reappeared under the figure of catastrophe.
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List of Abbreviations

Common abbreviations used throughout the text. For full citations, see the bibliography at the end of the text.

AMM  All Men Are Mortal (Beauvoir)
ASTB  At Swim-Two-Birds (O’Brien)
BM    The Best of Myles (na Gopaleen)
BN    Being and Nothingness (Sartre)
BT    Being and Time (Heidegger)
CD    The Chips are Down (Sartre)
CM    The Childermass (Lewis)
CSP   Collected Short Plays (Beckett)
CSPr  Collected Short Prose (Beckett)
D     Le dépeupleur (Beckett)
DA    The Dalkey Archive (O’Brien)
EA    The Ethics of Ambiguity (Beauvoir)
EN    Être et neant (Sartre)
HA    The Human Age: Books 2 and 3 (Lewis)
HC    Huis clos (Sartre)
JSF   Les jeux sont faits (Sartre)
MF    Malign Fiesta (Lewis)
MWA   Men Without Art (Lewis)
<table>
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<th>NE</th>
<th>No Exit (Sartre)</th>
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<td>Pour une morale de l'amibiguïté (Beauvoir)</td>
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<td>SP</td>
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<td>THM</td>
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<td>TS</td>
<td>Un théâtre de sitations (Sartre)</td>
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<td>WLA</td>
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This project has benefited from the feedback of many individuals. My committee has helped to shape the form of the dissertation at every step of the way. Michael Valdez Moses provided constant support and encouragement; the present work would not exist without his influence. Fredric Jameson has been both a model of intellectual rigor and curiosity and an important interlocutor at various stages in the project. Toril Moi has consistently combined committed mentoring with rigorous reading and questioning, both of which helped me to develop my ideas in conversation with a larger audience. Kenneth Surin has been generous with his time and intellect, and I thank him for his support and involvement.

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Portions of Chapter 2 are reprinted by permission of the Publishers from “‘The Best in the Worst of all Possible Worlds’: Corporate Patronage in Wyndham Lewis’s Late Work,” in *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity*, eds Andrzej Gasiorek, Alice Reeve-Tucker and Nathan Waddell (forthcoming from Ashgate).
Introduction

How could harrowing fortune send you
To these sad sunless homes, disordered places?
—Virgil, Aeneid VI.715-716

In the “Epilogue” of Alasdair Gray’s Lanark: A Life in Four Books (1981), Gray notes (with faux-erudite tongue firmly in cheek) his epic’s indebtedness to an odd assortment of books from the mid-twentieth century depicting the travels of a dead hero in the afterworld:

The index proves that Lanark is erected upon an infantile foundation of Victorian nursery tales [specifically, Charles Kingsley’s The Water-Babies], though the final shape derives from English language fiction printed between the 40’s and 60’s of the present century. The hero’s biography after death occurs in Wyndham Lewis’s trilogy The Human Age, Flann O’Brien’s The Third Policeman and Golding’s Pincher Martin. Modern afterworlds are always infernos, never paradisos, presumably because the modern secular imagination is more capable of debasement than exaltation. (Gray 489)

Gray’s footnote offers an image of some literary consistency, linking a set of works about (post-) life in the afterworld to a specific moment clustered around and after the Second World War. I stumbled upon these texts (and others from outside the English-language context, like Nabokov’s Soglyadatay [The Eye, 1930] and Klossowski’s Le Baphomet [1965]) independently of Gray, while looking at late modernist strategies for depicting changes in everyday life. The conceit of following a dead character in the afterworld (as opposed to more common descent narratives, where a character goes on a specific quest into the beyond and returns) struck me as a characteristically late modern one, capable of registering structures of temporality and belief specific to the period. I began collecting
such narratives, while also trying to explain (to myself and to others) exactly why these curious, generally unrecognized narratives seemed characteristic of late modernism. I also began to ask myself if they had the consistency of a genre, if it was reasonable to talk about them as a specific kind of literature with its own form.

Along the way, Gray fell into my collection (thanks to a recommendation by Fredric Jameson), offering me a striking late example of what I was, by that time, calling a subgenre (following Alasdair Fowler’s use of the term in *Kinds of Literature*), as well as an external confirmation that someone else had made the same connection between these disparate works. Around the same time, I learned that fantasy and sci-fi fan communities already had a name for works of this nature: Bangsian fantasy (named after the American satirist John Kendrick Bangs), which has its own entries in Wikipedia and John Clute and John Grant’s *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. These indicators suggested to me that I was not the only one to make such connections between different afterlife fictions, and reminded me that genre is not a term owned by literary critics (indeed, that its application by readers in specific historical contexts is often more instructive than the logical, formalist systems constructed by critics like Northrop Frye).

1 The “Bangsian Fantasy” entry in the Clute and Grant *Encyclopedia* is on 84, and is cross-referenced with independent entries on posthumous fantasy (777-779) and the representations of the afterlife (11). The Wikipedia page can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangsian_fantasy. There appears to be some dispute as to whether Bangsian fantasy should refer to all afterlife fiction, or merely to those drawing on the classical genre of dialogues of the dead to enable various historical personages to interact in the afterworld.

2 Here, I drew strength from the work Franco Moretti, whose “Markets of the Mind” undertakes a quick study (an explicitly unscientific one) of film genres based not on formal characteristics but by the arrangement of video store sections. I do not follow this methodology here, since the present study focuses on the moment of production rather than reception, but merely remark the effect such studies can have in...
As my use of Gray suggests, this subgenre did not exist as such for its early authors, but has been constituted in retrospect; it is a consequence, I argue, of convergent solutions to shared situations of late modernism. What it offered late modernist authors was something slightly different than a stable subgenre: surreptitious access to the fictional resources of the larger subgenres of science fiction and the fantastic without the stigma associated with more explicitly subgeneric writing. I explore these resources in the chapters that follow through readings of specific examples of late modernist fictions of the afterlife.

Before I can make this argument, however, I need to define in more detail the traits of fictions of the afterlife, as well as give some picture of what the convergent solutions mentioned above are solutions to. In the following section, I discuss the situation of late modernism, suggesting the breakdown of the institutional structures supporting modernist literary production as one incentive for late modernists’ recourse to subgeneric writing. From there, I move from modified structures of belief and temporality characteristic of the late modernist period to the bureaucratic imaginary of such a world. I then lay out the basic generic traits and historical conditions of fictions of the afterlife, tracing the genealogy of the subgenre and describing how twentieth-century fictional depictions of the afterlife differ from previous ones. This discussion sets problematicizing our abstract ideas of genre. Subgenre, as described in more detail below, is my solution to the disconnect between critical and popular pictures of genre.
the ground for the situational readings of Sartre, Beauvoir, Lewis, O’Brien, and Beckett that make up the remainder of the dissertation.

**Situations of Late Modernism**

Subgenre as Middlebrow Mediator

Part of my larger project is to investigate how late modernists responded to the collapse of the institutional structures supporting modernist literary production. That these institutions did not survive the 1930s is well accepted, and though Lawrence Rainey’s analysis of them in *Institutions of Modernism* doesn’t delve into that decade, his treatment of modernist “market patronage” acknowledges that it was only ever a “brief, necessarily unstable synthesis” (Rainey 3). My suggestion here is that one avenue chosen by a number of late modernists was a more direct compromise with the book market than those described by Rainey, one pitched at a larger market of middlebrow consumers through the strategic employment of subgenre.

My use of the term “subgenre” is meant to clarify the kind and level of genre I mean, since there is a significant divide between popular uses of genre based largely around subject matter and thematics (detective stories, fantasy, science fiction, nautical tales, etc.) and the literary critical discourse around genre (looking at larger formal units like the novel, epic, tragedy, comedy, and so on). I take my initial approach from

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3 I cite Rainey here because his is still the most influential study of the institutional structures supporting literary modernism. Along with *Institutions of Modernism*, interested parties should also consult the edited collections *Modernist Writers and the Marketplace* (ed. Ian Willison, Warwick Gould, and Warren Chernaik) and *Marketing Modernisms* (ed. Kevin Dettmar and Stephen Watt).
Alasdair Fowler, who argues that subgenres are smaller subunits of “kinds of literature,” normally determined by “subject matter or motifs” (Fowler 112). The term subgenre has the added benefit of evoking common class associations with genre fiction, while also allowing its application across different literary genres. Subgenre is a slippery thing, but like Justice Stewart with pornography (another contender for subgenre status), most people feel they know it when they see it, whether on the stage or in a novella.\(^4\)

Within this field of modernist subgenre writing, we might find such writing as William Faulkner’s (attempted) potboiler *Sanctuary* (1931), Witold Gombrowicz’s modern gothic tale *Possessed: The Secret of Myslotch* (published serially in 1939), and Elizabeth Bowen’s ghost stories and espionage novel (*The Heat of the Day*, 1948). By making the claim that this strategy of market compromise is a distinctive strategy of late modernism, I do not want to obscure the earlier modernist reliance on subgenre writing as a way to sell books (e.g., Conrad)\(^5\) or as subject matter for parody (such as the

\(^4\) In this last point, I diverge from Fowler, since his depiction of subgenre is based around subdivision only, while I would argue that subgenre is a more wayward category, sliding about below the level of kind. My principal evidence is that we can and often do talk of such things as fantasy films, fantasy novels, fantasy stories, and could easily recognize a fantasy play, even going so far as to determine one fantasy play a tragedy and another a comedy or farce. There are obvious science fiction plays (Čapek’s *R.U.R.* [1920] springs to mind), but this does not cause us to doubt the existence or authenticity of science fiction prose fiction (novels, romances, novellas, or even anatomies). Should one notice poetry absent from these examples, I blame a combination of my expertise with the historical fact that most popular subgenres traffic less with poetry than with prose, largely due to the waning popularity of poetry (especially new poetry) in the general market.

\(^5\) That Conrad used the subgenre of the nautical tale to sell books is well-known. Q. D. Leavis actually complains about the popular “ignorance of values” in preference of subject matter in subgeneric terms in *Fiction and the Reading Public*: “a common complaint: ‘I can’t read Conrad, sea stories bore me,’ or alternatively: ‘I like Conrad because I’m so fond of stories about the sea’” (Leavis 6). For a more detailed description of how Conrad deployed subgenre (and deliberately attempted to modify the premises of that subgenre to appeal to a female readership with *Chance*), see Cedric Watts, “Marketing Modernism: How Conrad Prospered,” in *Modernist Writers and the Marketplace* 81-88.
Nausicaa episode of *Ulysses*)—as with all claims of this nature, it is a matter of degree rather than absolute novelty. The merit of the claim will be borne out only by how well it manages to shed light on actual strategies (textual strategies as well as marketing ones).

One of the difficulties late modernists had to face in this regard was how to employ subgenre without also giving up the cultural capital they had already achieved (in the case of those thrust into late modernism simply by surviving past modernism’s prime, such as Wyndham Lewis, who lived long enough to both gain and squander plenty of cultural capital) or were hoping to gain (as with Samuel Beckett, who famously failed to achieve much notice or widespread publication until after the success of *Godot* in 1953). To put it in Bourdieuan terms, these authors were faced with the question of how to maintain the “loser wins” logic of the field of cultural production (itself largely a product of modernism, which matches consecration with unmarketability) while also surreptitiously appealing to new readers. This, I have found, is what made afterlife fiction so appealing a prospect to late modernist writers: it held the promise of subgenre marketability while also maintaining a relatively highbrow literary pedigree, associating

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6 Nor should we accept at face value the modernist pretention to be beyond subgenre: the prevalence of things like the artist novel (e.g., the *Recherche*, *Tarr*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *To the Lighthouse*) give the lie to this immediately. What is different is the way subgenre is simultaneously embraced and disavowed in late modernism as a (mostly unsuccessful) way to gain readers.

7 On these terms, see Bourdieu’s *Field of Cultural Production*. His section of that book on the middlebrow (Bourdieu 125-131) is especially interesting in this regard. I should note that Bourdieu offers as one example of the middlebrow “‘Intellectual’ Westerns,” which appeal to insiders’ knowledge of subgenre tropes and allusions, creating the sense of an “inner circle” of western readers (128). His is not the same approach to subgenre I am taking here, but does open the field of the middlebrow to subgenre writing (which is more often cast as merely lowbrow).
its authors with Lucian, Homer, and Dante rather than Dashiel Hammett, H. G. Wells, or Zane Grey. Such associations offered a broad appeal, pitching the texts to highbrow readers turned off by more overt appeals to subgenre (like those listed in the above paragraph), but also to middlebrow readers with the promise of the cultural capital to be gained by brushing shoulders with easily recognizable literary giants. In this last, fictions of the afterlife can be seen as one attempt to tap into the broad cultural consecration of past art (the only kind of art Woolf presented middlebrows as purchasing, since “living art requires living taste,” an impossibility for the insensible middlebrow [Woolf, “Middlebrow” 184]).

For one example of how these associations functioned, I turn to I. A. Richards’s introduction to the 1952 BBC broadcast of *The Childermass*:

Some comparisons may help me to say something about this great and dismaying and entrancing book. And yet again they may not. They afford one such a sound excuse for going off and talking about something else: The *Divine Comedy*, say, the end of Plato’s *Republic*, or Fielding’s *Journey from This World to the Next*. All are relevant and apt, as I could, I hope, show. Moreover *The Republic* and *The Divine Comedy* have suitable stature and invention. They are daunting enough. And all three help one to see how entirely thought-about-the-next-world must still be thought-about-this. […] None the less I will keep off them. Our business is with *The Childermass* itself. (Richards, “A Talk on *The Childermass*” 16)

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8 I make no claims about the qualities or lack thereof of either of these latter writers. James Naremore, in an argument that bears comparison with the one I am making here, argues persuasively that the detective writing that informs film noir was itself informed by a popularization of modernist tropes and sensibility, singling Hammett out as “[t]he earliest and most radical of the popular modernists” (Naremore 48). His larger argument about modernism and detective fiction can be found in Chapter 2 of *More than Night* (Naremore 40-95).
Richards is pitching the radio adaptation to Third Programme listeners, to the point of asserting that Plato and Dante have “suitable stature and invention” to stand next to Lewis. (Take that, Fielding!) What I find interesting about the genealogy that Richards gives is that it both invokes the stuff of subgenre (in its evocation of “thought-about-the-next-world” and its concatenation of authors) while also studiously avoiding terms associated with genre: these are merely “comparisons.”

In particular, Richards’s term “invention” seems calculated to give listeners a reason to exempt all of these works from their possible subgeneric status: they are not formulaic. This has always been a principal (modernist) complaint about subgenre literature: that subgenre authors merely follow formulae (a gunslinger, a hard-boiled dick, and a foreboding castle walk into a bar…) while real artists produce unique works rather than reproduce conventions. We know this to be false, to be part of the ideology of modernism, but it remains an easy critical trap into which we can fall. Again, fictions of the afterlife appear to fit the disavowal bill nicely, because they each aspire to uniqueness (at least until postmodernism, this is part of the premise of the afterworld—everyone is subject to the same absolute authority) while building on established traits from classical dialogues of the dead and katabasis. Rather than exist in a subgenre world (a “western” world, for example), each afterlife fiction aspires to create its own world, with new forms of life appropriate to that imagined setting. In this, it has much in

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9 Robert Scholes’s criticism of Clement Greenberg’s conflation of the formulaic and the mechanical seems apposite here (Scholes 9).
10 Or, should we accept Robert Scholes’s term (discussed below), part of the “paradoxy” of modernism.
common with science fiction, but without the stigma of subgenre fiction. It is also, I should say, a “manly” subgenre, attracting few women writers and offering to bypass the feminized everyday in favor of heroic philosophical speculation.

If this literature is to be considered in any way middlebrow, it is so in an entirely different way than the texts and their intended publics described so pejoratively by Q. D. Leavis in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932). It gives off an air less of class and cultural aspiration than the scent of a highbrow temporarily stepping out from the already “leaning tower” (Virginia Woolf’s famous figure for the simultaneously elevated and threatened place of 1930s authors) to drum up interest on the ground. The “curious, bastard language” of “leaning tower literature” is neither of one world nor of the other (and Woolf offers class terms here: neither “aristocratic” nor “peasant” language), but rather “betwixt and between” (Woolf, “Leaning Tower” 147). These, of course, are the terms that she had used to describe the middlebrow as well. What is interesting is that her (still class-laden) distinction now bears the mark of historical necessity: these “leaning tower” writers no longer have the option of dwelling in a non-leaning tower, and so must make do with their middling position despite their well-funded educations (about which they must now be mildly embarrassed, unlike the unreflective

---

11 Hence the appropriateness of Jameson’s term “theological science fiction” to describe *The Human Age* (Jameson, *Fables* 52). I would mention here the dystopia, another subgenre that became popular in the late modernist period, with entries by late modernists like Henry Green (*Concluding*, 1948) and Maurice Blanchot (*Le Très-Haut*, 1948) brushing (obscure) shoulders with more recognizable middlebrow fare by Huxley and Orwell.

12 Lewis’s afterlife fiction goes so far as to make the near-total absence of women in his afterworld into a (patently unconvincing) theme.

13 “[Middlebrows] are neither one thing nor the other. They are not highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows, whose brows are low. Their brows are betwixt and between” (Woolf, “Middlebrow” 179-180).
“highbrows” described in the “Middlebrow” letter, who simply “read what we like and do what we like and praise what we like” without worrying about appealing to particular tastes or markets [Woolf, “Middlebrow” 181]).

As one might expect from those shut up for so long, their scent is rather musty, and most of these hybrid texts come off as failures—both aesthetic failures and commercial ones. This is certainly the case for most of the late modernist fictions of the afterlife. Nabokov’s *The Eye* (1930) is not one of his best known books, focusing so closely on the Russian émigré scene in Europe. Wyndham Lewis’s *Human Age* (1928, 1955) was a middling success for him (largely due to the BBC radio adaptations), but has received little critical attention since then. O’Brien was unable to publish *The Third Policeman* (1967) during his lifetime, although it is now widely recognized as a significant work of Irish modernist fiction. Golding’s *Pincher Martin* (1956) “surprised and offended many of its early readers” with its “trick ending” (Surette 205). Beckett’s afterlife works (*Play*, 1961-2; *Le dépeupleur*, 1970) are generally considered minor ones. Klossowski’s *Le Baphomet* (1965) still appears as a parody of the historical novel tied to fascinating but obscure philosophical fiction. Sartre’s *Huis clos* (1944) is the only unqualified success (in general, afterlife drama seems to have fared better than prose fiction), but even this success is something of a failure, since its rising star was made possible only by the over-subtlety of its metatheatrical criticism of the (middlebrow) bourgeois stage. Their successes and failures are instructive, but my main focus on what follows is on the logic of the attempts themselves.
Antinomies of Late Modernism

In his *Paradoxy of Modernism* (2006), Robert Scholes argues that modernism is both constituted and misunderstood by continued adherence to what he calls modernist “paradoxy”: “A kind of confusion generated by a terminology that seems to make clear distinctions where clear distinctions cannot—and should not—be made” (Scholes xi). For Scholes, such thinking leads to the assumption of “clear and simple binary oppositions” that “function to suppress or exclude a middle term” (Scholes xi). His examples are clear enough (high/low, old/new, poetry/rhetoric, and hard/soft), and could easily be multiplied. Although years of training in structural semiotics and deconstruction have taught me that all conceptual systems tend to be based on similar oppositions, I resist the urge to make that move here, instead recognizing that such “paradoxies” (the quotes should show how little I like the term itself) may indeed lie behind the extremities of modernist forms. To link Scholes’s thinking up to Beauvoirian terms, I wish to suggest that these and other paradoxies develop out of a flight from ambiguity common to most utopian projects (and I do wish to suggest that modernism was a utopian project—or better, a conglomeration of many different and conflicting utopian projects): the attempt to organize the world (or the monadic version of the world found in art) around some Absolute.14

14 I discuss Beauvoir’s philosophical writing in more detail in Chapter 1, where I look at her changing views on the significance and meaning of finitude for human action. For her most programmatic statement regarding ambiguity and the Absolute, see her *Ethics of Ambiguity.*
I say this not to advance another grand theory of modernism, which would add yet one more to an already unwieldy pile of theories both necessary and (necessarily) insufficient. Nor do I need to, since Fredric Jameson has already offered an provocative argument that the pursuit of the Absolute should be seen as both a characteristic trait of modernism and what “endows it with its revolutionary power” of reference (Jameson, *Singular Modernity* 159-160). Instead, I advance a decidedly less grand extension of his theory of late modernism, which involves asking what happens when the utopian energy sustaining the various modernist Absolutes wanes, leaving only the husks of so many absolute distinctions in its wake. The determination of late modernism as a phase in which the formal structures and premises of modernism persist after belief in their utopian promise and character has broken down has the merit of avoiding hard dates, since it describes a repeatable structure rather than a single event. This image of the persistence of such distinctions beyond their motivating moments should recall Jameson’s discussion of late modernism as a formalization of the once-experimental strategies of modernist predecessors into the well-known “autonomy of the aesthetic” (Jameson, *Singular Modernity* 208). When aesthetic autonomy is put into play as merely one Absolute (in opposition to the “social realism” of the 1930s, perhaps, or the literature of the “angry young men” after WWII) among others, we can, I contend, start to get a better view of a whole field of which aesthetic purity of the sort promoted by Blanchot represents only one aspect.
In accordance with my subtitle, the two areas that fictions of the afterlife most explicitly thematize are those of temporality and belief. The Absolutes I chart the hypostatization and decay of are the division of temporality into Absolutes of stasis and change, thematized in the terms “everyday” and “event,” and the division of belief into purely private and purely public terms (internalization and externalization). In the move from modernism to late modernism, the tensions sustaining and motivating these distinctions erode, leaving only the formal distinctions (and the erasure of ambiguity: the place of becoming where things are made to happen and beliefs are treated as sharable) behind. What is left for late modernist temporality is the distinction between static repetition (a fallen everyday) and apocalypse (an equally fallen event). The correlate in the field of belief is the production of purely private beliefs (seen as impervious to evidence and argument alike—the sacred right of all liberalized individuals) and, on the other hand, the establishment of purely external beliefs (to which one does not subscribe so much as submit): a perversion of Kant’s famous enlightenment exhortation to “Argue as much as you will and about whatever you will, but obey!” (Kant, Practical Philosophy 18) where “argue” is surreptitiously replaced by its opposite: “believe privately.” The ground for both of these divisions is a larger failure of belief in the efficacy of action on the world, in the connection between humanity and the world in which it exists.

15 Identifying this shift in secular liberalism from public debate over shared beliefs to everyone’s unchallengeable “right to one’s own opinion” represents the main worth of Austin Dacey’s The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life (2008), which offers rather banal and confused solutions to the problem he identifies.
**Suspicion, Skepticism, and Belief in the World**

Nous sommes entrés dans l’ère du soupçon.
—Nathalie Sarraute

It is through fantasy that our conviction of the worth of reality is established; to forgo our fantasies would be to forgo our touch with the world.
—Stanley Cavell

Le fait moderne, c’est que nous ne croyons plus en ce monde. Nous ne croyons même pas aux événements qui nous arrivent, l’amour, la mort, comme s’ils ne nous concernaient qu’à moitié.
—Gilles Deleuze

Nathalie Sarraute claimed that “[w]e have now entered upon an age of suspicion” in *Les temps modernes* in 1950 (Sarraute, Ère du soupçon 59, Age of Suspicion 57). Cavell was writing in 1971 about the representation of fantasy in film (in this case, *Vertigo*), but within the frame of a larger argument about the “end of the myths” of film (Cavell, *The World Viewed* 85). Deleuze was writing about post-WWII Europe in terms that referred to both his present (1985) and ours when he declared that “we no longer believe in this world” is not simply a modern fact, but “[t]he modern fact” (Deleuze, *Cinéma 2* 223, *Cinema 2* 171). Before looking more closely at what each of them mean, I want to signal that this question of belief is not, strictly speaking, a matter of secularism. Or rather, it may be, but not as we tend to think of it, since what is at issue in each of these claims about our failures of belief is not God, not the moral and religious truths standing behind Him, nor even the cultural coherence that Eliot saw as lacking from a skeptical, secular culture (Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* 101-2). Rather, this is a larger pattern of doubt about our fictions and the ways those fictions help us to act in the world.
Sarraute is writing primarily about literary character, in an essay that would soon be taken up (with the rest of Sarraute’s essays, collected in 1956) as a defense of the “nouveau roman” along with Robbe-Grillet’s Pour un nouveau roman (1963). But character is only the way in to a larger suspicion, in which the reader “se méfie de tout” (“has grown wary of practically everything”; Soupçon 64, Suspicion 61) and now, viewing fiction as manipulation, prefers “le petit fait vrai” over “l’histoire inventée” (Soupçon 66, Suspicion 63). This preference is the result of “un état d’esprit singulièrement sophistiqué” (“unusually sophisticated state of mind”; Soupçon 59, Suspicion 57), in which the reader “a, depuis quelque temps, appris à connaître trop de choses, et qu’il ne parvient pas à oublier tout à fait ce qu’il a appris” (“has, for some time now, been learning about too many things, and he is unable to forget entirely all he has learned”;
Soupçon 64, Suspicion 61, translation modified). These things, we find, are the stuff of modernism itself:

Il a connu Joyce, Proust et Freud ; le ruissellement, que rien au dehors ne permet de déceler, du monologue intérieur, le foisonnement infinie de la vie psychologique et les vastes régions encore à peine défichées de l’inconscient. Il a vu tomber les cloisons étanches qui séparaient les personnages les uns des autres, et le héros de roman devenir une limitation arbitraire, un découpage conventionnel pratiqué sur la trame commune que chacun contient tout entière et qui capte et retient dans ses mailles innombrables tout l’univers. […] Il a vu le temps cesser d’être ce courant rapide qui poussait en avant l’intrigue pour devenir une eau dormante au fond de laquelle s’élaborent de lentes et subtiles décompositions ; il a vu nos actes perdre leurs mobiles courants et leurs significations admises, des sentiments inconnus apparaître et les mieux connus changer d’aspect et de nom. (Soupçon 64-5)

He has made the acquaintance of Joyce, Proust and Freud; the trickle, imperceptible from without, of the interior monologue; the infinitely profuse growth of the psychological world and the vast, as yet almost unexplored
regions of the unconscious. He has watched the watertight partitions that used to separate the characters from one another give way, and the hero become an arbitrary limitation, a conventional figure cut from the common woof that each of us contains in its entirety, and which captures and holds within its meshes the entire universe. [...] He has seen time cease to be a swift stream that carried the plot forward, and become a stagnant pool at the bottom of which a slow, subtle decomposition is in progress; he has seen our actions lose their usual motives and accepted meanings, he has witnessed the appearance of hitherto unknown sentiments and seen those that were most familiar change in both aspect and name. (Suspicion 62)

Whether we accept Sarraute’s specific emphases, which already gesture toward her aesthetic of the “sous-conversation,” we cannot fail to recognize a number of modernist concerns and techniques, ranging from interior monologue to the near-elimination of plot. Sarraute suggests both that those techniques have lead to a greater awareness of actual life and that they (along with that awareness) render previous literary forms untenable (they now appear “conventionnel”).

One might imagine that this would lead to a greater interest in modernist literature at least, because it appears to have taught us so much about the complexity of the psyche, but Sarraute treats the new techniques as essentially unrepeateable themselves; having exposed earlier conventions as such, they also call attention to their own conventionality, becoming one more trick now to be avoided. The result, according to Sarraute, is a turn not to modernism but away from literature. The reader “a si bien et tant appris qu’il s’est mis à douter que l’objet fabriqué que les romanciers lui proposent puisse receler les richesse de l’objet réel” (“has learned so much and learned it so well, that he has begun to doubt whether the novelist’s artificially constructed object is capable of secreting the wealth of the real object”; Soupçon 65, Suspicion 63). It is in this
point, that the modernist exploitation and destruction of literary techniques tends not only to new forms of fiction but to a suspicion of all fiction as “fabriqué” (and fiction obviously is that, as the etymology implies), that Sarraute’s essay finds its main interest.16

How did we get from the one to the other, from the exhaustion of certain tropes, of specific conventions of description, characterization, and plotting, to a suspicion toward the idea of fiction? How did postwar readers and authors (and filmmakers, as Sarraute briefly notes on 76 [73]) alike end up in “l’impasse où aboutit nécessairement toute technique” (“the blind alley into which all techniques necessarily lead”; Soupçon 76, Suspicion 73), and how are we to take this suspicion (which is not, at least not yet, the same as rejection, but merely an attitude of mildly hostile skepticism)? Sarraute ends her essay on an ambiguously hopeful note, claiming that “[I]e soupçon, qui est en train de détruire le personnage et tout l’appareil désuet qui assurait sa puissance, est une de ces réactions morbides par lesquelles un organisme se défend et trouve un nouvelle équilibre” (“[S]uspicion, which is currently destroying character and the entire outmoded mechanism that guaranteed its force, is one of the morbid reactions by which an organism defends itself and finds a new equilibrium”; Soupçon 77, Suspicion 73-4,

16 In this, her thoughts could be usefully compared with Ortega y Gasset’s theory of the exhaustion of the novel in “Notes on the Novel” (1925) and Adorno’s idea of modernism as driven by successive taboos in the Aesthetic Theory (1970). See Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 35-39 on prohibition and experiment. Recast in Adorno’s terms, the turn Sarraute notes in the postwar period becomes the danger of absolutizing art’s determinate negation of its competitors: “[A]rt threatens to become allergic to itself; the quintessence of the determinate negation that art exercises is its own negation” (Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 36). See also Jameson on Adorno’s utility for a theorization of modernism along these lines (Jameson, Modernist Papers 5).
translation modified). This suspicion, it turns out, is healthy, in that the preexisting conventions appear as so much dead weight that must be shed before the organism that is the novel can flourish anew, and us with it.

Such suspicion is a model of skepticism, which can (even has a tendency to), as Stanley Cavell has shown, move from uncertainty about a specific premise to a generalized condition of doubt. Yet Cavell does not set out to refute skepticism, nor to render it ineffective. Rather, he takes the opposite tack in *The Claim of Reason*, refuting those who found in Wittgenstein a refutation of skepticism (see, for example, his treatment of Malcolm and Albritton on 47). His approach is rather more similar to that of Sarraute: to assume skepticism as a healthy, natural attitude but also a perpetual threat to which we are (must always remain) exposed (Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* 432-3). As with Freud, exposure to skepticism (to taking positions, to making assumptions about the world, and to accepting the consequences of being wrong about those assumptions) is part of being in the world, of moving from the pleasure principle to its refined variant, the reality principle (Freud, “Formulations”).

In an interesting moment in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, Cavell makes the link between postmodernism and the “nightmare” of a “world in which skepticism is pointless,” in which “humankind’s terrible capacity for adaptation has become absolutized” (Cavell, *Philosophy* 340). His mention, like so many moments in his work

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17 Cavell’s basic argument about this tendency is to be found in *The Claim of Reason* 129-167.
18 This is also, I take it, the reason why there is “no human alternative to the possibility of tragedy” (Cavell, *Claim of Reason* 453).
that seem to gesture toward the historicity of skepticism, is brief and vague enough to be merely suggestive rather than compelling, and he explicitly refuses to answer the question whether skepticism “requires historical conditions” or if language use is a sufficient condition (Cavell, Philosophy 340). I am inclined to affirm something of the sort, however, about postmodernism: that it involves a condition of indifference to the conditions of one’s own life and one’s own knowledge, that in the absence of assurance it delves not into the anxiety of uncertainty but the despair of indifference. Late modernism is not this, I think (otherwise I would just call it postmodernism), but an earlier moment, in which a healthy skepticism, which roots out falsehoods and error in both thinking and art, becomes generalized in reaction to (what is then retroactively called) excessive credulity.19

Sarraute provides a beautiful description of such a moment of generalized skepticism in “Ce que voient les oiseaux,” the final essay in L’ère du soupçon.20 She is discussing the effect of the mass production of books that bear the external semblance of art but are “dénué[s] de toute valeur littéraire” (“devoid of all literary value”; Soupçon 130, Suspicion 124): the very image of the middlebrow cuckoo, usurping the nest of art in the name of quick profit for publishing firms and quick pleasure for readers. These

19 That post-WWII Europe (or America, for that matter) would have some reason to be concerned about excesses of credulity I believe I can state without much elaboration. Too much ink has been spilled about mythology, about propaganda, about universal culpability and Adorno’s claim about the “barbarism” of art after Auschwitz. But the war merely exacerbated an existing trend toward suspicion.
20 The passage reminds me of similar descriptions by Cavell of the vertiginous feeling of having been wrong about an object of certainty (a visiting friend’s telephone number and the performer behind a big-band recording on the radio), and the way such a feeling calls all certainties into question momentarily. See The Claim of Reason 140-143.
pleasures are even greater than those of art, since they are based on easy recognition and accommodation:

Ici aucune accommodation n’est nécessaire ; on entre sans effort, on se trouve aussitôt de plain-pied ; les personnages nous ressemblent ou ressemblent aux gens que nous connaissons ou bien à ce que nous pensons que doivent être ceux de nos contemporains que nous aimerions connaître ; leurs sentiments, leurs idées, leurs conflits, les situations où ils se trouvent, les problèmes qu’ils ont à résoudre, leurs espoirs et leurs désespoirs sont les nôtres. On se sent dans leur vie comme un poisson dans l’eau. (Soupçon 130-131)

Here no adaptation is necessary; we enter in without effort and immediately everything goes quite smoothly; the characters are like us, or like people we know, or else as we imagine those of our contemporaries whom we should like to know. Their feelings, their ideas, their conflicts, the situations in which they find themselves, the problems they must solve, their hopes and despair are all ours: we take to their lives like fish to water. (Suspicion 124-125, translation modified)

As with most highbrow descriptions of the middlebrow, these books are soon found to be less edifying than they appeared; they bear neither rereading nor scrutiny. Readers who do return to these middlebrow novels after the thrill of recognition wears off are greeted not with renewed life but rather the sense that they were duped by “un trompe-l’œil. Un plate et inerte copie” (“a flat, inert copy”; Soupçon 132, Suspicion 126). The characters who seemed so alive (so like us, in fact) appear on second glance as “des mannequins de cire, fabriqués selon les procédés les plus faciles et les plus conventionnels” (“wax dummies, fabricated according to the easiest, most conventional methods”; Soupçon 132, Suspicion 126).

So far, this is a common experience of disappointment. We have all (and Sarraute’s “nous” relies on her reader having had this experience) returned to objects of
temporary and perhaps easy esteem only to notice that the seams were showing, that
they failed to hold up to our initial evaluation of them. Her description of the
consequences of the repetition of this situation is more remarkable, however:

On sait combien, dans notre hâte, dans la nécessité où nous sommes, à chaque
instant, d’aller au plus pressé, de nous guider d’après les plus grossières
apparences, nous pouvons être ignorants et crédules. Il suffit de se rappeler
quelle révélation a été pour nous le monologue intérieur ; la méfiance avec
laquelle nous avons considéré et considérons parfois encore les efforts de Henry
James ou de Proust pour démonter les rouages délicats de nos mécanismes
intérieurs ; avec quel emprisonnement nous acceptons de croire que telle grille—
comme la psychanalyse—posée sur cette immense masse mouvant qu’on nomme
notre « for intérieur », où l’on peut trouver tout ce qu’on veut, la recouvre tout
entière et rend compte de tous ses mouvements ; et avec quelle satisfaction, quel
sentiment de délivrance nous nous sommes laissés convaincre, et sommes restés,
pour la plupart d’entre nous, convaincus, que ce « for intérieur », tout récemment
encore si fertile en découvertes, n’existait pas, n’était rien : du vide, du vent.
(Soupçon 136-7)

Everyone knows to what extent, in our haste, we can be ignorant and credulous,
obliged as we are continually to do what presses most, to be guided by the
grossest of appearances. It suffices to recall what a revelation the interior
monologue was for us; the wariness with which we regarded and at times still
regard the efforts of Henry James or Proust to take apart the delicate wheelworks
of our inner mechanisms; with what readiness we consent to believe that a
certain cipher code—such as psychoanalysis—when applied to the immense
mobile mass we call our “heart of hearts,” in which almost anything may be
found, can cover it entirely and give an account of all its movements; and with
what satisfaction, what a feeling of deliverance, we let ourselves be convinced,
and have most of us remained convinced, that this “heart of hearts” which, quite
recently, still offered such a fertile field for discovery, did not exist, was nothing:
empty space, so much air. (Suspicion 130)

Here, the price of credulity is a greater skepticism, one no longer about the fictional
world, about the characters and plots contained in novels, but about our interiority (the
conventionality of which is signaled by the very term “for intérieur”: hence Sarratute’s
quotation marks). That these characters can be so lifelike, and yet, upon reflection, so
empty and conventional, this can lead to a local doubt (about the skills of the author or our frame of mind while reading) or to a generalized one: what must life be like if this conventional and banal book captures it so well? If it is a single book, the local doubt may be more appropriate; if most of the books we read appear equally flat and conventional, does this not say something about our world, and not just about what we are willing to accept as a picture of it?

Modernism draws attention to fictional conventions; it cannot help but do so simply by the force of divergence, by forcibly avoiding existing techniques. I am inclined to think (but cannot prove here) that this is part of a larger process, brought about originally not by modernism but by its supposed opposite, realism, since it is initially the impulse to try to represent reality that causes conventions to appear harmful (because they get in the way of that reality). ¹¹ This is itself a skeptical position, one that fails to recognize that there is no way of reaching behind conventions to grab at the real (or that, should we do so, we could share such experiences with others unaided by any convention). It certainly appears so to Sarraute, whose perjorative terms ("conventionnel," "fabriqué," "plate et inerte copie") mark convention as bad, all while she realizes that any successful art will ultimately find itself turned into one more reproducible technique down the road.

¹¹ This claim would put me close to the Auerbach of Mimesis, who presents modernism in continuity rather than conflict with earlier realisms. The difference is that Auerbach’s is a progressive model, whereas I am more convinced by Adorno’s idea of successive taboos (which doesn’t necessarily imply a greater grasp of reality).
Sarraute’s approach here could be thought of as an early representative of a strain of postwar thinking (brought together by the Tel Quel group), one described by Fredric Jameson and Toril Moi as the “ideology of modernism” (Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* 161-179; Moi, *Henrik Ibsen* 17-36), which seems to lead from a fear of culture as manipulative and conventional to a doctrine of aesthetic autonomy. As with her fellow nouveau romancier Robbe-Grillet, however, Sarraute does not go in for the autonomy of the aesthetic, arguing instead that “les bons livres” (*Soupçon* 139, *Suspicion* 132) are written precisely by “réalistes” who exert all their effort “à saisir […] ce qui [leur] apparaît comme étant la réalité” (“to seize […] what appears to [them] to be reality”; *Soupçon* 141, *Suspicion* 134). She goes on to argue that it is the middlebrow authors who should bear the epithet “formalistes” (*Soupçon* 140) because they are more interested in reproducing conventions of *verisimilitude* than in grasping the elusive thing Sarraute calls reality (*Soupçon* 145, *Suspicion* 137). Her fear is rather that we might lose faith in this reality under the force of too much shoddy writing, that we might give up on ourselves and accept the emptiness of their conventional picture of the world as accurate. In this context, suspicion is a weapon against a greater lack of faith in the world.

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22 Robbe-Grillet’s defense of a realism detached from *verisimilitude* can be found in *For a New Novel* 157-168.
23 The elusiveness of reality is a common modernist premise, as with Virginia Woolf’s description of life, the proper object of the novelist, as “a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to its end” and “this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit” (Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 741).
At this point we must return to the question of when a healthy suspicion of fiction, a fear of manipulation and falsehood (examples of which are only too common), turned into a debilitating skepticism toward all fiction as something that can (or should) give us purchase on reality. To take one stab at such a large question, I turn to the curious convergence of Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze on postwar cinema. The merit of this detour into cinema is not only to show that suspicion is relevant beyond the realm of prose fiction described by Sarraute, but also attempt to locate causes for this dilemma in the world at large (rather than the more localized process of exhaustion of techniques Sarraute presented). The common thread (one already identified by Paola Marrati [97-111]) is a loss of belief in the world, not understood as skepticism about the existence of the world (or other people, to mention the two forms of skepticism most often covered by Cavell) but about our connection to it—our capacity to act in it and on it.

Cavell claims in *The World Viewed* that “film satisfy[s] the wish for the magical reproduction of the world by allowing us to view it unseen” (101).

To say that we wish to view the world itself is to say that we are wishing for the condition of its viewing as such. That is our way of establishing our connection with the world: through viewing it, or having views of it. Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen. We do not so much look at the world as look out at it, from behind the self. It is our fantasies, now all but completely thwarted and out of hand, which are unseen and must be kept unseen. As if we could no longer hope that anyone might share them—at just the moment when they are pouring into the streets, less private than ever. So we are less than ever in a position to marry them to the world. (Cavell, *The World Viewed* 102)
What Cavell describes clearly recalls the twofold transformation determined by Heidegger as the world becoming picture and man becoming *subiectum* (Heidegger, “Age of the World Picture” 132), with us looking out from “behind the self” at a world become a view. And Cavell’s diction about our fantasies (“As if we could no longer hope that anyone might share them—at just the moment when they are pouring into the streets, less private than ever”) marks the extremity of that division between self and world in terms that I would recast as one version of the duality of belief I gestured to earlier: private and unsharable fantasies hidden from equally uninternalizable (one might say incredible) public fantasy. For both Heidegger and Cavell this is the consequence of a Cartesian legacy, a separation between subject and object, man and world, that renders our picture of being-in-the-world as one primarily of abstract knowledge. 24

Such a claim casts a very broad historical net, however, indicating a malaise common to an equally amorphous modernity. The relevance of such a claim for my argument becomes clearer in relation to Cavell’s more specific historical argument about film in the post-WWII period, which is marked by the failure of “conviction in the movies’ originating myths and geniuses” (Cavell, *The World Viewed* 62). The films of

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24 See notes 4 and 9 to Heidegger’s “Age of the World Picture” (139-141, 147-153), along with Cavell’s comments about the philosophical experience of trying to “establish an absolutely firm connection” with the world after imagining it as a thing wholly apart from the self (Cavell, *Claim of Reason* 238). These claims seem relevant to the fate of skepticism under secularism insofar as Descartes, having provisionally found grounds for doubt of the world in the early meditations, finds the “unique” link to reground his knowledge of the world in God in the fifth meditation: “Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge about anything else until I became aware of him” (Descartes, *Philosophical Writings II*, 49 [70-71]).
Hollywood “no longer naturally establish conviction in our presentness to the world” (Cavell, *The World Viewed* 60). I take this to be one way of saying that the forms of life depicted in pre-war film are not our own, or that they no longer seem convincing as pictures of our own. The specific “myths” he discusses bear out this conclusion:

We no longer grant, or take it for granted, that men doing the work of the world together are working for the world’s good, or that if they are working for the world’s harm they can be stopped. These beliefs flowered last in our films about the imminence and the experience of the Second World War, then began withering in its aftermath—in the knowledge, and refusal of knowledge, that while we had rescued our European allies, we could not preserve them. [...] It is the knowledge, and refusal to know, that we are ceding to Stalin and to Hitler the permanent victories of the war (if one of them lost the old world battle, he shares the spoils of the present war of the worlds), letting them dictate what shall be meant by communism and socialism and totalitarianism, in particular that they are to be equated. (Cavell, *The World Viewed* 62-3)  

Here, the situation of the cold war eats away at a myth of American heroism, a myth of heroism more generally, and (at its limit) an even more general faith in the efficacy of action on the world (barring that of “the men doing the work of the world together”, from whom Cavell’s “we” is clearly excepted).  

This is, according to Cavell, one way of describing the entrance into modernism of postwar film, a consequence of the failure of its traditional myths to convince us of “our presentness to the world” (due to the failure of film’s “automatisms,” by which he means “modes of achievement” otherwise called genres [Cavell, *The World Viewed* 105]):

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25 Paola Marrati deals briefly with the same passage in Gilles Deleuze, pointing out that it identifies a “lost [...] form of the everyday” no longer available to our new, postwar forms of life (Marrati 111).
26 Terrence Des Pres notes a similar failure of the Western heroic ideal (and indeed, the idea of action more generally as a risking of the self) as a consequence of the death camps. See Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, esp. 3-26 (which discusses “The Survivor in Fiction”), as well as Liesl Olson’s discussion of Des Pres in *Modernism and the Ordinary* 29-30.
“The lapse of conviction in its traditional uses of its automatism forces [film] into modernism; its potentiality for acknowledging that lapse in ways that will redeem its power makes modernism an option for it” (Cavell, *The World Viewed* 103). Modernism is here recast as an acknowledgement of the failure of traditional modes of attunement, one that holds the promise of redemption in some as-yet unimagined form.

This seems the place to link Cavell’s writings on film with those of Gilles Deleuze, who offers a strikingly similar argument about both the problem and the vocation of the cinema in the postwar era. In his two *Cinéma* books (1983, 1985), Deleuze posits a substantial break in the history of cinema coincident with the Second World War. This break, also coinciding with the gap between the volumes, is characterized by Deleuze as a movement from what he calls “l’image-mouvement” to “l’image-temps.” Although Deleuze spends a book apiece explaining these terms in great detail, a brief gloss is still possible. The movement-image describes a form of cinema (associated with classical Hollywood) in which narrative movement and character action and reaction are central, while the time-image emerges through a breakdown of what Deleuze calls “liens sensori-moteurs [sensory-motor links]” (which, as the backbone of movement-image film, involves the rapid transformation of stimulus into response). This breakdown makes apparent in film the passing of time no longer subordinated to movement and response, “un peu de temps à l’état pur” (“a little time in the pure state”; Deleuze, *Cinéma 2* 27, *Cinema 2* 17).
The component of Deleuze’s argument that interests me here is one broached in his chapter on “la pensée et le cinéma,” where he presents this breakdown of the sensory-motor link as a consequence of a larger rift between humanity and world:

C’est le lien de l’homme et du monde qui se trouve rompu. Dès lors, c’est ce lien qui doit devenir objet de croyance : il est l’impossible qui ne peut être redonné qui dans une foi. La croyance ne s’adresse plus à un monde autre, ou transformé. L’homme est dans le monde comme dans un situation optique et sonore pure. La réaction dont l’homme est dépossédé ne peut être remplacé que par la croyance. Seule la croyance au monde peut relier l’homme à ce qu’il voit et entend. […] Chrétiens ou athées, dans notre universelle schizophrénie nous avons besoin de raisons de croire en ce monde. (Deleuze, Cinéma 2 223)

The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible which can only be restored with a faith. Belief is no longer addressed to a different or transformed world. Man is in the world as if in a pure optical and sound situation. The reaction of which man has been dispossessed can be replaced only by belief. Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. […] Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, we need reasons to believe in this world. (Deleuze, Cinema 2 171-2)

According to Deleuze, the apparently natural links enabling the action-image in Hollywood cinema are broken, leaving a rift that can now be healed only by a belief in the world, in our capacity to act upon it.²⁷

In the absence of belief in the world, belief remains divided between private fantasy or opinion and public necessity. On the one hand, we can all hold whatever opinions we like, but those opinions need not lead to action: all the better if they don’t,

²⁷ I consider it fair here to use “natural” in a sense similar to that invoked by Cavell above, treating the easy attunement of people sharing a fundamental form of life (one expressible through the traditional forms or “automatisms” generated from within that form of life). To say that this natural link is severed is also to remark that our form of life has changed, that we now seem alien to an alien world, because we have changed, the world has changed, or both.
since then they need never be tested, abandoned, or modified to accord with the world. (Here again I recall Freud on reality-testing.) On the other side of things, we have externalized belief, the belief of the world rather than our belief in it, appearing as so many structures submitted to cynically. As Slavoj Žižek argues in his critique of Peter Sloterdijk (Žižek, Sublime Object 30-35), this externality of belief corresponds to the level of ideology, which functions as a consequence of objective action, leaving the subject free to believe or doubt whatever he or she likes privately (since these latter beliefs have no efficacy). Such detachment between internal and external belief (which can be at any sort of odds, to various psychic and affective results) is enabled by our lack of belief in the world, which tells us that we cannot remake the world, that we have no connection with it, that we merely experience it as so much externality to be undergone.

Deleuze makes a similar point in a 1990 interview with Antonio Negri, where he returns to the question of belief in the world:

Croire au monde, c’est ce qui nous manque le plus ; nous avons tout à fait perdu le monde, on nous en a dépossédé. Croire au monde, c’est aussi bien susciter des événements même petits qui échappent au contrôle, ou faire naître de nouveaux espaces-temps, même de surface ou de volume réduits. C’est ce que vous appelez pietâs. (Deleuze, Pourparlers 239)

What we lack most is belief in the world, we’ve quite lost the world, it’s been taken from us. If you believe in the world you precipitate events, however inconspicuous, that elude control, you engender new space-times, however small their surface or volume. It’s what you call pietas. (Deleuze, Negotiations 176)

This later statement, which shows that Deleuze thought this idea of belief in the world had a scope exceeding postwar cinema (although the concept emerged from his engagement with it), focuses on the political implications of belief in the world,
specifically the claim that it not only enables action in the world, but demands it. Belief is now also indicated explicitly as a secularized religious category through the invocation of piety (a term raised by Negri in his question), suggesting a demand for a binding of a people back to the world.

Given this secularized and immanent religious context, Deleuze goes on to give us a late version of the modernist idea of salvation by art. In *Cinéma 2*, Deleuze is clear that art bears the vocation of producing this belief, of creating new ties with the world more suitable to our new forms of life. He glosses Rossellini to make this point: “moins le monde est humain, plus il appartient à l’artiste de croire et de faire croire à un rapport de l’homme avec le monde, puisque le monde est fait par les hommes” (“the less human the world is, the more it is the artist’s duty to believe and produce belief in a relation between man and the world, because the world is made by men”; Deleuze, *Cinéma 2* 27, *Cinema 2* 171). I deal in more detail below with the logic behind the implication that the world, made by humans, is becoming less human; now, I want to remark the ethical vocation of the artist Deleuze proposes, that art must create belief.

To return to Cavell’s claim that film’s modernism entails “acknowledging that lapse [the lapse of conviction in traditional ways of establishing our rapport with the world] in ways that will redeem its power,” part of the vocation of modernist art, precisely that part that occasions suspicion, is to acknowledge the inadequacies of older forms of art to our new situations, our new forms of life, in a productive way. Both

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Deleuze and Cavell, in otherwise radically different ways, affirm this. The postwar period may well be the modernist moment of cinema (as Cavell claims explicitly and Deleuze implies), but it also characterizes the problem of belief faced in what I am calling late modernism. Sarraute’s “ère du soupçon” is one way of naming an era in which our fictions no longer seem adequate to the reality they face, which no longer establish a sense of our “presentness to the world” (to use Cavell’s terms) or produce a “croyance au monde” (to use Deleuze’s). Part of this mission included the challenge of producing credible fictions, but another, more difficult challenge was in restoring faith in the basic power of fiction to grasp and affect reality. This is one of the fundamental situations faced by all the authors I discuss, and they employ the afterlife in different ways to respond to the challenges mentioned above, through metatheatrical, metafilmic, and metafictional critique of attitudes that abandon the ambiguity of the world (Sartre and Beauvoir), parodic heteroglossia and allegory (Lewis), the modernist fantastic (O’Brien), and world reduction (Beckett).

Fictions of the afterlife come to thematize the question of the relation between human and world openly, throwing one or more posthuman and posthumous characters into a wholly new world. Unlike classical katabasis, these dead have no heroic quest, are not heroes in any case, and are there for good. Fictions of the afterlife also openly ask basic questions that follow from Deleuze’s premise: what does it mean to

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29 This gets into the larger question of whether film was ever anything but a modernist medium. This goes far beyond the bounds of my project and expertise.
believe in a world, how does one avoid such belief, and is it possible to fully disbelieve in the world?

**The Serialization of Time**

This sense that the old fictions had failed, perhaps that fiction *tout court* had failed, that it had led Europe only to war, compromise, tolerance of the intolerable, genocide or the willful ignorance thereof, to inauthenticity, to pernicious images of heroism and the idea that there would be some sort of home to return to, to all this and more, offers one explanation for the schismatic variant of apocalypticism that Frank Kermode was calling “late modernism” as early as 1965 (Kermode 103). This is not a new thought; it is, for example, of a piece with Benjamin’s famous idea of the “aestheticization of politics” (Benjamin, “Work of Art” 122) under fascism (although, as his less-frequently cited counter-proposal of the communist “politicization of art” shows, he was not ready to give up on art in the mid-1930s), with Kermode’s own observation “that modernist radicalism in art […] involves the creation of fictions which may be dangerous in the dispositions they breed towards the world” (Kermode 111), and with the whole rush of relief and excitement that greeted the early days of celebratory postmodernism. My purpose in returning to it is not to muddy the waters with the idea of late modernism (that deed is already done), but to look more closely at the temporal consequences of this schismatic apocalypticism.

That is, after all, Kermode’s basic motive for talking about it at all in *The Sense of an Ending*. There, he claims that “what distinguishes the new from the old modernism
most sharply in this context is not that one is more apocalyptic than the other but that they have such different attitudes to the past. To the older it is a source of order; to the newer it is that which ought to be ignored” (Kermode 115). This is the source, for him, of the schismatic drive that underlies late modernism’s break with paradigm and intelligibility. In the preceding section I suggested some reasons for this (both literary and extra-literary), centered around Deleuze’s idea of a loss of belief in the world. Kermode, however, is speaking of late modernism’s sense of relation to its own past (modernism itself), rather than the temporality represented in it. This latter, I suggest, offers a similar rupture within temporality, one stemming from an absolutization of the modernist division between the everyday and the moment. The result is something I call the serialization of time.

The assertion that modernism is marked by such a division does not seem to require much support. Ezra Pound’s famous letter about the Cantos notes his search for “the ‘magic moment’ or moment of metamorphosis, bust thru from quotidian into ‘divine or permanent worlds’” (Pound 210). A laundry list of similar terms can easily be compiled: Joyce’s “epiphany,” Woolf’s “moment,” Proust’s instance of “mémoire involontaire.” All of these terms deal in a division (some stronger than others—few as strong as Pound’s) between the mere passage of time (sometimes aligned with clock time, sometimes with everydayness) and meaningful time. Even modernists who set clock time and everyday time in opposition (such as Woolf) invoke in places the unique event that breaks into everyday time. So, for example, Mrs. Dalloway operates primarily
with the opposition of monumental time with private or everyday time, but the novel is also shaken by the event of Septimus’s death.\(^{30}\) Whether this moment is read as melodrama (the folly of madness that Clarissa’s everydayness can correct or absorb) or a moment of extreme meaning, the opposition remains.

Kermode treats this as the distinction between \textit{chronos} and \textit{kairos}, the mere passing of time and the moment charged with meaning: “\textit{[C]hronos} is ‘passing time’ or ‘waiting time’—that which, according to Revelation, ‘shall be no more’—and \textit{kairos} is the season, a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end” (Kermode 47).\(^{31}\) As the Greek terms suggest, this opposition is much older than modernism, but the terms take on an added significance in the works of modernist authors, who found themselves charged with the task of rejuvenating an everyday life that seemed bereft of meaning.

My point here, however, is not to simply to return to this opposition once again, but rather to argue that it was, for most modernist authors, not an absolute distinction. Hence the very project of redeeming everyday life in the modern world, through mythic means or otherwise. Liesl Olson’s \textit{Modernism and the Ordinary} (2009) seeks to remedy the emphasis on the event in modernist studies by examining how modernist writing doesn’t treat the everyday as merely meaningless and fallen. The point is clear and the

\(^{30}\) I draw my terms from Paul Ricoeur’s discussion of the novel in volume 2 of \textit{Time and Narrative} (Ricoeur 2.101-112.

\(^{31}\) In Chapter 1, I explore this idea in more detail through an analysis of Sartre and Beauvoir’s divergent treatments of Heidegger’s “being-toward-death,” worked out in counterfactual fiction based on premises of the afterlife or immortality.
readings interesting, but one wonders, after looking at the works themselves (Ulysses, Mrs. Dalloway, Mrs. Reynolds), how anyone could ever have thought otherwise. This seems to be the moment to return to Jameson’s discussion of the ideology of modernism in A Singular Modernity. This strikes me as a prime example of the retroactive application of absolute distinctions generated in the late modernist period and marshaled to constitute the “modernist moment” itself (on this, see Jameson, Singular Modernity 179, 209-10).32

Such a distinction is not merely ideology, however; it has its formal correlate in the literary production of late modernism. This literature breaks apart the everyday and the evental, treating the one as purely fallen, a mechanical repetition of the same, and the other as an absolute break with the present.33 Olson also notes this change in approach to the everyday from modernism to late modernism, and correlates it—and the rise of the “everyday theory” of Barthes and Lefebvre—with material changes in everyday life in postwar France (Olson 13). Such an absolute division of time into a static and empty everyday and an elusive event that one does not “suscite” (to use Deleuze’s term) but merely awaits seems to me to be a concomitant feature of loss of belief in the world.

32 David L. Pike’s writing about the employment of the descensus ad infernus to simultaneously rewrite and transcend the past can give us a sense of how afterlife fiction functioned in late modernism’s retroactive constitution of modernism. I discuss Pike below.

33 Thinking of the dispute between the two giant French philosophers of immanence (a dispute largely manufactured by the survivor), I am tempted to call Gilles Deleuze a modernist thinker of the event and Alain Badiou a late modernist. This claim is more cheeky than rigorous, and, at any rate, would take me far astray at present, so I will follow it no further here.
I call this form of temporality the serialization of time, partly in reference to actual serials (which generate a similar form of time, where crises punctuate the narrative regularly but never change anything, returning us to the same place week after week), but also to note the connection between this form of time and the isolating function of institutional forms (and mass media) that Sartre calls “seriality.” In fictions of the afterlife, this takes up the eternity of the afterworld as a degraded and intolerable everyday punctuated by purely external cataclysms (or the perpetual promise of such cataclysm). Such a temporality explains the anxious tone that pervades so many late modernist works, which exploit this sense of an everyday at once meaningless and perpetually under threat.

The Image of a Fully Built World

In 1951, Roger Caillois published a short essay on the representation of death and the afterlife in American film (mostly of the late 1930s and 1940s). There, he noted the prevalence of “un au-delà administatif” (“an administrative afterworld”; Caillois, “Représentation de la mort” 116), one that struck him for its banality and for its lack of tension:

34 I discuss seriality briefly in the following section of this Introduction, and in more detail in Chapter 4. 35 This essay, “La Mort dans le cinéma américaine” originally appeared in Quatre essais de sociologie contemporaine (Paris: Olivier Perrin, 1951) 17-23. A revised version, “La représentation de la mort dans le cinéma américain” appears in Instincts et société (Paris: Gonthier, 1964) 115-129. My citations are to this later version. The films Caillois mentions are Death Takes a Holiday (1934), On Borrowed Time (1939), Here Comes Mr. Jordan (1941), Heaven Can Wait (1943), and It’s a Wonderful Life (1946), as well as the influences of these films on Powell and Pressburger’s A Matter of Life and Death (1946) and Sartre and Delannoy’s Les jeux sont faits (1947).
Un ordre parfait règne dans cette administration gigantesque. [...] L’autre monde se présente ainsi sous un aspect bureaucratique qui l’apparente à la réalité et la prolonge. On ne s’y trouve nullement dépayssé. Les fonctionnaires sont affables et complaisants. Rien d’essentiel ne les distingue, sinon leur cordialité, de ceux à qui chacun a eu affaire sa vie durant. On cesse de relever d’une administration pour dépendre d’une autre, presque identique à la première. (Caillois, “Représentation de la mort” 118-119)

[A perfect order reigns in this immense administration. [...] The other world presents itself in this way under a bureaucratic aspect both similar to and prolonging reality. One finds there no transcendence. The functionaries are friendly and accommodating. Nothing important distinguishes them, save their cordiality, from those with whom we all traffic while alive. One ceases to rely on one administration only to depend on another, almost identical to the first.]

Unlike those afterlives I examine here, which are fraught with difficulty and in which any kindness breeds (justified) suspicion rather than pleasure, these secularized filmic afterlives strike Caillois as patently dull: a mere transposition of the features of this world into the next. These representations perform a reassuring function (Caillois calls it a “mythologie rassurante” [125]), domesticating death and making it appear both palatable and insignificant.

Returning to these films in Obliques (1975), Caillois repeats a similar description, adding the following summary judgment on it:

La première représentation de l’au-delà imaginée par le monde moderne est, comme il faut s’y attendre, à sa ressemblance : bureaucratique et administratif. Il est dû pour l’essentiel au cinéma américain. [...] Ce modèle, semble-t-il, fit long feu. Situé dans l’au-delà, il heurtait la vraisemblance, tout en y transposant ce que l’existence quotidienne avait de plus terne. Il prolongeait dans l’autre monde une monotonie bien répartie, ni alléchante ni terrifiante. (Caillois, Obliques 225)

The modern world’s first representation of the Beyond was in its own image—as might be expected. It was bureaucratic and administrative, essentially derived from American films. [...] Apparently, this model turned out to be unsatisfactory. It seemed implausible because it was located in the Beyond; at the
same time, it simply transposed there the dullest measures of everyday life. It extended into the next world a well-balanced monotony that was neither alluring nor frightening. (Caillois, “Metamorphoses of Hell” 303-4)

Caillois goes on to argue that the evaluative aspects of the afterlife (lost in this “everyday” afterworld invented by the Americans) found themselves transposed not onto another world but into this one, which holds images of such excessive pleasure (now salacious and bodily rather than contemplative) and pain (as in the concentration camps) as to make the literal afterworld seem irrelevant.

In making this move, which led Caillois ultimately to science fiction as the new source of the best and worst we moderns can imagine (placing him in the company of Kingsley Amis, who titled his 1960 book on sci fi New Maps of Hell), Caillois left behind the question of the fate of this everyday, bureaucratic afterworld. It is this thread that I would like to follow, the rapid transformation of the figure of the bureaucratic afterworld from a comforting fantasy of a fully-domesticated and humanized land of the dead to the nightmarish bureaucracies of fictions of the afterlife. These latter still give us a vision of everyday life, but one in which the banalities of bureaucratic authority have become intolerable rather than comforting. I do not want to suggest, as Caillios did in the first version of the essay (“Représentation de la mort” 126-127), that this is merely a cultural difference between America and Europe (although I wouldn’t discount the possibility as a partial explanation). Instead, drawing on the work of Rosalind Williams and Jean-Paul Sartre, I argue that this transition is part of an internal dialectic of the fully
humanized world, where the most familiar rapidly metamorphoses into the most alien and alienating.

In her *Notes on the Underground*, Williams identifies the image of the underground as a significant cultural site for registering the modern ambiguities of a fully built environment. Seen as a consequence of “humanity’s decision to *unbind* itself from the soil” (Williams 2), the enclosed and artificial space of the underground (broadly defined by Williams to include both literally subterranean spaces as well as fantastic and secular versions of the classical underworld) figures a new “technological environment” which, although human in origin, appears both alien and incomprehensible to those dwelling within it. Such a dialectical reversal from the fully human (a negation of the natural world) to the absolutely inhuman (a negation of the negation) is figured, she argues, in an “underground aesthetics” that moves from the “technological sublimity” of the literally built world to the “aesthetics of magic” where this world becomes fantastic and often demonic in origin (Williams 82-120).

This experiential and cultural registration of a sense of the inhumanity of the fully human finds a more general theorization in Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of the “pratico-inerte”: the field of previously worked matter appearing to actors in the present as so many impediments to further praxis. “[E]lle transforme la *praxis* humaine […] en *antipraxis*, c’est-à-dire en *praxis sans auteur* et dépassant le donné vers des fins rigides dont le sens caché est la contre-finalité” (“[I]t transforms human *praxis* into *antipraxis*,

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that is to say, into a *praxis without an author*, transcending the given toward rigid ends, whose hidden meaning is counter-finality”; CRD 276, CDR 166).

This concept, developed as part of Sartre’s (necessarily incomplete) attempt to reconcile his commitment to individual freedom with a totalized meaning of History over the course of the 1950s, is regularly figured in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) through the invocation of Hell: hence the “circularités infernales” (“infernal circularities”; CRD190, CDR 76) of a totalization without a totalizer, the “enfer tournant du champ de passivité pratique” (“shifting hell of the field of practical passivity”; CRD 329, CDR 219), the “existence du champ pratico-inerte” as “l’enfer comme la négation de sa négation [praxis’ negation]” (“existence of the practico-inert field” as “hell as the negation of [praxis’] negation”; CRD 357n, CDR 248n), the “machine infernale du champs pratico-inerte” (“infernal machine of the practico-inert field”; CRD 798, CDR 717), and the “enfer pratico-inerte” (“practico-inert hell”; CRD 798, CDR 718) of the Algerian colonial system. Such an imaginary only updates Garcin’s oft-quoted line in *Huis clos* (”l’enfer, c’est les Autres”) for an analysis of historical exigency (rather than the individual struggle for recognition), since the practico-inert is simply the combined product of previous human praxis.36

The *Critique of Dialectical Reason* tells a tale (moving, on the model of Marx’s *Capital*, from the abstract to the concrete) of paradise (re)gained and lost on the plane of

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36 As Hazel Barnes notes in her 1973 book on Sartre, he recasts the meaning of the line from *Huis clos* in these terms in an 1964 interview with *Playboy* magazine. See Barnes 104-5 for a brief but insightful treatment of this shift in Sartré’s attribution of meaning to the play from the mid-1940s to the 1960s. I discuss *Huis clos* in detail in Chapter 1.
social organization. Beginning with what Sartre calls “la sérialité,” a basic structure of social being based on external coordination from the practico-inert field (in which the being of each member is found outside of him- or herself in a constituted social form), Sartre moves to the negation of the coordinated separation of seriality in the “fused group [groupe en fusion],” then proceeds to the reintroduction of inertia back into the group to preserve its existence and function beyond the situation of its spontaneous emergence. (This step is necessary, since the group has no being outside of its praxis.) Sartre argues that the ultimate end and limit of this reintroduction of inertia into the group is to be found in bureaucracy, the formal and fatal limit to the process of institutionalization.

The bureaucratization of a sovereign group derives from its use of serialization (massification through “other-direction”: the production of alterity to prevent the formation of groups) to govern. This serialization, however, reacts back on the governing group, reproducing inertia at all levels but the highest point at the top of the hierarchy (CRD 738, CDR 655). According to Sartre, the manipulation (other-direction) of the serial masses by local leaders of sub-groups within the hierarchy reacts back on

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37 Sartre offers many examples of serial “collectives” in the Critique. His first is that of people waiting for a bus: as one can see, the being of the each individual as part of the collective is the product not of group but individual praxis (the desire to get from here to there), coordinated through the external arrangement of the entire public transit system (CRD 364-377, CDR 256-269). His following examples (a radio broadcast, the determination of price and value in the market, the spread of rumor during the Great Fear, and the class-being of the French proletariat) give an idea of the scope of this concept, one central contribution of the Critique to the Marxist discourse on alienation. I discuss the formal structure of seriality in more detail in Chapter 4.

38 I use the English “other-direction” rather than the French “extéro-conditionnement” because Sartre takes the term from American sociologist David Reisman (CRD 727, CDR 643). Resiman’s analysis of this process can be found in The Lonely Crowd (1950).
those sub-groups, reifying those relations: “La différence entre le dirigeant local et l’individu dirigé est presque insaisissable: tous deux sont sérialisés, tous deux vivent, agissent et pensent sériellement; mais le dirigeant pense la sérialité de l’Autre et agit sériellement sur les séries extéro-conditionnées” (“The difference between the local leader and the led individual is almost imperceptible: they are both serialized, and both of them live, act and think serially; but the leader thinks the seriality of the Other and acts serially on other-directed series”; CRD 740, CDR 656). This functionary can no longer imagine a popular praxis and thinks of dissent only in serial terms (captured by Sartre’s discussion of the “meneur” [“trouble-maker”; CRD 739, CDR 656]). The local leader therefore fails to mediate between the serial collective and the top of the hierarchy. He or she treats the people in a purely instrumental way, as a material body to be manipulated.

However, the local leader is just one more serial body to be manipulated from the level above in the institutional hierarchy, and so on. This has the effect of remplaçant à tous les degrés l’activité réelle par l’inerte pratique de la matière ouvrière. […] La paralysie du système remonte nécessairement des séries dirigées jusqu’au sommet, le souverain seul […] n’est pas touché. Ou plutôt il est affecté de passivité en tant qu’individu totalisant, il devient inorganique par en dessous, dans les profondeurs de la hiérarchie; mais nul supérieur ne peut le transformer en chose. (CRD 740-741)

replacing real activity by the inert practice of worked matter at every level. […] The paralysis of the system necessarily rises from the series which are led to the top, the sovereign alone […] remaining unaffected. Or rather he is affected with passivity as a totalizing individual; he becomes inorganic from below, from the depths of the hierarchy; but there is no superior who can transform him into a thing. (CDR 657)
This creeping petrification from below gives us the “triple rapport” of bureaucracy: other-direction of the masses, mistrust and terror of ones peers, and the “annihilation des organismes dans l’obéissance à l’organisme supérieur” (“annihilation of organisms in obedience to the superior organism”; CRD 741, CDR 658). Sartre goes as far as to call this a “suppression totale de l’humain [total suppression of the human]” and “la minéralisation de l’homme [the mineralization of man]” everywhere but at the level of the sovereign individual or sub-group (CRD 741, 742; CDR 658). The end result of this process, for Sartre, is generally self-destruction, since through this process “l’impuissance des masses devient l’impuissance du souverain” (“the impotence of the masses becomes the impotence of the sovereign”; CRD 742, CDR 658).

At this point, we reencounter the dialectical logic described by Williams above, now shifted from the logic of environment (world) to the social: the dream of total social planning leads to the total dehumanization of all actors, leaving the leader at the head of a petrified and ineffective machine. I have presented Sartre’s theory of bureaucracy at such length not because it is the final word on the subject, but to show how bureaucracy came to figure at a specific historical moment (that of the European left’s engagement with the fact of Stalin’s brutalities, an explicit context for Sartre’s Critique, but also the postwar “colonization of everyday life” by American technology, welfare state
apparatuses, and consumer culture)³⁹ the social consequences of the full humanization of the world through a nightmarish dialectical reversal.

This idea of bureaucratization as complete dehumanization is given its most dramatic form in fictions of the afterlife. Even the dystopias of Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell all include some gesture to an outside, whether this be the area beyond the Green Wall or the Malpais reservation. In contrast, the divine order of the afterworld, created and ordered by a presumably Absolute authority in a metaphysical as well as political sense, offers no vision of another place. The world from which its inhabitants came, our world, is closed to all, and the fictional edifice in which they must now exist is made for them but not by them, the very image of a fully built world. Such a closed, ready-made, and administered afterworld, an exaggeration of actual social trends in the late modern period, presents difficulties for our traditional images of belief, of action, of freedom, and of change. At its most pessimistic, it threatens either to negate the terms absolutely or to render them irrelevant. To show how it does so, I must define the subgenre more precisely.

³⁹ Henri Lefebvre, who shared the slogan “colonization of everyday life” with the Situationists, went so far as to propose the term “société bureaucratique de consommation dirigée [bureaucratic society of controlled consumption]” for the emergent postwar France (Lefebvre, Everyday Life in the Modern World 60). Sartre notes Stalinism as a precondition for the entire Critique (CRD 165-167, CDR 49-51). He discusses Stalinism in the section on bureaucracy, but notes that bureaucratization takes place in capitalist as well as socialist states. He explains the extremity of bureaucratization under Stalin by noting that class tensions make it impossible for the entire system to petrify in this way, and that the action of a sovereign in a class-based society will be based primarily in politics rather than a repressive police-state (CRD 742, CDR 658-9).
In this section, I describe the basic traits of fictions of the afterlife and give a general picture of the way they respond to the situations of late modernism discussed above. In order to clarify the specificity of fictions of the afterlife, I briefly survey previous types of afterlife writing to show what fictions of the afterlife draw from them as well as what renders them distinct.

Classical depictions of the afterlife in fiction were largely either examples of epic descent narratives or dialogues of the dead. The former, used episodically in classical epic and expanded into a full-blown work in Dante, sent a living hero or poet on a quest into the underworld to rejuvenate the world of the living. The latter employed the resources of the afterlife to put various historical and/or fictional characters into conversation for the purposes of satire and philosophical argument.

Of the two, descent narratives are by far the better known, with famous classical examples in Book XI of the *Odyssey* and Book VI of the *Aeneid*. David L. Pike identifies the *descensus* as a way of authorizing and defining the new through a strong rereading and rewriting of the past:

> The descent to the underworld functions simultaneously as a repository for the past and as a crucible in which that repository is melted down to be recast as something other than what it had been. The most characteristic strategy of the descent is to stress its own complexity and novelty in contrast with a simple and outmoded past, a past newly reconstituted as such by the new act of descent. (Pike 2)\(^40\)

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\(^{40}\) As Pike argues in *Passage through Hell*, this function persists into the twentieth century. It can be seen most clearly in fictions of the afterlife in Lewis’s and O’Brien’s treatments of James Joyce. On this, see Chapters 2 and 3 below.
Within the larger category of heroic descent, two basic tropes (often but not always combined) are to be distinguished: the *katabasis*, which refers to the actual descent, and the *nekyia*, or summoning of the dead (a variant of the shamanistic *nekyomanteia*), which serves a ritual function of summoning the past in order to overcome it toward a future.\(^4\)

The actual *katabasis*, whose heroic function is emblematized by Heracles’ descent to retrieve Cerberus (briefly invoked in *Odyssey* XI.741-745, 205), emphasizes the difficulty of the journey and return, and is a narrative in its own right (whereas *nekyia* tends to indicate a larger narrative turning point by stopping that narrative to allow the dead to tell their tales). This is the active portion of the descent, in which the hero is tested and proves himself worthy of the temporal synthesis (sublation) promised by the *nekyia*.

Odysseus’s journey to summon Teiresias amid the “crumbling homes of Death” (*Odyssey* X.568, 181) explicitly indicates the temporal synthesis lying at the heart of the heroic *nekyia*, while also bluntly stating its reliance on *katabasis*: “We must go / to the cold homes of Death and pale Perséphoné / to hear Teirêsias tell of time to come” (*Odyssey* X.623-625, 182). As David L. Pike argues, *nekyia* serves a mythic function based around “a hero’s rite of passage, a leave-taking from the past and orientation toward the

\(^4\) The critical literature is obviously extensive. I draw most heavily from Pike (6-7) and Stroumsa in the following discussion. Falconer discusses the “generic features of katabatic narrative,” but in a way that refuses to differentiate from literal and figurative *katabases* and which devotes little attention to the difference between *katabasis* and *nekyia* (42-47). Segal also offers a synthetic but often brief overview of classical *nekyia* and *katabases* focused more on the representation of the afterworld than on the literary function of the tropes (204-247).
future, and the prophetic voice related to it” (Pike 6). This function is clear in Aeneid VI as well, which locates Aeneas’s katabasis at the center of his empire-building mission, using Anchises’ prophecy to build a mythological link between his own ancestry and the founding of Rome (Aeneid VI.1014-1202).

Alongside these heroic narratives of descent, we find as well their mocking doubles: classical satires of descent narratives that reverse the functionality of heroic descent, submitting the present to the judgment of the past rather than emphasizing the present’s use of the past in the service of a different future. This conservative aspect of satiric descents is apparent in the narrative of The Frogs (405 BC), in which Dionysus, despairing of finding a living poet of quality, travels to the land of the dead to retrieve Euripides. Once there, Aeschylus and Euripides engage in an “abstruse and mighty battle / Of profound and learned prattle” (Plays of Aristophanes 281) to determine which is to be considered the greatest tragedian of all time. At the end of the play, Dionysus chooses Aeschylus as the winner of the contest and decides to rescue him rather than Euripides from the underworld. This ruling, and the satire leading up to it, favors the dead to living playwrights, as well as the more seasoned Aeschylus to the recently deceased Euripides. The play closes with an equally dismal appraisal of the present in

42 Less persuasively, Pike claims that, in contrast to nekyia’s mythologizing function, katabasis serves a satirical and historical function by linking the land of the dead to living history through allegory. Curiously, he cites Aristophanes’ The Frogs and Lucian’s Voyage to the Underworld as his principal examples (Pike 7). While I don’t want to argue that katabasis cannot be parodied or used for the purposes of satire (quite the opposite, in fact), I find Pike’s easy dualism (nekyia is mythic, katabasis historical) to ignore the original function of katabasis as a proof of heroism, taking the parody of the thing in Lucian and Aristophanes for the thing itself. I discuss the parodic moment of Menippean satire (of which we can count both of Pike’s examples) below.
politics, gesturing to the idea of recalling Alcibiades with the chorus’s exhortation that Athens, “fatigued with wars and long revolution, / At length be brought to return to just and wise resolutions” (Plays of Aristophanes 306).

The satiric tone of The Frogs focuses on the concrete and base aspects of death and the afterworld, mocking the heroic pretentions of epic. When Dionysus asks Heracles for the “shortest road and the most convenient one” to reach the afterworld, for example, Heracles suggests he take “The Hanging Road,” “the Hemlock,” or a jump off a tall tower (Plays of Aristophanes 238). This not only mocks Dionysus’s laziness in seeking the “most convenient path,” but also Circe’s laborious description of how Odysseus is to reach the land of the dead in the Odyssey (X.540-597). Heracles continues this mockery with an explicit parody of such directions, promising “serpents, and wild beasts, and monsters, / (Suddenly, and with a shout in [Dionysus’s] ear) / Horrific to behold!” (Plays of Aristophanes 239). Dionysus never encounters such monsters, only the eponymous “chorus of Frogs—uncommon musical Frogs” (Plays of Aristophanes 243), offering what John Hookham Frere calls a parody of the tunelessness of “contemporary dramatical lyrics” (Plays of Aristophanes 243).

This satiric approach to the land of the dead is continued with the later subgenre of dialogues of the dead (originating with Lucian of Samosata, 125-180 AD). These dialogues have a long history, leading from Lucian through Erasmus, Fontenelle,
Fénelon, Prior, Lyttelton, Montagu, and into the 20th century with authors like Lytton Strachey. Frederick M. Keener, from whom I take much of my understanding of dialogues of the dead, defines the subgenre by noting the divergences from descent narratives:

The genre Lucian established represents the conversations, in Hades and its environs, of shades and infernal deities. There is no narrative frame; the dead are overheard, an important point because it serves to separate the dialogue of the dead from the most prominent of the genres that it resembles, the narrative of a passage to the realm of the dead. […] The dialogue of the dead, it may be thought, amounts to the equivalent of a conversation excerpted from these narratives, and in some cases that is true. But in general it is not, for the dead behave otherwise when alone and simply overheard than they do when consciously speaking to, or for the benefit of, the living. (Keener 4)

These dialogues take their initial formal traits from philosophical dialogue, but expand the range of representable personages and positions by drawing from the ranks of the dead. A dialogic form by definition, they present not a single view, but the conflict of differing positions within an abstract frame separated from action by the conceit of the afterworld (where there remains nothing for the shades to do but talk) and the minimization of plot even within this circumscribed half-world.44 Most are quite short, establishing the figures in conversation and then allowing the ideas to play out, either to the rhetorical victory of one of the speakers or a stalemate in which each of the two or more sides present their positions and refuse to budge. When they do contain actions,

44 Narrative is not entirely eliminated, as in Lucian’s Dialogue 22 (Charon, Menippus, Hermes), which depicts Menippus tricking Charon into giving him passage without payment (Lucian 203-205). In keeping with the restrictions of the subgenre, the brief plot is communicated with only dialogue, using no external description or narration of action.
these are generally communicated through dialogue, with little or (more often) no description.

Lucian is generally credited with inventing the subgenre, and his satirical use of the leveling power of the underworld (which treats all shades alike, regardless of social standing) and the Cynic trickster Mennipus has led to the association of the entire subgenre with satire. It is not possible to affirm the full identity of dialogues of the dead with satire, but it remains a common use of the subgenre due partly to the irony generated from placing current intellectual fashion against the wisdom of the past. Northrop Frye, for instance, notes it as an early form of Menippean satire (rapidly renamed “anatomy” to furnish Frye with one of his major genres as well as the title of his most famous book):

The Menippean satire deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes. Pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds are handled in terms of their occupational approach to life as distinct from their social behavior. The Menippean satire thus resembles the confession in its ability to handle abstract ideas and theories, and differs from the novel in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic, and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent. (Frye 309)

As Frye goes on to note, this satirical attitude draws on “a combination of fantasy and morality” (Frye 310), with most instantiations tending toward one pole or the other. Frye marks Menippean satires (and the more specific subgenre of dialogues of the dead) as primarily fictions of ideas, ones tending toward the abstract and philosophical. Yet

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45 Keener notes a similar distinction in dialogues of the dead, writing that “the trappings of Hades receive scant mention when a dialogue seems designed to be serious in every respect, when burlesque is out of order” (Keener 10).
his inclusion of fantasy alongside morality implicitly acknowledges the desublimatory aspect of satire, which often marks folly on the body (as in Swift or Rabelais) in a concrete or grotesque manner. While Menippean satire as described by Frye goes far beyond the bounds of dialogues of the dead (sometimes reincorporating them into larger forms, as with Swift’s satirical Glubbdubdribian nekyia in Book 3 of Gulliver’s Travels), it takes from dialogues of the dead this conjunction of fantasy and morality.

The other major precursor to fictions of the afterlife is, of course, Dante’s Commedia, which expands the localized epic motifs of katabasis and nekyia into an allegorical depiction of the Christian afterlife.46 Since my main purpose is to introduce the novelty of twentieth-century fictions of the afterlife, I will keep my remarks here to a minimum, focusing on basic shifts in approach to and function of the afterworld in Dante’s poem. Dante continues the classical use of the descensus ad infernos to transform previous narratives of descent into predecessors now superseded, most obviously through the use of Virgil as guide, but also with the appearance of Ulysses in the Eighth Circle of Hell.47 However, Dante has a higher authority to appeal to in his rewriting of the past, and he makes the most of it, offering justifications beyond that of heroism and poetic prowess to explain his treatments of past katabases.

46 Although the tradition of katabasis and nekyia outweigh that of satire in Dante, remnants of the latter persist in the Inferno, as in Barbariccia’s march signal in Inferno XXI.139 or the Navarrese barrator’s trickery in Inferno XXII. The chaotic and cynical character of Menippean satire is tamed, however, through the divine order behind the system.

47 David Adams provides a useful reading of Ulysses in Inferno XXVI in Colonial Odysseys 26-32.
The transition from classical to Christian cosmologies also affects the function of the space of the afterworld, providing an ordered pattern to replace the more vague organization of shadow, darkness, and mist in Hades. Virgil, in sending Aeneas beyond Avernus into the land of the dead, had already begun the creation of a coherent geography of the underworld. But Dante’s systematization of the afterworld according to categories of sin and forms of love marks a qualitatively new representational structure, formalizing the breaks between Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso from the more casual geographies of Elysium, Dis, and Tartarus in Aeneid VI.724-8. This divine ordering turns cosmology into narrative space and simultaneously reduces time to the simultaneity of synchrony.48 This allegorical time is mitigated only by the presence of the poet, who allows for a temporal presentation of a synchronic system. The one exception to the fundamental synchrony of the Commedia is the singular Christian event, instantiated most vividly in Christ’s harrowing of hell (narrated by Virgil in Inferno IV.52-63).

This systematization also changes the role of the dead made to speak. While they retain their status as individuals with specific histories and passions, those histories are yoked to the allegorical moral and cosmological system within which they find their place.49 Part of the punishment in the Inferno and reward of the Paradiso is to know why one is where one is, and the dead (with differing degrees of veracity) are capable of

48 This is Bakhtin’s basic description of the allegorical chronotope, of which the Commedia serves as the principal example (Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination 156-158).
49 This is one of Auerbach’s basic claims about Dante’s novelty: his rooting of absolute value and infinite truth in the “earthly unity of his personality” (Auerbach, Dante 90-91).
relating this to Dante. Even those with the limited mobility of purgation know why they must pay penance and understand how their current actions will lead to their ascent. One part of Virgil and Beatrice’s role as guides is to ensure that the pilgrim is aware of the overall pattern and does not get lost in details of local narratives, which sometimes threaten to break away from the system in their solicitation of interest from the poet.50

Although there are numerous depictions of the afterlife between the fourteenth and twentieth centuries, no texts weigh as heavily on twentieth century afterlife writing as does the *Commedia*. Rather than attempt a full survey of fictional representations of the afterlife between Dante and the twentieth century, I mention here only those few texts that were widely enough regarded or known to have a significant influence on fictions of the afterlife. Henry Fielding’s *A Journey from this World to the Next* (1743) stands as a first major novelization of the afterlife, following an unnamed first person narrator from his death through the “City of Diseases” and the “Palace of Death,” leading finally to judgment by Minos and entry into Elysium. Once there, the text becomes an excuse for Fielding to give short vignettes of different lives (all past lives of Julian the apostate). It draws heavily from Lucian, but shifts the form to include narration as well as dialogue (and it novelizes that dialogue rather than presenting it in dramatic form). Much of his humor in the text is based on the premise that the dead are not significantly unlike us (that they, for example, cannot see in the dark simply because

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50 Bakhtin describes this as a tension between the “horizontal time-saturated branches” of individuals’ stories and “the extratemporal vertical of the Dantesque world” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 158).
they are dead), or in the juxtapositions of figures from different social classes. Its main importance is in the novelty of bringing the idea of everyday life into the afterworld.

John Kendrick Bangs continues in this vein of using the afterworld for the purpose of light satire, smoothing over the rougher edges of Fielding while maintaining the idea of updating dialogues of the dead in a prose fiction format. His first of such books, *A House-Boat on the Styx: Being Some Account of the Divers Doings of the Associated Shades* (1897), consists largely of short conversations between the dead in a club atmosphere (a characteristic joke is the premise that everyone but Shakespeare claims to have written one of his plays—even who lived long after his day). The one bit of interest comes when Bangs begins using fictional and historical personages in new narratives, giving them things to do in the afterworld. At the end of *A House-Boat on the Styx*, for example, Captain Kidd, in league with a group of other pirates, steals the house-boat while the shades are away, leading into the adventures of *The Pursuit of the Houseboat* (in which Sherlock Holmes leads Socrates, Sir Walter Raleigh, Noah, and others to reclaim the boat). It is this invention that led science fiction fan communities to grace afterlife fiction with his name. The conceit of using all of history (and sometimes fiction, as with Bangs) as a repository of characters to be placed side by side in new adventures was later expanded and given science fiction justification by Philip José Farmer’s *Riverworld* series (1971-1980), but this tradition has had no significant effect on the late modernist fictions I examine.
The other text worth mentioning here is Charles Kingsley’s children’s tale, *The Water-Babies* (1863), which follows a chimney-sweep named Tom to his death by drowning, and then his transformation into a “water baby.” In this transformed form, he receives a moral education, eventually learning responsibility and returning to life at the end of the book. While Fielding and Bangs tended to render the afterworld quotidian, Kingsley does the opposite, making the most of the possibilities opened by the otherworldly character of the hereafter for fantastic representation, metamorphoses, and the literalization of moral precepts and lessons (traits that would resurface in *The Third Policeman* and other fictions of the afterlife).

There are any number of modernist and late modernist texts that draw from these traditions (or, in the case of modern afterlife writing, non-traditions), especially the epic trope of *katabasis*. Extended to its limits, it is difficult to find a modernist author who does not have some sort of descent narrative or extended allusion to the afterworld.51 Fictions of the afterlife are not this, refusing the heroic associations employed either nostalgically or critically (often both) by modernist authors to found their authority or rejuvenate a degraded modern world. Rather, they revise a number of basic premises of previous afterworld writing in a relatively consistent way: (1) the

51 There is significant literature on this, ranging from the excellent, like David L. Pike’s *Passage through Hell* (1997) and David Adams’s *Colonial Odysseys* (2003), to the truly terrible, such as Evans Lansing Smith’s *The Descent to the Underworld in Literature, Painting, and Film, 1895-1950* (2001), which stands as a prime example of how archetypal criticism turns every text it approaches into the same amorphous and unenlightening pattern, in this case called *nekyia* at the drop of a hat—threshold imagery, literal descents, and (on the random page I chose) the mention of bees (91) all qualify a text as a *descensus*. Rachel Falconer also has a fine book, *Hell in Contemporary Literature* (2005), on literal and figurative descent narratives after the Second World War, which includes a chapter on Gray’s *Lanark*.  

protagonist is no longer a visitor but a recently dead wanderer thrown into a strange world he or she (but mostly he) must discover over the course of the fiction; (2) the certainties about the divine origins and order of the afterworld are replaced by incomprehensible bureaucracy or chaos, in which the characters have no clear place; (3) the representational mode turns from Dantesque allegory to a literalized representation that often inclines toward metafiction; and (4) the chronotope of the afterworld becomes one of seriality, in which narrative development is replaced by repetition punctuated by crises and the space becomes an abstract one, with mysterious and often inaccessible means of transit between sectors.\textsuperscript{52}

We saw the beginning of the turn away from heroic descent to the more ordinary means of entry into the afterworld (such as those Aristophanes’ Heracles recommended for Dionysus) in Fielding and Kingsley; fictions of the afterlife bring this feature to the fore. The protagonists of these books are not heroes, and are allowed to remain more or less anonymous. We learn less about them than about the protagonists of most novels, since their lives (entailing their class backgrounds, families, professions, goals, and most of the other material that goes into making a novelistic character) have been left behind. More surprisingly, we rarely get much back story on the newly deceased, as if their

\textsuperscript{52} I should mention that the fictions I examine here are not religious in any immediate way. Indeed, a different project could look at explicitly religious versions of the afterworld in the same period (in the work of the Inklings C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams, for example). Part of the choice was made for me, since the authors mentioned above make very different use of the afterworld than do those not bound by orthodoxy (or even the inverted orthodoxy of deliberate heresy). I focus here on the secular uses of the afterworld, partly because they raise the question of what function the religious imagination had for these secular authors. My one exception here is O’Brien, who remained a Catholic throughout his life. The reason behind his inclusion is his obvious interest in experimental writing over surface moral didacticism.
previous lives hardly matter any longer. Lewis’s *Childermass* uses this trait to show the erasure of both memory and previous forms of life by the First World War, promising to lead from one slaughter of the innocents to another. In keeping with this, Pullman and Satterthwaite are hardly characters and have little established past; their relationship in the afterworld is determined by the time they spent together in school, with Satters subservient to the pedantic Pullman.

Taking this anonymity of the protagonist further, Nabokov hides his protagonist’s name behind first person narration, then (after the protagonist’s suicide, although even here we are led to doubt whether he is really dead) pairs that narration with a third person narration of the protagonist as double, effecting a split between observing and observed self. This makes *The Eye* a game of discovering which name corresponds to the “I” of the narrator, who we realize is unreliable as an observer of either the world or of himself. Both O’Brien and Gray take this anonymity further, having their respective protagonists forget their name upon death. The narrator remains a nameless “I” for the duration of *The Third Policeman*, while Gray’s protagonist loses his entire memory upon death and takes a name, Lanark, from the caption of a photograph in the train compartment he finds himself in at the start of the novel. He learns of his own life (as failed Glaswegian painter Duncan Thaw) later and in much detail, but by then he has become Lanark in the decaying city of Unthank.

This dropping of a fully grown but generally unformed protagonist into a new and unfamiliar world takes Lukács’s idea of “transcendental homelessness” to a new
level in an absurd literalization of Heidegger’s “thrownness” (Lukács 41, BT 127-129 [135-137]). Unlike the dead in the Commedia, these dead do not have an assigned place, and the space (literal and moral) of the afterworld is characterized more by chaos than order. This is certainly the case in Lewis’s phantasmagoria of the “time flats,” but equally true of O’Brien’s fantastic parish, where the law is represented by three bumbling and nonsensical policemen and eternity is an elevator to an underground machine of useless plenty. Nor is there generally a guide to help the protagonist understand the new world. When there is a pairing, as with Pullman and Satters or Lanark and Gloopy, it is in the neurotically dependent form of the “pseudocouple” (Jameson, Fables 58-9).53

Figures of authority do appear, from the Bailiff of the Childermass and O’Brien’s eponymous policeman to the Valet of Huis clos and the moving spotlight of Play, but these figures are mere functionaries of some larger, veiled organization. Nor is the source of their authority necessarily benevolent: the Bailiff is slowly unveiled as an all-powerful demonic patron within the Third City of Monstre Gai, then discarded, after the change of venue from purgatory to hell, as a lowly and unimportant servant of Sammael in Malign Fiesta. More often, though, the moral coordinates that Lewis added to the later books of The Human Age are simply absent, leaving a Dantesque apparatus behind but removing from it any clear purpose. This is the source of the bureaucratic imagery that

53 Jameson adapts this term from Beckett’s Unnameable (Beckett, Three Novels 297). Caracciolo notes that Pullman and Satterthwaite are also “teasing variants of the alazon and eiron tradition” of descent narratives (Caracciolo 265).
Caillois noted in afterlife film, although with its “reassuring” aspects removed. Such an imaginary combines aspects of everyday life in late modernity with a sense that the utopian energies spent to create a new world (either in politics or in art) had fallen or were falling into ruin in the moments leading up to and following the Second World War.

One implication of the late modernist recourse to fantastic representation is that the novel, the genre that Lukács coined the term “transcendental homelessness” to describe, no longer seemed adequate to late modernists as a way of grasping the relation between humanity and world. The very familiarity that novelistic conventions brought to representation made it appear suspect, and a number of new forms (fictions of the afterlife, dystopias, and other sorts of hybrid subgenre fiction) were tried from the 1930s to the 1960s in an attempt to develop representational strategies capable of registering the sense that the old world (and the forms of everydayness that accompanied it) had been lost.

The treatment of the dead on their own, without recourse to a living visitor, reconnects with the tradition of dialogues of the dead, which equally eschew heroic descents in favor of the common discourse of the afterworld. Yet that subgenre is based on the use of well-known historical or fictional figures to stand in for intellectual positions. In fictions of the afterlife all characters are equally anonymous, and the protagonists do not, as a rule, run into historical personages in the afterworld. This does not mitigate, but merely transforms, the tendency of dialogues of the dead toward
philosophically inclined satire. The intellectual positions held by representative figures in dialogues of the dead are replaced in fictions of the afterlife by free-floating speech genres, enabling a dialogic linguistic parody often tied to metafiction. The effects of this are most dramatic in Lewis’s *Childermass*, which enacts an extensive stylistic parody and critique of the various modernist private languages, but it can also be seen as late as Beckett’s assemblage of middlebrow bourgeois clichés in *Play* and the purportedly neutral and rational discourse in the narration of *Le dépeupleur*.

Such a treatment of existing speech genres registers a larger sense of the failure of the language of traditional genres (the novel above all, but also the language of the bourgeois stage in Sartre and Beckett) to capture the forms of life of late modernity, as well as a sense that the varied languages and techniques of high modernism are equally unsuited to this new task. They also take up the mythological function of *nekyia* described by Pike, authorizing renewed experiment in the present by consigning these languages to the underworld. The difference is that, unlike heroic *nekyia*, there is no way out of the land of the dead, calling into question the transcendent quality of the new in relation to the now mythic past. These parodies are also consigned to the afterworld, from which, we know all too well, there is no exit.

Since I am arguing for a minimal subgeneric consistency to fictions of the afterlife, I ought to be able to show that they have a distinct chronotope. This Bakhtin famously defined as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships as they are expressed in literature” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 84). Less famously, he
also made chronotope central to his idea of genre (one closer, given the examples he uses, to the miniaturized genres I am calling subgenres):

It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is intrinsically chronotopic. (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 85)

Bakhtin identifies chronotopes as historical, giving expression to forms of temporality and spatiality characteristic to a particular historical society or moment. This, of course, is the case for fictions of the afterlife as well, which give expression to forms of time and space characteristic of the pre- and post-WWII moment. Nor should it be surprising that the edifices of these late modernist afterworlds recall the spatial and temporal terms offered by Deleuze to discuss postwar film, with the spaces often abstracted into the functional vacuums of "espaces quelconques" and the characters reduced to "seers" incapable of forming adequate responses to this new world.54 The afterworld setting offers to this distinct chronotope, appropriate to the loss of belief in the world, a combination of narrative justification and fantastic imagery.

If we agree that in some form or other biographical time, given both meaning and closure by the finitude of the protagonist, is central to the establishment of the novel,55 fictions of the afterlife take as their premise the idea that the definitive event has already taken place. Such an event exists as a past cataclysm, radically changing the

54 For his most concise description of these traits, see Deleuze, *Cinema 2* xi.
55 On this, see Lukács 77-8.
world of the characters, and is, as such, irreversible. Fictions of the afterlife do not dwell on this, however; we sometimes do not even learn how the characters died. Instead the cataclysm is projected into the future, but not as something under the control of the dead (such as the narrator’s perpetually pending execution in *The Third Policeman* or the apocalyptic nuclear “storms” of *Monstre Gai*—the dead are constantly trying avoid death, but with no means at their disposal). This creates a common tone of both desolation and upcoming apocalypse. In the meantime, however, characters are left with an equally troubling everyday, a remnant of the novel form these works try to supersede. Such an everyday is estranged, rendered simultaneously banal and intolerable. Such a split, rendering the everyday and the event equally terrifying and exterior to the characters, is the result of the absolutization of the modernist division of temporality into everyday time and the event. Such a temporal scheme modifies the traditional eternity of the afterworld. For a modern time-sense primed to value novelty as such, that eternity (whether in bliss or in torment) can only register as the tedium of repetition. The dead rarely work, and the basic means of life (should they require such things) are usually provided for by the administration. In the absence of these and other means of organizing their time, the dead either wander or engage in idle chatter.

The space they wander is both abstract and closed. This is the case whether the afterworld is an urban space or a rural one. In the former case, the bounds of the city

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56 The connection of this facet of the afterworld to the development of welfare state apparatuses should be relatively transparent. I discuss Lewis’s satire of the English welfare state in Chapter 2.
tend to coincide with the bounds of the navigable world, while the latter use more bizarre conceits to hem in the characters (like the breakdown of all temporal consistency in the outskirts of the “time flats” of The Childermass or the fantastic boundedness and circularity of the world of the parish in The Third Policeman). Spaces tend to be externally differentiated (a remnant of Dante’s tripartite division of space) but internally homogeneous or formless. Travel between these spaces is metaphysical rather than physical, extremely rapid, and generally requires the assistance of some official (as with the escape to Matapolis at the end of Monstre Gai). In the theater, which offers different possibilities for spatial representation than does prose fiction, the space of the afterworld is generally made commensurable with that of the stage, allowing only functionaries like the Valet of Huis clos to exit the space or usher characters in.

These fictions use the resources of the fantastic and science fiction to represent an alien world which human beings must inhabit. At the same time, they opportunistically draw from the repository of existing tropes of descent and satire specific to classical and Christian afterworlds, creating a hybrid subgenre with some chronotopic stability and a flexibility of reference and function. I can only say so much about how these texts actually work at this level of generality, so it is time to move to specific texts and situations to show how some late modernist authors employed the resources afforded by a secular afterlife fiction.

To bring these ideas together, the following chapters take a situational approach to literary reading, giving local readings of how disparate late modernist authors came
to afterlife fiction as a response to the situation outlined above. As is fitting for an approach drawn in part from Sartre, I begin with a closer analysis of the connection between the loss of belief in the world and the loss of temporal finitude in the afterworld by looking at Sartre’s *Huis clos* and *Les jeux sont faits* alongside Simone de Beauvoir’s novel *Tous les hommes sont mortels*, which addresses similar questions about temporality through the conceit of immortality. These text were all written during or in the immediate aftermath of the War and Occupation, and bear the mark of that moment.

In chapters 2 through 4, I advance a historical argument about the shifting function of fictions of the afterlife, using the Second World War as a pivot. I argue that, in the moment preceding the war, fictions of the afterlife served primarily as satirical criticisms of an earlier modernism’s break with everyday intelligibility, producing the babble of disparate private languages. After the war, this focus on modernist self-criticism gives way to more deliberately dystopian uses of the afterworld, focusing less on issues of intelligibility (although these do not disappear) than on ethical and social responses to a loss of belief in an administered world.

Chapter 2 treats the modifications in Wyndham Lewis’s *Human Age* series (begun with *The Childermass* in 1928, and continued with *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta* in 1955) to give an overall picture of the shifts I track between pre- and post-WWII variants of late modernism. I show there how *The Childermass* uses dialogic stylistic parody (adapted from dialogues of the dead) to critique the loss of shared belief brought about by high modernism’s focus on private languages, while the later volumes employ a
more novelistic but still fantastic style to depict the fragile everyday life of postwar Britain. I link this change in style to Lewis’s replacement of an afterworld built on incommensurable and idiosyncratic mythologies with a decidedly Christian and universalist one.

In Chapter 3, I examine Flann O’Brien’s use of the fantastic in The Third Policeman (written 1940, published 1967). I argue that O’Brien uses the fantastic imagery of a nonsensical afterlife to figure the schismatic consequences of the modernist break with intelligibility and a social idea of belief. The fiction condemns his unnamed narrator to a cyclical hell for his adherence to the fictional philosopher de Selby, a “savant” who professes a wisdom that breaks with everyday intelligibility. I argue here that the afterworld setting authorizes O’Brien’s use of the fantastic, creating a streamlined version of modernism that turns modernist ideals of interiority and originality against themselves. The circular form of the novel, which reserves the revelation that the narrator is dead for the end of the story, allows O’Brien to transform the epistemological fantastic of a first reading into an ontological fantasy on a second reading, all the while mocking the modernist self-importance that demands such rereading and careful analysis.

Chapter 4 moves to the post-WWII period, reading texts by Samuel Beckett to show how fictions of the afterlife allow him to address the desire for stable knowledge and meaning in a world that no longer appears to afford such things. Beckett’s later prose and theatrical pieces figure the loss of belief in the world through enclosed and
abstract afterworlds, which I analyze in *Play* (1963) and *The Lost Ones* (1970). I argue that the repetitions of these texts come to figure the impossibility of being done with belief, while the connection of world reduction and torture scenarios render the disarticulation of individual and social belief and action as a late modern mythology.
Chapter 1: The Sense of No Ending: Meaning and Finitude in Sartre and Beauvoir

In my introduction, I discussed the chronotope of afterlife fiction as the culmination of the modern division of the temporal field into the everyday and the evental (chronos and kairos), one that becomes degraded, in mid-20th century Europe, into a division between static repetition and apocalypse. In this chapter, I narrow my focus to France in the 1940s to examine the existential consequences of forms of life imagined without finitude. To do this, I read first Sartre’s employment of the afterlife as a counterfactual investigation of non-human forms of life (first in Huis clos during the final days of the Occupation, and again in his scenario for Les jeux sont faits, filmed by Jean Delannoy in 1947). I follow this with a reading of Simone de Beauvoir’s 1946 novel, All Men are Mortal (Tous les hommes sont mortels), which uses the conceit of immortality rather than the afterlife to pose similar questions about meaning and finitude in a different way. At the crux of the disagreement between these two thinkers is a divergent attitude toward Heidegger’s concept of being-toward-death (Sein-zum-Tode) as the foundation of authenticity in Being and Time (1927).

Death, Finitude, and Meaning in Heidegger and Sartre

Anticipation reveals to Da-sein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility to be itself, primarily unsupported by concern taking care of things, but to be itself in passionate anxious freedom toward death which is free of the illusions of the they, factical, and certain of itself. (BT 245 [266])
Early Heidegger offers us one striking example of the modernist division between the everyday and the evental in his treatment of the potential modes of being of Da-sein: either inauthentic flight into “average everydayness” or authentic resoluteness in the charged Moment (Augenblick). Inauthentic everydayness is characterized by dispersion, a becoming lost in the present where Da-sein fails to choose from among its possibilities, engaging instead in what Heidegger terms “uninhibited ‘busyness,’” the taking care of whatever is before one (BT 164-8 [175-180]). Authentic existence, as a “modified grasp of everydayness” (BT 167 [179]), requires a resoluteness (Entschlossenheit) that “brings the being of the there to the existence of its situation” (BT 276 [300]), “free[ing] itself for its world” (BT 274 [298]). This division between authenticity and inauthenticity establishes two different modes of temporalizing the three ecstasies of future, having-been, and present: they appear inauthentically as awaiting, forgetting, and making present, and authentically as anticipation, retrieve, and the Moment (BT 309-12 [336-339]). The former involve approaching temporality “in terms of what is taken care of,” and not in relation to Da-sein’s ownmost potentiality-of-being, leading to a passivity in relation to the world (even if that passivity is experienced as the activity of busyness—the passivity lies in a failure to choose rather than any failure to perform specific activities). While inauthentic temporality involves a dispersive lack of connection between the three ecstasies, authentic temporality implies a holding-together of them,

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1 All references to Being and Time give the page number of the Stambaugh translation (SUNY Press, 1996), followed (in brackets) by page references to the original Neimeyer German edition.
drawing the retrieved past into the charged Moment to bear on or bring about an anticipated future.

At stake in this image of authenticity as a holding-together enabling resoluteness is the ontological possibility of an “authentic potentiality-for-being-a-whole” of Da-sein (BT 246 [266]). As something fundamentally temporal and finite, Da-sein appears as “fragmentary” (BT 215 [233]) and incomplete. “A being whose essence is made up of existence resists the possibility of being comprehended as a total being” (BT 215 [233]). While it exists, it cannot be said to be whole as something objectively present can be, because the “primordial ontological ground of the existentiality of Da-sein [...] is temporality” (BT 216 [234]); when, in death, it ceases to exist, it can no longer be whole as Da-sein, for it no longer exists as such. For this reason, the fact of death as it pertains to the ending of animal life (what Heidegger calls merely “perishing”) cannot on its own establish the potentiality-for-being-a-whole of Da-sein. What he requires instead is a relation to death made immanent to life, the indefinite certainty and anticipation of death that he calls being-toward-death. Arising as the crux of authenticity, being-toward-death is defined as “the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Da-sein. Thus death reveals itself as the ownmost nonrelational possibility not to be bypassed” (BT 232 [250-1]).

Heidegger is clear that being-toward-death is neither a willing of death (in suicide), nor is it a brooding over death or an activity meant to stave off death. Rather, it is anticipation understood as understanding of the constitutive finitude of Da-sein.
Terminologically, we shall formulate this being toward possibility as \textit{anticipation of this possibility}. But does not this mode of behavior contain an approach to the possible, and does not its actualization emerge with its nearness? In this kind of coming near, however, one does not tend toward making something real available and taking care of it, but as one comes nearer understandingly, the possibility of the possible only becomes “greater.” \textit{The nearest nearness of being-toward-death as possibility is as far removed as possible from anything real. The more clearly this possibility is understood, the more purely does understanding penetrate to it as the possibility of the impossibility of existence in general.} (BT 242 [262])

It therefore manifests as the certainty of something indefinite: it cannot be controlled, and the anticipation of death is not a matter of thinking morbidly about death, but is experienced through the attunement of Angst, which is characterized by “self-understanding of Da-sein in terms of its ground” (BT 245 [265-6]).

Being-toward-death enables authentic action because its disclosure of the fundamental finitude of Da-sein frees it from the influence of the “the they” and of chance, individualizing it and freeing it for its ownmost possibilities.

Becoming free for one’s own death in anticipation frees one from one’s lostness in chance possibilities urging themselves upon us, so that the factical possibilities lying before the possibility not-to-be-bypassed can first be authentically understood and chosen. […] Free for its ownmost possibilities, that are determined by the \textit{end}, and so understood as \textit{finite}, Da-sein prevents the danger that it may, by its own finite understanding of existence, fail to recognize that it is getting overtaken by the existential possibilities of others, or that it may misinterpret these possibilities, thus divesting itself of its ownmost factical existence. (BT 243-4 [264])

Da-sein’s own temporal finitude allows for an awareness of the finitude inherent in authentic choice, the fact that “freedom \textit{is} only in the choice of the one, that is, in bearing the fact of not having chosen and not being able to choose also the others” (BT 263 [285]).

It is also for this reason that being-toward-death allows for a certainty and seriousness
about being-in-the-world: “Holding death for true (death is always just one’s own) shows a different kind of certainty, and is more primordial than any certainty related to beings encountered in the world or to formal objects, for it is certain of being-in-the-world” (BT 244 [265]). It offers a grounding and certainty not of some part of the world (of the coherence of mathematics or the reality of other minds, for example), but of the total phenomenon of world as such, and of Da-sein’s fundamental thrownness. This is why Heidegger can say that Da-sein’s resoluteness in being-toward-death “frees itself for its world.”

What I would like to draw out from this exposition is the connection Heidegger makes between being-toward-death as an awareness of finitude and the certainty of being-in-the-world as an enabling factor for authentic action. My ultimate interest is less with the place of these ideas within Heidegger’s early work than the influence of these ideas on Sartre and Beauvoir, both of whom we find engaging Heidegger’s presentation of the connection between finitude, authenticity, and being-in-the-world. Specifically, we find Sartre and Beauvoir responding to these ideas through the writing of dramatic and fictional counterexamples imagining forms of life not defined by mortal finitude.2 While Sartre turns to the conceit of the afterlife not once but twice in the 1940s (with Huis clos and Les jeux sont faits, both composed during the war, although the film and scenario of the latter were not published until 1947), Beauvoir addresses similar

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2 Since both Sartre and Beauvoir argue for an expansion of the term “finitude” beyond the fact of mortality, I use “mortal finitude” here and in what follows to refer to that specific aspect of finitude: the fact of human mortality.
questions about finitude, meaning, and belief through the conceit of immortality in her
*Tous les hommes sont mortels* (1946). Despite the fact that the latter is not technically a
fiction of the afterlife, it is relevant for this study because it helps sharpen the central
question of the meaning and interest of a life imagined without end and (as a
consequence) without meaning or belief. Before turning to these, however, I must
address Sartre’s critique of Heidegger’s treatment of being-toward-death, since it helps
to clarify the philosophical underpinnings of Sartre’s afterlife writing.

In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre presents Heidegger’s use of being-toward-
death in *Being and Time* in aestheticized terms through the repeated metaphor of death
as the “accord de résolution au terme d’une mélodie. […] Si le sens de notre vie devient
l’attente de la mort, en effet, celle-ci ne peut, en survenant, que poser son sceau sur la
vie. C’est au fond ce qu’il y a de plus positif dans la « décision résolue »
(Entschlossenheit) de Heidegger” (“resolved chord at the end of a melody. […] If the
meaning of our life becomes our expectation of death, then when this death occurs, it
can only put its seal upon life. This is basically the most positive content of Heidegger’s
‘resolute decision’ (Entschlossenheit)”; EN 617, BN 683). It is not Heidegger, however, but
Sartre who offers this aestheticized idea of death as a culminating meaning to life, which
Sartre then goes on to critique. Heidegger’s focus is never on the fact of death, but on
Da-sein’s living awareness of its finitude as the *ground* of meaning (and not that
meaning itself, as in the above quotation). Nor does Heidegger, as Sartre suggests, claim
that Da-sein makes a “projet de sa propre mort” (“project of its own death”; EN 616, BN
which would amount to making death into a culmination of life rather than the limiting possibility and ground enabling the resolute choice of other projects.

Drawing on this misreading of Heidegger, Sartre focuses his critique of the notion of being-toward-death as the foundation of authenticity through the “caractère absurde de la mort” (“absurd character of death”; EN 617, BN 682).

If it is only chance which decides the character of our death and therefore our life, then even the death which most resembles the end of a melody can not be waited for as such; luck by determining it for me removes from it any character as an harmonious end. An end of a melody in order to confer its meaning on the melody must emanate from the melody itself. (BN 687)

This contingency of the actual moment of death means, for Sartre, that death can never be Da-sein’s ownmost nonrelational possibility:

Thus this perpetual appearance of chance at the heart of my projects can not be apprehended as my possibility but, on the contrary, as the nihilation of all my possibilities, a nihilation which itself is no longer a part of my possibilities. Thus death is not my possibility of no longer realizing a presence in the world but rather an always possible nihilation of my possibles which is outside my possibilities. (BN 687)
Since death is not in itself meaningful, it can contribute no meaning to life. Rather, “nous ne pouvons même plus dire que la mort confère un sens du dehors à la vie : un sens ne peut venir que de la subjectivité même. Puisque la mort ne paraît pas sur le fondement de notre liberté, elle ne peut qu’ôter à la vie toute signification” ("we can no longer even say that death confers meaning on life from the outside; a meaning can come only from subjectivity. Since death does not appear on the foundation of our freedom, it can only remove all meaning from life"; EN 623, BN 689). As an arbitrary end, it cannot provide the aesthetic closure that Sartre thinks Heidegger is looking for; instead, it represents the impossibility of giving life an organic form, since it always comes from outside of life.

Despite this significant divergence from Heidegger, Sartre nonetheless maintains the division between authenticity and inauthenticity, locating the ground for authenticity not in being-toward-death but in the finitude inherent in choice. To do this, he insists that we “séparer radicalement les deux idées ordinairement unies de mort et de finitude” ("separate radically the two usually combined ideas of finitude and death"; EN 630, BN 698):

On semble croire d’ordinaire que c’est la mort qui constitue et qui nous révèle notre finitude. De cette contamination résulte que la mort prend figure de nécessité ontologique et que la finitude, au contraire, emprunte à la mort son caractère de contingence. Un Heidegger, en particulier, semble avoir bâti toute sa théorie du « Sein-zum-Tode » sur l’identification rigoureuse de la mort en la finitude. […] Mais, à considérer les choses d’un peu près, on s’aperçoit de [son] erreur : la mort est un fait contingent qui ressortit à la facticité ; la finitude est une structure ontologique du pour-soi qui détermine la liberté et n’existe que dans et par le libre projet de la fin qui m’annonce mon être. Autrement dit, la réalité humaine [Henry Corbin’s translation of Da-sein] demeurerait finie, même si elle était immortelle, parce qu’elle se fait finie en se choisissant humaine. Être fini, en effet, c’est se choisir, c’est-à-dire se faire annoncer ce qu’on est en se
Ordinarily the belief seems to be that it is death which constitutes our finitude and which reveals it to us. From this combination it results that death takes on the shape of an ontological necessity and that finitude, on the other hand, borrows from death its contingent character. Heidegger in particular seems to have based his whole theory of Sein-zum-Tode on the strict identification of death and finitude. […] But if we consider the matter a little more closely, we detect [his] error: death is a contingent fact which belongs to facticity; finitude is an ontological structure of the for-itself which determines freedom and only exists in and through the free project of the end which makes my being known to me. In other words human reality [Da-sein] would remain finite even if it were immortal, because it makes itself finite by choosing itself as human. To be finite, in fact, is to choose oneself—that is, to make known to oneself what one is by projecting oneself toward one possibility to the exclusion of others. The very act of freedom is therefore an assumption and creation of finitude. (BN 698)

For Sartre, every choice reconstitutes finitude, since any act excludes other possibilities: to turn right at the corner excludes the possibility of turning left, or at least of having turned left at that moment. One is finite not because one cannot return to previously rejected possibilities, but because those possibilities will have changed as a result of the “irréversibilité de la temporalité” (“irreversibility of temporality”; EN 631, BN 698). As the axiomatic foundation of Sartre’s philosophical system, human freedom is presented here tautologically as both the result and ground of finitude (“la finitude est une structure ontologique du pour-soi qui détermine la liberté et n’existe que dans et par le libre projet de la fin”). As Ethan Kleinberg remarks in his discussion of Sartre’s critique of Heidegger, “if anything like an authentic understanding of existence can occur it must be in confronting the realization that the pour-soi is self-constitution based on nothing” (148). This self-constitution allows Sartre to bypass being-toward-death as the basis of
finitude and the ground of possible authenticity, since that finitude is characteristic of all
choice as a negation of other possible choices.\(^3\)

Having rejected being-toward-death as an ontological statute of human being, Sartre still maintains a specific meaning for death (one clearly reflected in his afterlife writing): “la mort représente une totale dépossession” (“death represents a total dispossession”; EN 628, BN 695) by the Other, handing the meaning of one’s life over to the living.

[L]a vie décide de son propre sens, parce qu’elle est toujours en sursis, elle possède par essence un pouvoir d’auto-critique et d’auto-métamorphose qui fait qu’elle se définit comme un « pas-encore » ou qu’elle est, si l’on veut, comme changement de ce qu’elle est. La vie morte ne cesse pas pour cela de changer et, pourtant, elle est faite. Cela signifie que, pour elle, les jeux sont faits et qu’elle subira désormais ses changements sans en être aucunement responsable. [...] [E]lle est entièrement close, on n’y peut plus rien faire entrer ; mais son sens ne cesse point d’être modifié du dehors. (EN 627-8)\(^4\)

[L]ife decides its own meaning because it is always in suspense; it possesses essentially a power of self-criticism and self-metamorphosis which cause it to define itself as a “not-yet” or, if you like, makes it be as the changing of what it is. The dead life does not thereby cease to change, and yet it is all done. This means that for it the chips are down and that it will henceforth undergo its changes without being in any way responsible for them. [...] [I]t is entirely closed; nothing more can be made to enter there; but its meaning does not cease to be modified from the outside. (BN 694-5)

Death is the elimination of being-for-itself, exposing one’s being entirely to being-for-others. As long as one remains alive, one can modify the meaning of one’s actions

\(^3\) As Kleinberg also notes, Being and Nothingness “was written at a point when Sartre was moving away from the influence of Heidegger and closer to Hegel and Marx” (148), which explains his emphasis on determination as negation (a Spinozan phrase filtered through Hegel).

\(^4\) As one might expect, Sartre’s use of the phrase “les jeux sont faits” to describe the situation of the dead as externally determined is relevant to the text bearing that title.
through further action; death represents the arbitrary arrest of this capacity, which hands that life and meaning over to others as an inert thing (a being in-itself and no longer for-itself) to be interpreted (EN 625, BN 692). “Ainsi l’existence même de la mort nous aliène tout entier, dans notre propre vie, au profit d’autrui” (“Thus the very existence of death alienates us wholly in our own life to the advantage of the Other”; EN 628, BN 695).

In all of this, we can see how Sartre focuses on the moment and fact of death, and specifically on the relation between death and meaning, whereas Heidegger puts the emphasis instead on being-toward-death as a fundamental awareness of finitude that contributes meaning not to death (nor to life, for that matter, as if life could have a single meaning) but to the concrete choices faced by Da-sein. In keeping with this emphasis, Heidegger is less concerned with the finitude faced by Da-sein in any particular choice than with the capacity for dissipation inherent in an un-reflective everydayness, an attitude toward being-in-the-world as a whole rather than any single choice within that world. Unlike Sartre’s metaphor of the melody, which can only be said to have reached a resolution in its end retrospectively, being-toward-death functions only for an existent Da-sein as anticipation of a certain but indefinite possibility. Once Da-sein ceases to exist, the question of resoluteness is simply irrelevant, since it no longer has any possibilities from which to choose. What being-toward-death is meant to establish in the meantime is not a meaning of life, but a certainty of finite being-in-the-world that gives choice an urgency, pushing Da-sein to form its own choices rather than passively
accepting those of “the they” or falling into temporal dissipation (putting off desired actions into an indefinite future, allowing the conveniences of daily existence to draw Da-sein into a path of least resistance, etc.).

My purpose here has been less to preserve Heidegger’s being-toward-death against Sartre’s criticism than to spell out their different treatments of death within the temporally bifurcated schema of authentic and inauthentic being. Since the temporality of the afterlife is such that it eliminates death as a temporal limit, one should expect these differences to have effects on the worlds and freedoms (or lack thereof) depicted in Sartre and Beauvoir’s writings of unending life. To show how these ideas play out, however, it is necessary to go to the texts in question.

**Sartre: Huis Clos**

Without a doubt, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Huis clos* (1944) is the most famous and successful 20th century representation of the afterworld. It is also his most well-known piece of writing, surpassing even *Being and Nothingness* and *Nausea*. And, despite the existence of other significant theatrical representations of the afterworld (from the “Don Juan in Hell” section of *Man and Superman* to Genet’s sprawling Algeria play, *Les paravents*), it remains the standard against which theatrical afterworlds are judged. Even those who have neither seen nor read the play are likely to be familiar with Garcin’s line, “l’enfer, 

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5 As early as 1973, Hazel Barnes had already noted the play’s remarkable popularity (Barnes 100). The text is generally known in English as *No Exit*. Since this title eliminates both the sense of a closed door juridical session and the ambiguity of the final moments of the play, I retain the French title throughout. I also use the French for the title of *Les jeux sont faits*, since it appears as such (rather than as *The Chips are Down*) in most of the critical literature in English.
c’est les Autres,” which is often taken as a shorthand summation of the play as a whole. The irony of this fame (and its attachment to that particular line), is that, while actually capturing significant elements of both the play and Sartre’s philosophy (particularly the idea of death as a “total dispossession” by the Other discussed above), Huis clos constitutes a wholesale reversal of Sartre’s picture of that toward which both life and theater should aspire, a world turned upside down. As we know from other inverted worlds, they tend to evoke aspects of our own in need of remedy, and Huis clos does this as well, targeting both the flight from freedom represented by inauthenticity and the institution of bourgeois theater. In tracing the connections Sartre established between these two targets, I show how Sartre’s philosophy of freedom led him, in Huis clos, to engage in a modernist project of anti-theatrical drama.

In a lecture given in Germany in 1966, Sartre attempts to account for the “critical theater” of Artaud, Genet, Brecht, Beckett, Ionesco, Weiss, and Brook (a veritable laundry list of the big names of late-modernist theater) through a list of 3 aspects of bourgeois theater rejected by all of these playwrights in different ways: “le refus de la psychologie, le refus de l’intrigue, le refus de tout réalisme” (“a rejection of psychology, a rejection of plot, and a rejection of realism of any sort”; TS 190, ST 155). While these rejections play out in different ways (Genet and Brecht both focus on the imaginary aspect of the theatrical performance, highlighting the theatrical artifice as such for different ends, while Artaud attempts to do away with the imaginary by creating a real—and non-representational—act on the stage), they are united in their attempts to
“faire des insuffisances mêmes de théâtre les instruments d’une communication”

(“convert the very inadequacies of theater into instruments for communication”; TS 171, ST 137). The narrative Sartre draws is a dialectical one, in which (post-bourgeois) theater has become aware of its contradictions, and (through the isolation of one or another of these contradictions) produces a synthesis of such contradictions not in a single play or author, but in the “pressentiment d’une unité future” (“intimation of a future unity”; TS 190, ST 155) suggested by the total field of then-contemporary theatrical practice. Sartre remains silent on the question of his own role either within or without this concatenation of figures in modernist theater, but, using his retrospective analytic, we can place Sartre’s drama from the 1940s (his time-frame in the lecture spans from the 1950s to the mid ‘60s) within a larger genealogy of modernist drama.

The central feature of Sartre’s theater (from the Occupation years through the 1950s) is the presentation of freedom through the staging of “limit situations” that force that freedom to risk itself (often with death) in a single choice: “Ce que la théâtre peut montrer de plus émouvant est un caractère en train de se faire, le moment de choix, de la libre décision qui engage une morale et toute une vie” (“The most moving thing the theater can show is a character creating himself, the moment of choice, of the free decision which commits him to a moral code and a whole way of life”; TS 20, ST 4). Although the details of Sartre’s description of the means of forcing this choice on the

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6 Cf. Stanley Cavell’s definition of modernism (Cavell, The World Viewed 103). I discuss this passage in my Introduction.
stage varies (particularly after his encounter with Brecht’s work in the 1950s), his basic focus on the theater as a place to stage freedom remains consistent. For this reason, he also consistently critiqued the primacy of character in bourgeois psychological drama; for Sartre, such presentation of character renders the personages on stage as unfree creatures, reduced to traits whose interaction bears no more resemblance to free action than leaves buffeted by the wind: “Un conflit de caractères, quels que soient les retournements qu’on y mette, n’est jamais qu’une composition de forces dont les résultats sont prévisibles” (“A conflict of characters, whatever turns you may give it, is never anything but a composition of forces whose results are predictable”; TS 19, ST 3). Character exists for Sartre as a “durcissement du choix” (“hardening of choice”; TS 20, ST 4) seen from after the fact, which he links in the same essay to Kierkegaard’s notion of repetition. It is something that comes only after the play, when all is said and done and the choices represented on stage have made the freedoms into one thing or another. Since the play, unlike life, does not continue beyond the final curtain, it is then possible to speak of a character, but the direct presentation of character on stage is anathema to Sartre’s idea of theater. We can see here an echo of Sartre’s treatment of death in Being and Nothingness, since the division between the presentation of a freedom on stage and the retrospective capacity of an audience to turn it into a character mirrors that of “suspended” life and its alienation in death, when responsibility for its meaning is handed over to the Other (EN 627-8, BN 694-5).
Unfreedom is much easier than freedom to represent aesthetically, however. Indeed, the goal of freeing the personages on stage (or in making them appear free) seems fundamentally at odds with the goal of assembling a coherent and satisfying plot, which requires that all the characters’ actions appear both explicable and inevitable.\(^7\) Within this regime of plotting (the well-made story), a moment of genuine freedom can only appear as a narrative sinkhole, an undetermined and aleatory moment. This is precisely how it appears in *Les mouches* (1943), Sartre’s first foray into public drama,\(^8\) where Orestes’ awakening to freedom is stated bluntly in both dialogue and the stage directions: “ORESTE, d’une voix changée. Il y a un autre chemin” (“ORESTES [slowly, in a tone he has not used till now]: There is another way”; HC 177, NE 92). The contentlessness of this change (in both speech and tone) is necessary; had Sartre given explanations for why Orestes chooses to ignore “le Bien” and avenge his father’s murder, the act would have been subsumed back into the sort of psychological explanations Sartre was at pains to avoid. The narrative awkwardness of this freedom is only underscored as the play continues, when freedom is thematized as such by both Zeus (who baldly explains to both Ægistheus and the audience that “Oreste sait qu’il est libre” [“Orestes knows that he is free”; HC 200, NE 104]) and Orestes himself: “Je suis libre, Électre; la liberté a fondu sur moi comme la foudre” (“I am free, Electra. Freedom has crashed down on me like a thunderbolt”; HC 208, NE 108). The meteorological reference to thunder both

\(^7\) Gary Saul Morson takes up this problem at length in *Narrative and Freedom* (1994). I address his arguments in chapter 3 below.

\(^8\) Sartre had already written and put on *Bariona* (a Resistance drama thinly veiled as a mystery play focused on the nativity) while in the Stalag. See ST 183-5 and Beauvoir, *Prime of Life* 385-6.
indicates the externality of the freedom to the plot and ironizes Zeus’s impotence in the face of it. Given Sartre’s clumsiness in introducing and sustaining his ideal of freedom on the stage in *Les mouches*, it is unsurprising that his next play, *Huis clos*, represented something of a tactical retreat.

*Huis clos* presents three characters accompanied by a valet arriving in hell (depicted as a closed room done up in Second Empire style) and coming to realize the conditions of their posthumous existence. Garcin, the first to arrive, questions the Valet about the logic of the world; the other inhabitants of the room, Inès and Estelle, arrive one by one. They each tell of the reasons for their damnation, and they slowly realize that their punishment is simply to eternally coexist with the others in an irresolvable triangle of unfulfillable desire. The one act ends when the characters have realized their respective positions, and Garcin’s final line (“Eh bien, continuons” [“Well, well, let’s get on with it . . .”; HC 94, NE 47])9 marks the final curtain as the beginning rather than end of this new form of (post-)life.

In many ways, *Huis clos* is the opposite of *Les mouches*: one act rather than three, using minimal props (3 armchairs, a bronze sculpture, and a paper-knife) and simple costumes rather than extensive ones (masks, urns, “blood-smeared” statues, guards with swords, a magically moving boulder, etc.), maintaining a single setting and small cast rather than a large cast of extras and chorus members, and treating contemporary

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9 The ellipsis in the English translation is absent in the original, but it merely renders a final typographical indication of the non-closure of this ending.
characters (albeit in an unusual situation) rather than figures from classical tragedy, it is minimal in many of the ways *Les mouches* was spectacular. Of course, some of these traits are explicable by externalities (Sartre was writing for three friends and didn’t want to give any one of them a larger part than the others, the curfew requirements and rationing under Occupation recommended a short and simple production, etc.), but the more significant modification is how this play reverses his basic condition for theater, using the conceit of damnation in the afterlife to present his theater of freedom negatively through its absence.

This negative presentation, however, leads Sartre not only to a reversal of his basic approach to theater, but a sustained engagement with theatricality as such, and, more particularly, with an extended parody of the forms of theatricality employed on the bourgeois stage. For example, all the personages in *Huis clos* are reducible to characters in precisely the way that Sartre argued against above: Garcin is the cowardly pacifist, Inès the sadistic lesbian, and Estelle the narcissistic flirt. Of these, only Garcin ever tries to be other than what he is, but even he fails in this effort. In keeping with Sartre’s discussion of “la vie morte” in *Being and Nothingness*, they have ceased to be forthemselves, and are now merely in-themselves as inert, knowable things. Through this literalization of his complaints about psychological drama, Sartre treats the bourgeois

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10 Sartre has credited these “accidental causes” with the initial impetus for his choices, but (in keeping with his philosophy of situated freedom) not with determining what he did in response. See TS 237, ST 198.

11 My claim here draws from and develops those of Rhiannon Goldthorpe, who sees Sartre in *Huis clos* “adopting, or alluding to, the conventional dramatic modes which his hypothetical bourgeois spectator would recognize, and [then] gradually subverting them” (Goldthorpe 89).
theatrical edifice of character as one only suitable for depicting an afterworld where everything has already occurred and no change can come except from on high (God is not mentioned, and the Valet refers only to “la direction” [“the management”; HC 19, NE 6], furthering the bureaucratic aspect of this hell). It is as if Sartre were taking Peter Bürger’s description of the bourgeois institutionalization of art as a separation of art from the praxis of life to its literal extreme, presenting bourgeois theater as only appropriate for depicting the damned in hell.

Martin Puchner has argued persuasively in *Stage Fright* that modernist drama can be characterized by a resistance to theatricality, expressed either through anti-theatricality (developed in closet drama and reapplied to the stage) or a heightened theatricality (as in the avant-gardes or Artaud). He develops this argument through the classical distinction between mimesis and diegesis (imitation and narration) and their respective treatments of gesture. A diegetic theater (of which modernist theater would be one example), he contends, is one that uses narration (ranging from extensive stage directions in the printed text of a play to the inclusion of a narrator, chorus, or other controlling element in the staged performance) to control and reduce the actor’s gestures, “bringing an anti-theatrical and anti-mimetic impulse onto the stage” (Puchner 116). The setting of *Huis clos* in hell establishes a tension that runs through most afterlife fiction, but which is especially evident in the theater: that between retrospective narration and the discovery of a new and different form of (after-)life. As such, the
fictional space created by the afterworld is one that lends itself to the struggle between
diegesis and mimesis that Martin Puchner argues is central to modernist drama.

This division between narration and mimesis is made most clearly in Huis clos by
the description of earthly goings-on given by the damned. Each character, we learn, can
see and narrate events pertaining to their lives after their death, an extension of
teichoscopia (the on-stage reporting of off-stage action) to span not only physical but also
cosmological space. Sartre provides a simple stage direction to indicate the shift from
mimesis of afterworldly action to an otherworldly reportage: “(Elle parle avec beaucoup de
naturel, mais comme si elle voyait ce qu’elle décrit)” (“[her tone is natural enough, but she seems
to be seeing what she describes]”; HC 30, NE 11). This direction is unassuming (its main
purpose seems to be to caution the actress not to adopt too trancelike or exaggerated a
tone to signal this shift in attention from the on-stage, mimetic world to the narrated
one), but the particular term Sartre uses (“naturel”) needs to be placed in the context of
his larger treatment of theatrical tone and rhythm. This he details in a lecture given on
June 10, 1944, shortly after the opening of Huis clos.12

Sartre’s insistence here is on distance as a requisite formal property of drama: the
actor must be present on the stage, but in such a way as to bring about a ritual space of
judgment where the audience interprets the actions of the character but cannot
intervene. In this, the audience plays a role similar to that of God, externally judging the

12 This lecture, which contains Sartre’s most direct presentation of this aesthetics of the theater (and its
difference from both prose fiction and film), has been translated as “On Dramatic Style” (ST 6-29). For the
French, see TS 22-50.
actions within the fictional world, but from outside of that world (TS 27-8, ST 11-12). As Sartre remarks, his placement of his second major play in hell establishes this formal distance through a cosmological distance in “un moyen de timidité” (“unadventurous[ly]”; TS 32, ST 15), just as the use of classical source material produced such a distance in Les mouches. Such distance is to be maintained not only through the conceit of the fictional world, but also through a very specific treatment of language involving three key features: (1) the vocabulary is to be taken from contemporary, everyday use, but should be rendered strange and “dramatic” through a “non-naturalistic” rhythm; (2) the language of the play must be expressed through interrupted movement, where dialogue is interrupted and completed by physical gesture (and vice versa); and (3) all dialogue must be irreversible, committing the character in a speech act that cannot, once delivered, be undone (TS 32-35, ST 16-18).

All three of these traits are reversed in the use of teichoscopia in Huis clos: the reportage of these off-stage and otherworldly events (the continuing lives of those who still remember the dead) is said to be presented “natural[ly]”; it is presented in large blocks of text, deviating from the short, interrupted lines of the rest of the play (although, in a larger sense, each block represents a significant interruption of the total

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13 As Sartre also notes, this distance, which is a basic condition of the stage, is characteristic of the fantastic within prose fiction (described by Sartre as a world seen from the outside, which operates a dehiscence of means and ends: humanity viewed by God or an angel—I deal with Sartre’s writing on the fantastic in more depth in chapter 3 below). See Sartre on Theater 12. This (along with more practical considerations of censorship under Occupation) helps explain his recourse to fantastic scenarios during his wartime theatrical production. It was not until after the war, with Morts sans sépulture (1946), that he attempted to establish this theatrical distance without recourse to fantastic representation.
action); and it does not appear as an act, bearing as it does on a world to which the
characters no longer have any but the most passive access. Nor, for that matter, do these
lines appear to be spoken for the sake of the other characters. Estelle, for example, shifts
helplessly between the indicative and imperative, alternately narrating passively and
making unheard demands on the absent living: “Elle fait ce qu’elle peut pour pleurer.
Allons! allons! encore un effort. Voilà!” (“She’s trying her best to cry. Come, dear! Make
another effort. That’s better”; HC 30, NE 11). And if these deviations from Sartre’s own
prescriptions for the stage aren’t enough, Sartre has a criticism of just this sort of speech
in Eugene O’Neill:

Il y a, à mon avis, dans une pièce d’un grand auteur américain une grave erreur,
je parle de L’Étranger: les personnages viennent sur scène et échangent des
dialogues comme dans toute pièce de théâtre, mais ce qu’il y a de particulier,
c’est que de temps en temps ils s’immobilisent, prennent un visage un peu
spécial et défilent comme pour eux-mêmes ce qu’ils ont dans la tête; ils ont voulu
faire un monologue au lieu de faire un monologue intérieur à la manière de
Joyce, mais transporté au théâtre. […] Ceci est une erreur très grave, je crois,
parce que le spectateur ne demande nullement à savoir ce qui se passe dans la
tête d’un personnage mais à le juger dans l’ensemble de ses actes, à ne pas être
sur le plan lâché de la psychologie naturaliste; il demande que le mot ne serve
pas à peindre un état intérieur mais à engager. […] L’erreur du naturalisme est
de peindre avec des mots les choses de tous les jours, c’est à dire de faire des
mots sur les mots. (TS 34)

There is, I believe, a serious mistake in a play by a well-known American author,
Strange Interlude: characters enter and engage in dialogue, as in any play; but
what is peculiar to this play is that from time to time they stand still, put on a
rather strange expression, and pour out whatever is in their mind, as it were to
themselves. They are trying to deliver a monologue like Joyce’s interior
monologue, but transferred to the stage. […] It is a very serious mistake, I think,
because the audience is not in the slightest interested in what goes on inside a
character’s head, but wants to judge him by everything he does. It is not
concerned with some sort of slack naturalistic psychology; it does not want
speech used to depict a state of mind but to commit. […] The mistake in
naturalism is that it depicts everyday things in words, that is to say in words about words. (ST 17-18)

Although the interior monologue has the added effect in Huis clos of giving us access to the world of the living (as experienced by the dead), it clearly does all of the things Sartre insists must not occur on the stage. It is, in this instance, something like a parody of the “naturalistic,” bourgeois drama from which Sartre wishes to distance himself, but a parody given justification by the afterworld setting: these characters, being dead, exist in a form of life that no longer allows action on the world, and are reduced to describing it as it slowly drifts beyond their field of vision.

If Sartre is clear that the dead can no longer influence the world of the living (and that their descriptive and inactive use of language reflects this gap), the possibility for mimesis remains on the side of the afterworld, that of the interactions between the three characters in hell (the space of mimetic action as opposed to diegetic narration). As the play progresses, the characters eventually lose sight of our world, focusing both their and the audience’s attention on their own. In fact, all sorts of things are said, characters attack one another verbally, short pacts are made (and rapidly broken), and there is no lack of onstage action. The question remains, however, as to the basis of these actions: are the characters freely subjecting themselves to this mutual torture, or are they simply behaving as puppets, arranged and set in motion by the powers that be?

This question is thematized by the debate between Inès and Garcin. Inès takes the position that everything has all been decided and carefully arranged by “them,” and that there is nothing to be done but accept that condition: “Et le bronze, c’est un hasard
Jusque dans les moindres détails, avec amour. Cette chambre nous attendait” (“[T]hat statue on the mantelpiece, do you think it’s there by accident? And what about the heat here? How about that? [A short silence.] I tell you they’ve thought it all out. Down to the last detail. Nothing was left to chance. This room was all set for us”; HC 36, NE 15). And a bit later, to Garcin: “Croyez-vous qu’ils n’ont pas prévu vos paroles?” (“Do you think they haven’t foreknown every word you say?”; HC 65, NE 31). These words have a metatheatrical status (the stage was carefully set, and the script does determine the lines delivered and the actions performed), but they also highlight one reading of the nature of the fictional space of hell as a space of absolute determinism.

Garcin, on the other hand, initially holds out the possibility of freedom in solidarity, and tries to enlist Inès and Estelle’s aid “a déjouer leurs ruses” (“[t]o defeat their devilish tricks”; HC 64, NE 30): “Inès, ils ont embrouillé tous les fils. Si vous faites le moindre geste, si vous levez la main pour vous éventer, Estelle et moi nous sentons la secousse. Aucun de nous ne peut se sauver seul; il faut que nous nous tirions d’affaire ensemble. Choisissez” (“Inez, they’ve laid out their snare damned cunningly—like a cobweb. If you make any movement, if you raise your hand to fan yourself, Estelle and I feel a little tug. Alone, none of us can save himself or herself; we’re linked together inextricably. So you can take your choice”; HC 63, NE 29). The main action of the play, insofar as it has one, is simply Garcin’s coming around to accept Inès’s paranoid view of
hell as a place of absolute unfreedom, first in his refusal to leave when the door opens for him, and then in his lines leading up to the one about hell being other people:

Eh bien, voici le moment. Le bronze est là, je le contemple et je comprends que je suis en enfer. Je vous dis que tout était prévu. Ils avaient prévu que je me tiendrais devant cette cheminée, pressant ma main sur ce bronze, avec tous ces regards sur moi. Tous ces regards que me mangent... (Il se retourne brusquement.) Ha! vous n’êtes que deux? Je vous croyais beaucoup plus nombreuses. (Il rit.) (HC 92)

Yes, now’s the moment; I’m looking at the thing on the mantelpiece, and I understand that I’m in hell. I tell you, everything’s been thought out beforehand. They knew I’d stand at the fireplace stroking this thing of bronze, with all those eyes intent on me. Devouring me. [He swings round abruptly.] What? Only two of you? I thought there were more; many more. [Laughs.] (NE 46)

While the first lines replicate Inès’s earlier statements, the closing one here again accentuates the metafictional aspect of this paranoia: the setting is not only determined, but theatrical—everything has been determined beforehand for the “devouring” eyes of both “the management” and the audience.14

Chief among the aspects of this setting are the two major props of the play: the bronze and the paper knife. We can learn much about Sartre’s treatment of gesture in Huis clos by attending to the use of these props. The former, described only as “[u]n bronze” in the initial stage direction (Gilbert hazards more detail with “[a] massive bronze” in the initial stage direction (Gilbert hazards more detail with “[a] massive bronze

14 Nancy Bauer notes the prevalence of “narcissism, paranoia, and skepticism” in Huis clos, but goes on to claim that these states are ones that Sartre “takes to be characteristic of genuinely human self-consciousness” (Bauer, Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism 104-135). While I agree that Sartre’s picture of the struggle between consciousnesses for the status of subject in Being and Nothingness bears the traces of these attitudes, I find Bauer’s decision to approach them through Sartre’s theatrical depiction of specifically non-human forms of life infelicitous to say the least. Such a treatment takes theater on the level of representation, ignoring the rhetorical function and effectivity of representations in the actual performance; it also misplaces and minimizes the import of the afterlife for Sartre as a picture of the “dead life” of the bourgeois stage and a bourgeois attitude to the world, treating the play instead as a universalizing allegory of all human relations.
ornament”; HC 13, NE 3), is later identified by Garcin’s dialogue as “[u]n bronze de Barbedienne. Quel cauchemar!” (“[a] bronze atrocity by—what’s the fellow’s name?—Barbedienne. A collector’s piece. As in a nightmare”; HC 16, NE 4-5). Here again Stuart Gilbert has added additional information (“atrocity,” “collector’s piece”) in the translation, presumably to fill in associations that would be lacking for an English-speaking audience. Ferdinand Barbedienne operated a foundry during the Second Empire that specialized in miniature reproductions of classical statues, and Sartre’s invocation of him here indicates not simply something massive and gaudy, but refers specifically to the mass reproduction of art as a consumer product for the 19th century bourgeoisie. The other thing we learn about it is that it is useless—an immovable object; Garcin attempts to use it to destroy the lamp in the room, but discovers (as promised by the Valet) that it is too heavy to move.¹⁵ This massive immobility transports the lack of contact between character and world from the split between world and afterworld into the latter. Not only can they not influence the living; they cannot even act on their current surroundings.

Sartre’s treatment of the other major prop (the knife) only accentuates this detachment between characters and world, bringing out the negative connotation of

¹⁵ Sartre addresses both of these traits in “On Dramatic Style,” putting the emphasis on the latter: “Il est nommé dans le texte: le bronze de Barbedienne; en ce qui concerne le bronze lui-même comme décor, je puis vous affirmer qu’il n’est pas de Barbedienne. Cela fait une masse quelconque au fond; je crois qu’il représente une femme nue à cheval sur un nu; je ne crois d’ailleurs pas que ce soit d’une utilité quelconque” (“It is named in the text as a bronze by Barbedienne; as to the bronze itself, I can assure you it’s not by Barbedienne. It’s any massive object in the background; I believe it represents a naked woman astride a naked man. I don’t think it’s of any particular use”; TS 49, ST 29).
gesture (as when one says that something is just a gesture, rather than a genuine act).

The knife, unlike the statue, is light enough for the characters to move, but it remains a useless object. Garcin notes that they have been left a paper knife with no books to open, and thematizes the non-utility of such an object: “Alors à quoi sert-il? (Le garçon hausse les épaules.)” (“Then what’s the use of this? [VALET shrugs his shoulders]”; HC 21, NE 7).

Despite this, Estelle does finally attempt to use the knife at the end of the play, but without any result.

ESTELLE: Ha! Eh bien, elle ne nous verra plus.
   Elle prend le coupe-papier sur la table, se précipite sur Inès et lui porte plusieurs coups.
INÈS, se débattant et riant: Qu’est-ce que tu fais, qu’est-ce que tu fais, tu es folle?
   Tu sais bien que je suis morte.
ESTELLE: Morte?
   Elle laisse tomber le couteau. Un temps. Inès ramasse le couteau et s’en frappe avec rage.
INÈS: Morte! Morte! Morte! Ni le couteau, ne le poison, ne la corde. C’est déjà fait, comprends-tu? Et nous sommes ensemble pour toujours. Elle rit. (HC 93)

ESTELLE: Right! In that case, I’ll stop her watching. [She picks up the paper-knife from the table, rushes at INEZ, and stabs her several times.]
INEZ [struggling and laughing]: But, you crazy creature, what do you think you’re doing? You know quite well I’m dead.
ESTELLE: Dead?
   [She drops the knife. A pause. INEZ picks up the knife and jabs herself with it regretfully.]
INEZ: Dead! Dead! Dead! Knives, poison, ropes—all useless. It has happened already, do you understand? Once and for all. So here we are, forever. [Laughs.] (NE 47)

This plays out like a parody of the old saw that a gun seen on stage at the start of a play must be fired by the end. The knife is used as a weapon in the final moments, but to no avail. Even this movable object cannot perform the desired action, since everything “est
déjà fait.” The gesture of stabbing is here separated from its expected effects, and
becomes a pure (and inconsequential) gesture, existing only in its theatricality. Inès
brings this detachment of action from effect to its logical conclusion, stabbing herself
either “avec rage” or “regretfully” (as Gilbert has it), two very different emotional
reactions to a state of impotence. This divergence from the original text to the translation
is less significant, however, than the mobility of emotion, which runs rapidly from
murderous rage to an infectious laughter that emerges quickly and slowly dies away as
the play draws to a close. All other emotions are subsumed in a lack of seriousness
perfectly adequate to a situation in which nothing can be done.16

The one possibility left ambiguously open for the entrance of freedom is the open
door that Garcin refuses to use, constituting the climax of the dramatic action. As with
the earlier disagreement between Inès and Garcin, the audience is left with two
interpretive options: either Garcin had the capacity to leave and simply chose
inauthenticity due to his obsession over Inès’s judgment of his cowardess, or everything
was foreknown by “la direction” and Garcin was merely an automaton all along. Were
the setting not hell, the former would obviously square better with Sartre’s overall
presentation of human freedom, but the new ontological setting introduces an element

16 As my phrasing should already suggest, this helpless laughter looks forward to a similar use of laughter
(and its absence or wasting away) in Beckett. Tyrus Miller analyzes this latter in Late Modernism 45-62 in
terms of a subjective “hardening” against a malignant world. While his theory of “self-reflexive” laughter
focuses on the defensive role of laughter, I am more interested here in laughter as one more gesture without
effect, something to be done when nothing can be. While Miller’s characterization of laughter implies a
tragic world, gestural laughter is closer to a cynical ebullience than a last-ditch attempt to preserve the self
against external forces.
of doubt: perhaps Inès is right, in which case Garcin simply accepts the truth of his situation at the end of the play. Ultimately, this comes down to a question of how literally hell is to be taken in the play: does the weight fall on the fantastic imagining of another world, or on the figurative import of that world in its inversion of our own?

In his preface for a 1965 recording of the play, Sartre places more emphasis on the symbolism of hell than on carrying the ontological difference to its logical conclusion (in which both authenticity and its opposite would be extinguished in pure determinism):

[C]es gens ne sont pas semblables à nous. Les trois personnes que vous entendrez dans Huis clos ne nous ressemblent pas en ceci que nous sommes vivants et qu’ils sont morts. Bien entendu, ici, ‘morts’ symbolise quelque chose. Ce que j’ai voulu indiquer, c’est précisément que beaucoup de gens sont encroûtes dans un série d’habitudes, de coutumes, qu’ils ont sur eux des jugements dont ils souffrent mais qu’ils ne cherchent même pas à changer. Et que ces gens-là sont comme morts. En ce sens qu’ils ne peuvent briser le cadre de leurs soucis, de leurs préoccupations et de leurs coutumes ; et qu’ils restent ainsi victimes souvent des jugements qu’on a portés sur eux. […] De sorte que, en vérité, comme nous sommes vivants, j’ai voulu montrer par l’absurde l’importance chez nous de la liberté, c’est-à-dire l’importance de changer les actes par d’autres actes. Quel que soit le cercle d’enfer dans lequel nous vivons, je pense que nous sommes libres de le briser. Et si les gens ne le brisent pas, c’est encore librement qu’ils y restent. (TS 239).

[T]hese people are not like us. The three persons you will be hearing in No Exit do not resemble us, inasmuch as we are alive and they are dead. Naturally, “dead” symbolizes something here. What I was wanting to imply specifically is that many people are encrusted in a set of habits and customs, that they harbor judgments about them which make them suffer, but do not try to change them. And that such people are to all intents and purposes dead. Dead in the sense that they cannot break out of the frame of their worries, their concerns, and their habits, and that they therefore continue in many cases to be victims of judgments passed on them by other people. […] So that, in point of fact, since we are alive, I wanted to show by means of the absurd the importance of freedom to us, that is to say the importance of changing acts by other acts. No matter what circle of hell
we are living in, I think we are free to break out of it. And if people do not break out, again, they are staying there of their own free will. (ST 200)

Nonetheless, the play itself gives an audience little basis on which to make the decision whether the characters are behaving inauthentically or are purely determined from outside. In one sense, this simply exports Sartre’s pure, undetermined moment of freedom from the action on stage to the audience, who is forced to make an interpretive choice about the sort of world it has been watching in the absence of strong evidence in either direction. If we conclude that Garcin chooses inauthenticity at the end of the play, accepting Inès’s deterministic interpretation of their situation, we learn something about the operation of bad faith and produce an ethical judgment of Garcin as a character; if we instead conclude that Garcin, being dead, never has a real choice to exit through the door (his actions having been foreseen and planned by “la direction”), we learn something about what we mean when we say that the world on the stage (both the represented hell and the bourgeois space of theatrical representation) is not our world. Such ambiguity regarding the presence or absence of freedom is characteristic of fictions of the afterlife as a whole, although it plays out differently in different texts.17 The ultimate choice made by each particular author is interesting in its own right, but the ambiguity itself is more telling as a consistent thematic question in an age of waning belief in the capacity of human beings to affect the world they inhabit.

17 Lewis, for example, ends up arbitrarily carving out a space for freedom and ethical choice even in the afterworld (Chapter 2), while O’Brien disguises a purely determined world as a free one for as long as possible, revealing its unfreedom and circularity only in his final pages (Chapter 3). Beckett pushes this tension to its limit, leaving a minimal possibility for indetermination within elaborately structured and closed afterworlds (Chapter 4).
Sartre: Les Jeux Sont Faits

Sartre gives this incapacity to affect the world its most vivid presentation not in *Huis clos*, however, but in his first film scenario, *Les jeux sont faits (The Chips are Down)*, submitted to Pathé in late 1943 and turned into a film in 1947. The scenario was written at the request of Jean Delannoy (who later directed the film), and it was the first of several that Sartre submitted during and immediately after the war. Like the American film *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941), the plot of Sartre’s afterlife film hinges on a clerical mistake made by afterworld bureaucrats. The central characters, Pierre and Eve, are both killed early in the film, only to discover that they were fated to meet and fall in love but failed to do so due to an “erreur au service des naissances” (“an error in the department of births”; JSF 68, CD 92). As a result, “Article 140” gives them the option of returning to life for 24 hours, during which time they must “réussi[r] à [s’]aimer en toute confiance et de toutes [leurs] forces” (“[succeed] in loving each other with perfect confidence and with all [their] might”; JSF 68, CD 92). If this condition is fulfilled, they will be allowed to live out the rest of their lives together. They return to life, but are unable to give up the commitments they had before their respective deaths. Pierre was the leader of an insurrectionist group, and tries to warn his comrades of an ambush he learned of while dead; Eve was poisoned by her husband, and tries to save her sister

18 Simone de Beauvoir mentions Sartre’s writing for Pathé in Prime of Life (439). Contat and Rybalka give a more detailed description of the circumstances surrounding Sartre’s composition and Delannoy’s eventual filming of the scenario in the “Appendix on the Cinema” of The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Volume 1: A Bibliographical Life (602-3). J. D. Connor also gives a short description of the material compensation Sartre received for the work and its role in allowing Sartre and Beauvoir to leave the academy to pursue independent careers as public intellectuals (1045-6).
Lucette from the same fate. Their attempts to intervene in these others’ lives come in the way of their love (while also failing to save either Lucette or Pierre’s comrades), and the film ends with the couple dying once more and reconciling themselves to their separate afterlives.

In an interview in *Le Figaro* from April 29, 1947, Sartre declared the film to be “bathed in determinism” and clarified that the film “will not be existentialist” since “existentialism never admits that the chips are ever down. Even after our death our acts pursue us. We outlive ourselves in our acts, even though they often develop contrary to our intentions and in directions we did not want them to” (cited in Contat and Rybalka, *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre* 1: 163-4). The overall tone of the interview is dismissive, identifying the scenario as a bit of “fun” (ibid.) Sartre was having rather than a serious work. His comments call attention to its counterfactual status, presenting (as did *Huis clos*) a world specifically imagined to differ from our own.

Thematically, *Les jeux sont faits* differs from *Huis clos* in its focus on responsibility for one’s commitments, marked by Pierre and Eve’s separate inabilities to ignore the commitments they had made when alive, as well as its thematization of “confiance” as both what Pierre and Eve must exhibit toward one another and what they fruitlessly demand of others (the trust of the insurrectionists and Lucette). But what the film communicates most clearly and vividly is not this thematic material but a more basic incapacity of Pierre and Eve to act in the world (either while dead or once returned to life). Such incapacity is rendered most clearly in the depiction of the dead souls. Unlike
the damned souls in *Huis clos*, who exist in a closed, interior setting proper to the stage, the dead in *Les jeux sont faits* do not leave our world, but rather continue to exist in it without the capacity to interact with it. They can see and hear the living, but do not exist for them.

The ontological status of the dead as pure seers is communicated simply in both the scenario and the completed film.\(^\text{19}\) We see both Pierre and Eve die, and then doubles of them rise and try to interact with the world only to be ignored. Sartre describes Pierre’s death as follows:

> A ce moment, tandis que son corps demeure étendu sur le sol, un autre Pierre se redresse lentement… Il a l’air de sortir d’un rêve et brosse machinalement sa manche. Il tourne le dos à la scène muette qui se joue. Néanmoins, trois ouvriers lui font face ; ceux-ci pourraient le voir, et cependant, ils ne le voient pas. (JSF 15)

At that moment, while his body remains stretched out on the ground, another Pierre gets slowly to his feet . . . He looks as though he were waking from a dream, and mechanically brushes off the sleeve of his coat. His back is turned to the silent scene being enacted. There are, however, three workmen facing him who could see him, but who do not see him. (CD 24)

Pierre attempts to ask one of his comrades what happened, but is ignored. Two scenes later, someone throws a bucket of water on him as if he were not there, and when he looks at his trousers they remain dry (JSF 19, CD 29). Despite these clues, he fails to realize that he is dead until he is mysteriously drawn to the Impasse Laguénésie, where the dead queue to sign their final papers and are finally declared “mort officiellement” (“officially dead”; JSF 31, CD 45). Eve’s ghost goes through a similar process, first being

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\(^{19}\) Although Deleuze does not mention *Les jeux sont faits* in *Cinema 2*, the status of the protagonists as seers rather than actors resonates with his description of postwar film.
ignored by her maid Rose and then noticing that she has no reflection in the mirror (JSF 17, CD 26-7). After both Pierre and Eve are processed at Laguénésie, they witness a pickpocket rob a little girl. Eve tries to alert the girl to the theft, but she cannot be heard by the living. Pierre and his otherworldly guide (an old man hanged in 1778) are more reconciled to their inability to affect the world, and simply “se taisent et observent l’enfant d’un air bouleversé” (“watch the child in silence with a troubled air”; JSF 34, CD 48).

Delannoy’s adaptation is quite faithful to the original scenario. The most significant departure is the omission of two proposed sequences emphasizing the tragic element of this impotence. The first sequence (JSF 46-49, CD 63-66) shows the deceased Pierre trying to warn his comrades of the ambush he has learned about while eavesdropping in the Regent’s palace. As before, he is neither heard nor seen by them, and the scene ends with Pierre “martèl[ant] rageusement la rampe de coups de point insonores” at “l’inutilité de ses efforts” (“[i]n impotent rage, [pounding] with his fists on the stair railing, blows that make no sound” at “the futility of his efforts”; JSF 48, CD 66). The second sequence depicts Eve visiting her home and discussing her situation with her equally dead father, whose “résignation attristée [sad resignation]” appears the only affect appropriate to his incapacity to act on or communicate with the living world (JSF 49-53, CD 66-73). The omission of these two sequences lightens the overall tone of the film, leaving the earlier moments (discussed above) to communicate to the audience in a
more whimsical and less labored fashion the dead’s passive situation in relation to the living world.

As with Sartre’s early work in the theater, his approach to film takes up medium-specific properties as subject matter—in this case the ghostly absent-presence of the image (as opposed to the actual presence of the stage). In “On Dramatic Style,” Sartre first introduces the specificity of the stage (drawing from Henri Gouhier’s *L’Essence du théâtre*) by contrasting it with film: “Dans un très bon livre sur « L’essence du théâtre », l’auteur, M. Gouhier, parle d’une présence de chair et d’os qu’aurait l’acteur au théâtre et qu’il n’aurait pas au cinéma” (“In a very good book on ‘the essence of theater,’ Monsieur Gouhier observes that an actor is present in the flesh on the stage in a way in which he is not on the screen”; TS 23, ST 7). The “absence” of the filmic image is linked to an “ambiguous” identification between camera, character, and spectator.

Au cinéma, il y a un phénomène assez ambigu qui vient de ce que nous ne voyons pas directement las choses mais qu’il y a l’œil de la caméra, c’est-à-dire un témoin impersonnel qui s’est intercalé entre le spectateur et l’objet vu : je vois les choses comme quelqu’un les voit qui n’est pas moi ; par exemple, je suis très loin du personnage et cependant je le vois en gros plan. Il y a donc ici une sorte de recul mais, c’est là le caractère ambigu, d’autre part cet œil devient fréquemment l’œil d’un des personnages, du héros par exemple. (TS 24)

In […] film something rather ambiguous happens, because we do not see things directly, but through the camera eye, that is, through an impersonal witness which has come between the spectator and the object seen. I see things as someone who is not me sees them; I am, for instance, a long way from the character, yet I see him close up. There is a sort of detachment here, but—and this is what is ambiguous about it—this eye often becomes the eye of all the characters, for instance the hero’s eye. (ST 8)
These passing remarks (meant to set up the specificity of the theater rather than constitute a full-blown theory of the cinematic image) identify the cinema as a space of detached identification, or identification with the pure, impersonal, and impotent witness of a camera (not, in most fiction film, ontologically part of the fictional world), which is only secondarily (“fréquemment” but not necessarily) re-linked to the world through the mediation of a character. Sartre’s key term here is not “recol [detachment],” however, but “ambigu,” indicating not a simple lack of connection between character (and therefore identificatory spectator) and world, but a more complex situation in which the spectator exists as both a passive view on a world and as a vicarious actor in that world by way of identification with the hero.

One of the effects of Sartre’s treatment of the afterlife in Les jeux sont faits is to address this ambiguity by negating it, rendering the principal characters as incapable of acting on the fictional world as both the camera and the spectator are. As with Huis clos and its treatment of theatricality, the fantastic conceit of the afterlife works here to negate the ordinary functioning of the medium. The stakes of such a negation are slightly different, however. In Huis clos, the reduction of the action on the stage to the

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20 We can see in these comments the seeds of the division between the movement-image and time-image Deleuze identified in the shift from pre- to post-WWII cinema, the former relying on this mediation by an active character (reconstituting the sensory-motor link in an action-image), and the latter tending toward reducing characters to a state similar to that of a camera, establishing “purely optical situations” that mark a break “between man and the world” (Deleuze, Cinema 2 2, 173). I discuss Deleuze’s treatment of the move from movement- to time-image in the context of a loss of “belief in this world” in detail in my introduction, and readers are directed there for more details.

21 Sartre’s comments could be fruitfully compared to the extensive debates about identification and the apparatus in film studies from the 1970s and 1980s. My interest here is less with Sartre’s connection (or lack thereof) to film theory, however, and more with how Sartre’s understanding of film influenced his own film writing.
status of pure gesture functioned as a critique of the conventions of the bourgeois stage. While *Les jeux sont faits* has a similar metafictional aspect (discussed below), the negation of identificatory pleasure associated with vicarious action works principally as a critique of both an abstract idea of freedom and a related social situation of mandatory leisure.

The critique of abstract freedom is articulated in capsule form in two exchanges with the elderly bureaucrat who registers the signatures of the recently dead. The first takes place after Pierre has signed the ledger, and inquires as to what will happen next:

—Et où faut-il que j’aille?
La vieille dame le considère d’un air étonné :
—Mais où vous voudrez…
Cependant, comme il va sortir par où il est entré, elle lui désigne une autre porte sur le côté :
—Non, par là… (JSF 26)

“Where should I go now?”
She looks at him with an air of astonishment.
“Why anywhere you like . . .”
However, when he starts to go out the way he came, she points to a door on the other side.
“No, this way . . .” (CD 38)

Here, the abstract freedom of “où vous voudrez” rapidly becomes the concrete necessity of “par là,” depicting both the emptiness of such an idea of freedom detached from effective action and the doublespeak of bureaucratic apparatus, where human freedom is absolute so long as it remains determined in advance. This little gag is repeated almost verbatim with Eve, sharpening Sartre’s point about the identity of abstract freedom with pure determination.

—Mais où faut-il que j’aille?
—Où vous voudrez. Les morts sont libres.
Eve, like Pierre, mechanically starts to leave by the same door through which she had entered, but the elderly lady intervenes:

“No . . . this way . . .” (CD 45)

The addition of the word “machinalement [mechanically]” (a word used liberally by Sartre throughout the scenario, and applied to almost all the characters in Les jeux sont faits at some point) only underscores the existing point about the determinism undergirding the promise of total freedom. The “dead are free” to do anything precisely because they can do nothing, at least nothing that has any consequence in the world.

This philosophical critique of abstract freedom is linked closely with a social critique of bourgeois leisure. Sartre’s initial description of the setting just after the exchange between the elderly lady and Pierre establishes this connection quickly:

La rue débouche, à vingt mètres de là, sur une large artère où voitures et piétons se croisent en un mouvement très animé. Dans ce court espace, quelques rares vivants circulent affairés, tandis qu’une dizaine de personnages morts sont assis ou debout contre les murs, ou bien encore se promènent nonchalamment en regardant les vitrines. (JSF 27)

A few yards further along, the street runs into a large throughfare where there is a great bustle of traffic, and in this short distance a few rare living persons are walking rapidly, while a dozen or more dead ones are either sitting or standing along the walls, or strolling about carelessly looking at the shop windows. (CD 39)

While the living have responsibilities, the “freedom” of the dead simply reduces them to passing time. A few pages later, this aimlessness of the dead is said to render them
“tristes et quelque peu honteux” (“sad and a little ashamed”; JSF 29, CD 41). In this situation, it is little surprise that the dead, exemplified here by the old man from the 18th century who volunteers to show Pierre around, are pleased to find such a “distrait [diversion]” (JSF 28, CD 40). The same old man is given the line that sums up the situation of the dead: “Pas de responsabilités. Pas de soucis matériels. Une liberté totale. Des distractions de choix” (“'No responsibilities. No material worries. Complete liberty. Choice diversions’”; JSF 55, CD 75). These are meant to convince Pierre of the “petites compensations” of being dead, but he remains as unconvinced as was Sartre of the pleasures of a leisure class in an administered consumer society. This is one of the points of contact with Huis clos, since the situation of the dead in either case is characterized by an absolute lack of want.22 Ultimately, this is more important for Sartre than the more superficial difference between the enclosed determinism of Huis clos and the abstract (but equally determined) freedom of the dead of Les jeux sont faits. The absence of responsibility established by the absence of need and the inefficacy of all action renders freedom abstract and ultimately meaningless.

While the conceit that the dead are unable to affect the world of the living is simple enough (and a common complaint of the dead from as far back as antiquity),

22 This lack of want obviously contrasts with the material deprivations of Paris during the Occupation years, although it recalls the expansion of leisure time and mass culture in France during the 1930s and looks proleptically to the postwar consumer culture. In the more local arena of the Occupation itself, Sartre’s depiction of an afterlife in which all is taken care of and nothing can be done also obviously refers to a state in which little of substance could be done (apart from clandestine resistance activities) and life was reduced to passivity and empty consumption of just such “diversions” as the depoliticized film and theater approved by Occupation forces. I discuss the specificity of the Occupation in more detail in the final section of this chapter.
Pierre and Eve’s inefficacy persists even after they are returned to life. Having fallen in love with one another in this “free” state with neither responsibility nor cares, their love remains largely abstract, while they both feel the all-too-concrete pull of their former responsibilities (Pierre to his comrades, Eve to her family) upon resurrection. Although they manage to pass a night of love after much difficulty (including the re-emergence of their disparate class backgrounds, which had themselves been insignificant and abstract in the afterlife), both finally allow these commitments to come between them, and their second deaths signal their inability to love one another “en toute confiance.” What is even more striking is that a general lack of confidence erodes Pierre’s and Eve’s abilities to act even on those groups to which they do commit themselves. Pierre is unable to explain how he came by the information about the ambush, and his appearances with Eve (the wife of the Secretary of the Militia) make him suspect in their eyes. While he finally does manage to convince them he is trustworthy, the entire group is attacked and massacred by the militia before anything can be done. Eve is equally ineffectual. Her sister refuses to believe that André poisoned Eve. Eve eventually steals Pierre’s gun and forces both Lucette and André to listen to her, but their forced interview is interrupted (with Lucette still unconvinced) by Eve’s second death at the end of the allotted 24 hours.

This persistence of the incapacity to act even into the world of the living gives the film a formal unity, but is also likely what led Sartre to distance the film from existentialism in the Le Figaro interview cited above. As long as the characters possess a
non-human form of life in the afterworld, their determination has a narrative justification that does not contradict Sartre’s fundamental axiom of human freedom. Once they are returned to life, however, this justification seems no longer to apply. Sartre addresses this difficulty through an appeal to the fictionality of the entire scenario. After Pierre and Eve are returned to life, they experience a moment of self-consciousness when they realize that they are being watched by the dead: “C’est vrai. Ils doivent être là. Le vieux avec son tricorne et les autres... Au spectacle, comme chez le régent. Ils s’amusent de nous” (“It’s true. They must be there. The old man with his cocked hat and the others... looking on at the spectacle, as at the Regent’s. We’re their amusement”; JSF 99, CD 132). This metafictional moment aligns the passivity of the dead with that of the filmic spectator, but also turns the living world depicted in the film into an equally frozen “spectacle.”

This point is in keeping with J. D. Connor’s claim that Pierre and Eve’s “determination is thus a figure of their literary status,” their status as characters in an aesthetic work that must conform to specific production standards in order to be made—in this case, standards upheld by Pathé (Connor 1053-4). In a letter to Beauvoir from the summer of 1943, Sartre recounts a meeting with Jean Delannoy, Jean Giraudoux, Bernard Borderie, and René Delange about the screenplay, emphasizing their demand that the characters be given just the sort of psychological motives Sartre was arguing against in his writing on the theater: “Giraudoux made a few comments which boil down to this: that the personality of the characters was not brought out
enough and that now the thing was to emphasize the psychological. […] Delannoy seemed satisfied, though he too is calling for psychological motives.” The producer, Borderie, exhibited little interest in psychology, but instead wanted more “[p]hony irony” to get the film to conform more closely with “picturesque little schemes” he already had in mind (Quiet Moments in a War 254). Rather than give up the financial boon he was hoping the sale of the screenplay would be (one that would allow Sartre and Beauvoir to exit the professional life of the lycée system), Sartre appears to have folded this external determination into the narrative of the film, thematizing it as such.

The intra-textual figure for this external determination is, of course, the bureaucratic apparatus of the afterlife. Its offer of a renewed chance at life and love (via “Article 140”) comes to appear, over the course of the film, just as phony and abstract as the freedom of the dead promised by the elderly bureaucrat. “Anywhere you like” is again transmuted to “this way,” now on a larger narrative scale.

In keeping with his critique of Heidegger regarding being-toward-death, Sartre locates his counterfactual investigation of non-human forms of after-life not in the eternity of that life, but in the incapacity to act that comes from a separation between the dead and the world. Both theatrical and filmic versions of Sartrean afterlives turn on this separation and the determinism it fosters. At the same time, both Huis clos and Les jeux sont faits perform subtle critiques of the bourgeois uses of the stage and screen for entertainment steeped in fatalism and psychological explanation. Taken together, they can be seen as a larger attack on aesthetic norms that leave no space for the
representation and interrogation of free action. Yet they also refuse to abandon certain minimal conventions of aesthetic form, instead taking those forms to their limit and exposing their complicity with a worldview in which such free action is impossible. While *Huis clos* maintains something like aesthetic closure by focusing on the adaptation of new souls to the afterworld (ending when their situation stabilizes and they come to accept their new post-lives), *Les jeux sont faits* uses the more arbitrary and clichéd idea of the couple’s second chance at life to generate that same closure. Both approaches turn the focus away from the lack of mortal finitude implied by the afterlife, in keeping with Sartre’s joint claims that finitude should be understood to be inherent to all choice and that the mortal finitude established by death cannot be the ground of authenticity.

**Beauvoir: All Men are Mortal**

In 1943, around the same time Sartre was writing both *Huis clos* and *Les jeux sont faits*, Simone de Beauvoir began her own counterfactual fantasy, the novel that would become *All Men are Mortal* (1946). Originally conceived as “un long vagabondage autour de la mort” (“a sort of protracted wandering around the central theme of death”; *La force de l’âge* 621, *Prime of Life* 478), the novel employs the conceit of the immortality of one man, Raimon Fosca, to explore the significance of human finitude within a fictional setting. Although Beauvoir’s philosophical writing from the same period (1943) explicitly supports and extends Sartre’s critique of Heidegger on being-toward-death, I argue that the exploratory and experimental character of her fiction led her to conclusions much
closer to Heidegger’s position than her contemporary philosophical work would suggest.23

Beauvoir explicitly separates human finitude from mortal finitude in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944, written in the summer of 1943), using arguments similar to those of Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*.24 As part of a larger argument about the importance of others’ freedom for our own, she argues that one can only act freely by “assuming my finitude,” taking on the risk of uncertainty and failure as a necessary component of free action (PW 139). According to this argument, death is no more central to finitude (which is defined in terms of risk and the objectification of transcendence) than it is in Sartre’s argument about finitude as a foundation factor of all choice:

La finitude de l’homme n’est donc pas subie, elle est voulue : la mort n’a pas ici cette importance dont on l’a souvent revêtue. Ce n’est pas parce que l’homme meurt qu’il est fini. Notre transcendance se définit toujours concrètement en deçà de la mort ou au delà. […] Il ne faut donc pas dire avec Heidegger que le projet authentique de l’homme, c’est d’être pour mourir, que la mort est notre fin essentielle, qu’il n’y a pour l’homme d’autre choix qu’entre la fuite ou l’assomption de cette possibilité ultime. D’après Heidegger lui-même, il n’y a pas pour l’homme d’intériorité, sa subjectivité ne se révèle que par un engagement dans le monde objectif. Il n’y a choix que par un acte qui mord sur les choses : ce que l’homme choisit, c’est qu’il fait ; ce qu’il projette, c’est ce qu’il fonde ; or il ne fait pas sa mort, il ne la fonde pas : il est mortel. Et Heidegger n’a pas le droit de dire que cet être est précisément pour mourir ; le fait d’être est gratuit ; on est pour rien, ou plutôt, le mot pour n’a aucun sens ; l’être est projet puisqu’il pose une fin, dit Heidegger ; mais en tant qu’être, l’être ne pose aucune fin : il est ;

23 I am certainly not the first to note the import of Heidegger for Beauvoir’s thought, nor even the way she uses Heideggerian concepts to mitigate some of the more melodramatic and antisocial aspects of Sartre’s philosophy. By all means see Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex*; Gothlin, “Reading Simone de Beauvoir with Martin Heidegger”; and Bauer, “Beauvoir’s Heideggerian Ontology,” as well as my “Beauvoir-in-America: Understanding, Concrete Experience, and Beauvoir’s Appropriation of Heidegger in America Day by Day.”

24 On Beauvoir’s composition of that text, see PL 433-435. Debra Bergoffen also discusses Beauvoir’s composition of *Pyrrhus and Cineas* in her “Introduction” to that text in the *Philosophical Writings* (PW 79).
c’est le projet seul qui définit son être comme être pour. (Pyrrhus et Cinéas 60, 61-62)

Man’s finiteness is therefore not endured, it is desired. Here, death does not have that importance with which it has often been endowed. It is not because man dies that he is finite. Our transcendence is always concretely defined on this side of death, or beyond it. [...] Therefore, one must not say, with Heidegger, that man’s authentic project is being for death, that death is our essential end, that there is no other choice for man than the flight from or the assumption of this ultimate possibility. According to Heidegger himself, there is no interiority for men; his subjectivity is revealed only through an engagement with the objective world. There is choice only through an action that bites onto things. What man chooses is what he makes; what he projects is what he founds, but he does not make his death; he does not found it. He is mortal. And Heidegger has no has no right to say that this being is precisely for death. The fact of being is gratuitous; one is for nothing, or rather, the word for makes no sense here. Being is project because it posits an end, says Heidegger. But as being, being posits no end; it is. The project alone is what defines its being as being for. (PW 113)

This reading turns around the term pour, an infelicitous translation of the zum of Sein-zum-Tode. Starting from a position (close to that of Sartre) that death cannot be a project and cannot therefore give meaning (one is never “for death”), Beauvoir goes on to reject summarily the claim that being “en face de la mort” (a better rendering of Sein-zum-Tode than “être pour mourir”) has any genuine significance for authenticity:

Heidegger convient qu’à la différence des autres fins, cette fin suprême n’est pas définie comme fin par aucun acte ; la décision résolue qui jette l’homme vers sa mort ne le conduit pas à se tuer, mais seulement à vivre en présence de la mort : mais qu’est-ce que la présence ? Elle n’est pas ailleurs que dans l’acte qui présentifie, elle ne se réalise que dans la création de liens concrets. Ainsi la conversion heideggérienne se montre aussi inefficace que la conversion stoïcienne ; après, comme avant, la vie se poursuit, identique ; il ne s’agit que d’un changement intérieur. Les mêmes conduites qui sont inauthentiques lorsqu’elles apparaissent comme des fuites deviennent authentiques si elles se déroulent en face de la mort. Mais ce mot : en face de n’est qu’un mot ; de toute façon, pendant que je vis, la mort n’est pas là ; et aux yeux de qui ma conduite est-elle fuite si pour moi elles est libre choix d’une fin ? (Pyrrhus et Cinéas 62-3)
Heidegger agrees that, compared to other ends, this supreme end is not defined as an end by any act. The resolute decision that throws man toward his death does not lead him to kill himself, but only to live in the presence of death. But what is presence? It is nowhere else than in the act that presences [présentifier]; it is realized only in the creation of concrete links. Thus the Heideggerian conversion is shown to be as ineffective as the Stoic conversion. After, as before, life continues, identical. It is only a matter of an interior change. The same behaviors that are inauthentic when they appear as flights become authentic if they take place in the face of death. But this in the face of is only a phrase. In any case, while I am living, death is not here, and in whose eyes is my behavior a flight if for me it is a free choice of an end? (PW 114)

While Beauvoir attends here rather closer to Heidegger’s claims than does Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, she still approaches being-toward-death from the point of view of an external judgment about authenticity or inauthenticity, rather than dealing with the idea of being-toward-death as an enabling ground and existential condition of authenticity. This “changement intérieur” that she rejects seems to be precisely the sort that Heidegger reserves for authenticity, but it is addressed in *Being and Time* not in terms of the question “how can we tell whether an action is authentic?” but the question “what makes authentic action possible?” This is in keeping with her focus on existential ethics rather than transcendental ontology in both *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, but it has the effect of deferring a more complicated engagement with Heidegger’s question to her fiction.

In describing this fiction (both writing fiction in general, and *All Men are Mortal* in particular), Beauvoir’s emphasis lies in the open and exploratory character of literature. In her defense of the “metaphysical novel” (first delivered as a lecture in 1945,
then published as “Littérature et métaphysique” in *Les temps modernes* in 1946), Beauvoir stresses this openness of fiction:

> [S’il veut que le lecteur croie aux inventions qu’il propose, il faut que le romancier y croie d’abord assez fortement pour découvrir en elles un sens qui rejaillira sur l’idée primitive, qui suggérera des problèmes, des rebondissements, des développements imprévus. Ainsi, au fur et à la mesure que l’histoire se déroule, voit-il apparaître des vérités dont il ne connaissait pas d’avance le visage, des questions dont il ne possède pas la solution […]. (“Littérature et métaphysique” 1157)

If he wants the reader to believe in the inventions he proposes, the novelist must first believe strongly enough in them to discover a meaning in them that will flow back into the original idea, a meaning that will suggest problems, new twists, and unforeseen developments. Thus, as the story unfolds, he sees truths appear that were previously unknown to him, questions whose solutions he does not possess. (PW 272)

Beauvoir contrasts this exploratory character of fiction with the thesis novel: one written as an illustration of a pre-existing point or “système tout constitué et se suffisant à lui-même” (“fully constituted, self-sufficient system”; “Littérature et métaphysique” 1157, PW 272). The latter is “sans risque et sans véritable invention” (“without risk and without real invention”; “Littérature et métaphysique” 1157, PW 272), and is to be distinguished from genuine metaphysical fiction, which explores metaphysical questions through the concrete singularity of the situations and characters described rather than the abstract presentation of philosophical treatises.25 Her retrospective assessment of *All Men are Mortal* turns on the same point:

25 Eleanore Holveck discusses Beauvoir’s treatment of the relation between literature and philosophy in more detail. See Holveck 15-41. Curiously, she never mentions *All Men are Mortal* in the book, despite its obvious relevance to the relation of “literature and metaphysics” (the subtitle of her book) in Beauvoir’s writing. Toril Moi discusses Beauvoir’s choice of a “life of literature” rather than philosophy in biographical
Cette morale [the capacity of Armand to act in the novel] rejoint les conclusions de Pyrrhus et Cinéas, mais elle n’est pas assenée sous forme de leçon ; plutôt, elle sert de prétexte à une expérience imaginaire. Des critiques, ceux-là mêmes qui s’irritent quand un roman démontre, one reproché à celui-ci de ne rien prouver ; c’est justement pourquoi malgré des longueurs, des redites, des surcharges, j’ai de l’amitié pour lui. (La force des choses 79)

This morality relates to the conclusion of Pyrrhus et Cinéas, but it is not driven home in the form of a lesson; rather, it serves as the pretext for an imaginary experience. Some critics, the very ones who are annoyed when a novel proves something, blamed this one for not proving anything; which is precisely the reason why, despite the longueurs, the repetitions, the excesses, I still feel warmly toward it. (Force of Circumstance 66)\footnote{Fallaize also notes the openness of All Men are Mortal in her monograph on Beauvoir’s fiction (68).}

For this reason, we should not be entirely surprised that the novel departs from the arguments in Pyrrhus and Cineas, nor even, to take the specific claim at issue, that it comes to contradict her arguments against the importance Heidegger gave to mortal finitude in that essay.\footnote{The Beauvoir of 1960 is herself critical and dismissive of Pyrrhus and Cineas, writing “[J]e ne désapprouve pas mon souci de fournir à la réalité existentiale un contenu matériel; l’ennui, c’est qu’au moment où je croyais m’évader de l’individualisme, j’y restais enlisée. […] Mon subjectivisme se doublait, nécessairement, d’un idéalisme qui ôte toute portée, ou presque, à mes spéculations. Ce premier essai ne m’intéresse aujourd’hui que parce qu’il précise un moment de mon évolution” (“I do not disapprove of my anxiety to provide existentialist morals with a material content; the annoying thing was to be enmeshed with an individualism still, at the very moment I thought I had at last escaped it. […] My subjectivism was, inevitably, doubled up with a streak of idealism that deprived my speculations of all, or nearly all, their significance. This first essay only interests me today insofar as it marks a stage in my development”; La force de l’âge 563-4, Prime of Life 435).}

As with the counterfactual thrust of Sartre’s afterlife writing, All Men are Mortal investigates the practical meaning of mortal finitude by eliminating it in the case of one character, following the transformations of Raimon Fosca from the 13\textsuperscript{th} to the 20\textsuperscript{th}
century. Framed with the story of Régine, a narcissistic actress who encounters Fosca at a hotel,\textsuperscript{28} the bulk of the novel consists of Fosca’s narration of his life to Régine, culminating in Régine’s horror regarding her finitude seen from the point of view of Fosca’s immortality. Fosca’s story moves in multiple stages.\textsuperscript{29} It begins with his role as ruler of the fictional city of Carmona, where he is offered a potion of immortality by a mysterious beggar. Seeking to defend Carmona against the Genoese and establish a stable authority over the city, Fosca accepts the offer (after testing it on a mouse) and uses his newfound power to defend his city and defeat both Genoa and Florence. His success rapidly turns to failure, however, as he discovers the global scope of both military and economic causality, and the section ends with him acknowledging that his idea of benevolent rule enabled by immortality remains meaningless unless he can rule on a global scale. Book II describes his attempts to enact this global rule by way of the Hapsburg Empire, where Fosca works as an advisor to Charles V. His failures in this section (to unify the world either politically or economically) lead Fosca to the point of despair, and it ends with him abandoning his imperial goals of establishing a benevolent world order.

\textsuperscript{28} Beauvoir emphasizes Régine’s narcissism quite unsubtly, having her wish, while standing before a mirror, that there were two of her, one to adore the other (THM 13, AMM 5). Some pages later, we find her “effleur[ant] de bout des doigts les narcisses posés sur la table” (THM 37, AMM 28).

\textsuperscript{29} Here I generally follow Fallaize’s tripartite division of the novel into a stage of disillusionment with the possibility of action from above (Books I and II), an “uphill climb” toward a more modest idea of action (Books III and IV), and a “re-reading” of the events of the novel from “the mortal perspective” in Book V (Fallaize 68-75).
Book III finds Fosca traveling aimlessly in North America, where he meets the explorer Carlier. Fosca is briefly able to take on Carlier’s own project (to locate the mouth of the “great river”) as his own, but his immortality has the unintended effect of demoralizing Carlier after Fosca uses his supernatural powers to rescue him from starvation. After they reach a second impasse, Carlier chooses to kill himself rather than authorize another rescue, and Fosca is once again left alone. Books IV and V return Fosca to Europe, the France during the 18th century and the 1848 Revolution respectively, deepening his narrative by contrasting Fosca’s inability to engage the world meaningfully with the commitments of other characters. We see this first with his relationship with Marianne, who believes in scientific progress and attempts to found an independent university with Fosca’s help. Although these projects (of Fosca’s love for Marianne and the founding of the university) ground Fosca temporarily, Marianne becomes as demoralized as Carlier when she learns of Fosca’s immortality, and she dies hating him for all he has done for her. The revolutionary Armand (a descendant of Fosca) is, as Beauvoir notes in *La force des choses* (79), the one figure who can withstand knowledge of Fosca’s immortality, due to his embrace of human finitude and limitation. Fosca’s narrative thus ends with hope for human action, but not for Fosca, who is no longer human and can ground no project of his own because he knows he will see any action he undertakes undone and cannot risk his life in the service of any cause.

Beauvoir situates the fantastic conceit of immortality by relating it to actual human desires, in this case a lack of belief in everyday, human meaning and a desire for
Throughout the prologue, Régine desires to transcend human limitation. She wishes for absolute rather than relative importance; the terms are laid out clearly on the first page: bowing after a performance, she is disappointed with the reminder that her fans are merely “pauvres hommes sans importance” (“mortal beings of no special importance”; THM 11, AMM 3) rather than gods and becomes jealous when her co-star is also applauded and given flowers, “[c]omme si on pouvait nous aimer toutes deux ensemble” (“[a]s if they could like the both of us!”; THM 11, AMM 3). Her desire for the Absolute drains the meaning from ordinary things and people, and against than the relative recognition of her peers, she desires “un signe. Par exemple, une auréole se posent sur [sa] tête” (“some sort of sign, like a halo suddenly appearing over [her] head”; THM 12, AMM 4) to make it “vraiment sûr” that she is a great actress. The immortal Fosca seems to promise just such absolute recognition, and his presence only aids in the emptying of meaning from the everyday world in which Régine lives: “« Si c’est vrai, il se souviendra de moi, toujours. Si c’est vrai, voilà que je suis aimée par un immortel ! » Ses yeux firent le tour du bar. Un monde quotidien ; des hommes sans mystère” (“If it’s true, he’ll remember me forever. If it’s true, I’m loved by an immortal man! Her eyes surveyed the room. An ordinary crowd; mysteryless men”; THM 44, AMM 35). Shortly after hearing that Fosca is immortal, Régine remarks that “le monde serait à [elle]” (“[t]he world would be [hers]”; THM 34, AMM 25) if she had a similar power. This phrase repeats her desire for absolute power and recognition (to the exclusion of all others and beyond the limitations of mortality), but the use of the conditional also
implies privation: she does not see the world as hers, and demands a fantastic supplement (like the “halo” above) to make it so.

Fosca’s story provides the counterargument to Régine’s claim, showing how the absence of mortal finitude loses rather than gains the world for him. Upon drinking the potion of immortality, he feels much as Régine would expect, certain of an inhuman and absolute power over the world, indicated here by the image of Fosca plucking the sun from the sky:

Rien n’avait changé ; c’était le même silence, les mêmes échoppes aveuglées par les lourds volets en bois. Et cependant tout était neuf comme une aube ; l’aube muette et grise d’un jour éclatant. Je regardai le soleil rouge, suspendu dans le ciel cotonneux et je souris ; il me semblait que j’aurais pu cueillir dans les nuages ce gros ballon joyeux. Le ciel était à portée de ma main, et je sentais tout l’avenir contre mon cœur. (THM 100)

Nothing had changed—the same silence, the same shops behind their heavy wooden shutters. And yet everything was as new as dawn, the gray, mute dawn of a radiant day. I looked at the red sun suspended in the cottony sky and I smiled; it seemed as though I could have plucked that great joyous ball right from the clouds. The sky was within my grasp, and I felt the whole future inside my heart. (AMM 87)

Beauvoir undermines this feeling almost immediately, however. Even before Fosca begins to feel the tragic element of his immortality, seeing his triumphs fall into ruin and his loves grow old and die, he likens his state to that of childhood, figured here by Sigismondo, his grandson: “Il était plus proche de moi qu’aucun homme, il ne savait pas que ses jours étaient comptés, il ignorait les années, les mois, les semaines, il était perdu au cœur d’une éblouissante journée sans lendemain et sans fin, un éternel commencement, un éternelle présence. Sa joie était infinie comme le ciel” (“he was closer
to me than any other being. He was unaware that his days were numbered; he knew
nothing of years, months, weeks. He was lost in the heart of a resplendent day, without
tomorrows and without end, an eternal beginning, an eternal present. His joy was as
infinite as the sky”; THM 105, AMM 93). Already Fosca’s fantasy of absolute power is
shown to be a childish one, and the move from “tout l’avenir” to “une éternelle présence”
gestures toward the loss of temporal synthesis yet to come for the newly immortal
Fosca.30

Fosca is soon forced to face his limitations, when both economics and politics
threaten a militarily triumphant Carmona. Yet he is, at this stage of the narrative, still
capable of projecting his desires onto a global scale, imagining that his limitations are
mere contingencies of the limited scope of his planning. With the shift from Carmona to
the Hapsburgs, Fosca extends his desire for absolute power over the whole of the world:

Je pensais : « Ce sera là mon œuvre. Il faut qu’un jour je tienne entre mes mains
tout l’univers ; alors aucune force ne sera gaspillée, aucune richesse dissipée ; je
mettrai fin aux divisions qui opposent les peuples, les races, les religions, je
mettrai fin aux désordres injustes. Je régirai le monde avec autant d’économie
que naguère les greniers de Carmona. Rien ne sera livré aux caprices des
hommes ni aux hasards du sort. Ce sera la raison qui gouvernera la terre : ma
raison. » (THM 163)

That task belongs to me, I thought. But first I’ll have to hold the whole universe in my
hands. Then, no energy will be dissipated, no wealth wasted. I’ll put an end to the
quarrels which set nations, races and religions against each other. I’ll put an end to
injustice. I’ll regulate the world as carefully as I did Carmona’s granaries. Nothing will
be left to the capriciousness of men or the hazards of fate. Reason will govern the earth.
My reason. (AMM 151)

30 Beauvoir regularly relates an abstract and absolute idea of the world (and one’s relation to it) to childhood
and childishness. See Moi, Simone de Beauvoir 24-5 and Ruch 146-150.
His optimism is soon transmuted into despair, as he finds himself the tool of history rather than its master. Learning that the excessive imperial wealth had led not to an increase in overall wealth but to the depreciation of the value of both crops and money and an overall decline in wages, Fosca is exposed to what Sartre would come to call, in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, the exigency of the practico-inert. Faced with peasant revolts at their dire economic situation, he is forced to conclude that they must be put down with violence:

Ils ne songeaient qu’à leurs intérêts égoïstes ; ils accablaient leurs paysans de corvées et d’impôts. Moi je voulais faire régner sur la terre la justice, la raison, je voulais donner aux hommes le bonheur. Et cependant je disais la même chose qu’eux : il n’y a qu’un remède. Comme si mes pensées, mes désirs, comme si toute mon expérience et ces siècles que j’avais vécus n’avaient rien pesé sur la terre. Ligoté. Une monstrueuse mécanique était montée, chaque rouage en entraînent un autre, et j’étais forcé de décider malgré moi ce que décidait Ferdinand, ce que n’importe qui eût décidé à notre place. (THM 178-9)

Thinking only of their own selfish interests, they crushed their peasants with drudging work and unreasonable taxes. I, on the other hand, wanted to create a world in which justice and reason would prevail, a world in which men would find peace and happiness. And yet I said the same thing as they—only one solution. My thoughts, my desires, all the experience accumulated during the centuries through which I had lived, counted for nothing, were worthless. I was bound hand and foot. A monstrous mechanism had been wound up, set in motion, and each wheel inexorably turned another. In spite of myself, I was forced to the same decision as Ferdinand, the same decision as anyone else in our places would have to make. (AMM 167)

Looking to direct history on a global scale, he instead finds himself fully determined by the “monstrueuse mécanique” of history. His global and absolute perspective, in which every individual action vanishes into the totality of historical rationality, leads him to despair of any action as fruitless.
The narrative continues, moving from Europe to the Americas, but Fosca’s despair is only confirmed as he surveys the unintended but devastating effects of his imperialism on the Incan empire. He concludes that there is no reasonable scale for action, since “Carmona était trop petite, l’Italie était trop petite, et l’Univers n’existait pas” (“Carmona was too small, Italy too small, and the Universe did not exist”; THM 212, AMM 101). He also despairs of doing anything for humanity, since Fosca’s utopian dreams could only impose a ready-made world on people who need to remake the world anew:

Ce qui a du prix à leurs yeux, ce n’est jamais ce qu’ils reçoivent : c’est ce qu’ils font. S’ils ne peuvent pas créer, il faut qu’ils détruisent, mais de toute façon ils doivent refuser ce qui est, sinon ils ne seraient pas des hommes. Et nous qui prétendons forger le monde à leur place et les y emprisonner, ils ne peuvent que nous haïr. Cet ordre, ce repos dont nous rêvons pour eux serait la pire malédiction… […] On ne peut rien pour eux ni contre eux. On ne peut rien. (THM 214)

“It’s never what they receive that has value in their eyes; it’s what they do. If they can’t create, they must destroy. But in any case, they have to rebel against what is, otherwise they wouldn’t be men. And we who aspire to forge a world for them and imprison them in it, they can’t help but hate us. The very order, the peace that we dream of for them, would be their worst possible curse.” […]

“Nothing can be done either for or against them,” I concluded, “Nothing can be done.” (AMM 202-3)

This realization echoes one of Beauvoir’s general assertions, that human beings lose an important aspect of their lives when they find themselves in a ready-made world rather than one they have remade according to their desires. Armand makes a similar point.

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31 In *America Day by Day*, Beauvoir’s account of her 1947 trip to the U.S., she makes a similar criticism of the stifling and infantilizing effects of convenience in American life: “Their tragedy is precisely that they are not children, that they have adult responsibilities, an adult existence, but they continue to cling to a ready-made,
from the human perspective at near the end of the novel: “Ce qui nous décrivons comme un paradis, c’est le moment où les rêves que nous formons aujourd’hui seront réalisés. Nous savons bien qu’à partir de là d’autres homés auront des exigences neuves…” (“Paradise is for us simply the moment when the dreams we dream today are finally realized. We’re well aware that after that other men will have other needs, new desires, will make new demands”; THM 341, AMM 327). Fosca’s benevolence (described as such—his dream of an eternally just and peaceful order is never attributed to selfish motives) would have the unintended effect of robbing humans of their transformative potential, of “imprison[ing]” them in a world not of their own making.

While he has given up doing things for others, there is equally nothing that he can do for himself, since “[p]our préférer il faut avoir un point de vue” (“[t]o have a preference, one must have a point of view”; THM 46, AMM 37). By identifying himself with history rather than existing as an historical actor, he has given up the particularity of a point of view. “Béatrice me l’avait dit un jour: ni avare, ni généreux, ni courageux, ni lâche, ni méchant, ni bon, en vérité je n’étais personne” (“Beatrice had said to me one day: neither miserly nor generous, neither courageous nor cowardly, neither evil nor good. In truth I was no one”; THM 259, AMM 247). He can no longer commit himself to a project on a human scale, such as the protection of Carmona from Book I, because he

opaque universe, like that of childhood. [...] [W]hereas in Europe every adolescent begins the world anew—whether in revolt, pride, eagerness, or fear, whether timidly or impetuously—in America he simply fills the space assigned to him, a world that doesn’t owe its existence to him” (America Day by Day 313). See Ruch 155-158 for a detailed reading of Beauvoir’s comments on America and childhood. Fosca’s mistake is to treat humans as children, attempting to impose a utopia externally rather than allowing them to remake the world according to their own desires, needs, and projects.
knows beforehand that he will outlive the relevance of that project. Yet he has
discovered that there is no other scale on which to form a project either, because from
the point of view of eternity all actions are one. After Charles passes on the empire,
Fosca takes on a parasitic existence, taking on others’ projects (Carlier’s search for a
waterway, Marianne’s founding of an independent university, Armand’s insurrection)
“[p]our tuer les temps” (“to kill time”; THM 275, AMM 264), but it is clear that his
actions bear little conviction because, as he tells Marianne, “ma conscience ne
m’ordonne jamais rien” (“my conscience never orders me to do anything”; ibid.).

If Fosca cannot act on a grand historical scale, there at least remains the hope that
he might be able to find more local and human attachments to the world in the form of
love and friendship with other individuals. Beauvoir instead depicts how even this
capacity degrades as his story progresses and he comes more and more to take the point
of view of eternity. When Laure solicits Fosca’s love near the very end of his narrative,
even this enticement to commitment falls before the eternal:

Elle dit très bas :
— Laissez-moi vous aimer.
Quelques jours, quelques années. Et la voilà couchée sur le lit avec ce
visage ratatiné ; toutes les couleurs se sont brouillées, le ciel s’est éteint et les
parfums se sont glacés : « Tu m’oublieras. » Son image se fige au milieu du cadre
ovale. Il n’y a même plus de mots pour dire : elle n’est pas là. Où n’est-elle pas?
Je ne vois aucun vide autour de moi.
— Non, dis-je. C’est inutile. Tout est inutile. (THM 347)

“Let me love you,” she said very softly.
A few days, a few years, and then she would be lying on a bed with a
shriveled face. Colors would all become jumbled together, indistinguishable, the
sky would fade, odors would freeze up. You’ll forget me. Her face was frozen in
the middle of the oval painting. There weren’t even words any longer with
which to say: “She’s not here.” Where was she not? I could see no emptiness around me.

“No,” I said, “It’s useless. Everything is useless.” (AMM 332)

Here, Fosca’s thoughts go immediately to Marianne, jumbling together Fosca’s past thoughts (“En même temps que Marianne un monde avait sombré, un monde qui n’émergerait plus jamais à la lumière. Maintenant toutes les fleurs s’étaient mises à se ressembler, les nuances du ciel s’étaient confondues, et les journées n’auraient plus qu’une seule couleur : la couleur de l’indifférence” [“With Marianne’s death, a whole world had foundered, a world that would never again emerge into the light. Now, all the flowers began to look alike, the sky’s various shades became indistinguishable, and the days were destined to have but a single color—the color of indifference”; THM 297, AMM 284-5]) with Marianne’s speech (“Oh! Je sais que tu m’oublieras” [“Oh, I know you’ll forget me”; THM 294, AMM 281]). His future is entirely taken up by his past in a way that precludes present attachments.

Fosca ends his story with the Pyrrhic victory of the insurrectionists’ march on the Bastille, emphasizing the way meaning requires a provisional ending rather than an eternal perspective. His own sense of disconnection with the world, however, is articulated within this scene by his (this time failed) attempt to recall Marianne.

Je regardai Laure ; décoiffée, les cheveux mouillées, elle serrait son châle autour de ses épaules et ses yeux luisaient ; c’était Laure, ce n’était pas Marianne. Pour se tenir ici, à mes côtés, il eût fallu que Marianne cessât d’être elle-même ; elle était figée au fond du passé, dans son temps, et je ne pouvais pas l’appeler près de moi, même en image. […] Je levai les yeux ; je vis le ciel sans lune, les façades illuminées, les arbres, et autour de moi la foule des hommes, ses semblables. Et je sus que le dernier lien qui m’attachait au monde venait de se briser : ce n’était plus le monde de Marianne ; je ne pouvais plus le contempler avec ses yeux ; son
regard avait achevé de s’éteindre ; même en mon cœur les battements de son cœur s’étaient tus. « Tu m’oublieras. » Ce n’est pas moi qui l’avais oubliée. Elle avait glissé hors du monde, et moi qui étais à jamais en ce monde, elle avait glissé hors de moi. (THM 351)

I looked at Laura. Her hair was wet and in disarray, she was holding her shawl tightly around her shoulders and her eyes were beaming. She was Laura; she was not Marianne. To remain here at my side, Marianne would have had to stop being herself. She was frozen in the depths of the past, in her times, and I was no longer able to call her to me, not even her image. […] I raised my eyes, looked at the motionless sky, the illuminated façades, the trees, and around me the crowd of people, her fellow creatures. And I realized then that the last bond which attached me to the world had just been broken. It was no longer Marianne’s world and I could no longer contemplate it through her eyes. The image of her face was now snuffed out completely, forever, and in my heart, even the beating of her heart had stopped. You’ll forget me. It was not I who had forgotten her. She had slipped out of the world, had slipped out of me who would never leave this world and yet who did not belong to it. (AMM 336-7)

Friedman’s addition of “and yet who did not belong to it” in his translation of the passage captures and recapitulates the sense of the whole, despite its divergence from Beauvoir’s text. Fosca describes himself as simultaneously “en ce monde” and no longer “attached” to it. This is Beauvoir’s description of a form of life without mortal finitude: forever in but not attached to the world. It remains to explain why this is so.

Part of Fosca’s lack of attachment to the world comes from his inability to risk himself in the service of some cause. This inability of Fosca to risk himself gets to the fundamental transformation in his form of life brought about by the absence of mortal finitude, and also brings Beauvoir much closer to Heidegger than to Sartre’s critique of him. During the July Revolution, Fosca notes the distance between himself and committed mortals:
Quelque chose allait arriver par eux : ils le croyaient. Ils croyaient qu’ils pouvaient quelque chose, la main crispée sur la crosse du revolver, prêts à mourir pour s’en convaincre, prêts à donner leur vie pour affirmer qu’elle pesait lourd sur la terre. […] Ils donnaient leur vie pour qu’elle fût une vie d’homme—ni fourmis, ni moucherons, ni blocs de pierre, nous ne nous laisserons pas changer en pierres,—et les bûchers flambaient et ils chantaient. Et Marianne disait : « Reste un homme parmi les hommes. » Mais quoi ? je pouvais bien marcher à côté d’eux : je ne pouvais pas risquer ma vie avec la leur. (THM 320, 321)

Something was going to happen, they were going to make it happen. They believed it. They believed that they were capable of doing something, and with their hands gripping the butts of their revolvers, they were ready to die to prove it to themselves, ready to give their lives to prove that those lives weighed heavily on earth. […] They gave their lives to prove to themselves that they were living men and not ants, or flies, or blocks of stone. We won’t let ourselves be turned into stones. And the stakes blazed, and they were singing, and Marianne was saying: “Be a man among men.” But what was the use? I could march beside them, but I couldn’t risk my life with theirs. (AMM 306, 307)

This quotation turns around the mutual implication of risk and belief. Fosca is unable to risk his life and is, as a result, equally unable to believe that he can “make something happen.” Fosca does not doubt that the revolutionaries will perform local actions, but the terms in which he describes their conviction (as an act of will tied to personal sacrifice) also shows how his extended perspective (which anticipates the unmaking of all of their local accomplishments in a more or less distant future) leads him to doubt their efficacy as well as his own.

The preceding example still takes place on the historical level, and bears the traces of a melodramatic valuation of risking one’s life bodily in combat. The example of Fosca’s love for Marianne gives another treatment of his inability to risk himself even in actions that do not hinge on a literal threat to mortal life. Upon learning of his
immortality, Marianne feels betrayed precisely because what she had imagined to be a reciprocal staking of life is exposed to be rather more one-sided:

—Je me suis donnée à toi tout entière, dit-elle. Je croyais que toi aussi tu te donnais pour la vie, pour la mort. Et tu te prêtas pour quelques années.
Un sanglot la suffoqua :
—Une femme parmi des millions d’autres. Un jour tu ne te rappelleras même plus mon nom. Et ce sera toi ; ce sera bien toi et personne d’autre. (THM 290)

“I gave myself to you completely,” she said. “And I believed that you had given yourself completely to me, in life as well as in death. And you were only lending yourself to me for a few scant years.” A sob choked her voice. “Just another woman among millions. One day you won’t even remember my name. And it will still be you. It will be you and no one else.” (AMM 278)

Despite the presence of a certain melodrama in these lines as well, the point remains that Marianne’s finitude gives added meaning to her commitment to Fosca; years of her life are precious to her in a way they are not for Fosca, since she “ne peu[t] pas même […] souhaiter un autre [destin]” (“can’t even hope for another destiny”; THM 291, AMM 279).32

Fosca’s conversation with Armand near the end of the novel returns to the connection between belief and action, again contrasting mortal risk and certitude with Fosca’s immortal skepticism regarding the capacity of action to change the world:

—Est-ce qu’on peut vivre sans espoir?
—Oui, si l’on possède quelque certitude.
Je dis :
—Je n’en possède aucune. (THM 326)

32 Beauvoir had already identified risk as a necessary aspect of assuming one’s freedom and finitude in Pyrrhus and Cineas (see PW 120-121). What All Men are Mortal brings to this idea is the imaginative interrogation of a form of life defined by the absence of mortal finitude and the conclusion that such a form of life is equally divested of the capacity to risk itself in concrete projects.
“Is it possible to live without hope?”
“Yes, if you believe in something with absolute certainty.”
“As for me, I believe in nothing,” I said. (AMM 312)

Pages later, Armand describes the reason for Fosca’s lack of certainty in any cause:

“You êtes déjà au fond de l’avenir, dit-il. Et vous regardez ces instants comme s’ils 
étaient déjà du passé. Toutes les entreprises passées semblent dérisoires si on ne voit que 
leur aspect mort, embaumé” (“‘You’re already far off in the future,’ he said. ‘And you 
look upon these moments as if they were part of the past. And all past enterprises 
appear derisive when they’re seen only as dead, embalmed, and buried’”; THM 342, 
AMM 328). Living a sort of permanent future anterior, Fosca has lost the transformative 
and open aspect of the present, experiencing it as simply what will have been in a 
distant future. For Fosca, the world both exists absolutely (as a thing untouchable by 
Fosca’s actions) and not at all, since from the point of view of the abstract future it no 
longer exists, it is “mort, embaumé.”

This figure of a dead world parallels Fosca himself, whom Beauvoir repeatedly 
describes (or has him describe as narrator) as living a dead life. Early in the novel, 
Régine accuses him of “chois[ir] de vivre comme un mort” (“prefer[ring] to live like a 
dead man”; THM 13, AMM 15) and indeed of being “un mort” (“already a corpse”; 
THM 33, AMM 24) due to his lack of action. Upon the taking of Rome, Fosca thinks to 
himself: “Rome allait renaître. Et moi e’étais mort” (“Rome was being reborn, and I … I 
was dead”; THM 187, AMM 175), and his narrative ends with one more
acknowledgement of Fosca’s disconnection with the world, again drawing on the language of death:

Je marchai vers la porte; je ne pouvais pas risquer ma vie, je ne pouvais pas leur sourire, il n’y avait jamais de larmes dans mes yeux ni de flamme dans mon cœur. Un homme de nulle part, sans passé, sans avenir, sans présent. Je ne voulais rien; je n’étais personne. J’avancais pas après pas vers l’horizon qui reculait à chaque pas; les gouttes d’eau jaillissaient, retombaient, l’instant détruisait l’instant, mes mains étaient à jamais vides. Un étranger, un mort. Ils étaient des hommes, ils vivaient. Moi je n’étais pas des leurs. Je n’avais rien à espérer. Je franchis la porte. (THM 353)

I walked toward the door. I could not risk my life, could not smile at them, there was never a flame in my heart nor tears in my eyes. A man of nowhere, without a past, without a future, without a present. I wanted nothing, I was no one. I advanced step after step toward the horizon which retreated with each step; drops of water squirted up and fell to earth again, each instant destroyed the next, the last. My hands were forever empty: An outsider, a dead man. They were men, they were alive. I . . . I was not one of them. I had nothing to hope for. I went out the door. (AMM 339)

This paragraph, nicely bookending the imperfect description of Fosca’s eternal state with the curt preterit of the first and last clauses, draws attention to Fosca’s exclusion from the world and from the human temporal order of past, present, and future. The image of the constantly receding horizon emphasizes the endlessness of abstract repetition in a world that is not Fosca’s (“[u]n homme de nulle part”), but in which he must nevertheless remain. Thus, despite the fact that he remains ontologically in our world in a way the spirits of Les jeux sont faits do not, his immortality equally excludes him from being an active part of that world.

33 This image thus also echoes Régine’s experience of repetition, evidenced by the very first line of the novel: “Le rideau se releva “ (“The curtain went up again”; THM 11, AMM 3). Were this not the first line, the repetition would be less pronounced; because it is, it subtly draws the reader’s attention to Régine’s dissatisfaction with her ordinary life.
Beauvoir would later define this approach to the world as the “aesthetic attitude” in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), written immediately after *All Men are Mortal*:

On peut appeler esthétique cette attitude, parce que celui qui l’adopte prétend n’avoir avec le monde d’autre rapport que celui d’une contemplation détachée ; hors du temps, loin des hommes, il se pose en face de l’histoire, à laquelle il ne croit pas appartenir, comme un pur regard ; cette vision impersonnelle égalise toutes les situations, elle ne les saisit que dans l’indifférence de leurs différences, elle exclut toute préférence. (PMA 105)

We may call this attitude aesthetic because the one who adopts it claims to have no other relation with the world than that of detached contemplation; outside of time and far from men, he faces history, which he thinks he does not belong to, like a pure beholding; this impersonal version [sic] equalizes all situations; it apprehends them only in the indifference of their differences; it excludes any preference. (EA 74-5)

She also claims there that this attitude “apparaît dans les moments de découragement, de désarroi [appears in moments of discouragement and confusion]” and that its treatment of the present as “un passé en puissance [a potential past]” is “une manière de fuir la vérité du présent” (“a way of fleeing the truth of the present”; PMA 107, EA 76).

Her linking of an aesthetic, contemplative attitude toward the world with death in *All Men are Mortal* ties in nicely with Sartre’s use of the afterlife as a way of figuring the passivity of (and encouragement by) bourgeois aesthetic form. Catharine Savage Brosman has already made the connection between Fosca’s inability to act and theatricality in terms that recall Sartre’s use of gesture in *Huis clos*: “Since an immortal can make no lasting commitment (he will outlive that to which he devotes himself) and can risk nothing essential, his acts are gestures, as theatrical as on a stage” (Brosman 64).
Beauvoir also historicizes such “discouragement and confusion,” writing about voter apathy in postwar France: “il y a une équivoque aujourd’hui, et particulièrement en France, parce que nous pensons que notre destin nous échappe; nous n’espérons plus contribuer à faire l’histoire, nous nous résignons à la subir” (“there is an ambiguity [sic] today, and particularly in France, because we think that we are not the master of our destiny; we no longer hope to help make history, we are resigned to submitting to it”;

PMA 194, EA 139). While this observation in part relates to the specificity of France’s helplessness during the Occupation, Beauvoir also points to more general conditions of modernity that encourage such demoralization, centered around the matter of scale:

Ce sens de la finitude est difficile à sauvegarder aujourd’hui. […] [L]es mesures ont changé d’échelle, autour de nous l’espace et le temps se sont dilatés : c’est peu de chose aujourd’hui qu’un million d’hommes et un siècle ne nous semble qu’un moment provisoire ; cependant l’individu n’est pas touché par cette transformation, sa vie garde le même rythme, sa mort ne recule pas devant lui ; il prolonge son emprise sur le monde par des instruments qui lui permettent de dévorer les distances et de multiplier le rendement de son effort dans le temps ; mais il est toujours qu’un seul. (PMA 168-9)

It is difficult today to safeguard this sense of finiteness. […] [T]he scales of measurement have changed; space and time have expanded around us: today it is a small matter that a million men and a century seem to us only a provisional moment; yet, the individual is not touched by this transformation, his life keeps the same rhythm, his death does not retreat before him; he extends his control of the world by instruments which enable him to devour distances and to multiply the output of his efforts in time; but he is always only one. (EA 120-121)

In terms that recall David Harvey’s “time-space compression” (Harvey 240), Beauvoir notes an existential conflict emerging between the scale of social action in modernity and that of the individual human. This discrepancy is, of course, nothing new: it is the basis of all modern production processes. What is distinct, and this I add to Beauvoir, about
late modernity (and late modernism) is the absence of a mediating term: the group. The result is that human action becomes imaginable only on the scale of the individual. All other activity tends to be treated as inhuman, and finds its most common form in the idea of state or corporate action as pure externality. Part of my argument across this project is that the inhuman and inscrutable apparatuses of afterworld fiction offered mid-century authors a consistent resource for figuring such perceived externality.

In her depiction of Fosca’s progressive detachment from the world, Beauvoir produces an imaginative response to Sartre’s claim in Being and Nothingness that “human reality would remain finite even if it were immortal, because it makes itself finite by choosing itself as human” (BN 698, cited above). While Sartre’s point is that every choice, whether experienced through being-toward-death or not, is an affirmation of finitude, the fictional scenario chosen by Beauvoir plays out the difficulties of such choice for a form of life without mortal finitude. Her move, which returns her to ground more similar to the Heidegger of Being and Time than the Sartre of Being and Nothingness, takes the question out of the local setting of an individual action (Sartre’s frame of reference in the above claim) to return to the Heideggerian question of a certainty of being-in-the-world that forms the ground for any of those discrete acts.34 This certainty, which in Beauvoir is the certainty not of the existence of the world but of one’s

34 To clarify, I am not arguing that Beauvoir set out to address this statement in Being and Nothingness, but that her fictional experimentation with the idea of immortality led her to such a position. It has the character of a discovery, not a thesis to be proven.
transformative potential within and upon it, is what Fosca’s immortality bars him from attaining.

Despite this proximity to Heidegger, Beauvoir never adopted the term “being-toward-death” in her philosophical work, although she did argue in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that “l’homme doit en tout cas assumer sa finitude : non pas en posant son existence comme transitoire, relative, mais en réfléchissant en elle l’infini, c’est-à-dire en la posant comme absolu” (“man must, in any event, assume his finiteness: not by treating his existence as transitory or relative but by reflecting the infinite within it, that is, by treating it as absolute”; PMA 182, EA 130), a statement quite close to Heidegger’s position in *Being and Time*. This likely has to do with the melodramatic strain of heroic individualism in Heidegger’s presentation of being-toward-death as that which individuates Da-sein, allowing it to escape from determination by “the they.” As we have seen with the example of Fosca in *All Men are Mortal*, however, Beauvoir’s picture of an immortal form of life is of one individuated to the point of alienation and separation from humanity, existing as “[u]n étranger, un mort.” Mortal finitude, while it separates, is also for Beauvoir a condition for social being. Beauvoir addresses this point directly in *La force de l’âge*, recalling her treatment of Fosca in *All Men are Mortal*: “infinie, notre vie se dissoudrait dans l’universelle indifference. La mort conteste notre existence mais c’est elle qui lui donne son sens; par elle s’accomplit ‘absolue séparation, mais elle est aussi la clé de toute communication” (“if our lives were infinite, they would merge into universal indifference. Though death challenges our existence, it also gives meaning
to our lives. It may be the instrument of absolute separation, but it is also the key to all communication”; *La force de l’âge* 620-1, *Prime of Life* 478). Again, this statement brings her closer to Heidegger than to Sartre (who treated death as pure contingency and therefore simply absurd), but it also represents a divergence from Heidegger in its emphasis on “meaning” and “communication” rather than heroic individuation.35

**Dead Life and Occupation**

The fictional logic of all three of these texts (*Huis clos, Les jeux sont faits*, and *All Men are Mortal*) is one of counterfactual investigation, interrogating human form of life through the negation of one of its fundamental aspects: its capacity to transcend the given through action in the world. At the same time, however, this fictional experimentation (whether motivated by the device of the afterlife or of immortality) also constitutes a critique of actual inauthentic forms of life, as well as the ways such inauthenticity is affirmed by the fatalism of both bourgeois aesthetic production and the organization of social life on a scale that makes individual action appear insignificant (and which equally excludes any group action unmediated by the state). Sartre gives this fatalism its strongest figure in the bureaucratic apparatus of the afterworld, which appears purely external, immutable, and largely obscured from the view of any of the dead. The

35 Both Toril Moi and Nancy Bauer emphasize this aspect of Beauvoir’s philosophical thinking, largely in terms of her move away from the melodramatic strain of Sartre’s early philosophy. For a reading of *L’Invitée* as “an existentialist melodrama” (as well as Beauvoir’s subsequent criticism of that novel on those grounds), see Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir* 95-124. Bauer discusses Beauvoir’s philosophy of practical (rather than merely formal) reciprocity as a departure from Sartre’s antagonistic view of the struggle between consciousnesses in “Must We Read Simone de Beauvoir?” She also treats Beauvoir’s use of Heidegger’s *Mitsein* in the service of such a project in “Beauvoir’s Heideggerian Ontology.”
bureaucracy only shows its lowliest functionaries, the Valet and the old woman in the shop; any greater authority is invisible, appearing only in mysterious effects like the door opening in *Huis clos* or the voiceover in *Les jeux sont faits*. Beauvoir, unlike Sartre, does not need a figure for the immutability of the world, since it is produced not by the ontological peculiarity of the world itself (a literalization of the aesthetic by way of metafiction) but through an “aesthetic attitude” to our own world (one still describable, however, as a sort of dead life).

We find in all of these texts (*Huis clos*, *Les jeux sont faits*, and *All Men are Mortal*) a draining of meaning from the world, whether this is a result of the incapacity to act (as in Sartre’s afterlives) or the cause of this inability (as in Beauvoir’s treatment of Fosca).36 Such a loss of meaning corresponds to the absence of mortal finitude, but also to the less fantastic or counterfactual situation of a loss of belief in the world, one that Sartre and Beauvoir saw as a result of the Occupation, and which Beauvoir related after the war to a more general divergence in scale between individual human action and that of larger political and social entities. This is not a belief in the existence of the world, but a disarticulation between humanity and world, leading to a perceived impotence.37 Both

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36 This is another context, I think, in which to view Toril Moi’s observation that “Beauvoir describes Fosca’s living death by endowing him with all the symptoms of depression: Fosca feels empty and lonely; his words seem meaningless; he is unable to invest his affects in people or causes; all activities come to seem equally futile; his only wish is to die” (Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir* 237).

37 Beauvoir also links impotence, as an important theme in *All Men are Mortal*, to her personal experience during and immediately after the Occupation, in this case articulated through the responsibility one has by virtue of the necessity of “interven[ir] dans des destins étrangers [impinging on other people’s destinies]”: “car je sentais avec acuité qu’à la fois j’étais responsable et que je ne pouvais rien. Cette impuissance fut un des principaux thèmes que j’aborde dans *Tous les hommes sont mortels*” (“though keenly aware of my
Sartre and Beauvoir link such impotence and meaninglessness to the aesthetic: Sartre through his respective metafictional critiques of bourgeois drama and film, and Beauvoir through her critique of the “aesthetic attitude” (given a fantastic and inhuman figure in Fosca, but present in the all-too-human actress Régine as well). The result is the temporality of “bad infinity,” the endless concatenation of one thing after another that corresponds to an everyday imagined as fallen. Change (the finite, human change valued by Sartre and Beauvoir) seeps, in these texts, from the characters into the setting (the opening door, the old shop at Laguénésie, an unattainable and incomprehensible History), while these same characters are divested of both freedom and risk. They instead take on meaningless and dead lives in pathetic comfort (either the Second Empire drawing room of a stuffy play, the leisure of the dead existing helplessly in our world, or the dissipation of Fosca, whom Régine first encounters sitting in a provincial hotel courtyard day in and day out). This is the temporality of late modernism, where all real change takes the form of catastrophe, on the model of death as an external event, a full change of world (the live one for the dead) rather than a change made within it. It is the result of a loss of belief in the world, and though it will take on different forms in the texts that follow, it will do so without abandoning the basic template of a fallen, repetitive everyday punctuated by external catastrophe.

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responsibilities, I nevertheless felt myself wholly incapable of action. This impotence was one of the main themes I tackled in All Men are Mortal”: La force de l’âge 622, Prime of Life 479).
Such a temporality appears particularly suited to the Occupation, in which the everyday was rendered horrible and drained of meaning. Sartre uses these terms to describe the experience in his 1945 essay “Paris Under the Occupation”:

Je l’ai déjà dit : nous avons vécu. Cela signifie que l’on pouvait travailler, manger, causer, dormir, parfois même rire—encore que le rire fût assez rare. L’horreur semblait dehors, dans les choses. On pouvait s’en distraire un moment, se passionner pour une lecture, une conversation, une affaire ; mais on y revenait toujours et l’on s’apercevait qu’elle ne nous avait pas quittés. […] C’était à la fois la trame de nos consciences et le sens du monde. […] Me comprendra-t-on si je dis à la fois qu’elle était intolérable et que nous nous en accommodions fort bien ? (Sartre, *Situations III* 23-4)

I have already said: *we lived.* This means one could work, eat, chat, sleep and sometimes even laugh—even though laughter was quite rare. The horror seemed to be outside—in things. You could distract yourself for a moment, be excited by something you were reading, by a conversation, an affair, but you always came back to it. […] It was at once the weft of our consciousness and the meaning of the world. […] Will it be understood if I say that it was intolerable and, at the same time, that we got along with it very well? (Sartre, *Aftermath of War* 18)

After noting this continuation of a modified and horrible sort of daily life under the Occupation, Sartre goes on to describe this form of life in terms of death, making explicit the link between Occupation and the idea of dead life:

Tout le monde connaît ces malades qu’on nomme « dépersonnalisés » et qui s’avisent soudain que « tous les hommes sont morts » parce qu’ils ont cessé de projeter leur avenir au-delà d’eux-mêmes et parce que, du même coup, ils ont cessé de sentir l’avenir des autres. Ce qu’il y avait peut-être de plus pénible, c’est que tous les Parisiens étaient dépersonnalisés. […] Nous nous regardions et il semblait que nous voyions des morts. (Sartre, *Situations III* 28-9)

Everyone knows those sick individuals who are termed “depersonalized,” and who suddenly come to believe that all human beings are dead because they have stopped projecting their own futures forward and have, as a result, lost any sense of other peoples’. Perhaps the most painful thing was that all Parisians were depersonalized. […] We looked at each other and it seemed we were seeing the dead. (Sartre, *Aftermath of War* 24-25)
Unlike the mentally ill Sartre mentions, the French had not simply “stopped projecting their own futures forward”; their future “on [leur] a volé” (“had been stolen from [them]”; Sartre, *Situations III* 28, *Aftermath of War* 23) by the situation of Occupation, which they could only wait out passively. One can see the effects of this minimally comfortable yet intolerable position in the lack of want presented in the afterworld, where the dead are exempted from basic material needs (they do not need to eat and are provided shelter) but simultaneously divested of their capacity to do anything of substance. This is also the case for Fosca, whose immortality equally exempts him from need and separates him from action.38

Even the Resistance, the principal option for an attempt to reclaim both action and future, is described by Sartre as primarily “symbolic.” As with the damned in *Huis clos*, their actions were reduced to gestures as the Resistance waited for external salvation:

Cette déshumanisation, cette pétrification de l’homme étaient si intolérables que beaucoup, pour y échapper, pour recouvrir un avenir se sont jetés dans la Résistance. Étrange avenir, barré par les supplices, la prison, la mort, mais que du moins nous produisions de nos propres mains. Mais la Résistance n’était qu’une solution individuelle et nous l’avons toujours su : sans elle les Anglais auraient gagné la guerre, avec elle ils l’auraient perdue s’ils avaient dû la perdre. Elle avait surtout, à nos yeux, une valeur de symbole ; et c’est pourquoi beaucoup de résistants étaient désespérés : toujours des symboles. Une rébellion symbolique dans une cité symbolique ; seules les tortures étaient vraies. (Sartre, *Situations III* 29-30)

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38 I don’t mean to trivialize the actual material shortages of the Occupation years. I am interested here, however, in Sartre’s presentation of the situation of Occupation, which does marginalize such facts.
This dehumanization and petrification was so intolerable that many, to escape it and regain a future, threw themselves into the Resistance. A strange future, barred by torture, prison and death, but a future we were at last producing with our own hands. Yet Resistance was merely an individual solution and we always knew this: without it the British would still have won the war, with it they would still have lost it, if that was how it was meant to be. First and foremost, it had a symbolic value for us; and that is why many resisters were in despair: still just symbols. A symbolic rebellion in a symbolic city; only the tortures were real. (Sartre, Aftermath of War 25)

Again, such a situation finds powerful figuration in the afterworld, in which the dead are rendered equally “free” and unreal in the face of the untranscendable externalities of the fantastic and bureaucratic apparatus of the afterworld.

These texts by Sartre and Beauvoir use the afterlife (or the similar temporality of immortality, in the case of Beauvoir) as a counterfactual means to explore human existence through the depiction of non-human forms of life. Implicit in this approach is a faith in the fact that the world is not fallen, that human beings can act on the world in a meaningful way. In the fictions of the afterlife I explore in the following chapters, such faith is either absent or severely attenuated, and the separation of humanity and world used counterfactually by Sartre and Beauvoir comes to figure the conditions of actual human life (at least in the mid 20th century) rather than their negation. Dead life shifts from a danger and attitude to be avoided to a situation to be undergone, reinstating the “aesthetic attitude” as a traumatic necessity rather than an inauthentic luxury.

One way of reading this different treatment of the afterlife is to remark the difference between the French situation of military Occupation (which allowed for a sense that this dead life was a contingent and temporary suspension of the normal
order) and a growing sense elsewhere that such an existence was rapidly becoming the ordinary state of affairs (and not its suspension). Sartre notes the sense of suspension in “Paris Under the Occupation”: “Aujourd’hui qu’elle est dissipée, nous n’y voyons plus qu’un élément de notre vie; mais lorsque nous y étions plongés, elle était si familière que nous la prenions parfois pour la tonalité naturelle de nos humeurs” (“Today, when it has dissipated, we see it only as one element in our lives; but when we were immersed in it, it was so familiar that we took it sometimes for the natural tonality of our moods”; Sartre, Situations III 24, Aftermath of War 18). In the cases of Sartre and Beauvoir, such a period of suspension was bracketable, and they were able to view it in retrospect as merely “one element in [their] lives.” Their counterfactual uses of the afterlife and immortality bear witness to this distance. The more allegorical treatments of the afterworld in other fictions of the afterlife tend to refuse the possibility of such distance, using similar formal structures to register a permanent, not a temporary, transformation (indeed, a transformation as permanent as death) in the ordinary state of affairs. To say this is to remain at the level of generality, however; to substantiate it concretely, I must reconstruct the situations in which such projects developed.
Chapter 2: Deals with the Devil: Publics and Genre in Wyndham Lewis’s Human Age

It is at this point a truism to mention that Wyndham Lewis is an odd beast within the canon of English modernism, or indeed any concatenation of modernist writers. This gesture begins any number of monographs on Lewis,1 and has for years remained accurate. Both an example of and an arch-critic of modernism, a novelist, painter and art critic, essayist, philosophical and political “vulgarizer” (one of Lewis’s favorite terms), and occasional poet, his output, spanning from the 1910s until his death in 1957, still remains, to employ the vocabulary the Bailiff uses in The Childermass to introduce the dead to their new “post-human life,” largely undigested by the peristalsis of the contemporary academy. This is unfortunate not because Lewis “was one of the greats,” but because the same problems of categorization that keep Lewis out of the modernist canon are those that can most help us to understand its varied strains and trajectories. A cosmopolitan fascist, abstract naturalist, author of vulgarizing anti-vulgarization tracts (such as Time and Western Man and The Art of Being Ruled), painterly author, and political agnostic with propagandistic tendencies, he could be said to have been both entirely inconsistent in his views and thoroughly consistent in his condemnation of whatever was in front of him at a given moment.2 But this would be too easy. The more difficult work is in parsing these positions and practices, and identifying the logic behind them

1 See Jameson 1981 and Schenker for two examples.
2 In this, he would be a paradigmatic case of Robert Scholes’s Paradoxy of Modernism, a book in which he plays a very small part.
(the decision that there is none amounting, as it does, to throwing up one’s hands in exasperation—a gesture I repeatedly contemplated while researching this chapter).

As his inclusion in my study of fictions of the afterlife suggests, it is the “theological science fiction” (Jameson, *Fables* 6) of the *Human Age* project that interests me here. Any theorization of late modernism will have to come to terms with modernism in some way, and the curious publication history of *The Human Age* affords me a chance to develop a comparative study of a “single work,” if a series begun in the late 1920s and continued (but not completed) in the 1950s can be considered such a thing. It is a narrative of this project, particularly the self-criticism and meditation on the changed situation of the writer in volumes 2 and 3 of the *Human Age* (*Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta*, respectively) that occupies this chapter. My particular version of this narrative weds Lewis’s various literary “salvos” on the divergence of publics (first into “highbrow” and “lowbrow” publics, later exacerbated by his fear of politically exclusive publics in the post-WWII period) to the narrative dynamic of his afterlife fiction, characterized by a simultaneous repulsion by and attraction to an Absolute divested of both content and collective belief, and leading to a structure of endless deferral of the moment of revelation beyond the space of the text.

To clarify the terms in which Lewis articulates this attraction/repulsion response to an (the) Absolute (a relation common to a number of authors I choose to call late modernists), I direct the reader’s attention to his 1934 essay “explaining” the asceticism of modernist architecture to “the puzzled man-in-the-street”: “Plain Home-Builder:
Where is Your Vorticist?”3 There, it (the Absolute) is articulated in terms of “inhumanism”—a refusal to afford humanity pride of place in a system of valuation—then split into a political/religious and an aesthetic variant. The former is aligned with political nationalism, communism, or any other political idealism, as well as the “re-dehumanization of [...] religion”:

In both ‘advanced’ religious and ‘advanced’ political theory there is the same cold-shouldering of the ‘bourgeois’ moral values—notably of the humanitarian values. The value of human life—to take only that one value, as typical of the rest—the stocks of that value have never stood lower than they do today. We find the world rushing headlong towards further, and yet more disastrous and diabolical, wars. [...] But the traditional guardians—religious and political—of the humanitarian values do not seem to turn a hair at the thought of bigger and better bombs, laden with poison, for the destruction of ‘alien’ cities. (Lewis, Wyndham Lewis on Art 282)4

This component, as the apocalyptic rhetoric of the above passage should make clear, accounts for Lewis’s repulsion from the Absolute (given another, similar spin in his postwar The Writer and the Absolute). But this repulsion is tied to the beneficial effect of in- or anti-humanism in the aesthetic realm, leading to the “paradox” of the artist who must “applaud” the effect of this “spectacle of desolation” on the arts:

How the notorious inhuman characteristics of so much contemporary art and thought might have something to do with mass attacks upon humanism, is not very difficult to see. And that non-human principle—so characteristic of the art of Asia, in contrast to that of Europe—promises a finer standard of art, whatever else you may think about it, upon purely human grounds. [...] All of the non-human influences I have been discussing operate in favour of its being a high

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3 The article was originally published in the November 1934 volume of The Architectural Review. The title of the essay is an obvious reworking of the subtitle of his earlier parable of modernism and patronage: The Caliph’s Design: Architects! Where is Your Vortex? The role of architecture as the most public of the arts allows Lewis himself to connect the attraction of the Absolute for modernism with the divergence of publics.

4 All italics are in the original, and appear as in the original text unless noted otherwise.
standard of excellence—if not commercially prosperous, which is another matter. The disappearance of spare cash from the pocket of the Public may certainly in the end lead to the extinction of the fine arts; but in the meanwhile the severity of the intellectual ideal has helped them immensely. (Wyndham Lewis on Art 283, 284)

This “paradox,” laid out in surprisingly clear terms in Lewis’s essay, forms the matrix through which we must read Lewis’s reflections on the value of modernism itself. Such a reflection is to be found throughout Lewis’s work, but never was his fraught relation to the Absolute (and thus to modernism itself) as evident as in his fiction of the afterlife, which sets the modernist artist in a world governed quite literally by the Absolute.

In this chapter, I trace the formal and thematic consequences of this contradictory relation to the Absolute through Lewis’s Human Age books, paying particular attention to the generic modulation between his critical anatomy of modernism, The Childermass, and his later, more novelistic, sequels in the 1950s: Monstre Gai and Malign Fiesta. Such a generic modulation operates in tandem with his stylistic shift from the textual parody of The Childermass to the “super-naturalism” of the later books. Throughout this discussion, I trace Lewis’s adaptation of the subgenre of fictions of the afterlife to suit his own changing publication prospects and potential publics, marking the way this change in situation impacts his auto-critique of modernism. The resources of the subgenre of fictions of the afterlife afford Lewis a motivation for some of his more experimental textual practices in the 1920s, while they also provide him an allegorical space in which to develop his social criticism without directly aligning himself with particular political parties, positions, or politicians. As a result, Lewis’s afterworld is primarily a space of
negativity, but one haunted by the promise of an eventual revelation of a positive
governing Absolute, in this case figured as the God whose appearance is deferred
throughout the project. This apophatic deferral marks the narrative form of the project,
creating a serial structure of perpetual deferral that both renders ultimate narrative
closure impossible and, in doing so, creates a liminal space for an (unspecified) utopian
aspect to survive within an otherwise relentless criticism of the divergence of publics in
the twentieth-century. The paradoxical persistence of such a diminished and
diminishing utopian imagination within an increasingly hostile or impossible situation
is one way of describing late modernism.

**The Childermass: “the rivolooshums-highbrow-lowneck-racket”**

In 1928, Wyndham Lewis published the first of three projected books depicting the
afterlife, *The Childermass*. One of several books connected to an encyclopedic project of
the Lewis of the 1920s, *The Man of the World* (other parts to appear in book form were *The
Lion and the Fox* in 1925, *The Art of Being Ruled* in 1926, and *Time and Western Man* in
1927), it derived more directly from an uncompleted work tentatively titled “Joint,” a
series of Rabelasian fragments (as it now stands) about an eponymous schoolteacher and
featuring a dream section titled “The Infernal Fair” that sends Joint on a descent into the
underworld to witness a dialogue of the dead between figures such as Socrates,
Carneades, Montaigne, Dr. Johnson, Kant, and Cézanne.5 The appeal of the subgenre of

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5 For a detailed textual history of *The Man of the World* and its various offspring, the reader should consult
Paul Edwards's “Afterword” to the Black Sparrow edition of *Time and Western Man* (481-498). Edwards
the dialogue of the dead is clear for Lewis, since one of its traditional functions, particularly in its early-modern resurgence, was the use of the eternity of the afterlife as an equalizing force against the sense of “superiority of the present” that Lewis derided in *Time and Western Man* (147-151). “Joint” was ultimately abandoned, but Lewis’s interest in writing a dialogue of the dead was expanded between 1926 and 1928 from a dream section of an unfinished book to a 322-page first volume of a projected trilogy. The book, in its revised and published form, is essentially a fictional version of the arguments against the “‘time’-notions” presented in *Time and Western Man*, and it uses the setting of the afterlife to demonstrate, through a variety of hallucinatory set-pieces and stylistic parodies, the (to his mind) pernicious effects of belief in the flux of space-time in de-metaphorized form.⁶

This setting of the afterlife is introduced both mysteriously and abruptly, with a theatrical note (“SCENE: OUTSIDE HEAVEN”) followed (on the next page) by a jump into prose describing the exotic geography of the “‘time-flats,” finally focusing in on James Pullman and his meeting with his “ex-fag” Satterthwaite, two of the new war-dead populating the area. Together they wander a phantasmagoric landscape of “anomalous times behind the ordinary furniture of Space,” encountering such satiric

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discusses “Joint” and its relevance as a precursor to *The Chidermass* on page 482 of that text, and in more detail in Wyndham Lewis 317-323. The existing fragments of “Joint” are housed in boxes 16 and 17 of the Wyndham Lewis collection, #4612. Division of Rare and Manuscripts Collections, Cornell University Library. A portion of the “Infernal Fair” section of “Joint” (featuring Montaigne, Cézanne, and Socrates) has been published in the Wyndham Lewis Special Edition of *Agenda* 7(3)-8(1), Autumn-Winter 1969-70 (209-215), prefaced with an explanatory note by Hugh Kenner (199).

novelties as a miniature Thomas Paine, whom Satters stomps into the ground in a fit of rage, illustrating for Lewis the illusoriness of rights in the face of brute force (CM 100-103). Eventually, these two return to the “landing-stage” to see the Bailiff, the voluble functionary responsible for appraising and admitting shades into the “Magnetic City,” presumed to be Heaven itself. He is challenged by the Hyperideans (the fascist promoters of classical form and solid intellect) to defend his time-doctrine against their jabs, bringing about a philosophical dialogue (complete with traditional typography) in parodic mode that continues for the rest of the book.7

Such a description of the basic narrative markers of the book do little to illustrate the experience of reading it, however. Although the narrative is not negligible, it amounts in this first volume to a means of getting the various characters (I use the term out of habit rather than suitability, since the “puppets” that populate the shores of the Styx are rather more abstractions given allegorical flesh than novelistic characters) into physical and verbal proximity. When this proximity is attained, the product is a flow of clashing words, producing the dialogues of the later two-thirds of the book as a series of

7 This latter section is an obvious sign of the book’s generic reliance on the dialogue of the dead (stemming from antiquity, above all the satires of Lucien, and taken up in the 17th and 18th centuries by authors such as Fontenelle, Matthew Prior, Lord Lyttelton, and Elizabeth Montagu), but, as I will argue here, the satiric dialogue of the dead informs even the more narrative portions of the book, with speech genres and particular modernist tropes taking up the dialogic roles of the dead in dispute. Although they end the book, the dialogue sections were written first, and significant portions of it had to be cut from the manuscript to allow for more of Pullman and Satters. See Edwards, Wyndham Lewis 322-3. On the history of the dialogue of the dead as genre, particularly the English uptake of the genre in the 17th and 18th centuries, see Keener. As for dialogism, the texts to reference remain Bakhtin’s Dialogic Imagination and Speech Genres, to which the argument of this chapter owes a significant debt. Lewis, however, has his own theory of speech genres surprisingly similar to that of Bakhtin: “There is an organic norm to which every form of speech is related. A human individual, living a certain kind of life, to whom the words and style would be appropriate, is implied in all utterance” (Lewis, Time and Western Man 113).
violent yet static (although The Childermass was written long after his vorticist period, “vortex” is clearly the appropriate figure here) verbal combats assembled out of the detritus of multiple speech genres, with a special emphasis on the popular cliché.8 The Bailiff, Lewis’s figure for both the zeitgeist of 1920s Britain and mass political manipulation (for Lewis these are one and the same), concentrates and distills this method of textual production into his Punch routine:

‘Gentlemen! I am glad to see you all looking so well and so much yourselves. That is capital: to be oneself is after all the main concern of life, irrespective of what your particular version of self might be. It is remarkable how distinct you all are this morning. My warmest congratulations.’ (CM 133)

The acceptability of this official yet falsely warm language to the postulants assembled before the Bailiff is perhaps explained by the aridity of the setting and the omniscient narrative voice adopted by Lewis, a version of his satirical method loosed on a setting which no longer need conform to our own understanding of reality:

Tying their chokers, trotting clowns hurrying at the crack of the magisterial circus-whip, the six [the “Carnegie batch” of petitioners] scuttle and trip, but never fall, the ground rising in pustules at their feet to mock them, the wind clipping them on the ear, or pushing them on the obstructions arranged for them to amuse the idiot-universe. (CM 129)

The impingement of the ground (literal and figural in this case, another illustration of Lewis’s method of conflation of the two) upon the figures can be taken here as a synecdoche of the relation of setting to both character and narrative, as scenes—depicted as such, as at the appearance of the beast of “Babberl’n”: “‘It’s a cinematograph!’” (CM

8 On this point, see Jameson, Fables 62-80.
emerge from the landscape to punctuate the events at the encampment, and disappear just as abruptly: “The mirage disappears, the dusty red daylight is reinstated and the walls of the customary city are there as before” (CM 143). This latter is the experience of leaving the cinema, only with the volition of the moviegoer replaced by that of the “idiot-universe”—setting recast as both amused spectator and cruel projectionist. The narrative, such as there is one, is simply this arranging of “obstructions,” brought about through the fantastic setting of the land of the dead.

Most of the ideas bandied about by the Bailiff, Hyperides, Alectryon, and others are capsule summaries or ventriloquized arguments that can be found in Time and Western Man and The Art of Being Ruled, and, as this period in Lewis’s career is not my main focus here, I leave it to the reader to sort out the clash of the aural modern flux of the suiciding West against the ocular classical form of ancient Greece. The one aspect of this philosophical novel with which I must deal in more detail is that of the role of the intellectual, which is important here but becomes paramount in the later volumes. This, as are so many things, is summed up by the Bailiff in his reported discourse with “the little man,” whose means of treating “the great ones” on earth is held up as a possible method of “stop[ping] the mouths of these terribly indolent conversationalists” in Heaven. Due to the insipid rhetorical style employed by the Bailiff, I quote at length:

‘In a general way you are described as making war upon the great in every form but especially where mind not money is in question (indeed we understand that it could be simplified in such a way that it would appear that it was money that was pitted against mind and that your admirable campaign derives from policies of embattled capital) by means of progressive systems of isolation. [...] All this effects gradually, through your skillful arrangements for their segregation, a sort
of living death for those objectionable persons. But since they are cold-shouldered and cut as it were by what was originally their kind, and are forced into a corral apart, they must cease to be effective or to exercise the influence that their powers, if they were not dealt with in this way, would secure to them. In fact of course where the treatment is entirely successful these objectionable freaks could as well be dead for all the living they are permitted to do. [...] First you shut them off entirely from all participation in active public life, political and even as far as possible social, since social with you is only a form of politics or business—you neither have nor wish for art [...] only you do it with all the gestures of a frightened veneration, with a salvo of ironical kowtows for their sublime capacities, their incomparable gifts, which, you say, would never consort with yours. This behavior makes it seem that their enforced splendid isolation has come about through your heightened appreciation of all that is noble and bewitching. Or on the other hand you can affect to believe that it is they who have withdrawn from your society and left you severely alone much to your regret. But whichever way it is done, the important thing is to enlist all “the little” in a self-consciously “little” class, and leave all the great Untouchables by themselves, in an inhuman category of other-worldliness, where they can no longer interfere in the affairs of this world. If you can persuade them, once they have been locked out and marked “great,” to invent a cant of their own, which is a further barrier to communication, why then the thing is as near as perfect as mortal hands can make it.’ (CM 284-7)

Whatever we may think of the Nietzschean resonances of this particular interpretation of the origin of a stilted modernism out of an enforced detachment from everyday life, we can still read in this passage a real frustration at the situation diagnosed by Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*: the “institutional status of art in bourgeois society (apartness of the work of art from the praxis of life)” (Bürger, *Theory* 25), although Lewis denigrates the Marxist etiology as a “simplified” “appear[ance]” in favor of a theory of *ressentiment* wedded to mass political manipulation. With this turn, a number of the more obscure formal traits of the book begin to fall into place as a full-scale parodic attack on the modernist idea of a private language (“a cant of their own”)
unmoored from everyday life and “communication.” The famous parodies of Stein and the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*, then still *Work in Progress*, now appear motivated by more than Lewis’s critique of the influence of the “time-cult” on the modernists in *Time and Western Man* (although that is still obviously present). Indeed, these fragments of language spinning away from any type of communication appear less maliciously satirical and more genuinely tragic when they are reconsidered as failed attempts to communicate at all, or as a number of monads all speaking private languages only to themselves—a literalization of that most famous of modernist techniques, the interior monologue. Lewis himself made the connection between the “transition from a public to

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9 This description of modernist practice should resonate with my reading of the mid-twentieth century attention to Dante, particularly the *Commedia*, in terms of the generation of a “common language” of the “noble vernacular.” To recall three examples, here are Auerbach, *Dante* (1929): “Dante says explicitly that he does not write for the learned who have striven for only for money and public prestige and turned literature into a harlot; he writes in Italian because he does not wish to serve learned Italians or foreigners who know Latin, but the unlearned in Italy who are capable of noble aspirations and greatly in need of lofty instruction” (76-77); Eliot, “Dante” (1929): “[T]he style of Dante has a particular lucidity—a poetic as distinguished from an intellectual lucidity. The thought may be obscure, but the word is lucid, or rather translucent” (Eliot, *Selected Essays* 225); and Sayers, *Introductory Papers* (1954): “Dante wrote to be read by the common man and woman, and to distribute the bread of angels among those who had no leisure to be learned” (xiii). Auerbach is particularly interesting here in his reading of the emergence of Dante’s “mature” style as a result of his rejection of the “esoteric,” “obscure,” and “private” nature of the *stil nuovo* (68-70).

10 “Pulley has been most terribly helpful and kind—most terribly helpful and he's been kind, he can't help being—he’s terribly” (CM 37).

11 “‘Ant add narfter thort wilt? nope one mild one just this dear Shaun as ever was comminxed wid Shem Hanp ant Japhet for luck (for he’s a great mixer x Master Joys of Potluck, Joys of Jingles, whom men call Cross-word-Joys for his apt circumlocutions but whom the gods call just Joys or Shimmy, shut and short.’” (CM 172). This latter parody goes on for pages and, for those curious, the parenthesis never does end. Joyce took the time to respond to Lewis’s parody in *Finnegans Wake*. “His pips had been neatly all drowned on him; his polps were charging odours every older minute; he was quickly for getting the dresser’s desdain on the flyleaf of his frons; and he was quietly for giving the bailiff’s distrain on to the bulkside of his cul de Pompe. In all his specious heavings, as he lived by Optimus Maximus, the Mookse had never seen his Dubville brooder-on-low so nigh to a pickle.” (Joyce, *Finnegans* 153). For a careful and detailed account of the “anti-collaboration” of Lewis and Joyce, see Klein’s *The Fictions of James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis*, esp. 153-197. The question of who, apart from literary scholars, might want to read such a conversation is exactly what is at issue here.
a private way of thinking and feeling” and modernist aesthetics (“‘Subjective’ art”) in an article published in Eliot’s Criterion a year before The Childermass appeared, a sort of summary of the connection between the two sections of Time and Western Man:

We have been thrown back wholesale from the external, the public, world, by the successive waves of the “Newtonian” innovation, and been driven down into our primitive private mental caves, of the Unconscious and the primitive. […] Are we not of necessity confined to a mental world of the subconscious, in which we naturally sink back to a more primitive level; and hence our “primitivism,” too? Our lives cannot be defined in terms of action—externally that is—because we never truly act. We have no common world into which we project ourselves and recognize what we see there as symbols of our fullest power. (Lewis, Wyndham Lewis on Art 249, 251, 254)

This language of “common” or “public world,” as opposed to a diversity of monadic “private mental caves” is here wedded to an incapacity not only to communicate linguistically but also to act on and in a shared world, recalling Joyce as the premiere author of both interior monologue and paralysis (the latter most notably in Dubliners).12

To take a less obvious example of the same impulse to private language and its parody in The Childermass, the pages of dialect writing provided by the conversations of the lost shades pose an interesting problem for the reader. Here is a sampling of this dialogue, taken from the “vortex of workers” talking amongst themselves during an intermission in the Bailiff’s routine:

12 Declan Kiberd has also noted the tragic aspect of interior monologue apropos Joyce. “A few pages of interior monologue are sufficient to make clear that the Blooms can never know one another as the reader will come to know each of them. Indeed, the tragedy of the interior monologue will be revealed to lie in the counterpoint between the richness of a person’s thoughts and the slender opportunities for sharing those thoughts with others in conversation. What is depicted in the ensuing chapters [of Ulysses] could hardly be called a society in the conventional sense, being rather a gathering of fugitives, of submerged groups, of clamorous competing voices and of speakers who do not often listen to one another.” (Kiberd, Inventing Ireland 347). The final sentence here could be applied without modification to The Childermass.
‘Forelcomeer timewasalive there wasn’t nothin used to rile me sameazthat. All you bloominwelladdtersay was oddmanart an I wentorfther deepend proper.’
‘Go on!’
‘I wanted to be same as the rest—yewknow.’
‘Acorseyewbloominwelldid sameas orluvuss time we was—’
‘Ah!’
‘Ittaintarf comic come terthinkkovvit, eeritzther bloomin opper-zite, yew dontbloominwell want to be sameazeverybody.’ (CM 242)

This several-page long dialogue is as tedious to read as one might imagine from the sample here, the deliberate production of tedium being one of Lewis’s principal rhetorical devices. Before we take this dialect writing as evidence simply of Lewis’s scorn for the “little man,” it is worth pausing to consider exactly what the parodic referent of such dialect writing actually is. Certainly there is to be found here a barrier to communication, at least between different classes. It is significant for this scene that the workers are speaking to each other (without difficulty), while Pullman—Lewis’s stand-in for the contemporary fashionable intellectual—“aloofly listens” in, finally giving up on the group “with a flicker of fierce additional disdain” (CM 238, 243). This is the same Pullman who a few pages earlier cheers the Bailiff in his dialect play, a form of linguistic blackface, which he highlights by showing his now-racialized tonsils to the gathered audience:

BAILIFF. ‘Ole black clam—see de roof? It’s all baby-nigger.’

APPELLANTS IN CHORUS. 

‘All his roof is negro baby!’
‘Oh how exciting! He’s after all Afro, who’d have thought it!’
‘Our black baby!’

[...]
BAILIFF. ‘With rabbit-palate see to rattle—rattle-snake for pretty baby!’ (CM 168-9)

These are the passages, even more so than those about homosexuality, that must give the contemporary reader the greatest discomfort. Yet the targets of the satire here are neither Africans nor African-Americans, but rather the modernist “racial masquerade” that Michael North analyzes in The Dialect of Modernism (1994) and Lewis attacks in Paleface (1929). This particular instance of dialect writing has less to do with Lewis’s pernicious claims about “primitive people” or racialized others (these are to be found elsewhere in the novel and its sequels) and more to do with the simultaneously infantilizing and instrumentalizing modernist practice of motivating linguistic experiment through an appeal to racial dialect (which need not have any relation to actually existing speech patterns). This is why race appears here as mediated not through visual blackface but through language, figured here through the mouth and tonsils (“‘Oh our Bailiff’s black inside him only his outside’s dirty Paleface’” CM 169).

The Bailiff is performing for a “dithyrambic” crowd, however, and his grandstanding needs to be read as such. The workers cited above also have an audience (Pullman), but are not aware of it. They are speaking something equivalent to the private language of the modernists, but with the class roles reversed (obscure workers nearly incomprehensible to the “aloof” author). The effect on the reader of all these lines of dialect to shift and reorder is simply exhaustion, particularly when, upon

13 The intended social satire here is clear: the socialist “fellow traveler” is shown to be a snob, dedicated to an abstract ideal of social revolution but disdainful of the unwashed masses.
decoding, the content of the lines is often simply a mélange of clichés. The rhetorical
effect of this is to call into question, once again, the merits of such incomprehensibility,
while the class reversal suggests that the masses are not less responsible for the
linguistic schism than are the intellectuals. Pullman’s reaction of “disdain” mirrors that
of the artist as elitist aesthete, sets him up as the villain of the (near) encounter (insofar
as a near-encounter can have one), and, if the rhetoric functions as I suggest it does,
aligns his reaction to that of the reader, who now finds his or her disgust with Lewis’s
parodic dialect writing mirrored in the figure of the spectator within the text.

With Lewis’s unrelenting focus on failed communication in The Childermass, it
would seem no coincidence that the mirage that appears with the landing of the Phoenix
over the Magnetic City is one of Babylon, split in two by Lewis to link the ancient and
the modern cities of babble:

Two ponderous sounds enter the atmosphere along with the image. They are Bab
and Lun, of the continuous Babber’In. The tumultuous name of the first giant
metropolis echoes in the brains of the lookers-on. Heavily and remotely its
syllables thud out in the crowd-mind, out of its arcanum—the Lon as the
lumbering segment of the name of another nebulous city, and the mysterious
pap of Bab that is the infant-food of Babel. (CM 136-7)

No sooner does one identify this properly mythical overlay of London and Babylon,
however, than suspicions must set in once again as to the referent of this passage and
those that follow. For if the comparison appears unproblematic or even commonplace,
this is because the method of comparison is familiar to us as, precisely, “mythical
method” as exemplified by the modernist “greatest hits” of 1922, Ulysses and The Waste
Land, and theorized by Eliot in “Ulysses, Order, and Myth.” I suggest that this (mythic
method) is what is at issue in this section of *The Childermass*, rather than the simpler comparison of London and Babel that at first appears to be the content of the passage. The entire premise of *The Childermass*, a phantasmagoria of parodic voices centered around the figure of the Bailiff, could indeed be read as some hyper-literal version of Eliot’s original Dickensian title for *The Waste Land*: “He do the Police in Different Voices.”

To understand what Lewis is doing here, one needs to keep in mind his specific criticism of mythic method. This can be found in his essay on Eliot and Richards in *Men Without Art* (1934). The mythic overlay, we find, smacks for Lewis of a romantic snobbery, a preference for the (mythic) past as more interesting than the present, to such a degree that the poet, in order to render the present meaningful at all, must resort to a nostalgic and melancholic overlay of the (meaningful and exotic) past onto the (meaningless and drab) present.

[I]t is easy to say ‘the historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.’ But that past is, at the best, seeing its proportions, very selective, and its ‘presence’ is at the best ideal. You cannot purge it of the glamour of strange lands. Strange times, after all, are strange lands, neither more nor less. And so this theory of ‘the presence of the past’ results in a new exoticism (proper to our critical and chronological civilization). [… ] And so the *here and now* is diminished too much: and we desert the things that after all we stand a chance of learning something concrete about, for things that we can never know except through a glass darkly and as it were in a romantic dream. (MWA 61, the passage quoted can be found in Eliot, *Selected Essays* 14)

These withering remarks should be enough to convince the reader that Lewis is not simply practicing mythic method in *The Childermass* to make a point about the
degradation of the modern world. Instead he offers us a parody of this method (the cinematographic overlay of the “mirage” of Babylon, “having the consistency and tint of a wall of cheese,” over the Magnetic City), followed by its dissolution. We find the Tiresias of The Waste Land (“Old man with wrinkled female breasts” III.219) recast here as the Whore of Babylon: “One heavily painted lowering Charlotte-the-harlot pushes his haughty way past Pullman and Satters” (CM 138), and the entire scene brings with it a polyphony of unnamed voices not dissimilar from that of Eliot’s poem: “There is a babble of awestruck voices” (CM 137). These voices dissipate in confusion at the uncertain spectacle before them:

‘Is that Bab?’ and there is a hiccup of surprise ‘Lon?’
‘No!’ A cry gasps self-conscious infant-wonder. ‘Bab?’
‘Which is it? I see two, or is it one?’ (CM 137)

Finally, the Hyperideans appear to sow the seeds of dissent: “‘That town is Himenburg!’ […] ‘It is Niflheim! It is the home of the mist. Don’t you believe them if they tell you it is Babylon.—Babylon!’” (CM 141). It is with this last claim, that the city is not Babylon but the Norse land of the mists, that Lewis’s criticism of the mythic method comes to fruition, since it suggests simultaneously that the mirage is just that (a land of mists—an “unreal city,” to use Eliot’s corruption of Baudelaire—made doubly unreal through its association with the cinematic image) and that the petitioners might give more consideration to their own situation (the land of the dead—now returned to focus through the pagan reference) than to a distracting “spectacle” presented repeatedly by Lewis as such: “The crowd hushes its voice like a theater audience upon the turning
down of the lights” (CM 137). The Bailiff himself trivializes the interruption, commenting when the Phoenix has departed: “‘They always do that film bit when the Phoenix comes. It’s quite pretty, but as archaeology it’s all nonsense I’m afraid. I hope you enjoyed it?’ (CM 144). Finally, the placement of this scene in The Childermass also reinforces Lewis’s critique of the method as “diminish[ing]” the “here and now,” since it interrupts the Bailiff’s explanation to the appellants of their position in the afterlife, surely a matter of grave concern to all present.14

Eliot’s own role as tastemaker and literary “mandarin” (MWA 55) is parodied later in The Childermass, yoked in this case to a satire of the Hyperideans when a reading of their roster turns the land of the dead into an impromptu Cabaret Voltaire:


His fashionable friends echo in every key the vocables exploding from the blunderbusses of the mouths of the ushers and runners. A long wail of Pa-pa! goes up and a super Da is syncopated and trumpeted by a hundred contralto throats. (CM 250)

Along with the references to the pagan figures whose names are taken by the Hyperideans (“Epaphus.” “Thor.” “Finn.”), the “Dada” of Huelsenbeck’s “Negro rhythms,”15 the Bailiff (“Nidhogg,” the eater of the dead in Niflheim), and even Lewis’s earlier work (“Tar.”), we find the “DA” of the final section of The Waste Land parroted by

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14 Scott W. Klein discusses Lewis’s use of Griffith’s Intolerance (1916) in this scene in his article “Modernist Babylons: Utopian Aesthetics and Urban Spectacle in D. W. Griffith and Wyndham Lewis” (forthcoming in Modernist Cultures).
15 The term is Huelsenbeck’s own description of his “Prayers” at the Cabaret Voltaire. See Richter 20-22.
a generation of “fashionable” poets striving to emulate their poetic “Pa-pa,” now aligned with the “syncopated” linguistic blackface of Huelsenbeck, the cult of violent action gestured toward with mouths that become “blunderbusses,” and the “contralto” of faddish male homosexuality.16

As I hope these references have indicated, The Childermass turns out to be a veritable parodic anatomy of high literary modernism, joining together through the representational potential of the subgenre of fiction of the afterlife the two parts of Time and Western Man (on the literature and philosophy of the time-cult, respectively) more adequately than Lewis could manage in that earlier book. It should come as no surprise that a book whose main protagonist, insofar as it can be said to have one, is a stand-in of James Joyce should turn out to be about modernism and its relationship to the age of mass-man. Lewis’s 1928 take on this relationship can perhaps be summed up in the following scenario:

The Bailiff settles himself upon his stool to be shown up [by Alectryon] and making up his mind quickly which way to look looks over at Pullman: his trusty and well-beloved anglo-saxon admirer gazes back at him through his glasses in steadfast silence while the sucker-like paw of Satters wakes into activity and massages the muscles of his patron’s arm in secret. (CM 300)

This sums up the state of the world for Lewis in the late 1920s: the only resistance to the disintegrating force of the times is to be found neither with the trusting masses of liberalism (reduced here to the grotesque poly-animality of the “sucker-like paw”) nor

16 For Lewis’s discussion of this latter, see The Art of Being Ruled, particularly the section pleasantly titled “The rôle of inversion in the war on the Intellect” (216-7). This is linked to racial masquerade in the section of that book titled “Man and Shaman” (239-273), an interesting discussion of which can be found in Douglas Mao, “A Shaman in Common: Lewis, Auden, and the Queerness of Liberalism.”
with the fashionable intellectual (who, in this “one-way” environment, is all too happy to parrot the party line), but with the Hyperideans. Their absent presence in this tableau, however, indicates that Hyperides, the gadfly of the Bailiff and obvious stand-in for Lewis in his self-proclaimed role as Enemy, is not especially effective, and “all this has been enacted before countless times, on unnumbered occasions all these things they are now about to say have been uttered, under every conceivable circumstance” (CM 150) without any change in outcome. That Hyperides cannot win over the public to his side is a constitutive feature of Lewis’s self-fashioning, since if he were actually successful in swaying public opinion he would eliminate his own centrality in a system imagined to be centered around and antagonistic to him. The afterlife as a setting here enables Lewis to lament (and even satirize) his own (necessary) critical failure while justifying that failure as one more feature of the setting. Such a failure is also inscribed in the book in a literal sense as well. I have suggested that The Childermass is a multi-front attack on the differentiation of private languages, centered around the “highbrow/lowlbrow” distinction, yet the book is too much of an intimate conversation—one with Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Yeats and others—to serve as anything but one more example of the very difficulty and self-importance he anatomizes and satirizes. Indeed, part of my justification in reading so many passages as satire directed at specific modernist figures (apart from the obvious parodies of those figures to be found in The Childermass) is the

\[17\] I owe this last point to David Trotter, who makes a good case for the centrality of paranoia to the formal features of Lewis’s version of modernism. I discuss Trotter in more detail in Chapter 3.
knowledge, on the part of Lewis as well as his publishers, that those individuals would make up much of his reading public.

As for the theological aspect of the afterlife, it is largely absent from this first volume of the project. Beyond the devices authorized by the setting (the mobile stasis of the action, the treatment of characters as allegorical figures of ideological forces, the “generalized mimetism” of figure and ground,18 and the literalization of figural language in phantasmagoria), the particularly Christian content of the afterlife serves mainly as a figure of the “one-way” character of the age. This is the ultimate refuge of the Bailiff: the claim that he is, after all, God’s servant, and there is no alternative to his methods but “‘that uncomfortable spot over there to our left’” (CM 136). With the authority of the divine, the Bailiff attempts to discredit the ideals of the Hyperideans: “‘health,’” “‘aristocracy,’” “‘logic,’” “‘secularity,’” and “‘optimism,’” “‘those are our antitheses, those are the features of the pagan, the now discredited, European world—of the heretical, promethean, insurgent mind of the West.’” “‘Against the puny humanism of the Greek we set up God, that great theologic machine’” (CM 262).

It is tempting to take the Bailiff at his word, taking this summation of conflicting principles as the final point of The Childermass, as do the Hyperideans themselves (in the final lines of Polemon in the 1928 volume: “‘Who is to be real—this hyperbolic puppet or

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18 I take this term from Tyrus Miller’s Late Modernism, where it appears as the first of his list of characteristic formal traits of inter-war art (Miller 62-3). As my own periodization of late modernism should make clear, I find Miller’s approach to the problem of late modernism instructive but limited by its refusal to think late modernism after World War II. Since this project shares two of Miller’s three examples (Lewis and Beckett), I hope that my readings of these figures will clarify in more detail than I can here the substance of this limitation.
we? Answer, oh destiny!” [CM 322]). Yet Lewis is clearly unwilling to cede the divine to
the side of his enemies, any more than he is to unproblematically embrace the nostalgic
classicism of Hyperides (of whom the Bailiff provides several substantial criticisms,
bolstered by a narrative voice that refuses to leave Hyperides & co. free from satiric
treatment), and he leaves a number of indications that the source of the Bailiff’s
institutional authority is less than holy. The Hyperideans repeatedly denounce him as
an impostor, a “Baphomet” sent to corrupt the souls of the dead.\footnote{The Bailiff, for his part, assures Hyperides that he is indeed authentic, but that he must maintain the fiction of his inauthenticity to keep the shades from detesting him as above their station (CM 266).} The Bailiff’s stage is
decorated with a number of symbols from varied sources (an Epicurean inscription, the
star of David, a mask of Astarte), but also includes “a goat-hoof” and a brocade that
represents “a serpent’s head” (CM 125). All of these “pretentious symbolic devices” are
set to the side a page later, however, when his setup is said to display “the untidiness
and fatigue of a secular community” (CM 127).\footnote{This gesture can be read as one more critique of the modernist investment in myth, particularly the esoteric symbol-mongering and pretentious erudition of authors like Pound, Eliot, or Yeats.} That there is ultimately no way to parse
this mass of symbols and contradictory indications of the Bailiff’s origin and authority is
one of the fundamental features of the book, which defers our access to the Magnetic
City (where, presumably, one would discover the truth behind the Bailiff’s lies) to the
sequel.\footnote{Just this difficulty is announced in I. A. Richards’s oft-cited radio broadcast about The Childermass, reprinted in Agenda 7(3)-8(1), Autumn-Winter 1969-1970: “I think everyone who has tried to write or talk about The Childermass has found himself in the same hole—the very deep and dubious hole Wyndham Lewis so craftily keeps us in. We don’t know—to an agonizing degree are not allowed to know—what it is all about. […] [T]he book disowns a doctrine” (Richards 16, 19).}
This deferral is not a mere contingency, however, but the consequence of a
grounding difficulty for Lewis. Eliot, who I have argued above plays a greater role in
*The Childermass* than has previously been acknowledged, wrote in his 1928 essay on
Babbitt that “Mr. Wyndham Lewis is obviously striving courageously toward a positive
theory, but in his published work has not yet reached that point” (Eliot, *Selected Essays*
419). This statement is fundamentally correct, and it finds its figuration in the absence of
God from Lewis’s afterlife, or even a non-equivocal indication of what God might stand
for, if he does indeed exist in Lewis’s fictional cosmology of 1928. The closest thing
Lewis has to a positive theory (opposed, in Eliot’s article, to purely destructive criticism)
at this point in his career (late 1920s to 1930s) is his theory of satire. Yet this theory of
“non-moral satire” (laid out in *Men Without Art*) is itself missing a center, we might say,
since Lewis explicitly fails to render any justification for it other than itself. Having
disparaged the *art-for-art’s-sake* of aestheticism at the beginning of that book (“*art-for-
art’s-sake* I do not even trouble to confute” MWA 11), he allows it to return through the
back door through his refusal to ground his own theory of satire on any positive
principles: “[I]t is my belief that ‘satire’ *for its own sake*—as much as anything else for its
own sake—is possible: and that even the most virtuous and well-proportioned of men is
only a shadow, after all, of some perfection; a shadow of an imperfect, and hence an
‘ugly,’ sort” (MWA 89).22 Perfection here is made to stand in for a lot, but it is one of

22 That this amounts to another version of *art-for-art’s-sake* is made clear when factor in Lewis’s claim that
“there is nothing written or painted today of any power which could not be brought under the head of
*Satire*” (MWA 15).
those terms (like the academic discourse on “excellence”) that has little content until it is
given any, which Lewis here refuses to do. It is an idealism that owes much to Plato, but
and idealism with no ideal but the tautological ideal of (unattainable and entirely
unspecified) perfection.23

The problem of the absence of a positive system to support his satire reappears
years later, and the terms with which he lays out the problem are instructive, because of
rather than despite the fact that Lewis has no particularly good answer to the lack of
justification for non-moral satire:

Persius, I have just read, founded his Satire upon the precepts of the Stoic
philosophy: his sanction was the Porch. Dante, no doubt, felt amply justified by
Christian principles in roasting his enemies: and, on the same principles, had
they been in his place, they would have roasted him. Whether Stoics or
Christians, their minds are quite at ease, for in their personal enemies they have
no difficulty in detecting vice: and it deserves the severest punishment, they feel.
[...] For those of us who can but feel very imperfect Christians (perhaps even of a
Laodicean habit, as is so usually today) or with no stoic backgrounds, or other
good excuses, it is another matter. How does a cartoonist like Mr. Low square it
with his conscience, for the bloodthirsty life he has led – driving his banderillas
into so many hides, year after year? (RA 56-7)

This is a serious charge against himself (coming as it does in his self-defense as a
satirist), and he acquits himself somewhat poorly by claiming that, in his case, he was
engaging in political satire (RA 57). At first, it would seem that the claim of political
satire answers perfectly the question of justification, since “[p]olitics is for the Twentieth
Century what Religion was for the Sixteenth and Seventeenth. In a time so exclusively

23 Lewis’s idealism is relatively easy to parse in terms of Schillerian idealism and its breakdown as described
by Moi in Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism (67-104), since the crux of his idea of satire is the depiction
of truth that is indifferent to the good (being “non-moral”) and opposed to the beautiful.
political, to stand outside politics is to invite difficulties: or not to identify yourself, in passionate involvement, with one or another of the contending parties” (RA 75). Lewis follows this, however, with the announcement (not a new one) that he is, to the best of his ability, an outsider, someone engaged critically with politics, but from no particular position. The difficulty of squaring this with his justification of satire on political grounds should be apparent, however, since the examples he gives of justified satirists are thinkers relying on some (social—most often religious) ground of authority to advance criticism, while Lewis has just presented himself as having political ideas, certainly, but not ones entertained by anyone else or adhering to any external authority.

This brings us to the question of belief, so long in abeyance. As part of Lewis’s critique of Eliot in Men Without Art, we find him citing Eliot’s writing on Dante:

“We can make a distinction between what Dante believes as a poet and what he believed as a man. Practically, it is hardly likely that even so great a poet as Dante could have composed the Comedy merely with understanding and without belief.” This means, if it means anything, that the “belief” of Dante (represented as the dogmatic philosophical system of St. Thomas Aquinas) was a support with which Dante the poet certainly could not dispense, because of his natural human feebleness – had he been a little more “great” he could have done without that dogmatic belief and treated the Hell and Paradise of Christian dogma as a Punch and Judy show. (MWA 65; the cited passage is from Eliot, Selected Essays 244)

This last comment is essentially a self-deprecating joke, responding to what he sees as Eliot’s doubts as to Lewis’s own “greatness.” Nonetheless, in calling up Lewis’s afterlife

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24 He takes pains, however, to present himself as neither a-political nor an advocate of Eliot’s “impersonality.” His point is that he is adheres to no particular political party.
fiction (the reference to Punch and Judy leaves little room for doubt), it points to the central difficulty of that fiction: the absence of belief as anything but private opinion.

I cannot proceed further without specifying the type of belief that is meant here. What Eliot means by belief is not an individually held conviction, but participation in “a coherent traditional system of dogma and morals like the Catholic: it stands apart, for understanding and assent even without belief, from the single individual who propounds it” (Eliot, *Selected Essays* 244; cited in MWA 65). Lewis, in citing this passage in *Men Without Art*, wishes to take Eliot to task for externalizing belief (taking Richards as a cue) into a system of tradition which smacks for Lewis of conformity and herd-mind. The danger of this view Lewis sees realized in Eliot, who Lewis argues adopts a permanently ironic stance toward belief (the chapter is titled “T. S. Eliot: The Pseudo-Believer,” again riffing off Richards’s *Science and Poetry*) creating an insincerity with regard to one’s own language: “[S]incerity is precisely what Mr. Eliot is afraid of – sincerity in the sense of integral belief of any sort” (MWA 66), leading ultimately to Eliot’s refusal to take responsibility for his own previous writing. This is part and parcel of Eliot’s doctrine of impersonality, which is the real point of disagreement for Lewis, unwilling as he is to cede the personality as an aesthetic requirement of the author. It is, however, Eliot’s version of social belief that seems to be lacking from *The Childermass*, the author of which held private beliefs about virtually everything under

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25 This last claim is made both forcefully and rather persuasively in the “Appendix” to Lewis’s article on Eliot (MWA 75-82). Since Lewis’s style of criticism is so dependent on heady rhetoric intertwined with extensive citation, I leave it up to the reader to appraise the original artifact rather than try to reproduce it here.
the sun. In saying this, I do not mean to criticize Lewis for not adhering to a version of belief that we have just seen him arguing against; the point is rather to indicate a fundamental feature of the text in relation to both its author and (even more importantly) his public. For it is not primarily (or at least not exclusively) on the side of the author and his or her personal convictions that belief is an issue here.

By 1950 Lewis seems to have come a long way toward recognizing this himself. In his career retrospective (and self-defense) *Rude Assignment*, we find him rehashing the same “plot” against the “great man” that he put in the Bailiff’s mouth above, this time recast in terms of publics: namely the “Two Publics” of the “highbrow” and “lowbrow.” The change in approach is minimal, yet enlightening. Lewis here presents the split as originating (1) within the bourgeoisie as a local snobbism, and (2) from the side of the self-described “lowbrow” public, with claims of “highbrow” (a “clownish, American term”) applied by “the Philistines” to anyone “who is not a bestselling or potboiling hack” (RA 15). “The artist has not ‘escaped,’ or ‘fled from,’ the outer world of men in general, of reality: he has been driven from it” (RA 29, Lewis’s emphasis). In keeping with this narrativization of the differentiation of publics and markets (itself not so far from the Bailiff’s monologue), Lewis provides a figure which reverses Huysen’s “anxiety of contamination”: that of the “highbrow” as (of all things) a dwindling Native American tribe consigned to a reservation:

26 “This classification does not extend beyond the bourgeoisie. The working class of course does not count. The typical ‘lowbrow’ would not like to think he shared his brow with them. They might, if it came to the point, be described as the ‘no-brows.’” (RA 15n).
We artists do rather live like an Indian tribe, the relics of another civilization, in a Reservation. Rich visitors can come among us: they are initiated into the tribal mysteries, becoming ‘blood-brothers’ – just the way it happens with the Indians or the Taos, or some other dusty centre of exotic tourism. [...] The Indians, you will recall, from what you have read of such resorts, begin to turn out art-objects for sale to these seasonal intruders. When they do that, naturally the work so produced loses greatly in artistic value. So long as a totemic object is carved or painted in response to the demands of a tribal cult, it has the power inherent in all belief. Producing it for sale to tourists – or to ‘blood-brothers’ who have bought their way in – is another matter. And so it is with the ‘Highbrow’ tribe. (RA 30)

There is more than a little Arnold here, and Lewis cites Arnold’s use of the term “philistine” approvingly later in Rude Assignment (RA 143). Indeed, the entire force of the argument is deeply Arnoldian, but with the difference that Lewis has little faith in the protective power of unified and unifying culture and the dissatisfaction it can beget to stem the tide of “Philistinism.” We must attend to the extendedness of his metaphor of the Reservation above, for it seems to me to suggest more than simply an instrumental identification of the artist with a people at the verge of extinction (although it is also that). The “highbrow” and “lowbrow” are here recast literally as different cultures, one in ascendance and the other staving off extinction by living off the proceeds of the occasional patron—“rich visitors” who know nothing about the real importance of the wares being peddled, but willing to invest in the exoticism of a fading bohemia.

In this figure, Lewis appears to recognize the importance of a communal system of belief extending beyond the personality. “So long as a totemic object is carved or painted in response to the demands of a tribal cult, it has the power inherent in all
belief.” Lewis presents us with the image of art as a mystical object, a totem capable of bearing meaning through shared belief (and indeed, demanded by a public determined by that belief). I do not wish to extend this to religion, belief being a category that transcends its religious application. But I do wish to underscore the extent to which what is lost, for Lewis, in the loss of a public based on shared beliefs, is communicability itself. It is replaced here by the “dreary tourism” of the art collector, more interested in the future sale price or curio value of a painting than its form, its content, its referent, its function, its argument, or (collecting all of these together) its meaning (even, to extend the point, its status as meaningful).27 This digression has taken me years into the future of The Childermass, however, to Lewis’s 1950 reassessment of his own situation (both that of 1928 and 1950). Which is perhaps a sign that I had best end my discussion of The Childermass and move on to its sequels.

**From Childermass to Human Age I: The Letters**

Although possessing only the loosest of plots, The Childermass ends as abruptly as it begins (resolving neither the debate between the Hyperideans and the Bailiff nor the fates of Pulley and Satters in the afterlife), and announces itself as “SECTION I” on the title page, promising (on the title verso) that “[t]he Childermass will be published in 3

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27 Lawrence Rainey, in a hyperbolic statement (not without its own rhetorical effectiveness) has suggested that we might best understand texts like The Waste Land by not reading them at all, since the text of the poem is “largely irrelevant” to its reception conditions at the time of and surrounding its publication (106). I do not embrace this approach here (interested as I am, even if patrons/publishers of the time largely were not, in what the books have to say), but I acknowledge the extent to which his claim attests to a real institutional situation for the modernist author.
Sections. Sections II and III will appear in the autumn of 1928.” They did nothing of the sort, however, and Lewis was unable to produce a sequel until almost 30 years later.

This was not for lack of interest. The book (at least, the first part of it) was praised by such figures as W. B. Yeats and Rebecca West. Lewis thought of *The Childermass* as one of his best and most important books, writing of it in a letter of 1940 that “when it is finished will be my principal work of fiction I suppose (if you can call it ‘fiction’)” (Lewis, Letters 273). He essayed completion several times, as documented in a letter he sent to Charles Prentice of Chatto & Windus from Agadir in 1931. On this occasion he instead produced the travelogue *Filibusters in Barbary*, published by Grayson & Grayson in 1932 and suppressed after a libel suit in 1934 (Meyers 194, 211, 218). Lewis had contracted with Chatto & Windus in 1928 to submit the sequel to *The Childermass*, and his non-delivery of the goods led to a claim for damages entered against Lewis in 1932, ending his relationship with Chatto & Windus, and leaving him in a difficult financial situation regarding the completion of the book. From the 1930s to the 1950s

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28 Chatto selected the following text from a letter Yeats sent Lewis as a possible blurb for the American edition: “I have read ‘Childermass’ with excitement. … It is as powerful as Gulliver and much more exciting to a modern mind. … There are moments in the first hundred pages that no writer of romance has surpassed.” (Lewis, Letters 182). Lewis himself cites West’s comments from a 1929 Time and Tide article that parts of *The Childermass* “thrill one by a vivid and novel vision” (RA 217).

29 “I have a whitewashed cell here where I can write, and have started work: in consequence of the propitious scenery and circumstances, at once [sic] the *Childermass*. The country is most remarkable and the desert cities, humped antelopes, Berber brothels etc. abound in suggestions of a sort favorable to the production of the major book.” (Lewis, Letters 203).

30 On the contract and suit, see Pound and Grover 19. During the intervening period, Lewis instead chose to publish with Chatto the “minor” books *Paleface, Hitler, The Diabolical Principle and the Dithyrambic Spectator*, and *The Doom of Youth* (the latter also suppressed after a libel suit). As late as 1950, Lewis’s breach of contract contributed to his difficulty in completing *The Childermass*: “A serious disagreement with the publishers obliged me to sever all connections with that firm. A new publisher would have to undertake to buy the unbound sheets, such copies as remain, and commission me to finish it. As yet I have not been able
the sequel remained unwritten and ultimately became mythologized in Lewis’s mind as an emblem of the great work he could produce under better economic circumstances, as we can read in his letters:

1940: At present I am a painter without a workshop, and a writer who is capable of such productions of the Childermass forced to write – well, very jolly stuff, but not providing such a scope as nature clearly intended. – However, we all waste our lives. I reckon I waste 99 per cent of mine, without ever getting reconciled to it. Society is not organized properly. The money-value everywhere usurps the place that belongs to the values of greater importance. (Lewis, Letters 274)

1943: I have written just on 30 books, most not easy books to write. One of the best of them, the Childermass, is only half-finished, because I have never been able to raise the money to finish it. – I believe at this stage of the proceedings I deserve the salary of a second-rate bank-manager, and (desert apart) think I could help in the cultural life of England. (Lewis, Letters 351)

And in a letter to D. D. Paige of 1948 accompanying his response to a draft of a petition for the release of Pound after his imprisonment for treason, he presents a resident artist position in the U.S. university system as his “dream”:

At the back of that dream is a super-dream: namely that I might become a “cultural expert resident.” I could then finish a book of mine called “Childermass.” … I confide to you this super-dream, but it is I imagine too vague-looking to be practical, or too marvellous to materialise. (Lewis, Letters 468-9)

I cite these passages not to advance the commonplace claim that modernism existed in an antagonistic relationship with the market, but to highlight the specific terms used by

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to make an arrangement of this kind.” (RA 214). To put this in perspective, Lewis published 17 books between 1933 and 1951. Of these 9 were hastily written political books, 2 collections of essays, 2 volumes of auto-biographical material, 2 novels, 1 long poem, and 1 book of stories. Of these, only the novels The Revenge for Love (1937) and The Vulgar Strump (1941) would have required anything approaching the amount of care and time he would have had to devote to finishing The Childermass.
Lewis to express and understand that relationship.\textsuperscript{31} The trajectory we see here is one of external projection moving from the hopelessly abstract (blaming “Society” in a move that, however accurate, also reeks of bad faith) through the concrete (“the salary of a second-rate bank-manager”—although not the position, as with Eliot; Lewis instead promises general “cultural” utility) into the fantastic, where the concrete possibility of a university post merges with the hyperbolic unreality of a “marvellous” “super-dream.”\textsuperscript{32} The trajectory also recapitulates in miniature that of Lewis’s own career, from the high abstraction of the vorticist period, to the concrete of his social criticism in the 1920s and 30s, and moving into the juxtaposition (I hesitate to call it a sublation) of the abstract and the concrete in the fantastic fiction of the sequels of \textit{The Childermass} that did appear in the 1950s.

These latter books, \textit{Monstre Gai} and \textit{Malign Fiesta}, were largely made possible by the intervention of B. G. Bridson and the BBC. Lewis had had a periodic relationship with the BBC since 1928, when he appeared on the air reading selections from his works, but Bridson’s intervention was something altogether different. He put on a full radio dramatization of \textit{The Childermass} for the BBC Third Programme and, on the strength of that performance—first broadcast on June 18, 1951—secured Lewis’s financial support from the BBC for the following two years (with an advance of £1,000—more than 3 times the highest advances he had received for publishing ventures), to allow him to compose

\textsuperscript{31} This is also, as I see it, the function of Frank Lentricchia’s use of the letters of Eliot, Pound, Frost, and Stevens in his \textit{Modernist Quartet}.

\textsuperscript{32} The last two entries also mirror the trajectory of his friend and supporter Eliot, from his work at Lloyd’s to the Norton professorship at Harvard.
the long-awaited sequel, which would also be adapted for radio jointly by Bridson and Lewis (Meyers 325-5). With this prospect of both financial support and a renewed audience, the now-blind Lewis finally broke his “blockage” (Caracciolo 258) to continue his fiction of the afterlife.33

As my reading of The Childermass should make clear, however, Lewis’s difficulties in finishing the book were as much, if not more so, a matter of the work to be completed as the economic circumstances surrounding it (although the break with Prentice was a major one with significant financial consequences for Lewis). For what he had managed to avoid in The Childermass (a positive system or a centered cosmology that would make sense of the disparate, parodic voices of the land of the dead) through the promise of a continuation would need to be dealt with in those sequels. Lewis sent Sturge Moore a description of the projected sequel in September of 1928:

As to the rest of the book, no entry into the city is contemplated, nor do I go to the Womans Enclosure. The “camp” is described, its pastimes and nightlife; the figures that feature in the opening (Pullman and Satters) are brought forwards again after the Hyperideans are disposed of. Then a conflict develops between the “peon” hosts of Heaven and the World of flies, or Baal; this is “Armageddon.” Meanwhile the infant-choruses have been massacred by the gladiators – they are the “Innocents.” The whole affair ends in chaos. (Lewis, “Sturge Moore Letters” 21; cited in Edwards 529)

Paul Edwards provides a useful discussion of this plan as a “mythic extrapolation from the First World War,” and, as he writes there, “the only religious myth in any way

33 The broadcast of the “complete” Human Age first took place in May of 1955 (on the 24th, 26th, and 28th respectively). It was then re-broadcast in July and October of the same year (to correspond with Methuen’s publication of the new novels, as stipulated in the contract), and again in July of 1957. Bridson continued his collaboration with Lewis beyond The Human Age, producing dramatizations of Tarr (first broadcast July 18, 1956) and The Revenge for Love (June 28, 1957). See Pound & Grover 169-175.
equivalent to the events of the war is a vision of Apocalypse and chaos” (Edwards 529). Yet Lewis chose not to write this story even before his break with Chatto, or at least failed to do so. Once Chatto filed suit against him, it must have been all the easier for Lewis to blame this failure on his economic difficulties in continuing the book.

**From Childermass to Human Age II: The Paintings**

The impact of the setting of the afterlife on Lewis’s imagination is borne out not only in his letters, but also on its appearance in his visual art during the 1930s. I refer to the “metaphysical-cum-history cycle of oils” (Edwards 455) done between 1933 and 1937 and shown together in the Leicester Galleries in December 1937. Those among the 30 drawings and 24 paintings in the show to explicitly depict the afterlife include *One of the Stations of the Dead* (1933), *Red Scene* (1933-6), *Group of Suppliants* (1933), *Queue of the Dead* (1933-6), and *Inferno* (1937). Although the afterlife paintings are in the numerical minority in the show, they are given precedence in Lewis’s catalogue text, where he claims that “they [the drawings and paintings] are in some sort a series, from the *Stations of the Dead* to *Inferno*** (Michel 439).

34 The number of these dated 1933-6 can be explained by the fact that Lewis had originally intended to produce a number of works very quickly for a show in the autumn of 1933. On this, see his letter to Sydney Schiff, dated May 21st 1933 (Lewis, *Letters* 212-13). His poor health between 1932 and 1936 (cystitis as a complication of an earlier bout of gonorrhea, combined with influenza) forced him to delay the exhibition until 1937, and several other paintings in the exhibition feature “clinics.” Neither the title nor the imagery of *Inferno* require one to treat it as an afterlife painting, although the two together combined with the painting’s role as the end of a series begun with *One of the Stations of the Dead* point circumstantially in that direction. (The title would be more persuasive if it included the definite article, which would make the possible Dante reference more forceful. It is worth noting that when it was reprinted in Lewis’s collection of essays on art, *Wyndham Lewis the Artist*, in 1939 the article was added to the caption.) My choice to read it as such here can only be justified (if indeed it is) by the importance of the afterlife to this period in Lewis’s work and the light it sheds on Lewis’s re-imagination of the afterlife between 1928 and 1951. *Queue of the Dead* has unfortunately not survived, and is known only from its listing in the catalogue of the Leicester exhibition.
This displacement from one medium to another resolved for a time both difficulties described above: the material one involving the financing of a sequel to *The Childermass*, and the formal one demanding a clarification of the foundation of authority and the metaphysical status and meaning of the shades in the afterworld.\(^{35}\) The different institutional structures for publishing and painting made the elimination of the first difficulty rather straightforward,\(^{36}\) while the relative de-emphasis of narrative in the painted afterlife enabled the deferral of a cosmological order to continue.

This lack of narrative is common to most of Lewis’s paintings, even those drawing inspiration from narrative sources, like his *Timon of Athens* pieces. It can be seen clearly in *One of the Stations of the Dead* (figure 1), which, like *Group of Suppliants*, takes waiting as its subject. The figures are apparently the newly-dead, as were the principal figures of *The Childermass*, waiting to cross the Styx (which appears, along with Charon’s boat, in the upper left corner of the canvas). The figures themselves are mostly faceless and even more rigidly vertical than other abstract people from this period of Lewis’s painting, causing them to resemble chess pieces as much as individuals (an effect heightened by the blue wedge at their feet, approximating the base of a stand, and by the apparent diversity of roles, from rulers and clergy to a small, muscled, dark and

\(^{35}\) “Resolved” is perhaps the wrong term here, since it implies completion, whereas I am more interested in it as another method of deferral by way of a temporary solution. Theoretical models for such a temporary resolution abound, from Levi-Strauss’s theory of myth and Althusser’s theory of ideology to Lyotard’s *differend*. All of them, however, share the trait of treating temporary resolution (and social containment) as a matter of displacement of a contradiction from one domain into another, where it can be more easily assimilated or given symbolic resolution. As should be clear from the language of displacement as an operation, the wellspring for this aspect of all of these theories is Freud.

\(^{36}\) The finances of the exhibition are detailed in O’Keefe 333-4.
naked body on the right). The static rigidity of the figures is also highlighted by the root imagery, present both at the bottom of the painting and on the middle of the right-hand edge, where a piece of wood is held in vertical suspension by a root-like network of lines. The landscape is otherwise arid (painted in earth-tones), and the wood appears as a simulacrum of nature rather than an example of it. A dark figure stands a head above the line of dead, perhaps in a Bailiff-like role, and gestures toward the waiting boat. The presence of the boat and river make the painting identifiable within traditional iconography of the afterworld, but it generates only the weakest of narrative frames, and that only by implication, since we are given no indication of the fates of those who cross beyond it, unless we are to find it in the passage from this painting to Red Scene (figure 2).
Figure 1: Wyndham Lewis, *One of the Stations of the Dead* (1933, Michel P50, Edwards 245). Oil on canvas. 127 x 77.5. City of Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums Collections.
Figure 2: Wyndham Lewis, *Red Scene* (1933, Michel P52, Edwards 246). Oil on canvas. 71 x 91.5. Tate Gallery, London.

Such a passage is implied in the way *Red Scene* revises compositionally many of the images depicted in *One of the Stations of the Dead*. The earlier painting places the dead in the center of the canvas, and flattens the space in manner more reminiscent of medieval painting than of other modernist methods, with the boat placed above the figures and the root system below, indicating metaphysical rather than spatial arrangement. *Red Scene* is a more open canvas, with the compositional elements reversed. The river now runs across the middle of the image, dividing the dead into 2 groups, a black and white “angelic” group (complete with wings) above the river, and a
group painted in earth tones below it. Although there is more of a perspectival effect here than in *One of the Stations of the Dead* (up to and including mountains in the distance, a celestial orb on the horizon below them, and a treatment of the sizes of the figures owing more to spatial depth than metaphysical importance), Paul Edwards seems fundamentally correct in reading the painting as a “differentiated afterworld of matter and spirit” (Edwards 410), with the river separating the upper, “spiritual” half from the lower, “material” shades (presumably still attached to their past physical selves). The tension produced by the rigidity of the figures in *Stations* is here replaced by an almost pastoral calm, in which anxiety is replaced by acclimatization, as well as with a future made tangible (the angelic figures) rather than just implied by the presence of the ferryman’s boat. *Group of Suppliants* (figure 3) makes this future more immediate and individualized by focusing on different reactions (figured through facial expressions and bodily postures) to the prospect of crossing the Styx, across which the dead look toward the viewer.
Figure 3: Wyndham Lewis, *Group of Suppliants* (1933, Michel P48, Edwards 244). Oil on canvas. 76.5 x 61. Private collection.

While these paintings contain the seeds of a narrative that only promises further development or resolution, Lewis eschews all narrative in *Inferno* (figure 4) in favor of a dualist structure divorced from the classical landscape of the afterworld, which is here simplified into a single threshold image (the white wedge of a door against the flat
greenish background). Lewis writes of this painting in the catalogue that it is a depiction of two types of eternity: “a world of shapes locked in eternal conflict is superimposed upon a world of shapes, prone in the relaxations of an uneasy sensuality which is also eternal” (cited in Michel 440). In retrospect, the image resembles nothing so much as a Holocaust image, with a pile of bald, grayish bodies lying below the fiery column, yet it was painted in 1937. More disturbing still are the ghastly smiles on the lower figures, apparently expressing the “uneasy sensuality” that is the dualistic counterpart to the violent combat of the red area. These smiles give way to skull-like death-masks, most notably in the figure on the far left of the canvas. Yet the strangest feature here is the inclusion of a blond, apparently virile, “beast” in the center of the lower section (painted with a pinkish skin-tone), turned away from the viewer. This turning, which I read as a gesture of refusal of the inert sensual pleasures surrounding the figure, is apparently not enough to save him from this aspect of hell. In this, he is at one with Hyperides, himself figured as (doubly) turned away: “Twisted backwards, his hollow melancholy face surveys the scene on which his back is turned, without interest” (CM 192-3), and they share the fate of being sacrificial figures of opposition doomed to failure. While this figure looks backward (literally and figuratively) to The Childermass, the overall structure of the painting looks forward to the sequels, especially Monstre Gai, in which the welfare state of Third City is peopled by idiotic consumers dedicated to their own immediate

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37 The vapid, smiling figures reappear in other paintings in the exhibition, most notably Two Beach Babies (1933).
pleasures and oblivious to the import of the metaphysical battles of God and Satan’s armies taking place regularly over their heads. This painting predates the establishment of the welfare state in England just as it predates the Holocaust, however. It expresses, rather, one of the features of Lewis’s more general critique of modernity as the production and manipulation of enjoyment.38 This was present even in The Childermass—the Bailiff’s theatre bears the motto “Es bibe lude veni” (CM 125), advertising an Epicurean disinterest in the afterlife—but it is raised to a more systematic critique of comfort as covering over the moral import of the real in the latter books of The Human Age, which return Lewis to the specificity of his fictional afterlife.

38 This also marks Lewis’s critique of modernity as distinct from that of Eliot. The latter focuses on the melancholy and dissipation of a late industrial society, while the former deals instead with “enjoyment as a political factor” (to quote Žižek’s subtitle to For they know not what they do), looking ahead to the post-industrial or consumer society.
As important for my argument here as the specific contents of Lewis’s afterlife paintings are their role in the movement of Lewis’s career as a visual artist. The Leicester exhibition was to be the beginning of Lewis’s “return to art” after having dedicated
himself primarily to writing social criticism and satire during the 1920s. This instance (one of many) of Lewis’s public self-reinvention was occasioned by a disillusionment with abstraction for its own sake, combined with a sense that modernism as it was conceived by either the continental avant-gardes or the aestheticist abstractionists now appearing in England (the latter partly following in Lewis’s earlier footsteps) had no future because it had lost (or was in the process of losing) whatever public it had left. His 1937 exhibition was followed by the publication of a collection of Lewis’s essays on art (not nearly all of them), entitled *Wyndham Lewis the Artist* (1939), which was meant to solidify this re-branding of Lewis as an artist as well as advance a new program to save art from extinction in the face of the exhaustion of options left in the wake of modernism.³⁹ Lewis advances his claim about the end of modernism in the introductory essay in that collection, “Super-nature verses Super-real”: “modern art, of the highly experimental sort advocated in these essays and manifestos, is at an end” (WLA 19). The reasons he gives range from nationalist politics (WLA 19), to the stunts of the avant-garde movements, which have eroded all credibility of “serious” artists (WLA 46), to the financial situation of the artist “where the private collector has practically disappeared […] and state patronage is not yet born” (WLA 43). Despite the diversity of these listed causes, the essay is held together by the unifying claim that the visual arts have alienated the mass public, and are now only seen as relevant to a rapidly diminishing

³⁹ This sense of exhausted options parallels that of Adorno, who chronicles something like it in the “Situation” section of his *Aesthetic Theory*. One should also consult the fragment “Late Extra” in *Minima Moralia*, where Adorno briefly elaborates the dialectical transformation of the new into its opposite, an unending reproduction of “newness” for its own sake.
circle of wealthy patrons looking for sources of momentary amusement (a claim echoed in his writings about patronage in *Rude Assignment*, such as the section cited above likening patrons to wealthy tourists).

In response to this situation, Lewis proposes “super-naturalism” as a return to imitation (set against that of surrealism, the “super-real” of the title):

[S]ince it is no longer possible to proceed to any far-reaching experimental reforms except in a hole and corner way, it would be far better frankly to go back to the natural function of painting, and, in a word, *imitate*. [...] I am persuaded that that is the road to take—the only road open to the painter to-day—if painting is to be salvaged. It has been scuttled by the clowns of “super-realism”—which was a sort of revenge of the second-rate. In order to come back, it must become popular. (WLA 45)

Although this proposal appears entirely reactionary, Lewis is nonetheless aware that the “failed revolution” of modernism made it impossible to return to the styles of the past, occasioning the “super” in his “super-naturalism.” What this means is rather more tricky to summarize, as Lewis is not entirely clear about it himself. But the contrast with surrealism holds part of the key. The latter (exampled primarily by Dali and Magritte) involves for Lewis not the invention of new forms but the “dishing up” of old ones “disguis[ed] in surface novelties” borne of unexpected and often momentarily exciting but ultimately empty juxtapositions (WLA 45-6). The nature offered up by the imagined “super-naturalist” would offer to the viewer not the collaged photographic real of the surrealists, but “nature” “*predigested*” by the artist:

It is nature transformed by all her latent geometries into something outside “the real”—outside the temporal order—altogether. [...] [B]y methods of elimination, or of simplification, the objects of nature are themselves transformed into
something like themselves, yet differing, in reality, as much as chalk from cheese.  
(WLA 62, 64)

Again, this proposal could stand to be clearer, but it does at least recommend a form of representational art which purports to provide the viewer with an experience of the essence of some part of the world, with the extraneous details “eliminated” or “simplified” to the point that the “nature” depicted appears as “outside ‘the real’” but must nonetheless be recognizable as deriving from it (for otherwise the potentially popular mimetic status of the art would be lost).

Fortunately, Lewis selected several images for inclusion in the book to illustrate “super-naturalism” in action, three of which appear in color plates: his 1938 Portrait of T. S. Eliot (figure 5), The Surrender of Barcelona (1936-7), and Inferno (now identified as The Inferno). I have already discussed the last of these, but the first, which serves as a frontispiece to the book, also gives us insight into what Lewis might have understood by “super-naturalism.” One can readily say that it does look to have the public accessibility that something like his 1913 Portrait of an Englishwoman (figure 6) might not.40 Since many people, from Kenner and Michel to Edwards, have written about the portrait of Eliot in some detail, I will restrict myself to pointing out the features salient to the discussion here. Coming after several decades of experimentation in painting, the portrait does look, at a first glance, rather traditional, but at the same time appears

40 I include this image somewhat facetiously, since the comparison of the two portraits is itself dubious. The title alone indicates its different status, since it is a “portrait” of no one in particular, while the Eliot portrait is both named and recognizable. The contrast does serve to demonstrate the extent to which Lewis’s approach to painting changed between the days of “high modernism” and his “late modernism,” although it skips much in between to do so.
curiously “off,” a result of several features, most prominently Lewis’s placement of the sitter within the overall composition (lower than one would otherwise expect) and his exaggeration of Eliot’s posture, making him appear to be shrinking (both in the image and from the viewer). This is compounded with Eliot’s drifting and introverted gaze and the shadow behind his head, both of which draw him away from the viewer toward the background, where the abstract shapes of Eliot’s metaphysics flank the blank wall in the center. This is a painting about abstraction more so than an example of it, with abstraction depicted as the “simplified” truth of Eliot’s pose.

41 Kenner has already pointed out Eliot’s odd posture in the painting. See “The Visual World of Wyndham Lewis” (Michel 14-16). I must add to this observation a criticism of Lewis’s relatively clumsy foreshortening of Eliot’s legs, which mars an otherwise brilliant canvas.

42 It is worth mentioning that Lewis’s 1939 portrait of Pound extends this connection between modernism and disconnection via abstraction even further, when it depicts Pound sleeping in front of an impressionistic canvas of the sea. The more connected the figures are to the “time-cult” of modernism, the less are they depicted as willing to acknowledge the viewer.
Figure 5: Wyndham Lewis, *Portrait of T. S. Eliot* (1938, Michel P80, Edwards 271). Oil on canvas. 132 x 85. Municipal Art Gallery, Durban.
In both the Eliot portrait and in *Inferno*, we see a streamlining of abstraction for a new public (at least, this was Lewis’s hope—the anticipated sales largely failed to materialize) through the “simplification” and “elimination” of surface details to connect (hopefully) the physical and the metaphysical, or the natural and the supernatural (to
conflate Lewis’s hyphenated term with its more usual sense). The bifurcation of the painting into a more naturalistic foreground and an abstract background giving the metaphysical meaning of that foreground—which Edwards suggests was responsible for its rejection by the Royal Academy (Edwards 468)—is indicative of a larger split in Lewis’s visual art during the 1940s between the portraits and the metaphysical “creation myth” paintings.43 A newly-motivated abstraction finds its refuge in these latter paintings, such as Jehovah the Thunderer (figure 7) or Creation Myth, No. 17 (both 1941), leaving Lewis relatively free to pursue private patrons willing to commission more traditional portraits.44 His most compelling paintings from this period, however, manage to hold the two together in a single canvas (as with the portraits of Eliot, Pound, and his wife Froanna). It should perhaps come as no surprise that Lewis was only able to achieve and maintain this tension when painting a sitter he knew well. It is, of course, possible that Lewis could have found a new means of bringing the stylized abstract and naturalistic concrete together in his paintings had he not lost his sight, but this was not to be.

43 I am not the first to comment on this division. Both Michel (134-146) and Edwards (455-516) draw attention to it. Edwards’s title (and subtitle) to his chapter on Lewis’s 1940s work says it all: “Public and Private Worlds: Portraiture and the Imagination, 1937-1949” (Edwards 455).
44 I don’t want to exaggerate Lewis’s capacity to make money with his portraits, although he was more successful as a portrait painter than as an author of fiction. Many of his sitters refused to accept the portraits, and, according to Edwards, he often had difficulty convincing his patrons that the canvases were finished (Edwards 481). This is likely a consequence of his method of isolation and simplification proposed above, often leaving the backgrounds sparse or stylized in relation to the foregrounds.
One other consequence of Lewis’s late “super-naturalism,” one which links his aesthetic strategies up with other late modernists, is that its tendency toward the isolation and simplification of a subject often gives rise to a series of smaller pieces examining something from a series of discrete perspectives rather than the monumental or encyclopedic “masterwork” of high modernism. Beckett’s *ouvre* might be taken as the
most dramatic example of such a serial impulse, but it can also be found in the repetitions of the *nouveau roman* (think of the “sub-conversations” of *Tropismes* [1939] or the iterations of *La Jalousie* [1957]) and the perspectivism of the sections of the *Alexandria Quartet* (1957-1960) or *The Golden Notebook* (1962). Even Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (1936-1942) effect a similar change in respect to the monumentality of *The Waste Land*. Such an aesthetic principle of repeated sparsity rather than encyclopedic inclusion (an attempt to approach the universal by way of multiple singularities rather than the totalities of high modernism) has the added benefit of being “cost effective,” since it can generate multiple works out of a single idea or concept, at least when it is not recontained in a single publication.45

It remains to be said here that the afterlife and the afterworld fit the bill wonderfully for such a streamlining, since they possess a simple and recognizable iconography and have been, since Dante if not since the ancients, ways of cutting through the surface details of life to distill the meaning of a soul, an act, or even a world in a few simplified traits. The temporal frame of the afterlife also lends it to formal repetition, since it is premised on eternity rather than temporal progression. Such a progression as can be carved out of eternity is largely a spatial one, charting the movements of a spatially if no longer temporally finite being through the expanses of

45 I do not wish to stress this difference overmuch. It remains one of degree rather than kind, and one could find parallels with, for example, the aesthetics of imagism if one tried. Pushed hard enough, even *Ulysses* can become a serial work (it was, after all, originally published as such, as were most of the “masterworks” of high modernism). Nonetheless, I think the shift in emphasis is indeed actual, and can be seen in a range of works from late modernism. The only demonstration I can give of this shift are the readings that this dissertation comprises.
the afterworld. It is therefore no surprise that Lewis turned to a series of paintings beginning and ending (by his own description) with images of the land of the dead to inaugurate his “super-naturalist” phase in painting. His most successful late combination of the concrete and the abstract is represented not by his late paintings, however, but by his narrative continuation of the afterlife of The Childermass.

**Human Age: The Devil's Bargain**

FAUST. You Prince of Paradox! Lead on, I am not loath.
It does appear a queer proceeding, though.
We go to taste Walpurgis with the elves,
And promptly start to isolate ourselves.
—Goethe, *Faust, Part I*, 4030-4034

When Lewis was finally able to actualize his continuation of his fiction of the afterlife in writing, what he produced were two novels that took the fictional premises of *The Childermass* from the realm of phantasmagoria into the concrete realm of science-fiction and shifted the ambiguous mixture of pagan and monotheistic mythic references into a specifically Christian cosmology, heretical though it was. As a correlative to this move, the Lucianic echoes of the dialogues of the dead in the camp were replaced by the dual

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46 This particular subgenre actually serves as a fine example of what a truly spatial “spatial form” might be. This, of course, in response to Kermode’s rejoinder to Joseph Frank over the concept of spatial form (a concept, we should recall, developed out of a reading of *Nightwood*, another example of the perspectival version of serial form in late modernism). See Frank, *The Widening Gyre* 3-62 and Kermode 177-179. Readers interested in this debate should also consult the “spatial form” issue of *Critical Inquiry* (4(2): Winter 1977), and Kermode’s response in issue 4(3): Spring 1978.

47 It is much easier to call *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta* novels than it is to apply that title to *The Childermass*, the latter being a relatively clear example of the anatomy. Although, in the context of *The Childermass*, it might be better to refer to the original Mennipean satire of Lucian than to Frye’s more modern “anatomy.” On his discussion of this genre, see *Anatomy of Criticism* 308-312. Books 2 and 3 of *The Human Age* would fall under a combination of novel and anatomy, but with the everyday of the novelistic overtaking (in my view) the encyclopedic function of the anatomy despite the fantastic setting.
influences of Dante and Milton (both now translated into decidedly novelistic prose, including a substitution of past tense narration for the eternal present of *Childermass*). James Pullman now emerges as a genuine protagonist (although not exactly a character—he is still a figure for the intellectual, but is no longer the “revolutionary simpleton” that he was in *The Childermass*, a result of the social differences for Lewis between the 1920s and the 1950s), with Satters remaining in tow but becoming less of a force in the narrative, dropping out of the action entirely for large sections of both books.

*Monstre Gai* follows these two into the Magnetic City, which turns out not to be Heaven, but instead a satire of the postwar welfare state cast as a decaying purgatory. Although controlled in name by a “white angel” (the Padishah), it has been essentially subverted by the Bailiff, now recast as a gangster, fifth-columnist, and (one gradually becomes aware) emissary of Satan. This latter is warring with God’s army for control over the city (now renamed Third City so as to signal the fading political importance of England in relation to the superpowers behind the cold war), and Pullman accepts the patronage of the Bailiff in exchange for protection and material wealth. When the battle comes to a head, he escapes with the Bailiff (Satters still along for the ride) to Matapolis, which turns out, in *Malign Fiesta*, to be Hell itself.

The third book repeats the pattern of *Monstre Gai* (the repetition being both a general characteristic of the iterative temporality of the afterlife and a local product of Lewis’s serial narrative structure of deferral), now with Satan filling the role played by
the Bailiff in the previous book. Sammael provides Pullman with a tour of the torture chambers of Dis (renovated to resemble the Nazi death-camps), then accepts him as a political advisor who can aid him in a plot to corrupt the divine essence by breeding angels with humans (a sort of eugenics in reverse) to bring about the “Human Age” of the retitled series. Pullman prays to God in private, but remains publicly the Devil’s servant, even after receiving notices from Heaven promising swift punishment. Finally, God’s armies arrive to battle Satan in person, and Pullman is seized by God’s angels and taken to be tried in Heaven, ending the book and the published portions of the series.48

More striking than the shift to a recognizably Christian cosmology for most readers/listeners, however, is the abandonment of his earlier parodic and kaleidoscopic style in favor of a more austere prose variously described by commentators as an “almost eighteenth-century sobriety” (Jameson, Fables 34), “a style as straightforward as that of a Graham Greene novel” (Schenker 168), and a “linguistic impoverishment” of “apparently transparent prose” in relation to the surface density of his earlier work (Quéma 81). As for the cause of this stylistic shift between 1928 and the 1950s, Jameson suggests Lewis’s blindness (Fables 34), Penelope Palmer mentions the “clarity” of a “sure touch” that comes with a now-coherent metaphysics (Palmer 24), Tyrus Miller attributes it to a “partial abrogation of satire” (Miller 83), Quéma identifies a shift in “allegorical

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48 The variations on the ending are more complicated than this, as Lewis’s original version had Pullman crushed by the foot of one of Sammael’s foot soldiers, and the radio adaptation was broadcast with an equivocal ending, in which the crushed figure was not named, leaving the audience to determine whether the gardener’s son or Pullman had been killed, thereby leaving room for another installment. I address the permutations of the ending in more detail below.
character” from “stylistic texture” to “polysemy” (Quéma 81), and Schenker, Edwards, and Trotter all see it as stemming from a new-found humanism which recognizes value in human contact as a way of connecting with, rather than as an opposite of, the Absolute, which dissolves the productive tension behind Lewis’s earlier style (Schenker 168; Edwards, Wyndham Lewis 525; Trotter 292-3).

One would be tempted to add to this list his knowledge of writing for a radio audience as well as a reading public, but the stylistic shift can be identified in other works of his late period, such as Self Condemned (1954) and The Red Priest (1956), and the style of The Childermass really only gained comprehensibility in its translation to radio, since the dialogic parodies of speech genres (analyzed above) were translated in 1951 into a literal clash of transmitted voices. Instead, I wish to connect his stylistic shift with late modernist style more generally, maintaining several of the local insights (particularly those of Quéma and Edwards) and expanding them beyond their description of Lewis’s work. This new clarity of communication on the surface level of late modernism finds its critical echo in the championing of Dante as a master of legibility and accessibility, capable of generating a text (The Divine Comedy) that is both eminently clear and allegorically complex (the complexity having moved from the style and surface difficulty of the stil nuovo to allegorical polysemy, as described by Auerbach). Part of the sacrifice that is made in this move toward a general accessibility,

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49 On the suitability of The Childermass for radio, see Bridson, “The Making of The Human Age” 163 and Caracciolo 258-262.
demanded by the collapse of the modernist “institutional counter-public” of little
magazines and private patronage, was the abandonment of the private languages and
idiosyncratic mythic systems of high modernism in favor of the more culturally legible
mythos of Christianity, mediated through Dante, Milton, and others.\textsuperscript{50} But to say all this
is not to show it, and to do that I must return to the particularities of \textit{Monstre Gai} and
\textit{Malign Fiesta}.

\textbf{“A Creator who had forgotten how to create”: Men Without Art}

Art will die, perhaps. It can, before doing so, paint us a picture of what
life looks like without art.
—Wyndham Lewis, \textit{Men Without Art}

The peculiar position of Wyndham Lewis as one of the “men of 1914” who lived to write
into the 1950s should, by itself, give us reason to pay attention to his own attempts to
explain modernism and its collapse.\textsuperscript{51} That Lewis should be the one to pontificate most
extensively the end of modernism (and, in that way, his own earlier literary and visual

\textsuperscript{50} To be clear, I am not claiming that Dante or Milton either possessed or advanced a non-idiosyncratic
version of Christian cosmology. Indeed, I would argue that any attempt to figure such a cosmology in a
work of creative poetry or prose must be idiosyncratic, if not outright heretical. I only wish to advance here
the less controversial claim that, by the mid-1900s, these idiosyncratic imaginaries were no longer regarded
as such, but had gained general recognition and recognizability through canonization and cultural diffusion,
to the extent that even those who had read neither Dante nor Milton would still be aware of some of the
basic characteristics of their respective poetic cosmologies.

\textsuperscript{51} Eliot, another writer in a similar position, was too busy creating modernism as a retrospective event and
canon to bother with theorizing it as such. We have, of course, his earlier documents, such as “Tradition and
the Individual Talent” and “\textit{Ulysses}, Order and Myth,” but these are both from the moment rather than
retrospective assessments of the sort we find in late Lewis, and they obviously cannot tell us much about the
end of modernism. This is not to say that Eliot’s later writings are not relevant to an analysis of late
modernism—indeed, Jed Esty has shown how his late thought on culture and religion is exemplary of the
“insular time” of late modernism in England (Esty 108-162). But it remains the case that Eliot did not
produce the volumes of writing about modernism that Lewis, for better or worse, did. I also find Lewis a
more fruitful figure than Eliot because his insistent cosmopolitanism led him to link Anglo modernism up to
other national modernisms (notably the French modernism with which I deal in other chapters).
practices) should come as no surprise, since *Time and Western Man* (1927) announced rather early a full-blown theory of modernism (and, this being Lewis, its discontents). As I hope to have shown above, *The Childermass* continued and expanded this critique of modernism by attacking its complicity in the differentiation of publics and its susceptibility to the Zeitgeist.

While his 1920s assessments of modernism *avant la lettre* were directed against the fashionable “time-cult” and its influence on the “weak-minded,” his later writings on what we now call modernism focused more on economic and political influences on aesthetic production than on the form of the aesthetic products. The explanation for this shift in focus is both clear and enlightening: in the 1920s, the Enemy was still throwing salvoes in a war of one camp of art against another (although, as his self-applied moniker reminds us, the war was one principally in his own mind—the “external approach” that he recommends over that of the interiority of the “revolutionary simpleton” having only ever had himself as backer); by the mid-1930s (and continuing on into his last works), we see Lewis repeatedly invoking as a spectral combatant and menace the non-existence of art as a whole.52 In 1934, Lewis collected his essays of literary criticism under the title *Men Without Art* (the Eliot section of which I have already cited above), referring not to the local failures of the artists he discusses, but rather punning off the title of Hemingway’s *Men Without Women* to project the image of

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52 It should be noted that Lewis repeatedly uses the phrase “world without art” to mean the cessation not of all aesthetic activity, but only that “serious” pursuit of aesthetic quality that Lewis associates with modernism and the “highbrow”: i.e., any art which is made for some purpose other than direct commodification.
a world in which “serious art” had been extinguished. The possible “antagonists” of art listed are legion: “the Deep-Dyed Moralist, the public of Anglo-Saxony, down to that nationalist nuisance, which would confine art to some territorial or racial tradition; from the Marxist who would harness art to politics, up to the mystical dogmatism which would harness it to the vapours of the spirit-world” (MWA 13). This is certainly a paranoid vision of art beset on all sides, but one that Lewis himself presented as a tendency to be guarded against rather than an eventuality, writing in 1935 that “we must assume, for argument’s sake, that the present rapidly evolving societies will, although starving or shooting (according to taste) all their artists on principle, yet leave a few, here and there, who may at least carry on the traditions of the greatest art,” and quickly adding that the assumption that art may well continue on is “fairly safe,” describing the “artistic impulse” as a “very fundamental, semi-magical, thing” (Lewis, “Art and Patronage” 185). After WWII, Lewis’s confidence in semi-magic appears quite shaken. He writes, for example, in the ultimate paragraphs of The Writer and the Absolute (1952): “Politics may, at any moment, bring to an end all serious creative writing, just as religion can. […] The present is a private age in the making. It is all a question of how long we can fool ourselves, or others, that this is a public age: a public age, in my way of speaking, being a free age” (Lewis, Writer 198).53

53 To invoke an historical parallel, it is worth noting that Michael Warner, in his essay on “Styles of Intellectual Publics,” invokes the situation of Winston Smith in 1984 (published in 1949 and praised by Lewis in The Writer and the Absolute): that of his problematic role as writer without a public (Warner 125-8). The image of Smith writing (in the greatest secrecy) for an unimaginable public is presented by Warner as the common lot of the contemporary intellectual, rather than simply that of life under “totalitarian rule”:
As the epigraph to this section indicates, however, it is not to his critical writing but to his fiction that we should look to see Lewis’s “picture of what life looks like without art,” in particular his fiction of the afterlife. Outside of commercial products (particularly the homosexual pornography found between Fifth and Tenth Piazza) and the Bailiff’s curiosities (most memorably, a flatulent Venus de Milo—the latter indicating the Bailiff’s disdain for humanity), there is little in the way of aesthetic production in Third City. Pullman, in his role as famous author, appears capable of changing this, but he instead opts for stagnant comfort under the patronage of the Bailiff, writing nothing during his time in Third City. This is not surprising when we recall the poor quality of the citizenry of the city, as witnessed by Pullman and Satters during their entry:

Their mouths hung open beneath stupidly smiling eyes, their skins like vellum, their teeth like a mummy’s; they encouraged one another to laugh—for if you cannot think you can always laugh—at the stars. They seemed to believe that these were bubbles of light, and might burst at any moment. (HA 17-18)

“Orwell’s dystopia stirs readers because the frustration it generates is common enough not just behind the old Iron Curtain but here in the land of freedom, under civil-society conditions, whenever the available genres and publics of possible address do not readily lend themselves to a world-making project. Anyone who wants to transform the conditions of publicness, or through publicness transform the possible orientations to life, is in a position resembling Orwell’s diarist” (Warner 127-8). That Smith’s diary is intended not for personal gratification but for some (as-yet unimaginable) future is clear from both the original text and Warner’s gloss on it. A similar dilemma is to be found in the diarist activities of Zamyatin’s D-503 of We, the source text for much of Orwell’s dystopian vision, but there the public is not impossible to imagine formally (as in Orwell) but only substantially, since D-503’s diary is originally intended for reading on planets colonized by the Integral. Thus, D-503 is unable to imagine the form of life that might be reading the diary and how to make his own comprehensible to it, while Smith is unable to imagine any possible public for his diary. I write all of this to show that Lewis’s interest in “public” and “private” ages has a historical component extending beyond Lewis’s personal paranoia. (Lewis was undoubtedly paranoid, as David Trotter has shown in the most detail. Anyone imagining that paranoia is merely personal rather than socio-historical is directed to Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus.) Warner’s text is too essayistic and present-oriented to develop a full historical narrative of types of publicness and privateness, although he is clearly more cognizant of the historical dimensions of publics than the citation here lets on.
These figures are fascinated by the spectacle of the stars (no enemies these!), but it is impossible to imagine these creatures (carefully selected, we later learn, by the Bailiff in a plot to undermine the original purpose of Third City as “a kind of halfway house to Heaven” for those whose only sin was lust) reading either *Ulysses* or *The Apes of God*—or even, given the extremity of Lewis’s description, the latest issue of *Punch*. Beyond the Bailiff and a shrinking pool of clubmen (themselves too “reactionary” for Pullman’s liking), there exists no public for “serious art” in Third City.

This difference between (potential) author and public is only exacerbated in Matapolis into a species difference between humans and angels, and Lewis makes clear the difficulties in understanding in terms not dissimilar from Wittgenstein’s famous fragment about the lion (Wittgenstein 190): “He [Gatiel] and Kokabiel [two angels at the Haus Europa] discussed *Hamlet* and *Timon*. They seemed very quick, but as yet understood very little. The main difficulty was the kind of life lived by the characters in the books—the Earth-life” (HA 446). As if even the extreme exaggeration of a “lowbrow” public were not enough, Pullman is now faced with a potential public made of an entirely different species, incapable of understanding human experience or forms of life without extensive education. In *Malign Fiesta* Sammael has decided (under the advisement of Pullman) that this education is to be forthcoming for the angels in order to “soften them up” for the eventual corruption of the angelic essence “by involving them more deeply in human modes” (HA 440), and he appoints Pullman as an instructor at the newly-created Haus Europa, the center of the new angel university.
From here, Pullman’s activities are consumed by education and by his role as political advisor to Sammael. This trajectory continues Lewis’s critique of the educationalist state\textsuperscript{54} while also paralleling rather closely the fate of modernism, which by this time had ceased to be anything like a literary movement and was already being institutionalized in the various national university systems, in no small part thanks to Lewis’s friend and colleague Eliot.\textsuperscript{55} As we have already seen, Lewis himself was not adverse to taking on academic positions, but was met with little success in the university systems.

While Pullman never takes up a pen (or typewriter) in \textit{Monstre Gai}, there are two instances of Pullman writing in \textit{Malign Fiesta}, and the purposes of this writing are quite instructive. The first is a series of notes passed between himself and Satters to convey his fears that a servant offering them transportation out of hell might be a spy. The instructions Pullman gives to Satters only sharpen the point; private language has ceased to be a badge of aesthetic merit and is now inspired by fear of being overheard by the wrong parties: “Be very careful what you say to him (or to anybody else). Do not try to whisper anything private to me. Always write it. I will burn it at the grate. Hand this back to me, without speaking” (HA 386, italics in original). Writing is here transmuted from permanence (the persistence of the mark) to transitoriness (“I will burn it”) and has definitively left any sort of public sphere. We do learn later that Pullman has begun

\textsuperscript{54} For Lewis, compulsory education is primarily a tool of state manipulation and indoctrination, “a decade of soaking in certain beliefs and opinions.” The source of this citation is the section of \textit{The Art of Being Ruled} on “The Democratic Educationalist State” (105-107), and readers interested in the specific terms of Lewis’s critique should look there for a concise summary of his objections.

\textsuperscript{55} On Eliot’s role in academic canon formation, see Guillory 134-175.
writing publicly again, but the result is “a small literary work composed by Pullman (printed anonymously), named ‘Woman-Hater Loses His True Love’” (HA 541), written as a propaganda piece to justify to the angels Sammael’s execution of his second token-wife. The dualism here is apparent: Pullman can either write sincerely in the extreme privacy of secret notes (to an audience of one) or compose propaganda for publication (and, even then, unsigned).

The existence of the *Human Age* attests to the fact that Lewis did not think things were quite as bad for him as they were for Pullman (just as Orwell clearly did not think that things were as bad for himself as for Winston Smith). Indeed, Lewis’s writings on publicness all presume the uncharacteristically optimistic view that satire and dystopian representation might actually be able to “transform the conditions of publicness” (to redeploy Michael Warner’s terms, cited above). In *The Writer and the Absolute* this hope appears in the image of a “Community of Writers” able to join together for the common good of writing in general, setting aside political disagreement in order to “acquire a better sense of corporate responsibility” (Lewis, *Writer* 52-3). His afterlife fiction instead attempts to bypass the politicization of the public by way of fantasy and allegory, removing the politics depicted from the direct referentiality of a book like *Rotting Hill* and providing a universalizing frame (that of the war between God and

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56 That this is a sad utopia indeed is signaled by the fact that Lewis has apparently given up all hope in the “common reader,” to whom many of his earlier missives were directed. The prospect of radio as a means to develop a larger popular audience figures in *The Writer and the Absolute* not at all. This is unsurprising, in that the book would have been mostly composed by the time the BBC was to offer Lewis royalties to produce the sequel(s) to *The Childermass* for broadcast.
Satan) as a means to turning the reader/listener’s attention from immediate (and polarizing) political issues to the ethical concerns and meanings behind them. These ethical concerns are depicted in the narrative by way of the negative example of the deceased writer Pullman, giving rise to the dystopian rather than utopian character of the text (which was repeatedly referred to by readers and listeners alike as “nightmarish”). Before we can proceed to the narrative logic of the Human Age, we need to examine the effect that such a displacement of his concerns into the space of the fantastic (and, more specifically, of the morally founded afterworld) has on the narrative that it contains.

“The strangest supernatural company”: Against the Background of the Absolute

The opening of Monstre Gai recapitulates that of The Childermass, once again thrusting both Pullman and the reader into a confusing and disorienting setting, in this case, the Magnetic City, which Pullman and Satters try to sneak into only to be incapacitated by its magnetic properties (bearing a marked similarity to the early reports of radiation sickness available in the 1950s) and finally led into the city by the Bailiff. The Childermass, however, was marked by Lewis’s “external method,” which provided access only to the physical exterior of things and kept focalization to a minimum. It was also marked by a profound stasis, borne of Lewis’s 1920s distaste for temporal flux.57 The more traditional novelistic style of Monstre Gai allows Lewis to hew closer to Pullman, focalizing the

57 It is indeed part of the critique that the fluidity of bodies and identities in the time-flats gives rise to a stasis of the “perpetually new,” concretized in the eternity of the hereafter.
narrative information through him almost exclusively (the one exception to this in the
two later books is a scene in *Malign Fiesta* between Sammael and the Bailiff). It also
affords him the opportunity to move from initial confusion (of both the reader and his
narrative surrogate) to a greater (although certainly not total) understanding of the
afterworld.

Just as Lewis’s painting output bifurcated into a more naturalistic
representational style and a metaphysical, abstract one, so too the world of Third City is
presented as one split between the everyday “life” of a static consumer society and the
metaphysical background of the Manichean battle between God and Satan. The purpose
of this split, however, is critical, and Lewis uses the literally supernatural setting as a
framework for his “super-natural” fiction, which attempts to wed the natural and
metaphysical while critiquing the ways in which we (according to Lewis) use the
normality of the everyday to avoid encountering the fundamental meanings
underneath. Lewis provides us with an early depiction of the disjunction between the
two levels of the quotidian and the supernatural, or, more precisely, the blindness of the
former to the latter:

The Bailiff with his square nose and his apple for a chin, the trumpeters, all the
strutters and swaggerers, passed the carpet-slippers of a seated man, exposed to
the evening street, relaxed within a doorway, the white smoke of his pipe curling
around the bold white cliffs of his hair; passed a black cat seated upon a
window-sill, its eyes fixed in a green trance, the membranes of its ears only
recording cat sounds, and in any case not functioning just then; passed a
pressing-and-cleaning outfit, the last pair of trousers of the day going into the
steaming press. So the white tobacco-smoke continued to curl against the snowy
hair, and the old man’s smoky eyes saw nothing, the cat continued immobile and
unresponsive as a monument, and the steam issuing from the ultimate pair of
trousers put a veil over the window, the other side of which passed the glittering procession. (HA 11)

This passage mocks the self-importance of the Bailiff, but it also calls the figure of failed perception (submitted here in triplicate) to our attention. The mobility of the procession not only does not cause a stir in the static routine of the city, but goes entirely unperceived, leaving the dead to find their own way into the daily post-life of the Piazzas.

Pullman, upon his entrance to Third City, rapidly becomes aware of the degraded quotidian life of the city, characterized by the pointless consumption and aimless enjoyment facilitated by the welfare state. The supernatural background of this “normality,” however, becomes apparent to him only in bursts, beginning with the “Blitz” (complete with a rain of flies) which Satan calls down on Third City and coming to a head with the “Deputation from Hades,” during which the residents of Third City are privy to a battle between giant angels and demons above the city. This latter scene may sound epic, but the narrative voice and the choice to focalize the scene through an observer on the ground turns a potentially epic battle into satiric farce, since the combatants quickly become too large to be observed clearly from the ground and soon the sky is filled with the “anchovy-coloured balloon” of a demonic buttocks. Even when the combatants have risen into the sky and can be seen again, Lewis consistently emphasizes their recoding by the spectators into the terms of their life in Third City, as in this passage:
The light figure had now, springing out of its shoulders, prodigious wings, stretched to their utmost length, and dazzling white, whereas the dark figure protruded wings of a smaller size, dark and bristling. Blood dripped from both, and splashed down among the markets near First Piazza, so it was learned later on. (HA 111)

The final phrase here connects the metaphysical space of the battle in the sky with the quotidian post-life of Third City (“the markets”) while also chronicling the reduction of the conflict to its physical aspect and impact on everyday “life” in the city, the passive “so it was learned later on” emphasizing the normalizing post-evental work of “the they”—a reduction performed by both the author and by the citizens of Third City throughout the novel.

This reduction of the metaphysical to the immediate can partially be explained, once again, by the citizens chosen by the Bailiff to enter Third City, whose laughing at the stars (cited above) stands in for the extremity of the reduction of the cosmic or significant to the trivial, but Lewis does not wish to attribute this reduction of metaphysical meaning to the dullest of his failed purgatory, and it is the “intelligent” clubman Mannock who serves as the principal figure for the blindness to the significance of extraordinary events in Third City. Pullman, who was merely a pedantic dupe of the Bailiff in *The Childermass*, now has to instruct his early benefactor in Third City on the significance behind these occurrences. After the battle in the sky, Mannock explains to Pullman that he was shaken by the fact that the angelic combatant was a “very pleasant fellow” whom he had “talked to a dozen times,” but had now grown to enormous size and sprouted wings. In response, Pullman, the newcomer not yet
accustomed to the everyday appearances of the city, tells Mannock that he should have expected the immortal to behave as an angel all the time, and was duped by his expectation that things should be, in this metaphysical environment, as they were on earth. "'All my life I was a skeptic. And now I see that I was very short-sighted. The miraculous here is the most common or garden of things: for men (whom we are able to meet socially) are literally walking miracles'" (HA 117). Mannock eventually thanks Pullman for his instruction ("'You have opened my eyes to what I should have seen, instead of the quite dull things which I did see'" [HA 118]), and this part of the book ends with Mannock reflecting on his previous blindness:

Of God, he had always been mystically aware … that is, when he was in a beautiful church and the organ was playing some terrific piece; but at other times this awareness shrank to something that he found it impossible to think of except as a cold abstraction: but now he had seen with his own eyes the great Mazdean Principles of Light and Dark, of the Good and the Bad, locked in a fearful embrace, disappearing into the sky. And what had he been thinking of a short while after that? He had been thinking of the indecorous behaviour of one of the leading figures in the ruling caste of the city—of something that was not done, or was not said. He felt very humble, but he also felt very elated. (HA 118)

The opening of this quotation is consistent with Lewis's earlier claims that the nearest and most perfect experience of the divine or Absolute that humans can achieve is aesthetic perfection (here the "beautiful church" and "terrific piece"), all else being either the "cold abstraction" of reason (which he supports) or muddy mysticism (which he does not). Theological science-fiction of the Human Age allows him to introduce the divine into experience more directly, however, since in this supernatural

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58 This view is expressed most clearly in Lewis, Time and Western Man 370 and repeated on 376.
environment the divine exists with a physical reality and immediacy not evidenced on earth, which here does seem to function as a synthesis of reason and experience or abstraction and immediacy.

Yet the aesthetic does not drop out of this new configuration, since the experience of the divine in Third City is still presented in aesthetic terms, and indeed (as here) in need of interpretation. The celestial conflict bears meaning which does not necessarily accompany either its spectacular reduction or its transcoding into the language of the everyday. The meaning is apparently immanent to the occurrence itself, but must nonetheless be uncovered (unveiled, if one prefers Heideggarian terminology) from beneath the normalizing banalizations that are immediately applied to it. This represents something of a shift in Lewis’s thinking about the nature of art, or at least the responsibility of the artist to make him- or herself publicly accessible. In *Time and Western Man* Lewis was content to chastise those “congenitally incapable” of experiencing the divinity of the aesthetic (Lewis, *Time and Western Man* 370), while here Lewis (by way of the intellectual Pullman) offers Mannock (and by extension, the reader or listener) tutelage in the proper interpretation of the events of the fiction. In this, he allows Pullman to reprise Virgil and Beatrice’s role in the *Commedia*, providing in this section of the novel a rather clumsy “allegory of reading.” That this allegory is particularly clumsy here is testament to the changed situation between Dante and Lewis.

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50 It is worth pointing out that God only briefly appears in the published portions of *The Human Age*, and that this moment is re-aestheticized through the language of painting. The passage is cited below.
Dante could rest assured that God and Satan would be interpreted at least as polar figures of good and evil, if nothing else. By the mid-twentieth century this was not the case, and a fiction as strange as Lewis’s needed to clarify, however clumsily, that the respective cosmic personages did still bear these moral traits and were not meant to stand, as Jameson argues they were, as “simply measurable and material quantities of force, the whole matter of piety and impiety resolv[ing] itself into an assessment of the balance of power” (Jameson, *Fables* 150). It is precisely this conflation of naturalistic description with a rejection of the moral aspect of the afterlife that Lewis attempts to correct here. More particularly, Lewis attempts to replace Mannock’s interpretative move from the aesthetic to politics (thinking about the combatants in terms of “leading figures of the ruling caste of the city”) to one from aesthetics to morality or ethics. In this, we can see Lewis participating in the more general turn of post-WWII modernist writing away from the sectarian politics of the 1930s and toward a universalizing ethics.

“A very fragile environment”: Lewis’s Heavenly Welfare State

One way to deal more concretely with the function of the setting within the fiction is to look at its effects on his satire, in particular that of the postwar welfare state. Even on the most cursory of readings, one cannot fail to notice that *Monstre Gai* recasts the “Heaven” of *The Chilvermass* as a satirical welfare state: “‘Provided with money by the State, we

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60 Schenker also takes issue with this aspect of Jameson’s analysis, drawing justified attention to the reliance of Jameson’s argument on statements made by Sammael, taking them to be definitive truths about Lewis’s fictional cosmology (Schenker 169). As I argue below, the absence of such reliable interpretations of the world of the fiction from within that world is part of what constitutes Lewis’s rhetorical strategy.
exist in suspended animation, sexless, vegetarian, and dry, permanently about forty-six. If you can see any sense in it, I can’t’” (HA 25). It is significantly less clear, however, exactly what aspects of the welfare state are being satirized, and it seems worth taking stock of the specific criticisms that Lewis directs toward the postwar institutionalization of the welfare state in England, as well as how the afterworld features in this critique. This specification seems all the more pressing because Lewis was uncharacteristically supportive of the proposal for the establishment of a social welfare system, writing to Henry Moore in 1943:

The announcement of the Beveridge Report [Social Insurance and Allied Services, 1942] a little time ago made cheerful reading. That seems the minimum requirement, and it is an excellent thing that it should have been stated in black and white. I hope the “progressive” parties will stand on that: really make their stand on that and not allow the smallest fraction of it to be whittled away. Not to allow it to be treated, as a maximum, but as an absolute minimum. (Lewis, Letters 343)

Such blanket approval is rarely to be found in Lewis’s appraisals of almost anything, so it is all the more interesting to note the passage from his support for the principles of the welfare state to his satire of the existing welfare state in England a decade later, both in fantastic guise in The Human Age and the more direct referentiality of the stories of Rotting Hill (1952). Such an about-face can indeed be attributed to the conventional bugbear of theory vs. practice, but Lewis’s specific views on the issue are still instructive. He was, upon returning to England in 1945, justly appalled at the “ruined society” (RH v) of postwar England, and was canny enough (having now lived through two world wars) to attribute this economic decline to the years of war rather than
Attlee’s welfare state, but he describes the “honeymoon” of Labour (in *Rotting Hill*) as the establishment of an “extremely brilliant, if exceedingly artificial situation” which substituted relative comfort for the working classes for real rebuilding and economic prosperity and bringing about the “laziness” and “rot” which provided the book with its title—a vision of a momentary period of artificial prosperity covering over an unchecked entropy (RH vi-vii).

This re-appraisal of the welfare state as a retreat into an artificial and fantastic comfort is coupled with a more idiosyncratic argument about socialism and Christianity, which he lays out both in the preface and in the first story of *Rotting Hill*: “The Bishop’s Fool.” There the claim is that socialism, itself the culmination of nineteenth-century liberalism, is “a final product of bible-religion,” a program based on ideal and ultimately ethical Christian grounds (RH viii). Lewis’s fear is that such an ethical program might (indeed, for him, *would*), in an age of secularization, become detached from its original justification and become an instrumental political mechanism for those in power to increase their control of the population. He puts this argument in his own fictional mouth to counter the arguments of the Reverend Rymer (depicted as a well-meaning but imprecise and impractical advocate of an ethically based socialism):

The natural twentieth century drift must be toward the repudiation of Christianity, or its sentimental political puritan hang-over. […] [T]he danger is that in its hour of triumph socialism will forget, ignore, or violently discard, the ethics by means of which it was able to gain acceptance and mount to power: indeed that it may strip away all of our Christian freedoms and thrust us back into a system of villeinage or worse. Socialism without ethics is a terrible thing. (RH 52)
With this clarification, we can see how Lewis’s return to the fantastic serves two purposes. It enables him to highlight the “artificiality” of the welfare state by way of the decidedly fantastic setting, making the source of welfare funds crudely metaphysical (deriving “from the bank” in apparently limitless quantity). At the same time, setting the satirical city in the afterworld allows him to depict what he can really only allude to as a future possibility or inevitability in the more “realist” Rotting Hill: the detachment of the welfare state from its ethical purpose (in the case of Third City, the rehabilitation of sinners, which has apparently ceased, turning an intended purgatory into another limbo, or a means into an end) and its susceptibility to political corruption (the corrupting influence of the Bailiff, now recast as a gangster). The specifically Christian nature of the afterworld gives a concreteness to Lewis’s tendential argument in Rotting Hill, since the forces of God and Satan are visible and easily coded (especially by racial traits—the “Light” and “Dark” angels) and absolute meaning assigned by the reader or listener in a way that could only be intimated in the metaphysical muddiness of daily life in 1950s England.61

It remains to be said that Lewis also relates the welfare state of Third City to the new situation of England in international politics. Its precariousness is made evident by the “storms” repeatedly grinding its activity to halt and threatening its ultimate

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61 To make this even more muddy, Lewis himself was, at the behest of several friends (Meyers speculates that it might have been Eliot and Naomi Mitchison), awarded a Civil List Pension of £250 in February of 1952 (the same year Rotting Hill was published), and the amount was raised to £400 in 1954. The pension was “designed for impoverished men who had distinguished themselves in the arts” (Meyers 308).
destruction (recalling, in their description, the effects of the atomic bomb). These are fallout from the war between God and Satan, here allegorizing England’s newfound lack of centrality in relation to the burgeoning cold war powers (hence the change in name from “Magnetic” to “Third”). Going nowhere, it is now simply in a state of entropy, existing through its final days at the whim of powers outside of its control. Countering the “insular turn” that Jed Esty convincingly associates with late modernism in England, Lewis insists that the movement of power to centers outside of England must be accompanied by a realistic appraisal of international politics rather than a self-serving turn toward “Englishness,” particularly that pastoral vision which is entirely absent from Lewis’s Third City, except in the mind of the Padishah (more concerned with swans and stars than the souls under his charge). We learn that there are farmlands on the outskirts of that city, and the Padishah suggests that Pullman visit them during their one conversation (HA 153), but Pullman is never able to oblige.

“Acting in a valueless vacuum”: The Narrative Logic of The Human Age

Narratively, the initial sections of the novel are primarily important to set up what is to follow, since we can have little doubt after Pullman’s lectures to Mannock (the one in

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62 Schenker draws attention to this last aspect of the description on 170-171.
63 “These two gigantic nations tower above our famished slums” (Lewis, America and Cosmic Man 9-10). Of these, it is relatively easy to decide which nation is divine and which infernal, since we learn that “there would be no wings in a Bailiff-world except left-wings” (HA 148). Lewis’s (grudging) siding with America in this combat is identified most clearly in America and Cosmic Man (1948), which revises his earlier disdain for the “melting-pot” (expressed in Paleface) into an appreciation for the cosmopolitan possibilities of a nation of “disunity,” unable, he thought, to generate a nationalism out of a non-native citizenry. In this regard, he models his utopian vision of a “federative World Government” on the United States’ incorporative power.
which he explains the significance of the metaphysical nature of Third City and a later “report” in which he expounds his views on the politics of that city) that he is aware of the moral significance of the conflict between God and Satan. The rest of Monstre Gai is devoted to narrating Pullman’s gradual acceptance of the patronage of the Bailiff (a known emissary of Satan), choosing material comfort and flattery over morality, repeating at the individual level the social acceptance of the stagnation of the welfare state described above. At the opening of the novel, we are asked to accept as mere ignorance or naïveté Pullman’s failure to interpret the Bailiff’s banner correctly (“The Serpent’s head in conjunction with the Egg presented no difficulty, but the significance of 666, though it had a familiar sound, baffled him” [HA 9-10]). Even if this is not simply bad faith (Pullman, like Joyce, was given a Catholic education and, although no longer a believer at the beginning of Monstre Gai, should recognize the number of the beast), the excuse is no longer viable after Pullman has instructed Mannock on the ultimate meaning of divinity.

Unlike Faust, Pullman never definitively chooses or forms a pact with the Bailiff. The corruption occurs rather as a series of compromises, each of which aligns him closer with his patron and limits his options in Third City. The first favor offered to Pullman is the servant Sentoryen, sent to follow him and aid him in his explorations of the city, and to bring him to the Bailiff’s party, where it is established that (1) the Bailiff is indeed demonic in nature (in one of the least palatable aspects of the novels, the demonic servants have a pungent and clearly racialized scent), and (2) that he is aligned with
aesthetic modernism, of a particularly spare sort (the “exquisite frigidity of the Bailiff’s
design” is accompanied by Alban Berg’s Lyric Suite).64 Flattery (“‘you were the greatest
writer of your time’”) is followed by financial reward (a higher stipend from the bank)
and an offer of “cultivated” living in the Phanuel Hotel. “[S]tinking of new money, of
wads of welfare state banknotes, and nothing human about it” (HA 182), the hotel is
located in “a little wood” created by the Bailiff to “shroud [his guests] from the vulgar”
(HA 171), repeating Lewis’s critique of the elitism of modernism in spatial terms.

That these ploys are so effective is all the stranger, in that his stature as a writer
was already recognized at the Central Bank and his finances were already more than
sufficient for anything that he might want, up to and including advances if he chose to
embark on another piece of writing (something he never does in Third City). Lewis,
however, chronicles it as a passive acceptance of luxury fueled by flattery followed
(often immediately) by fear of the effects the Bailiff’s disfavor might bring. The one
moment that would seem to demand a definite choice from Pullman is the (again, rather
clumsily arranged) political rally, at which representatives for different parties (the
gangster Bailiff, the Catholic Father Ryan, the communist Vogel, and the fascist
Hyperides, the latter having broken into Third City with his retinue) offer speeches at

64 The phrase cannot help but recall Lewis’s own piece, The Caliph’s Design, which is also a parable about
patronage. As with that earlier parable, a modernist impulse is backed with the threat of violence. Now,
however, Lewis is less inclined to envy an imaginary State mandate for modernism. In this regard, it is also
telling that the art form at which both the Bailiff and the eponymous Caliph play is architecture, with its
public focus. The Bailiff claims later in Monstre Gai (HA 294) to be responsible for the architecture of Tenth
Piazza, itself a parodic Haussmannesque grand-boulevard: “an enormous oblong space almost a mile long,
and probably a quarter of a mile across. Heavy, regularly-placed paving stones emphasized its size and
emptiness; it was quite without ornament, and down its sides ran a spacious, arched arcade” (HA 43).
which Pullman grazes. Coming close to a choice, Pullman instead chooses not to choose
(never, as Kierkegaard tells us, a real choice, but only an abdication of responsibility).

For the perspective this passage gives on Lewis’s understanding of the meaning of the
afterlife in his work, it is worth quoting at length:

The speaker of his choice, beyond any question, was the Catholic priest. But on
Earth he had abandoned the Catholic religion; was he now to enter once more
into that communion? He should have been able to answer that question without
hesitation: of the four speakers he had listened to, it was the first heard by him
which spoke to his intellect and to his heart. Yet … there was a destiny in this,
there was a compulsion from the past. […] His life on Earth was the real life. This
was not a life at all, but something artificial, in which the values of the life-on-
Earth were dressed up in a different way, and manifested themselves with clarity
in this sterilized medium. He had lived with the Bailiff upon the Earth but had
not recognized him. He had built his success upon Bailiff-like rather than
Padishah-like interests; and now, here, the Bailiff acted as a magnet: he had been
drawn in that direction at once. And anyhow, where else would he be in this
collection of men? […] As he had been instructing Mannock, only some men
were intelligent. No other creature, natural or supernatural, could be; and for
him human intelligence alone mattered. Yes; the natural—supernatural problem
(problem for a man among supernatural creatures) was the essence of things
here, it supplanted everything else. Odious and monstrous as the Bailiff was, he
was the supernatural element, paradoxical as it might seem, most favourable to
man. (HA 266-7)⁶⁵

The fundamental question here is how to read this passage: is this a tragic afterlife in
which Pullman is doomed to repeat his terrene failings, or is he exercising bad faith and
using his “human intelligence” to produce a rationalization for remaining under the
patronage of the Bailiff? Eliot, in his introduction to the radio broadcast of Monstre Gai,

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⁶⁵ To clarify, Pullman (and here he seems again to be the mouthpiece for an observation to be taken as truth,
for it is re-affirmed repeatedly in Malign Fiesta) has already explained (again to Mannock) that angels,
bearing perfection, are stupid, having no need of “critical objective intelligence,” clarified as “consciousness of
self.” Perfection and stupidity go hand-in-hand, as do imperfection and intelligence (HA 164-5). This is the
argument behind Pullman’s conclusion that the Bailiff is “the supernatural element […] most favourable to
man.”
follows the former route, no doubt conditioned by his extra-textual belief that choices of this nature are not extended beyond the grave. For those more accustomed to novels (a group from which Eliot excludes himself at the beginning of his introduction), however, the idea of a protagonist without free will might well be more off-putting than heresy.

Based on textual evidence alone, I must side with the bad faith interpretation, since we are told that Third City was set up as a “celestial testing ground” or “a kind of halfway house to Heaven” for those whose only sin was lust, segregating men and women to try out their chance for salvation in the absence of heterosexual temptation. This, along with the ending of *Malign Fiesta* (which makes little sense if Pullman has already been definitively judged), implies that Lewis’s afterlife does not exclude ethical choice.

This approach to the narrative of *The Human Age* ultimately leads one to question the value of Pullman’s much-lauded intelligence, since, although eminently practical when giving instrumental advice to either the Bailiff or Sammael, it is ultimately incapable of remedying his situation in any way, and indeed often seems positively determined to lead him astray, or at least to provide rationalizations that facilitate his drifting (repeatedly) into the service of evil. Given Lewis’s repeated defense of the

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66 This brief introduction was published in the *Hudson Review* as “A Note on Monstre Gai.” *Hudson Review* 7:4 (Winter 1955): 522-526. Eliot also, as might be expected, voices his theological objection to the claims about the stupidity of angels (526).

67 Unfortunately, none of the BBC Listener Reports for the 1955 broadcasts go into enough detail to provide information on a popular appraisal of this question. It is telling, however, that when Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle (of *The Mote in God’s Eye* fame) produced their own theological science fiction version of Dante’s *Inferno*, free will and the capacity to save one’s soul through the exercise of it was the one dramatic change made to Dante’s hell (making that hell actually closer to a purgatory, although salvation and purgation are still two different operations). That this is a popular heresy in afterlife novels probably has something to do with the attempt to write an engaging narrative set in the afterworld, since predetermined fates rarely make for narrative suspense.
intellect against intuition or emotion, this would seem a strange move. It appears less
strange when we recall the influence of Julian Benda’s 1927 _Trahison des clercs_ on Lewis.68
The section of _Rude Assignment_ dedicated to Benda places his book against Edouard
Berth’s _Les Méfaits des intellectuelles_ (1914) and, in typical Lewis fashion, uses them to face
off against each other (although he obviously favors Benda’s “humane, sensible, and
social ends” over Berth’s “Faustian Man” of romantic intuitionism and violent action)
only to end the section by pointing out (correctly) that both parties use the term
“intellectual” exclusively to express disapprobation, and to add as a disjointed yet
telling conclusion that “few intellectuals are to be found who are prepared to oppose the
Zeitgeist. This latter is committed to courses which, if pursued to their logical ends, will
wipe out all that the human intellect has contrived, distinguishing us from cattle and
pigs, and still more from bees and centipedes” (RA 46). This essentially throws us back
onto the critique of Lewis’s fellows in _The Childermass_, seduced by the Bailiff and
directing their intellectual resources to propagating his ideas. It is almost impossible not
to apply Lewis’s capsule summary of Benda’s use of the term _clerc_ (“a learned man
prostituting his high function and inciting others to violence” RA 45) directly to
Pullman, particularly when we are told that he has a “typical aptitude for action” (HA

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68 Benda was already an influence on Lewis prior to the publication of _Le Trahison des clercs_. He calls his
_Belphégor_ “excellent” in _Time and Western Man_, and it comes up repeatedly in that book and _The Art of Bing
Ruled_. More proximate to books 2 and 3 of the Human Age is the “Intuition Verses the Intellect” section of
_Rude Assignment_, which is largely devoted to a discussion of _Le Trahison des clercs_ (32-46). Edwards also
draws attention to the importance of Benda for _The Human Age_ on _Wyndham Lewis_ 541.
“action” being for Lewis a term virtually synonymous with warmongering. The principal difference between the Pullman of 1928 and that of 1955 is that the latter Pullman knows what he is doing. Either way, however, the critique is less against the intellect than against its misuse, whether this misuse is (as in 1928) a failure of the critical faculty or (as in 1955) a purely instrumental use of reason without regard for moral significance. This emphasis on instrumental or functional reason unmoored from moral evaluation is made explicit in *Malign Fiesta*:

> God *values* man: that is the important thing to remember. It is this valuing that is so extraordinary. There are men who only value *power*. This is absurd, because power destroys value. Value can only exist with multiplicity. The only value for Sammael is solipsistic. I, Pullman, am acting in a valueless vacuum called Sammael. (HA 528)

Despite the unequivocal nature of these conclusions, Pullman continues to serve Sammael publicly to preserve his own post-life, aiding him in his attempt to destroy the very Divinity that serves, as above, as the source of value. In this, Pullman not only supports but also participates in Sammael’s solipsism, recognizing only the personal value of self-preservation.

This critique of Pullman (and, by extension, of those intellectuals not “prepared to oppose the Zeitgeist”) can be seen most clearly in his treatment of and comportment toward Satters, his irritating and largely helpless companion. Although Satters is repeatedly depicted as a fool and in satiric terms (he is prone to unthinking violence and

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69 This somewhat idiosyncratic use of the term is tied to his (and Benda’s) negative appraisal of Charles Maurras’s *Action Française*. It is worth noting in passing that Eliot dedicated his 1929 monograph on Dante to Maurras, a fact not evident in later reprintings of the essay on Dante in his *Selected Writings*.
speaks almost entirely in clichés—often the same two or three repeated ad nauseum), he also repeatedly notices things or produces “naïve” interpretations that are more effective than the labored locutions of Pullman, particularly when Pullman enters his schoolmaster mode. His intuitive grasp of their situation in The Childermass is consistently critical, and he puts the dilemma rather more clearly than does Pullman, even if he is unable to offer any useful solution to it: “I’ve no grey matter they left it out, all the same I know there’s something wrong. There’s something on the cross in this show it’s a pretty dud Heaven if it’s Heaven. If!” (CM 64) And again, in relation to the Bailiff: “I know what I feel—that’s all I can tell you. If you want to know, for the first go off I don’t know what to make of that Bailiff fellow” (CM 65). This inarticulate perceptiveness continues in the later installments, as when Satters notices a hint of fear in the Bailiff’s voice, which Pullman first dismisses and later acknowledges as correct (HA 280). Satters is trusting, however, and allows Pullman to lead him not only into Third City, but into hell itself. Even before Pullman and Satters flee with the Bailiff, Pullman gauges his guilt through his (failed) responsibility to Satters: “Pullman was deferential, though he wondered all the time what the devil he had been doing. He realized to the full what an ungodly mess he had got himself into, implicating Satters, in, he told himself, the most heartless manner” (HA 291).

Paul Edwards offers a similar evaluation of Satters’s naïve intelligence in response to Pullman’s undoubtedly pedantic lecture about Professor Tyndall (Edwards 328). The scene can be found on CM 69-72. Alan Munton offers a similar reading of Pullman’s “intelligence” as a corrupting rather than guiding force in “A Reading of ‘The Childermass’” (Munton 123-5).
Pullman’s frequent disdain for Satters comes down to a snobbery surrounding the use of language, especially the repetition of stock phrases. This disdain is itself parodied near the end of *Monstre Gai*, when Pullman is briefly abducted by a gang of Hyperideans from the Irish district. Michael Devlin, one of the thugs, offers a clear indictment of Pullman, in terms that replicate those used above:

> “If you are James Pullman, as you say you are, you understand quite enough to have worked out for yourself by now the kind of man the Bailiff is. You are consorting with the scum of the earth, and you know what you are doing. To save your own skin you accept help from an inhuman beast in the form of a man. [...] You are a rat—yes, a far worse rat because you are an *intelligent* rat.” (HA 221)

This attack is fundamentally correct, and Devlin tells Pullman nothing that he does not know himself, but Pullman still avoids the moral force of the argument by focusing on the redundancy of Devlin’s language rather than the indictment it carries (which is not entirely dissimilar to Pullman’s own, private, self-criticism):

> “You like hearing yourself talk.” Pullman spoke strongly and clearly. “You do not speak well! You would not be so dependant upon *rats* and *mice* if you did. You slap better than you *speak*."

Polemon laughed. “You forgot, Michael, that you were speaking to a man trained in the use of words.”

> “Yes, like so many people living among words, he has grown demoralized as a man. He has no values left. They have become *words* and have become rotted. You are a *rat*." (HA 222)

As should be clear even from this brief sample, the figures fail to engage one another, and the scene stalls until the Bailiff’s cronies arrive (complete with Tommy guns) to

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71 O’Rourke, another of the thugs more prone to punching than talking, is described on 219 as “the Minotaur”, a mythological and Dantesque companion to “the pansy Centaur” Sentoryen (HA 190). As for Geryon, the only likely suspect is the Bailiff himself, who magically transports Pullman and Satters into Matapolis.
rescue Pullman. The relevant point, however, is the way in which Pullman’s snobbery is used to dismiss Devlin’s criticism, and how Lewis implicates the reader/listener on both sides of this argument (Devlin is indeed a poor speaker, and he does come off as an unreflective thug even while we recognize the correctness of his judgments). The text demands that we move beyond the focus on the originality of the language to engage with the ideas expressed, and the values with which the words are bound. Anyone familiar with Lewis’s “Taxi-Cab Driver Test for Fiction” (MWA 237-241) cannot help but recognize the self-criticism in this section of the novel, and, although I disagree with Eliot about the “irrevocab[ility]” of Pullman’s fate, he is certainly right when he points out the extent to which *The Human Age* continues Lewis’s Self Condemnation (Eliot, “A Note on *Monstre Gai*” 524-5). But Pullman here is identified once again with Joyce rather than Lewis, primarily by Devlin’s Irish background and the particular reverence afforded his reputation, drawing attention to Pullman’s own Irishness.

If Satters takes this linguistic redundancy to the extreme, often stuttering the same phrase or syllable over and over again (“Wha ... wha ... wah ... wha ... what!” appearing several times in the text) or using the same adjective repeatedly in the course of a few lines (“swish” is a particular favorite, one which Bridson extends even further in the radio adaptation), he is also the closest thing *The Human Age* has to an active artist. While Pullman has been planning and executing the fiesta of the title (a kermess to convince the angels to breed with humans), Satters has been growing a Japanese peony
which figures centrally in the ending of Book 3. The terms used to describe the peony indicate that it is to stand as an emblem of aesthetic value:

Pullman went down on one knee, and stared through the glass at the peony. It seemed to him miraculously beautiful. It came from the Far-East of the Earth. There physical beauty was understood. The European believed he had evolved spiritual beauty of a higher order—but did the spiritual product ever come up to this physical perfection? (HA 560)

The specificity of this aesthetic object cannot but recall the passage (cited at the beginning of this chapter) linking Eastern art to both modernism and aesthetic value more generally: “[T]hat non-human principle—so characteristic of the art of Asia, in contrast to that of Europe—promises a finer standard of art, whatever else you may think about it, upon purely human grounds” (Lewis, Wyndham Lewis on Art 284). This re-entrance of (specifically non-human) beauty into the narrative occasions a greater intrusion, that of the God that has been absent throughout so many pages. This appearance is also developed in primarily aesthetic terms, appearing as a painting:

There was something transparent about this filmy host, in the main very light, with pale blue, and crimson, and long elongated smudges, also transparent. There, towards the top, was a small rather whiter figure: it was the core of the composition, for it was extraordinarily composed, this aerial army, reminiscent of the Paradiso of Tintoretto; or better still, of a pastiche of Tintoretto painted by El Greco. (HA 560-1)

Pullman’s response, upon realizing that he is actually looking at God, is to lower the other knee and begin praying, a gesture suggesting that we recognize the pious attitude in his first lowering before the peony as well. Although the two events are not narratively connected, their immediate proximity suggests that the beauty of the flower
opened the floodgates, allowing God to enter bodily into the fiction after so many pages of deferral.

The Human Age does not end with this, however, but ends with the crushing of the peony by one of Sammael’s foot-soldiers (the destruction of an aesthetic Absolute by a political one), along with either Pullman or the gardener’s boy, depending on the version of the ending. In the original ending, Pullman was crushed with the flower. The text of this original passage is worth reproducing (from Bridson’s typescript for the radio adaptation), if for no other reason than that it does not appear in the published versions of The Human Age and is therefore of historical interest:

Satters stared down where the foot had been... Upon the ground was his peony, as flat as those flowers which we crush in the leaves of a book – souvenirs of a picnic – and there was what had been Pullman’s head, stamped as flat as a sheet of paper into a shape which was in another dimension to the shapes of Pullman living; He could see the teeth mangled into something like a mosaic resembling a fish. It was a patchwork pancake, mostly blood. Underneath came a larger unit, it was an enormous cow-patch where the body and legs had been, and one real boot at the bottom of that – a boot in which was a foot and a bloody section of bone. (Bridson, Malign Fiesta Typescript 67)

This original ending follows a rigid logic: if the return of the aesthetic brings about the appearance of the Absolute, it is, in the logic of The Human Age, an Absolute not conducive to human life, which is simultaneously destroyed and turned into an aesthetic object itself (albeit a repulsive one: “flat as a sheet of paper,” “something like a mosaic”) by the emergence of that Absolute. Lewis thought better of the nihilism inherent in this

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72 The typescripts for the BBC broadcasts of Monstre Gai and Malign Fiesta can be found in the Bridson Mss. Collection at Indiana University’s Lilly Library (Box 1). Courtesy, The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
ending, however, and substituted another one in which the peony alone is crushed and Pullman is carried off by servants of God for the unfinished fourth installment, *The Trial of Man*.73 The passage above is replaced in the published version with the following:

“The glass case and the peony vanished beneath this awful tread, and when the angel’s foot rose and swept onward there was nothing left but a crushed handful of glass and a meaningless mash of vegetation” (HA 562). Here it is only the aesthetic object which is destroyed, and rather than simultaneously aestheticizing and destroying the human (Pullman) it instead loses its power in a sacrifice, giving up both its “physical perfection” and its “meaningfulness” to save the sinful writer from his fate, a sacrifice coming as close to that of Christ as Lewis was likely to muster (Christ not serving much of a role in his appraisal of Christianity, and none at all in *The Human Age*). This is a rather more literal version of “salvation by art” than we find in the “artist novels” of high modernism, from Proust and Joyce to the Lewis of *Tarr*—one that reverses the polarities of value: no longer life devoted to art but art sacrificed for life (or what counts for it in the afterlife). This is an interpretation which is borne out by none of the published versions of the text, however, since neither of them (the radio drama or the

73 These changes were made during the revision of the radio typescript (the book was in proof stage at this time), and Bridson decided that the ending for radio required both a body and equivocation for dramatic effect (Bridson, “‘The Human Age’ in Retrospect” 240). He and Lewis jointly concocted the character of the gardener’s son, creating a few pages of dialogue for him and inserting him in Pullman’s place in the scene. The typescript shows the successive choices: “Pullman’s head” is crossed out, for instance, and replaced with “the gardener’s boy,” which is then crossed out in turn and replaced with the more equivocal “a head.” A similar series of changes accompanies the later instance of “Pullman” in the passage. This equivocation, as described by Bridson, was to allow for the audience to imagine that Pullman had been crushed while, in good serial form, allowing for the revelation (in the next installment, which never materialized) that it had been the gardener’s boy all along (Bridson, “‘The Human Age’ in Retrospect” 240).
printed novel) present the choice or substitution as such. It is rather an argument from a reconstructed narrative of the composition process. At the ending of the radio drama, Pullman is punished for his sins against the divine, receiving his just desserts in the grotesque voiceover cited above. At the ending of the novel, the emergence of conflict simply demolishes the aesthetic object as such, and shows the fallout of the appearance of the Absolute (the demise of art) as imagined by Lewis already in *The Writer and the Absolute*. It is only in the movement from the novel proofs to the radio dramatization and back to the published novels (i.e. in the process of adaptation and transmediation itself) that we find this glimpse of sacrifice and salvation in an otherwise resolutely pessimistic text.

**“'You are not used to time, sir’”: Deferral and Apophasis**

I say “resolutely pessimistic” despite the ultimate choice to spare Pullman for judgment in *The Trial of Man* because this choice is simply one more deferral of the ultimate revelation of Good, whether in the direct form of a novelistic God or in the less direct form of the “Celestial Camp” of Heaven. If I side with Schenker and Edwards against Jameson’s claim that the afterlife in The Human Age is “resolutely materialistic,” rather than morally/metaphysically ordered, I nonetheless find Jameson’s point that Lewis’s afterworld presents a vision of evil without a corresponding or opposed principle of good to the point (Jameson, *Fables* 150). I simply conclude from this not that the difference between good and evil in Lewis is one of mere force or political power, but that the Enemy (as his self-applied moniker suggests) was more adept at finding fault
than at developing positive principles or values. I have already remarked the effect of the absence of a social idea of belief in *The Chidermass*. The sequels, while intimating a social ground for belief in the mythos of Christianity, nonetheless continue this deferral by projecting the ultimate presentation of positive values, or even a definitive clarification of the metaphysical meaning of the afterlife, into a future volume. Jameson reads this metaphysical meaning as ontologically or fundamentally absent in *The Human Age*. I simply add the fact that, by including these deferrals as a constitutive structure of *The Human Age*, Lewis intimates the presence of such foundational values without actually supplying them through a serialization of both narrative and time.

While the idea of Pullman’s salvation was a late addition to the published text (coming between the galley proof stage and the printed edition), Lewis understood from early on that he would have to remedy the absence of a positive term or value in *The Chidermass*, writing to Bridson in 1951:

> Finally, needless to say planning for the Chidermass has been constantly going on. It bristles with difficulties. God is a big problem. The sorting out of dialogue is another. As a theologian I am inferior to what Eliot is supposed to be. That must be remedied! (Lewis, *Letters* 546)

This remedy appears to have been initially a decision not to specify the exact nature of the Divine, opting instead for a reliance on the popular acceptance of the evilness of Satan and the goodness of God, with the latter remaining both absent and a purely formal term to complete the dualism. Lewis clearly found this attempt to resolve the problem of a positive foundation of values unsatisfying, and instead opted at the last minute to continue the deferral that had already structured the preceding books.
As I have said, the narrative repetition from Monstre Gai to Malign Fiesta is evident, and Lewis draws attention to this repetition in an oft-cited yet still instructive letter to Hugh Kenner (of Aug. 29, 1955):

‘Monstre Gai’ shows him entrapped by the Bailiff, in whose power he reluctantly remains. [...] The Bailiff is, of course, not Divine. Then the same situation is repeated in Malign Fiesta, only even more tragically, and the figure in that case is Divine, though Diabolic. In the last book of all, the hero, Pullman, is at last in Divine Society. He favours the Divine. I favour the Divine. There is a gigantic debate, in which Sammael’s purpose to combine the Human and the Angelic, is discussed, the Celestial spokesman naturally attacking Sammael’s big idea. [...] Under the circumstances, a new overall title will be required. (Lewis, Letters 562)

The idea of Pullman “favouring the Divine,” in particular, has been taken up by critics interested in recasting Lewis as a religious thinker (above all Schenker, who uses this phrase as the title of his chapter on Self Condemned and The Human Age). Yet the narrative logic of the extant text tells a different story: one of Pullman “favouring the Divine” privately and secretly (and, even then, only in the final sections of Malign Fiesta), while publicly serving Satan. From the textual history, it is clear that this idea of Pullman’s ultimate redemption was a very late idea, which emerges to justify the continuation of the narrative into this projected fourth book, once again modifying the project and deferring the final judgment (that of the reader about the series and of God regarding Pullman) into the future.

This serialization of time brought about by narrative deferral finds itself allegorized in the content of the text as well, in two rather flat gags present in Monstre

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74 This narrative logic places The Human Age in the same thematic vicinity as Vonnegut’s Mother Night (1961), another work of pessimistic ethics drawn via negative example. Vonnegut’s novel also rewrites the Faust myth as a fatal disjunction between public and private belief.
*Gai* and *Malign Fiesta*. The first involves the perpetual replacement of unsuitable servants appointed by the Bailiff to assist Pullman. After Sentoryen is rebuffed for making a pass at Pullman (HA 183-193), he is replaced in turn by Bates (too much of a military man), Vbasti (too cheeky), Abdul Pan (too ambitious), Jashormit (too old, and makes a pass at Satters), and finally Torg (“a broad-minded young man”). The joke is not particularly funny, and Bridson wisely chose not to reproduce it in the radio adaptation, since it adds nothing substantial to the plot. (He replaces it with the one-time substitution of Pan for Sentoryen, allowing him to preserve the unfortunate scene with Pullman and Sentoryen). It is repeated by Lewis, however, in *Malign Fiesta*, where the unsatisfying assistants for Pullman are replaced by unsuitable fiancées taken by Sammael (a resolute “woman-hater” trying to serve, on Pullman’s suggestion, as a public example for the angels he wishes to take wives).

The first is “a young American octoroon” (HA 495—the mixed race, in one of Lewis’s worst moments, standing in for the miscegenation of Satan’s Human Age plot) selected for the book’s eponymous fiesta. Sammael is unable to stand being around a woman, and soon has her killed, requiring Pullman to invent an acceptable excuse for her execution to appease the public. This is supplied when it turns out that she was a murderer, leading to another execution, this time of Dr. Petrus of Dis and his First Clerk by the Secret Police for not informing Sammael of her background. (Another of Pullman’s suggestions, the Secret Police is headed by the Bailiff, now under his Matapolis name Zoë.) The second fiancée, taken up again to sway public opinion, is
presented to Pullman as “The Princess Cecilia Romanoff,” but turns out to be a lunatic
named Ernestine Schumann who believes herself to be a Romanoff.

Learning this, Pullman concludes that she must be executed as well, giving a set
of suggestions that speak both to Lewis’s canniness about his own repetitions and to the
extreme callousness of Pullman’s instrumental intellect in its service to Sammael:

At first sight, the present difficulty bore so close a resemblance to the last, that it
could only be treated in the same way. The same questions had to be asked, and
when it had been confirmed that there was no unexpected element, the solution
must be a repetition of the means employed to dispose of the octoroon. Pullman
did his best to disguise the fact that he was saying, ‘Same Prescription as before.’
But the monotony depressed him, and he hoped it would not depress his patron.
(HA 538)

That it is the monotony and not the actual execution order (itself veiled in official jargon)
that depresses Pullman is much of the point of passages like these, making Pullman’s
failings understandably damnable even to those readers/listeners who find him
sympathetic merely because he is the protagonist. But Lewis also draws our attention to
the monotony of the repetitions, and to the storyteller’s need to disguise them with
extraneous details.

Thankfully, this later series of fiancées is interrupted much earlier than the series
of servants, in this case by the appearance of God with his army. That this is a fitting
interruption should be clear, because it is the difficulty of imagining a God that gives
rise to Lewis’s own deferrals. Yet, as we have seen, the God at the end of Malign Fiesta
remains distant and spectacular, aesthetic rather than moral. And it is this moral God
that Lewis, by his own admission, required to properly end the series of novels. The
continuation of *The Human Age* in *The Trial of Man* promised the same resolution and clarification that the prospect of *The Childermass, Book 2* offered in 1928: a positive account of his fictitious afterlife and its meaning within the fiction.

This continuation Lewis did not write, although he left a (rejected) 14-page draft of part of *The Trial of Man*, which has been published (thanks to Hugh Kenner) as an appendix to the 1966 Calder and Boyars edition of *Malign Fiesta*. The draft does not mention Pullman or his fate, but instead narrates the very brief battle between Sammael and the heavenly army, as well as its aftermath in Matapolis. The heavenly forces approach unarmed, welcoming Sammael and the other angels to re-join God’s number (“We wish to attempt to persuade you to scorn to isolate yourselves from the main body of angels, led by the Divine and inexpressible Spirit, Lord God” [MF 215]). Sammael responds with violence, and is quickly subdued by a few of God’s angels. The remaining followers of Sammael lay down their arms and accept the invitation, “both sides abandoning themselves to an orgy of brotherhood” (MF 217). The scene then shifts to the interactions of the injured Sammael and God (introduced as “the Stranger” at the hospital ward where Sammael is recovering after having his leg amputated). Sammael curses God, then undergoes a bizarre “American Speed Cure” to gain the mobility to visit God’s provisional headquarters in Matapolis, where he once again questions God’s authority and finally storms out. Given its brevity, there is little to be made of this fragment, but it is worth examining briefly his depiction of God, since the absence of just such a thing has been crucial to my argument. The scene of his entrance is focalized
through the consciousness of a Sister at the hospital, to whom God addresses himself.

Her perception of God is presented through a series of negations, specifically of the human, now refigured as Will and particularity:

There was nothing personal pressing on her from this big machine ['"the Stranger"]: and this indifference, or this apathy, delighted her, without her knowing what was responsible for such a reaction. Here, at last, was someone asking nothing of her personality, who was a selfless expanse, of indifference (free of the selfish pressures which are emitted by all men and women, who are so unrelievedly functional). […] From her young days she remembered "Where there is nothing there is" … oh, what was it that there was? Something like this … something which was not a zero, as she had always supposed this meant. No-that nothing of her early teachers meant somewhere where nothing oppressively human was to be found—nothing functional, that loved and hated, nothing that uncomfortably willed and wanted—something which had everything. But that was the reverse of nothing, was it not? (MF 218)

This is as close as Lewis came to describing a positive principle, yet it was defined only by formal negation ("the greatest degree of the opposite of nothing which it was possible to imagine" MF 218), and remained unpublished during Lewis’s lifetime. The phrase "Where there is nothing, there is [God]" derives from early Yeats, who gave this title to both a play and a short prose piece. Yet its relation to modernism is mediated in Lewis’s text more proximately by the figure of Sammael, whose characteristics as depicted in *Malign Fiesta* (asceticism, solipsism, willfulness, and, of course, pride) appear as the negation ("a valueless vacuum") of which God is (in turn) the negation.

This rudimentary dialectics (I hesitate to call it a negative dialectics, since Lewis was here clearly trying to generate a more affirmative negation of the negation than that envisioned by Adorno) provides no more than a gesture towards a positive principle, however, and rather than re-write or complete this draft, Lewis instead turned his post-
1955 attentions to the composition of two other books: *The Red Priest* and “Twentieth-Century Palette.” The latter was to be a semi-autobiographical novel about an artist, and remains unfinished and unpublished. The former is an expansion of “The Bishop’s Fool” into a full-length novel, which Lewis hoped would have popular success. It did not. It is a nihilistic book, linking once again Christianity and communism (the title says it all), the failure of which is allegorized through the fate of the Anglican priest Father Augustine Card (killed by Eskimos after a self-imposed exile for killing a man who challenged his own views). The least that we can say about this decision is that it reinforces publicly his private decision not to convert to Catholicism (indeed to any religion), an option that he addressed several times with Froanna (who converted after his death), although largely in the negative.75 That this was an option in a concrete sense is indicated by his repeated “flirtations” with Catholicism, from the period of *Time and Western Man* (in which he praises Catholicism’s rigor, rationalism, and attention to institutional authority) to that of *The Human Age* (in which Catholicism is presented as more persuasive and correct than any of the other political options in the Piazza).76 This option too he chose to defer, in this case into the grave.

75 On this aspect of Lewis’s life, see Meyer 277-8 and 289. For a more extensive record and analysis of Lewis’s various attachments to Catholicism throughout his life, see Schenker 115-125.
76 In *The Writer and the Absolute*, Lewis criticizes Sartre for being a “political flirt,” entranced by communism but unwilling to join the PCF (Lewis, *Writer* 88). Lewis’s interest with Sartre may have something to do with the parallel between Lewis’s views of Sartre and his own attachment to Catholicism. For a more extensive record and analysis of Lewis’s various attachments to Catholicism throughout his life, see Schenker 115-125.
“To scorn to isolate yourselves”: Publicity and Genre

I described a fundamental problem both in and for The Childermass as an absence of belief, the nonexistence of a sense of commonality or consistency, that ultimately rendered communicability problematic. This emerged in the thematics of The Childermass as a critique of the private languages of a modernism detached from its public. It was, however, another example of the very obscurity it militated against, and the offering of a positive alternative was deferred to his later books. When Lewis was able to continue the project after the Second World War his stylistic approach had changed substantially, substituting his “super-naturalism” for the dense allusions of the earlier text. In its fictional form, this included an invocation of the collective belief (as opposed to individual belief) inherent in the use of figures such as God and Satan to coordinate the metaphysical ground of his fiction. By this I do not mean to imply that his readers/listeners (either actual or imagined) were necessarily Christian, but that the use of these figures implied participation in a common mythological ground, readily recognizable to most members of the English general public.

Such an appeal to a common ground of shared cultural experience is to be read alongside his opportunistic turn toward radio as a possible new institution of publicity after the collapse of the institutions that enabled literary modernism in England: the little magazines and “market patronage” chronicled by Rainey in Institutions of Modernism. Lewis was canny enough about the postwar cultural landscape to realize
that the BBC’s Third Programme was not a populist source of listeners (who would, ideally, then become readers), writing in *Rude Assignment*:

In practice he [a member of “The Majority Public”] is never obliged in Great Britain to switch anything off, however, unless by mistake he should tune in to the Third Programme. All his cultural allergies are locked away in the so-called Third Programme, which, because of the wave-length reserved for it, can only be heard in London and its neighbourhood. So, in Manchester or Nottingham he is perfectly safe. (RA 18)

Nonetheless, he clearly saw the prospect of the BBC (as both patron and organ of publicity) as a possible alternative to the complete absence of “serious art.” The link between the two (the employment of a Christian mythos and the attempt to gain a wider public) is to be found in the resources of fantastic representation, which provided Lewis with a way to combine memorable and provocative imagery (always one of his strong points) with social criticism couched in ethical (rather than openly political) terms. I do not wish to argue that this response to the situation of the modernist writer after WWII was necessarily successful (in either aesthetic or market terms), only that the subgenre of afterlife fiction provided him with the resources for such a response, and that neither his estimation of his situation nor his turn to this kind of writing were unique within the period.
Chapter 3: “Hell Goes Round and Round”: The Modernist Fantastic in *The Third Policeman*

In the previous chapter, I discussed the first book of Wyndham Lewis’s *Human Age* series as an instance of pre-WWII modernist auto-critique. This chapter continues this thinking, taking as its object a book written in Ireland on the cusp of that war: Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*. I argue here that the afterworld setting provided O’Brien with a narrative justification for his attempt to create experimental writing for a popular audience, while also allowing him to figure in disguised form the unreality of Irish life under de Valera. As with many of these attempts to write modernist fiction for a middle-brow audience, his gambit paid off only posthumously, most recently with the uptick of book sales occasioned by the appearance of the book on the television program *Lost*.

*The Third Policeman* is anomalous in this list of afterlife fiction for at least two reasons: O’Brien is the only confirmed believer I discuss, and the afterlife fiction he has created owes little to nothing to that of Dante. In a sense, these could be thought of as one, since the fact that O’Brien is writing from a perspective of faith could be said to give his afterlife an urgency that needs no previous literary support (as do the afterlives of those who don’t explicitly profess personal belief in such a thing). Yet to say this is to refer belief back to the individual, which is to impoverish the very ideas of belief and secularism. More significant, both for O’Brien and for my reading of *The Third Policeman*,

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1 In this context, it is worth mentioning Pierre Klossowski, whose *Baphomet* is another fiction of the afterlife produced by a professed Catholic, and which also owes little to Dante compared to the afterlife fictions of atheists, agnostics, or vague protestants.
is the site of enunciation, and the pressures that that site places on the enunciation itself.

As with the other authors I discuss, the situation is made up a literary component and a more general socio-political one operating in conjunction: in this case, the former is the problem of making a name for oneself as an experimental novelist in Ireland after Joyce, while the latter is to be found in the early years de Valera’s constitution (established in 1937) and the first stirrings of “the Emergency.” The first sections of the chapter describe the situation in which O’Brien found himself in 1939, while the later sections read the textual mechanisms of the modernist fantastic as O’Brien’s attempt to navigate the non-place afforded by that situation. Such navigation operates, in this case, through a division of textual labor between an excessively restrictive plot and the freeing of floating details of description and narration, the former authorizing and enabling the latter.

**Situation**

**A Latecomer in the Land of Joyce**

James Joyce was an artist. He said so himself. His was a case of Ars gratia Artist. He declared that he would pursue his artistic mission even if the penalty was as long as eternity itself.

—Brian Nolan, “A Bash in the Tunnel”

The way downward is easy from Avernus.
Black Dis’s door stands open night and day.
But to retrace your steps to heaven’s air,
There is the trouble, there is the toil.

—Virgil, *Aeneid* 187-190

In 1939, Brian O’Nolan (the civil servant), aka Brian Ó Nualláin (same), aka Brian Nolan (in at least one publication), previously aka Brother Barnabas (regular contributor to the
UCD student magazine Comhthrom Féinne), soon to be aka Myles na gCopaleen (the Irish Times columnist beginning in 1940), was still trying to make a name for himself as a novelist. Actually, that name, Flann O’Brien, was already some steps toward being made, having appeared on a novel on March 13th of that year. The early critical reception of that novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, was dominated instead by another name, that of James Joyce.

This trend was begun by Graham Greene’s well-meaning praise of the novel, which appeared on the dust jacket of the 1939 Longman’s edition (Greene was then a reader at Longman’s, and it is largely thanks to him that Longman’s picked up the book):

> It is in the line of *Tristram Shandy* and *Ulysses*: its amazing spirits do not disguise the seriousness of the attempt to present, simultaneously as it were, all the literary traditions of Ireland—the Celtic legend (in the stories of Finn), the popular adventure novel (of a Mr. Tracey), the nightmare element as you get it in Joyce, the ardent poetry of Bardic Ireland and the working-class people poetry of the absurd Harry Casey. On all these the author imposes the unity of his own humorous vigour, and the technique he employs is as efficient as it is original. We have had books inside books before but O’Nolan takes Pirandello and Gide a long way further. The screw is turned until you have (a) a book about a man called Trellis who is (b) writing a book about certain characters who (c) are turning the tables on Trellis by writing about him. It is a wild, fantastic, magnificently comic notion, but looking back afterwards one realizes that by no other method could the realistic, the legendary, the novelette have been worked in together. (Greene’s reader report, quoted on dust jacket of the first edition; cited in Jones 2, Cronin 89)

2 Although “O’Nolan” had also slipped onto the dust jacket of that novel, in Graham Greene’s blurb (Cronin 89). I will refer to him in what follows as O’Brien when writing of him in general, but maintain the different personae when referring to specific texts or to the personae themselves.
Although Greene’s main focus here is (quite understandably) on the formal structure of nested narrative levels, reviewers of the book immediately pounced on the double mention of Joyce (both *Ulysses* as a whole, and the “Circe” episode in particular). The first review of the book to appear, in the March 18 edition of the *Times Literary Supplement*, keeps mostly to the same terms as Greene, focusing on the nested structure and incorporation of the Irish literary tradition, but it also includes a mention of “a fragment modelled on the *Walpurgisnacht* manner of Mr. Joyce” (“Nest of Novelists” 161), and concludes that “[a]ltogether this is something of a *tour de force*, in which the only exceptional thing is a schoolboy brand of mild vulgarity” (“Nest of Novelists” 161). To add to the indignity of this lukewarm review, it appeared crushed on the bottom of the page, underneath an equally cool review of the “First Choice” recommendation: Faulkner’s *Wild Palms.*

From here, however, the reviews develop a pattern of calling up Joyce to effect an unflattering comparison between the two authors. Writing for the *Observer*, Frank Swinnerton noted that

*At Swim-Two-Birds* has been compared to *Tristram Shandy* and *Ulysses*. It is not equal to either. […] It reads as if it were the work of an Irish undergraduate, familiar, indeed, with both books and others of recent appearance, but uncertain of anything except his own humour and his wish to produce a work of fiction. *(Observer*, March 19, 1939; cited in Cronin 92)

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3 Of this latter, the reviewer writes: “It contains nothing that makes no sense at all, but there is a good deal that seems deliberately dim or is plainly overwritten” (“Mississippi Tragedy” 161). Surely appearing as a second choice to Faulkner is no mean feat, but appearing as a runner-up to such an unenthusiastically reviewed American book, coupled with the Joycefest that was to follow, must have added to the insult O’Brien was to feel over the reception of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. 240
Sean O’Faoláin made more of the Joyce comparison, noting that the novel had “a general odour of spilt Joyce about it” (John O’London’s Weekly, March 24, 1939; cited in Cronin 92), and Anthony West called it a “self-conscious work heavily under the influence of Joyce” (The New Statesman and Nation, June 17, 1939; cited in Cronin 92). West seems to have liked Joyce little, and resemblance to him even less: “Long passages in imitation of Joycean parody of early Irish epic are devastatingly dull, passages slavishly following Joyce’s love of snot-green squalor are worse still” (ibid.). Even those reviewers who generally praised the book did so by comparing it with Joyce. Edwin Muir wrote for The Listener that “[t]he dialogue has the same timeless quality as Mr. Joyce’s” and “[t]he autobiographical narrator with his preoccupation with dirt and shabbiness reads like a comic variant of Stephen Dedalus” (“New Novels” 805). Even here, however, Greene’s comparison of the novel with Tristram Shandy and Ulysses on the dust jacket provoked Muir to object with the declaration that “compared to either it is flimsy” (ibid.). O’Brien clearly felt that his invention was eclipsed by the constant references to Joyce, as indicated by his terse note to Timothy O’Keefe after the British republication of Swim-Two-Birds in 1960: “If I hear that word ‘Joyce’ again I will surely froth at the gob!” (Robert and Henderson 79).

In retrospect, one can see how the Joyce references (which appear simultaneously inevitable and only partially warranted) spoke differently to different national audiences. For English reviewers and audiences alike, the Joyce references indicated a decidedly “Irish” content (the book is set in Dublin, enough to garner a Ulysses reference
in those days, and does indeed reference various aspects of an Irish literary tradition in a manner sometimes similar to that of the “Cyclops” episode), as well as a general literary experimentalism. In an Irish context, the focus of the Joyce reference was shifted more onto the “mild vulgarity,” depiction of squalor, and occasionally even accusations of blasphemy. In both situations (the English and Irish book markets), however, the references to Joyce enforced a similar claim: that any experimental writer of fiction coming out of Ireland would inevitably be held up against the model of Joyce (the persona/literary figure as much as the writing).

The Joyce references also served to distance the reputation of Swim-Two-Birds from one of its more significant achievements: the use of the fantastic as a justification for experimental writing. Joyce had, of course, used the experimental fantastic (if I can call it that) in his “Circe” episode and at other moments in Ulysses (a point made by the TLS review cited above), but a more careful comparison of these two texts indicates the differences of strategy between them more than the similarities. The earlier author uses the fantastic primarily as either an allegorical commentary on or depiction of an internal state derived from the literal (and generally “realist”) events of June 16, 1904. O’Brien’s book has none of this: the Pooka is a devil, the “Good Fairy” a fairy (it was originally an “Angel,” but was changed before publication [Robert and Henderson 66]), a “short-horn cow” is given the power of speech by “a secret theurgic process” to allow her to testify against Trellis (ASTB 222), and “aestho-autogamy” allows the creation of new human beings “from an operation involving neither fertilization nor conception” (ASTB 37). All
of these fantastic conceits are played literally (the last in the list is, in fact, a literalization of the capacity of a writer to create a character through text) rather than treated as figures for an absent (but indicated) “real” scene. They are, however, held in check by the conceit that all the elements of the fantastic occur only within the narrative of the narrator’s manuscript (and in this way, they do not contaminate the “realism” of either the frame story or the book). It is, as Greene noted, an “efficient” and “original” device to authorize any aspect of the fantastic within an ostensibly realist genre (the novel) without resorting to the “mythic realism” (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 327-355) of Joyce.

While the references to Joyce downplay the originality of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, they also obscure its debt to a specifically Irish tradition of the fantastic, not just the obvious use of legendary figures such as Sweeney and Finn, but, more importantly, O’Brien’s role in a consistent tradition of Irish writing running from Swift through 20th century figures like James Stephens, Eimar O’Duffy, Austin Clarke, and Mervyn Wall (the last of whom was an associate of O’Brien in Dublin). The posthumous publication of his second novel in 1967 prompted a revaluation of O’Brien’s writing along these lines. The *Times Literary Supplement* (Sept. 7, 1967) review is characteristic, presenting the Joycean genealogy as a false start:

It is customary, on the strength of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, to place O’Brien in the Joycean tradition in Irish literature. [...] But it is not at all certain that these are the right lines. *The Third Policeman* has for its neighbour *The Dalkey Archive* [written and published in 1962]. [...] These two books throw a different light upon *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and suggest that the proper place for Flann O’Brien is the tradition of modern Irish fantasy and romance in which the definitive figure is James Stephens. ("Tall Talk" 793)
Part of the difficulty of placing O’Brien in literary history is that he stands out as a particularly (late) modernist variant of this tradition. For many years the response to this confusion of categories had been to throw him to the modernists as a latter-day Joycean (a choice made as early as Greene’s comparison, and confirmed by the early reviews), while the more recent treatment, ushered in by critics such as the TLS reviewer cited above, has been to rescue him from the international cadre (which, perplexingly, still held him under the thumb of the Irish expatriate) and assert his links to this Irish tradition. The argument that follows identifies The Third Policeman as a self-conscious attempt on O’Brien’s part to emphasize the experimental fantastic (already present in At Swim-Two-Birds) in order to distance his own reputation from that of Joyce and establish an alternative (and specifically Irish) version of modernism motivated by explicitly fantastic representation rather than interiority or “mythic realism.”

Insofar as he (unlike Joyce) never broke with Irish Catholicism or went into exile on the continent to escape his national predicament, O’Brien could perhaps be said to be more of an Irish writer than was Joyce. To do this, however, one would have to determine what it is that makes one an Irish writer, a matter that doesn’t concern me overmuch here, especially since O’Brien (in the guise of Brian Nolan) has given his own idiosyncratic account of “the position of the artist in Ireland.” This is to be found in his

4 Indeed, it is idle yet interesting to wonder what the life of the book would have been had they focused on Greene’s reference to Sterne rather than Joyce.
5 Several recent studies have emphasized this revised genealogy by way of the genre of Menippean satire. M. Keith Booker makes a case of a Bakhtinian reading of O’Brien in Flann O’Brien, Bakhtin, and Menippean Satire, while José Lanters places O’Brien within a specifically Irish tradition of that genre in Unauthorized Versions: Irish Menippean Satire, 1919-1952.
“Editorial Note” to the Joyce special issue of *Envoy* (May 1951), alternately titled “A Bash in the Tunnel,” and centers around the anecdote that gives the essay its name. After a brief section decrying Joyce’s blasphemy, Nolan poses for himself the question of the position of the artist in Ireland, and then answers with the following convoluted story (to which I cannot do justice in the space allotted here), told to him, he writes, in the Scotch House by the son of a grocer and publican, “then a complete stranger.” His father, the story goes, had a contract stocking the dining cars for the Dublin railway, and his son had a copy made of his father’s master key. Once a week, he would use the key to sneak into a dining car in the morning, lock himself in, take the whiskey from the car into the lavatory (which he would also lock), and have his fill. During this time, the dining car is “shunted” from station to station as passenger lines are overfilled and the dining car is left behind for an additional passenger car to accommodate the additional travelers. The son would remain in the lavatory, drinking the whiskey and becoming resentful of the “shunters” for causing him to spill whiskey on himself whenever the car was moved. (Nolan 6-7, SP 202-205).

Although this is not the end of the story (I will get to that in a moment), it is all one needs to know to follow Nolan’s conclusion, which returns to the question of the artist in Ireland:

Funny? But surely there you have the Irish artist? Sitting fully dressed, innerly locked in the toilet of a locked coach where he has no right to be, resentfully drinking somebody else’s whiskey, being whisked hither and thither by some

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6 “If there’s no God, […] the thing is stupid and unnecessary. If there is, it’s dangerous” (Nolan 5, SP 202).
anonymous shunters, keeping fastidiously the while on the outer face of his door the simple word ENGAGED? […] I think the image fits Joyce: but particularly in his manifestation of a most Irish characteristic—the transgressor’s resentment with the nongressor. (Nolan 9, SP 206)

This is an alternately silly and savage portrait of the artist (Joyce, certainly, but also any Irish writer—presumably including Nolan himself, unless his self-exclusion was the motive behind the absent “O” in his name), but it demands a serious reading as well. The double interiority of the locked toilet of a locked car highlights the self-imposed exile and detachment of the writer from Irish (or indeed, any) society, while his position as transgressor (thief of his father’s goods) calls into question his arrogation of the authority to write. The characteristic that Nolan calls attention to, however, is that of resentment against those who go about their daily life without regard to this great man locked away in furious yet ultimately irrelevant activity. With this move, he effectively dodges once more the question of authority (on what authority does one write?), yet the (otherwise unnecessary) ending of the story of the “bash in the tunnel” offers a rather unexpected answer.

After the son in the story has described his weekly exploits in the cars, he tells the further tale of his “bash in the tunnel.” Not wearing a watch, this unnamed man would use the light outside the car to determine the length of a “bash,” but on one occasion the car was parked in Liffey Tunnel for several days, leading to an unintended

7 Myles had already asked (but not answered) this question in a column on “passive print addiction”: “What prompts a sane inoffensive man to write? Assuming that to ‘write’ is mechanically to multiply communication (sometimes a very strong assumption, particularly when one writes a book about peasants in Irish) what vast yeasty eructation of egotism drives a man to address simultaneously a mass of people he has never met and who may resent being pestered with his ‘thoughts’?” (BM 237).
“three day bash” when daylight failed to appear in the morning (Nolan 8, SP 205). This extension of the story seems only to highlight the divorce between the world and the author (who can no longer tell night from day), but it also finds an unexpected echo in O’Brien’s last completed novel, *The Dalkey Archive* (1964). Here, we discover that the unnamed transgressor above is in the same position as that of the reluctant prophet Jonas: “The Bible merely says that he spent three days and nights in the belly of the creature. Not clear how anybody could distinguish night from day in the darkness” (DA 72-3). The resemblances between the two stories (three days spent in darkness as punishment for hubris and unwarranted resentment) suggest that there may indeed be a more serious import to the story of the “bash in the tunnel,” retroactively recast as a parable of betrayal (of the prophet’s—and author’s—duty to both God and the people). The duty to God *is*, in a sense, the duty to the people, the duty to warn the people of their transgressions against divine law. For O’Brien, Joyce (like any modernist) was too proud, and substituted his own system for that of God. Yet I claim O’Brien here as a late modernist (hence his inclusion in the present text), and indeed his own aesthetic is one of creation rather than mimesis, recalling the hermeticism of other late modernists like Nabokov or Beckett:

If I paint you a still life [...] you must understand that this canvas can be placed beside any similar ‘natural’ object, a flower, a shell, a leaf, in competition, not in imitation. A shell, in its accidents, is the phenomenal expression of a design the meaning of which is not accessible to us but which is rigid, logical, coordinated, formed according to a morphology that transcends our understanding of these terms. In the human scale, my painting must inevitably exhibit these same characteristics—under my own control and use of light, pigment, canvas, form, texture, colour, chroma, value, sense, line, impasto and chiaroscuro. These …
events are … organized to produce not merely a symbol, a décor, but a … sort of legendary organism which is to be appreciated and can only be judged in terms of itself. (BM 260)

Should this appear to put the artist on an even level with that other Creator, Myles emphasizes instead the triviality of art. “The main thing to bear in mind is the unimportance of all art. It is very much a minor activity” (BM 258-9). In a sense, At Swim-Two-Birds, set in Dublin and featuring a UCD student, still looked a bit too much like both Joyce and referential fiction. His next novel (at least in manuscript), The Third Policeman, would not make the same mistake.

Such a comparison also marks out a difference between Joyce and Jonas (both of whom appear as characters in The Dalkey Archive). Jonas, despite his initial betrayal of God, was finally expelled from the “belly of hell” (Jonas 2: 3) to deliver God’s message of repentance to the city of Nineveh, while Nolan writes that “at the end, Joyce will still be in his tunnel, unabashed” (Nolan 11, SP 208). Joyce had written his own katabasis narrative in the 6th episode of Ulysses; Nolan at his most devious reminds us what Virgil told us of the underworld: that it is easy to enter but difficult to return to the light.

**The View from Nowhere**

To complicate the issue of Joyce’s (indirect) influence on the reception of At Swim-Two-Birds, the terms with which O’Brien described the book to others indicate that he had been self-consciously trying to write a book that could be simultaneously popular and experimental, pleasing the “low-brow” set with its irreverent humor and the “high-brow” set with its complex narrative structure and dense allusions. He sent copies to
both Joyce and Ethel Mannin, and his note to the latter (a popular novelist of the day) set out the gambit: “It is a belly-laugh or high-class literary pretentious slush, depending on how you look at it” (Robert and Henderson 69). Mannin’s response was unfavorable, while Joyce supplied O’Brien with one of the last pieces of literary praise he would produce before his death: “That’s a real writer, with a true comic spirit. A really funny book” (Cronin 93-4). This was, however, delivered through word of mouth (if not entirely apocryphal), and, as O’Brien wrote Longman’s in May of 1939, “Joyce was very particular that there should be no question of reproducing his unsolicited testimony for publicity purposes and got an undertaking to this effect” (Robert and Henderson 68).

The disparity of praise between these representatives of the “high-brow” and the “low-brow,” respectively, was not replicated in the market. The generally cold critical reception was met by equally chilly sales. The book sold just under 250 copies over the course of 1939, and Longman’s remaining stocks of it were destroyed by German bombs in autumn of 1940 (Cronin 99).

O’Brien did not just attempt to promote the book to multiple publics, however; the “high-brow” / “low-brow” distinction is turned into subject matter and (unsurprisingly) mocked in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, indicating that O’Brien knew the difficulties his book would face even as he tried to ignore them. His parody of the attempt to pander to popular sentiment comes in the form of Jem Casey, the “poet of the people” (ASTB 73). When Finn recounts the lays of Sweeney (in O’Brien’s own
(translation) for a band of Trellis’s characters, Shanahan interrupts to champion a more populist approach to literature:

> It’s good, very good. But by Christopher it’s not every man could see it, I’m bloody sure of that, one in a thousand. [...] It’s the stuff that put our country where she stands to-day, [...] and I’d have my tongue out of my head by the bloody roots before I’d be heard saying a word against it. But the man in the street, where does he come in? By God he doesn’t come in at all as far as I can see. (ASTB 76)

Shanahan’s rant begins as a not-entirely unusual complaint against the Celtic Twilight’s attempts to popularize traditional Irish poetry and tales as part of their nation-building project, but the literature held up as a substitute leaves little doubt that O’Brien does not share the populism with which he endows Shanahan. Jem Casey, “one man that can write pomes that you can read all day long and all night and keep reading them to your heart’s content” (ASTB 77), with his poem “Workman’s Friend” (each stanza of which ends with the all-caps line “A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN”), inspires little confidence in either the working man or (more specifically) Shanahan’s estimation of him. Ultimately, it is Shanahan’s own characterization of a “low-brow” public that is the target of O’Brien’s satire. By the end of the book, his net is pitched so low as to empty out the very category he tries to champion. “[Y]ou have to remember the man in the street. I may understand you, Mr. Lamont may understand you, Mr. Furriskey may understand you—but the man in the street? Oh, by God you have to go very very slow if you want him to follow you. A snail would be too fast for him, a snail could give him

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8 O’Brien studied Irish poetry at UCD under Douglas Hyde, and Cronin notes that he was unimpressed with Hyde’s grasp of the language (Cronin 53-4).
yards” (ASTB 184). The extensive italics allow O’Brien to indicate economically the
histrionics into which Shanahan enters in defense of “the man in the street” (a category
in which he never includes himself). Such exaggeration shows “the man in the street” up
as a phantom, a figure invoked by others to excuse their own laziness or justify their
tastes, rather than an actual human being with whom one might fail to communicate.9

As is generally the case with O’Brien, the “other side” of this debate receives no
more of a pass than does literary populism as embodied by Shanahan. The narrator
himself gives the game away at the end of his “explanation spontaneous and
unsolicited” regarding the nature of the novel:

The modern novel should be largely a work of reference. Most authors spend
their time saying what has been said before—usually said much better. A wealth
of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with
the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would
effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimbleriggers, and persons of
inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature. (ASTB 20)

This passage is difficult to place in the economy of the text, particularly since one of the
narrator’s earlier points does, in fact, seem to characterize one of O’Brien’s own
positions on the novel (and At Swim-Two-Birds as a whole), viz. that “a satisfactory novel
should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his
credulity” (ASTB 19).10 At the same time, the passage serves as an internal inoculation

9 A few years later, “the man in the street” would become Myles’s “Plain People of Ireland,” with whom he
would have mock dialogues in the pages of the Irish Times.
10 This point, in turn, is a response to the potentially “undemocratic” nature of the novel: “The play was
consumed in wholesome fashion by large masses in places of public resort; the novel was self-administered
in private. The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic. […] It was undemocratic to
compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should be allowed a private life, self-
against bad reviews, since these reviewers are now labeled (before the fact)
“mountebanks, upstarts, thimbleriggers, [or] persons of inferior education” for failing to
understand *At Swim-Two-Birds*. As with Shanahan’s defense of “the man in the street,”
however, this discourse on the modern novel begins in a general sympathy with the text,
only to reach a point of extremity at which the position becomes self-consuming (a
process we can read in the passage from the second to third points of the final sentence
quoted above), indicting a resurgence of the very elitism that the attack on the
“undemocratic” aspects of the novel in the beginning of the paragraph militated against.
In terms of literary distinction (since this is what the “high-brow”/“low-brow”
distinction purports to designate), O’Brien found himself most comfortable in a
“middle-brow” position, declaring a pox on both houses in favor of a “sensible” middle
stance that mocked the emptiness of both extremes without directly specifying an
alternative.

This positionless criticism, or criticism that remains void of positive terms, is
characteristic of much of O’Brien’s writing, and even more so Myles’s journalism. Such a
approach was, to a certain extent, mandated by his position as a civil servant, a position
which disallowed him from direct criticism of official policies.¹¹ Even with his multiple

determination, and a decent standard of living. This would make for self-respect, contentment and better
service.” (ASTB 19)
¹¹ Cronin usefully reproduces the text of the circular O’Brien was forced to sign upon entering the service:
“The nature and conditions of a civil servant’s employment should, of themselves, suggest to him that he
must maintain a reserve in political matters; and not put himself forward on one side or another and,
further, that he should be careful that he do nothing that would give colour to any suggestion that his
official actions are in any way influenced, or capable of being influenced, by party motives” (Civil Service
Circular No 21/32, Civil Servants and Politics, cited in Cronin 180).
personae, he could not take a strong position for or against any specific aspect of partition, home rule, de Valera’s Ireland, or any other matters of state. In this situation, much of his *Irish Times* satire was based either on social foibles or, more often, linguistic clichés or rhetorical failures. Indeed, one running feature was his “Catechism of Cliché,” a “unique compendium of all that is nauseating in contemporary writing” (BM 202). Such an approach allowed him the excuse of attacking the style of address rather than the position presented, and indeed, one often sets down even the most amusing of “Cruiskeen Lawn” pages with little sense of Myles’s actual position on the matter at hand. Such a practice does not dull the humor, since taking a position is clearly not the point—O’Brien/Myles instead positions himself parasitically in relation to positive discourse, playing on relations rather than occupying a stable position.12

Such positionless criticism is also characteristic, however, of late modernism more generally, in which the attempt to locate an Absolute that could serve as an alternative for the liberalism of pre- and inter-war Europe is replaced by a non-normative criticism of the created world.13 We have already seen this in the case of Lewis, where such an empty critique found itself the motor of a serial literary production moving asymptotically toward an unnameable Absolute (God, as circled around in the latter two books of *The Human Age*). O’Brien’s case is rather different,

12 These terms come from Michel Serres’s *The Parasite*. See esp. 34-39.
13 Tyrus Miller makes similar claims about the lack of position of the author in late modernist fiction: “late modernism is decisively marked by a minimal ‘positionality’ of the authorial subject. That is to say, these texts bear the marks of an author without determinate social, moral, political, and even narrative location: isolated, in drift, and unstably positioned with respect to the work” (Miller 63).
particularly since, unlike the resolutely secular Lewis (never able to do more than “flirt” with religion), O’Brien was able to take up a particularly Catholic Absolute in order to critique the state of the (fallen) world for not measuring up to the demands made of it by God. The position of outright rejection of Catholicism had already been taken by Joyce, and could not be reoccupied by O’Brien without reemphasizing his similarities to his unwanted predecessor. At any rate, there is little evidence that O’Brien would have wanted to take such a position even had it not been already occupied, and his writings, while rarely advocating directly for belief, exist against a horizon of assumed belief. Indeed, this trait is probably at least partly responsible for the sense of affection and friendship Irish Times readers had for “Myles” (Jones xii-xv); the columns were presented as (sometimes savage) asides to friends and co-religionists, messages to those also already “in the know.”

Yet he clearly did not want to position himself as a staunch defender of de Valera’s Fianna Fáil party and new constitution, which advocated a populist, isolationist, agrarian, and specifically Catholic Ireland. The idealization of a pure Irish peasantry, exemplified by de Valera’s simultaneously economic and cultural focus on small, family-based agriculture adhering to his own view of traditional Irish peasant life, was one of the principal targets of Myles’s An Béal Bocht (1941), an Irish language parody of Gaeltacht literature. From a personal financial perspective, he had little to gain from a party headed by a man who had already tried (unsuccessfully) to cut civil service salaries in the interest of “social justice” in 1932. As far as state Catholicism was
concerned, O’Brien, like so many other Irish intellectuals at the time, was less concerned with the correctness of the basic beliefs, and more with the specifically provincial emphases on sexual restrictions and moral prohibitions (and the extension of these into state policies). Of all failures, the most important for O’Brien was that of misplaced emphasis, of undue focus on doctrinal details and specific prohibitions to the detriment of an overall moral orientation—a case, if one resorts to the language of cliché, of missing the forest for the trees. In his 1951 reflection on Joyce, Brian Nolan reverses this cliché to characterize Joyce’s revolt against Irish Catholicism in a way that speaks to O’Brien’s (and, in this case, perhaps even O’Nolan’s) own relationship with that institution:

It seems to me that Joyce emerges, through curtains of salacity and blasphemy, as a truly fear-shaken Irish Catholic, rebelling not so much against the Church but against its near-schism Irish eccentricities, its pretense that there is only one Commandment, the vulgarity of its edifices, the shallowness and stupidity of many of its ministers. His revolt, noble in itself, carried him away. He could not see the tree for the woods. But I think he meant well. We all do, anyway. (Nolan 10, SP 207)

This essay, at least, finds O’Brien asserting himself as the voice of reason, trying to recall Joyce (or, at least, the memory of him) from the threatening void of true unbelief.

Rhetorically, it cautions that one hold to the unifying tree of the Church so as not to become lost in the dark woods of its local institutional expression (as, according to Nolan, did Joyce). The passage is as clear, however, in its criticism of the Irish Catholic institution as it is in its defense of the basis of Catholic belief against the blasphemy of

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14 On this codification of Catholic doctrine into the 1937 constitution, see Whyte 24-61.
Joyce. It is in such a squeezed position of middle-brow literary production, critical of both the Church and criticisms against it, and unable to comment explicitly on state policy (which, under de Valera’s constitution, included much Church doctrine) without risking his livelihood, that we find O’Brien planning his (then to-be) second novel, which is the subject of the remainder of this chapter.

**The Third Policeman**

Despite the poor initial sales and mediocre critical reception of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (perhaps because of them), O’Brien was toying with ideas for a follow-up novel in May of 1939. In a letter dated the 1st of that month, O’Brien proposed the idea to Mr. Gillett of Longman’s:

I have not yet done anything about another novel beyond turning over some ideas in my head. My difficulty is to find the time to get down to work of this kind. My bread and butter occupation keeps me busy until very late in the evenings at this time of the year and I do not expect to be able to start anything until rather late in the Summer and cannot see it finished until perhaps November or so. I should like to hear from you as to whether whatever is forthcoming should come quickly from the point of view of continuity in whatever fragment I have of the public mind or whether a long interval is unobjectionable. [...] Briefly, the story I have in mind opens as a very orthodox murder mystery in a rural district. The perplexed parties have recourse to the local barracks which, however, contain some very extraordinary policemen who do not confine their investigations or activities to this world or to any known planes or dimensions. Their most casual remarks create a thousand other mysteries but there will be no question of the difficulty or “fireworks” of the last book. The whole point of my plan will be the perfectly logical and matter-of-fact treatment of the most brain-staggering imponderables of the policemen. I should like to do this rather carefully and spend some time on it. (Jones 34-35)

Of particular importance here are several features that O’Brien highlights to distance himself from the image of a latter-day modernist: the passing practical reference to his
“bread and butter occupation” in the civil service (no career writer or artist, this, but a devoted hobbyist), the emphasis on the next book as a work of genre fiction (even here, however, he hedges his bets, since he only claims that the book “opens as a very orthodox murder mystery,” not that it is one), and the specific claim that his projected book will not be as formally difficult or complex as *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The latter two points, at least, are clearly attempts to prematurely sell the book to a publisher who had taken a risk on his first novel with little financial recompense. Yet they also speak to O’Brien’s genuine desire to write books that would be read and enjoyed widely.

He mentioned the new book in passing in a letter to William Saroyan (dated Sept 25, 1939) lamenting his failure to find an American publisher for *At Swim-Two-Birds*:

About that book, the failure of American publication comes to me as a distinct expectation. I knew all that. There is a great population in America but not enough arty-tarty screwballs to go in for stuff like that in satisfactory numbers. Joyce has the market cornered. I’m forgetting about that book. I’ve got no figures but I think it must be a flop over here too. I guess it is a bum book anyhow. I’m writing a very funny book now about bicycles and policemen and I think it will be perhaps good and earn a little money quietly. If I finish it I will instantly send you a copy and then you can pass it on to Matson if you think he would not take offense. (Robert and Henderson 70)

By February of 1940 he wrote again to Saroyan (in a letter dated Saint Valentine’s Day, 1940), describing the now-finished novel, which he had sent to Longman’s in January (Cronin 100), despite his claim to the contrary:

I’ve just finished another bum book. I don’t think it is much good and I haven’t sent it anywhere yet. The only thing good about it is the plot and I’ve been wondering whether I could make a crazy Saroyan play out of it. When you get to the end of this book you realise that my hero or main character (he’s a heel and a killer) has been dead throughout the book and that all the queer ghastly things which have been happening to him are happening in a sort of hell which he has
earned for the killing. Towards the end of the book (before you know he’s dead) he manages to get back to his own house where he used to live with another man who helped in the original murder. Although he’s been away 3 days, this other fellow is 20 years older and dies of fright when he sees the other lad standing in the door. Then the two of them walk back along the road to the hell place and start going through all the same terrible adventures again, the first fellow being surprised and frightened at everything just as he was the first time and as if he’d never been through it before. It is made clear that this sort of thing goes on forever—and there you are. It’s supposed to be very funny but I don’t know about that either. If it’s ever published I’ll send you a copy. I envy you the way you write just what you want to and like it when it’s finished. I can never seem to get anything just right. Nevertheless, I think the idea of a man being dead all the time is pretty new. When you are writing about the world of the dead—and the damned—where none of the rules and laws (not even the law of gravity) holds good, there is any amount of scope for back-chat and funny cracks. (Robert and Henderson 70-71)

Although some of the details are different in the extant version (the narrator returns home after 16 years rather than 20, for example), this gives a concise description of The Third Policeman. The focus is no longer on genre but on the plot, with its surprise ending.

“[T]he idea of a man being dead all the time” was not entirely new (the most obvious similar conceit is that of Ambrose Bierce’s “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” from 1886), but there is little reason to find O’Brien disingenuous in his statement. At the very least, O’Brien had taken the premise of that very brief American Civil War story and expanded it to create an extended narrative—something which would not otherwise be done until Golding’s Pincher Martin (1956). At any rate, we have little reason to believe that O’Brien had any familiarity with Bierce’s story, and the twist ending and

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15 Sue Asbee notes the similarity of these texts in her monograph on O’Brien (Asbee 50-51).
authorization of otherwise absurd description serve very different purposes than they did in “Occurrence.”

Longman’s, however, would have none of it, and replied in a brief note of March 11, 1940: “We realise the author’s ability but think that he should become less fantastic and in this new novel he is more so” (Longman’s reader to A. M. Heath & Co., cited in Jones 31). O’Brien’s agents failed to place the book with other publishers, and, after Harold Matson was also unable to find an American publisher for the manuscript (now titled *Hell Goes Round and Round*), O’Brien gave up, concocting not one but several stories of how the manuscript had been lost to avoid exposing his failure to friends (Cronin 101-103). Apart from a few essays and a short story from late 1940 and early 1941, it was to be the last thing written by Flann O’Brien for over twenty years. 16 To take his place, O’Nolan created Myles na gCopaleen (later shortened to simply Gopaleen), *Irish Times* columnist, playwright, and author of the Irish-language peasant novel parody *An Béal Bocht*. This figure, known mostly for his journalism, was the public figure O’Brien had failed to become, and served O’Nolan relatively well until the late 1950s. The novelist O’Brien made a late recovery several years before his host’s death on April Fools’ Day 1966, publishing two minor comic novels: *The Hard Life* (1962) and *The Dalkey Archive* (1964). O’Brien even managed to outlive O’Nolan, publishing *The Third Policeman* in 1967 through the medium of Brian’s wife Evelyn.

The tale of *The Third Policeman* is told by an unnamed narrator who has devoted all his available time to the study of a “savant” named de Selby, whose eccentric theories are chronicled in a series of digressions and footnotes parodying academic discourse and disputes. The first chapter describes the narrator’s childhood, education, and experience with John Divney, the dishonest and opportunistic fellow to whom the narrator’s family farm and public house had been entrusted after his parents’ deaths. After Divney has insinuated himself into the narrator’s life and livelihood, he suggests the murder of Mathers to finance his own marriage to Pegeen Meers and the publication of the narrator’s “De Selby Index,” “wherein the views of all known commentators on every aspect of the savant and his works had been collated” (TP 14). Resistant at first, the narrator eventually relents and the two murder Mathers on the roadside. Divney hides Mathers’s “black cash-box,” leaving the narrator to bury the body in a ditch. When he returns, he refuses to disclose the location of the box, leading to three years of the narrator shadowing Divney, lest the latter escape without giving the narrator his share of the money. Finally, Divney announces that ample time has passed, and sends the narrator to claim the box (hidden under the floorboards in Mathers’s empty house) for both of them.

At the moment of attaining the box, however, “something happened” which the narrator “cannot hope to describe” (TP 23), leading to a series of absurd and confusing occurrences, dislocations, and scenarios that make up the remainder of the book. Mathers’s ghost appears to the narrator, drinking tea and willing to answer questions.
only in the negative. The narrator begins to hear and have conversations with his soul, which he names Joe. Having forgotten his own name, the narrator leaves the house on a single-minded quest to locate “the black box,” presenting himself at a nonsensical parish police barracks with a false story of a missing “American gold watch.” Much of the action of the body of the book is taken up with the absurd exploits of the policemen Pluck and MacCruiskeen, who share some curious theories about bicycles and have located an underground Eternity hidden down a trail off the road. Midway through the book, the body of Mathers is discovered and Sergeant Pluck decides that the narrator should hang for the murder, since he is handy and has no name:

“For that reason alone,” said the Sergeant, “we can take you and hang the life out of you and you are not hanged at all and there is no entry to be made in the death papers. The particular death you die is not even a death (which is an inferior phenomenon at the best) only an unsanitary abstraction in the backyard, a piece of negative nullity neutralized and rendered void by asphyxiation and the fracture of the spinal string.” (TP 102)

Although he is largely passive, the narrator manages to escape on the day of his intended hanging to return to Mathers’s house, where he meets the eponymous third policeman (Fox), who explains that the box is filled with a substance called omnium (which confers omnipotence on the possessor) and that it is the rightful property of the narrator and will be waiting for him at his home. When he finally returns there, he instead encounters a much-older Divney living with his wife and child. It is disclosed that Divney had hidden a bomb in place of the cash-box and that the narrator had died trying to retrieve it. Upon encountering the narrator, Divney dies of fright and accompanies the narrator back to the police barracks, where the action of the tale returns
to the narrator’s first arrival there, indicating that they will repeat this sequence of
events forever.

**Genre and the Literary Fantastic**

The reader, referred from the implement to the man, as from means to end,
discovers that man is, in turn, only a means. […] As a result, the universe of the
fantastic seems like a bureaucracy. Actually, it is the civil service that most
resembles a “topsy-turvy” society.
—Jean-Paul Sartre

In his early writings, O’Brien treats the novel not as a stable genre with its own
conventions, but more as a formal container to manage and authorize the juxtaposition
of other genres and subgenres. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the elaborate device of novels
within novels allowed him to yoke together a bildungsroman, an artist novel, two
different sorts of traditional Irish poetry (centered around Finn and Sweeney
respectively), the western or cowboy tale, the serial potboiler, the novel of moral
instruction, and sections from *The Conspectus of the Arts and Natural Sciences* and various
dictionaries, among other things. All of these things are held in place by the stability of
the frame narrative (that of the student narrator), which serves as a guarantee of a
minimal realism: all the fantastic elements appear in one of the secondary or tertiary
fictional levels, and, although characters can and do move from level to level within
these fictional levels, they all exist within the student’s manuscript and are not able to
leave that world to influence the “real” world of the frame narrative.

17 In this, O’Brien is in keeping with Bakhtin’s treatment of the novel as a dialogical genre defined not so
much by a specific set of traits as by its capacity to serve as a container for multiple speech genres. On this,
In comparison, *The Third Policeman* appears quite straightforward. Although ultimately circular, the majority of the book develops a single narrative, digressing only in the de Selby sections. What appears as narrative stability, however, is actually a streamlined approach to generic hybridity. The tale combines aspects of the murder-mystery/detective story, the confession, the fable, nonsense writing, the puzzle novel (as with Nabokov, Borges, Robbe-Grillet, or Calvino), the scholarly monograph, and the ghost story. It does so, however, not through a repetition of the “Chinese box” form of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (eliminated from the form of *The Third Policeman*, this figure reappears in the content of the novel in multiple spatial figures of infinite regression: MacCruiskeen’s boxes, Mathers’s eyes, etc.), but through the enabling device of afterlife fiction. One consequence of this shift is that the fantastic elements are no longer contained as they were in *Swim-Two-Birds*, but instead spread to contaminate the entirety of the book, or at least everything taking place after the death of the protagonist (which happens early in chapter 2, approximately 1/8 of the way through the book). Once this conceit is established (that the main character is dead and living in a hell of his own making), it indeed functions as an authorization for any sort of fantastic event (along with “back-chat and funny cracks”) or premise—an authorization that O’Brien repeatedly makes good on with sentient bicycles, colors that make all those who see them go mad, an industrial eternity, and a tea-drinking ghost.

This talk about the fantastic can only go so far, however, until the fantastic itself is clarified. I have used the term loosely (as loosely as did Longman’s in their rejection of
the manuscript) until now as a catchall term for fiction that is in some way deliberately unrealistic (that depicts, for example, magic in action, angels and devils, events not explicable through conventional logic, etc.). Yet there are other, more rigorous ways of defining the fantastic that shed some light on *The Third Policeman*. The most famous of these is certainly Todorov’s presentation of the fantastic as a literary genre in which it is undecidable whether some event or events are to be ascribed to natural or supernatural causes (“The Turn of the Screw” can serve as a standard example of this). Since the ending of *The Third Policeman* leaves little doubt that the cause of the various events is to be read as supernatural, the book would fall under Todorov’s category of the “fantastic-marvellous”: “the class of narratives that are presented as fantastic and that end with an acceptance of the supernatural” (Todorov 52). Yet the distance that classification gets us is not great. For my part, I am more inclined to think of this as a rhetorical tactic rather than a genre, since it can be modulated at various moments in a text to different effect, and bears few of the marks of a genre per se (identifiable formal structures, chronotopes, or subject matter). If looked at in this way, *The Third Policeman* certainly resembles the Todorovian fantastic, at least in the beginning of a first read, when a reader must grapple with how the various unexplained phenomena are to be taken. The curious thing to note in this regard, and one thing that marks *The Third Policeman* off from other “puzzle novels,” is that the “solution” leaves as many questions as it answers; it explains the possibility of the unusual occurrences in the novel (the narrator is dead and in hell), but often has little direct explanatory value as to the specifics of those occurrences (why
should the ghost of Mathers drink tea, and why is Joe fixated on the possible alter ego of “Signor Beniamino Bari, the eminent tenor”? In a realist novel, such things could be said to bear Barthes’s “reality effect” as unnecessary details included to aid verisimilitude. In the absence of such verisimilitude, these same traits take on an air of meaningfulness, but without a readily identifiable meaning.

Such deliberately artificial meaningfulness (or semblance of meaningfulness) can also be located in the many repetitions in the text. O’Brien’s propensity to identify and mock “the rigid, the ready-made, the mechanical” (Bergson, *Laughter* 118) in language can be readily seen on nearly all of Myles’s *Irish Times* columns, and one can find instances of that in *The Third Policeman* as well, as in Martin Finnucane’s repetition of the phrase “powerful steam machinery” (TP 44, 45) or Sergeant Pluck’s fixation with teeth. Yet the book extends repetition beyond this purpose, recycling language beyond the purview of particular characters. Divney has a fixation with “artificial manures,” which he associates with the “‘trickery of the Jewmen and the Freemasons’” (TP 14), and tries to sway the narrator against Mathers by “accusing [the old man] of being in ‘the artificial manure ring’” (TP 15). The narrator exhibits bland skepticism about the accusations, since “[he] knew it was not true about the manures” (TP 14). The obvious pun here is that Divney’s story is transparently bullshit, or indeed, less than bullshit, being not merely manure but “artificial” at that. But O’Brien does not leave the jest there. After the narrator’s death, the ghost of Mathers mentions that he was “‘party to the formation of an artificial manure-ring’” (TP 28). On a first glance, the effect of this repetition is to call
into question the narrator’s presumed position of knowledge (his skepticism regarding Divney’s claims). But the exact repetition of the phrase has the more fundamental effect of collapsing the verisimilitude of the fiction altogether, transforming the contingency of the first instances (as Divney’s casual lies) into necessity, the suggestion of a meaningful pattern underlying and informing the fiction. Yet any urge to interpret the phrase is met with the previous response, which is that it is merely bullshit, a formal gesture of artificiality without substance.\(^\text{18}\)

By the end of the novel, the narrator incorporates the substance into a utopian fantasy brought on by the promise of omnium’s power: “Fruits and crops, surpassing anything ever known would flower on my farm, in earth made inconceivably fertile by unparalleled artificial manures” (TP 189). At this point, the artificiality of both the repetition and the material can be linked up with a series of gestures to artificiality, which are (within the fiction) clues as to the artificiality of the narrator’s hell (a world created only for him), and more generally a metafictional device reminding the reader that the novel is a “self-evident sham,” as is the narrator’s fantasy cited above (indicated by the use of the conditional). This includes the appearance of the police barracks:

\(^{18}\) O’Brien’s choice of phrase no doubt recalls the terms of the Humus controversy going on in England during this time. Albert Howard’s 1940 *An Agricultural Testament* presents an alarmist approach to artificial manures which Myles would later parody in “Cruiskeen Lawn.” Howard: “Artificial manures lead inevitably to artificial nutrition, artificial food, artificial animals, and finally to artificial men and women” (Howard 37). Myles: “The mass of the human body (we confine ourselves strictly to the physical here) is made up of the soil where it grows up. The food that nourishes it is the clay, which yields up its salts and substances in the appetizing and attractive form of cabbage and beef and spuds. A man born in Ireland and reared here is therefore an Irishman according to far more extreme criteria than the speaking of Gaelic, wearing bicycle-clips at dances, or winning hand-ball medals. He is Ireland. He is temporarily a little bit of Ireland walking about on two rather ungainly pink stilts” (BM 380). I would like to thank Britt Rusert for calling this agricultural context to my attention.
As I came around the bend of the road an extraordinary spectacle was presented to me. About a hundred yards away on the left-hand side was a house which astonished me. It looked as if it were painted like an advertisement on a board on the roadside and indeed very poorly painted. It looked completely false and unconvincing. It did not seem to have any depth or breadth and looked as if it would not deceive a child. That was not in itself sufficient to surprise me because I had seen pictures and notices by the roadside before. What bewildered me was the sure knowledge deeply-rooted in my mind, that this was the house I was searching for and that there were people inside it. (TP 52-3)

As the narrator approaches the barracks, this de-realization of the building begins to spread to the rest of the world, producing an effect of artifice in the entire surrounding:

It seemed ordinary enough at close quarters except that it was very white and still. It was momentous and frightening; the whole morning and the whole world seemed to have no purpose except to frame it and give it some magnitude and position so that I could find it with my simple senses and pretend to myself that I understood it. (TP 53)

This transformation of the world into a frame for an equally artificial building gestures to the falsity of both the world (a private hell unrecognized as such) and the fiction (everything is indeed arranged for the narrator by O’Brien himself). But its immediate effect is to create a sense of artificial and inexplicable meaningfulness, not unlike that of a dream. Indeed, much of the narrator’s adventure has an oneiric quality, driven by such details as the inexplicable knowledge cited above, his flexible memory, and the displacement of affect onto environmental details (discussed below). In the service of a plot of confused persecution and unfulfilled desire, however, this oneiric writing gives the text a “nightmarish quality” (Clissmann 155).

I am tempted to nominate this as a distinctly middle-brow (and distinctly masculine) version of the aesthetic, which formalizes the Kantian depiction of beauty as
“purposiveness without purpose” into the semblance of pattern. The key psychological
trait of such an aesthetic is paranoia, visible formally and thematically in late modernist
texts from *Lolita* to *La Jalousie*. We know what is to be done with dreams, have known
from Joseph to Freud: we interpret them, seeking a meaning that would turn these
senseless but sense-promising forms into prophetic discourse, a sign of wisdom from the
beyond. If only there were a textual key (like the perpetually absent writings of de
Selby), all would surely become clear. This encourages a form of paranoid reading,
which treats the text as a network of signs, each leading on to the next and promising an
absent comprehension of total pattern. It corresponds to what Deleuze and Guattari call
the signifying regime of signs: “every sign refers to every other sign, and only to another
sign, ad infinitum” with a perpetually unfulfilled promise of signifying mastery, a
promised omnipotence within the “impotence of the deterritorialized sign,” in which the
paranoiac participates in his or her subservience to the sacred text (Deleuze and

This version of the aesthetic has become quite popular today, in television serials
such as *Lost* or *Heroes*, in novels like *Infinite Jest*, in films as diverse as *Pulp Fiction* and
*Mulholland Drive*. The difficulty is to separate out the form from the reading or viewing
practice attached to it, since, for most of these texts, the desire to “figure it out” drives
the experience of consumption, while the significance of such texts (whether taken as
effect, message, or Adorno’s “truth-content”) is always to be found elsewhere. Once
again, Joyce appears here as a precursor, the Joyce of *Ulysses* (or, more accurately, the
Joyce of the Linati Schema), a book that possesses a complex, difficult, and ultimately rather insignificant system of correspondences of colors, organs, sciences, rhetorical devices, etc. Only the most paranoid of readers cares what these correspondences are, or thinks they have understood the book when such correspondences are decoded. Yet such a paranoid reader also becomes the popular image of the critic (the textual expert), and contemporary fan culture has produced its own version of criticism to decode any number of texts.19

For O’Brien, paranoid reading is a habit to be broken, and The Third Policeman is a textual machine to help break the reader of that habit. Indeed, all of the texts mentioned above (The Third Policeman included) both encourage and punish paranoid reading: delirium is to be experienced, not mastered, no matter how carefully one counts the banana trees. Hence the elaborate parodies of academic discourse, exemplified in the footnotes of The Third Policeman, Pale Fire, Lanark, and Infinite Jest. Hence also gestures like the repetition of “artificial manures” discussed above, which holds out an empty promise of meaning at the level of the repetition, while mocking that desire with its desublimatory content. But whence such desires for mastery and textual expertise in the first place? To what situational pressures does this type of reading lead us back to, and how are we to describe the motives that made O’Brien and others create textual

19 Henry Jenkins treats both the communities of criticism in fan culture and the gendered division within that culture in Textual Poachers (Jenkins 86-119). Relevant for this project, Jenkins, following David Bleich, suggests that female interpreters tend to operate within a fictional world, speculating on characters’ experiences and motives, while male fans are more likely to engage in this delirium of speculation about the fictional world as such (Jenkins 110-112).
mechanisms of paranoia as inoculations against the very reading practices they initially seem to demand? A brief detour through another theory of the fantastic is in order, this time developed out of a specifically twentieth-century version of the fantastic.

Writing of “the Kafkaesque” in his review of Blanchot’s Aminadab (1942), Jean-Paul Sartre identifies the fundamental feature of the modern fantastic as the “revolt of means against ends,” which creates a “topsy-turvy world” in which both means and ends persist, but without meeting in practice (Sartre, “Aminadab” 61). Sartre’s focus on the disconnect between means and ends as the source of the fantastic helps to clarify the type of fantastic that grounds much of The Third Policeman. The air of absent meaning combined with the overall tone of growing anxiety and persecution provides a link between O’Brien’s version of the fantastic and that of Kafka. The “revolt of means against ends” is easily recognizable in the book. The narrator, for example, utters the following response to his death sentence: “‘I will resist,’ I shouted, ‘and will resist to the death and fight for my existence even if I lose my life in the attempt’” (TP 98). Here he proposes means that subvert his end (the preservation of his life) while locked into a comical fixity of language through the clichéd insistence on “resist[ing] to the death.”

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20 Niall Sheridan confirms that O’Brien was familiar with Kafka’s writing. In his biographical sketch in Timothy O’Keeffe’s volume Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan, he mentions Eliot, Yeats, Joyce, early Beckett, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Proust, Kafka, and Kierkegaard as significant influences on the social scene to which O’Nolan was attached in the 1930s, and indicates the special importance of the last three for O’Nolan (Sheridan 39-40).
More globally, recurring elements such as the narrator’s quest for his “American gold watch” emphasize the confusion of means and ends. The narrator initially concocts the watch as a pretense for using the police to locate the black box.\footnote{At the end of \textit{At Swim-Two-Birds}, the (equally unnamed) narrator of that book receives a watch (held in a “small black box”) from his uncle (ASTB 243). The fabricated story of a stolen watch as a way of getting to the black box in \textit{The Third Policeman} neatly reverses this scenario, while the constant and unnecessary addition of the appellation “American” is a jab at those who take American-ness as a source of (artificially) inflated value, as with the “over-endowed American universities” that took such a liking to Joyce.}

I felt relieved and simplified and certain that I would soon have the black box. But I would not ask the policemen openly about it at first. I would be crafty. In the morning I would go to the barracks and report the theft of my American gold watch. Perhaps it was this lie which was responsible for the bad things that happened to me afterwards. I had no American gold watch. (TP 36)

The language used here puts significant moral emphasis on this moment (as it did on the decision to take the volume of de Selby earlier in the book), but that tone is soon forgotten as the narrator begins to believe his own lie before he has a chance to mention it to the police. “If I had not lost my American gold watch it would be possible for me to tell the time” (TP 52). On this occasion Joe reminds the narrator of his lapse, but he repeatedly imagines the watch as really lost, and goes so far as to offer it to Joe 100 pages later (TP 161). Sergeant Pluck exhibits a more distinct version of this dehiscence of means and ends when he repeatedly reaches correct conclusions for bizarre (although internally logical) reasons. He correctly surmises that the gold watch mentioned above does not exist, on the basis that no one would steal a watch when he or she could steal a bicycle (TP 61). When the body of Mathers is discovered, Pluck decides that the narrator
should hang for the murder, but only because someone must hang and the narrator is “present adjacently at the time” (TP 98).

The logical puzzle of Mathers’s consistently negative responses charts carefully the demoralizing consequences of the detachment of means from ends. Mathers initially presents his policy of responding to every question in the negative as a moral consideration (of which Joe approves):

‘I discovered,’ he said, ‘that everything you do is in response to a request or a suggestion made to you by some other party either inside you or outside. Some of these suggestions are good and praiseworthy and some of them are undoubtedly delightful. But the majority of them are definitely bad and are pretty considerable sins as sins go. […] I therefore decided to say No henceforth to every suggestion, request or inquiry whether inward or outward. It was the only simple formula which was safe and sure.’ (TP 30)

A few lines down, however, Mathers admits that the policy is easily circumvented to accommodate any desire, and it in fact does no moral work.

‘You must find it irksome in some ways,’ I suggested. ‘If, for instance, I were to offer you a glass of whiskey . . . ’

‘Such few friends as I have,’ he answered, ‘are usually good enough to arrange such invitations in a way that will enable me to adhere to my system and also accept the whiskey. More than once I have been asked whether I would refuse such things.’

‘And the answer is still NO?’

‘Certainly.’ (TP 30)

As with Pluck, this example lies in some ways closer to Lewis Carroll than to Kafka, in part because they are both explorations of the extension of logic deriving from uncertain
premises. Yet the moral underpinnings of O’Brien’s logical play mark it off from Carroll’s in terms of tone and reference if not method; Carroll focuses on the logical end of things, while O’Brien hues closer to the consequences of such dubious yet rigid logic (sentencing a man to death for arbitrary reasons and allowing a moral system to admit all forms of immorality, respectively). In the Alice books and The Third Policeman alike, the fantastic exists in a distinct world, set off from the presumably verisimilar world by set means of entry (the rabbit hole, the looking glass, and death, respectively). Yet, as this list should clarify, the fantastic worlds of Carroll have both entrances and exits, while O’Brien’s hell has no exit. It is motivated by more than the whimsy and mathematical/logical puzzles that undergird Carroll’s nonsense writings; while the techniques are often shared, the tonality is different, since Alice is merely a tourist in Wonderland while the unnamed narrator is a permanent resident of hell. In Carroll, the fantastic techniques essentially serve as their own end, while the moral ends of the “topsy-turvy world” of the parish are distinct from the often similar means. O’Brien’s afterworld is both a source of wordplay and literary experiment and a site for (moral) social criticism, with the latter underlying the former.

To ground this claim, it is necessary to identify the situations lying behind and motivating the fantastic in The Third Policeman. Perhaps the most obvious one is that implied by the epigraph to this section, in which Sartre links the modern fantastic to the

22 Wim Tigges has gone furthest in tracing this connection in his essay “Ireland in Wonderland: Flann O’Brien’s The Third Policeman as a Nonsense Novel.”
bureaucracy of the civil service. Surely O’Nolan’s “bread and butter occupation” in the Irish civil service (as Private Secretary to the Minister for Health and Local Government) played some role in his particular version of the fantastic, yet the biographical aspect of this is ultimately less interesting than the social forces that the position in the civil service variously constellated and stood for. This is ultimately the rise of large-scale bureaucracies (both state and corporate), as well as the naturalization of a number of institutions that, having been created for the management of specific sectors of public life, began to appear not as products of human activity but as self-perpetuating, “practico-inert” structures impeding that activity.23 Before any allegorical reading, such a literal context must be assumed for the emergence of both Kafka and the Kafkaesque.24

The particularly Irish expression of such bureaucratization in this period was the emergence of the civil service, the edifices of which absorbed those seeking job security within an economy shifting (despite de Valera’s wishes and policies) away from agriculture and manufacture toward service-sector work.25 The promise of stable employment was particularly appealing to an otherwise unskilled intellectual class, a fact which O’Brien lamented in no uncertain terms in a 1944 draft protesting the extension of civil service pension protocols to local administration employees: “Already the bulk of the country’s intellectual material passes into the Civil Service as a matter of

23 The term “practico-inert” is one of Sartre’s major innovations in his Critique of Dialectical Reason. See my Introduction for a more detailed discussion of the concept.
24 Benjamin and Deleuze and Guattari both insist on the importance of resisting allegorical readings of Kafka. See Benjamin, “Franz Kafka” 804; Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka 46.
25 This shift is well-documented in Meenan’s The Irish Economy Since 1922 (42-46).
course. Once there, it is deliberately debased and dehumanized but it is lost forever to
the proper service of the nation” (Heads of Superannuation Bill, National Library of
Dublin; cited in Cronin 161). In this way, the civil service became, for O’Brien, a sign of
the increasing bureaucratization of intellectual life in Ireland, as well as the only sensible
economic option for “[p]eople of intelligence whose parents have no money,” unable to
enter into the “professions” or the “business community” (ibid.). The strongly worded
second sentence cited above clearly indicates O’Brien’s own sense that this economic
capture amounts to an enormous separation of means (intellectual ability) from ends
(“the proper service of the nation”), resulting in a wastage of talent to which Flann
O’Brien (if not Brian O’Nolan, who tried another escape in the form of Myles) had fallen
victim, not to return until the 1960s, and even then in middling form.

As with most things, however, O’Brien was equally wary of the establishment of
the writer as a professional. His complaints in this regard are well documented in
“Cruiskeen Lawn,” although, coming as they do after his abandonment of the Flann
O’Brien literary persona, they also bear a certain mark of bitterness against those writers
who made do without a “bread and butter occupation”:

[R]ecently on the newsstands I have noticed PUCK FARE printed regardless on
white paper fully glazed and fashioned and dedicated to the nice whimsy that
the writer—the writer, do you know—is a professional man, a craftsman, a highly
trained party who should never be paid less than five bar for a good job. (I could
do it for four and a kick, Mr. O’Faoláin, but it wouldn’t be a job.) [...] Since this

26 The main focus of O’Nolan’s specific objections to the civil service superannuation system was its
systematic enforcement of “docility and progressive emasculation” by withholding approximately 15% of
total income in the form of pension liability, all of which would be forfeit if the servant were to leave before
a minimum term of 40 years (Cronin 159-162).
magazine is offered as evidence of the spontaneous adoption by a whole
nondescript gang of professional status and since the contributions of these ex-
waamateurs may be considered as perfect technical jobs at least (‘Art, finally, is
not measurable by (sic) a footrule’) the layman may be permitted to check
admiringly over the shining machinery. (BM 231-2)\textsuperscript{27}

The column continues with numerous examples of grammatical and spelling errors.

While this in some ways continues Myles’s general tendency to focus on style rather
than intellectual content, in this case it also mocks that very focus, taking (mock-)
seriously the idea that a professional writer must be judged as a technician rather than
an artist. Here, the criticism is of a reduction of ends to means, in which grammar counts
for everything and literary or aesthetic quality for nothing.

This returns us to the narrator of *The Third Policeman*, whose “De Selby Index”
would brand him as an expert in an obscure field, the petty rivalries and controversies of
which are well documented in the narrator’s footnotes to the text. Even when recounting
his perdition, he seems to be unable to resist demonstrating the same obscure expertise
that led him indirectly to that fate. In *Paranoid Modernism*, David Trotter argues that a
certain type of male, English modernist fiction (exemplified by Conrad, Ford, Lawrence,
and Lewis) was characterized by a writing both of and about the paranoia of
“professional identities under extreme pressure” (Trotter 7). While I do not wish to
reproduce here Trotter’s elaborate discussion of paranoia as a disease of
professionalization, I would suggest that the central terms that he uses to characterize

\textsuperscript{27} The convoluted pun “ex-waamateurs” refers to a long-running series of “Cruiskeen Lawn” columns
mocking Sean O’Faoláin’s artist’s trade union, the Irish Writers, Actors, Artists, Musicians Association,
which O’Brien saw as a misguided attempt to professionalize the arts in Ireland. See BOM 15 for the first
WAAMA column. *Puck’s Fare* is a WAAMA publication.
paranoid narrative are useful in parsing O’Brien’s treatment of the fantastic in The Third Policeman:

The protagonist of these stories is invariably a man of rare gifts, with aspirations to match, which the world does not seem disposed either to acknowledge or to reward. Unwilling or unable to settle for indifference, he reimagines indifference as implacable persecution; with all eyes on him at last, with every man’s hand against him, he can no longer doubt his own uniqueness. Paranoid symmetry adjusts the degree of fantasized grandeur to the degree of fantasized persecution. (Trotter 82)

Trotter sees this dynamic worked out in narrative as an “externaliz[ation]” of a fantasy construct into narrative form, as can be seen in his treatment of the generic break in Lord Jim (between the “realism” of the first half of the book and the retreat into imperial romance of the Patusan sections) as a move from the rendering of the professional scene of paranoia to the narrative articulation of Jim’s paranoid fantasy (Trotter 159-186). One of the difficulties of the Lord Jim’s reception is the relative lack of motivation of this shift, which has occasioned both negative evaluations and critical explanations of various stripes.28 In a sense, O’Brien’s use of the afterlife enables him to replicate a similar structure, albeit with an extremely atrophied “realist” section and a hypertrophied fantasy, while providing a justification for both the turn to fantasy (as a conceit of the new, metaphysical setting) and the specific persecutory/solipsistic content of that fantasy (as divine retribution). The very idea of a hell made for one seems necessarily to imply a

28 This critical literature is too well-documented to require much comment, but see Jameson, Political Unconscious 206-210 and Trotter 159-166.
degree of self-aggrandizing, elegantly combining the two symmetrical paranoid fantasy
constructs of persecution and self-importance.29

The increasing importance of service sector jobs (including the civil service) and
the rise of the professions in Ireland (and, more locally, O’Faoláin’s attempts to
professionalize the arts), stands as one significant context (part of the substance of the
content, to use Hjelmslev’s terms) behind the use of the fantastic in The Third Policeman.
Yet such a connection also begs the question why O’Brien’s afterlife is not an urban one.
The Irish civil service was concentrated in Dublin, and O’Brien was living and working
in the city while writing the manuscript. Sartre takes the urban, “human” setting as
central generic trait of the fantastic, since the appearance of a natural world would (for
him) imply the absurdity (meaninglessness) of the “complete absence of ends,” rather
than the fantastic “revolt of means against ends”:

[Kafka and Blanchot] are both trying to depict the same preposterous world.
They are primarily concerned with excluding “impassive Nature,” and that is
why we find the same stifling atmosphere in the novels of both men. The hero of

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29 The reference to paranoia could also, if taken in the psychoanalytic sense as a consequence of repressed
homosexual desire, go some way to explaining the relative lack of women in the novel. Inter-gender
interaction is replaced in the book by the openly paranoid relation between the narrator and Divney, which
has its textual justification in the narrator’s suspicion that Divney (who knows the location of the cash box)
will sneak away to reap the benefits of their robbery/murder without the narrator: “Divney and I never
parted company for more than one minute either day or night. […] I remember waking up with a start in the
small hours of a black night and finding him quietly dressing himself in the dark. […] I slept with him
always after that. We were friendly and smiled at each other but the situation was a queer one and neither
of us liked it. […] And it is not strange that two people came to dislike each other as bitterly as did I and
Divney. And two people were never so polite to each other, so friendly in the face” (TP 13). The relationship
covers all of the positions indicated by Freud’s analysis of Schreber (from the foreclosed “I (a man) love
him” to “I do not love him—I hate him, because HE PERSECUTES ME” [Freud, Three Case Histories 165-6]). It
is also telling, in this regard, that the moment of revelation of the death of the narrator corresponds with his
return home, where he witnesses Divney in a domestic scene with Pegeen Meers. For a more elaborate
discussion of the psychoanalytic implications of the (non-) treatment of women and sexuality in The Third
Policeman, see Hopper 56-107.
The Trial struggles in a great city; he walks through streets and enters houses. Thomas, in Aminadab, wanders through the endless corridors of an apartment building. Neither of them ever gets a glimpse of forest, plains and hills. How restful it would be if they could come within sight of a mound of earth or a useless piece of matter! But if they did, the fantastic would immediately vanish; the law of this genre condemns it to encounter instruments only. These instruments are not [...] meant to serve them, but rather to manifest unremittingly an evasive, preposterous finality. (Sartre, “Aminadab” 62)

The hell of The Third Policeman is based not on O’Brien’s experience of Dublin, however, but on Tullamore, a “flat, rather featureless central plain of Ireland” where O’Brien lived for part of his childhood (Cronin 17). The conflict is only apparent here, since the feature of the parish most consistently highlighted by the text is its artificiality. The first description of a “natural” scene following the death of the narrator occurs at the beginning of chapter III, where the possibility of an “impassive Nature” is offered and quickly withdrawn. “The dawn was contagious, spreading rapidly about the heavens. Birds were stirring and the great kingly trees were being pleasingly interfered with by the breezes” (37). The jaunty tone of the passage enables the reader to briefly overlook the disease metaphor in the first sentence, but the narrator rapidly shifts his attention from the natural setting to the “firm high-road” on which he travels:

I found it hard to think of a time when there was no road there because the trees and the tall hills and the fine views of bogland had been arranged by wise hands for the pleasing picture they made when looked at from the road. Without a road to have them looked at from they would have a somewhat aimless if not futile aspect. (TP 37)

The final sentence brings up the possibility of an absurd, inhuman setting, but the conditional again designates this as a counterfactual musing. Instead, the landscape
appears to be “arranged” into a “pleasing picture” for a viewer. Several pages later, the landscape is further de-realized:

My surroundings had a strangeness of a peculiar kind, entirely separate from the mere strangeness of a country where one has never been before. Everything seemed too pleasant, too perfect, too finely made. Each thing the eye could see was unmistakable and unambiguous, incapable of merging with any other thing or of being confused with it. The colour of the bogs was beautiful and the greenness of the green fields supernal. Trees were arranged here and there with a far-from-usual consideration for the fastidious eye. (TP 39)

The aesthetic arrangement of the setting now makes it seem “strange,” even to the narrator. As with most metafictional gestures in the book, it can be read either within the fiction (as an early sign that the narrator is existing in a personal afterworld, created by God) or outside of it as a reference to its fictional ontological status (and that of the narrator) as an aesthetic creation.

Rather than restrict the fantastic to the human world within the fiction, O’Brien instead instrumentalizes the “natural” world, depicting it as artificial and aesthetic, “arranged” for viewing. One of the consequences of this is that the narrator and the landscape begin to infect one another affectively, fulfilling the promise of the “contagious” dawn. In this scene, the cheer of the surroundings overpowers any concern the narrator has over the loss of his name: “Blank anonymity coming suddenly in the middle of life should be at best alarming, a sharp symptom that the mind is in decay. But the unexplainable exhilaration which I drew from my surroundings seemed to invest this situation merely with the genial interest of a good joke” (40, italics added). While
the narrator awaits his execution later in the novel, the contagion goes in the other
direction:

Rain was beginning to beat on the windows, not a soft or friendly rain but large
gerky and stormy and out of it I heard the harsh shouts of wild geese and ducks
labouring across the wind on their course pinions. Black quails called sharply
from their hidings and a swollen stream was babbling dementedly. Trees, I
knew, would be angular and ill-tempered in the rain and boulders would gleam
coldly at the eye. (TP 148)

Here, the narrator’s description imposes a personal meaning upon the landscape,
leaving the reader without a sure method for extricating the subjective and objective
elements of the description (since the scene is created by that description).30 This setting
is “natural,” but an artificial nature “in[vest]ed” with meaning and pathos. Once again,
we encounter the “generalized mimetism” described by Tyrus Miller, in which subject
and object, figure and ground, commingle and become mutually constitutive.31

This general contagion brings us to one of Sartre’s most salient points about the
fantastic, which is its connection to world:

You cannot impose limits on the fantastic; either it does not exist at all, or else it
extends throughout the universe. It is an entire world in which things manifest a
captive, tormented thought, a thought both whimsical and enchained, that
gnaws away from below at the mechanism’s links without ever managing to
express itself. In this world, matter is never entirely matter, since it offers only a
constantly frustrated attempt at determinism, and mind is never completely

30 We see a similar mingling in Robbe-Grillet’s early fiction. I take the famous paperweight from Les Gommes
(1953) as my example. His initial description treats it as a neutral object: “A kind of cube, but slightly
misshapen, a shiny block of gray lava, with its face polished as though by wear, the edges softened,
compact, apparently hard, heavy as gold, looking about as big as a fist; a paperweight?” (Robbe-Grillet, The
Erasers 21). At the moment before Wallas shoots Dupont, the new description evokes a murderous tension
between its adjectives and adverb: “The cube of vitrified stone, with its sharp edges and deadly corners, is
lying harmlessly between the inkwell and the memo-pad” (Robbe-Grillet, The Erasers 236).
31 I discuss this trait in The Childermass in Chapter 2.
mind, because it has fallen into slavery and has been impregnated and dulled by matter. (Sartre, “Aminadab” 57-8)

It is impossible to restrict the fantastic to a local inexplicable occurrence. The emergence of something violating the presumed logic of a world calls the entirety of that world into question. As long as a world is self-consistent, it is not fantastic, no matter how “unrealistic” the contents.32

None of this exactly explains O’Brien’s choice of setting, however. The first remark to be made to try to do so would be to point out that O’Brien’s Dublin novel branded him as a Joycean, the consequences of which were discussed above. Yet the rural setting of *The Third Policeman* should not be allowed to rest on the idea that O’Brien merely wished to differentiate himself from Joyce. In this regard, his decision to depict hell as a vague, artificial rural Ireland surely owes as much to Fianna Fáil and the immediate pre-war setting as it does to Joyce. When de Valera came to power in 1932, he instituted a protectionist economic policy based around an idealized vision of rural Ireland. As mentioned above, his vision of “small agricultural units, each self-sufficiently supporting a frugal family; industrious, Gaelicist and anti-materialist” (Foster 538) was largely impractical, and the cash income of farmers fell in 1933 to less than half of the 1929-1930 amounts, despite the institution of state subsidies (Meenan 95-102).33 It is in this context of a top-down national redefinition that we must read the

32 My determination of the fantastic here owes much to a series of conversations with Timothy Wientzen and to the participants in our seminar on “Modernism and the Fantastic” at the 2008 MSA conference.
33 This was accompanied by a 1934 shift within agricultural production away from livestock and toward expanded production of food crops (Meenan 101, Foster 552-4). This (extremely unpopular) economic policy
setting of *The Third Policeman*, which repeatedly invokes the rural Irish landscape only to highlight its artificiality. The nostalgia for an Irish peasantry is recast here in literally fantastic terms, simultaneously evoking and mocking the fantasy that lay behind the Fianna Fáil policies.

One can also read a more direct critique of de Valera’s belief in the capacity of protectionist state policies to ensure economic well-being in the narrator’s excitement at the power of omnium:

Formless speculations crowded in upon me, fantastic fears and hopes, inexpressible fancies, intoxicating foreshadowing of creations, changes, annihilations and God-like interferences. Sitting at home with my box of omnium I could do anything, see anything and know anything with no limit to my powers save that of my own imagination. Perhaps I could even use it to extend my imagination. I could destroy, alter or improve the universe at will. I could get rid of John Divney, not brutally, but by giving him ten million pounds to go away. I could write the most unbelievable commentaries on de Selby ever written and publish them in bindings unheard of for their luxury and durability. Fruits and crops surpassing anything ever known would flower on my farm, in earth made inconceivable fertile by unparalleled artificial manures. [...] I would present every poor labourer in the world with a bicycle made of gold, each machine with a saddle made of something as yet uninvented but softer than the softest softness, and I would arrange that a warm gale would blow behind every man on every journey, even when two were going in opposite directions down the same road. (TP 189)

The first sentence sets the criticism of such thinking as “[f]ormless,” “fantastic,” “inexpressible,” and (especially) “intoxicating,” leaving the list of details to grind the point home. Those details, particularly the flourishing of “[f]ruits and crops” at the

may also stand behind O’Brien’s repeated use of the term “artificial manures” in *The Third Policeman*. It is, of course, impossible to determine exactly how much the general economic stagnation in Ireland was due to state policies and how much was an inevitable result of the global economic situation of the 1930s. In a sense, it doesn’t matter here, since the attribution of blame for such systemic features of international capitalism is usually pitched at the more immediately comprehensible national level.
behest of the (now recognizable) “artificial manures” and ridiculous and pacifying
handouts of gold bicycles to “poor labourers,” clearly recall the sights set by de Valera’s
late 1930s economic policies. As one might expect, the narrator’s fantasy of omnipotence
never comes to anything, and soon after this moment the narrator learns that he is
already dead and fated to repeat the events of the novel for eternity.

De Valera’s protectionism was only highlighted by official Irish neutrality
regarding the impending war (a political gesture used to underscore Ireland’s
independence from England). In the same letter to Saroyan where O’Brien recounted the
premise for *The Third Policeman* (Saint Valentine’s Day, 1940), one finds O’Brien’s
comments on the affects of the “Emergency” on Ireland:

> There’s nothing very new about this town. The war is bad to think about but it is
> a very phoney war so far and people here have simply forgotten about it. There’s
> no black-out or any other nonsense here like England and the only sign in war is
> the jump-up in prices. (Robert and Henderson 72)

The dominant sense here is one of a sort of generalized artificiality. The war is described
as “phoney” (whatever that might mean in the circumstances), but the sense of business
as usual in Ireland (“nothing very new”) comes off as equally artificial. Writing of these
years in his history of modern Ireland, R. F. Foster describes the “atmosphere of wartime
Éire” as “cautiously authoritarian and necessarily introspective, even solipsistic” (Foster
562). The former aspect refers to the extension of economic planning and the welfare
apparatus engineered by Seán Lemass, the figure who shaped Ireland’s wartime
economic policy as Minister of Supplies under de Valera. The latter comes across clearly in the tone of O’Brien’s letter to Saroyan, as well as in the overall tone and premise of *The Third Policeman*. Such insularity defines the parish, but finds its most tangible figuration in the underground eternity in which anything can be done, but without any consequence on the outside world. Time does not pass there, and one leaves exactly as one enters. Each room opens onto itself, like the landscape of certain video games, in which one leaves a room on the right only to reenter the same room from the left. In the penultimate chapter of the book, the narrator learns that Fox is responsible for creating this eternity to distract Pluck and MacCruiskeen. Such is the closure of this type of fantastic fictional system, in which the space seems expansive while remaining absolutely bounded and the world is created as pure semblance for the soul trapped within it.

**De Selby and Damnation**

Joyce has been reported as saying that he asked of his readers nothing but that they should devote their lives to reading his works. Such a method of spending a lifetime would be likely to endow the party concerned with a unique psychic apparatus of his own. I cannot recommend it.

—*Myles na Gopaleen*  

The main thing to bear in mind is the unimportance of all art. It is very much a minor activity.

—*Myles na Gopaleen*

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34 On Lemass’s role in the planning of the Irish economy, see Raymond.  
35 *Hair of the Dogma* 154.  
36 BM 258-9.
The action of *The Third Policeman* is at once grim and ridiculous, creating a manic tone resembling the description of a fever-dream, at once humorous and unnerving. Much of the humor, however, is localized in the regular digressions the narrator makes to explicate the various theories of de Selby (such as the idea that night is not caused by the relative movement of the sun and earth but is “simply an accretion of ‘black air,’ i.e., a staining of the atmosphere due to volcanic eruptions too fine to be seen with the naked eye and also to certain ‘regrettable’ industrial activities involving coal-tar by-products and vegetable dyes” TP 116n), leaving the comparable absurdities of the world of the dead into which the narrator is thrown to appear as menacing as they do silly. Anne Clissmann describes the sensation of reading the novel well: “It is, in parts, extremely amusing, but the overall impression is anything but funny. […] It presents a vision which becomes steadily more horrifying” (Clissmann 152). In part, the asides to de Selby (and his various commentators) provide a safety valve to lighten the tone of the book, but the presence of de Selby serves as more than comedic fodder; although he never appears in the novel outside of the narrator’s mentions of his works, he serves indirectly as the motive for the central murder (performed to finance the narrator’s publication of the “De Selby Index”) and, as Keith Hopper argues, the afterlife of the novel can be read as “a hell-world constructed from the disparate fragments of de Selby’s theories” (Hopper 185). Only in this very general sense can the hell of the narrator be said to have something in common with that of Dante, since the punishment does appear to have an allegorical relation with the principal sin of the narrator’s life.
Yet this suggests that we cannot stop at the obvious reading that his fundamental sin was murder (which leads to the equally obvious and uninteresting moral: murder is evil), and must instead treat the murder as the culmination of a greater sin, a move suggested by the first mention of de Selby in the novel. At boarding school, the narrator comes across and pockets “a first edition of [de Selby’s] *Golden Hours*”:

> By the time I was nineteen and had reached the end of my education I knew that the book was valuable and that in keeping it I was stealing it. Nevertheless I packed it in my bag without a qualm and would probably do the same if I had my time again. Perhaps it is important to the story I am going to tell to remember that it was for de Selby that I committed my first serious sin. It was for him that I committed my greatest sin. (TP 9)

The narrator’s entrance into sin “without a qualm” is paralleled a few pages later in the disinterested narration of the murder of Mathers, the fact of which the reader is aware from the first sentence of the novel. The tone here is one of unrepentant confession, the statement of a choice in the form of a fact. This is one of the moments of the text that calls attention to the (impossible) situation of the narrator’s enunciation: the addition of the words “to remember” place emphasis not on the connection (between de Selby and sin) but on the narrator’s need “to remember” that connection for the sake of the story (but also, in light of the rest of the novel, for the sake of his punishment).

The narrator goes as far as to erase himself before this moment and before de Selby, claiming “I still think that day is the most important in my life and can remember it more readily than my own birthday” (TP 9), and later, having devoted his life to the study of de Selby’s works, “I knew that if my name were to be remembered, it would be remembered with de Selby’s” (TP 10). Certainly portentous words for a book in which
the narrator cannot recall his own name, yet readily generates extensive footnotes on de Selby’s theories and commentators. The works of de Selby are clearer in the narrator’s writing than is his early family life and loss of his mother and father, the entirety of which takes up the first three pages of the book (far fewer than those devoted to de Selby).

A more curious feature yet is the fact that, although the narrator has high praise for de Selby in general, none of the footnotes or other references to de Selby in the book describe a theory which the narrator supports. Indeed, de Selby is regularly mentioned with a combination of awe and scorn, as in this characteristic moment (a commentary on de Selby’s assertion that “all journey is an hallucination”): “It is a curious enigma that so great a mind would question the most obvious realities and object even to things scientifically demonstrated (such as the sequence of day and night) while believing absolutely in his own fantastic explanations of the same phenomena” (TP 52). A bit later the narrator dispatches rapidly the idea that de Selby might offer any practical advice for living:

The severe shock which I encountered soon after re-entry to the barracks with the Sergeant set me thinking afterwards of the immense consolations which philosophy and religion can offer in adversity. They seem to lighten dark places and give strength to bear the unaccustomed load. Not unnaturally my thoughts were never very far from de Selby. All his works—but particularly Golden Hours—have what one may term a therapeutic value. They have a heart-lifted effect more usually associated with spirituous liquors, reviving and quietly restoring the spiritual tissue. […] The humanising urbanity of his works has always seemed to me to be enhanced rather than vitiated by the chance intrusion here and there of his minor failings, all the more pathetic because he regarded some of them as pinnacles of his intellectual prowess rather than indications of his frailty as a human being. (TP 92)
So far, this accords the more ridiculous or least useful of de Selby’s ideas a minor place in his work, but as the passage progresses the narrator seems to talk himself out of this esteem. “Holding that the usual processes of living were illusory, it is natural that he did not pay much attention to life’s adversities and he does not in fact offer much suggestion as to how they should be met” (TP 92). From here, the narrator recounts an anecdote from Bassett, one of de Selby’s other commentators:

A young man in the town was seriously troubled by some question regarding a lady and feeling that this matter was weighing on his mind and threatening to interfere with his reason, he sought de Selby for advice. Instead of exorcising this solitary blot from the young man’s mind, as indeed could easily have been done, de Selby drew the young man’s attention to some fifty imponderable propositions each of which raised difficulties which spanned many eternities and dwarfed the conundrum of the young lady to nothingness. Thus the young man who had come fearing the possibility of a bad thing left the house completely convinced of the worst and cheerfully contemplating suicide. […] So much for the savant as a dispenser of advice. (TP 92-3)

The reason for the narrator’s search for such advice in de Selby is delayed for another two pages, when we are finally told what the “severe shock” that set off these ruminations actually was. When we do get there, we discover that the police have found Mathers’s body and that the narrator has been arbitrarily chosen to hang for it. Seeking solace and advice in de Selby, the narrator finds the intoxication of “humanising urbanity,” but nothing to parallel the “immense consolations which philosophy and religion can offer in adversity.”

Nor, it seems, is de Selby’s influence on his commentators particularly beneficial. *As The Third Policeman* progresses, the footnotes focus less and less on de Selby and
more on the controversies between his commentators. The final footnote of the book (which runs along the bottom halves of the first seven pages of chapter XI) reports the fate of the academic Hatchjaw after he sails to Hamburg to “end once and for all a cancerous corruption which has become an intolerable affront to the decent instincts of humanity” (TP 168-9n), namely the “shadowy Kraus,” whom Hatchjaw believes has slandered de Selby under the pseudonym du Garbandier. Setting sail with a “varied and deadly collection of lethal engines” (listed in 7 lines of text) with which to dispatch his rival, Hatchjaw takes on a biblical rhetoric to describe his mission: “In destroying the evil things which prevail abroad, I do not exclude my own person from the ambit of the cataclysm which will come and of which I have the components in my trunk’” (TP 170n). As with the majority of parodies of academic self-importance, Hatchjaw fails to bring about this cataclysm, instead being arrested upon arrival for “impersonating himself” (TP 171n). The note lists five possible but unconfirmed fates for him following release, ranging from conversion to Judaism to mental collapse or descent into petty crime.

All this evidence points to de Selby as a demoralizing influence. His books have driven the narrator to murder, Hatchjaw into an attempt at murder/suicide, and an apocryphal young lad into near suicide. His detachment from the everyday world of human problems and concerns appears infectious, however, drawing people into an insular world of textual commentary in which conventional morals appear less

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37 Those readers concerned over the fate of this last will be pleased to learn that his life was spared due to a “happy intervention on the part of the moon for he had gone home by the harbour only to find the tide was two miles out” (TP 93). Let it not be said that no tale has a (relatively) happy ending. O’Brien is willing to supply these as long as they occur as acts of providence rather than human planning.
important than either obscure cosmic truths or the reputation of the master. “In the
*Layman’s Atlas* he deals explicitly with bereavement, old age, love, sin, death and other
saliencies of existence. It is true that he allows them only some six lines but this is due to
his devastating assertion that they are all ‘unnecessary’” (TP 93). This is part of his
theory that the earth is not spherical but “sausage-shaped” and that “‘life’ with its
innumerable concomitant limitations, afflictions, and anomalies” is a “permanent
hallucination” (TP 95).\(^{38}\) As with O’Brien’s estimation of Irish Catholicism, the error is
one of misplaced emphasis, losing sight of what is really important in a focus on
minutiae and abstract logical problems.

De Selby himself never appears in *The Third Policeman*, haunting instead the
margins and footnotes of the text through his influence on the narrator. In 1964,
however, O’Brien returned to de Selby (now De Selby) in *The Dalkey Archive*, a novel
which cannibalized parts of the (then still unpublished) *Third Policeman* manuscript. De
Selby is a central character in this later novel, providing the principal motor for the plot
through his invention of D.M.P., “a chemical compound which totally eliminates oxygen
from any given atmosphere” (DA 21). De Selby uses this substance to talk to the dead in
an underwater cave. Apparently, “a deoxygenated atmosphere cancels the apparent
serial nature of time and confronts us with true time and simultaneously with all the
things and creatures which time has ever contained or will contain, provided [one]

\(^{38}\) What sounds like complete nonsense here is actually an exaggeration of the theories of J. W. Dunne
(author of *An Experiment with Time* and *The Serial Universe*). Clissmann, O’Toole, and Hopper all discuss the
importance of Dunne on O’Brien’s depiction of de Selby and the universe of *The Third Policeman*. See
Clissmann 155, O’Toole, and Hopper 241-250.

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invokes them” (DA 22). While this dubious metaphysic is primarily a device to allow O’Brien to craft some bizarre dialogues with St. Augustine and other church fathers, De Selby also cheerfully explains to the protagonist Mick and his friend Hackett that the ultimate purpose of D.M.P. is to destroy all life on earth by releasing the substance into the atmosphere. “I do not care a farthing about who made the world or what the grand intention was, laudable or horrible. The creation is loathsome and abominable, and total extinction could not be worse” (DA 19). Here we see O’Brien’s most hyperbolic version of “the transgressor’s resentment with the nongressor,” one rather less benign than a three-day bender on stolen booze. The world is (almost) saved through an act of providence (which Mick thwarts with his own hubristic plan for world salvation), but De Selby’s abstraction and detachment from the world still appear here as a fount of ill intentions (now those of De Selby himself, rather than simply his commentators).

_The Dalkey Archive_ also draws a strong parallel between De Selby (who is living in a house off Vico Road) and James Joyce. This latter also appears as a character in the novel, and we learn that he is not dead after all, but merely keeping a low profile at a public house in Skerries. This is, by O’Brien’s logic, entirely fair, since “Joyce spent a lifetime establishing himself as a character in fiction” and is well known for “importing

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39 This is O’Brien’s version of the dialogues of the dead, now motivated through an elaborate science-fictional conceit.
40 In the novel, Mick steals the cask of D.M.P. from De Selby’s home, locking it in a safe deposit box in the Bank of Ireland before it could be destroyed in a fire later that morning. Hugh Leonard, when adapting the novel to the stage as _When the Saints Go Marching In_, sharpens the point by having him throw the cask into Dublin Bay only to discover soon afterward that D.M.P. is activated by saltwater, a change of which O’Brien approved (Cronin 244-5).
real characters into his books” (Nolan 9, SP 206); O’Brien is simply turning the tables on him when he has Joyce deny having written any of the books attributed to him except *Dubliners* and ask Mick to help him join the Jesuits (DA 174, 178). One of Mick’s first thoughts upon meeting Joyce is his similarity to De Selby, and he tries to think of a way of getting these “great pioneer[s]” together. “I had always thought of yourself [Joyce], […] as belonging to that sort of company. […] De Selby’s scientific investigations don’t preclude an interest in more abstract matters. Indeed, I am certain he would be delighted to meet yourself …” (DA 134). There is some vague talk of Joyce and De Selby embarking upon a “literary collaboration” (DA 137), and Mick leaves the meeting pondering the possible product of such a joint work: “Would Joyce and De Selby combine their staggeringly complicated and diverse minds to produce a monstrous earthquake of a new book, something claiming to supplant the Bible?” (DA 139). In this moral world, eccentricity and hubris lead straight to blasphemy and schism (if not simply evil).

*The Third Policeman* is not *The Dalkey Archive*, however, and it would be presumptuous to read the de Selby of the former book as a stand-in for Joyce on the basis of the latter. What can be taken from these readings is a general context in which to read the characters of de Selby, De Selby, and James Joyce—one in which we see O’Brien repeatedly caution against the attribution of undue importance to figures who are ultimately exposed (at least in O’Brien’s insular worlds) as simply schismatic eccentrics who shake our faith in a shared and comprehensible world. The narrator of *The Third*
*Policeman* loses both his world and himself (including his name) in his quest for de Selby’s, and when he is rewarded with that world in the afterlife, it contains only false hope and endless incomprehension.

Having studied Irish poetry at UCD, O’Brien would certainly have been no stranger to academic buffoonery and self-importance, yet he had a particular dislike for “the ex-G.I. type of literary scientist who festers in the over-endowed American universities—who allege that [*Finnegans Wake*] is the veritable apocalypse of the undermind, a map of the floor of the soul, the anatomy of sleep and dream, a dissection of fate and destiny” (*Hair of the Dogma* 154). A writer, he obviously did not oppose the writing of books, even difficult ones, but he did express a deep suspicion of fiction that purported to do more (or at least, much more) than entertain. The utopian attempt to remake the world or create a new one (rather than merely live in it) is at the heart of any number of modernist literary projects (as well as scientific and political ones), and O’Brien creates his own fictional world to serve as a space where such ambitions are punished rather than rewarded—a modernism against itself.41

**Bad Faith and Free Will**

In the previous section, I argued that de Selby’s corrupting and demoralizing influence on the narrator of *The Third Policeman* is one of O’Brien’s ways of criticizing the

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41 In his biography of O’Brien, Anthony Cronin includes a description of an early oratory O’Nolan gave at UCD, which began as an elaborate comic set-piece but gradually “became a savage onslaught on the deceipts of advertisement generally and the cruel manner in which it raised people’s expectations” (Cronin 46-7). Apparently, his skepticism toward utopian promises was developed even before his entry into the civil service.
modernist cult of the artist as prophet. But to lay the blame for the murder of Mathers squarely on de Selby’s shoulders is to accept the same bad faith shown repeatedly by the narrator, beginning with the opening paragraph of the book, where the narrator names himself as a killer and immediately displaces all responsibility for that murder onto Divney:

Not everybody knows how I killed old Phillip Mathers, smashing his jaw in with my spade; but first it is better to speak of my friendship with John Divney because it was he who knocked old Mathers down by giving him a great blow in the neck with a special bicycle-pump which he manufactured himself out of a hollow iron bar. Divney was a strong civil man but he was lazy and idle-minded. He was personally responsible for the whole idea in the first place. It was he who told me to bring my spade. He was the one who gave the orders on the occasion and also the explanations when they were called for. (TP 7)

De Selby enters into the tale only indirectly, providing the ultimate motive for the murder and some of the specifics of the world in which the narrator is trapped. The narrator is explicit that it was his choice to steal the copy of Golden Hours, his choice to devote his life to de Selby, and he describes elliptically but unequivocally his decision to agree to help Divney rob and murder Mathers: “Three further months passed before I could bring myself to agree to the proposal and three months more before I openly admitted to Divney that my misgivings were at an end” (TP 15).

Soon after the narrator has died, he encounters Mathers alive once more, and the difficulty of reconciling his recollection of the murder with Mathers’s presence gives him ample room for disavowal.

I decided in some crooked way that the best thing to do was to believe what my eyes were looking at rather than to place my trust in a memory. I decided to show unconcern, to talk to the old man and to test his own reality by asking
about the black box which was responsible, if anything could be, for each of us being the way we were (TP 26).

The narrator is, of course, the one responsible for both of them being the way they are, despite his projection of that responsibility onto (in this case) an inanimate object (the “black box”), the search for which takes up most of the remainder of the novel. This type of bad (“crooked”) faith goes on throughout the book, modulating with the narrator’s memory, which often has no access to the fact of the murder, or at least his role in that murder. Having abandoned memory (in favor of the evidence of the senses) in the passage cited above, it abandons him as well. These memory distortions begin when Mathers asks the narrator his name:

I was surprised at this question. It had no bearing on my own conversation but I did not notice its irrelevance because I was shocked to realise that, simple as it was, I could not answer it. I did not know my name, did not remember who I was. I was not certain where I had come from or what my business was in that room. I found I was sure of nothing save my search for the black box. But I knew that the other man’s name was Mathers and that he had been killed with a pump and a spade. I had no name. (TP 31)

A few pages further on, the narrator again uses the passive voice to elide the agent behind the murder: “I had got to like him and thought it was a pity he had been murdered” (TP 36). His memory of the murder is (equally mysteriously) restored to him the next morning (TP 39), but his name eludes him for the rest of the novel. After this point, his memory of the past fluctuates depending on the circumstance, until he realizes that he is dead, at which point his mind is wiped clean:

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42 This conceit of flexible memory is used to more humorous purpose with the confusion over the existence of his “American gold watch,” discussed above.
My feet carried my nerveless body unbidden onwards for mile upon mile of rough cheerless road. My mind was completely void. I did not recall who I was, where I was or what my business was on earth. I was alone and desolate yet not concerned about myself at all. The eyes in my head were open but they saw nothing because my brain was void. (TP 198)

This description comes close to Bergson’s idea (as a purely notional entity, not itself actual) of pure matter, a matter divorced from memory, in which even the sensation that originally overthrew memory (in the scene with Mathers’s ghost above) is in turn extinguished. Such is the fictional gambit that allows him to be “surprised and frightened at everything just as he was the first time and as if he’d never been through it before,” as the text following this passage repeats several paragraphs from 150 pages earlier with few modifications, ending the book with an indication of sterile and eternal repetition of the same.

This depiction moves from a psychological depiction of bad faith to a literalization of that bad faith in a character without access to either past or identity, who is shown to be moving mechanically and inevitably through an afterlife in which free will has been extinguished. O’Brien emphasizes this automatic action most dramatically in the moments after the narrator’s death: his hand “had closed mechanically” in the space where the black box had been (TP 23), he noticed things “in a clod mechanical way” (TP 24), and “[w]ords spilled out of [him] as if they were produced by machinery” (TP 26).

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43 See Bergson, *Matter and Memory*. 
In terms of the narrative, it is possible to read this transformation as one more level of the narrator’s allegorical punishment: since his bad faith allowed him to fall into sin, his punishment is to be shorn of the freedom that he disavowed while living. This reading is in keeping with Hopper’s claims about the construction of the narrator’s private hell, but it skirts around the more fundamental point that the afterlife as a whole implies such an absence of free will, since its form is determined by one’s choices during life; all choices having been made, all that is left is penance, purgation, and/or reward. We have already seen this tension in Lewis’s version of the afterlife in The Human Age, leading to two incompatible readings: either Pullman is indeed damned and is merely suffering for his sins on Earth, or he remains free and can still determine the fate of his soul through the choices he makes in the afterlife. On this point, I concluded earlier that Lewis preferred to affirm freedom (and an unfulfilled promise of grace) at the expense of orthodoxy. O’Brien, a believer, has less leeway in this regard, and the circular ending of The Third Policeman leaves little room for dispute: the narrator is fated to experience the same events eternally, and to react in the same way each time.

This situation of absolute determination in damnation appears as a hyperbolic version of a problem Gary Saul Morson identifies as a general malady of narrative: the need for meaningful totality presents an image of a world bereft of freedom, where all events turn out to be necessary for the fitting end.

[Narrative models transform the process of activity into a finished product. Stories are over; they are oriented toward a known ending, and if they are well-made stories, everything tends to that ending. Each moment can be understood in terms of the finished pattern of the whole. (Morson 20)
Morson develops his readings of Bakhtin and Dostoevsky to advance a set of techniques that would retain a sense of the lived experience of freedom and indetermination within narrative. “Sideshadowing,” the most significant of these for Morson, is intended to create, “in addition to actualities and impossibilities, a middle realm of real possibilities that could have happened even if they did not” (Morson 6).

Rather than dwell on the particularities of Morson’s argument about Dostoevsky’s and Tolstoy’s responses to this problem of rendering a sense of freedom and possibility within narrative, I return briefly to O’Brien’s early writing, which approaches the same problem through the resources of metafiction. As early as his University College years, O’Brien (then O’Nolan or Brother Barnabas) was already toying with the idea of characters revolting against their creator. In the March 1933 edition of Comthrom Feinne, an alternative UCD student magazine, Brother Barnabas penned a “Probably Posthumous” sketch called “Scenes in a Novel,” which chronicled the revolt of Barnabas’s characters within his uncompleted novel. Carruthers McDaid, a character created as a “rank waster and a rotter,” finds religion unbeknownst to Barnabas and refuses to rob a poor-box despite Barnabas’s threats of anthrax (Barnabas 15-16). Barnabas narrates how the other characters follow suit, and the short piece has a

44 This description of an ontological realm of real but unactualized possibilities strikes me as quite similar to Deleuze’s treatment of the virtual aspect of events in The Logic of Sense (148-161). However, Deleuze specifies that “[c]ounter-actualization is nothing, it belongs to a buffoon when it operates alone and pretends to have the value of what could have happened. But, to be the mime of what effectively occurs, to double the actualization with a counter-actualization, the identification with a distance, like the true actor and dancer, is to give the truth of the event the only chance of not being confused with its inevitable actualization” (161).
Lovecraftian ending, with the narrator waiting for his death at the hands of the characters he created but could not control:

The book is seething with conspiracy and there have been at least two whispered consultations between all the characters, including two who have not yet been officially created. Posterity taking a hand in the destiny of its ancestors, if you know what I mean. […] Candidly, reader, I fear my number’s up. […] It is a strange world, but beautiful. How hard it is, the hour of parting. I cannot call in the Guards, for we authors have our foolish pride. The destiny of Brother Barnabas is sealed, sealed for aye. (Barnabas 18)45

This occasional piece formed part of the germ for *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where the rebellion of characters against their creator is expanded to dominate much of the narrative. As with “Scenes,” Dermot Trellis creates John Furriskey (“a man of great depravity”) to be the villain of “a book that would show the terrible cancer of sin in its true light and act as a clarion-call to torn humanity” (ASTB 31). Furriskey, however, falls in love with the woman he is to defile, and conspires against Trellis with the rest of the characters, who eventually put Trellis on trial and punish him for his treatment of them.

The above should adequately indicate that O’Brien’s interest in narrative and the freedom of characters predated *The Third Policeman*. While his earlier work operates on the model of nested narrative levels (to show characters existing within a nested level breaking into the frame narrative), he writes the reverse in *The Third Policeman*, which features a main character devoid of freedom. Like Beckett’s or Lewis’s “puppets,” the

45 Morson discusses (by way of Bakhtin’s commentary) Dostoevsky’s attempts to give his own characters freedom by leaving their fates undetermined in advance (97-100). Given Morson’s litany of failed strategies for depicting freedom (in Chapter 5), O’Brien’s metafictional approach would almost certainly not satisfy him (especially since it makes the indetermination of character into subject matter rather than a formal principle, and that subject matter leads to a conclusion determined in advance by the real author). Nonetheless, the principle warrants comparison.
narrator is subordinated to a plot he does not understand, motivated by an incoherent
desire for the black box, which becomes more desirable as the contents become
symmetrically more abstract.46 Unlike those other figures of character as pure
determination, he tells, by way of confession, not only the story proceeding from his
damnation, but the causes of that damnation as well. As I have indicated above, much of
this loss of freedom is linked to a failure of temporal synthesis, in particular a disavowal
(always in bad faith) of his past and his memory, which disables his capacity to act in the
present. The final gesture of the book, turning tail on itself (as did Joyce’s last book, but
in a completely different tonality and to completely different effect), exposes the
narrator’s hopes for a continually more idealized and abstract future (figured in the
desire for omnium) as itself a mechanism of punishment, keeping him eternally moving
through the short circuit of his perdition.

In a dream the narrator has while awaiting execution, Joe threatens to leave the
narrator in terms that clearly recall the failure of temporal synthesis, this time in
generational terms:

Before I go I will tell you this. I am your soul and all your souls. When I am gone you are
dead. Past humanity is not only implicit in each new man born but is contained in him.
Humanity is an ever-widening spiral and life is the beam that plays briefly on each
succeeding ring. All humanity from its beginning to its end is already present but the
beam has not yet played beyond you. Your earthly successors await dumbly and trust to
your guidance and mine and all my people inside me to preserve them and lead the light
further. You are not now the top of your people’s line any more than your mother was
when she had you inside her. When I leave you I take with me all that has made you what

46 Beckett’s narrator uses this term to describe the characters in Murphy. Generalizing this point to describe a
condition of 1930s fiction, Miller depicts a scenario in which “characters are near-puppets of external forces”
(62), terms which could be easily applied to The Third Policeman.
you are—I take all your significance and importance and all the accumulations of human instinct and appetite and wisdom and dignity. You will be left with nothing behind you and nothing to give the waiting ones. Woe to you when they find you out! (TP 119-20)

Although Joe does not actually leave, he implicates the narrator’s loss of a past with the impossibility of a future. We see here the threat that an absolute break with the past gives to meaning (“significance and importance”), one which Frank Kermode (describing in 1965 a “late modernism” which he claimed characterized the present state of literature) calls the “schismatic”:

Transition, decadence-and-renovation, have perhaps become the dominant aspects of apocalypse for the arts, as distinct from politics; and in consequence we have all grown more interested in the possibilities of a break with the past; of considering the present in relation to the end without calculations based on history. The schismatic, to put it another way, has gained in power. [...] [W]hat distinguishes the new from the old modernism most sharply in this context is not that one is more apocalyptic than the other but that they have such different attitudes to the past. To the older it is a source of order; to the newer it is that which ought to be ignored. [...] [W]hatever preserves intelligibility is what prevents schism. (Kermode 114-16)

Rather than move too quickly to identify *The Third Policeman* as an example of Kermode’s version of late modernism, I prefer to point out that what Kermode describes as a (largely post-WWII) temporal premise of a body of work is treated by O’Brien as subject matter which he approaches critically.

At this point, I must return briefly to O’Brien’s national context, to clarify the local referent of this critique of the loss of the past. This involves sketching out the

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47 At the beginning of the relevant lecture ("The Modern Apocalypse"), he calls it a “treatment of the paradigm” (Kermode 93), meaning a way of treating paradigm as such rather than a treatment of any particular paradigm. At issue is an approach to order and ordering ("sense making") in general; as such, his examples (Beckett, Burroughs, Sarraute, and the Sartre of *Nausea*) are unsurprising.
rudiments of reading of the narrative of *The Third Policeman* as national allegory (a reading which is both necessary and inadequate). I have shown above how the debilitating effects of the loss of the past emerge on the thematic level. This same loss is figured in the narrative by the deaths of the narrator’s parents (in a single sentence, no less: “Then a certain year came about the Christmas-time and when the year was gone my father and mother were gone too” [TP 8]) and the murder of old Mathers, both of which occur in the first chapter of the book.48 It is perfectly possible to read these deaths (the former unexplained, the latter the crux of the plot) as figures of (or at least vague gestures toward) the traumas of the Anglo-Irish war and the civil war that followed in 1922-3 (both of which took place when O’Brien, born 1911, was still a child). The few details we learn of Mathers (“He had spent a long life of fifty years in the cattle trade and now lived in retirement in a big house three miles away” [TP15]) associate him (again, vaguely) with Anglo-Irish relations by way of the cattle trade and the term “big house,” which calls to mind but doesn’t necessarily name the then-moribund Ascendancy Big-House culture. He is clearly an object of envy for the narrator, the son of a “strong farmer” (TP 7) and a public house owner, who kills him to get his cash box.49 The murder goes off but the box eludes the narrator, leading him into the world of the dead, where he succumbs to an endless and quixotic search for this obscure object of desire.

48 Hopper describes well how the deliberate lack of clarity in this first chapter invokes the specter of an allegorical of non-literal meaning (203-210).

49 The very lack of clarity or specificity of this first chapter emphasizes again the effect the loss of his past has on the narrator, who seems to understand little of his own story.
Such post-colonial disillusionment and stagnation is itself now the stuff of cliché, but that does not negate its force or persistence. The circular form of the narrative only underscores the cultural and economic stagnation that was to follow national independence and partition into the 1930s and 1940s, while the narrator’s fantasies of absolute power force a contrast between the idealizations and protectionist aims of Fianna Fáil Ireland and the economic realities. *The Third Policeman* is a terribly funny book, but the humor is slowly consumed by the terror over the course of the reading, like Prometheus’s liver. As with the bringer of fire, the punishment is never complete, and the eagle appears to dine again each morning. O’Brien leaves the reader where he or she began, with a hoodwinked farmer’s son eternally selling both past and future for a box of magical promises and a schismatic philosophy. This is indeed an apocalyptic vision of historical failure, linked in this case to a specific national situation of post-colonial disillusion.

I have said that such a reading, which I gesture toward rather than produce here, is both necessary and inadequate. As with the “punchline” ending of the book (the revelation that the narrator has been dead the whole time), it both explains the text and fails to account for the details of the rendering. I have tried to indicate above how those details can be read for their rhetorical effects rather than as signifiers with direct referents, and how those effects can in turn be referred back to their inter- and intra-literary situations. It remains to be reckoned how such a resolute failure in 1940, a manuscript rejected by publishers and author alike, became a solid success and critical
darling in 1967. To put it another way, how did O’Brien’s arch-pessimistic vision of a post-colonial Ireland in stagnation, left with neither past nor future, play so poorly to English and American publishers in 1940, but so well to a postwar international audience?

Some of this can be pinned on the rising star of O’Brien, begun by the 1951 Pantheon edition of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, but one must also look at the expanded consumer base for modernist fiction of a now-decontextualized and universalized desolation and apocalypse, consecrated internationally by the output of a post-WWII phase of late modernism, including that of O’Brien’s more famous fellow countryman, Samuel Beckett. Since I have been following the threads of a series of failures, deferrals, and repetitions, it should be no surprise that these questions are not answerable here, but will take us beyond the war and into the following chapter.
Chapter 4: “If only I could think, There is no sense in this…”: Beckett and the Impossibility of Disbelief

It is notoriously difficult to identify the settings of Beckett’s works, especially those written after the culmination of his first stripping away of traits like character, setting, and plot in *L’innommmable* (1953). Indeed, his inclusion in this study can only seem simultaneously obvious (given his well-documented interest in and extensive allusions to Dante, especially the *Purgatorio*) and perverse (since he rarely allows a reader to identify the ontological situations of his “characters” in any unambiguous way).

Hugh Haughton makes the case most strongly for the presence of Dante behind the very move to the abstract and enclosed spaces in which most of his late work is set:

After the war […] Beckett made his fiction and his drama out of his own vision of the afterlife—or various kinds of posthumous or near-posthumous, or would-be posthumous afterlives, in which we encounter speakers such as Malone and Hamm and Krapp, who are trapped as in a perpetual aftermath, referring endlessly back to their former lives and the “world,” but no longer actively living in or defined by the social world that Dante’s theology takes as much for granted as the City of God. […] For Beckett, it is as if the world itself came to be only representable when imagined as some kind of Dantean afterworld. (Haughton 144)

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1 Beckett identified this interest in Dante as early as 1929 with “Dante … Bruno. Vico… Joyce” (Beckett, *Disjecta* 19-33). For early criticism documenting and analyzing Beckett’s use of Dante, see Cohn, “A Note on Beckett, Dante, and Geulincx” and Strauss, “Dante’s Belacqua and Beckett’s Tramps,” both of which predate the two texts I discuss in this chapter. For a quick listing of allusions to Dante in Beckett’s work, see the entry on Dante in Ackerley and Gontarski’s *Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (118-122). Casanova gives an interesting reading of Beckett’s interest in Dante in *Samuel Beckett* 45-53. For a more extensive discussion of Dante’s role in Beckett’s work, see Caselli.
Haughton paints with a broad brush, but his notion that everyday life in the postwar period came to appear as a kind of aftermath or lost life should resonate with my discussion of loss of belief in the world.

On the other end of things, commentators like Peter Murphy and Paul Lawley reject claims for an afterworld setting for even those late works most steeped in Dantesque language and imagery. To take this as an external obstacle for this chapter would be to miss the point; I instead turn my attention to two works that both demand and refuse to be read as specifically afterworld pieces: his play *Play* (1963) and the short prose piece *Le dépeupleur* (*The Lost Ones*, 1970). Both of these pieces inaugurate the late phase of Beckett’s work, ushering in a reduced and enclosed space corresponding to both a reduction of the world and a tightening of aesthetic options in the exhaustion of modernism. What is remarkable is that both these transitional pieces do so through the ambiguous invocation (simultaneously proffered and refused) of the afterworld.

It is relatively easy to discern two poles in Beckett criticism: the humanist reading focusing on his images of suffering and misery and the formalist reading that takes these images of misery as so many figural remnants of Beckett’s drive toward abstraction. Although the latter pole appears to be coming back to ascendency (with the

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2 Maurice Blackman notes the pivotal role of *Play* in Beckett’s oeuvre, declaring that it “lifted Beckett’s theatre on to a new level of minimalism in theatrical language, dramatic form and staging technique” (Blackman 87). Likewise, *Le dépeupleur* joins the minimalism of the *Textes pour rien* (1955) with the mock-exhaustive description of a purely fictive world of *Comment c’est* (1961), which has also been linked with Dante’s *Inferno* (Haughton 149-154 and Caselli 148-182).

3 Hugh Haughton notes the importance for Dante to Beckett’s late work in terms similar to mine here (Haughton 143-4).
different but in this case convergent readings of Alain Badiou and Pascale Casanova), I argue here that neither pole can exist without the other, and that the tension to be found in late Beckett comes precisely from the uncomfortable co-presence of both aspects in his work.\(^4\)

My treatment of the space of the afterworld as a mediating term between reference and abstraction is meant to provide a more detailed understanding of the operations enabling and underpinning this tension. If the drive toward increased abstraction (the “worsening” of Beckett’s later work) is also a move away from meaning and toward the self-enclosure of a purely fictive construct, I argue here that its force is drawn from the necessity of its failure. This failure, itself thematized by Beckett as the remnant of meaning established by the impossibility of disbelief, takes us to both the culmination and the inversion of the loss of meaning figured in the 20th century afterlives, the turning of the loss of belief in the world back on itself.

I argue here that Beckett’s abstraction is not be seen in purely formal terms, that it in fact registers transformations in the social order of postwar Europe. The implication is that isolation within an administered consumer society is itself abstract, and Beckett’s formal registration of this fact needs to be read as itself referential rather than as a sign of his paradoxical commitment to the autonomy of art. The reduction of Beckett’s theatrical and fictional worlds to minimal structures is often performed under the

\(^4\) In this, I draw from Fredric Jameson’s claim that late-modernist aesthetics (and Beckett’s late work in particular) establish a dialectical relation between “[t]he form itself—autonomy—and the anecdotal content on which it depends yet which it cannot manage to appropriate into its own substance” (\textit{A Singular Modernity} 209).
auspices of authoritarian figures (the spotlight in *Play*, the narrator in *Le dépeupleur*), finding their culmination in the Director of *Catastrophe* (1982), who unites the political torturer and artist in a single on-stage figure. *Play* uses the conceit of the afterworld to show forms of belief that emerge under these authoritarian conditions, while the narration of *Le dépeupleur* turns this around to show us forms of belief and mythological justification appropriate to the administration of life.

**Play**

First produced in Germany (as *Spiel*) on June 14, 1963, *Play* was written in English from 1961-1963 and published in English in 1964. Taking the immobility of *Happy Days* one step further, the play features three heads protruding from “three identical grey urns” (CSP 147), each of which delivers a monologue spliced with the others’ through the coordination of a spotlight. After a short “Chorus,” during which all the figures speak at once, the spotlight moves from face to face, soliciting speech from each in turn. The content of the parallel monologues, a simple and clichéd love triangle in the first part (the “Narration”) and a reflection on the figures’ current situation in the second (the “Meditation”), emerges slowly (if at all) for the audience, since the voices are “faint, largely unintelligible” and maintain a “rapid tempo throughout” (CSP 147). The entirety of the play repeats twice, followed by just enough of a “[c]losing repeat” (CSP 157) to suggest infinite repetition.

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5 The terms “Chorus,” “Narration,” and “Meditation” to describe the parts of *Play* are Beckett’s own. See Martin Esslin, “Samuel Beckett and the Art of Broadcasting” 44.
Although we are never explicitly told that this is a form of hell, the combined evidence is certainly stronger than almost any other Beckett play: the “urns” suggest a funereal setting and mood (as do the “white boxes” of Beckett’s earliest conception of the play); the fixed and protruding heads recall those damned trapped in the icy lake of Cocytus at the base of the *Inferno* (cantos XXXII and XXXIII, describing the fates of traitors to kindred, country, and guest); Beckett’s description of the light as an “inquisitor” and the heads as “its victims” in a note on lighting (CSP 158) indicate that this is a space of both confession and punishment, a feature largely confirmed by the division of the play into confessional narration and reflective meditation on the figures’ current fate; and the static temporality, heightened even from that of *En attendant Godot* through the use of exact repetition (summed up in Beckett’s chilling stage direction on the penultimate page: “[Repeat play.]” [CSP 157]), indicates a world with no possibility of change. Most of the critical literature has taken these clues as to the afterworld setting to be sufficient. Ackerley and Gontarski seem comfortable declaring that Play’s “characters are post-mortem” (Ackerley and Gontarski 444), Knowleson claims that Play replays “a

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6 James Knowlson cites a note Lawrence Harvey made over dinner with Beckett in April of 1962, which contains the mention of the “white boxes” (Knowlson 444). Maurice Blackman has produced a painstaking and exceedingly helpful study of the manuscript stages of Play, and notes the presence of the “white boxes” in the first known version (titled “Before PLAY” by the author), dated from late 1961. As Blackman notes, the boxes “[suggest] coffins,” and are not modified to become “large white urns” until June-July 1962 (Blackman 91-95).

7 In this, Beckett makes a common trait of afterlife fiction and drama (the tension between retrospective narration of the characters’ past lives and investigation into their new forms of life of the afterworld) into a structuring element of the play.

8 Beckett later allowed for minimal variations in both speech order and strength of both light and voices, suggesting “the notion of a gradual running down” (Blackman 103). See CSP 160 for the appended note. Beckett also indicated that these variations should “express a slight weakening, both of question and of response” in a letter to George Devine from September 1964 (*Disjecta* 111). I discuss this choice (which mirrors that of the final section added to *Le dépeupleur* in 1970) in more detail below.
middle-class adulterous affair in Limbo” (Knowleson 444), and Hugh Kenner calls it “Beckett’s ultimate version of the Protestant Hell” (Kenner, A Reader’s Guide 153).

One notable exception is Paul Lawley, who argues for a “synchronic reading” that discounts the temporal frame indicated by the three monologues, treating them instead as stories “invented to counterpoint the light-torture” (Lawley 36).

In affirming that the work is about this life and not an after-life we are defining Beckett’s method as a making strange of the familiar which depends for its final effect upon the liberating realization that what seemed distant and alien at first—the parody of presence we glimpse before us—is in fact the essence of how and what we live day in day out. (Lawley 40-41)

This absolute either/or option (either Play is about our world, or it is about the afterworld and has nothing to do with ours) strikes me as quite silly, since it ignores the capacity of the fantastic to refer to the world elliptically (either allegorically, thematically, counterfactually through negation, or even on the generic level of the chronotope) as well as the ambiguity of the afterworld as a setting at once fantastic (since it depicts a world that is not ours) and referential (because it nonetheless has a very specific tie to our world—being after it in an irreversible way—seen neither in the pure fantasy of Tolkien nor the mixed fantasy of Rowling).

Lawley’s attitude is one, common in studies of modernist literature, that denigrates the fantastic as merely frivolous, explaining it away the literal level of the text in order to draw in reference at a supposedly deeper level. All this stems, in this case, from a fear of subgenre: a concern that the profundity of the work is lost when fantastic reference is acknowledged as such. Fortunately for Lawley, such a fear is developed not
only in the criticism, but also by modernist authors, for whom subgenre reeks of
conventionality and a lack of invention—the taint of “entertainment fiction.” In this
sense, Lawley is not wrong to note that Beckett gives us numerous indications as to a
possible fantastic setting for *Play*, but also refuses any definite confirmation of that
setting. He is also correct to take Kenner to task for making *Play* merely the staging of
moral retribution of a specifically Protestant sort, both for the reason Lawley gives (that
it reduces the scope and interest of the play unduly [Lawley 33]) and because it neglects
Beckett’s reference not only to religious imaginations of the afterlife but to other afterlife
drama, most obviously Sartre’s *Huis clos*.

The connections between *Huis clos* and *Play* are as obvious as they are commonly
unremarked: both deal with three principal characters trapped on stage, and the plots of
each play (or the remnants of what one used to call plot) center around a banal love
triangle repeated eternally.9 Indeed, it is tempting to see *Play* as something like a direct
rejoinder to Sartre, in which we are shown that the only thing worse than other people is
their absence. Yet to do this would be to miss the extension of formal traits presaged in
Sartre’s afterlife play: anti-theatricality and the reduction of gesture, the creation of a
largely plotless and abstract space on the stage, and the establishment of a
metatheatrical situation that questions the freedom of the characters on stage.10 What

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9 The two commentators most interested in the connections between *Huis clos* and *Play* are Vivian Mercier and Thomas Whitaker. Mercier goes as far as to claim that “*Godot, Endgame, Play* are all offspring of *Huis clos*” (Mercier 84), identifying Sartre as a mediator between Racine and Beckett. Whitaker also cites Mercier’s claim, but suggests Sartre as a mediator between Ibsen and Beckett instead (Whitaker 175).

10 I discuss these traits in relation to *Huis clos* in chapter 1.
appeared in Sartre as a parody of bourgeois drama and a reversal of Sartre’s program for a theater of freedom, however, stands here as the realization of a new approach to drama in Beckett’s reduction of action and character.

The irony of this convergence (of Sartre’s parodic negation of his dramatic program and Beckett’s realization of his own) can be seen in the dramatists’ opposed views on Racine and Corneille. Sartre associates Racine with the psychological drama he so detests and holds up Corneille as an example of a playwright able to go beyond the merely mechanical:

Racine peint l’homme psychologique, il étudie les mécanismes de l’amour, de la jalousie d’une manière abstraite, pure, c’est-à-dire sans jamais permettre à des considérations morales ou à la volonté humaine d’infléchir leur mouvement inévitable. Ses personnages ne sont que les créatures de son esprit, la fin résulte d’une analyse intellectuelle. Corneille, au contraire, en montrant la volonté au cœur même de la passion, nous restitue l’homme dans toute sa complexité, dans sa réalité totale. (TS 60)

Racine paints psychologic man, he studies the mechanics of love, of jealousy in an abstract, pure way; that is, without ever allowing moral considerations or human will to deflect the inevitability of their evolution. His dramatis personae are only creatures of his mind, the end result of an intellectual analysis. Corneille, on the other hand, showing will at the very core of passion, gives us back man in all his complexity, in his complete reality. (ST 37)

Beckett values precisely those aspects of Racine that Sartre complains about: the minimalism and precision of the form, the rigorously mechanistic analysis of action, and the insolubility of desire (figured in the love triangle of Andromaque—a precursor to those of Huis clos and Play). Vivian Mercier makes much of Beckett’s interest in Racine, which began at Trinity College, where Beckett both lectured on Racine for his teacher, T. B. Rudmose-Brown, and penned a parody of Corneille (Le Kid) in 1931 (Mercier 74-5). In
his biography, Knowlson notes that Beckett returned to Racine in the late 1950s, claiming that rereading _Andromaque, Phèdre, _and _Bérénice_ “pointed him in the direction that made a tightly focused, monologic play like _Happy Days_ or _Play_ possible” (Knowlson 383). Mercier draws this point out as well, identifying _Play_ as “Beckett’s most Racinian play” (Mercier 80). _Huis clos_ was also Racinian, but in a subtly parodic mode (as I argued in Chapter 1 above); _Play_ takes up many of the same traits, but no longer linked to the local critique to which they were put by Sartre.

The convergence of _Huis clos_ and _Play_ appears ironic, however, only until we recognize Beckett’s own aesthetic program as one of a more general anti-theatricality. In this case, the fact that Beckett takes up as general strategies ones used by Sartre in a more localized attack on bourgeois theater only shows us the extent to which anti-theatricality became the basis of this postwar phase of late modernist dramatic production (rather than one strategy put to the service of some more positive project, as it was for Sartre and his theater of freedom). I showed in Chapter 1 how _Huis clos_ emerged from the situation of Occupation, which Sartre found rendered action meaningless and reduced life to a living death. One question we need to ask is how aesthetic strategies developed for such an exceptional situation were generalized after WWII to inform whole aesthetic programs such as Beckett’s. One possible answer is Fredric Jameson’s observation that earlier modernists’ “freedoms are utterly blind and groping,” while experimental writers after the war had authors like Joyce to “serve as a model” (Jameson, _A Singular Modernity_ 200-201). Such an argument is surely accurate,
but also fails to account for the specificities of all the other aspects of late modernism (as Jameson also acknowledges [200]), particularly the way late modernists used this very belatedness and formal restriction to figure larger changes in social structure in the postwar world.

Puchner uses Play’s staging as a key example of modernist anti-theatricality (Puchner 157), in which the actors’ gestures are reduced to a minimum through their fixity within urns (an extension, as he notes, of the trash cans housing Nagg and Nell in Fin de partie). He does not, however, make much of how this anti-theatricality works within the overall economy of the play. All of the framing directions indicate how mechanically Beckett wanted the lines delivered, with “[f]aces impassive throughout” and “[v]oices toneless except where an expression is indicated” (CSP 147). What actions we are left with are the speeches themselves, the movement of the spotlight, and occasional non-linguistic verbal gestures (M1’s hiccups and W2’s laughter), which might pass unremarked by the audience in some other play but which take on added importance here by virtue of their scarcity.

Anti-theatricality is clearly established as an aim from Beckett’s earliest conceptions of Play. Knowlson has unearthed a short note that Lawrence Harvey took down for Beckett on April 30, 1962: “New play. Must it. 3 white boxes—no more than 3 feet high. 3 heads . . . Don’t realize the others are there. Play of light and dark. Must speak when light on (life)—(Must accept life). Histoire Banale. Stage abolished” (Knowlson 444). While certain aspects of this note have been changed in the final version
of *Play* (the boxes have become urns and the specific reference to the “Muß es sein? Es muß sein! Es muß sein!” of Beethoven’s Op. 135 has been transmuted to the more general musical form of the play), the final comment indicates the extent to which anti-theatricality was a specific goal of Beckett in the composition of *Play*. It also shows the extent to which the tension established between the removal of drama from the stage (the “abolish[ing]” of stage, action, and plot alike) and its persistence in the “[h]istoire banale” that must nonetheless be accepted (by playwright, audience, and figures alike) is a deliberate feature of the play.11

An interpretation of *Play*, it seems to me, must go through two stages, the first of which treats the form and content of the text, while the second reinterprets that material in light of the repetition and overall structure of the play. In this way, such an interpretation hues closely to an audiences’ actual experience of the performance, where they are successively asked to make sense of the material of the play, then to make sense of its identical repetition and closing chorus. From there, I move on to indicate the referential component to Beckett’s world reduction in *Play*, linking the anti-theatrical staging of the play with the registration of serializing and bureaucratizing trends of the postwar years.

11 Knowlson also notes that the “[h]istoire banale” of M, W1 and W2 (the very abbreviations connoting the ease with which such a plot can be shorthanded) appears to be a working through of Beckett’s feelings regarding his affair with Barbara Bray and 1961 marriage to Suzanne (Knowlson 430). What is more relevant than the similarity between Beckett’s biographical love triangle and that of *Play* is Beckett’s apparent embarrassment at the all-too-human feelings associated with them: the feeling that such entanglements are banal, inauthentic, common, along with the acknowledgement that these apparent banalities are still the stuff of which everyday life is made and must be accepted as such.
The most obvious aspect of Play’s staging is its isolation and separation of the three figures, with each figure enclosed in its own urn and faced relentlessly forward (“Don’t realize the others are there”). In keeping with this separation, which takes Winnie’s separation from Willie in Happy Days one step further, their speech is not dialogue, but an assemblage of three monologues coordinated and “provoked” by the spotlight “inquisitor.” What Beckett presents us with is a space of non-reciprocal speech: three characters are on stage, but all three are unaware of and do not speak to the others. The separation of the characters is highlighted via the irony of M’s line: “To think we were never together” (CSP 156)—as well as the final line of the play (also M’s): “We were not long together—” (CSP 158), which heaps temporal irony on the spatial irony of the earlier line—to describe three figures in urns which are not only on stage together but actually described by Beckett as “touching one another” (CSP 147). This non-reciprocity of speech is established as early as the Chorus, where all three figures speak (mostly unintelligibly) at once, and clearly not to one another.

12 My use of the term “figure” to discuss the “characters” of Play is simultaneously meant to register Beckett’s reduction of characters to puppets or human-like objects and acknowledge the connection between this aesthetic reduction and the Nazi biopolitical reduction of the dead in the camps to “figuren.” On this latter, by all means see Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah and Felman’s commentary on it in Testimony (Felman 209-210). I would also like to link this connection (but only in the mode of suggestion) to Caruth’s essay on de Man’s reading of Kleist’s On the Marionette Theater in Unclaimed Experience, which treats the “impact of reference” as a necessary “falling” of theory (Caruth 73-90). I will say here only that this embarrassment about the necessity of reference (taken here to the point of trauma) strikes me as similar to Beckett’s embarrassment about the necessity for reference within his drama and fiction, and that both of these are incomprehensible outside the framework of the (late modernist) ideology of modernism discussed by Jameson in A Singular Modernity. To show this would require an entire essay and may not be worth the effort, given the rapidity of both the rise and fall of trauma theory in the humanities.

13 The absence of interaction between the three speakers was given technological form in the 1966 BBC Third Programme radio adaptation, where (at Beckett’s suggestion) each monologue was recorded separately on tape and only later spliced together (Esslin 44).
Rather than address the others, each figure speaks only to the light (a point not entirely clear until the movement from the Narration to the Meditation, where they address the light directly in the second person), a sort of Other offering only its movement in return. Even this movement is unavailable to the figures, however, and both M and W2 interpret it as “go[ing] out” (CSP 152, 155) because they lack the audience’s perspective on the scene. What they are left with to interact with and speculate about is the intermittency of the provoking light (a sort of cruel reversal of Sartre’s unblinking eye from *Huis clos*), which may or may not have any consciousness behind it. In this way, *Play* gives us one of Beckett’s most direct visions of the conditions of actual human knowledge, which have less to do with the indubitability of clear and distinct notions than with foundations unclear, indistinct (“Hellish half-light” [CSP 152]), and unverifiable.14 In the absence of any clear (or distinct) answer to M’s final question, “Am I as much as . . . being seen?” (CSP 157), the figures are left to speculate as to the possible meaning or lack thereof of their current situation.

This state of uncertainty leads to a variety of perspectives represented by the different figures. The common thread uniting the three perspectives is hope, which takes three different forms. M, we learn, is a materialist and cynic; in the Narration, W1 speaks

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14 Beckett already mocked Descartes’s criterion of indubitability (based on clarity and distinctness) as the basis of knowledge in *Molloy*, where Molloy reasons: “I think that all that is false may more readily be reduced, to notions clear and distinct, distinct from all other notions” (*Three Novels* 82). Acklerley and Gontarski call attention to this passage in their entry on Descartes (134), but they neglect the significantly more damning sentence that follows: “But I may be wrong.” The substitution of “false” for “true” is so much silliness, but the dubitability of even that claim represents a stronger challenge to Descartes’s edifice. As for the unverifiable, Beckett would give it its strongest treatment in *Company* (1980).
of “his horror of the merely Platonic thing” [CSP 148] and W2 remarks that “with him no danger of the . . . spiritual thing” [CSP 149]. Whether we take this unspeakable “thing” to be love or some more elaborately metaphysical concern, his expectation for the afterlife was one of annihilation: “I thought, It is done, it is said, now all is going out— […] Peace, yes, I suppose, a kind of peace, and all that pain as if . . . never been” (CSP 152). Whether or not we do (depending on how we choose to interpret the world of Play: as a morally punitive afterworld or simply a new form of life with new rules to be learned), M refuses to connect his behavior in his past life to his current situation, insisting that “I know now, all that was just . . . play” (CSP 153), giving the play its name.15 Nor does he invest any importance in what he does in this new world (“All this, when will all this have been . . . just play?” [CSP 153]), using the future anterior to empty out the present in favor of yet another world (or the non-world of annihilation he had previously anticipated) that “will come. Must come” because “[t]here is no future in this” (CSP 153). His version of hope assumes an absence of meaning that reduces everything to “just play,” but the fact of the hope itself contradicts this absence (otherwise the “Must come” would not follow from the idea that “There is no future in this”).16

15 Although Play was first written and published in English, it is nonetheless interesting to compare Beckett’s German and French titles with the original, to see how he parsed the polysemy of “play” as both dramatic performance and game, noun and verb. The German Spiel has the interesting effect of connecting Play explicitly to Fin de partie (first performed in Berlin in 1957 as Endspiel): a new version of apocalypse, but now without the “end.” The French Comédie, meanwhile, draws attention to both a specific theatrical genre (rather than the more ambiguous jeu or cumbersome pièce) as well as M’s lack of seriousness.

16 Such an attitude seems to correspond to his cynical use of language while alive, which treated communication as a sort of game, manipulating the clichés of which the Narration is assembled more
W2 shares some aspects of M’s skepticism toward meaning, but holds it out as a future prospect rather than a cynical approach to the present. While M ends the play with the image of the light as “Mere eye. No mind. Opening and shutting on me” (CSP 157), W2 begins to imbue the spot with a personality, projecting character traits to it (“It would not be like you somehow. And you must know I am doing my best. Or don’t you?” [CSP 153]). At the same time, however, she calls this projection into question: “No doubt I make the same mistake as when it was the sun that shone, of looking for sense where possibly there is none” (CSP 153-4). Read synchronically as a proposition, this is a characteristic skeptical claim, moving from the idea of a possible absence of sense to the conclusion that looking for sense in such uncertain data is simply a “mistake.” 17 When treated as a Kleistian sentence, however, her move from “no doubt” to “possibly” instead attests to her ambivalence, as a statement expressing certainty of meaninglessness shifts mid-sentence to one expressing the possibility of meaning where it had originally been discounted.18 (A further question, one that I return to below, is why incredulity seems—to W2, but also often to us—a safer or wiser response to uncertainty than does credulity: why, that is, it seems a mistake to respond to the possibility of meaninglessness by “looking for sense” rather than affirming its absence.)

17 For an extensive discussion of this skeptical gesture, see Cavell, Claim of Reason 129-167.
18 By “Kleistian sentence,” I mean to refer to his “On the Gradual Production of Thoughts Whilst Speaking.” In a more general sense, I use this term to shorthand a type of reading that focuses on the force of desire to modify or destabilize sentences midstream.
Rather than imagine another world or non-world to follow this one (as with M), W2 instead focuses on the idea of an end either in darkness (“Some day you will tire of me and go out . . . for good” [CSP 152]) or in the madness of unceasing light (“You might get angry and blaze me clean out of my wits. Mightn’t you?” [CSP 153]). As befits her skeptical position, however, her monologue ends with doubt, leading into her final laugh before the return of the Chorus: “I say, Am I not perhaps a little unhinged already? [Hopefully.] Just a little? [Pause.] I doubt it” (CSP 256). Having moved from her earlier “[n]o doubt” to “I doubt it” (repeated at the end of each of her final three lines), her “[p]eal of wild low laughter” (CSP 157) comes across as one more attempt to convince either herself or the spotlight that she is indeed “a shade gone, just a shade, in the head,” but it carries little conviction and is “cut short as spot from her to W1” (CSP 157), as if the light is either unconvinced (if sentient) or unconvincible (if not).

One possible first but insufficient response to the question I raised above (why incredulity seems a safer response to the possibility of meaninglessness—but then also the possibility of meaning—than belief) hinges on the reduction of the figures to the state of inaction. Encased in their separate urns, they are unable to physically affect their world, left with only their voices (and hiccups, and laughter). In these particular circumstances, it is unclear what either disbelief or belief in a meaning behind the light would entail. This is one way of saying that the loss of belief in the world (belief in the connection between and transformative power of human and world, as discussed in my Introduction) tends to lead to the more traditional idea of the draining off of meaning.
from the world, leaving not doubt so much as disinterest, since there is “nothing to be done” in any case.19 This is to move too quickly, however, discounting the possibility that the figures’ remaining avenue for action (their speech) could have some effect in their worlds (plural because while they are in the same world for us, the audience, their worlds are clearly separate from one another).

This is the gambit W1 takes up and thematizes: “I can do nothing . . . for anybody . . . any more . . . thank God. So it must be something I have to say. How the mind works still!” (CSP 153). This perspective takes up the opposite approach to W2, assuming that, in the absence of certainty, purpose (meaning, sense) should still be assumed. She takes this as less a heroic stance than an impossibility of doing otherwise, indeed as an unfortunate consequence of “[h]ow the mind works still”: “If only I could think, there is no sense in this . . . either, none whatsoever. I can’t. […] I can’t. The mind would have to go. Yes” (CSP 154-155). Unlike W2, she doesn’t even try (and fail) to convince herself that her mind is going, but her inability to believe in the absence of sense appears to her as torment. Indeed, her perspective is a moral one, and she comes closest to imagining this world as a moral afterworld, in particular a purgatory (since to imagine it as a hell would be, in some sense, to imagine that “there is no sense in this,” at least insofar as there is no solution to the question, Lenin’s question: “what is to be

19 Cf. Cavell on the relation of will and world: “Since I cannot measure in each case how far to invest my will, I must trust myself to be up to calamities (the consequences of accidents, mistakes, inadvertence, clumsiness, thoughtlessness, foolishness, imprudence, hesitation, precipitousness, acts of God, and so on). The alternative is to make the world not strange but indifferent to me, and that disfigures both the world and me” (Cavell, Philosophy 139-140).
done”): “Penitence, yes, at a pinch, atonement, one was resigned, but no, that does not seem to be the point either” (CSP 156).

In the absence of any sense of why she is there or what is expected of her, however, she merely runs through her various possibilities. First, confession: “Is it that I do not tell the truth, is that it, that some day somehow I may tell the truth at last and then no more light at last, for the truth?” (CSP 153). Yet she soon rules out this option, and all options pertaining to speech: “But I have said all I can. All you let me. All I—“ (at which point “[Spot from W1 to M],” making her point viscerally [CSP 153]). From there, she moves (turning from the mode of genuine query to that of provocation) to non-linguistic gesture: “Is there something I should do with my face, other than utter? Weep? [...] Bite off my tongue and swallow it? Spit it out? Would that placate you?” (CSP 154). These, however, she does not do, nor are we given to believe they are genuine options open to her. If she has “said all [she] can,” why should she (or the audience) think she has not done the same?

I take W1 to state the basic condition of all these figures, which is the impossibility of disbelief in the existence of some form of meaning behind their world. M, whose treatment of the past as “just play” and hope that the present will equally be revealed as such leads him to question most directly the existence of intention behind the pattern of the light, cannot maintain this assumption consistently. We hear him ask, for example, “Am I hiding something? Have I lost— [...] Have I lost . . . the thing you want? Why go out?” (CSP 155). W2 seems to escape meaning even further, ending her
monologue not with speech but laughter. Yet her repeated expressions of doubt regarding her possible escape into madness call this laughter into question as anything but an attempt to convince herself of something that she cannot believe. Given the minimal stimulus of the provoking light, going on and off of them in turn, they cannot help but attribute some meaning to this stimulus at the same time that they are unable to fix any particular meaning. Questions and expressions of doubt are to be read against this horizon, which maintains different varieties of hope that some action (either on their parts or on that of the inquisitor) will lead to the darkness and non-being each figure craves.

And then the entire play repeats da capo, giving the audience an added temporal perspective on the action to supplement its spatial perspective (which transcends and synthesizes the closed worlds of the three figures into the larger world of the stage). As with the ending of The Third Policeman, we are shown that the worlds in which the figures are trapped are ones of sterile repetition, in which the same monologues are run through over and over again, presumably for all eternity. We learn that there is, in a stronger sense than that meant by M, “no future in this.” On a technical level, the exact repetition enables the audience to make slightly more sense of the lines (delivered too

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20 In a recent article in Science, clinical researchers showed that “[p]articipants who lacked control were more likely to perceive a variety of illusory patterns, including seeing images in noise, forming illusory correlations in stock market information, perceiving conspiracies, and developing superstitions” (Whitson and Galinsky). While this, like the results of so many studies, seems to tell us only what we already know, it also offers the seeds for an existential theory of paranoia. I discuss paranoia in more detail in Chapter 3.
quickly and in such short bursts to be readily comprehensible the first time around).\textsuperscript{21}

Yet it makes not only for added comprehension, but also a reappraisal of what one is being shown.

If, during the first time around, we seemed to have witnessed the confusions and agitations of three consciousnesses—reduced, to be sure, and strained to their limits, but consciousnesses nonetheless—the exact repetition forces the audience to reappraise that assessment. It is, of course, possible to imagine that the figures have no memory of the previous repetitions (as with the narrator of \textit{The Third Policeman}, who makes the same choices for eternity because he cannot learn from his experience). Yet one element of \textit{Play} renders even this interpretation doubtful: M’s hiccups, which are subject to the same repetition as the rest of the play. (One might suggest, only partly in jest, that M’s eternal case of the hiccups is enough to prove that the setting for \textit{Play} is indeed hell.)

Unlike the identical monologues, which can be interpreted as the figures making the same choices over and over again, a hiccup can be taken as a sign of contingency as such. The identical repetitions of each hiccup convert this absolute contingency to an equally absolute necessity: everything is accounted for and even those occurrences

\textsuperscript{21} Given this facet of the performance, on which Beckett insisted on despite objections from actors (see Knowlson 460), one might have cause to question the relevance of my interpretation of the lines (or any interpretation based on the text of the play). All I can say in defense is that the lines remain part of the play, and that, it being impossible to assess just how much any audience member might glean from a single performance, any refusal to interpret the text amounts to a general refusal to interpret \textit{Play} at all.
outside of any will come around again just the same. Play’s eternal return turns out to be less Nietzsche’s ethical one than the cosmological hell imagined by Blanqui.22

This would seem to question the basic premise of my above reading, and indeed, the presumption that we can read anything like consciousness into the monologues. We might imagine instead that the figures are like so many tape recorders (an assumption actualized in the BBC radio adaptation cited above), with the light playing the part of Krapp. Such a reading would drain out the idea of interiority altogether, leaving only the formal play of light on three mindless speaking shells. Yet this assumption is, I argue, impossible to support, despite the extensive apparatus suggesting it (toneless voices, heads made up to appear part of the urns, the exact repetition of the monologues, the clichés of which the monologues are largely made up). It would remove all interest from the play, but, more to the point, is not something we as audience members can accomplish. In this turn, the impossibility of belief is passed from the stage to the seats, as we find ourselves equally unable to accept the figures on the stage as anything but conscious.

This is also to say that a “humanist” reading, while not exhaustive, remains a necessary response for the functioning of the play. I have put “humanist” in quotation marks since, despite being the common name for readings of Beckett that assume some form of compassion or acknowledgement of characters beyond their formal reduction,

22 See, in this regard, Benjamin’s treatment of Blanqui’s idea of eternal return in his “Exposé of 1939” (Benjamin, Arcades Project 25-6). I take my understanding of Nietzsche’s eternal return from Deleuze, Nietzsche and Philosophy 47-49 and 68-72.
the human has virtually nothing to do with it. (Could we even call the figures in urns human? What form of life do they share with us, and, more to the point, what would be gained from calling them human? Why not “conscious figures,” or “shades,” or simply “the damned” or “the dead” or “ex-love-triangulators”?) Rather, such an acknowledgement must persist, even while we recognize the drive toward abstraction behind Beckett’s aesthetic. The “corpsing” of so many human figures in the service of such abstraction cannot be written off as a consequence of world reduction; or rather, it is a consequence of world reduction, but the concomitant suffering then needs to be acknowledged as such also. Play is not merely a formal game.

I claimed above that late modernists used the formal imperatives of world reduction to figure larger changes in social structure in the postwar world. As an attempt to make good on this claim with regard to Play, I turn to the curious fact that Beckett’s staging of the afterworld as separation coordinated by the central authority of the spotlight provides an excellent formal depiction of the mechanism Sartre identified (just a year before Beckett’s composition of Play) as seriality.23 This, however, requires a brief detour through the Critique. Sartre defines seriality as “un nouveau type de rapport « externe-interne » [produit] par l’action du champ pratico-inerté” (“a new type of

23 I in no way want to claim that Beckett had read the Critique. My claim is not one of influence, but of parallel recognition of more widespread mechanisms of social organization and institutionalization. Nor do I wish to read Beckett as providing a figure for the truth generated by Sartre. I am more inclined instead to say that both Sartre and Beckett give figurations of actual transformations in the social, one within philosophy, the other within art. One creates concepts, the other percepts and affects; neither one is somehow “closer” to the truth (as in the folly where we use philosophy to seek the truth of art, while we should be looking for historical parallels or convergent series between the two). On this, see Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy?
‘external-internal’ relation [produced] by the action of the practico-inert field”; CRD 363, CDR 255), characterized by the production of social isolation (which is taken up as a project by the praxes concerned). This is the constitution of social objects (serial collectives—in Sartre the negative opposite of the positive group) through the mediation of external institutional forms, which come to replace direct relations of reciprocity.

His most basic, quotidian example is a gathering of Parisians waiting for a bus. They constitute a social object, but they are not a group because the unity of their social being is to be found outside of them in the larger institution (the mass transit system). Each relates to the other only through this mediation (external determination by the practico-inert field).

[C]omme tous les caractères vécus qui pourraient servir à une différenciation d’intériorité tombent en dehors de cette détermination, l’identité est l’unité de chacun avec chaque Autre, c’est leur unité là-bas comme être-Autre et c’est ici, maintenant, leur altérité commune. Chacun est le même que les Autres tant qu’il est Autre de soi. Et l’identité comme altérité, c’est la séparation d’extériorité. (CRD 367-8)

[S]ince all the lived characteristics which might allow some interior differentiation lie outside this determination, everyone’s identity with every Other is their unity elsewhere, as other-being; here and now, it is their common alterity. Everyone is the same as the Other in so far as he is Other than himself. And identity as alterity is exterior separation. (CDR 260)

They have an abstract interest in common (each wants to get where they are going), but this interest lies in separate, non-communicating projects. This unity-in-alterity is lived as “nécessité irrationnelle” (“irrational necessity”; CRD 368, CDR 260).

Such institutional structures, while obviously necessary for urban life (as the bus stop example clarifies), turn this exterior separation into isolation. “[L]’intensité de
solitude, comme relation d’extériorité entre les membres d’un rassemblement provisoire et contingent, exprime le degré de massification de l’ensemble social en tant qu’il se produit sur la base de conditions données” (“[T]he intensity of isolation, as a relation of exteriority between the members of a temporary and contingent gathering, expresses the degree of massification of the social ensemble, in so far as it is produced on the basis of given conditions”; CRD 365, CDR 257). Such massification extends beyond the simple example of the bus stop, transforming seriality into a “mode de vie” (“way of life”; CRD 365, CDR 257) common to social situations characterized by institutional mediation. As Sartre notes, “[i]l y a des conduites sérielles, il y a des sentiments et des pensées sérielles ; autrement dit, la série est un mode d’être des individus les uns par rapport aux autres et par rapport à l’être commun et ce mode d’être les métamorphose dans toutes leurs structures” (“[t]here are serial behaviour, serial feelings and serial thoughts; in other words a series is a mode of being for individuals both in relation to one another and in relation to their common being and this mode of being transforms all their structures”; CRD 373, 266).

Sartre presents seriality as part of an abstract sociology, but it is not difficult to historicize his creation of the concept, particularly when he turns, in the section of the Critique on the Institution (CRD 670-746, CDR 576-663), to the question of the external administration of seriality through David Reisman’s idea of “other-direction” (CRD 727, CDR 643), which turns on the uses of consumerism and corporate or state propaganda to foreclose the possibility of group formation through the promotion of seriality. At this point, his presentation of seriality as social manipulation connects back
up with its extreme form of “double pétrification” in bureaucracy. I discuss this late modern concern with bureaucracy in some detail in my Introduction. Here as there, I both want to suggest that Sartre captures something real about social life and, at the same time, produces a mythic structure that draws from and contributes to larger modes of thought about postwar social organization. His consistent use of infernal imagery in the Critique to discuss the practico-inert testifies to the extent to which his abstract sociology is also a period myth that both registers and gives exaggerated figuration to actual transformations of everyday life in the “bureaucratic society of controlled consumption” (Lefebvre, Everyday Life in the Modern World 60).

Beyond staging seriality formally through the basic conceit of three non-reciprocal monologues coordinated by the central authority of the spotlight, Play also follows the same path as that charted by Sartre, where what at first appears a total concentration of freedom in the top of the hierarchy (in this case, the “provoking” light) comes to approach a total absence of freedom.24 Hence M’s final sceptical question, “Am I as much as . . . being seen?” which calls the attribution of such meaning into question (as does the repetition). I claimed above that this position is impossible, however—that, in the words of W1, “the mind would have to go.” Seen from this renewed context, the impossibility of disbelief also explains in some ways the necessities of ideology, of

24 Beckett’s acknowledgement of this movement is apparent in the suggestions for variation he made to Georges Devine in 1964. There he proposed “a less confident movement of spot from one face to another and less immediate reaction of the voices. The whole idea involves spot mechanism of greater flexibility than has seemed necessary so far. The inquirer (light) begins to emerge as no less a victim of his inquiry than they and as needing to be free, within narrow limits, literally to act the part, i.e. to vary if only slightly his speeds and intensities. Perhaps some form of manual control after all” (Beckett, Disjecta 111-12).
objective or what I have been calling the polarity of external belief. The impassiveness of
the apparatus, its apparent indifference, solicits a belief compatible with extreme private
skepticism or doubt, particularly in a situation in which transformative action appears
impossible.

Before moving on to discuss Beckett’s world reduction in _Le dépeupleur_, I wish to
draw attention to two further aspects of this state of separation. The first is that it is
supplemented by fantasies of togetherness; the second is that these fantasies, while
clearly nostalgic, are marked by expressions of pity rather than envy. M goes through
two different fantasies in the Meditation, imagining first W1 and W2 together in the
vague present, and then all three together in an explicit fantasy scenario. His first
imaginary scenario runs as follows:

Perhaps they have become friends. Perhaps sorrow— […] Perhaps sorrow has
brought them together. […] Perhaps they meet, and sit, over a cup of that green
tea they both so loved, without milk or sugar, not even a squeeze of lemon— […]
Not even a squeeze of— […] Meet, and sit, now in the one dear place, now in the
other, and sorrow together, and compare—_[Hiccup.]_ pardon—happy memories.
[…] Personally I always preferred Lipton’s. […] I pity them in any case, yes,
compare my lot with theirs, however blessed, and— […] Pity them. (CSP 153-5)\(^25\)

This bit of monologue can serve several purposes here. The first is to draw attention to
the closed aspect of the retrospective Narration, which focuses relentlessly on the
relations between the three figures. In this case, the closed focus leads to an excessive

\(^{25}\) I have here and in some places below extracted one of the monologues, skipping over the spot directions
and others’ lines to focus on M’s speech. This means of presentation has the drawback of eliminating the
rhythm and interplay between the parallel monologues (the end of this section, for example, is intercut with
W2’s disgust at the idea of M and W1 pitying her), and the merit of following one line of speaking. The
ellipses in square brackets are (as usual) mine, while the “_[Hiccup.]_” stage direction is in Beckett’s text.
narcissism, in which M imagines W1 and W2 united in “sorrow” at his absence, and capable only of sharing “happy memories” of their respective times with him. This narcissism may be one aspect of his pity, if we take their imagined “lot” to consist mainly of life without M. More generally, it highlights a larger failure of imaginative projection: M can only imagine a pitiable lot for these women, correlated around simple comfort (located in consumption through the comically misplaced interjection of M’s brand loyalty—one apparently more important to him than the human loyalty at issue in their affairs) and his own absence. Beyond his (now-absent) presence and a general sphere of consumption, these women have little reality for him.26

Nor is this fantasizing only restricted to M. W1 imagines instead a scenario in which M and W2 have run away together, although even this quickly turns from togetherness to imagined absence, this time coordinated not by consumerism but by the exoticism of an unspecified Mediterranean locale:

Perhaps she has taken him away to live . . . somewhere in the sun. […] Perhaps she is sitting somewhere, by the open window, her hands folded in her lap, gazing down out over the olives— […] Gazing down out over the olives, then the sea, wondering what can be keeping him, growing cold. Shadow stealing over everything. Creeping. Yes. […] Poor creature. Poor creatures. (CSP 155-6)

In some ways, this imaginary scenario gives M’s validation, since W1 also seems to be able to imagine W2 only in relation to M, and even M’s absence (a curious feature of a fantasy originated from the idea of the two of them together—is this wish-fulfillment or

26 I am not focused on gender here, but Beckett’s choice to identify his figures primarily in terms of gender (as M, W1, and W2) calls attention to the role of gender disparity in social isolation.
a sign that her imagination is bound by her experience of M as absent?). And as with M, W1 ends pitying these “[p]oor creatures” rather than envying them.

This is the place to return to M’s line about never being together, since it serves not merely as an ironic commentary on the staging of separate togetherness, but also as occasion for a final, now fully fantastic and counterfactual imagination of togetherness:

To think we were never together. [...] Never woke together, on a May morning, the first to wake to wake the other two. Then in a little dinghy— [...] A little dinghy— [...] A little dinghy, on the river, I resting on my oars, they lolling on air-pillows in the stern . . . sheets. Drifting. Such fantasies. [...] We were not civilized. [...] Such fantasies. Then. And now— (CSP 156-7)

The final “Then” gives this the air of a paradise lost, although it is explicitly a paradise never had, an assemblage of banal “fantasies” of leisure and mutual comfort, in this case an unproblematic dinghy-à-trois “[d]rifting” on “the river” (a phrase vague enough to suggest both familiarity and fantasy). Yet whatever sleaziness and avoidance of reality we might want to identify in this speech, we should simultaneously note its utopian quality, one both highlighted and undercut by the intrusion of the statement “[w]e were not civilized,” which could mean that such togetherness could only be had by the truly civilized and/or that these fantasies are themselves those of the uncivilized (because only supplemental fantasies, though, or because of their laziness as fantasies?).

These fantasies, however banal, call up a form of life now lost to the figures, an everyday life based in human interaction. The expression of pity for the (real or imagined) living inverts the common trope of the deads’ envy for the living, emblematized in Achilles’ famous lament in Odyssey XI.579-581: “Better, I say, to break
sod as a farm hand / for some poor country man, on iron rations, / than lord it over all
the exhausted dead” (201). That these figures prefer the “[s]ilence and darkness” of non-
being to the thought of lived relations testifies to the apocalypticism inherent in loss of
belief in the world, whether this involves “learning to love the bomb” or more banal
fantasies of others’ greater banality. To come to love the afterworld (or at least this
version of it) is also to give up on belief in the world (as well as skepticism).²⁷

_Le dépeupleur_

_Sur la terre d’exil pourquoi resté-je encore ?
Il n’est rien de commun entre la terre et moi._
—Lamartine, “L’isolement”

If _Play_ stages an ambiguous afterworld as an enclosure within oneself, operating a
separation coordinated by a central authority, Beckett’s prose fiction appears to give
more definite form to this world reduction, since the use of description allows for a more
direct thematization of world as such. One can present a world on the stage, but
simultaneously describe and create it (create it through description) in prose. _Le
dépeupleur_, following the direction Beckett had begun with _Comment c’est_, builds on
Dante’s imagination of hell to create a fully fictional, enclosed world, all while
thematizing the artificiality of the world through allusions to a lost nature. At the same
time, prose description comes, in _Le dépeupleur_, to figure a particular attempt to control

²⁷ I am inclined to say here that the celebratory acceptance of the loss of belief the world is also entry into the
condition of postmodernity, or at least its celebratory version. Cf. Cavell’s claim in _Philosophy the Day After
Tomorrow_ that postmodernism could be described as an approach to the world in which skepticism is no
longer a scandal (Cavell, _Philosophy_ 340).
and regulate that world, effecting a parodic critique of official discourses ranging from scientific reports to the more sinister Nazi uses of abstract and distancing language when referring to the Holocaust. Beckett’s staged afterworld of Play allows us insight into the forms of belief stemming from administered life in the postwar era. His short prose piece, Le dépeupleur, turns this around to show us the forms of belief adjusted to external administration of life.

Le dépeupleur describes the conditions of existence of 205 “corps” contained within a hard rubber cylinder 50 meters in circumference and 16 meters high. In this place, we are told in the first sentence, “des corps vont cherchant son dépeupleur” (“lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one”; D 7, CSPr 202). The untranslatable “dépeupleur” (literally closest to “depopulator” —Beckett opted for the more descriptive “lost one,” recalling the “perduta gente” of Dante’s Inferno [III.3]) offers the first of many mysteries lying behind a text that gives off an air of exhaustiveness while failing to answer most of the reader’s questions: where is this place, what is its purpose (should it have one), what exactly is a lost one, and what would happen were one of the bodies to find theirs? The term itself is an allusion to Lamartine’s “L’isolement,” where he writes “Un seul être vous manque, et tout est dépeuplé!” (Lamartine 4).28 The larger frame of the poem describes the flight of meaning from the world (rendering the speaker’s soul “indifférente” to “l’immense univers”), giving us some basic context for

28 Almost all commentators on this work mention the Lamartine allusion in the title. Caselli provides an extensive rundown of Beckett’s allusions in Beckett’s Dantes, although she focuses on Dante more than Lamartine for obvious reasons.
Beckett’s sentence; *Le dépeupleur* describes these bodies searching for the lost one who would render the world meaningful and interesting once more.

We are never told, however, of any body finding its lost one. As the narrator notes: “S’ils se remettent il n’y paraît pas. Quoi qu’ils cherchent ce n’est pas ça” (“If they recognize each other it does not appear. Whatever it is they are searching for it is not that”; D 32, CSP 213). Instead, the text enumerates, in excruciating and often pedantic detail, the different types of movement the bodies may take (including the 4 basic categories of those always in movement, those that pause occasionally, those that remain sedentary but continue to search with their eyes, and “les vaincus [the vanquished],” who have ceased to search and turn their eyes downward), the arrangement of the space (divided into 3 zones), the possibilities for change between one of these categories and the others, the use of ladders to search tunnels located in the upper part of the wall, and the “va-et-vient vertigineux entre des extremes se touchant” (“vertiginous tremolo between contiguous extremes”; D 15, CSP 205) of temperature and light.

A notoriously difficult text within Beckett studies, *Le dépeupleur* seems designed to both raise and refute the question of whether it is to be read allegorically. Its repeated allusions to Dante and Lamartine suggest any number of obvious (and obviously reductive) options, which Susan D. Brenzia runs through and Peter Murphy repeats: “the cylinder is hell; the cylinder is the Tower of Babel” (Brenzia 139, Murphy 72). Yet these options fall away under the hermetic pressure of the text, which even allusion does not force open. Beckett actually teases the reader at one point, writing: “Ce qui frappe
d’abord dans cette pénombre est la sensation de jaune qu’elle donne pour ne pas dire de soufre à cause des associations” (“What first impresses in this gloom is the sensation of yellow it imparts not to say of sulphur in view of the associations”; D 32, CSPr 213).

Here Beckett offers us a possible allegorical referent (the infernal associations of “sulphur”) only to present it in the mode of negation to avoid “des associations.” The text remains just as insistently self-enclosed as the space it describes.

I need not describe it as hell (or purgatory, should we accept the mythologizing final section as truth), however, because its decided artificiality and world reduction essentially are the material drawn from Dante and other afterworlds. In any case, the bodies of Le dépeupleur are just as “after” life as are the figures of Play, since we are told that “[p]arents et amis sont bien représentés sans parler des simples connaisances” (“[r]elatives and friends are well represented not to speak of mere acquaintances”; D 33, CSPr 213). These relations cannot have emerged in the cylinder (the bodies do not speak and, while they do attempt to copulate occasionally, they do so without either pleasure or procreation), so they must refer to some pre-cylindrical state now past.

The impossibility of disbelief appears in the text primarily through the search itself, in which the bodies (minus the five vanquished) persist despite consistent failure to locate their respective lost ones. It is thematized more locally, however, in the question of an exit to the space.

De tout temps le bruit court ou encore mieux l’idée a cours qu’il existe une issue. […] Sur la nature de l’issue et sur son emplacement deux avis principaux divisent […]. Pour les uns il ne peut s’agir que d’un passage dérobé prenant naissance dans un des tunnels et menant comme dit le poète aux asiles de la
nature. Les autres rêvent d’une trappe dissimulée au centre du plafond donnant accès à une cheminée au bout de laquelle brilleraient encore le soleil et les autres étoiles. (D 16-17)

From time immemorial rumour has it or better still the notion is abroad that there exists a way out. Regarding the nature of this way out and its location two opinions divide [...]. One school swears by a secret passage branching from one of the tunnels and leading in the words of the poet to nature’s sanctuaries. The other dreams of a trapdoor hidden in the hub of the ceiling giving access to a flue at the end of which the sun and other stars would still be shining. (CSPr 206)

As with the titles (but now within each language rather than between the two), the two options offered divide between a reference to Lamartine and Dante. The poet mentioned in the passage option is again Lamartine, while (as virtually every commentator notes) “le soleil et les autres étoiles” is a literal translation of the final line of the *Commedia* (“l’amor che move il sole e l’altre strelle” ([Paradiso XXXIII.145]) while also recalling the opening at the base of the *Inferno* (XXXIV.139) out of which Dante sees the starry sky.

It is difficult not to read this choice allegorically. As Caselli notes, both options rely on images of nature, which establishes a contrast with the artificiality of the cylinder and the “culture” of the language with which it is created (Caselli 195). Haughton treats it as an opposition between the “romantic and secular” evocation of nature and the properly religious salvation promised in heaven (Haughton 154). This latter seems more fitting to me given Beckett’s language, although there is no doubting that they both offer the promise of escape from just the sort of fully built world I discuss in my Introduction.

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29 From “Le vallon”: “Prêtez-moi suelement, vallon de mon enfance, / Un asile d’un jour pour attendre la mort” (Lamartine 21). See also Caselli 195.

30 Caselli adds that the ladder also gestures to the end of the *Purgatorio*, and that all three books of the *Commedia* end with the stars (195).
Furthering this allegorical reading, we are told in the same paragraph that the trapdoor option is gradually coming into favor. Or rather, the narrator suggests that this is the shift is “dans la logique des choses,” since it is happening “de façon si lente et si peu suivie et bien entendu avec si peu de répercussion sur le comportement des uns et des autres que pour s’en apercevoir il faut être dans le secret des dieux” (“in an manner so desultory and slow and of course with so little effect on the comportment of either sect that to perceive it one must be in the secret of the gods”; D 17, CSPr 206-7). This comment notes the detachment of belief from action as if this were the natural state of belief (to be purely private and a matter of no consequence on action). At the same time, the assertion on the part of the narrator that this shift is indeed taking place itself becomes a matter of belief rather than knowledge, since it is imperceptible to all but the gods (unless we take the narrator to be a god—a possibility, but not a strong one).

The cynical proof the narrator offers for the popularity of the trapdoor option is precisely its unverifiability: “Car ceux qui croient à une issue accessible comme à partir d’un tunnel elle serait et même sans qu’ils songent à l’emprunter peuvent être tentés par sa découverte. Tandis qu’aux partisans de la trappe ce démon est épargné du fait que le centre du plafond est hors d’atteinte” (“For those who believe in a way out possible of access as via a tunnel it would be and even without any thought of putting it to account may be tempted by its quest. Whereas the partisans of the trapdoor are spared this demon by the fact that the hub of the ceiling is out of reach”; D 17-18, CSPr 207). If we take this allegorically as well, we are left with the return of religion over nature due to
the strength of religion’s unverifiability—it is maintained as the better fiction because it is not verifiable as fact or falsehood.

To take all of this as allegorical, however, one must display credence in the narration. As my use of the adjective “cynical” to describe this proof should indicate, however, the narrator is far from reliable, and indeed sneers at this hope and “[s]a petite lumière inutile” ([i]ts fatuous little light”; D 18, CSPr 207). At moments like this, we get a glimpse of another possible reference for the text, this time at the level of style: the employment of formal and distancing language by officials to disguise (or avoid recognition of) suffering, taken to its extreme in the Nazi “euphemisms of death” (Landau 289). Seen in this light, a phrase like “Ce qui frappe d’abord dans cette pénombre est la sensation de jaune qu’elle donne pour ne pas dire de soufre à cause des associations” (D 32), cited above as an example of Beckett mocking the reader’s desire for allegory, comes to appear more sinister: a torturer deliberately avoiding associations that would give the game away.32

31 The most famous example is a June 5, 1942 memorandum on possible improvements that could be made to poisoning vans: “The lighting must be better protected than now. The lamps must be enclosed in a steel grid to prevent their being damaged. Lights could be eliminated, since they apparently are never used. However, it has been observed that when the doors are shut, the load always presses hard against them as soon as the darkness sets in. This is because the load naturally rushes towards the light when darkness sets in, which makes closing the doors difficult. Also, because of the alarming nature of the darkness, screaming always occurs when the doors are closed. It would therefore be useful to light the lamps before and during the first moments of the operation” (cited in Lanzmann, Shoah 1035). Felman discusses this in Testimony 240. Landau reprints it on 289-90. I do not mean to suggest that Beckett was familiar with this document, but his well-documented activities with the French Resistance and the mere fact of his being alive in France after the war testify to his awareness of Nazi crimes and methods (see Knowlson 278-308, 344). It is almost impossible to imagine Beckett’s postwar work without the Holocaust as some form of referent.

32 Adelman makes the link between Nazi discourse and the narration of Le dépeupleur, mediated (less convincingly) through a discussion of Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” (Adelman 167).
Such cynicism (an external form of belief that takes the opposite polarity to private belief) is expressed in a passage like the following, which suggests a moral concern on the part of the narrator only to expose that initial reading as misplaced:

Il y a d’abord quelque chose de troublant dans la lenteur relative de cette navette comparée à celle qui fait vibrer la lumière. Mais c’est un trouble que l’analyse a vite fait de dissiper. Car à bien y réfléchir la différence n’est pas entre les vitesses mais entre les espaces parcourus. Et si celui demandé à la température était ramené à la valeur de quelques bougies il n’y aurait rien à choisir mutatis mutandis entre les deux effets. Mais cela ne ferait pas l’affaire du cylindre. Tout est donc pour le mieux. […] Car seule le cylindre offre des certitudes et au dehors rien que mystère. (D 37-8)

There is something disturbing at first sight in the relative slowness of this vibration compared to that of the light. But this is a disturbance analysis makes short work of. For on due reflection the difference to be considered is not one of speed but of space travelled. And if that required of the temperature were reduced to the equivalent of a few candles there would be nothing to choose mutatis mutandis between the two effects. But that would not answer the needs of the cylinder. So all is for the best. […] For in the cylinder alone are certitudes to be found and without nothing but mystery. (CSP 215-6)

The fluctuations the narrator is discussing are the ones causing the “dessèchement de l’enveloppe” of the bodies and making the soul “souffre”—but less than the skin (D 47, 46). The first sentence seems to register an understandable objection to this diabolical mechanism, yet the following sentences reverse this reading, to the point that the narrator identifies “l’affaire du cylindre” (not that we are ever explicitly told what that

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33 These features of the cylinder are the ones most difficult for those who think of world reduction as a neutral exercise in abstraction to deal with. Casanova, for example, is forced to cite these mechanisms as part of a general reduction of desire into stasis and non-being, leading to Beckett’s “utopia of collective non-existence” (Casanova, Samuel Beckett 73). While it is possible to read the text this way (as part of Beckett’s progressive abstraction, of which suffering is simply a neutral mark mistaken by humanist readers as negative), such readings neglect the existence of a culture which does read suffering in negative terms and in which Beckett had to sell books.
is!) with “le mieux.” In the absence of any sense of a greater purpose, we are left to take it as a world reduction in a slightly different way, with the purpose being to reduce out will to attain the “certitude” it problematizes (as when the narrator notes that it does not know what the bodies are looking for in their lost ones).

This conclusion is given greater force in the following passage.

Et pour l’être pensant venu se pencher froidement sur toutes ces données et évidences il serait vraiment difficile au bout de son analyse de ne pas estimer à tort qu’au lieu d’employer le terme vaincus qui a en effet un petit côté pathétique désagréable on ferait mieux de parler d’aveugles tout court. (D 35)

And the thinking being coldly intent on all these data and evidences could scarcely escape at the close of his analysis the mistaken conclusion that instead of speaking of the vanquished with the slight taint of pathos attaching to the term it would be more correct to speak of the blind and leave it at that. (CSPr 214)

According to this phrasing, the conclusion is both logical and mistaken, logical in terms of the “données et évidences” but mistaken in thinking that “aveugles” is a more accurate term than “vaincus.” The only conclusion to be drawn from this, as far as I can tell, is that “l’affaire du cylindre” mentioned above is not to blind the bodies but to vanquish them, that the cessation of searching is (must be) a matter of will rather than capacity.

This makes it easier to understand the narrator’s sneer accompanying the bodies’ belief in a hidden exit to the cylinder. As it turns out, the conditions of the cylinder actually do render it possible for them to check for a trapdoor in the ceiling, should they band together to move one of the ladders from the wall and hold it up while one climbs to feel the ceiling.
Il suffirait d’une vingtaine de volontaires décidés conjuguant leurs efforts pour la maintenir en équilibre à l’aide au besoin d’autres échelles faisant office de jambes de force. Un moment de fraternité. Mais celle-ci en dehors des flambées de violence leur est aussi étrangère qu’aux papillons. Ce n’est pas tant par manque de cœur ou d’intelligence qu’à cause de l’idéal dont chacun est la proie. Voilà pour ce zénith inviolable où se cache aux yeux des amateurs de mythe une issue vers terre et ciel. (D 19)

All that is needed is a score of determined volunteers joining forces to keep it upright with the help if necessary of other ladders acting as stays or struts. An instant of fraternity. But outside their explosions of violence this sentiment is as foreign to them as to butterflies. And this owing not so much to want of heart or intelligence as to the ideal preying on one and all. So much for this inviolable zenith where for amateurs of myth lies hidden a way out to earth and sky. (CSPr 207)

The “flambées de violence” refer to moments of “fureur collective [collective fury]” over infractions of “conventions d’origine obscure” “fait pour la commodité de tous” (“conventions of obscure origin” “devised for the convenience of all”; D 19-20, CSPr 207-8). This passage identifies a failure of sociality to accomplish anything other than mutually assured convenience and the smooth functioning of an external system of seriality. The narrator identifies “l’idéal dont chacun est la proie” as the cause of this failure of “fraternité.” I imagine two readings of this: the first takes this to be a continuation of the narrator’s cynical discourse, leading to the conclusion that the bodies dare not risk their ideal of an outside against reality for fear of disappointment, instead believing privately in a secret but inaccessible trapdoor. The second reading takes “l’ideal” to refer to the idea of the lost one, “le dépeupleur” of which each searcher seeks its own, as an isolating structure of individualized lack which none dare risk through collective action (since escape also means giving up on that lost one). Either reading
leads to a similar situation, in which private belief is maintained in isolation, enabling the external belief in the “conventions d’origine obscure” to persist in action. This is not the bodies’ world, they have lost their world, and they have no control over the apparatuses to which they submit.

As is proper for the last in a number of texts dealing in the temporality of repetition and deferral, I have deferred my own discussion of temporality in *Le dépeupleur* until the very end. The text contains minimal narration (as opposed to description), since the main function of the text seems to be to describe the workings of a stable system in purely synchronic terms: it occurs “à la heure qu’il est la seule qui sera” (“at this moment in time and there will be no other”; D 31, CSPr 213). As Peter Murphy notes, however, the text occasionally breaks its own rules, imposing an entropic rather than static framework on the system (Murphy 84-85). The most notable of these moments is the final paragraph, added in 1970 to the otherwise complete text of 1966. This section imagines the gradual winding-down of the system as more and more of the bodies join the ranks of the vanquished, zeroing in on a final searcher.

The entry of narrative into the system is introduced as hypothesis rather than fact and narrated in the same impassive present tense used in the rest of the piece: “Ainsi de suite à l’infini jusqu’à ce que vers l’impensable fin si cette notion est maintenue seul un dernier cherche encore par faibles à-coups” (“So on infinitely until towards the unthinkable end if this notion is maintained a last body of all by feeble fits
and starts is searching still”; D 53, CSPr 222). The remainder of the section describes this last man’s final moments, ending with an evocation of the total cessation of the system:

Lui-même à son tour au bout d’un temps impossible à chiffrer trouve enfin sa place et sa pose sur quoi le noir se fait en même temps que la température se fixe dans le voisinage de zéro. […] Voilà en gros le dernier état du cylindre et de ce petit peuple de chercheurs dont un premier si ce fut un homme dans un passé impensable baissa enfin une première fois la tête si cette notion est maintenue. (D 55)

He himself after a pause impossible to time finds at last his place and pose whereupon dark descends and at the same instant the temperature comes to rest not far from freezing point. […] So much roughly speaking for the last state of the cylinder and of this little people of searchers one first of whom if a man in some unthinkable past for the first time bowed his head if this notion is maintained. (CSPr 223)

This ending both presents itself as fact (with the matter-of-fact narration, including even a rare use of the narrative tense of passé simple with “baissa”) and remarks its own hypotheticality (with the repeated “si cette notion est maintenue”—the passive voice allowing for the evasion of exactly who might or might not maintain the notion). It also renders this vision of an end mythical by an invocation of an equally mythical origin “dans un passé impensable,” in which the narrator imagines the first man to give up. Both beginning and end are equally “impensable,” but the narrator nonetheless imagines them both.

This hypothetical aspect, which Murphy remarks primarily in this final section, actually persists in the whole of the text, as the apparently factual assertions of the narrator are called into question. The following passage demonstrates in miniature the means by which the text negates itself from within:
Elles sont disposées en quinconces irréguliers savamment désaxés ayant sept mètres de côté en moyenne. Harmonie que seul peut goûter qui par longue fréquentation connaît à fond l’ensemble des niches au point d’en posséder une image mentale parfait. Or il est douteux qu’un tel existe. (D 11)

They are disposed in irregular quincunxes roughly ten metres in diameter and cunningly out of line. Such harmony only he can relish whose long experience and detailed knowledge of the niches are such as to permit a perfect mental image of the entire system. But it is doubtful that such a one exists. (CSPr 204)

This final sentence renders the narrator’s own position doubtful, since the text both announces such harmony and doubts the position from which it could be recognized. The harmony of the system, remarked incessantly by the narrator of *Le dépeupleur*, is more assertion than fact. Dante’s plan of the afterworld rested on the assumption of a stable and just author. This one does not, and “il est douteux qu’un tel existe.” The bodies may be “des amateurs de mythe,” but the narrator is merely a better-seasoned mythmaker, turning despair and abandonment from a choice into a mythic destiny, loss into lack.35

**Conclusion**

I mentioned Blanqui’s vision of a hellish eternal return as a way of discussing the repetitions of *Play*. In his own version of the *descensus ad infernus*, Walter Benjamin treats Blanqui’s eternal return as characteristic of post-revolutionary and post-utopian disappointment: “The irony of this scheme—an irony which doubtless escaped the

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34 In the repeated phrase “pour l’harmonie,” used first in the fourth sentence (D 7) and repeated many times throughout the piece.
35 As Georges Bataille remarked in 1947, “the absence of myth is also a myth” (Bataille, *The Absence of Myth* 48).
36 David L. Pike offers a reading of the *Arcades Project* in these terms. See Pike 203-247.
author himself—is that the terrible indictment he pronounces against society takes the form of an unqualified submission to its results” (Benjamin, Arcades 25). This is also one way of approaching the desolation of late modernism, which seems to approach the loss of belief in the world by merely representing it, by giving us an image of an impossible world in which freedom has been eradicated and action is impossible. To criticize them for this, however, is to mistake representation for textual function. Artists cannot give people the world; all they can do is help them to find new ways of believing in it.

Both of the texts I examined in this chapter seem to give us such an indictment in the form of submission, producing representations of hermetically sealed afterworlds within which hope appears as delusion merely prolonging suffering. This may be so at the level of representation. I have argued here that part of Beckett’s project of “worsening” these worlds is to call these representations of total control and submission into question, examining the mythologizing force behind them. Play depicts both the loss of meaning and its persistence in the most impossible of situations, forcing the choice of belief (and the impossibility of its refusal) back on the audience. Le dépeupleur, likewise, depicts its reduced world as a machine for the elimination of will, while also identifying the success of such world reduction as a matter of administrative myth rather than history. The rhetorical force of these texts is at odds with the apparent submission of their representations. The representations follow the path marked by Casanova, giving us the image of “Beckett l’abstracteur.” To take these representations (or even, to give Casanova her due, the “operators” enabling this reduction of the
represented world to its minimum) as merely formal gestures, one more aesthetic of autonomy, is to miss the way these texts draw this world reduction into themselves thematically and rhetorically through the use of the afterworld. It is for this reason that we need the more naïve, “humanist” reading of Beckett to supplement an equally necessary recognition of his world reduction and abstraction.\textsuperscript{37} The tension between the two provides a better understanding of the way his texts work than either deployed in isolation.

\textsuperscript{37} What needs to be removed from it is the ahistorical focus on “the human condition,” in favor of historicizing readings of those traits that once led to universalizing interpretations.
Epilogue

The preceding has suggested that fictions of the afterlife developed in response to the situation of late modernism, understood as a combination of institutional breakdown and a failure of belief in the world. This conclusion raises two major questions. The first is whether the characteristics I nominated as means of approaching late modernism have gone away. Is the structure of belief and temporality different now than it was in the 1940s, 1950s, and into the 1960s? What institutions exist now to support the arts, and particularly experimental writing? And, if these traits remain the same, does this mean that the coordinates I have used are too broad for period markers, or that we have simply been too hasty in calling the present age postmodern?

The second, concomitant question is what has happened to fictions of the afterlife since the end of the 1960s. To this, at least, I can hazard a brief factual answer, while deferring the more interpretive question for a later date. Looked at from Franco Moretti’s evolutionary perspective, afterlife writing after late modernism seems to have found two distinct niches. The first is in American science fiction, such as Philip José Farmer’s Riverworld series (1971-1980), Niven and Pournelle’s Inferno (1976), Stanley Elkin’s The Living End (1979), and Thomas Disch’s The Businessman: A Tale of Terror (1984). The other strain developed from the more explicitly experimental fictions of the afterlife I studied in the previous pages, and includes Alasdair Gray’s Lanark (1981), Monique Wittig’s Virgile, Non (1985), William S. Burroughs’s The Western Lands (1987), and Cees Nooteboom’s The Following Story (1993).
Now, as then, these texts remain difficult to place in terms of cultural hierarchy. In this, they resemble the “curious, bastard” texts Woolf saw as the product of the breakdown of the highbrow position in the 1930s. However, the co-existence with little interaction between these two suggests to me that the divide between explicit subgenre fiction and its perverse middlebrow twins has persisted well into the period we call postmodernism. Such is not surprising from a sociological perspective, since there is still cultural capital to be distributed and niche markets to be kept separate. It certainly does raise questions for me about the different readerships of these texts: the degree to which they overlap, and the extent to which readers of one parallel track are aware of the other. The present study has focused closely on the moment of production. For a fuller understanding of the overall function of the subgenre, more work must still be done on the reception of these texts (both the ones I discuss in the bulk of the dissertation and the more recent ones I mention above).
References


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Biography

Alexander Ruch was born in Indianapolis in 1976. He received his Bachelor of Arts in cultural studies and comparative literature from the University of Minnesota in 2000. He has published scholarly papers on Simone de Beauvoir’s travel writing and Wyndham Lewis’ late writing on patronage. He is also a member of the Polygraph editorial collective, and edited (with Rodger Fry) the 2006 special issue, “Biopolitics, Narrative, Temporality.”