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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2022
ABSTRACT


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Abstract

"Existential Realism: Modernism and the Ethics of Agency in the Franco-American Existentialist Tradition, 1937-1955" unearths the pivotal role American fiction played in the development and dissemination of the French existentialist ethics of agency. French intellectuals regarded American fiction as a reinvention of novelistic realism based on its engrossing quality. Through readings of novels by John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, and Patricia Highsmith, I show how such immersive narratives invite readers to inhabit characters’ agency. These novels illuminate a dimension of character agency that has gone overlooked in the prevailing modernist accounts of twentieth-century literature in that they allow the reader to experience by proxy moral clarity and blindness. By tracing agency through the motif of gratuitous murder, I show that this fiction critiques a notion of authenticity that casts autonomy as nothing more than individual self-determination at the expense of social considerations. Ultimately “Existential Realism” shows how existentialist thought enriches our appreciation of a strain of American fiction, and also how action-driven fiction dramatizes the triumphs and failures of agency.
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The conviction driving this dissertation is that existentialism is a version of what Stanley Cavell calls “moral perfectionism,” an ethical outlook centered on, to use Emerson’s phrase, “the unattained but attainable self.” One tries to be better than one is, and one does so by finding their own voice in a community of voices. I am grateful for the community that has helped me have something to say and find a way to say it.

Thanks go first and foremost to my advisor, Toril Moi, not just for guidance and support, but for transforming my entire approach to humanistic inquiry. The first time I met her, she advised me to read Cavell, and it is no an exaggeration to say that her seminar on Ordinary Language Philosophy was a conversion. Fredric Jameson helped shape this project from the first stages to the last, and I am grateful to him and Toril for validating and encouraging my interest in existentialism. Corina Stan and Sarah Beckwith have also been encouraging and receptive, and I am fortunate to have had a committee that combined academic rigor and personal warmth.

My friends at Duke have also played a key part in this project. Spending evenings on Kevin Gallin’s porch remains among my fondest memories from Durham. Michael McGurk’s keen editorial eye made him a wonderful writing partner. Rob Tate provided helpful feedback on drafts of the introduction, and his genuine commitment to the life of the mind was and remains refreshing. Rachel Gelvin and Claire Ravenscroft were always warm and gracious friends and provided much appreciated advice when I was preparing for job interviews. James Draney and Myles Oldershaw were good company and models of subtle but clear writing.
I also had occasion to turn to friends from before Duke, particularly Theo Finigan, who was receptive and encouraging whenever I turned to him. Conversations and arguments with Mike Coutu in the Seoul Philosophy Club were enormously enriching. He was also the catalyst for my moving to Korea in 2008, which was the single biggest turning point in my life.

My family in Alberta and in South Korea have been a source of emotional support and encouragement when I most needed it. My parents in Alberta did not always understand what I was up to at university, but they gave me free-rein to pursue my interests. My parents-in-law in Korea were always so enthusiastic and supportive when it came to doctoral studies. My daughter, Jia Kim Spencer, was born halfway through my doctoral program, and this clever, sensitive little girl has been a gift, even when she got in the way of writing. I would never even have applied to doctoral programs had it not been for the encouragement of my wife, Bu Il Kim. I cannot imagine life without her.
1. Introduction: Existential Realism

In her travelogue *America Day by Day* (1947), Simone de Beauvoir recounts an argument over literature she had with Dwight MacDonald, Lionel Abel, William Phillips, and possibly Philip Rahv, key members of the New York Intellectuals. Since the mid-1930s, a handful of American novelists had been in vogue in France, prominent among them William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Erskine Caldwell, Dashiell Hammett, and Richard Wright. Rahv had already complained in 1940 that, “[t]he intellectual is the only character missing in the American novel, which contains everything except ideas,” and this seems to have been the central complaint as Beauvoir tells it.¹ They scorned recent American fiction for its “unaesthetic and superficial realism. Description of behavior has replaced a deeper psychology, and documentary precision has replaced invention and poetry.”² Beauvoir agreed with their characterization, but for her, these features were strengths, not flaws. The existentialists believed French literature had grown stale and that American fiction offered “lessons in a renewal of the art of writing”³ that could teach French authors how to “give philosophy itself a novelistic form.”⁴ They appreciated the emphasis on unconceptualized experience in American fiction, the same feature Rahv lamented.

The disagreement hinges on the value and meaning of novelistic realism. “In a sense,” Beauvoir wrote elsewhere, “one can call Steinbeck and Richard Wright ‘realists’”⁵ (AR 110). Her tentativeness shows she was not entirely comfortable with the idea that there might be a correspondence between American fiction of the interwar period and the

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³ Sartre, “American Novelists in French Eyes,” 118.
novels of Balzac and Stendhal, but clearly she detected enough of a similarity to use the word. While the Partisan Review crowd faulted the same fiction for this quality, Beauvoir thought their “indictment of realism has no clear meaning.” The problem with nineteenth-century French realism, she wrote, was that it was an alibi for conservatism (“rank prejudice masquerading as impartiality in the face of reality”), but she was not against realism as such. The American novels that the French loved were not politically reactionary, nor did they aspire to represent society impartially; rather, in them “[l]ife is revealed in its truth, through the hero’s consciousness. What, then, does the word ‘realism’ mean?” (A 55). In various writings and remarks, Sartre and Beauvoir themselves provided an answer to this question, and in this introduction, I reconstruct the existentialist account of novelistic realism and argue for its relevance to current academic attempts to rethink realism.

What I call “existential realism” is rooted in the experience readers have of getting immersed in a novel such that they forget about themselves and get wrapped up in characters’ struggles and triumphs as though they were their own. I will show below that Beauvoir and Sartre were dissatisfied with what they saw as politically quietist trends in French literature that we now call modernist. While recognizing the limits of nineteenth-century realism, they welcomed a strain of twentieth-century American literature because in their eyes, it invited an immersive reading experience that was politically committed (engagée) and philosophically sophisticated. Existential realism is based on the idea that we relate to reality not by representing it, but by disclosing it, a process in which mind and world are mutually revealing through human action and perception. This vision of realism transforms our notion of character, steering a path between a Jamesian vision that
prioritizes self-enclosed subjectivity with its private thoughts and memories, and a narratological view that reduces character to nothing more than a function of plot.

While a strain of American fiction provided its literary exemplar, existential realism’s philosophical foundations lie in the French existentialist uptake of the phenomenology of Husserl and, to a greater extent, Heidegger. In a short essay called “A Fundamental Idea of Husserl’s Phenomenology: Intentionality,” Sartre explains that intentionality entails that consciousness is always consciousness of something. We don’t just see, we see a parking lot; we don’t just fear; we fear the prospect of falling down an icy staircase. In teasing out the implications of this idea, Sartre notes, “We can leave Proust behind now. And, with him, the ‘inner life’: in vain would we seek […] the caresses and fondlings of a private intimacy, since, at long last, everything is outside.”

This remark reflects Sartre’s mission to go beyond the bourgeois fascination with inwardness—a reaction to his immediate literary predecessors (a theme I develop below), as well as to his own early literary output.

The other major phenomenological concept informing existential realism is Heidegger’s concept of Welt, world. Rather than naming the totality of objects offered up to the passive contemplation of a subject, world designates the network of usable things disclosed by the individual through purposeful activity.

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5 Louis Menand provides a lively account of how Sartre develops his existentialism by fusing German philosophy and American fiction in Chapter 4 of The Free World: Art and Culture in the Cold War (2021).
7 Dennis Hollier writes that Sartre’s experience as a POW led to a “conversion to realism,” a turn from the self-absorbed introspection of Nausea (1938) to his first “committed” novel, The Age of Reason (1945). See Hollier, The Politics of Prose, 174.
As a twentieth-century reinvention, existential realism sublates rather than ignores the innovations of aesthetic modernism. Beauvoir’s praise of American fiction for revealing life “through the hero’s consciousness” might sound like a rehashing of modernism’s inward turn, but the existential-phenomenological view of consciousness complicates this interpretation. Because consciousness is always outside itself, novels that aspire to treat subjective experience should avoid both introspection and self-conscious formal experimentation; instead, they should “hurl the reader into the midst of a universe where there are no witnesses.” In other words, existential realism rejects the omniscient narration prominent in nineteenth-century novels as well as the psychologizing and writerly tendencies of the early twentieth. If modernism is thought of as a turning away from external reality toward characters’ minds, existential realism could be thought of as a second revolution, away from minds back toward reality.

1.1 Realism and Immersive Reading

Beauvoir and Sartre were novelists and founding editors of a journal (Les Temps Modernes), so their defenses of realism as an alternative to modernism were part of their program to set a new course for writers of fiction. But their concerns resonate with our own. In the last decade, several scholars have expressed frustration with the way approaches to literature rooted in aesthetic modernism have limited our view of realism. Joe Cleary, Jed Esty, and Eli Park Sorensen have criticized postcolonial and world literature studies for privileging “modernist-associated terms such as hybridity, 

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8 In this regard, it bears an affinity with the realism that scholars of British fiction have found in what has variously been called “late modernism” and “intermodernism.” See British Fiction after Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century (eds. Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge).

polyphony, pastiche, irony, and defamiliarization.” They show how this bias has marginalized novelists who focus on “realist-associated conceptual categories such as historical transition, class consciousness, and totality.”\(^\text{10}\) In Victorian studies, a number of scholars have taken issue with the modernist caricature of nineteenth-century realism, which casts it as the false promise that literature can hold a mirror up to nature.\(^\text{11}\) Anna Kornbluh argues that realist novels model rather than reflect reality, and Elaine Freedgood points out that realist fiction is “riddled with the key features of metafiction,” giving the lie to the Tel Quel caricature of realism as textually naïve.\(^\text{12}\) These critics all register a frustration with the way prevailing trends in literary studies cast realism as fatally flawed.

Existential realism is consonant with these projects insofar as it also rejects the concept of a passive, apolitical reality that the author simply translates into words. But it diverges from these approaches in two important ways: it emphasizes the immersive experience of reading realist novels, and it focuses on how characters in these novels disclose their world by acting on it. By immersive reading, I mean the way realist novels absorb the reader’s attention. Fredric Jameson writes that before realism solidifies into a paradigm (a genre, tale-type, period, etc.), it starts with “a promise of immediacy,” the fantasy of fresh, pure experience, undiluted by conventional modes of expression; signifieds without signifiers.\(^\text{13}\) This goal is impossible to satisfy—it is not clear what

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\(^\text{10}\) Cleary, “Realism after Modernism and the Literary World-System,” 265. Cleary and Esty call for a rethinking of realism in relation to world literature, and Sorensen calls for the same in his defense of postcolonial studies. See Esty, “Realism Wars”; Sorensen, Postcolonial Realism and the Politics of the Political.

\(^\text{11}\) Works that complicate the pejorative view of nineteenth-century realism include Ayelet Ben-Yishai, “Is He Popenjoy? Deciding to Know and the Presumption of Realism”; Anna Kornbluh, The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space; and Elaine Freedgood, Worlds Enough: The Invention of Realism in the Victorian Novel.

\(^\text{12}\) Freedgood, Worlds Enough, 32

\(^\text{13}\) Jameson, “A Note on Literary Realism in Conclusion,” 261.
satisfying it would even look like. Nevertheless, the promise of immediacy is also a
promise to engross the reader’s whole attention. Richard Wright’s description of his
ambition as a young writer expresses this aspect of the fantasy: “If I could fasten the
mind of the reader upon my words so firmly that he would forget words and be conscious
only of his response, I felt that I would be in sight of knowing how to write narrative.”
Words might mediate the story, but if the reader forgets them as she goes, it is as though
she gets the immediate story.

What I am calling realism’s immersive quality has long been ignored in academic
criticism. Scholars associated with postcritique have shown that literary studies has been
dominated by a too-narrow focus on critical distance, paranoid reading, and hermeneutics
of suspicion in which the critic either disavows her attachments to works as an
embarrassing, amateurish mode of reading, or couches them in the vocabulary of political
urgency. Joseph North argues that academic criticism’s “historicism/contextualist
paradigm” has dispensed with criticism (in the sense of cultivating aesthetic judgements
and sensibility) and instead viewed literary works primarily as indices of the social
conditions from which they arose. Similarly, Toril Moi has challenged what she calls the
“modernist-formalist paradigm,” an approach to literature going back to the mid-
twentieth century that privileges detachment and a concern for the formal workings of the
text. Think of the New Critics’ various fallacies, narratologists’ scientific
schematizing, or deconstructionists’ distrust of the metaphysical assumptions smuggled

14 Wright, Black Boy, 267.
15 See Rita Felski, Hooked: Art and Attachment on the disavowal of attachment and The Limits of Critique. Toril Moi,
Revolution of the Ordinary, particularly chapters 7-9 on reading as a practice of acknowledgement; Amanda
Anderson, The Way We Argue Now, Chapter 2 “The Temptations of Aggrandized Agency: Feminist Histories and the
Horizon of Modernity” shows how the imperative to political urgency is often channeled into an anti-humanist
framework that leads to incoherent claims about character and authorial agency.
16 Toril Moi, “Rethinking Character,” 30-3.
into the text by ordinary language. Within these paradigms, the immersive reading experience that realist novels engender goes largely overlooked.¹⁷

At this point someone might wonder what is so special about the realist novel. Surely people wholeheartedly get immersed in poems, philosophical treatises, mathematical problems, and recipes. What then is the specific immersive quality of the realist novel? Answering this question brings me to the second way existential realism differs from the recuperations of realism described earlier: it centers character agency, putting it at odds with approaches to realism that focus on macrosocial processes and institutions at the expense of how characters interact with them. Existential realism invites a kind of identification with characters that Moi, following Beauvoir, describes as giving the “taste of another life.”¹⁸ One of the upshots of this attention to character is that it licenses us to discuss characters’ intentions, decisions, and bouts of self-deception—topics of keen interest to existential philosophers, but ones that have long been out of bounds in literature departments. Accounts of realism that minimize our investment in characters risk ignoring the feature that draws readers to these novels in the first place. In *The Art of Being: Poetics of the Novel and Existentialist Philosophy* (2018), Yi-Ping Ong argues their readability depends on an investment in characterological freedom: “The means by which the realist novel becomes an utterly compelling work of art are ultimately obscured by theories that cannot adequately distinguish its purposes from

¹⁷ In recent years, some critics working on the nineteenth-century novel have addressed what I call immersive reading, most notably Elaine Auyoung’s *When Fiction Feels Real: Representation and the Reading Mind* (2018), which incorporates cognitive psychology to “understand how realist writers seem to transcend the limits of their verbal medium” (7). In *Good Form: The Ethical Experience of the Victorian Novel* (2016), Jesse Rosenthal discusses the ethical significance of these novels’ availability to the casual reader (pp. 126-7). The first chapter (“Content of Form”) of Patrick Fessenbecker’s *Reading Ideas in Victorian Literature* (2020) traces the formalist bias in literary criticism back to modernist literary criticism and argues in favor of reading for the content, an argument that implicitly valorizes Victorian novels for their readability.

¹⁸ Moi, “‘What Can Literature Do?’ Simone de Beauvoir as a Literary Theorist,” 194.
sociological, anthropological, journalistic, scientific, or historical accounts of the relations between individual and world.”

Doing justice to the realist novel as novel requires accounting for readerly investment in the characters as agents.

Ong shows how existentialist thought illuminates the experience of reading nineteenth-century novels, specifically the way they invite readers to lose sight of themselves and take on characters’ agency as though it were their own (16). Why, when reading *Middlemarch* (1871) or *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), do we feel that Dorothea Brooke or Isabel Archer make choices? Why, despite knowing these novels are finished, do the lives they present feel unfinished? This immersion, Ong shows, is rooted in “a situation in which lived experience is made known from the point of view of a participant without the [...] reader [...] thereby being burdened by the responsibility that she would normally take up by claiming this knowledge” (10). Realist novels excel at effecting a kind of identification based not on the reader’s thinking she has really become the character or the novelist, but on momentarily casting the reader as witness to another life. To be immersed in realist fiction means not simply to get caught up in the world-building of the novel, but to experience this world from characters’ perspectives as they disclose it through their action. My argument is indebted to Ong’s, but it is worth stressing that when Beauvoir and Sartre were developing their vision of existential realism, they were not thinking about nineteenth-century literature; they were thinking about contemporary American novels.

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1.2 Committed Literature: Realism After Modernism

Sartre and Beauvoir embraced realism as part of their political awakening. Beauvoir recalled the “general euphoria affecting the French Left during the autumn of 1929”: anti-colonial protests in India and French Indochina spelled the end of imperialism, capitalism was teetering on the brink of collapse, and the Nazis in Germany were a buffoonish fringe party. At the time, she thought history would sort itself out, and the writer, even if nominally political, could devote herself to the insular concerns of “knowledge, self-expression.” In hindsight, she recognized that “[a]t every level we failed to face the weight of reality.” In the wake of the turmoil of the thirties and forties, she and Sartre felt called on to justify the author’s vocation, and they named their new vision of writing in the service of politics littérature engagée, “committed literature.”

According to Sartre, twentieth-century French literature’s failure to answer the calls of history led his generation back to “dogmatic realism by way of absolute subjectivism” (SW 187). He and Beauvoir criticized the way nineteenth-century realists concealed their own class interests and struck the pose of objective observers of society, but they appreciated these novelists’ dedication to making social reality intelligible to readers. The classic realists had unabashedly written for a mass audience. How had so many early twentieth-century writers come to see writing as an exploration of the self or as a coterie activity to be appreciated mainly by other writers? How could committed literature find its way back to realism? Sartre answers these questions by constructing a genealogy of modern French literary history.

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21 Sartre first used the term “committed literature” in “Introducing Les Temps modernes,” an article in the first issue of the journal that is kind of manifesto for the existentialist movement.
He adapts a sequence in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) to cast the history of recent French literature in terms of three ways the writer relates to society. Chapter 4 of the *Phenomenology* is famous for the lord-bondsman struggle that produces self-consciousness, but Sartre focuses on the next section, in which self-consciousness develops in three stages: stoicism, skepticism and the unhappy consciousness. Stoicism represents the mind’s retreat from the tumultuous world into the comfort of its own private autonomy. This inward turn creates the conditions for skepticism, which establishes its independence not merely by retreating from the external world, but by willfully negating it, in thought. Consider Descartes’s “first principle”: “You know that you exist, and you know this just because you are doubting.”22 The satisfaction of the skeptical posture is short-lived because eventually skeptical self-consciousness admits that it “affirms the nullity of seeing, hearing, etc., yet it is itself seeing, hearing, etc. It affirms the nullity of ethical principles, and lets its conduct be governed by these very principles.”23 This dissatisfaction leads to the unhappy consciousness (*das unglückliche Bewusstsein*). From here on, self-consciousness gives up trying to exult in its own detached autonomy and instead invests itself in the world.

Sartre borrows Hegel’s progression to show how three generations of French writers justified, or failed to justify, their vocation. All three were bourgeois, meaning they enjoyed middle-class economic comfort and were raised in the worldview that championed the detached, liberal individual. The first generation, corresponding to Hegel’s stoicism, started writing before World War I and included André Gide, François Mauriac, Marcel Proust, and Maurice Barrès. These writers, Sartre notes, all had financial

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22 *Descartes, “The Search for Truth by Means of the Natural Light,”*
23 *Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, §205*
resources beyond their income from writing, a detail that underwrites their focus on interiority and their neglect of broader social concerns (SW 146-7). He writes facetiously, “it was understood that one would find the seal of God in the human heart, provided one sounded it deeply enough” (148). By “seal of God” Sartre means a quality that justifies the writer’s task—in this case, that quality is a focus on interiority, whether that be Maurice Barrès’s “cult of the self” (culte du moi), Gide’s investigations of sexual desire, or Proust’s seven-volume study of memory. Sartre argue that these writers had internalized the doctrine of art’s gratuitousness (l’art pour l’art) and regarded artistic production as divorced from the struggles of the day: “It is always a matter of putting daily life in parentheses and living it scrupulously but without soiling one’s hands” (151). This generation thought that by retreating from history and looking inward at the self, it could find some kind of meaning, but Beauvoir points out their mistake: “The writers of this period [. . .] confused [their] own image with the eternal image of humanity.”24 Like Hegel’s stoics, this first generation of 20th-century French writers disengaged themselves from the world by endlessly pondering the mystery of themselves.

The second generation encompassed various avant-gardes that flourished after the First World War, represented by figures such as Jean Cocteau, Marcel Arland (a prominent dadaist), Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, and André Breton. This generation derided the first’s navel-gazing glorification of bourgeois subjectivity (SW 151-2). Psychoanalysis and automatic writing became two means of displacing subjectivity, while artworks like Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) undermine the very notion of art. This generation’s literature is marked by a “crisis of language,” which Sartre derides as “the

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great Surrealist prattling which, in many cases, consisted merely in banging objectless words against one another.”

Unlike the first generation, which was unperturbed by its bourgeois status, the second generation felt uneasy in it and sought to tear it down from within (SW 153).

But just as skepticism negates everything while leaving it all intact, these avant-gardes repudiated all “without even starting a single real destruction” (153). Sartre points out that Breton himself admitted as much when he wrote that the goal of surrealist revolution “is not so much to change anything whatever in the physical and apparent order of things as to criticize a movement in mind” (154-5).

Rather than challenging their own class position, this generation repeated the first’s mistake of taking the bourgeoisie to represent all humanity. Like Hegel’s skeptics, they reveled in their ability to dismiss the world without actually doing anything. “Quietism and permanent violence,” Sartre writes, are “two complementary aspects of the same position” (158). The second generation proclaimed a revolution of everything that changed nothing because they failed to account for their own bourgeois position.

Writers of Sartre and Beauvoir’s generation, the third in the genealogy, also enjoyed bourgeois upbringings, but they believed the bourgeoisie had “subjectively entered the phase of the guilty conscience” (203). Just as Hegel’s unhappy consciousness is driven to look beyond itself for satisfaction, so the latest generation of French bourgeois writers found themselves asking how they could bring the writer’s enterprise to bear on history. No longer satisfied with the idea that art is its own end, or that it is bound

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26 Sartre does not provide a citation, but the quotation comes from Breton’s Déclaration du 27 janvier 1925.
27 In typical fashion, Sartre overstates the existentialist antipathy to the Surrealists. Meryl Altman provides an excellent overview of the way surrealism contributed to Beauvoir’s racial consciousness in Beauvoir in Time (pp 257-94).
to be out of step with its own time, or that it rises above the din of everyday struggles, the writers of this generation wanted literature to serve action.

The path to action went through a reinvention of realism that avoided repeating the mistakes of the previous century. Émile Zola could claim that a novel like Balzac’s *Cousin Bette* (1846) provided “knowledge, scientific knowledge, of man in his individual and social action,”28 but Sartre lampoons this pretension to scientific impartiality: “Have we not been told often enough that [the realist author] ‘pores over’ [se penchait] the social groups he is intent on describing? He pores over! Where was he, in that case? In the air?”29 Sartre’s criticism is at base the same that he launched against Proust and the surrealists, namely, that the nineteenth-century realists refuse to own up to how entangled they are in society.30 He is especially hard on Flaubert: “What is Flaubert—who so raged against the bourgeoisie and believed he had withdrawn outside the social machine—for us if not a talented man living off his investments?”31 The detached realist is caught in a contradiction: he describes a society that he disowns, despite enjoying a privileged position in it.

In the new American fiction, the French found examples of a reinvented realism, and just as they criticized French authors partly in terms of their social positions, so they praised American authors. Hemingway and Dos Passos, both ambulance drivers in the First World War, offered the appeal of the man of action, a figure with counterparts in proto-existentialist writers in France, notably André Malraux and Antoine de Saint-Éxupery (known now in English primarily for *The Little Prince* [1943] but highly

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30 “Immobile or exhausted, it is not clear which, the repose of the bourgeois novelist shares more than one trait with the slumbers of the Surrealist poet.” Denis Hollier, *The Politics of Prose*, 12.
regarded in the 1940s for his lyrical aviation memoirs). Sartre also extols the figure of the American author who “has often practiced manual occupations before writing his books” (SW 141). He likely had in mind figures like Steinbeck, who had done back-breaking construction work building the third Madison Square Garden, and Caldwell, who famously split his time between writing, chopping firewood, and hoeing potato hills. Beauvoir’s attraction to Nelson Algren also seems to have stemmed in part from his familiarity and comfort with the seedy Chicago underworld, an embodiment of the romantic, salt-of-the-earth American author-type that the existentialists found so appealing.

These writers appealed to the French not so much because they were working class (some of them were), but more because they were not bourgeois, not merely in terms of economic class but in terms of the habits and worldview characterizing the European bourgeoisie. Unlike the French authors discussed earlier, these American authors were—in the existentialist imagination—unburdened by the self-consciousness of being participants in literary tradition; consequently, they were able to write about life itself. Sartre even goes so far as to claim that American authors write with “unconscious spontaneity,” as though they do not cultivate artistic styles at all.32 The suggestion is absurd, and it would not be worth the effort to contradict it by producing evidence that American writers read, planned, edited, and rewrote. Nevertheless, Sartre’s point is that American novelists seem more in touch with life outside of writing and have a knack for rendering raw experience in ways that engross readers’ attention.

1.3 Realism as Disclosure

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, criticisms of realism increasingly took on an epistemological flavor. Lionel Trilling rebuked the critic V. L. Parrington for advocating a simplistic idea of realism in which reality is obvious and the writer must simply take dictation.33 Roland Barthes wrote that while realism purports to give “the most accurate description of Reality,” it is “loaded with the most spectacular signs of fabrication.”34 The implication is that reality and fabrication, like nature and culture, are incommensurable. This sense that reality necessarily escapes the text became more pronounced in post-structuralism such that Paul de Man, for instance, could claim, “All literatures [. . .] have always designated themselves as existing in the mode of fiction” and so been guided by a “self-reflecting mirror-effect by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality.”35 Matthew Beaumont has shown how introductions to postmodernism “tend to impugn [realism] both for its ingenuousness and for its disingenuousness,” casting realism either as naive because it relies on some uninterrogated understanding of how representation works, or as duplicitous because it naturalizes the politically contestable reality it depicts.36 Even Ian Watt, who valued the novel on explicitly epistemological grounds, had to admit that the air of “total authenticity [. . .] does tend to authorize confusion” about how the novel is a truer representation of reality than other literary modes.37 These epistemological criticisms cast the text as a screen between readers and reality. Naïve readers fail to see

33 Trilling, “Reality in America,” 2-3.
34 Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, 67-8.
35 De Man, “Criticism and Crisis,” 17.
37 Watt, The Rise of the Novel, 32.
the screen, while savvy readers understand that even if they cannot gain unmediated access to reality, they can train their sights on the screen—an impulse that accounts for the attention given to textual conspicuousness in postmodern literary criticism.

Sartre and Beauvoir would disagree with epistemological criticisms of realism for the simple reason that they would deny the epistemological picture of knowledge. This phrase—“the epistemological picture of knowledge”—might strike some readers as odd. If epistemology is the study of knowledge, then isn’t this phrase as redundant as, say, “the culinary study of cooking” or “the philatelic study of stamps”? Not for Charles Taylor. In “Overcoming Epistemology,” he explains the critical mistake in epistemology and, I would argue, the epistemological view of realism, namely that “knowledge is to be seen as correct representation of an independent reality.”

In epistemology: mind is here, world is there, and knowledge results from the mind passively receiving impressions from the world. In the epistemological picture of realism: text is here, world is there, and realism (if it is even possible) involves the text faithfully reproducing the real.

But the epistemological picture fails in two ways. First, in casting knowledge as passive reception, it underestimates “the depth of the agent,” the degree to which our dealing with things permeates our perception of them (12). Our engagement with the world does not wait for knowledge, as though reality were a website that we can navigate only once it has finished loading. We are “thrown,” as Heidegger said, into a world in which we must act regardless of the state of our knowledge. The epistemological picture casts us as knowers before we are agents, but the existential-phenomenological one casts us as agents first and mere knowers second.

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This objection leads into the second failure of epistemology: it does not sufficiently account for how inextricable mind and world are. They are not two precipices to be bridged by knowledge; mind is already in contact with the world. This principle is implied in the phenomenological concept of the intentionality of consciousness. “Mind” is not a blank screen on which visions, thoughts, and feelings get projected—it is those visions, thoughts, and feelings. Heidegger’s term *being-in-the-world* (*In-der-welt-sein*) describes “a unified phenomenon. This primary datum must be seen as a whole.”\(^{39}\) We interact with the world “pre-scientifically” (the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* [1943] would say “non-theetically”) when we climb stairs without theorizing about their *stairness*, or when we drink a glass of water without asking ourselves, “But what *is* water?” Our practical engagement with the world is primary, and the epistemological notion of a mind that stands apart from reality is a deficient suspension of agency.

In the existentialist view, the epistemological picture of realism is wrong from the start. A text does not originally stand apart from an external reality that it then represents (or fails to represent). Representation is not at issue. Disclosure is. Beauvoir writes that literature is “an activity carried out by human beings, for human beings, with the aim of unveiling [*dévoiler*] the world for them, and this unveiling is an action.”\(^{40}\) Sartre too claims that literature is “creating by disclosing” [*dévoiler en créant*].\(^{41}\) For him, disclosing entails drawing something out from the undifferentiated background of things and making it noticeable: “To speak is to act; anything which one names is no longer

\(^{39}\) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 49.
\(^{40}\) Quoted in Moi, “What Can Literature Do?,” 191.
\(^{41}\) Sartre, “Why Write?,” 52.
quite the same; it has lost its innocence." Sartre alludes to a scene in Stendhal’s *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839) in which one character, Mosca, is spying on the blossoming romance of two others. “If the word Love comes up between them,” Mosca thinks, “I’m lost.” In this scene, the word “love” has enormous potential to change the characters’ relationships. It is not ancillary to love; it brings love out into the open. Saying “I love you” transforms a situation from one loaded with romantic tension to one in which romance is on the line, an option to be accepted or rejected. Disclosure names this effect.

From the existentialist perspective, if we ask how language can become action, we are posing the wrong question. Language is originally action, and according to Sartre, in literature language’s activity is best realized in prose. Sartre is channeling the Heidegger of *Being and Time* (1929), who argues that we encounter “useful things” (*Zeug*) by engaging them in our projects. In use, particular things do not call attention to themselves—they are part of the network of utilities that make up our projects. Before a hammer is just a hammer, it is a tool for driving nails or a weapon for bashing an enemy. It is only when things are broken, obstructed, or lost that they become conspicuous (*aufallen*) and, as it were, “mere things.” Sartre argues that prose best actualizes language because when it is written well, the words disclose some situation without calling attention to themselves: “the words are first of all not objects but designations for

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42 Sartre, “What is Writing?,” 36.
43 Ibid., 38.
44 Sartre’s well-known animus against poetry is rooted in the contention that in poetry, language draws attention to itself instead of disclosing a world. Sartre recanted this claim later. See Wolfe, “Rethinking Commitment: Ontology, Genre, and Sartre’s Mallarmé.”
45 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 68.
The existentialist admiration of prose for its inconspicuousness makes it a fascinating but underappreciated challenge to schools of literary criticism that prize disruption and difficulty.

To understand how Sartre’s praxis-oriented philosophy of language offers an alternative vision of realism, consider his well-known idea that humans are condemned to freedom such that “not to choose is, in fact, to choose not to choose.” By the same token, we might say that language is condemned to use (to invoke the later Wittgenstein). For Sartre, the choice is not whether the writer will use language actively but whether to knowingly and wholeheartedly engage language’s orientation to action: “the prose-writer is a man who has chosen a certain method of secondary action which we may call action by disclosure [. . . .] The ‘committed’ writer knows that words are action.” In a sense, realism is the “aesthetic” dimension of the committed novel, though I use “aesthetic” guardedly because the existentialists sought to stamp out any trace of belletrism. Refusing the idea that a novel is like a painting that must be appreciated from a distance, the existentialists prized the realist novel because it invites readers to participate in the consciousness of another as though it were their own.

Disclosure and immersive reading are two sides of the same coin. In “Literature and Metaphysics,” Beauvoir writes, “[w]hile the philosopher and the essayist give the reader an intellectual reconstruction of their experience, the novelist claims to reconstitute on an imaginary plane this experience itself as it appears prior to any

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46 Sartre, “What is Writing?” 35.
47 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 628; L’être et le néant, 526. Hereafter cited parenthetically, along with the French pagination, as BN; EN.
48 Sartre, “What is Writing?,” 36.
elucidation.” Sartre says a novel presents, rather than represents, experience; “reading is a free dream.” Any aesthetic categories brought to bear on the realist novel must be subordinate to the goal of immersing the reader “in the reality of a lived experience so compelling that she loses all awareness of herself.” Thus Sartre argues that in the case of the novel, beauty is “only a gentle and imperceptible force [. . . .] it acts by persuasion like the charm of a voice or a face. It does not coerce; it inclines a person without his suspecting it.” Realist novels are at their most successful when they cease to be objects of attention and instead become vehicles of experience. This “gentle and imperceptible force” is manifested through action.

1.4 Action and Character in the American Novel

The existentialists thought American novels unified character and action, two concepts that literary criticism has often struggled to reconcile. Rejecting the distinction between “novels of character” and “novels of incident,” Henry James asks, “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” Action and character would seem to be inseparable. The most trivial action (a woman standing up “with her hand resting on a table”) expresses character. But James undermines his claim in the next sentence. “What is either a picture or a novel that is not of character?” Tzvetan Todorov’s commentary on this passage points out its problem: even though action and character are inextricable, “one is more important than the other nonetheless—character.” Todorov takes issue with this prioritization, and in his project of

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50 Sartre, “Why Write?,” 57.
51 Ong, The Art of Being, 67.
52 Sartre, “What is Writing?,” 39.
53 James, “The Art of Fiction,” 583.
articulating the grammatical subflooring of narrative, he turns to stories in which he claims that characters, understood as centers of agency, cannot be said to exist at all. In the *Arabian Night*, characters are associated with traits contain an entire plot in nuce: “[a]ll character traits are immediately causal; as soon as they appear, they provoke an action.” 54 If someone is called brave or jealous, they will straight away undertake a brave or jealous act. In drawing attention to narratives in which character is subservient to plot, Todorov follows in the footsteps of the Russian Formalists, who “argue that characters are products of plots, that their status is ‘functional’.” 55

From the existentialist perspective, Todorov accurately names the problem, but his solution overcorrects. He flips James’s picture on its head and gives action priority over character, and in so doing presents a faulty view of both. Action in his account is synonymous with plot: a kind of depersonalized narrative rhythm in which characters are little more than notes in a score. Todorov neglects the sense we have when absorbed in a realist narrative that *characters* act and in acting show themselves to be free. This principle informs Sartre’s review of François Mauriac’s novel *La Fin de la Nuit* (1935), which Sartre criticizes for exhibiting a fatalism that undermines the protagonist’s agency: she is guided “by a certain law, independent of [her] will” and thus not really convincing as a free character. 56 He goes on to say that destiny has no place in a novel because it robs character and by proxy reader of freedom. Balancing the scales between action and character requires a vision of characters as agents.

54 Todorov, “Narrative-Men,” 68.
55 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 111.
American fiction provided this balance. Instead of presenting character and action as two independent concepts needing to be united, the American fiction that Sartre and Beauvoir praised offered a synthesis of the two that precedes their division. This fiction, writes Sartre, foregoes “intellectual analysis, which, for more than a century, had been the accepted method of developing character in fiction.” In its place, it provides “a psychology of synthesis which taught us that a psychological fact is an indivisible whole [. . . .] Here a new literature presented its characters to us synthetically. It made them perform before our eyes acts which were complete in themselves, impossible to analyze.”57 The term “synthesis” is the opposite of Proustian psychological analysis and conveys an original experience of wholeness, rather than an aggregate of parts. “[C]haracter is simply the sum of its actions,” writes Louis Menand in his commentary on how Sartre read American fiction.58

Instead of psychological depth, the Americans’ synthetic vision of character foregrounds action, typically with minimal treatment of characters’ perceptions, memories, and emotions—Hemingway’s In Our Time (1925) and The Sun Also Rises (1926) are still widely taught by pointing out the traumatized silences. Caldwell’s preferred brand of depthlessness was to write characters who are moved, to borrow Kenneth Burke’s memorable phrasing, by “the scant, crude tropisms of insects.”59 For example, the drama of a large portion of Tobacco Road (1932) is driven by some characters’ coveting a visitor’s bag of turnips. The novel concerns immiserated Georgia sharecroppers working depleted soil, and in another author’s hands it might become a

social or ecological tragedy. But in Caldwell’s novel, the characters lack tragic despair, righteous outrage, and any other indication of rich inner lives. Another version of this refusal of psychological depth can be found in Dos Passos. Sartre, who praised Dos Passos as “the greatest writer of our time,” explains the impact of his impersonal, journalistic narrative voice. The effect of this voice is to make even purportedly inner and intimate experiences come off as distant: “Acts, emotions and ideas settle suddenly upon a character, make their nests, and then fly off, without the character himself having much to do with it” (20). In the existentialist view, hunting for characters’ self-interpretations, or looking for a discerning Jamesian narrator who might translate every vibration of feeling will come up short. We can only understand the characters of American fiction by considering how they act.

The evacuation of the inner life is reflected in a paucity of individualizing features. In Hammett’s Red Harvest (1929), for instance, we never even learn the name of his protagonist—he’s just “the Continental Op”—let alone where he is from or what his childhood dreams were. Even his short-term plans and intentions are a mystery. Claude-Edmond Magny writes that Hammett created a hero “whose innermost being was unfathomable [. . .]: the strong, silent type who knows how to keep his own counsel and whose decisions always surprise us as much as they do his adversaries; who does not speak because he does not think, thought for him coinciding with action.” Noir novels are particularly rich in this character type—the drifter anti-hero in James Cain’s The Postman Always Rings Twice (1934), for instance, but we find it also in Steinbeck’s strike novel In Dubious Battle (1936), a novel I will discuss in detail in chapter 3. It

61 Magny, The Age of the American Novel, 43.
opens with the main character, Jim Nolan, joining the Communist Party and then traces his nine-day apprenticeship as an agitator. Few details of his previous life are given, and even those are mentioned only insofar as they explain his decision to join the Party.

In evacuating the inner life, this fiction dispenses with psychology, but not with subjectivity. Sartre’s notion of situated subjectivity as he develops it in *Being and Nothingness* clarifies the distinction. *La situation* is a technical term in Sartre’s philosophy, and it designates the combination of the given and the freely chosen. The given, what he calls *facticity*, names the conditions one is faced with and must deal with one way or another: family background, economic class, appetites (like hunger and thirst), obstacles (like an unscalable crag), and so on. These brute givens are one ingredient of subjectivity, but the other is freedom (Sartre also calls it *transcendence*), which is the way one chooses to deal with them: denying, lamenting, confronting, embracing, or any other way people relate to their circumstances. This mixture of the brute given and the ways one acts on it, facticity and freedom, constitutes situated subjectivity (BN 636–7; EN 533). In opposition to the much-derided figure of the liberal-humanist subject who imagines himself an island, “the notion of situated subjectivity implies also the social and cultural permeability of subjectivity and its history.”62 American fiction, in showing how characters act given their circumstance—as opposed to how they conceptualize them—dovetails with the existentialist vision of subjectivity.

Situated subjectivity reconciles character and action, and the existentialists called on writers to present various subjectivities because, as Sartre writes, “we deny that the origin, class, environment, and nation of an individual are simple accessories of his

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emotional life. It seems to us, on the contrary, that every affect [. . .] manifests his social situation.” The emphasis on showing a range of subjectivities accords with the existentialist conviction that because consciousness and world are mutually disclosing, the best way to explore important events, like the end of World War I in Dos Passos’s *1919* (1932), is by way of the different consciousnesses that comprehend them: “the event appears only through subjectivities. But its transcendence comes from the fact that it exceeds them all because it extends through them and reveals to each person a different aspect of itself and of himself.” (SW 187n30, 346). This argument also shows the committed (engagée), democratic impulse animating existential realism.

Experiments in rendering various subjective experiences and subject types play a prominent role in the American fiction beloved by the French, and Magny highlights this fiction’s cinematic technique. One aspect of this technique entails flexibility in conveying point of view: “the novelist can now permit himself to place his camera wherever he wants, to vary its position continually in such a way as to show us his characters from very far or very near and from unexpected angles, and to let us see a given scene from the eyes of first one and then another protagonist.” Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930) use this mobility to great effect, presenting the same events from multiple perspectives. Dos Passos’s *USA* trilogy (1930-38), which “bowled over” Beauvoir and Sartre, features multiple intersecting plots tracing the lives of Americans from various backgrounds, and frequently the subject of one plotline will appear as a minor character in another’s. Beauvoir writes admiringly that in the first volume, *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), Dos Passos “had worked out a bifocal perspective for

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the presentation of his main characters, which meant that they could be, at one and the
same time, drawn as detailed individuals and as purely social phenomena.”65 At the
individual level, characters act based on their particular ambitions, anxieties and
opportunities, largely unaware of their class position. From a distance, however, they
appear as class types: the drifter-turned-Communist Mac reacts to the prospect of World
War I by becoming a revolutionary in Mexico; the successful adman J Ward Moorehouse
sees the same event as a promising business opportunity. This “bifocal perspective”
appealed to Beauvoir and Sartre because it struck a balance between freedom and
determination, presenting characters as neither wholly self-determining nor as mere
products of their environments.

Another aspect of the narrator-as-camera is the emphasis it puts on what is
sometimes described as objective narration, depicting events from the outside—what
would come to be encoded in creative writing programs almost as a law of prose
composition, “show, don’t tell.” Hemingway’s fame rests largely on mastering this
narrative mode. For example, in “The End of Something” the protagonist Nick breaks up
with his girlfriend in a scene lasting just a few lines:

“It isn’t fun any more.”

He was afraid to look at Marjorie. Then he looked at her. She sat there with her
back toward him. He looked at her back. “It isn’t fun any more. Not any of it.”66

The tension is palpable, but it’s almost entirely implied. Nick’s repeated “It isn’t fun any
more” performs the breakup, just as the repeated “he looked at her” suggests his

65 Beauvoir, Prime of Life, 137.
66 Hemingway, “The End of Something,” 34.
solicitude. Hemingway does not provide internal monologues or flashbacks to happier times—the minimal narrative voice gives the scene its poignancy.

Subjectivity for the existentialists is best conveyed through engagement with the world and vice versa, so to describe these engagements is to describe subjectivity, not mindless, mechanistic behavior. “[T]he world and man reveal themselves by undertakings,” Sartre writes (SW 194). And Beauvoir claims objective narration presents a truer version of subjectivity than the psychological novel does:

Man’s inner life is nothing but his apprehension of the world, and it is by turning toward the world and leaving the hero’s subjectivity in the background that a writer manages to express that inner life with the greatest truth and depth. Subjectivity is implied through silences much more intelligently than through the babbling of inferior disciples of Proust, and this stance of objectivity highlights the dramatic character of human existence.67

If consciousness is always consciousness of something, then objective narration carries out the ambitions of the psychological novel better than the psychological novel does.

The synthetic quality of existential realism leads to a different mold of character than that of traditional realist novels. According to Alex Woloch, a hallmark of nineteenth-century realism is its “dual focus on psychological depth and social expansiveness.”68 Esty echoes this claim when he notes that the realist novel has often been caught between two poles: a psychological one that emphasizes “liberal individualism and deep interiority,” and one marked by “features we associate with social realism,” such as the depiction of the oppressive working conditions in factories.69 We readily find this social realism in Steinbeck’s stories of the plight of wage laborers, in

67 Beauvoir, America Day by Day, 263.
68 Woloch, The One and the Many, 31.
69 Esty, “Realism Wars,” 322.
Wright’s depictions of both overt and institutional racism, in Caldwell’s portrayal of the indigence of poor Southern whites. But the existentialist reception of American fiction shows that this social element is not to be understood as a distinct focus or pole, apart from that of character. Rather, it is only through character that the social is revealed.

1.5 Conclusion

Attending to the existential vision of realism can improve our understanding of literary history and critical practices. Pascale Casanova and Gisèle Sapiro have argued that French reception of writers like Faulkner, Hemingway, Hammett, Steinbeck, and Wright “consecrated” American fiction as capital-L Literature rather than as just regional curiosities—arguments supported by the fact that in a thirteen-year span, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck won Nobel Prizes. But these accounts do not explain why American fiction fascinated French intellectuals, so paying attention to the terms in which the existentialists appreciated these novels helps explain why these American authors became so internationally celebrated. Moreover, the existentialist appreciation of American fiction complicates the tired but still influential realist-modernist distinction. In The Antinomies of Realism (2013), Jameson observes that in the mid-twentieth century, the novel splits into two streams: a “serious,” modernist one that de-emphasizes narrative and instead foregrounds affect, literariness, and lyricism; and, what he calls (with some misgiving), “the ‘existential’ novel” that gives “preponderance of dialogue over description in the interest of easy reading.” My own reconstruction of existential realism is not entirely in line with what he suggests, but his remark about “easy reading”

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70 Casanova, The World Republic of Letters
71 Jameson, The Antinomies of Realism, 184.
squares with my emphasis on readability as a central feature of a realism that reinvents itself and flourishes alongside modernism.

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Having argued in this introduction for the legitimacy of reading fiction in terms of character agency, in the next chapter I uncover a shared genealogy of existentialism and modernism centered on the ethics of agency. In contrast to the Levinasian, deconstructivist “ethics of alterity” that has loomed large in literature departments for decades, the ethics of agency is decidedly first-personal and will-oriented, and it explores what it means to act. Such issues are central to Sartre’s signature ethical binary, bad faith and authenticity, which concerns the individual’s relationship to her own freedom. Does one shrink from one’s freedom by imagining it is curtailed by absolute values inscribed in the world (this is the “spirit of seriousness”), or does one assume one’s contingency and “roll the dice,” by throwing oneself into a project?

But the ethical status of these terms is murky. As a technical term, “authenticity”—authenticité, Eigentlichkeit—comes from Heidegger’s reading of Kierkegaard, and although Heidegger claims it is a neutral ontological term, Sartre points out that it is “marred by an ethical concern” because it seems impossible not to value authenticity over inauthenticity (BN 732; EN 610). Heidegger in turn charges Sartre with misunderstanding him, explaining that “authenticity” is used “in a provisional fashion” and does “not imply moral-existentiell [Heidegger’s term] or an ‘anthropological’ distinction.” The problem with Sartre in Heidegger’s eyes is that he believes existentialism is a humanism, and Heidegger rejects this formulation “because it does not
set the *humanitas* of the human being high enough.”\(^{72}\) Is the problem, then, that “authenticity” is extra-moral? The point in bringing up this disagreement is not to adjudicate it, but to point out that the term *authenticity* and its attending terms (*resolution, bad faith, sincerity*, and so on) are mired in ethical significance, even if Sartre and Heidegger are reluctant to admit it. Indeed, all but the most doctrinaire readers have regarded authenticity as obviously, if somewhat inarticulately, ethical.\(^{73}\) This inarticulacy has led many critics to treat authenticity as a fatally flawed ethical ideal. Insofar as it seemingly prioritizes self-determination above all, it would license any action whatsoever, even murder, so long as the agent acted wholeheartedly.

In fact, the theme of murdering just to do it, dubbed “the gratuitous act” by André Gide, is a motif that develops from the mid-nineteenth century onward. In chapter 2, I trace this motif’s development and argue it represents a distinctly modernist ethical problematic concerning the nature of autonomy. French existentialism inherits this tradition, and if it seems to wallow in violence and murder, it is not because Sartre and Beauvoir sought to spiritualize them. While on assignment in the States, Sartre recalls meeting an American who complained that Europe had gotten itself into such a mess because it was insufficiently rational, as though the horrors of war might be avoided were people more reasonable. “Discussion between us was not possible,” wrote Sartre. “I believe in evil and he does not.”\(^{74}\) The dialectic of authenticity and bad faith represents an attempt to come to terms with the most histrionic of moral concepts, evil, by casting it as a project one can undertake or avoid depending on how one relates to one’s *a priori*

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\(^{73}\) Marjorie Grene’s “Authenticity: An Existential Virtue” (1952) is among the best, earliest soundings of the term’s ethical import in both philosophers, and she does not even pretend it is anything but a virtue. Grene had studied under Heidegger.

\(^{74}\) Sartre, “Individualism and Conformism in the United States,” 90.
freedom. By tracing the history of the gratuitous act, I bring out a modernist ethics of agency that modernist studies has ignored.

With a characterological-agential framework in place, the three remaining chapters turn to individual American novels that were in dialogue with French existentialism. John Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle* (1937), the subject of chapter 3, is a proletarian novel describing the efforts of two Communist Party field-agents’ efforts to organize a strike among exploited seasonal laborers. In devoting themselves entirely to the ultimate goal of the workers’ revolution, they exemplify authenticity because they appropriate their individual freedom in a mission to realize freedom for all. When he wrote the novel, Steinbeck was interested in the Communist Party (though he never joined and he would later distance himself entirely), and *In Dubious Battle* stages an ethical choice facing the *lumpenproletariat*: they can make common cause and strike, a risky but hopeful project that intensifies their own lives in undertaking it, regardless of outcome. Or they can become vigilantes, lackeys for the ownership class, who terrorize the strikers not out of political conviction, but merely to indulge the sadistic pleasure of opposing themselves to the projects of others. Steinbeck has been spurned in modernist studies because of his sentimentalism, but I argue that this novel’s sentimentalized vision of commitment is key to its appeal for the existentialists.

In Chapter 4 I turn to Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* (1953). Wright’s early writings also impressed Sartre and Beauvoir, but unlike Steinbeck, Wright was also influenced by them, and *The Outsider* was written after he had befriended Beauvoir and Sartre and emigrated to Paris. It is the quintessential American existentialist novel. Not only does it take up bread-and-butter existentialist themes such as *Angst*, decision,
responsibility, and a “hell is other people” sensibility, but it does so in an unambiguously existentialist vocabulary. But Wright was not merely parroting French talking points. The hero, Cross Damon, strives to escape his entanglements and seize control of his life, but he can do so only by cutting the social bonds that give his life meaning, whether that means staging his own suicide and starting again or murdering those who would constrain him. Wright believed that Black Americans, on account of being born in a country to which they are denied full political participation, are attuned to the rootlessness and anomie bearing down on all peoples in modernity. He had already come to his own Black existentialist sensibility before he heard the word, and in *The Outsider* he blends a European existentialist concern for freedom with his American naturalist preoccupations with fatalism and decline to write a portrait of constrained agency.

The final chapter takes up the theme of constrained agency of a different sort by way of discussing Patricia Highsmith’s 1955 thriller, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Tom Ripley is a conman and a murderer, but he is not driven by any overt malice. Rather, like Wright’s Cross Damon, he can conceive of self-determination only in terms of detachment. His willingness to commit audacious crimes and to reinvent himself makes him an exemplar of the popular image of the lonely, self-reliant existentialist hero, but I argue that Tom’s ersatz vision of authenticity is in fact what Stanley Cavell calls “skepticism with regard to other people.” This vision of skepticism concerns not knowledge of what is true and false, but rather withholding acknowledgement of other people and oneself. While Tom achieves an independence of sorts, it is a fearful, lonely, highly restrained version that is a far cry from genuine freedom.
While I take up these three novels in chronological order, I do not attempt to write a history of the American uptake of existentialism. George Cotkin has already written that book in *Existential America* (2003). Insofar as I have an historical argument, it traces the decline of the ideal of authenticity, from its hopeful, pro-social picture in Steinbeck to its anti-social, narcissistic vision in Highsmith.
2. Toward a Modernist Ethics of Agency: Authenticity and the Gratuitous Murder

“What if morality should turn out to be the danger of dangers? . . .”

“There is the modern man for you: knife in hand, full of readiness to sacrifice, but in the absence of God, and of Isaac, and hence of an angel in the wings.”

“If the moralist is the human being who best grasps the human position, teaches us what our human position is, better than we know, in ways we cannot escape but through distraction and muddle, then our first task in subjecting ourselves to judgement is to tell the moralist from the moralizer.”

Late in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Peter Walsh is nervous about visiting Clarissa Dalloway, whom he has not seen since she rejected his marriage proposal years earlier. He distracts himself by half-attentively reading a newspaper:

“Cricket was important. He could never help reading about cricket. He read the scores in the stop press first, then how it was a hot day; then about a murder case.” Cricket, the weather, a murder: three subjects meaningful in the novel only insofar as they show Walsh’s effort to take his mind off his apprehension. Three topics filed down to the same level of unimportance. In a novel concerned with the subtle significance of the everyday, murder can enter the story only if it is reduced to triviality. Stephen Kern observes that high modernist novelists “avoided murders in accord with their rejection of dramatically pivotal events.” This passage exemplifies that trend: momentous events are subordinate to mundane ones, and action takes second stage to inner experience.

I have already argued that existential realism puts a premium on action and mistrusts inner experience, so making room for existentialism in modernism requires me

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3 ibid., 326.
to come up with an alternative view of modernism. In the opening of *The Rebel* (L’homme révolté 1951), Camus suggests one way modernism might accommodate murder:

> We are living in the era of premeditation and the perfect crime. Our criminals are no longer helpless children who could plead love as their excuse. On the contrary, they are adults and they have a perfect alibi: philosophy [. . . .] Heathcliff, in *Wuthering Heights*, would kill everybody on earth in order to possess Cathy, but it would never occur to him to say that murder is reasonable or theoretically defensible. He would commit it, and there his convictions end.\(^6\)

The nineteenth-century crime of passion versus the modernist “philosophical” murder.

Camus himself wrote the most famous philosophical murder novel, *The Stranger*. The protagonist murders an Arab, and when pressed to explain himself, he puzzlingly answers that it was because of the sun. A generation earlier, André Gide called such a murder *l’acte gratuit* or “gratuitous act.” Gide himself derived the theme in part from his reading of Dostoevsky, who took inspiration from Poe. Revisiting the gratuitous act motif reveals a strain of modernism that includes existentialism and gives murder its due.

This strain uses murder to interrogate moral agency, the idea that human action is suffused with what Charles Taylor calls “qualitative discriminations”—distinctions between lower and higher, meaningful and trivial, worthy and unworthy of desiring.\(^7\) To say that action is oriented in moral space is simply to acknowledge that human actions are subject to ethical evaluation, not to say that all our actions are virtuous, or even that agents are necessarily clear about what they are attempting to make happen.\(^8\) The gratuitous act strain of modernism (to which existentialism belongs) engages moral

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\(^7\) Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27.

\(^8\) Some writers distinguish between ethics and morality, but I use the two terms interchangeably in this chapter.
agency by radicalizing the principle of autonomy. Autonomy—ethical autonomy—is Kant’s invention, and it is meant to ground ethics in the subject’s rational self-governance, as opposed to some authority outside the subject (such as compliance with doctrine or tradition). For Kant, autonomy is effected through the categorical imperative, a principle that is meant to ratify an individual’s act by imagining it as a universalizable rule. The gratuitous act tradition dispenses with this test: if my action must be universalizable, is it actually my own? Can I not better achieve or prove my individuality by acting without such a reason? Better yet, without any reasons at all? Gratuitously?

This focus on individuality also informs the existentialist idea of authenticity, which has often been criticized for sanctioning any manner of destruction so long as it is baptized in the quasi-ethical waters of doing what one feels strongly called upon to do. Commenting on the existentialists’ predilection for violent books, Meryl Altman notes that the gratuitous act is often a murder and observes that “[s]omewhat violence functions as a sign of authenticity.” Before her, Lionel Trilling took issue with what he regarded as the pathological implication of the ideal of authenticity when he noted “the violent meanings which are explicit in the Greek ancestry of the word ‘authentic.’ Authenteo: to have full power over; also, to commit a murder. Authentic: not only a master and a doer, but also a perpetrator, a murderer, even a self-murderer, a suicide.” I will provisionally characterize authenticity as an ethics of radical individuality that gives moral priority to acts of self-determination, as opposed to actions that foster social harmony. Altman and Trilling detect a danger in this ideal. If authenticity means unlocking a more robust

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9 In describing autonomy as Kant’s “invention,” I am following Schneewind, The Invention of Autonomy.
10 This characterization of the categorical imperative is what Christine Korsgaard calls “the received story,” but philosophers including Korsgaard herself challenge the idea. See Korsgaard, Self-Constitution, 14-15.
12 Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity, 131.
individual mode of existence by turning my back on my more social mode of living, it is easy to see why the specter of murder would loom. Murder would doubly deliver on this version of authenticity: in committing such a transgression, I would break free of constraining social rules. In killing, I would strike a blow against society by dispatching one of the spies it sent into my solitary existence.

I believe the criticism of authenticity is mistaken. Authenticity’s opponents tend to raise the prospect of murder in the hypothetical register of the extreme example, as though to say, “you see what a slippery slope this ethics of individual choice is!”13 But as I will show in this chapter, murdering—not from moral failing, but in response to a positive moral calling to assert one’s individuality—was a motif in the intellectual tradition that existentialism inherited. In fact, the existentialist notion of authenticity should be read as a corrective to the amoral subjectivism its critics accuse it of being.

My argument proceeds in three stages. First, I argue that modernist scholarship is silent about moral agency because, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, it is held captive by a picture of modernism that suppresses moral considerations. After that, I spend the bulk of this chapter sketching an alternative genealogy of modernism by tracing the history of narratives of the gratuitous act with an eye to their regulating ethical ideals. Finally, I return to authenticity and its antithesis, bad faith, to argue that what critics of authenticity attack is in fact a version of bad faith that comes to prominence in the gratuitous act strain of modernism. Aside from making room within modernist studies for existentialism, this chapter sets the stage for my discussions of the ethics of agency in American fiction.

13 See Anderson, Sartre’s Two Ethics, 55.
2.1 The Ideology of Modernism and the Exclusion of Moral Agency

In “The New Modernist Studies” (2008), Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz write that since roughly 1990, the modernist canon has been expanded in “temporal, spatial, and vertical directions.” The expansions they describe can be seen by comparing the titles of two state-of-the-field monographs published three decades apart: the first, Michael Levinson’s *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine, 1908-1922* (1986), is a standard-bearer of the “old” modernist studies; the second, Susan Stanford Friedman’s *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (2015), exemplifies the new kind. The temporal and spatial expansions are easy to see. The old modernism designated England or some variation of the Paris-London-Rome-Berlin-New York cosmopolitan West in the first third of the 20th Century. The new modernism accommodates cultural artifacts from the entire world and stretches back before the sixteenth century and forward to the contemporary moment. The third expansion, vertical, refers to the bridging of the “great divide” between high and low culture, a distinction that not long ago was regarded as an essential condition of modernism, but which “has by now been traversed so many times as to constitute a critical straw man, invoked only to be dismissed.” Given the breadth of these expansions, does anything hold the field together?

Despite the expansion of its archive, modernist studies continues to be guided by the ideology of modernism as described by Fredric Jameson in *A Singular Modernity*

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15 Friedman suggests that despite her title, even the planet maybe too small a scale: “Planetary also gestures at a world beyond the human, even beyond the Earth, by invoking the systems and networks of inner and outer space that are both patterned and random.” *Planetary Modernisms*, 8.
16 Levay, *Violent Minds*, 125.
(2002). Central to this ideology is the notion of aesthetic autonomy, the idea that an artwork’s fundamental relation is to itself (its medium, material substructure, the visible traces of the process of its production). According to Jameson, the ideology of modernism arose not, as might be expected, in the early part of the twentieth century in the work of writers and artists now considered modernist. Rather, it is the aesthetic ideology that accompanies the widespread use of the word *modernism* after World War II. A retrospective label that prevailed in anti-Stalinist, Cold War America, specifically in abstract expressionist painting circles, the ideology of modernism was then projected back on to (first-generation) modernist artists in various media.17 “Modernism,” in spite of recent expansions still largely functions as a periodizing label to describe Western literature of the early twentieth century, but when modernist studies regards such literature as characterized by formal innovation, it continues to work within the ideology of modernism.

This history helps explain why despite the diversity of regions and periods included under “modernism,” the word itself reliably evokes a set of expected aesthetic associations: difficulty, ambiguity, fragmentation, lyricism, rupture. Toril Moi finds that culturalist challenges to the cult of artistic autonomy, despite their intentions, preserve its ways of reading. By culturalism, she means “the various approaches to literature and other cultural objects that reject the autonomy of art in its modernist formulation and stress the cultural, historical, social, and political aspects of aesthetic phenomena, such as Marxism, feminism, new historicism, and cultural, postcolonial, and queer studies” that have flourished since the 1980s. Culturalists position themselves against the insularity of

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artistic autonomy, but Moi notes that in their readings, “they often simply translate formalist concepts into politicized categories. Culturalist critics of film, theater, and literature are still obsessed with high modernist and postmodernist themes such as reflexivity, negativity, absence, the instability of boundaries, and the breakdown of language.”  

When modernist scholars discuss literature in terms of how it complicates aesthetic autonomy, troubles representation, or trains readers’ attention to form, it is working within the ideology of modernism.

On this view of modernism, there is no place to discuss moral agency, which is excluded by silencing one of the other of its component terms. Attacking the *moral* part, Oscar Wilde declared, “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book” and “No artist has ethical sympathies.” Nietzsche wrote that in his call for a revaluation of all values, “Morality is not attacked, it just no longer comes into consideration.” Such dismissals reduce ethical considerations to chiding didacticism, making it easy to brush them aside. As these quotations suggest, explicit repudiations of morality was mainly a turn-of-the-twentieth-century gesture. In modern times, the gesture does not need to be made—it is taken as a given that morality is irrelevant.

The other way the dominant picture of modernism shortchanges moral agency is by minimizing the *agency* side, either by aestheticizing morality such that it becomes a matter of cultivating a higher self, or by narrowing agency down to one’s social position. Lee Oser describes the former when he argues that “the modernist moral project” is “the

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20 Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 62. ("Die Moral wird nicht angegriffen, sie kommt nur nicht mehr in Betracht.")
effort to transform human nature through the use of art.”\textsuperscript{21} An aesthetic education can refine perception and deepen consciousness, but this sort of moral work largely takes place in one’s head. Ethics becomes nothing more than a matter of training one’s attention.\textsuperscript{22} When scholars of modernism do foreground agency, they tend to eliminate action by adopting an identitarian model of personhood in which agency is a consequence of one’s social position. Take, for example, Jessica Burstein’s argument that Krupabai Satthianadhan’s novel \textit{Kamala} (1894) “gestures [. . .] toward the possibility of a transfigured domestic sphere, with room for expanded female independence and agency.”\textsuperscript{23} Agency seems to refer to the outcome of some willing, but the willing itself—the decision, the resolve, the struggle against doubt, self-deception, and akrasia—is taken for granted. Moreover, by binding agency directly to the term \textit{female} and treating it as a thing that can be “expanded,” Burstein ties agency to one’s place in the social pecking order. Such discussions subordinate agency to a sociological vision of identity, in which “a narrow understanding of selfhood and practice results from an overemphasis on sociological, ascribed, or group identity.”\textsuperscript{24} Educating attention and accounting for social position are important elements of moral agency, but they fall short of addressing action.

One might expect modernist scholarship that focuses on crime and violence to take up moral issues, but in fact moral agency is sideline on principle in the literature. Jean-Michel Rabaté argues in \textit{Given: 1º Art, 2º Crime: Modernity, Murder, Mass Culture} (2006) that aesthetic modernism regularly took inspiration from real-life crime, and he cites Thomas De Quincey’s “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” (1827),

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Oser, \textit{The Ethics of Modernism}, 120.
\item \textsuperscript{22} A robust defense of moral perception is offered by Iris Murdoch in \textit{The Sovereignty of Good}.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Burstein, \textit{Modernist Commitments}, 139.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Anderson, \textit{The Way We Argue Now}, 4.
\end{itemize}
which treats famous murders and assassinations as artistic performances, to make his point. De Quincey draws a sharp distinction between morality and aesthetics: “Everything in this world has two handles. Murder, for instance, may be laid hold of by its moral handle, (as it generally is in the pulpit, and at the Old Bailey:) and that, I confess, is its weak side; or it may also be treated aesthetically, as the Germans call it, that is, in relation to good taste.” This sentence is the second citation in English of the word “aesthetic” and the first use of the adverb aesthetically, so Rabaté correctly sees the essay as foundational for the notion of aesthetic autonomy that became central to modernism (Breton would include the essay in his Anthologie de l'humour noir [1940]). Rabaté pursues De Quincey’s distinction to argue that crime is the “creaky hinge” connecting aesthetics and morals: aesthetic autonomy is not given once and for all but must provoke moral responses so that it can reject them.

Most modernist scholarship that takes up of crime and violence follows suit and focuses on their aesthetic and formal significance to the work of art. In Modernism and the Aesthetics of Violence (2013), Paul Sheehan argues that the sexually transgressive impulse of decadence and aestheticism gets diverted into high modernist depictions of violence—or rather the way violence undermines representation. High-modernist techniques such as fragmentation and discontinuity parallel the faltering, traumatized language produced by violence. Sarah Cole advances a similar argument by adopting Max Weber’s terminology to argue that a dialectic of enchantment/disenchantment of violence structures canonical modernism. At one moment, violence is “elevated” by

26 Rabaté, Given: 1° Art, 2° Crime, 6.
27 Sheehan, Modernism and the Aesthetics of Violence, 171.
being aestheticized, and in the next modernism defamiliarizes everyday life to expose its less overt forms of violence. Matthew Levay argues in *Violent Minds: Modernism and the Criminal* (2019) that representing the inner life of the criminal brought together two modernist preoccupations: deep psychology and the formal challenge of representing deviant motivations and internal conflicts.

These critics are missing much of the appeal of crime, at least when it comes to fiction. Consider, for instance, Levay’s argument that in the figure of Pinkie from Graham Greene’s *Brighton Rock* (1938), the novel shows how “identity is both fluid and fixed, labile yet wedded to social, economic, and biological hierarchies.” I can neither agree nor disagree with this claim because reading *Brighton Rock* as commentary on the ontology of identity strikes me as a very odd exercise. When I read *Brighton Rock*, what interests me are the compulsions that drive Pinkie to murder, his numbness to violence, his loneliness, and his ability to carry on a day-to-day existence that involves periodic acts of brutality. In short, I find myself torn between horror and fascination at the sort of person he is, not about how he relates to the metaphysics of identity. These are matters of moral psychology, but by and large modernist critics, rather than investigate the phenomenology of action implied in fiction about violence and crime, find the same old modernist preoccupations with ambiguity, liminality, the instability of structures, and the like.

Are these critics advocating a return to aestheticism? They would probably say no and point to the ways their attention to violence and criminality undermines aesthetic

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28 Sarah Cole, *At the Violet Hour*. See especially the introduction and chapter 1.
29 Levay, *Violent Minds*, 4-5.
autonomy. Nevertheless, in treating aesthetic autonomy as something in need of undermining, they reinforce its status as the central problematic of modernism. Sheehan claims for instance that “aestheticist autonomy is not an absolute, but rather seeks to confound the distinction between art and life.”31 This line of reasoning obscures an important feature of the principle of aesthetic autonomy: it was always an ideal and not a fact of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic autonomy has always floated on the half-submerged presence of what Jameson calls the semi-autonomous. “The fundamental paradox of the "autonomy" of the cultural sphere,” he writes elsewhere, is that “the realm of culture can absolutize itself over against the real world only at the price of retaining a final tenuous sense of that exterior or external world of which it is the replication and the imaginary.”32 Autonomy has always been a goal or fantasy rather than an accepted reality, so discovering impurities in the aesthetic—like morality, in the case of De Quincey and Rabaté—or showing that aesthetic autonomy is porous does not revise received notions of aesthetic autonomy so much as repeat them. In other words, treating aesthetic autonomy as a concept with fuzzy borders is entirely consistent with the ideology of modernism.

Understanding the dominant critical concerns of modernist scholars explains why modernist studies overlooks the gratuitous act. This motif concerns not so much the autonomy of the work of art as the autonomy of the person. It should come as no surprise that these two notions are related. According to Robert Pippin, autonomy in its various guises is the central problem of modernity, emerging in Kant’s attempt to describe the conditions by which reason, morality, and judgement can be self-grounding. Insofar as

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31 Sheehan, 8.
32 Jameson, “Periodizing the ’60s,” 200.
modernity constitutes itself by trying to break with the past and starting history afresh on clear, rational grounds, autonomy is at the core of modernity. “To be a modern individual is to demand independence; on the one hand, historical and intellectual ‘maturity,’ as Kant put it, a freedom from a dependence on historical tradition and the power to rule one’s own beliefs; on the other, social or existential self-direction and autonomy.” In this story, political, moral, aesthetic, epistemological, and any other sort of autonomy are species of modernity’s general problem of self-grounding.

I can suggest the deep-history of autonomy with a brief bird’s-eye view of modernity. In the 18th century the project of self-grounding begins earnestly and optimistically: think of the confidence required for Samuel Johnson to undertake his dictionary, of the Encyclopédistes, of Kant declaring in the original preface to the first Kritik that “there cannot be a single metaphysical problem that has not been solved here.” By the mid-nineteenth century this optimism gives way to perplexity and despair with the dawning realization that the tautological character of self-grounding makes ones head spin, an idiom almost identical to Kierkegaard’s description of Angst as “the dizziness of freedom.” According to Pippin, the episode of modernity known as modernism arises alongside a dawning realization in European high culture that its practices are ultimately unjustifiable, that they are underwritten by conventions that themselves rest on no solid ground (Cavell calls this realization “our dissatisfaction with criteria,” and Pippin’s book is subtitled On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture). These are the troubled waters in which the modern artist swims: the artist

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33 Pippin, Modernism as a Philosophical Problem, 38.
35 Pippin, Modernism as a Philosophical Problem 39–41
exposes the earlier illusions of self-grounding while also serving as an exemplar of radical autonomy. As art replaces religion, the artist replaces the prophet as the person able to shape the chaos and make sense of the dawning age. At the same time, as René Girard has shown, the novelist (the artist’s close relative and sometimes double) reveals the flimsiness of what many people think of as autonomy, showing that such independence is little more than a refusal of social reality.\textsuperscript{36}

This hasty sketch of modernism’s emergence within modernity is meant to show that by moving upstream on the topic of autonomy, we can see how the gratuitous act both shadows and critiques the notion of artistic autonomy. Murder for murder’s sake is the evil twin of art for art’s sake, not derivative of it, but coeval with it.

\section*{2.2 A Brief History of the Gratuitous Act}

\subsection*{2.2.1 Precursors}

The theme of doing wrong just for the hell of it gets its first great treatment in book II.ix of Augustine’s \textit{Confessions}. He recounts how he and some friends stole the pears from a neighbor’s tree and threw them to the pigs, for no reason other than the pleasure of “doing something that was forbidden.”\textsuperscript{37} A little over a millennium later, Shakespeare’s Iago stirs up trouble for no good reason and tries to justify it after the fact—memorably described by Coleridge as the “motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity.” Milton’s Satan inverts the moral order in \textit{Paradise Lost}, anticipating the anti-heroic dimension of the gratuitous act story, and Francis Hutcheson’s idea of “Disinterested Malice, or Delight in the Misery of others” is an early philosophical formulation of the idea that one might do bad not just despite but because one has nothing

\textsuperscript{36} René Girard, \textit{Desire, Deceit, and the Novel}.\textsuperscript{37} Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, 47.
to gain by it. Nietzsche may have gotten his sources mixed up when uses the term “disinterested Malice” [uninteressirte Bosheit] to discuss the joy in cruelty that, he argues, “constituted the collective delight of older mankind.” He claims it translates Spinoza’s term *sympathia malevolens*, but the term is nowhere to be found in the works of Spinoza.

Moving to Romanticism, the para-aesthetic nature of the gratuitous act finds a forerunner in the writings and biography of Heinrich von Kleist, whose ghastly descriptions of death, dismemberment and suicide foreshadow his own suicide, which Karl Heinz Bohrer calls “in analogy to the ‘art for art’s sake’ of European aestheticism, suicide for suicide’s sake.” Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner kills the albatross for no reason, an act which Robert Penn Warren reads as theologically equivalent to murdering a person, but with the benefit that by using a bird, Coleridge is able to keep the focus on the Mariner’s divine accountability without getting bogged down in earthly legalities. Substituting animal for human will become a motif in the gratuitous act plot because such a minimization keeps our focus on the moral drama of the murderer rather than the suffering of the victim.

Such is the case with another of De Quincey’s murder writings. Although not concerned with motivelessness, De Quincey’s short essay “On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*” (1823) is an important early theorization of some elements that will become more prominent in later developments of the gratuitous act story. I mentioned earlier that

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38 Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue in Two Treatises*, 143
39 Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 190
41 “[T]he motiveless murder of a man would truly raise the issue of probability. Furthermore, the literal shock of such an act, especially if perverse and unmotivated, would be so great that it would distract from the symbolic significance.” Warren, “A Poem of Pure Imagination (Reconsiderations VI),” 398.
“On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” ushers in aesthetic autonomy by declaring we must choose between an aesthetic response and a moral one. The earlier *Macbeth* essay takes up similar themes but cuts the other way. It shows that when it comes to the murderer’s story, we cannot separate the aesthetic from the moral response—that we wouldn’t even want to—but it also modifies the notion of morality away from any simple equivalence to moralizing. Rather than preaching right and wrong at us, the murderer’s story shows us how a will can stupefy itself, how acting decisively with (apparent) full awareness of what one is doing can be one of the cleverest guises of self-deception.

After Macbeth has killed the sleeping Duncan, he hears knocking. For De Quincey, this sound gives the murder “a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity.” Why? In searching for an explanation, he develops two themes that reverberate in later gratuitous act stories. First, De Quincey argues that in staging murder, the author can make audiences sympathize with the victim or with the perpetrator, either of which produces its own kind of dehumanization.42 Identifying with the victim is an artistic dead end because, in their final moments, the victim’s subjectivity is reduced to the mere instinct to survive. Because humans share this instinct with all creatures, it “degrades the greatest of men to the level of ‘the poor beetle that we tread on’.”43 There is little for the poet to do with this animalized subjectivity, but if he calls on audiences to identify with the murderer, he is able to paint “some great storm of passion,—jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred,—which will create a hell within him.” Instead of dragging us down to

42 De Quincey writes in terms of “sympathy,” which I translate into “identify with,” a phrasal verb that was not available to him (it dates from the 20th century).
43 De Quincey, “On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth,” 4-5. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
the animal, focusing on the murderer draws us “up” to the demonic: “We were to be made to feel that the human nature, i.e. the divine nature of love and mercy, spread through the hearts of all creatures, and seldom utterly withdrawn from man,—was gone, vanished, extinct; and that the fiendish nature had taken its place” (5). One of the themes that becomes clearer in the gratuitous murder story is the idea that the murderer cuts himself off from other people, living outside of his humanity looking in. It’s common to speak of murder as an inhuman act, but as Cavell writes, “only what is human can be inhuman.”

De Quincey, too, shows us that monstrousness is fundamentally a human possibility, rich in narrative vigor.

This theme leads into the second, developed in later gratuitous act stories, which could be called murder-as-event. In the moment of murder, the everyday is suspended: “Another world has stepped in; and the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires.” The idea that murder not only defies conventional mores, but that it ruptures the normal course of things—the experience of time, accepted values, and human self-understanding—is a forerunner to Kierkegaard’s celebrated concept of the decisive moment (Øieblick, “blink of an eye”). Ordinary time might be a succession of nows, but the decisive moment is qualitatively different, a sudden eruption of the timeless into the series. “Nothing is as swift as the blink of an eye, and yet it is commensurable with the content of the eternal.”

The instant at which everything changes, the decisive moment calls to mind road-to-Damascus-types of conversion, a motif that modernist scholarship (by way of Joyce) took up in idea of “the

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44 Cavell, The Claim of Reason, 418.
45 De Quincey 6.
46 For a detailed treatment of this concept and its afterlife in Existenzphilosophie, see Ward, Augenblick: The Concept of the “Decisive Moment” in 19th- and 20th-Century Western Thought.
47 Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety, 87.
But De Quincey points to a sinister version of the idea: the murderer is not simply the recipient of a revelation; he is the agent of this interruption and the cause of his own estrangement from the human world.

But of course, the murderer remains human, and herein lies De Quincey’s answer to why the knocking at the gate affects him so much. The knocking echoes the decisive moment, recommencing ordinary time and giving us enough distance from the event of murder to realize how horrible it was. If you have ever witnessed “a wife, daughter, or sister, in a fainting fit,” he writes, then you know that the most affecting moment is the one in which they start to move again. Or if you have ever witnessed the funeral for a public figure in which the whole world seems united in the act of mourning, and at the conclusion you hear wheels leaving the scene, it has the effect of breaking up the somber silence and reminding you that the world keeps going. Moments that recommence ordinary time complete the rupture and snap time in half. There is before when things were normal, and the future, fogged in apprehension, forcing the question: how will things be from now on?

Knocking is particularly evocative not only because the percussiveness imitates the eruption of the decisive moment, but also, though De Quincey does not say this, because it is a summons. The summons wrenches the murderer (and audience) out of their absorption in their deed, making them feel called upon, similar to how Heidegger’s

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48 Harry Levin’s James Joyce: A Critical Introduction (1941) is foundational: “An epiphany is a spiritual manifestation, more especially the original manifestation of Christ to the Magi. There are such moments in store for all of us, Joyce believed, if we but discern them. Sometimes, amid the most encumbered circumstances, it suddenly happens that the veil is lifted, the burden of the mystery laid bare, and the ultimate secret of things made manifest” (28).

Levin’s elaboration of the concept fits squarely within the ideology of modernism. Not only does he describe it in terms of literary form (“Though grounded in theology, it has now become a matter of literary technique), but also, he claims it can be found in formally innovative writers like Joyce, Proust, and Chekov, but not realists like James Farrell (31).
“call of conscience” (*Gewissensruf*) jars Dasein out of its lostness in *das Man* and how Sartre’s idea of being caught spying sends a wave of shame through the Peeping Tom as he recognizes he is an object for others. Knocking and summoning are a frequent sequel to murder in the fiction of the gratuitous act: the beating of the hideous heart in Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the strangers ringing at the door in *Crime and Punishment* just after Raskolnikov has committed the double murder; the four shots Meursault fires into his fallen victim, “like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness.”

### 2.2.2 Poe and Kierkegaard

Edgar Allan Poe’s status as a proto-modernist is well established. First generation modernist scholars recognized in Poe the poet an influence on the Symbolists. Later, once the high/low cultural divide in modernist studies came under scrutiny, he was again acknowledged as the inaugurator of one of modernism’s signature popular genres, the detective story. But the third proto-modernist Poe is the one hiding in plain sight: the author of psychological horror stories. This Poe shares with his contemporary, Søren Kierkegaard, grandfather of existentialism, a fascination with the first-person view of pathological agency. Both wrote prolifically in the 1840s and died young (Poe died in 1849 at age 40; Kierkegaard, in 1855 at age 42). Putting these two young grandfathers in conversation over the gratuitous act will go some distance in bringing together existentialism and modernism.

Whereas De Quincey laid the groundwork for taking seriously the mind of the murderer, Kierkegaard and Poe showed how seemingly motiveless murders might answer

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a quasi-ethical calling. The term “motiveless murder” gained currency in the mid-19th century despite its paradoxical formulation. William Alexander Hammond, an American physician and one of the founders of neurology, explains the problem in his 1888 paper “Madness and Murder”: “there is really no such thing as a motiveless murder. If there were no motive [. . .] there would be no murder.”50 The idea that motive is baked into murder would seem to make motiveless murder incoherent, yet Hammond defends the term because it describes murders compelled “by reasons which are altogether inadequate from a normal standpoint” or in which the murderer finds himself driven to “the perpetration of an act repugnant to his conscience and wishes” (627). These two characterizations provide useful diagnostics for understanding Kierkegaard’s and Poe’s respective contributions to the motiveless murder theme.

In Fear and Trembling (1843), Kierkegaard addresses the reasons murder might be inadequate from the normal standpoint. Reading the story in Genesis of how God commanded Abraham to kill his only son, Isaac, Kierkegaard concludes that the story does not make sense but is only more compelling for that reason. “The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he intended to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he intended to sacrifice Isaac.”51 That Abraham does not actually carry out the deed is inconsequential, since it was only last-second divine intervention that stopped him. A devout Christian, Kierkegaard admires Abraham, but he is appalled by him, too: “I cannot think myself into Abraham,” Kierkegaard’s Johannes de silentio writes (22). Abraham’s act of faith defies understanding, and by the same token, Abraham cannot explain himself to others: he “cannot speak. As soon as I speak, I express the universal,

51 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, 24. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
and if I do not do that, then no one can understand me” (52). By the universal, Kierkegaard means something like the conditions of mutual intelligibility (comparable to Wittgenstein’s idea of “forms of life”).52 Kierkegaard coins the phrase “the teleological suspension of the ethical” to designate Abraham’s unethical but—crucially—not wicked intention, the sense that he has a singular duty (to God) that cannot be made ethically intelligible to others. If a latter-day Abraham piously sacrificed his son because he thought that God commanded it, people would rightly find him deranged. Abraham is spared this condemnation because of his faith, but this more-than-ethical faith makes his motivations inadequate from a normal standpoint.

Poe fills out the other side of Hammond’s equation (“the perpetration of an act repugnant to his conscience and wishes”) in his treatment of perversity. “The Black Cat” (published in 1843, the same year as Fear and Trembling) tells of a man who loves his cat but who, in a bout of drunken malice, gouges out one of its eyes. Several days or weeks later, he kills it. He is remorseful and eventually gets a new cat that is almost identical to the first, but his fondness once again gives way to unprovoked cruelty. Finally, he is about to strike it with an axe when his wife stops his hand, and in his fury, he brings the weapon down on her head instead. The narrator explains that he had no reason to hurt the first cat, but that he was moved by “the spirit of perversity.” If perversity is madness, it’s of a different order from that of the latter-day Abraham. As David Sussman points out, “The fundamental paradox of perverse action is that while such deeds do not make much sense, neither are they completely insane.” The idea of

52 “routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, sense of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life.’ Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this.” (Cavell, “Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” 48.)
Augustine stealing pears because it is wrong makes more sense than if he stole them because it was Tuesday, or because the word *pear* has four letters. Unlike the teleological suspension of the ethical, perversity does not even have the alibi of answering to a higher duty.

Or so it would seem. In a digression, Poe’s narrator explains that although philosophy takes no account of it, perversity is among “the primitive impulses of the human heart,” and his elaboration makes it look like a faculty of human freedom. “Have we not a perpetual inclination [. . .] to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such?” Kant argued that the will is properly free when it gives itself the moral law, but Poe’s narrator chafes at the idea, seeing law only as binding and not at all liberating. Once Poe got hold of the idea that freedom is limited by reason, he could not let go, and the narrator of a later work, “The Imp of the Perverse” (1845), describes perversity as “a mobile without motive, a motive not motiviert.” This narrator, too, claims that philosophy has been unable to account for perversity because “[i]n the pure arrogance of the reason”—philosophy’s drive to systematize and explain—there is no place for a faculty that serves no end. Cavell reads the quoted phrase as a “critique of the arrogance of pure reason,” a rebuke to Kant and any other philosopher who would presume to chart the boundaries of human possibilities. Mad though it may be, perversity in its irrational, non-productive operation, attests to human freedom.

In fact, Poe and Kierkegaard intimate that one is not fully human until one has committed a motiveless misdeed. Kierkegaard makes this point in *The Concept of Anxiety*

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53 David Sussman, “For Badness’ Sake,” 617.
54 Poe, “The Black Cat,” 225.
56 Cavell, “Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe),” 20.
when he tries to explain original sin. In his primal innocence, Adam is ignorant of the distinction between Good and Evil, so “he is not animal, but neither is he really man.” He cannot understand what he’s doing by sinning until after it’s done, and it is by losing this innocence that he comes into his humanity. Original sin for Kierkegaard entails that every person repeats this process in their own life. The narrator of “The Black Cat” explains that he had always been unusually fond of pets and compares them favorably to people: “There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man.” Seemingly lacking any inner depths, pets are just what they seem and offer a constancy that people lack. When he hurts the cat for no reason except the all-too-human spirit of perversity, he shows himself to be a creature of gossamer fidelity and, with almost algebraic symmetry, proves he is a man.

This is why in a story featuring the murder of a wife, the harming of a cat takes central stage. De Quincey argued that the murder victim is animalized and the murderer given depths of subjectivity. In Poe’s story, the important thing is not so much whom or what the narrator of “The Black Cat” has killed but the fact that he has killed. In the larger story of the motiveless murder, the emphasis has shifted from the victim to the act itself. Acting in the spirit of perversity, “this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself,” the narrator in effect proves he has a soul, that he is not animal, but man. The paradox is that, as De Quincey also suggested, the gesture that proves his humanity is the very same gesture that exiles him from it. The idea that one must achieve and can lose

57 Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety, 49.
58 Poe, “The Black Cat,” 223.
one’s humanity, the sense that humanity is mere humanity, is one of the puzzling features of the morality of the motiveless murder.

2.2.3 Dostoevsky

Before he was recruited to existentialism, Dostoevsky vexed modernism. He was considered a major author in Russia by the 1870s, but it was not until the early 20th century that he was recognized as a first-rate world author. Early admirers outside Eastern Europe included Robert Louis Stevenson, Oscar Wilde, and Friedrich Nietzsche, but in 1913 it was still provocative for Gide to ask, “what [. . .] is a Balzac when faced with a Dostoevsky?” After Constance Garnett translated his works into English in the 1910s, a cult of Dostoevsky sprang up in England. Despite the excitement, his work was too far afield from the emerging modernist aesthetics, and it puzzled the literati. As one critic puts it, “Unlike other modernist works built upon new aesthetic principles and delineating new genre boundary lines, such as Ulysses and To the Lighthouse, which were at least identified as art by a minority, Dostoevsky’s works could not significantly alter the artistic expectations of his English readers, largely because the author was not acknowledged as someone self-consciously engaged in the task of redefining the novel.”

Virginia Woolf admired him (but thought of him as a psychologist, not an artist), and so did Arnold Bennett, a shared appreciation that complicates one of the founding myths of British modernism, which holds that Woolf put Bennett out of commission in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” Henry James had dismissed Dostoevsky for his formlessness; Joseph Conrad protested too much against him and then wrote Under Western Eyes, his response to Crime and Punishment; D. H. Lawrence

60 Peter Kaye, Dostoevsky and English Modernism, 22.
venomously denounced his Christianity; and Aldous Huxley took inspiration from him (in *Point Counter Point* [1928]). Even though the modernists had trouble assimilating Dostoevsky, most could not ignore him.⁶¹

It took longer for his influence to be felt in the USA, where he came into vogue first alongside and then as an early example of existentialism. In the 1930s and ‘40s, the New York Intellectuals found in him a perceptive critic of the spiritual pathologies produced by modernity. After their anti-Stalinist turn, they regarded him a forecaster of the nihilism haunting revolutionary ideals.⁶² Unlike French and British writers who came to Dostoevsky through translation, the core members of the New York Intellectuals were Jews of Eastern European extraction who were familiar with Russian culture and in some cases knew the language. Philip Rahv was introduced to Dostoevsky as a child living in Ukraine when a Russian soldier gave him some books, and he would go on to publish several important essays on Dostoevsky in *Partisan Review* between the 1930s and 1960s.⁶³ When French existentialism arrived in America, the New York Intellectuals heard in its themes of despair, death, and decision echoes of Dostoevsky.

That’s not to say that Dostoevsky was unheralded by the French existentialists (Sartre and Beauvoir mention him in various writings), but it was American critics who installed the Russian novelist in the existentialist pantheon. The single most important canonization was Walter Kaufmann’s anthology *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, first published in 1956. The book is arranged mainly in chronological order, but

⁶¹ The previous paragraph is indebted to two René Wellek’s dated but still excellent “Introduction: A Sketch of the History of Dostoevsky Criticism” and Peter Kaye’s *Dostoevsky and English Modernism: 1900-1930.*
Kaufmann opens the collection with Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* even though it was published eight years after Kierkegaard died. He justifies this decision on the grounds that Dostoevsky is an easier entry point to the themes that Kierkegaard takes up in more abstract and difficult prose: alienation of the individual, the untruth of the crowd, and the importance of caprice. If the English modernists could neither ignore nor accommodate Dostoevsky, American critics of the 1950s found a place for him by disrupting historical order. A further testament to Dostoevsky’s unseasonable quality is Girard’s *Desire, Deceit, and the Novel*, which also makes Dostoevsky a chronological exception by putting him after Proust, whose treatment of jealousy and spontaneity is “pre-Dostoyevskian”).

Dostoevsky plays a pivotal role in the gratuitous act story, not only because he fleshes out the philosophical justifications for murder that Camus mentioned, but also because he is a bridge between Poe and Gide. In fact, he was one of the first Russian critics to write about Poe. Dostoevsky read “The Black Cat,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and the lesser comic tale “The Devil in the Belfry”, and in a preface written in 1861 (three years before *Notes from Underground*; five years before *Crime and Punishment*), he praises the detail of Poe’s imagination, which endows his fantastic stories with psychological credibility.

Even though Dostoevsky professed no lasting interest in Poe, Joan Delaney has offered compelling evidence that “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” informed his mature novels. Poe’s notion of the perverse finds a new home in the first part of *Notes*

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64 For a more detailed discussion of how Kaufmann’s decision shaped his story of existentialism, see Pickus “Paperback Authenticity: Walter Kaufmann and Existentialism.”
from Underground, in which the narrator rails against the utopian socialists who believed that if society were put on a rational course, people would understand their true interest and evil would be eliminated once and for all. How tedious and constraining this would all be, the narrator muses: people will learn they in fact have neither “will nor any whim” but are just “a kind of piano key or an organ stop.” Rejecting such tranquilizing rationalization, the Underground Man declares that “man, always and everywhere, whoever he is, had preferred to act as he wished, and not at all as reason and advantage have dictated; one might even desire something opposed to one’s own advantages, and sometimes [. . .] one positively must do so.” The resonance with Poe is unmistakable, but Dostoevsky takes the further step of making explicit the connection between freedom and acting against self-interest (a succinct gloss for perversion). The idea would reappear in Demons (1869) in the character of Stavrogin, who exhibits what his mother calls “something higher than whimsicality [. . .] even something holy,” a frightening caprice marking him as free.

Crime and Punishment, Dostoevsky’s most significant contribution to the gratuitous act story, turns the detective story inside out. Instead of leading readers from corpse to killer, Dostoevsky puts us inside the killer’s head and makes his motivation the puzzle to be solved. Early in the novel, Raskolnikov, a troubled, poverty-stricken student, gets it in his head to kill a nasty old pawnbroker. He breaks into her apartment and murders her, but her unoffending sister comes in and in the heat of the moment he kills her too. The bulk of the novel thereafter follows Raskolnikov as he wrestles with his

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67 Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground, 18-19.
68 Delaney 53.
69 Dostoevsky, Demons., 189. “Нет, это было нечто высшее чудачества и, уверяю вас, нечто даже святое!” The word translated as whimsicality, чудачества, could also be translated by “eccentricity,” “oddness” and “weirdness.”
conscience and tries to evade the scrutiny of a suspicious police inspector. In a sense, Dostoevsky does to Poe what Kierkegaard did to the story of Abraham and Isaac: he amplifies and adds moral psychology. But whereas Johannes de Silentio discovered that he could not understand Abraham, in *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov cannot understand himself.

The novel stages this self-estrangement in myriad ways. Early on, before committing the murder, he experiences bouts of fatalism in which he feels unable to take the reins of his actions: “He walked like a man condemned to death. He was not reasoning about anything, and was totally unable to reason; but he suddenly felt with his whole being that he no longer had any freedom either of mind or of will, and that everything had been suddenly and finally decided.” At other times, he swings wildly to the opposite pole, at one point feeling that he must “do something without fail, at once, quickly. Decide at all costs to do at least something, or . . .” (45). In the first mood he experiences his actions not as something he does, but as something he undergoes, as though he could not do otherwise. In the second he feels the manic urgency to do something, perform some dramatic act, with no clear sense what that might be.

As we read on, it becomes less and less clear what his motivations are: he claims he needs the money for food, but he gives away what little money he has; he claims he wants to use the stolen money to help others, supposedly acting on a utilitarian ethics that justifies killing one to aid many, but he buries everything he stole; he blames his small room and poverty for driving him to distraction; he says he aspired to be an overman who, like Napoleon, would act without concern for established moral norms; and he says

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he wanted to do violence to his relationship to God (recalling Poe’s “longing of the soul to vex itself”). Faced with this overdetermination, Joseph Frank writes, “Raskolnikov himself, as it turns out, discovers that he does not understand why he killed; or rather, he becomes aware that the moral purpose supposedly inspiring him cannot really explain his behavior.” The short-story format allowed Poe to make perversion an ersatz motivation because the genre accommodates psychological simplification, but because perversion is a place-holder for motivelessness, it would not hold up to the sustained treatment of the novel. Dostoevsky’s solution is ingenious: he gives his murderer too many motives.

Raskolnikov’s self-estrangement is matched by his feeling of being on the far side of humanity. The day after committing the murders, he is summoned to appear at the local police precinct because of some outstanding debts. While dealing with that business, an unfamiliar feeling of speechlessness descends on him: “if the room were now suddenly filled not with policemen but with his foremost friends, even then, he thought, he would be unable to find a single human word for them” (CP 103). This sense of alienation possesses him, and later that day, he is surprised to discover he is walking in the street along a route designated for carriages, seemingly no longer aware of even such basic social conventions as the traffic rules. This lapse earns him a lash from an annoyed driver, and a stranger takes pity on him and offers him money. Raskolnikov suspects the woman takes him for a vagrant and he throws the coin in the river, but it’s not wounded class pride that compels him to throw away the money; rather, he cannot bear the minimal act of recognition expressed in her charity. Having murdered two near strangers and thrown himself out of ordinary society, the charity of another stranger threatens to

72 Frank, Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time, 484.
pull him back in. “It seemed to him that at that moment he had cut himself off, as with scissors, from everyone and everything” (CP 115). In throwing away the money, he takes himself out of currency.

The fact that Raskolnikov murders not just the pawnbroker but also her sister picks up a thread from earlier stories in the motiveless murder tradition. Although the novel predisposes us to dislike the pawnbroker, a surly miser detested in her community, the sister (Lizaveta) is a pitiable creature: “She was a tall, awkward, timid, and humble wench of thirty-five, all but an idiot, and was a complete slave to her sister, worked for her day and night, trembled before her, and even suffered her beatings” (CP 61). A reader might think the pawnbroker gets what’s coming to her, but the murder of Lizaveta—a victim who could in no sense be said to have gotten her just deserts and whose murder could not be thought profitable to anybody—drives home the indefensibility of Raskolnikov’s actions. Furthermore, her minimal subjectivity (“all but an idiot”) recalls Coleridge’s albatross and Poe’s black cats.

Why do we keep seeing the killing of these blank or minimal selves? First, as mentioned already, the minimal subjectivity of the victim keeps our attention firmly on the murderer and especially on the gratuitousness of his act. Our sympathy cannot find a foothold in the victim, and the murderer’s act seems all the more inexplicable for it. Second, Lizaveta stands at a midway point in the tradition, between the animal and the stranger. In works by Gide, Sartre, and Camus, the murderers have no prior acquaintance with their victims, so whatever interior life the victims might have, they are for the murderer what I’ve called blank or minimal selves.
2.2.4 Gide

In English departments, modernist French literature gets pared down to a handful of representative names: Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Proust, Breton, Tzara. The forgetting of André Gide stands out as one of the biggest differences between how the English department remembers French literature of the first half of the 20th century and how it was experienced. Despite winning the Nobel Prize in 1947, four years before his death, within a couple decades Gide had started to slip from memory. In 1963 Germaine Brée observed, “Gide’s works are so deeply rooted in a fast-disappearing culture that a whole re-education may be necessary before they again find a large reading public.”\(^{73}\) Her prediction seems to have been borne out, and in the conclusion to Postmodernism (1989), Jameson reflects on how certain “classic” modern authors like Flaubert and Joyce seem endlessly re-interpretable in light of the concerns of the moment, then asks, “What ever happened to Thomas Mann and André Gide?”\(^{74}\) It would be a mistake to press the point too far—Gide, like Mann, has continued to have his readers—but his reputation today has fallen far from where it was in his lifetime. In an appraisal written a year after his death, Wallace Fowlie speculated, “Gide has probably been the most photographed man of letters of our age, and hence of all ages.”\(^{75}\) One critic recently explained, “No other French writer during the interwar period had an influence as strong as Gide’s, to the point that historian Michel Winock calls these the ‘Gide years.’ [. . . ] Anything Gide said was worth its weight in gold. His intellectual reputation, both in France and abroad, increased throughout these years, which led him to behave more and more like a literary

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\(^{73}\) Brée, Gide, 9.

\(^{74}\) Jameson, Postmodernism, 303.

\(^{75}\) Fowlie, “What Was André Gide?,”612.
ambassador.” In short, Gide is emblematic of a strain of modernism that used to be major, but which has become minor.

Call it the immoralist strain, a label that recalls his *The Immoralist* (1902), but also more broadly encompasses how Gide and his contemporaries understood his place in literary culture. In one sense, modernist immoralism is so well known as to be unremarkable: How many authors could be described as courting scandal by challenging Victorian sexual mores? Gide certainly fits this bill, not least because his *Corydon* (1920) was among the earliest published defense of homosexuality. But his immoralism is not confined to sexuality, and he does not see morality as the dregs of a more pious age. The immoralist is still first and foremost a moralist: a writer who voices the confusions of the times and calls on audience to understand themselves and their era more deeply, naming our faults and urging better ways of living.

“Moralist” became Gide’s brand, and T. S. Eliot makes a passing reference to him when he explains what a moralist is within the context of aesthetic modernism. Eliot argues that the moralist differs from the aesthete in one important and subtle way: whereas the aesthete is an appreciator of the beautiful, the moralist treats life “in the spirit of art” by intensifying one’s appreciation for the passing moments. The idea that life’s moments call for intensification is captured by the slogan “art for art’s sake,” which Eliot, somewhat surprisingly, claims “is itself a theory of ethics.” Even though he objects to this theory and finds Gide’s moralizing “suspect or perverse,” he grants that Gide is a moralist insofar as he meets this requirement. The moralist has something to say about how we live our lives, even if he does not offer dogma. For this reason, in addition to the

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76 Biron, Michel. “André Gide and the Art of Evasion,” 117.
aesthete, another of the moralists’ foils is the teacher. Walter Benjamin said as much when he wrote that Gide “is the latest Frenchman in the tradition of Pascal. In the line of French moralists that runs through La Bruyère, La Rouchefoucauld, and Vauvenargues, none is more like him than Pascal [. . . .] This places Gide alongside Pascal in the ranks of the great French educators.”78 The notion of the moralist as educator is particularly apt in the case of Gide, who became famous in middle age by “making himself the spokesman of rebellious youth, exploited Africans, the ‘proletariat,’ the victims of Soviet Communism and Nazism [. . . .] Like Socrates, Gide was a ‘corrupter of youth’.”79 He is an immoralist in the sense that he thinks settled morality is no longer up to the challenge of modernity and needs rethinking.

Gide does not preach an inverted morality; instead, he struggles against superficial morality. This tendency shows in his lectures on Dostoevsky, which tell us as much about Gide as about the Russian novelist. We “readily acquire the habit of seeing the world, not so much as it actually is, but as we have been told and persuaded it is,” he writes. In diagnosing us with habit-induced reality blindness, Gide is consonant with Viktor Shklovsky’s idea of defamiliarization, which the latter justifies by claiming that in daily life, “the automatism of perception” numbs us to the specific, vivid panoply of things.80 But Gide takes a similar insight in the moral direction and claims that desensitizing perception applies to our understanding of ourselves and other people.81 In Dostoevsky, Gide finds characters who, “without any thought for consistency, yield with facility to every contradiction and negation of which their peculiar constitution is

78 Benjamin, “Conversation with André Gide,” 96.
80 Shklovsky. “Art as Technique,” 13.
The way Raskolnikov or the Underground Man can in the blink of an eye move from hatred to love, humility to arrogance, spite to benevolence attests to their credibility. Gide finds these characters refreshingly, if pathologically, in touch with their impulses such that they “rebel against the psychology and the ethics of the common herd” (109). They are admirable not because they exhibit the higher ethics and psychology of the superior individual, but because they do not succumb to the shallow mores of bourgeois society. They are not supermen, by neither are they hollow men.

Gide’s delight in Dostoevsky’s inconsistency represents a further development of the spirit of perversity. Poe and Dostoevsky cast perversity as sudden and fleeting, a momentary break with ordinary reason. In Gide, perversity is both magma and lava, an abiding condition hidden below daily life that can erupt when circumstances are right. “Do you know what is needful to turn an honest man into a rogue?,’” asks one character in Les Caves du Vatican, “A change of scene—a moment’s forgetfulness suffices. Yes, sir, a gap in the memory and sincerity comes out into the open!”

We are constitutively inconstant creatures, but we wear consistency like a mask, so to be sincere in Gide’s sense would be to give free rein to our impulses, whether they be benevolent or malicious. Like his contemporary Sigmund Freud, Gide saw the self as a battleground of competing forces.

Gide’s immoralism was an assault on established moral norms rather than a positively constructed doctrine. While he distrusted external, institutionalized moral...
authority, his chaotic view of the self gave his attempts to find a “personal, inner-based integrity” a tentative, speculative character.\textsuperscript{84} The gratuitous act is emblematic of this conjectural quality and appears almost as a thought experiment. Gide first flirted with the idea in a short piece called \textit{Le Prométhée mal enchaîné} (1892), translated as \textit{Prometheus Illbound} (1919). In this short absurd tale, a waiter tells the title character that he is an enthusiast for personality, which in his café is called “idiosyncrasy” [\textit{idiosyncrasie}]. He enjoys seeing how people reveal themselves in their interactions with others, and he stages everyday dramas designed to draw out personality by seating three strangers at a table and facilitating their conversation such that he gradually learns about the inner men.

His reason for doing so is simple. “It pleases me to create relationships.... Oh! not for me!... It is what one could call an absolutely gratuitous act.”\textsuperscript{85} He has nothing to gain in terms of social connections or wealth; he is an appreciator of life. The waiter elaborates on his theory of the gratuitous act: “I thought for a long time that this was the one thing that distinguished man from the animals—a gratuitous act. I called man an animal capable of a gratuitous act;—and then afterwards I thought the contrary; that man is the only being incapable of acting gratuitously;—gratuitously! just think; without reason—yes, I hear—shall we say without motive; incapable!” (18). Like Poe before him, the waiter at first believes that the ability to act without motivation is proof of human freedom, but he soon realizes it is just the opposite. Enslaved by reason, man has forgotten how to hear the tom-toms of spontaneous animal impulse. Driven constantly to

\textsuperscript{84} Sheridan, \textit{André Gide: A Life in the Present}, 160.
make sense of himself, he cannot except by indirect means exercise his will to power. The thought experiment breaks off here and the conversation moves to other matters.

The gratuitous act takes center stage in *Les Caves du Vatican*, a convoluted *sotie* (farce) in five books. In the central plot, con artists defraud devout Catholics by convincing them a false Pope sits in Rome and raising funds for the true one’s ransom. The multiple intersecting plots of the work converge on two motifs: the unreliability of reason and the illusory nature of personal autonomy. In Book I, a scientist, Anthime Armand-Dubois, conducts horrific experiments on rats to reduce all their behavior to *tropismes*, stimuli and response. The narrator ironically characterizes his method as “wringing from the helpless animal the acknowledgement of its own simplicity” (LA 14). A committed atheist who never misses an opportunity to disparage Catholic doctrine, Anthime has an insufferable habit of insulting every Christian he meets, including his wife and adolescent niece. But one night, he has a beatific dream in which he hears knocking at a previously unseen bedroom door. It opens to reveal a talking statue of the Holy Virgin, and he converts on the spot. It turns out that this free-thinking man of science was just as lost in his own house as his lab rats were in their mazes.

In another plot, a pampered, successful bourgeois novelist suffers the first setback of his life when his latest novel is not well received. Julius de Baraglioil eventually realizes that his characters are boring because of “their excessive logic, and at the same time their insufficient definition” (LA 193). But before he comes to this realization, he meets a mysterious young man who turns out to be his illegitimate half-brother, Lafcadio.

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86 Gide admired Nietzsche, so much so that according to Walter Benjamin, Gide claimed that “influence” was too weak a word to describe his debt: “Nietzsche […] created a royal road where I could only have beaten a narrow path. He did not ‘influence’ me; he helped me.” See Benjamin, “André Gide and Germany,” 81.
Wluiki, the same young man who will commit the novel’s gratuitous murder. Lafcadio prides himself on his idiosyncratic notion of freedom, and in one of his first meetings with the novelist brother, he declares, “I am a creature of inconsequence.” (“je suis un être d’inconséquence”) (LA 98). Not to be confused with inconsequential and its association with triviality, inconsequence denotes both a lack of logic and coherence as well as thoughtlessness, even recklessness. The novelist, who at this point has not yet figured out why his latest book was so boring, initially rejects this characterization, but he is unable to finish his thought: “there is no such thing as inconsequence—in psychology any more than in physics,’ he began. ‘You are a being in process of formation and. . .’ Repeated knocks at the door interrupted him” (LA 98). For the novelist, as for the scientist before him, knocking at the door signals the limit of ordinary reason and the transition to a less rational worldview.

When we next see Julius a hundred pages later, he has become obsessed with the idea of writing a new kind of novel in which the central character will perform inexplicable acts, good and bad, as a testament to his superior nature: “A contempt for what may serve,” he explains, “is no doubt the stamp of a certain aristocracy of nature” (LA 198).87 Julius, who “had rarely derogated from the customs of his class and [. . .] had very few dealings except with persons of his own milieu” is bourgeois to the bone, so his fantasy about a character with an aristocratic nature is loaded with meaning. Franco Moretti writes that for the bourgeoisie, usefulness is prized to such an extent that a thing’s being useful is more important than whatever ends it purportedly serves: “in the kingdom of the useful, nothing is an end in itself—but always and only a means to do

87 “Certainement le mépris de ce qui peut servir, reprit-il, est signe d’une certaine aristocratie de l’âme.”
Julius’s fantasy of a character who rejects instrumental action is a symbolic rebellion against his bourgeois worldview and society, and it is “aristocratic” in the sense in which Nietzsche construes the “noble soul,” as a self-possessed person who acts on his will-to-power directly, without deigning to justify himself. A character who acts out his whims without fear that they might strike others as inexplicable or out-of-character has a more robust relationship to his own vitality, and he treats each of his actions as ends in themselves, which is to say he treats his life as (modernist) art.

Little does Julius know that his half-brother Lafcadio is such a man, and when Julius concocts the plan to write a new kind of novel in which his hero kills without motive, he is unaware that Lafcadio has already done just that. (Gide was famous for his *mise en abyme* plots, which is another reason it is so striking that he was not more important to literary post-modernism.) Lafcadio, “who prized above all things the free possession of his soul,” commits himself to living a life of spontaneous, unreflective action, but this ideal proves impossible in practice. “More than all, he hated indecision, and for ten years he had kept on him, like a fetish, one of a pair of cribbage dice,” which he throws when faced with a situation that calls for a tough decision (LA 219). The forethought required to carry dice in anticipation of occasions to be spontaneous exposes the ridiculousness of his ideal, which is compounded by the fact that he ignores the throw when the result does not suit him. Late in the novel, the futility of Lafcadio’s commitment to inconsequence is laid bare when his old school friend, a master grifter named Protos, reveals that he has actually planned several of the actions that Lafcadio performed. Once again, a character who prizes his autonomy is shown to have been

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nothing but the unwitting pawn in another’s plot (LA 257). And if we thought we were done with the twists and turns there, the novel has one final reversal in store—Protos himself gets charged with the murder Lafcadio committed, driving home the point that nobody in this face is really in control.

Lafcadio’s attempt to make himself a being of inconsequence is ultimately shown to be self-defeating. He is not someone whose actions cannot be explained by mere humans; rather, like Raskolnikov, he is someone who strives to make himself a stranger to humanity. The novel clues us to this distinction early on when Julius, snooping in Lafcadio’s room, finds a diary in which one entry bears the promising title (in Italian) “Here Begins the Book of the New Requirements and of Supreme Virtue.” Instead of a new list of moral principles, there follows a mysterious handful of entries like, “For having shown that I spoke Italian . . . . . . . 3 punte” and “For having had the last word . . . . . . . 1 p.” (LA 60). A few pages later, the reader learns that this odd ledger is a book of self-punishments when Lafcadio adds a new entry about having let Julius catch sight of his diary and charges himself three punte, quite literally points: self-inflicted stabs in the thigh with a long needle-like dagger. This scene is just one of many in which Lafcadio exercises enormous self-discipline to harden his heart against any feeling of fellowship with others. Later he saves children from a burning house, justifying the act not on humanitarian grounds but as good sport, and he gets angry when onlookers applaud him. Lafcadio imagines himself an Übermensch who acts on his whims without giving a thought to how others might regard him, but the reader can see that he is obsessed with the image he presents to others.
The gratuitous act is meant to be Lafcadio’s proof to himself that he stands apart from ordinary humanity, and to sustain this fantasy, his murder victim must be a stranger for two reasons. First, Lafcadio must be able to picture his victim as representing all of humanity. Turning to Cavell’s discussion of the stranger in *The Claim of Reason* clarifies the relationship between the single stranger and the fantasy of a generic human.

Epistemologists sometimes speak of “the problem of other minds” which holds that I can know what’s in my mind, but I can’t based on your words and movements be certain about what’s in yours, or even if you have any mind at all. Is the ache I feel in a bad tooth the same as what you experience? How do I know others have an interior life and are not guided by the tropisms Anthime Armand-Dubois sought in his lab rats prior to his miraculous conversion? Cavell finds these questions troubling because to ask them, a person must mute their ethical responsiveness to others. It would be truly harrowing if a philosopher’s child were writhing in agony and the philosopher took the scene as an occasion to ponder the relationship between observable behavior and possible inner states. Of course, Cavell is well aware that for the most part epistemologists do not live out this aspect of their philosophy. They get around this problem by imagining not their loved ones, but a nondescript somebody—a stranger who, for the purpose of the philosophical exercise, is meant to be unremarkable. “There was nothing *special* about this other that led the skeptic to single him out [. . . .] So if something is special about the one singled out, it must consist in the very way in which there is nothing special about him; in the fact, that is, to say that he is a stranger”.

becomes the guarantee of mere humanity, which is to say an other to whom I (that is, the skeptic) has a minimal ethical relationship.

Lafcadio is no philosopher, but he takes the same basic ethical position as the skeptic of other minds. Before he pushes the man from the train to his death, he entertains grandiose thoughts about the common herd of humanity (“Human life! What a paltry thing!”) and daydreams about going off to Borneo to see if there is not some “anthropopithèque attardé,” or belated Anthropopithecus, a term for the now discredited idea of the so-called missing link between human and ape (that is, human and animal) (LA 208, 208). It is significant that he never entertains the idea of killing someone whom he knows. Imagining an escape from humanity requires him to take the posture of one who looks down on humanity from afar, denying his own (generic) humanity. For his gratuitous act to certify his extra-humanity, the victim must be merely, generically human. Were he to kill someone he knows, his motives would get messy, corrupted by feelings, and making him the master not of humanity in general but of just the one he killed.

This last point takes me to the second reason the victim must be a stranger. Murder is transitive: it is an action that takes an object (a victim). I have mentioned that in the history of the gratuitous act, the focus shifts from the victim to the murderer. Until now, this de-emphasizing of the victim was carried out by focusing on a victim with animalized or stunted subjectivity, but with Gide, the act acquires its aesthetic—which is to say, aestheticist—character. The gratuitous act strives to minimize the object so that the act may appear as an end, and having the victim be a stranger facilitates this

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91 Dorothy Bussy translated the term with her own coinage, “anthropopithex.”
minimization. This is why when Julius and Lafcadio imagine the person capable of such an act, Julius makes the surprising declaration, “There is no reason that a man who commits a crime without a reason should be considered a criminal” (LA 229). The criminological discourse of the time, reflected especially in Zola’s miserable perpetrators, characterized the criminal as a personal type resulting from biological degeneracy or economic hardship, such that crime was figured less as an act of will than as the fulfillment of a destiny. But the gratuitous murderer performs his action . . . and that is all. There is no inbred criminal temperament, no lingering on the satisfaction of revenge or punishment, no morbid contemplation of the corpse. Having the victim be a stranger, and having his corpse disappear as quickly and bloodlessly as possible, is necessary to keep the focus on the act of murder.

Even though the gratuitous act is about the act more than the victim, it needs the irrevocability of death so as not to become an act like any other. In their first meeting, Lafcadio and Julius discuss literature, and Lafcadio is uninterested in the whole endeavor. The implication is that he finds art a pale substitute for life itself. When the conversation moves to composition, Lafcadio is more strident. “Do you know what it is I dislike about writing?—All the scratchings out and touchings up that are necessary” (LA 86). Writing in this view is too labored and self-reflexive to satisfy a would-be man of impulse like Lafcadio, and he prefers a more spontaneous, direct mode of imposing himself on the world. Here we see an update of the murder-as-event theme. In its irreversibility, murder holds the promise of being an enduring proof that Lafcadio has done something, that he

92 See Levay, Violent Minds, pp 5-11.
has committed his freedom. This relationship between freedom, irrevocability, and commitment is only hinted at by Gide. A fuller treatment of it is provided by Sartre.

2.2.5 Sartre

“Erostratus,” from Sartre’s 1939 collection The Wall, borrows its title from the name of the fourth-century BCE arsonist who burned the Temple of Artemis to the ground in a bid for fame. “[H]e didn’t figure things out too badly,” thinks the narrator, considering the arsonist’s name is known millennia later while that of the Temple’s builder has been forgotten. Paul Hilbert is an Underground Man-type who, seething with an inexplicable sense of injury, gets it in his head to murder six strangers, one for each bullet in his revolver. He savors the plan and prematurely boasts about it in letters to famous authors. When it is time to put his idea into practice, Hilbert panics and kills just one stranger before hiding in a lavatory. He resolves to shoot himself, but again he loses his nerve, and the story ends with his surrender. Hilbert, in his habit of nourishing himself on regurgitated resentments, makes manifest the fraudulence of the ambition to aggrandize oneself by destroying others. We see right through him.

Early in his career, Sartre was drawn to the figure of the “solitary man” (l’homme seul), a self-sufficient figure who enjoys his solitude and preserves himself from the stultifications of the crowd. Paul Hilbert imagines himself to be such a figure, but actually, he is just isolated from others and pits himself against them in revenge. From his seventh-floor balcony, he looks down on people with contempt: “I knew they were my

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93 Sartre, “Erostratus,” 47. Hereafter cited parenthetically as E.
94 The inspiration for this narrator was Marc Zuorro, a friend of Sartre and Beauvoir’s who in a period of distress had taken to carrying around a revolver. He would also inspire the character Daniel in Sartre’s Roads to Freedom trilogy. See Beauvoir, Prime of Life, 284; Rowley, Tête-à-Tête 67, 360n50.
95 Flynn, Sartre: A Philosophical Biography, 41-6.
enemies but they didn’t know” (E 41). He feels contaminated by the mere existence of others and seeks to cut himself off from them completely. “Even the tools I used I felt belonged to them; words, for example: I wanted my own words,” he rants (E 49). Cavell shows that the fantasy of a private language, a language belonging to me alone, is really a “fantasy of inexpressiveness.” Why would anyone want to be inexpressive? Would it not be a burden to be condemned like Cassandra to the impossibility of explaining myself? In fact, Cavell says, speaking a language nobody else understands could come as a relief. I would not need to struggle to make myself known to others, since they wouldn’t understand anyway. But by the same token, I would dodge my own responsibility to understand myself because I would bypass the effort of finding the right words to explain myself. In effect, the wish for a private language is a wish not only to secure myself in my isolation from other people, but also a wish to hide from myself. 96 Hilbert’s longing for words that he would not need to share with others is a testament to his obstinate refusal to examine himself.

The repugnance for humanity that is only faintly visible in Cavell’s discussion is plain to see in “Erostratus.” Hilbert delights in humiliation, at one point hiring a prostitute and ordering her to strip naked and perform calisthenics at gunpoint while he ridicules her. Leaving the shaken and baffled woman, he chuckles to himself, “That’s what I want. To surprise them all” (E 45). Hilbert is moved by the decadent impulse, already seen in Gide, to jolt people out of their automatism. A similar theme runs throughout Sartre’s novel Nausea. The hero Roquentin looks down at the town of Bouville from afar. The townspeople “feel at home. All they have ever seen is trained water running from taps, 96 Cavell, The Claim of Reason, 351-2.
light which fills bulbs when you turn on the switch, half-breed, bastard trees held up with crutches. They have proof, a hundred times a day, that everything happens mechanically, that the world obeys fixed, unchangeable laws [. . .] what they take for constancy is only habit and it can change tomorrow.”97 By the time Sartre came on the scene, there was already a decades-long tradition of complaining that bourgeois respectability sedated people and reduced their vitality to a state of machine-like automaticity, but often this diagnosis went hand in hand with a treatment: shock the bourgeoisie out of their stupor. But when Hilbert imagines surprising everyone, he does not pretend it is for their own good. For him, killing is a bid for infamy. He thinks that by killing strangers, he will make his mark on the world and exalt himself.

A detour through Sartre’s idea of freedom illuminates the attraction of making one’s mark, and the ways it can go wrong. In the 1940s, Sartre formulated the concept of committed freedom. It is tempting to think of individual freedom as exemption from restraint, being unbound by rules and the claims of others, but Sartre rejects this vision. Mathieu, the main character of The Age of Reason (1945) initially subscribes to this idea of freedom. An intellectual who prides himself on his detachment, Mathieu recognizes “no allegiance except to myself.”98 He likes to keep his options open and avoid any commitment (fatherhood, marriage, political membership), but over the course of the novel, this abstract, uninvested freedom comes to feel pointless: “My freedom? It’s a burden to me; for years past I have been free, and to no purpose. I simply long to exchange it for a good sound certainty” (AR 157). He has the dawning realization that freedom is only valuable when committed to a project but at this point, he still wants to

97 Sartre, Nausea, 158.
98 Sartre, The Age of Reason, 17. Hereafter cited parenthetically as AR.
bet on a sure thing. He is holding himself in reserve even if the cracks are starting to show in this abstract ideal of freedom. Mathieu sees freedom as work in the sense Hannah Arendt gives the term in *The Human Condition*. Oriented toward fabricating something that will endure after the effort put into it, work is a process that for the most part evinces the “good sound certainty” that Mathieu hangs his hopes on: “To have a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end is the mark of fabrication.” In other words, the idea of committing one’s freedom on condition that it pays predictable dividends is a reification of freedom.

By the end of the novel, Mathieu sees the problem with this conditional commitment mentality. He has gotten his girlfriend Marcelle pregnant, and given the taboos surrounding unmarried mothers, his gay friend Daniel urges him to marry her. He does not and instead arranges an abortion despite Marcelle’s misgivings as well as the medical and legal jeopardy she faces (France still guillotined abortionists as late as 1943). At any rate, Marcelle does not want to lose the child and when she decides against an abortion, Mathieu breaks up with her. As the novel closes, Daniel himself reveals that he will marry Marcelle so that she can have her child without shame. Mathieu is rocked by the news, and his reflection on the significance of Daniel’s decision articulates the concept of committed freedom: “He has acted,” Mathieu thinks, “and now he can’t go back; it must seem strange to him to feel behind him an unknown act which he has already almost ceased to understand for which will turn his life upside down. All I do, I do for nothing. It might be said that I am robbed of the consequences of my acts; everything happens as though I could always play my strokes again. I don’t know what I

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would give to do something irrevocable” (AR 395). Daniel has made a choice that will alter the course of his life in ways he cannot foresee, but this burden enriches his freedom. Mathieu, in holding back from any big decisions, learns that he preserved his freedom for nothing. Genuine freedom entails rolling the dice, putting oneself into the hard work of undertaking a project without knowing what the results will be.

The idea that freedom flourishes when constrained is one of Sartre’s great insights. It informs the opening of his essay “The Republic of Silence,” published just after the Liberation of France. “Never were we freer than under German Occupation,” Sartre declares, because under this oppressive regime, “every one of our acts was a solemn commitment.” In Being and Nothingness, he uses the phrase “coefficient of adversity” to name this idea that freedom grows not in the absence of an obstacle but in tandem with it. When I lift a cup to my mouth, I don’t directly feel my effort, my lift. I feel the heft of the cup. Or rather, I feel my effort in the cup’s resistance to being lifted (BN 435; EN 364). Sartre extends this mundane example to any project and argues that resistance is not just a stumbling block to be overcome; it is an essential element of engaged freedom. Committed freedom reconciles effort and resistance, revealing resistance to be a necessary condition of freedom.

Committed freedom could also be called situated freedom in the sense that situation entails a synthesis of the subjective and objective. The highest expression of this freedom is (as Mathieu realizes when reflecting on Daniel’s decision) the irrevocable act. Such an act “comes in Sartre to define the heroic, the freely chosen act, one that marks your forever and from which there is no turning back: the act one drags about with one

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101 Sartre borrows the phrase “coefficient of adversity” from Gaston Bachelard’s L’Eau et les Rêves.
like a ball and chain.” Matthieu longs to do something irrevocable because such an act will, in effect, prove he has acted, remaking both the world and himself in its accomplishment. Reading “Erostratus” in the light of Sartre’s theory of committed freedom shows that while the irrevocable act can stand as a token of genuine commitment, it is not guaranteed to do so. It is prey to the same temptations to irresponsibility as any other act, and “Erostratus” is a story about what I might call false irrevocability—not because the action can be taken back after all, but because the mere fact of it not being able to be revoked can be hollow.

Once the idea of killing strangers takes root, Paul Hilbert begins to see himself as fated to carry it out. “I still hadn’t decided anything. But I did everything just as though my power of decision had stopped” (E 46). Like Raskolnikov in his more subdued moods, Hilbert relates to his decisions as events that befall him rather than actions he undertakes. He also starts to imagine his action from the third-person point of view. The wish for notoriety is a wish to mark history and impress himself on the world of others, but he does not imagine himself as participating in that world. While at this point he has not yet resolved to kill himself after his murder spree, he has a recurring dream in which he is an anarchist in the lead up to the Russian Revolution: “I had put myself in the path of the Tsar and I carried an infernal machine on me. At the appointed hour, the cortège passed, and the bomb exploded and we were thrown into the air, myself, the Tsar, and the three gold-braided officers, before the eyes of the crowd” (E 47). Destroying himself along with the Tsar would be one way of bestowing importance on his life by leveling the field between Hilbert the nobody and an illustrious somebody. But imagining the

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perspective of the crowd gives Hilbert distance from the scene. Like Tom Sawyer watching his own funeral, he envisions his destruction from the unengaged perspective of the bystander.

His self-estrangement is on display throughout the story. He third-persons himself even further when he writes a long letter to 102 famous “humanist” authors in which he explains his loathing for humanity and announces his plans to murder, ending the letter by telling his addressees to read tomorrow’s papers: “There you will see that an individual named Paul Hilbert has killed, in a moment of fury, six passers-by on the Boulevard Edgar-Quintet. You know better than anyone the value of newspaper prose. You understand then that I am not ‘furious.’ I am, on the contrary, quite calm” (E 49).

Pre-emptively protesting that he is calm shows how much it matters to Hilbert that people see him as a methodical actor who is in control of his decisions, not a maniac seized by a sudden frenzy. He wishes to show he is a hyperagent whose resolve and self-possession alone authorize his deed. The fact that Hilbert ultimately botches his plan shows he is not nearly as resolved as he thinks, but the more important lesson of the story is that resolve alone is not the proof of self-determination that Hilbert imagines it to be. He is entirely lost in the crowd he so despises. He tries desperately to persuade himself that his attunement to the higher values of the solitary individual accounts for his isolation, but his project depends on the anticipated horror of others.

A final instance of the way his estrangement is masked as supreme self-possession comes by way of an allusion to the Papin sisters, two housemaids who viciously murdered their mistress and her daughter in 1933. The crime and trial were a

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103 I take the term hyperagent from Pippin, “Philosophical Film: Trapped by Oneself in Jacques Tourneur’s Out of the Past,” 530.
sensation in France, and the event inspired dozens of essays and literary treatments, most famously Jean Genet’s play Les Bonnes (The Maids, 1947). Among the features that gripped the public’s interest was the stark contrast between the pre-murder and post-murder photographs of the two women. In the “before” picture, they appear as well-dressed, groomed, respectable young women, but in the “after” photo, they are considerably gloomier, their features made heavy by the shadowy lighting, their simple clothes and un-styled hair giving them a coarse appearance. Hilbert is fascinated by the change. If an unplanned crime can overhaul these simple maids, what metamorphosis can a great premeditator such as himself expect? “It would possess me, overturning my all-too-human ugliness... a crime, cutting the life of him who commits it in two” (E 50). Hilbert imagines the upshot of his crime will be a version of self-annihilation, making who he is now just a memory for the man he will become. He is dabbling in spiritual alchemy, wishing to transform himself into gold by processes he does not understand. He does not imagine a future for himself, in other words. The future he imagines will be for another person who will once have been him.

Murder for Hilbert is an act of pseudo-appropriation and reveals him to be alienated in the sense explained by Rahel Jaeggi. When Beauvoir and Sartre discuss alienation, they emphasize alienation by an other whose foreign gaze objectifies me, compelling me to regard myself as an other. By contrast, Jaeggi emphasizes the way a person can be alienated all by herself. A “relation of relationlessness,” alienation as Jaeggi explains it names a disconnect from the world—not discovering my absence in the world, but rather discovering a quality of relationship characterized by a sense of lack. One remains in the world and society but discovers one cannot formulate projects that
would establish one’s place in the world. In other words, alienation names a failure to appropriate one’s self and the world. Action seems pointless, ineffectual, or motivated by forces I cannot identify with, even nobody but me is the source of those forces.

Jaeggi outlines several contemporary manifestations of alienation: an offbeat academic who marries and moves to the suburbs only to get the creeping feeling he is sleepwalking through life, an ambitious junior editor who is a little too keen to adopt the industry look and lingo, a self-professed feminist who is dismayed to realize she lapses into giggling girlishness around men. Such figures seem, to themselves or others, not in control of themselves. They are moved by forces that are neither wholly alien (a suffocating family, a despotic social order) nor their own. What could explain this incongruity? Jaeggi advances an “appropriative” model of selfhood and argues that alienation is “an impeded appropriation of world and self.” The unalienated person accesses herself through her projects in the world in a process of productive appropriation; conversely, “self-alienation is also alienation from the world, and [. . .] alienation from the world is self-alienation” (152). Human being is human doing, and overcoming alienation requires repairing the conditions of appropriation.

“Erostratus” shows how alienation can disguise itself as its opposite, as a gesture of appropriation. Personifications of alienation since the mid-20th century tend to emphasize sclerosis and automatism: the housewife who relies on wine or pills to numb herself to life’s emptiness, the middle-aged husband sequestered in the basement with his model trains or video games, the careerist who throws himself into a pointless job. The cure for these types is a dramatic shake up: throw off the shackles of routine and seize the

104 Jaeggi, Alienation, 151. Hereafter abbreviated parenthetically.
day. Hilbert imagines murder will similarly intensify life. When he anticipates shooting strangers, he expects the act will “give the passing moment considerable force and beauty,” mark the world, and remake himself (E 47). For Gide’s Lafcadio, murder is expressive: of his “inconsequence,” of his more-than-human, disinterested will to power. For Sartre’s Hilbert, murder is appropriative, an attempt to find himself in the world by remaking it through his violence.

2.2.6 Camus

In the first part of Camus’s *The Stranger*, the protagonist, Meursault, murders an Arab man in colonial Algeria. The second part details his trial and ends with him being sentenced to the guillotine, a fate that by the final paragraphs of the novel he welcomes. *The Stranger* is the culmination of the gratuitous act tradition in that it lays bare the elements that have been slowly emerging: living beyond ordinary morality, murder as an event, and the minimal regard for the victim that keeps the focus on the perpetrator. But in making these elements plain to see, *The Stranger* also makes them available to criticism.

In the fiction discussed so far, motivelessness was a desire or ideal, not a fait accompli. With Poe, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Gide, and Sartre, there is no motivelessness per se. Rather, motivelessness ended up being an alibi for a hidden motive, one that is poorly articulated, but the broad strokes of which were visible to the reader—a perverse exercise of liberty, an expression of a superhuman subjectivity, a testament to an ethics beyond normal ethics, a mask for ressentiment. The characters register a dissatisfaction with received morality and a confusion about themselves, but they nevertheless wrestle with what Taylor calls “strong evaluations”: an understanding
of who one is in terms of values one feels “one ought to be true to, can fail to uphold, can surrender when one ought to.” The Stranger dispenses with the struggle. Meursault is reminiscent of Poe’s narrators in that he cannot account for his crimes, but unlike them, no storms of passion move him to act, and he is not racked with remorse. Unlike Raskolnikov, who swings wildly between rage and benevolence, Meursault wobbles between annoyance and polite agreeability. Gide’s Lafcadio and Sartre’s Hilbert try—and fail—to will themselves into motivelessness, a testimony to their superhumanity, but Meursault is the real deal. He says in the trial that he killed because of the sun, but he seems unsure what that means. He truly lacks motivations to kill. For other characters on this list, murder is the act by which they cast themselves from the garden of humanity. But Meursault kills so easily because, in some sense, he’s already on the other side of humanity.

Meursault’s inhumanity is the subject of insightful criticism from Camus’s contemporaries. Sartre writes, “The Stranger must put us, from the outset, into a ‘state of unease at man’s inhumanity’.” The internal quotation is borrowed from Camus’s The Myth of Sisyphus, and Sartre inaugurates a tradition of reading the novel in terms of the essay. He attributes Meursault’s uneasy humanity to Camus’s use of the “the American technique” of Hemingway. This technique atomizes sentences and actions alike: “Every sentence is like a snapshot of an action or an object. Each new action and each new object has its corresponding new sentence” (169). Camus’s analytic parceling out of reality into discrete instances, Sartre argues, disrupts the flow of time and makes each sentence a

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105 Taylor, Sources of the Self, 30.
107 Having published The Myth of Sisyphus only months before The Outsider, Camus invites this sort of co-reading; nevertheless, using the essay as a key to the novel strains Camus’s condemnation of the “thesis novel” (roman-thèse) in the essay.
present moment. Because each sentence is narrated by Meursault himself, the effect is to create a character who is eerily absorbed in each passing moment, lacking memory and anticipation, oblivious to the extension of actions and attachments across past and future. Maurice Blanchot notes that while the first-person voice is typically used for “confession, interior monologues, interminable descriptions from within,” Meursault speaks only about his most immediate actions, moods, and sensations, making him “stranger than if he had said nothing.”\(^\text{108}\) The result is a novel that “causes the notion of subject to disappear” (217). Wyndham Lewis makes a similar point much more harshly when he describes Meursault as one of “Camus’s moronic little sleepwalking killers” and classifies *The Stranger* as a “moron-as-hero” novel.\(^\text{109}\)

I would not go so far as to call Meursault a moron, but other ways I am tempted to describe him, such as listless or indifferent—strike me as too mild. To say he’s listless would make it sound like he is in a funk, as though he once had desires and might again, but for now he does not. Meursault’s condition is deeper. As Sartre correctly observed, he is incapable of comprehending continuous experiences, such as love. When his girlfriend asks if he loves her, Meursault says that “it didn’t mean anything but that I didn’t think so.”\(^\text{110}\) He can understand enduring relationships and lifestyles only as habituation. When he first checked his mother into a nursing home, she cried, but he muses that if he had tried to remove her later, she would have cried more: “She was used to it” (S 5). He declines his boss’s offer to work in a new Paris office on the grounds that “one life was as good as another and that I wasn’t dissatisfied with mine here at all” (S 41). Later in the


\(^{109}\) Lewis, *The Writer and the Absolute*, 133, 70.

\(^{110}\) Camus, *The Stranger*, 35. Hereafter cited parenthetically as S.
novel, after being jailed for murder, he finds himself acclimating to prison life. “I often thought that if I had had to live in the trunk of a dead tree, with nothing to do but look up at the sky flowering overhead, little by little I would have gotten used to it [. . . ] after a while you could get used to anything (S 77). Meursault is not devoid of preferences. He takes pleasure in the sun and the sea, for instance, but it seems to me mistaken to describe such inclinations as “commitments,” as one critic recently argued.\footnote{Webber, \textit{Rethinking Existentialism}, 31.} He does not throw himself into such pleasures with hedonistic dedication so much as he alights on them with minimal purposiveness.

This aimlessness explains why murdering the Arab is not for Meursault an event in the sense of a Kierkegaardian $\ddot{O}$ieblick, an eruption of the eternal into the temporal. In fact, the novel baits the reader by making the killing the critical event that separates parts 1 and 2, inviting us to see it as the turning point at which everything changes. But the change is only in Meursault’s fortune—it does not occasion or result from a spiritual conversion. In the lead up to the killing, Meursault and his companions take a day trip to the beach, and while strolling they encounter two Arabs that have it out for his friend, Raymond, on account of some trouble he had with one of their sisters. A fight breaks out (Meursault does not take part), but it quickly ends, and the two parties go their separate ways. A little while later, Raymond and Meursault see the two Arab men again, and Meursault tells Raymond to hand his gun over and fight his man one on one. While holding the gun, Meursault “realized that you could either shoot or not shoot” (S 56). Again the two groups part ways, but later Meursault, still in possession of the gun, goes back to the spot and encounters the man who Raymond fought. With his head pounding
and the sun almost blinding him, he shoots the man once, pauses, then shoots four more times.

His realization that one could shoot or not shoot is a pseudo-epiphany. It has the formal structure of a momentous decision that condenses the boundlessness of the world into exactly two options, but Meursault experiences the choice as nothing more than what Roland Barthes in his narrative theory calls a “cardinal function.” If in a story a phone rings, two paths are opened for the ensuing narrative: the phone is answered or it is not.\textsuperscript{112} By the same toke, Meursault’s realization that he can shoot or not is an empty one. He experiences the realization as nothing more than a fork in the road, requiring merely a choice, without regard to the meaning of his decision. Meursault’s tension-loaded description of the lead up to the shooting—the throbbing sun, the glint of light off the Arab’s knife, the sea carrying up “a thick fiery breath” and “the sky split[ting] from one end to the other to rain down fire”—prepares the reader for the manifestation of an otherworldly \textit{something} that would change Meursault irrevocably (S 59).

But when we move to Part II, it becomes clear that the only obvious change that has befallen Meursault is his situation. The magistrate tells Meursault that he will be provided a lawyer, and Meursault observes with his characteristic casual interest that “it was very convenient that the court should take care of those details” (S 63). The resumption of mundane reportage in part II shows that Meursault’s act of murder was spiritually insignificant, and any remaining doubt that the bright sun and the sea’s fiery breath was an epiphanic red herring is removed at the end of the first chapter of Part II. The judge asks Meursault if he is sorry for what he had done, and after a moment’s

\footnote{Barthes, “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” 248.}
reflection, Meursault responds that “more than sorry I felt kind of bored” (*plutôt regret véritable, j’éprouvais un certain ennui*) (S 70).\(^{113}\) Carl Viggiani argues that Part II shows an uptick in references to time, attesting to Meursault’s transformation from “a purely sentient consciousness into a man who begins to reflect upon himself and his relations with men.”\(^{114}\) However it seems to me that these alterations are minute at best and that the only substantial change in Meursault’s character comes in the novel’s final paragraphs. Following an angry outburst at the prison chaplain, Meursault articulates the vision of life that he had been living all along—“Nothing, nothing mattered,” and this formulation has the force of a conversion insofar as it lets him welcome the angry jeers he hopes to face as he’s led to the scaffold (S 122-3).

This deathbed conversion, as it were, underscores the insignificance of the victim of Meursault’s murder and invites readers to see how obscene it is to treat murder as meaningful only insofar as it affects the murderer. Blanchot criticized the “rather annoying change of tone” at the end of the novel by which Meursault awakens from his torpor and realizes that all the social rules he could not understand are a sham, and that he is being punished by society for not playing the game. Instead, Blanchot writes, “the more destiny closes around him, the more his sobriety, his silence, his ‘I do not think, I say nothing’ should also grow.”\(^{115}\) By making Meursault capable of a spiritual awakening, but only in relation to his own death, Camus humanizes (or perhaps de-dehumanizes) Meursault at the last instant. This gesture in turn makes his ability to kill in cold blood and feel nothing more than a tinge of boredom not the act of an insect-man for whom emotions like

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\(^{113}\) Translation adjusted (Ward writes “annoyed” instead of “bored.”)

\(^{114}\) Viggiani, “Camus’ *L’Étranger,*” 869.

\(^{115}\) Blanchot, “The Novel of the Stranger,” 221.
remorse are unavailable, but callous disregard for his victim. René Girard points out in his 1964 article “Camus’s Stranger Retried” that the murder is a pretext to put Meursault on trial and sentence him to death, and that the real reason he is condemned is not because of what he did but because of who he is—a nonconformist that society cannot abide.\textsuperscript{116} By the 1970s, postcolonial critics justifiably objected to the way “the Arab” was just a prop in Meursault’s spiritual drama.\textsuperscript{117} Camus himself seems not to have given much thought to the victim.\textsuperscript{118} Nevertheless, \textit{The Stranger}, whether Camus means to or not, highlights the atrocity of the insignificant victim trope that Camus inherited from previous motiveless murder stories.

I want to return to my claim that \textit{The Stranger} is the culmination of the gratuitous act story. In making Meursault a subject without subjectivity, Camus clears away the pretensions that accompany the desire to be motiveless that featured in previous stories. He shows the impossibility of motivelessness: the only agent who could kill for no reason would not really be an agent at all. The prosecutor questions Meursault about why he was armed and returned to the exact spot where the previous scuffle occurred, and the only response Meursault can muster is, “it just happened that way” (S 88). Raskolnikov and Paul Hilbert also at times experience their own acts as something that happen to them, but with them it comes in fleeting moments. For Meursault, passivity is bred in the bone. Until now, the gratuitous act has been a synonym of murder for murder’s sake, but in the reading I’ve offered, this equivalence is broken because \textit{nothing} Meursault does is for

\textsuperscript{116} Girard, “Camus’s Stranger Retried,” 521.
\textsuperscript{117} Patrick McCarthy provides a succinct overview of postcolonial responses to the novel in \textit{Camus: The Stranger}, 104-5. The most significant response in recent years have been Kamil Daoud’s rewriting of the novel from the perspective of the murdered man’s brother in \textit{The Meursault Investigation} (2013).
\textsuperscript{118} In his 1955 preface to the American translation, Camus does not mention the Arab; instead, he focuses on Meursault’s status as a scapegoat, claiming he is “the only Christ we deserve” (“Preface to The Stranger, 336).
any sake at all. In other words, the novel reveals the metaphysical incoherence of a motiveless murder.

But Camus goes further and rejects even the desire for motivelessness, particularly as it relates to aesthetic endeavor. A theme bookending his two-decade writing career is the rejection of artistic impersonality. In a discussion of art, Camus writes, “The idea of art detached from its creator is not only outmoded; it is false.”119 He does not elaborate on this idea, but the tradition he rejects squares with the Flaubertian stream of modernism as Pierre Bourdieu describes it. In writing Madame Bovary, Flaubert rejected both the social realism of his day and the idealist tendencies inherited from Romanticism. In this double rejection,

he invents in practice, in the work by which he creates himself as a ‘creator,’ the veritable principle of this difference: a singular relationship, which makes up the Flaubertian tonality, between the refinement of the writing and the extreme platitude of a subject which he happens to have in common with the realists, the Romantics, or even the boulevard authors; a sort of dissonance, by which we are reminded at every moment of the ironic or even parodic distance of the writer from what he writes.120

Flaubert dangled his work at arm’s length before a public he scorned, but Camus affirms the opposite principle in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize. He needs art, he says, “because it cannot be separated from my fellow men, and it allows me to live, such as I am, on one level with them.”121 In so affirming a humanist ethics of art, he rejects the principle of amoral aesthetic autonomy that would become central to the story of modernism.

120 Bourdieu, The Rules of Art, 93.
121 Camus, Nobel Banquet Speech.
2.3 Gratuitous Act Modernism and Existentialist Bad Faith

I wrote at the outset of this chapter that critics of the existentialist ideal of authenticity mistrust its antisocial implications. On the face of it, the ideal would seem to denigrate the individual’s social existence, and given that the word *authenticity* entered the existentialist lexicon through Heidegger, a short detour through his discussion of the idea clarifies the issue.

Heidegger writes that the individual for the most part exists in an inauthentic mode characterized by the “dominance of others” (*Herrschaft der Anderen*): “We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way *they [man]* enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way *they* see and judge. But we also withdraw from the ‘great mass’ the way *they* withdraw, we find ‘shocking’ what *they* find shocking.”

122 The inauthentic individual wears itself thin trying to keep up with the sheer volume of opinions, expectations, pleasures, and duties it is enjoined to assume, but every once in a while, it is struck by a bout of anxiety (*Angst*) that cannot be overcome with any of those readymade options that previously seemed so important. Sometimes this anxiety is accompanied by a “call of conscience” (*Gewissensruf*) in which the individual hears nothing, albeit a meaningful nothing that recalls it from its “self-forgetful lostness” (*selbstvergessene Verlorenheit*) in the ordinary social world.123 Those who get through anxiety may find they have gained clarity about their own engagements in the world and are able to undertake their projects with a starker sense of purpose and responsibility than they might have in their inauthentic modes. They are acutely aware that their actions are really their own.

123 Ibid. 256.
This vision of authenticity shows clear parallels to the ethical structure of the gratuitous act: the (eminently modernist) aversion to the crowd that threatens to overwhelm me; the willingness to believe in a temporality characterized by a dreary, uniform flow of everydayness interrupted by charged moments; the fantasy that such moments will individualize and renew me, giving me surer footing in life, even if the change is undetectable to outsiders. They even share the same inarticulacy about their moral impetus. Heidegger insists his inauthentic/authentic schema is ontological, not ethical, but the moralizing overtones are scarcely avoidable. Likewise, the heroes of the gratuitous act spurn society and value their brutal acts of self-assertion, but they imagine the act as an escape from morality.

The point of this comparison is to give critics of authenticity their due, not to open a sustained discussion of Heidegger, or even Sartre. Authenticity tends to get criticized in broad strokes, a lack of precision that extends to criticisms of existentialist ethics more generally. Iris Murdoch wrote that existentialism “attributed to the individual an empty lonely freedom, a freedom, if he wishes, to ‘fly in the face of the facts. What it pictures is indeed the fearful solitude of the individual marooned upon a tiny island in the middle of a sea of scientific facts, and morality escaping from science only by a wild leap of the will.” Murdoch, though she does not mention him, makes Dostoevsky’s Underground Man the apostle of existentialism. Evidently this conflation that was common enough at the time for Hazel Barnes to spend a chapter of her existentialist ethics refuting it (though she doesn’t mention Murdoch). Other philosophers have similarly characterized the

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125 See Barnes, An Existentialist Ethics, 3-28 (Chapter 1 :“The Choice to Be Ethical”).
The offhandedness of these criticisms is telling. It’s as though it is so well known that, for example, Sartre endorses the maverick individual that there is no need to parse his words. That is not to say that such characterizations are entirely wrong, so much as it is to acknowledge that existentialism was a victim of its own success. It became a pressing concern for some philosophers to criticize what Richard Moran calls the “caricature” of existentialism.126 Just as a caricature of a famous person can highlight features that were always visible but perhaps did not command our attention, the caricatures of “existentialist man” that appeared in the 1960s and ’70s responded to the vogue for existentialist ideas, which in their widespread use lost much of their subtlety.

But existentialism offers two ways to reject the gratuitous act. The first concerns existentialism’s recognition of the ethical density of everyday life, a point which critics of existentialism have accused existentialism of overlooking. Again Murdoch: “The existentialist picture of choice,” she writes, “ignores what at least appears to be a sort of continuous background with a life of its own; and it is surely in the tissue of that life that the secrets of good and evil are to be found.”127 True morality for Murdoch is found in what she calls the “secondary specialized words” of ethics: not big pronouncements on the Good and the Right, but ordinary attunement to what is tedious, delightful, irritating, refreshing and the like. Existentialism is faulted for focusing so much on dramatic decisions that it blinds itself to the “continuous background” of ordinary morality.

126 Moran, “Iris Murdoch and Existentialism.”
This criticism is not entirely false, but it ultimately misses the mark. The existentialist idea of the *situation* entails that I find myself oriented not only in physical, but also in moral space. Sartre’s parable about the student who must choose either to stay with his mother or join the Resistance is a case in point. He must make his choice within a context loaded with competing, concrete moral claims. It is true that Sartre does not emphasize the moral thickness of everyday life, and in *Being and Nothingness* he is interested in the adversarial dimensions of being with others rather than on the possibilities of social communion. A generous reading, such as Moran offers, accommodates the everyday moral texture that “Murdoch’s own formulations help us to hear better.”128

Beauvoir brings out the ordinary ethical dimensions of existentialist thought even more strongly by stressing the phenomenological indispensability of other people. In “Pyrrhus and Cineas” (1944), she points out a confusion besetting Meursault. He realizes that the values by which many live are not guaranteed by the universe, and in that regard he avoids falling prey to the spirit of seriousness, a worldview that “regards values as transcendent givens that are independent of human subjectivity” (BN 809; EN 674). But in refusing all values, he goes too far because “the foreign indifference of the world is not given either.”129 Beauvoir shows that between the insouciance of seriousness and nihilistic despair lies a large middle ground. It is not simply that other people make claims on me—my own subjectivity would be unthinkable in the absence of others. Nancy Bauer argues that Beauvoir complicates the Sartrean idea that the other’s look objectifies me. Yes, the other can fix me in my action (Sartre’s famous example is getting

129 Beauvoir, “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” 93.
caught peeping through a keyhole), but Beauvoir’s twist is to argue that by the same token, my actions are appeals to the Other, inviting them to respond. My actions only mean something in the negotiation between me and the other, who in Beauvoir’s treatment is no longer simply a threatening presence who steals my world, but also a generosity who gives my freedom a meaning: “the Other’s freedom is to be seen as not just a threat to my subjectivity but a necessary condition of its being regularly exercised.” This idea underwrites Beauvoir’s conviction that my freedom depends on the freedom of the other.

Existentialism’s second resource for rejecting the gratuitous act is the concept of bad faith. At its most basic, bad faith is a form of self-deception, and Sartre’s task is to account for this phenomenon within the unity of a single consciousness. Without dividing the self into multiple entities in the manner of psychoanalysis, how can one explain how the same consciousness can be both deceiver and deceived? Sartre’s answer is grounded in his dualist ontology of human reality. We are always in a situation, a mixture of given circumstances (facticity) and my freedom to move within them (transcendence), and in principle, it should be possible to bring these two aspects into alignment. But in bad faith, I waver between them in “a constantly disintegrating synthesis and a constant game of avoidance” (BN 101; EN 92). Take Sartre’s troublesome example of the woman on a date. The man and woman are enjoying their flirtation, but then the man makes a sexual overture by taking her hand. If the woman withdraws her hand, she risks offending the man and ruining the charm of the moment, but if she leaves her hand, she risks consenting to taking things to the next level (for the scenario to work, we must assume

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130 Bauer, Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism, 149.
she does not want to). What will she do? Sartre’s answer is that she leaves her hand, but she avoids noticing she has left it. She mentally severs it, leaving it a lifeless thing in the man’s grip, and in this way, she splits her transcendence from her facticity. Her mind becomes disembodied (or at least, lacking one hand), and her hand seems to be a thing apart from her.

The example has inspired scores of commentaries and criticisms, particularly among feminist commentators, and I will not attempt to do them justice here. What is interesting for my purpose is how despite Sartre’s saying the woman splits her transcendence and facticity, he nonetheless aligns her more with facticity by casting her bad faith in terms of passivity. Her leaving her hand and striving only to maintain the prior atmosphere makes her into an agent of entropy, exercising her freedom in the service of not letting anything change. At first sight, nothing is surprising here. Bad faith is a flight from the anguish of freedom, and what could fleeing freedom mean if not becoming passive? This notion of flight informs Sartre’s second example, about the waiter who throws himself into his role. In playing the part of the waiter to studied perfection, the man seems to announce to onlookers, “this is just who I am.” Here, too, we see an acquiescence to circumstance, as though bad faith is the dominance of facticity over transcendence.

In fact, despite his ontology purportedly giving equal weight to transcendence and facticity, Sartre privileges the former and disparages the latter, at least up until the publication of Anti-Semite and Jew (1946). But his third example shows that sometimes bad faith can manifest in the opposite direction, denying circumstance and

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131 See Moi, Simone de Beauvoir, 147-53; Le Dœuff, Hipparchia’s Choice: 70-74.
132 Flynn 245.
deploying an airy notion of freedom, and this is the formulation of bad faith that operates in the gratuitous act. This last example concerns a man who repeatedly has sexual liaisons with other men, but who (presumably from shame) does not identify as homosexual. Instead, he keeps finding ways to dismiss the incidents as meaningless one-offs. “His case is always ‘different,’ and particular: it involves games, accidents, mishaps; those mistakes are in the past; they can be explained by a particular conception of beauty that women are unable to instantiate; we should see them as the outcome of an anxious pursuit, rather than as manifestations of a deeply rooted drive, etc.” (BN 108; EN 98).

Unlike the woman on the date and the waiter, this man’s bad faith consists in suspending his facticity. He alienates himself from his past and disavows any continuity he might have with it. Sartre is at pains to insist that in a metaphysically true sense, he is not a homosexual because nobody is a being in Sartrean ontology. But this metaphysical sense is not what the man has in mind. Rather, his bad faith consists in his “continual renaissance.” He would constantly start his life anew by making declarations that, even if genuinely professed in the moment of speaking, are unmoored from past and future.

Sartre writes that bad faith can manifest in infinite ways, but Thomas Flynn suggests that there are basically two sorts:

we either collapse our freedom (our transcendence) into our facticity by saying ‘that’s just the way I am’—in other words denying our freedom and responsibility [. . .] or we ‘volatilize’ our facticity into pure transcendence (possibility) by convincing ourselves that we can accomplish anything we wish (as if life were a dream with no grounding in the facts of our situation).  

The fantasy of a gratuitous act—not just murder, but any kind of unmotivated action—is an instance of this second sort of bad faith. The fantasy that freedom could be

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133 Flynn 186.
exercised in leaps and jerks is not really freedom at all insofar as it brackets facticity. This is a vision of freedom-as-spasm, freedom as an action that acts itself, without any place for the agent. For the French existentialists, *freedom* means two things: both the condition of human reality (the dreadful idea that we are “condemned” to be free) and something to be achieved through committed action (political freedom). But by casting freedom as nothing more than a solitary will’s imposing itself on others, the pseudo-freedom of the gratuitous act entirely denies political freedom by and aestheticizes the prior, metaphysical freedom.

## 2.4 Conclusion

Modernist studies embraces both a set of objects (authors, texts) and a way of interrogating them. While the last thirty years has seen its corpus of texts expand dramatically, the “method” of reading has consistently disavowed characterological freedom and the concomitant interest in moral agency. This blindspot is one of the reasons existentialism has not been able to find a place within modernist studies despite the expansions of the field, their shared archive, and the prominence of existentialism in its heyday. I have tried to chart a moral agential path through modernism by focusing on the motif of the gratuitous act.

I have also argued that acknowledging the ethical norms that develop in narratives of the gratuitous act steels us against the temptation to regard existentialism as nothing more than a shallow voluntarism that would endorse atrocities. “Existentialism alone gives—like religions—a real role to evil,” writes Beauvoir in her ethical defense of
existentialism. It is doubtful that existentialism *alone* gives a role to evil, but the point Beauvoir is making is that most humanist philosophies account for evil only as error, whereas existentialism takes seriously the possibility of an evil will. The nightmare scenario that a person could, in the name of individual liberty, commit murder is not a consequence of existentialism. It is one of existentialism’s starting points.

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134 Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 34.
3. Commitment and Feeling in John Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle* (1937)

If acting gratuitously and murdering for the sake of murdering are false manifestations of authenticity, then what would a true one look like? John Steinbeck’s strike novel *In Dubious Battle* offers such a vision. To French readers of the 1940s, Steinbeck was one of America’s most exciting authors partly for what Sartre would call his metaphysics. “[A] novelistic technique always relates to the novelist’s metaphysics,” wrote Sartre in regard to Faulkner, and while he praised Faulkner’s art, Sartre objected to his metaphysics.¹ He found Faulkner too focused on the all-determining power of the past, too despairing, unable to imagine a future and hence freedom. *In Dubious Battle* cuts the other way. The characters in it barely have pasts. In committing themselves to bringing about a future that will enrich their lives collectively, they assume their own metaphysical freedom in an expression of authenticity.

Sentimentalism is Steinbeck’s great sin against literature, according to a loud faction of the critical establishment. His detractors have never passed up the chance to bash his “stagy” characters², the way he “transcribed his naïveté into the shabbiest theater emotions,”³ and his tendency toward “the abstractly formulated moral of the story.”⁴ Leslie Fiedler claimed that the “intellectuals and would-be intellectuals” who praised him did so by ignoring all “that was maudlin, sentimental and overblown, which was not easy.”⁵ Dwight Macdonald listed Steinbeck first among writers whom he considered “midcult”—that is, authors who pretend to high-cultural seriousness while actually

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⁵ Fiedler, “Looking Back After 50 Years,” 163.
writing schlock.⁶ Of Mice and Men might have been a good novel, mused Harold Bloom, were it not “marred by an intense sentimentality.” In his opinion, Steinbeck is ultimately an inept novelist, but like a judge dismissing a case on a technicality, Bloom grudgingly conceded he could discover no principle to disqualify The Grapes of Wrath from the canon.⁷ For Steinbeck’s critics, his success—sales, cultural relevance, and especially his 1962 Nobel Prize—represents an unhappy accident in literary history.⁸ In their eyes, his sentimentalism was synonymous with artlessness.

But recently, sentimentalism has been the feature of Steinbeck’s writing that some scholars have embraced in their efforts to redeem him. John Selye, Jennifer Williamson, and Gavin Jones have argued that Steinbeck’s appeal to readers’ feelings is the modus operandi of his protest fiction.⁹ Jones, contesting the charge that sentimentalism substitutes cheap emotions for political energy, argues that Steinbeck’s is a “dynamic sentimentalism” in which “tenderness is often the flipside of sharp outrage.”¹⁰ This way of advocating for Steinbeck—not in spite of, but on the basis of his sentimentalism—has been enabled by a more general academic revaluation of sentimental literature. In Dubious Battle is probably his least sentimental novel, and some critics have excluded it from their discussions on that basis.¹¹ But while it does not tug at the heart strings with the same force as his other proletarian novels (Of Mice and Men and The Grapes of Wrath), I nevertheless contend, along with contemporary reviews, that a quiet

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⁶ MacDonald “Masscult and Midcult,” 37.
⁷ Bloom, “Introduction,” 1, 4.
⁸ Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962 and was the seventh American to win it.
⁹ Selye, “Come back to the Boxcar, Leslie Honey: Or, Don’t Cry for Me, Madonna, Just Pass the Milk”; Williamson, Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism, chapter 4; Jones, Reclaiming John Steinbeck.
¹⁰ Jones, Reclaiming John Steinbeck, 7.
¹¹ Williams attributes the success of Steinbeck’s follow-up novel, The Grapes of Wrath, partly to “its departure from the militant Marxism on display in “typical” proletarian texts like In Dubious Battle” (88). Gavin Jones does not include a chapter in it in Reclaiming John Steinbeck, a striking omission given the chronological trajectory of his argument.
sentimentalist strain runs through the novel, though it is the sentimentalism of sports, military, and prison films—that is, the quiet sentimentalism of men in tight spaces working together.12

According to Robert Solomon, sentimentality or sentimentalism (I use them interchangeably) is “nothing more nor less than the ‘appeal to tender feelings’.”13 This characterization is the best short description I have found, and while “tender feelings” is vague, it evokes sentimentalism’s feminine associations. In the eighteenth century, sentimentalism enjoyed a respectable place in belles lettres, in works like Laurence Sterne’s A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy (1768) and Friedrich Schiller’s On Naive and Sentimental Poetry (1795). But by the end of the nineteenth century, it had joined “melodramatic” and “romantic” as one of those “previously value-neutral terms [that had] acquired increasingly negative, feminine, and old-fashioned connotations.”14 In American literary history, sentimentalism usually names nineteenth-century mass-market women’s writing (prose and poetry) by Alice Cary, Harriet Jacobs, Lydia Sigourney, and Harriet Beecher Stowe among others. For most of the twentieth century, such authors, when they were credited at all, were relegated to third-rate status, but they now regularly feature on syllabi, in anthologies, and as the subject of discussion in academic journals thanks to the feminist recuperation of sentimentalism as a serious literary mode.

Ever since Jane Tompkins published Sentimental Designs (1985), scholars of American literature have argued that throughout the twentieth century, sentimentalism was unfairly discounted because it did not satisfy “modernist demands [. . .] for

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14 Felski, The Gender of Modernity, 117
psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, epistemological sophistication, stylistic density, [and] formal economy.”\textsuperscript{15} This parochialism sidelined especially women authors who used sentimental modes to intervene in the social issues of their day. The classic example is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s abolitionist novel \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} (1852), which Tompkins admits “may seem saccharine or merely pathetic to us. But her language had power to move hundreds of thousands of readers in the nineteenth century.”\textsuperscript{16} On this view, sentimentalism is redeemed insofar as it is, in the existentialist parlance, committed (\textit{engagée}). Steinbeck has begun to benefit from this critical sea change.

Unlike American critics, French critics had little to say about Steinbeck’s sentimentalism. They admired, and eventually faulted, him for his commitment (\textit{engagement}). When he debuted in France in the spring of 1939 with \textit{Des souris et des hommes} (\textit{Of Mice and Men} [1937], he was welcomed as the latest American author to expose the destructive social effects of American capitalism—a trend that has led one critic to argue that the French invention of “the American novel” might more accurately be described as the French invention of the anti-American novel.\textsuperscript{17} With the publication of \textit{The Moon is Down} (1942; translated as \textit{Nuits noires} in February 1944), his reputation would swell to include not just his proletarian commitment, but also his support for the Resistance. The French read it as something of a companion piece to one of their homegrown resistance novels, Vercors’s \textit{Le silence de la mer} (1942). They were published by the same clandestine press (Les Éditions de Minuit), and both narratives depict the tense coexistence of an occupied nation and its occupiers. The occupying force

\textsuperscript{16} ibid. xviii.
\textsuperscript{17} Buffet, Alexis. “Paul Nizan, Passeur Militant du Roman Américain.” \textit{Le groupe interdisciplinaire d'études nizaniennes}, 2015, 1.14, p 175-95, p 178.
are not bloodthirsty monsters, so resisting them requires not feats of heroism, but rather
the cunning and mental fortitude to walk the fine line between open insurrection and
collaboration. American critics faulted the novel for what they regarded as an overly
generous representation of the Nazis, but in France (as well as Norway, Denmark,
Sweden, Holland, and the Soviet Union), the novel was regarded as “a masterpiece of
understanding” about life under occupation.18

Steinbeck enjoyed great prestige in France throughout the ’40s, but by the next
decade, he was out of fashion. He had given up writing proletarian fiction. More
damning, he had lent his voice to supporting US state interests, leading Beauvoir to write
in 1963 that although his early work still had merit, “Steinbeck had foundered in
patriotism and foolishness.”19 His reputation in France was built on his political
commitments, and it was his commitments that led to his undoing.

Steinbeck’s French and American critics would seem to be talking past one
another, but can they be put in conversation? I have said that sentimental literature can be
committed, but does it go the other way? Is there something about the existentialist idea
of committed literature that draws it toward the sentimental? In this chapter, I will
approach these questions by way of In Dubious Battle (1936) (En un combat douteux
[1940]). The plot is straightforward. It begins with Jim Nolan, a man in his early
twenties, joining a Communist Party cell somewhere in California where he is taken
under the wing of the experienced field-agent Mac. The two of them go to the fictional
Torgas Valley where they get jobs picking apples and plant the seeds of a strike in the

18 Donald Coers lays out the impact of the novel in his excellent study John Steinbeck as Propagandist: The Moon is
Down Goes to War. “Masterpiece of understanding” is a phrase Jacques Debû-Bridel, one of the founders of Les
Éditions de Minuit, used to describe the novel (quoted in Coers 110).
19 Beauvoir, Hard Times, 95-6.
other laborers’ minds. Pretty soon the workers agree to strike, and Mac and Jim take on a supporting role: advising the emerging leader, riling the crowd up when they are getting lethargic, and talking them down when they threaten to get rowdy. All the while, they are harassed by police and vigilantes, who in the novel’s conclusion, trick Jim and Mac to coming out into the open where they shoot Jim dead.

*In Dubious Battle* offers a sentimentalized vision of committed freedom. Joanne Dobson writes that sentimental literature tends to emphasize “the self-in relation; family (not necessarily in the conventional biological sense), intimacy, community, and social responsibility are its primary relational modes.” Sentimental narratives tend to feature little in the way of depth psychology, with its concern to tease out the subtle, private significance of small experiences. Sentimentalism casts the subject primarily as a member of an intimate community, which need not mean a small community; rather, a person is so thoroughly embedded in the lives of other members of the community as to have little in the way of a private reserve of individuality. The “we” is more important than the “I.” At first glance, it is hard to see how an individualistic philosophy like existentialism could accommodate sentimentalism. Rather than being struck mute by angst, chafing against the existence of others, or brooding over death, the characters of *In Dubious Battle* evince sureness of purpose, benevolent fraternity, and clear-eyed resolve.

### 3.1 In Dubious Battle as Committed Literature

During World War II, wrote Sartre, Steinbeck “held the ambiguous position of being acclaimed at the same time by the collaborationists and by the underground.” The

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translation of *In Dubious Battle* appeared in the fall of 1940, several months into the Nazi Occupation, and it was published and sold with the censors’ approval (unlike *The Moon is Down*). Sartre claims the censors permitted it because its unflattering picture of American capitalism made it amenable to Nazi ideology. Another reason it might have gained approval is because in one passage, one of the main characters (Mac) explicitly condemns those who “burned the houses of old German people during the [First World] war.” Whatever the reason, the novel appealed to members of the Resistance who needed little interpretive license to find an allegory of their own situation in a novel that depicts how a humiliated and outgunned group could band together in collective resistance.

But interest in the novel was not limited to its bearing on the Occupation. Gide read it shortly after it was published and praised “this beautiful and painful book” for its psychological portrayal of Communism. Sartre appears to make an oblique reference to it in *Being and Nothingness* in a subchapter about death. Beauvoir names it as one of the American novels that evinces “the authentic sense of the function of literature,” and late in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she approvingly discusses the novel’s presentation of the ethics of using violence to achieve political ends. An indication of Communist Party enthusiasm for the novel is offered by Henri Lefebvre in a single sentence in the first volume of the *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947). Why, he wonders, has France, which

22 Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle*, 657. Hereafter cited parenthetically as IDB.
24 “Ainsi échappé-je sans cesse à mon dehors et suis-je sans cesse ressaisi par lui sans que, en «ce combat douteux», la victoire définitive appartienne à l’un ou l’autre de ces modes d’être.” Sarah Richmond flags this apparent reference in her recent translation of *Being and Nothingness* (BN 706). The suggestion that Sartre had the novel in mind makes sense in the context of a paragraph in which Sartre argues that while alive, the meaning of one’s life and actions shuttles back and forth between how one view it first-personally and how others view it. But upon dying, the others’ viewpoint wins out. Steinbeck’s novel ends with Jim Nolan being murdered and his corpse immediately being displayed by his mentor, Mac, as proof of Jim’s commitment.
knows political struggle so well, not produced “a single book to compare with Steinbeck’s In Dubious Battle?” It is significant that he does not elaborate on what he finds impressive in the book. It is as though the novel is shorthand for a set of judgements that he expects his readers to share. What about this novel so appealed to French intellectuals?

The question is not easy to answer because, aside from professing their admiration for the novel, French thinkers had little to say about it. The historical circumstances of the book’s appearance undoubtedly played a large part in the lack of commentary. Paper shortages and the icy silence in Vichy France dissuaded people from writing about a great deal—not to mention that the war took the lives of some who might otherwise be likely to review the novel. Take Paul Nizan. In addition to being Sartre’s close friend since adolescence and one of the bright young stars in the Communist Party, he was a knowledgeable critic of the new American literature. Throughout the ’30s, he wrote a dozen articles on American fiction by the likes of Faulkner, Dos Passos, and Caldwell, and Of Mice and Men was the last American novel he reviewed (he praised it). Nizan was killed in action on May 23, 1940, four months before the publication of En un combat douteux.

I have presented this incongruity—between the lack of detailed discussion of the novel and the open admiration it inspired—because while it is frustrating from a strictly historical perspective, it provides the opportunity to creatively reconstruct the novel’s appeal. Beauvoir offers a direction in “An American Renaissance in France.” She claims that nineteenth-century French realist novels did not take a political position, but that

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26 Lefebvre, Critique of Everyday Life, 255.
27 See Buffet, “Paul Nizan, Passeur Militant du Roman Américain.”
American novels do. It is important, and there will be more to say on this below, that she is careful not to conflate taking a position with advocating a particular party line. “In Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle*, as in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, reality is invested with the concreteness of an experience in which an individual consciousness and an individual liberty have been staked; the struggle of a man against the resistances of the world is depicted,” she writes, and she goes on to assert that the task of literature is “to describe in dramatic form the relationship of the individual to the world in which he stakes his freedom.”

The key concern of these comments is individual freedom. A novel should not strive for Flaubertian impartiality, nor should it advocate a particular party line. Instead, it should dramatize the liberty of a particular individual and in so doing, advocate for individual liberty as such.

But Beauvoir’s discussion is somewhat abstract. What is meant by “individual liberty” and staking one’s freedom? To compound matters, why does she cite *In Dubious Battle* and *Black Boy* in the same sentence? *Black Boy* is Wright’s autobiography, and in it he narrates how he formed a sense of individual self-worth despite numerous forces that conspired to silence him, including a zealous Seventh-Day Adventist family, the racism of the Jim Crow South and Segregated North, and the paranoia and dogmatism of the Communist Party. *In Dubious Battle*, by contrast, is narrated in the third person, encompasses about two weeks of action, contains minimal exposition of the characters’ lives before the strike, and has next to nothing to say about anti-Black racism. The bulk of the action concerns the main characters’ on-the-ground efforts to bring the strike to fruition. The novel opens with Jim Nolan setting off to a meeting with a liaison who will

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28 Beauvoir, “An American Renaissance in France,” 110
usher him into the Communist Party. It is as though the growing pains and
disenchantment with mainstream American society of the sort that make up the bulk of
Wright’s narrative happened before the opening of In Dubious Battle, and Jim has come
out on the other side ready for action. Aside from being easy reads that are broadly
critical of American society, the two novels would seem to have little in common.

The solution to these issues lies in the notion of “committed literature” (littérature
engagée). The idea inspired fierce debates in the mid-twentieth century, but it is now
largely a relic of the past.29 Or rather, the idea that literature bears on the power struggles
of its time has become part of the common sense of academic literary studies such that it
hardly seems worth discussing any more. But that vague sense of art’s social relevance is
apt to be misleading if it does not account for the emergence of the idea. Two political
factors are particularly important. The first is the writer’s duty during the Occupation. If
an author publishes uplifting work or writes about “timeless” themes—is that not a
betrayal in Vichy France? For Sartre, the answer was obvious: writers wittingly or
unwittingly became collaborators by publishing in the Vichy press.30 The times forced a
stark with-us-or-against-us choice on writers and anyone else who wanted to participate
in public life.

The other factor was the Parti communiste français (PCF). During the war, the
PCF became a stronghold of resistance, setting themselves up for a powerful position in
the immediate aftermath of the war.31 Sartre and Beauvoir became “fellow travelers”:

29 Raymond Williams 1980 essay “The Writer: Commitment and Alignment” provides a succinct overview of the idea.
30 “I don’t trust people who claim that literature uplifts them by displaying Nobel sentiments, people who want the
theater to give them a show of heroism and purity. What they really want is to be persuaded that it’s easy to do good. In
fact, no! It isn’t easy. Vichy literature and, alas, some of today’s literature would like to make us think it is: it’s so nice
31 Tony Judt, Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956, particularly chapters 2 and 3.
subscribing to the PCF’s criticism of bourgeois society, its stress on the class struggle, and its affiliation with the USSR, which inspired a debt of gratitude for the losses it incurred defeating the Nazis. Nevertheless, as Beauvoir recalls, at this point Sartre was wary of Party ideology: “The Marxist dialectic, as he understood it then, suppressed him as an individual: he believed in the phenomenological intuition which affords objects immediately ‘in flesh and blood’.”

Rather than embrace Party doctrine, Sartre instead vested his hopes in his own vision of unaffiliated democratic socialism. Committed literature expresses this idea of being political without being in a party. It might be better to say that committed literature is not political in the strict sense so much as ethico-political: a committed writer should be aware of the political bearing of their writing, but they should steer clear of propagandizing.

Understanding the political background of committed literature helps explain Beauvoir’s juxtaposition of In Dubious Battle and Black Boy, because the two novels share roughly the same political vision as the existentialists. The second half of Wright’s Black Boy details how he was recruited to the Communist Party in Chicago because of the intellectual company offered by the John Reed Club, but it ends with him quitting the party on account of its stifling organizational hierarchy. In Dubious Battle is a proletarian novel, a genre that thrived in the 1930s, headlined by now little read works including Mike Gold’s Jews without Money (1930), Jack Conroy’s The Disinherited (1932), Grace Lumpkins’s To Make My Bread (1932), and Clara Weatherwax’s Marching! Marching! (1935). In many cases, the authors were card-carrying communists, but not Steinbeck. He was intrigued by the party and based the novel on conversations with “Irish and Italian

32 See Beauvoir, After the War, 7
communists whose training was in the field,” but ultimately, he was suspicious of communism on the grounds that it suppressed the individual.33

Steinbeck is careful to avoid calling his main characters communists (at least in the novel itself, though his letters make it clear that’s what he had in mind).34 Moreover, some of the most memorable passages in the novel are given to a secondary character, Doc Burton, who like Steinbeck, is sympathetic to but unaffiliated with the Party. When he is asked why he provides medical treatment to the strikers but refuses to endorse the strike, Doc explains that he sees the strike as nothing more than an “infection” affecting “group-men,” his term for the a group as a collective unit, of which individuals are nothing more than cells (I will return to this theme later) (IDB 641). In their respective works, Wright and Steinbeck walk the same road as the self-professed fellow-travelers Sartre and Beauvoir.

If not being Communist is the political half of committed literature, the ethical half consists in a vision of art that emphasizes appealing to the freedom of others, an ethics that is broadly Kantian.35 In The Ethics of Ambiguity, Beauvoir endorses Kant’s idea of art as “a finality without end” (une finalité sans fin) in which the artist invites the reader to realize her freedom by disclosing the world through art.36 Sartre says much the same thing in What is Literature? when he interprets the same Kantian idea to mean that art does not have a message the way propaganda does, but that it “presents itself as a task to be discharged” and thus solicits the reader. The goal should not be to move readers to

33 Steinbeck, A Life in Letters, 110.
34 See his letter from April 1935 to his agent, Mavis McIntosh in John Steinbeck: A Life in Letters, 107-8.
35 See Flynn, Sartre: A Philosophical Biography, 238, 298. A recent argument in favor of Sartre’s Kantianism is offered by Maria Russo, “The Normative Bond between Kantian Autonomy and Sartrean Authenticity: A Critical Existentialist Perspective.”
36 Beauvoir, Ethics of Ambiguity, 69.
think or do as I think or do, an effort that would attempt to constrain readers rather than free them. Instead, the committed writer should aim to “reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men [. . . ] in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it’s all about.”\(^{37}\) It’s beyond my purposes to provide a fuller comparison of Kant and existentialism here, and it must be noted that Beauvoir and Sartre objected to what they regarded as the Kant’s ahistorical formalism.\(^{38}\) The main point I wish to stress is that although committed literature was not loyal to the Communist party, it was nevertheless “socialistic” in its concern to enable the freedom of all.

Herein lies the appeal of *In Dubious Battle*. In Beauvoir’s reading, the novel shows how by coming together to strike, the laborers realize their freedom. Steinbeck’s title, borrowed from *Paradise Lost*, is appropriate because the novel’s conclusion leaves open the question of whether the strike will succeed or fail. But for Beauvoir, that issue is secondary to a more important one: “the strike is immediately an appeal to the freedom of the workers and in its very failure is already a liberation.”\(^{39}\) Two senses of “freedom” are relevant here: the basic freedom that all humans must deal with (usually by fleeing it), and the freedom we can valorize by authorizing ourselves to undertake projects. The strike at the heart of *In Dubious Battle* is not simply a protest against a wage cut; it is also a collective project by which the laborers assume their own freedom. Moreover, this project is necessarily communal insofar as each worker undertakes it to achieve their own

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38 Two decades later, Beauvoir would look back on *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as the work that most “irritates” her on account of its ahistorical abstraction, but even then, she still subscribed to the idea artistic commitment presented in that essay; however, she admitted that her prescriptions were “quite as hollow as the Kantian maxims” (Beauvoir, *After the War*, 67).
freedom as well as that of laborers (“to will oneself free is also to will others free”).\textsuperscript{40} In other words, the appeal of \textit{In Dubious Battle} is not just that it shows workers trying to cast off the chains that bind them, but that they evince a sense of mutual goodwill and fraternity in so doing. This emotional dimension of solidarity is where Steinbeck’s sentimentalism enters the picture.

\textbf{3.2 An Existentialist Novel?}

To make the case that \textit{In Dubious Battle} is a sentimental existentialist novel, I must show how it departs from the most recognizable existentialist picture of the subject, that of Sartre’s \textit{Being and Nothingness}.

First, the characters of \textit{In Dubious Battle} entirely lack anxiety (\textit{angoisse}). Following in the footsteps of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, Sartre makes \textit{angoisse} an essential structure of the subject: “it is in anguish that freedom is, in its being, in question for itself” (BN 66; EN 64). The realization that I alone am responsible for my choices, that nothing beyond me will determine or validate my actions, is an anxious experience. But fighting through that anxiety by acting decisively and bearing the full weight of my choice gives my acts a heroic sheen. Mac and Jim, the communist protagonists of \textit{In Dubious Battle}, never find themselves wrestling with the meaning of their lives. To the contrary, they exude what Claude-Edmonde Magny describes as a “royal calm,” a quality expressive of Steinbeck’s broader tendency toward “[s]implicity, ease, tenderness.”\textsuperscript{41} Far from being struck by pangs of self-doubt or indecision, they show unwavering dedication to their goal of bringing about the proletarian revolution, and this sense of purpose

\textsuperscript{40} ibid 73.
\textsuperscript{41} Magny, \textit{The Age of the American Novel}. 173, 162.
suffuses every passing moment. Early in the novel, before they go to the labor camp, Mac has Jim make several copies of a letter, and while one might expect a would-be revolutionary to be discouraged by this sort of mindless bureaucratic toil, Jim finds he enjoys it. “I don’t know why,” he tells Mac, “It seemed a good thing to be doing. It seemed to have some meaning” (IDB 550). A Roquentin would be overwhelmed by the dreary absurdity of such a task, but at no point do Jim or Mac show even a glimmer of angst.

Another way in which the vision of subjectivity in *In Dubious Battle* would seem at odds with the dominant image of existentialism concerns *l’esprit de sérieux,* “the spirit of seriousness,” a species of bad faith. Seriousness consists in regarding certain values as given and absolute such that one can work to realize or reject them, either of which amounts to the same thing: fleeing one’s freedom by taking refuge in an imagined certainty of meaning in the world. For the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness,* militant communists are exemplars of seriousness. “Revolutionaries are serious [. . . .] It goes without saying that the serious man buries in his depths any consciousness of his freedom, he is in *bad faith.*”42 Sartre seems to have had in mind the rank and file who unquestioningly accept party ideology, and Steinbeck offers one such figure in the character of Joy, an energetic but dim-witted party agitator who is “slug-nutty” from being beat up too many times. When Jim first meets him, Joy evangelizes with an incantatory thoughtlessness.

“Who produces the goods?” Joy demanded.

“Why—the workers,” said Jim.

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42 *Being and Nothingness* 752-3.
A foxy look came on Joy’s face, a very wise and secret look. “And who takes the profits?”

“The people with invested capital.”

Joy shouted, “But they don’t produce nothing. What right they got to the profits?”

Mac looked in through the kitchen door. He walked quickly over, a stirring spoon in his hand. “Now listen to me, Joy,” he said. “Stop trying to convert our own people. Jesus Christ, it seems to me our guys spend most of their time converting each other.” (IDB 546)

Joy personifies the Party fanatic who, in devoting himself body and soul to the cause, “annihilates his subjectivity.”43 A fervent ideologue, his ensnarement in the revolutionary spirit of seriousness throws into sharp relief the more thoughtful commitment of Mac and Jim.

Third and finally, In Dubious Battle offers a vision of amiable sociality that is at odds with the adversarial picture of intersubjectivity in Being and Nothingness. When Jim is first introduced to Mac, the two briefly stare at one another before Mac says, “Too bad we’re not dogs, we could get that all over with. We’d either be friends or fighting by now. Harry [the Party liaison] said you were O.K., and Harry knows” (IDB 544-5). In fact they might as well be dogs, because this is the only time we see even a hint of tension between them. They immediately fall into a cozy companionship undisturbed by jealousies, embarrassments, or rivalries. They never chafe one another despite spending nearly every waking minute with one another. To the contrary, they only grow closer to the point that Mac eventually tells Jim, “I’m getting soft. I’m scared something might happen to you. I shouldn’t have brought you down, Jim. I’m getting to depend on you” (IDB 644).

43 Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, 45
Steinbeck’s image of harmonious alliance is the opposite of that presented in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre’s vision of intersubjectivity is in large measure an elaboration of the Hegelian master-slave struggle for mutual recognition, and his examples frequently present encounters with the Other as an unpleasant affair: the appearance of another person in the park punctures the serenity of my world, making it flow away from me into him; realizing someone has seen me peeping through a keyhole makes me ashamed. Sartre briefly discusses times when subjects form a “we,” but even then, he argues that we are first constituted as a group (a “we-object”) not by virtue of a sense of collective agency, but insofar as we feel our shared abasement in the condescending gaze of a third party. Only after that can we summon a sense of common purpose and think of ourselves as a “we-subject.” At any rate, Sartre cuts the discussion short and concludes, “The essence of relations between consciousness is not Mitsein; it is conflict” (BN 564; EN 470). *Mitsein*, borrowed from Heidegger but transformed in Sartre’s treatment to harmonious being-together, is little more than a tucked-away cul-de-sac of his social ontology.44 The intimacy of common purpose that Mac and Jim share would seem to have no place in *Being and Nothingness*.

### 3.3 Sentimentalism Without Women

Any discussion of sentimentalism in *In Dubious Battle* must address the minimal space the novel gives to women. The point is nowhere better made than in a scene in which men from one camp visit Dakin, the leader of another, to broach the idea of striking. Dakin’s wife welcomes the men into her cabin, offers them a drink, and shows

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44 Sartre famously changed his mind by the time he got to *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, which contains various discussions of common endeavor: teams, pledges, moments of collective resistance. See Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 249-57
interest in what they have to say, but when they get down to business, her husband tells her to take the kids and visit a neighbor. “For a moment she looked questioningly at her husband, and he stared back with cold eyes. Suddenly Mrs. Dakin smiled widely. ‘You boys stay right her an’ do your talkin’,’ she said” (IDB 591). Disappointed but acquiescent, she encapsulates the marginal position of women in the novel.

There are a few other women. One, a young woman, gives birth in the camp, but the event ends up being less about her and the baby than it is about the men of the camp rallying together to help with the delivery, thereby getting a taste for working in concert toward a common goal. An old woman briefly serves as her midwife until Mac dismisses her and takes over. The laborers who strike, their sympathizers, and the hostile vigilantes they must confront are entirely stocked with men. Steinbeck took his inspiration from actual strikes, and the novel refers to “Bloody Thursday,” an episode in the 1934 West Coast waterfront strike in San Francisco in which police attacked and killed protestors. Could it be that those strikes mainly involved men and Steinbeck was accurately representing history? No. Women were involved, just as they were in the strikes happening all around the country at the time.45

Rather than foreclosing the possibility of sentimentalism, the novel’s exclusion of women seems to be the precondition for it.46 One of the few details about his life before the Party that Jim offers makes the point. While watching some kids playing, Jim offhandedly mentions to another character, Harry, that his sister was good at marbles. Harry is surprised to hear about a sister and asks what happened to her. “I don’t know,” Jim responds, and then he tells an odd story about how one night when she was fourteen,

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45 See Watson, “‘Written in Disorder’: John Steinbeck’s In Dubious Battle and ‘The Big Strike’.”
46 Such dynamics have been central to what Sedgwick coined “homosociality.” See Sedgwick, Between Men.
she didn’t come home. Their parents reported her missing, but they never found out what happened to her. The conclusion of the story is even more mysterious. Jim ends by saying, “She just disappeared one day, just dropped out of sight. The same thing happened to Bertha Riley two years later—just dropped out” (IDB 543). Is there a killer on the loose? Are girls running away from home? David Wyatt assumes the sister has been “spirited away” on account of her “burgeoning sexuality,” but not only is it unclear what he means (marriage? prostitution?), but the novel simply does not explain.47 The reader gets no answers. “It was one of those things that happen,” says Jim matter-of-factly (IDB 541). One might expect this rare discussion of a family trauma to have some central motivating force, but Jim introduces the story in an offhand way and drops it, seemingly without a second thought.

On my reading, this story, told without pathos and seemingly unrelated to the larger narrative, speaks to how the novel buries the feminine so that men can enjoy fraternal harmony. Steinbeck’s other novels from this period likewise emphasize male fraternity premised on the absence of women. Tortilla Flat (1935), his first commercial and critical success, is about a small band of “paisanos,” mixed race (Spanish-Indian-Caucasian) men, who live a life of carousing in serene poverty. Of Mice and Men (1937) concerns the relationship between the brawny, mentally disabled Lennie and his friend and de facto caretaker George. The only woman, “Curley’s wife,” poisons the precarious happiness of the male labor camp by trying to seduce Lennie (who ends up accidentally

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killing her). Far from promising domestic stability, women in all these novels seem to threaten it, and excluding them creates an emotional and domestic vacuum that men can then fill. At one point Jim tells Mac that he’s “scared of girls” because he’s seen too many other young men get involved with women only to find themselves trapped by a dead-end, materially impoverished domesticity (IDB 560). On the other hand, his own situation once he joins the CP is itself impoverished and quasi-domestic. The Party members are constantly soliciting donations and scraping together what little money they have between them, but their life together is homey and harmonious.

Scenes of shared meals are Steinbeck’s preferred way of indicating amicable fellowship. Early in the novel, before they set out for the Torgas Valley where the migrant laborers work, the Party members live and conduct business out of an apartment-cum-office. While the focus is on their party work, Steinbeck peppers the narrative with seemingly minor details about the upkeep of the household—washing dishes, cutting up vegetables, cooking a stew, and serving one another. Upon arriving at the Torgas Valley, Mac’s and Jim’s first stop is a diner. They have it on good authority that the proprietor, Al, is a Communist sympathizer who will treat them to a meal, and he obliges. Steinbeck attentively describes every detail of the cooking: “Al went to his ice-box and dug out two handfuls of ground meat. He patted them thin between his hands, painted the gas plate with a little brush and tossed down the steaks. He put chopped onions on top and around the meat. A delicious odor filled the room instantly.” The prose continues in this manner for several paragraphs, describing the deliberateness of Al’s cooking (“as inwardly-thoughtful-looking as a ruminating cow”), the heaps of mashed potatoes in which he

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48 Gavin Jones, citing Nina Baym, argues *Of Mice and Men* is a distinctly American “melodrama of beset manhood.” *Reclaiming John Steinbeck*, 114.
makes hollows to hold the gravy, and Jim and Mac’s eating every bite and wiping their plates clean with their bread (IDB 565-6).

Such passages are a fixture of Steinbeck’s writing from this period, most notably in a short sketch entitled “Breakfast” (1936), in which a traveler is invited to join the campfire meal of a group of strangers. The sketch, which I refrain from calling a story because nothing happens aside from eating, “is full of intensely remembered minutiae involving the human senses – the sucking sound of the nursing baby, the smell of the cooking bacon, the taste of the coffee.”49 In Dubious Battle extends scenes of communal meal preparation and eating to the entire community of strikers, using such scenes to indicate the good-natured, orderliness of their arrangement. Chapter 8 opens with lengthy descriptions of how the entire camp (somewhere between one and two thousand people) gather provisions, fill tubs with water, butcher a cow, and boil beans. The next chapter beings by describing how “the sweet smell of burning pine and apple wood filled the camp. The cooks’ detail was busy. Near the roaring stoves the buckets of coffee were set. The wash boilers of beans began to warm. Out of the tents the people crept, and went to stand near the stoves where they crowded so closely that they cooks had no room to work” (IDB 650). Claude-Edmonde Magny notes that if The Grapes of Wrath is Steinbeck’s Odyssey, then In Dubious Battle is his Iliad, and indeed, these scenes of communal cooking and eating recall Homer’s idyllic descriptions of the savory smoke of slaughtered cows and goats curling up toward the heavens.50

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49 Jones, Reclaiming John Steinbeck, 7. Steinbeck later reworked “Breakfast” and included it in Chapter 22 of The Grapes of Wrath.
50 Magny, Age of the American Novel, 167.
Even as the novel erases women, it expands the domestic scene to include the large-scale male community of cooking and eating in the strikers’ camp. Just as the CP apartment serves as an office, dispensing with any division between home and work life, the camp displays a sense of collective caretaking akin to what Lauren Berlant describes as an “intimate public”: “a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an $x$.”

Though the novel mentions in passing that there are women at the camp, they are almost entirely invisible. The focus is on the efficient, collaborative atmosphere of men who in putting aside their private misfortunes, take over the tasks women might be expected to perform.

Although the novel establishes a masculine sentimentality by excluding women, it does not suggest the world would be happier without them. With the strike underway, the orchard owners hit back by bringing in a train full of scabs. The strikers go to the rail station in the hopes of winning them over to their cause, but Mac’s optimism sours when he sees the train. “I don’t like the look of those guys [. . . .] There ought to be some women there. There aren’t any women at all” (IDB 653). The novel imagines emotional solidarity among men predicated on erasing women, but it also acknowledges that a group comprising only men is a threat. This apparent contradiction is resolved when one considers that the novel does not present gender alone as determinative of the group ethos. To put it in the existentialist vocabulary, the facticity of gender is only one factor in a group’s character. The other is transcendence, choice or freedom. The strikers’ sentimentality, based on having absorbed the feminine, signals their orderliness and self-

\[\text{Berlant, The Female Complaint, viii.}\]
control, but the scabs’ masculinity, untempered by a feminine influence, signals riotous indiscipline.

3.4 The Phalanx Argument

The novel’s depiction of the relationship between individual and group is complicated. Magny argues that the true “hero” of In Dubious Battle is the strike and the group of laborers through whom it exists. The “individual fates” of Jim or Mac are unimportant, and the two main characters “are nothing but commentators and privileged observers—the consciousnesses that are half doers, half endurers, the participants with whom author and readers must identify in order to contemplate the adventure because the novelist needs a particular consciousness in which to install his camera.” The claim is compelling inasmuch as it explains the minimal attention given to Mac’s and Jim’s inner lives, but Magny’s suggestion that the main characters are merely a formal necessity obscures their significance. Beauvoir hints at their importance as subjects in a passage I quoted earlier: “In Steinbeck’s In Dubious Battle [. . .] reality is invested with the concreteness of an experience in which an individual consciousness and an individual liberty have been staked; the struggle of a man against the resistances of the world is depicted.” Which has priority, the group or the individual?

This interpretive ambivalence is reflected within the novel. Some of the most contemplative passages assert the priority of the group over the individual, reflecting Steinbeck’s interest in the dynamics of crowds. Early European sociologists such as Emile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies are usually credited with pioneering the study of

52 See Magny 166; Peter Lisca makes the same claim. The Wide World of John Steinbeck, 118.
53 Magny 166.
collective behavior, but Steinbeck came to such ideas through American sources, most importantly the philosopher John Elof Boodin (1869-1950), the ecologist W. C. Allee (1885-1955), and the marine biologist Ed Ricketts, who was Steinbeck’s close friend and co-author (on *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* [1951]). In an unpublished essay entitled “Argument of Phalanx” Steinbeck writes, “Men are not final individuals but units in the greater beast, the phalanx,” and he proceeds to argue that just as our bodies are composed of cells with their own individual functions, so men are units of a larger group that follows its own laws. Most of the time the phalanx is dormant and people enjoy a sense of their individual autonomy, but it can suddenly awaken and overwhelm individual will, leading people to act in unison.

Doc Burton is the main advocate of the phalanx argument in *In Dubious Battle*, and he presents it as a strictly scientific, amoral hypothesis. Mac, finding it odd that the doctor reliably helps Communist Party members but refuses to endorse their cause, asks if he thinks the cause is not good. The doc explains that he wants to see “the whole picture—as nearly as I can. I don’t want to put on the blinders of ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ and limit my vision.” Mac presses him on his agnosticism toward social injustice, so Doc shifts the terms of the discussion. “Look at the physiological injustice, the injustice of tetanus, the injustice of syphilis, the gangster methods of amoebic dysentery.” When Mac says that the communist revolution would cure social injustice, Doc counters that

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54 Boodin, once a well-known American philosopher and educator, had been a student of both Josiah Royce and William James. He combined idealist and pragmatist philosophies, along with an interest in Durwinian evolution, to develop a theory of “the social mind.” See Jeffrey Wayne Yeager, “The Social Mind: John Elof Boodin’s Influence on John Steinbeck’s Phalanx Writings, 1935-1942”; Richard Astro, *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist*. 55 Steinbeck, “Argument of Phalanx”
communist ideals are only an excuse the group-organism gives itself to justify its peculiar will to power.

When group-man wants to move, he makes a standard. ‘God wills that we re-capture the Holy-Land’; or he says, ‘We fight to make the world safe for democracy’; or he says, ‘we will wipe out social injustice with communism.’ But the group doesn’t care about the Holy Land, or Democracy, or Communism. Maybe the group simply wants to move, to fight, and uses these words simply to reassure the brains of individual men. (IDB 642)

Given that In Dubious Battle is an action-focused novel, this exchange stands out on account of its philosophical register, and it has led many critics to credit Doc as Steinbeck’s mouthpiece.56

However, Doc concludes his disquisition by saying, “I say it might be like that, Mac,” and by adding this slight hesitation, he leaves room for doubting that idea that individual is powerless to resist the authority of the group (IDB 641-2). A similar qualification of the phalanx argument appears at another point in the novel when another laborer, Dan, offers his own version of the theory in a conversation with Jim. Still climbing trees to pick fruit in his seventies, Dan has spent his entire life around workers and senses the anger surging through the Torgas Valley and the US as a whole. He likens the country’s workers to a single “big guy” (he has no class analysis, but he’s talking about the lumpenproletariat), and he worries that “[w]hen that big guy busts loose, there won’t be no plan that can hold him. That big guy’ll run like a mad dog, and bite anything that moves. He’s been hungry too long, and he’s been hurt too much; and worst thing of all, he’s had his feelings hurt too much” (IDB 581-2). The note of worry in Dan’s

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56 “To be sure, one may surmise that the author speaks through the mouth of the doctor who sees little difference between men and microbes (Whipple, “Steinbeck: Through a Glass, Though Brightly,” 274). Mary McCarthy also sees Doc as speaking on behalf of Steinbeck in her highly critical review of the novel, “Minority Report.” See also Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, 120; Watson, “‘Written in Disorder’: John Steinbeck’s In Dubious Battle and ‘The Big Strike’,” 48.
forecast suggests that he would prefer the “big guy” didn’t break loose—that workers did not attempt to organize—and his own approach to labor issues is acquiescent. He just keeps his head down and does his work. It is hardly an inspiring message, and Mac warns Jim not to waste time talking to old men lest he “get [himself] converted to hopelessness” (IDB 587). Nevertheless, through Dan, the novel hints that the individual is not powerless to resist the group’s will.

Neither Doc nor Dan are heroes in the novel. Rather, they are both champions of what Beauvoir calls “the aesthetic attitude.” A person who adopts the aesthetic attitude “claims to have no other relation with the world than that of detached contemplation; out of time and far from men, he faces history, which he thinks he does not belong to, like a pure beholding; this impersonal version equalizes all situations.”

Dan boasts that he was a “top-faller,” a lumberjack who climbs high trees. “I’d go up a pole, and I’d know that the boss and the owner of the timber and the president of the company didn’t have the guts to do what I was doing. It was me. I’d look down on everything from up there. And everything looked small, and the men were little, but I was up there. I was my own size. I got things out of it, all right” (IDB 584). Considering that Dan says all this as an elderly man who still climbs trees to eke out a day-to-day existence, the bygone satisfaction of once having had the skill and daring to do what others could not (or would not) is sad compensation indeed.

Doc’s aesthetic attitude is a little more sophisticated. He tells Mac that his goal in coming to the strike is to “look at the whole thing” and “simply to see as much as I can” from the impartial stance of the scientist (IDB 640, 642). But as Mac tells him, “If you

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57 Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, 74-5.
see too darn much, you don’t get anything done” (IDB 642). Dan and Doc show that the aesthetic attitude is inherently quietist, but the problem goes deeper than that. Taking up the position of disinterested observer is also a flight from freedom and impoverishment of oneself. Doc says as much in his final appearances in the novel when he tells Mac, “I’m awfully lonely. I’m working all alone, toward nothing. There’s some compensation for you people” (IDB 726). Both he and Dan think of freedom only in the negative, as non-commitment. They cannot articulate a positive project that would give their lives meaning or provide them a sense of community.

3.5 Vicious Group Belonging: The Vigilante Temptation

Steinbeck concludes an article written two decades after *In Dubious Battles* by declaring what I take to be the governing idea of *In Dubious Battle*. “I believe that man is a double thing—a group animal and at the same time an individual. And it occurs to me that he cannot successfully be the second until he has fulfilled the first.”58 Putting the group before the individual puts Steinbeck in the company of sentimental writers who also challenge the cliché of American individualism.59 More importantly, he refuses any neat the dichotomy between a more individualistic existence and a more communal one. For Steinbeck, it is a matter of alignment. What sort of group fosters a “successful” individualism? How can an individual participate in a group without being swallowed up by it? The novel answers these questions through the presentation of two main groups, the strikers and the vigilantes who terrorize them, and elaborating on the attitude of these two groups with be the task of the next two sections. They represent two modes of group-

58 Steinbeck, “Some Thoughts on Juvenile Delinquency.”
59 “Sentiment emerges as central counter-term to individualism; it provides the to understanding how Americans imagined themselves as members of various communities and how America as a culture and nation imagined and defined itself.” Hildegard Hoeller, “From Agony to Ecstasy: The New Studies of American Sentimentality,” 343.
belonging: one that offers a sense of purpose, solidarity, and appeals to tender feelings; and one that encourages “pure incendiaryism and brass knuckle patriotism” (IDB 551).

The vigilantes are the novel’s bogeymen. They are ordinary, anonymous local men who, encouraged by the orchard owners and with tacit permission from the police, harass and attack the strikers. A minor character named Bolter, president of the fruit cartel, gives the game away when he threatens the strike leaders by telling them “if the outraged citizens band together to keep the peace, that’s their affair” (IDB 720). Only one vigilante appears in the novel, a teenager apprehended by the strikers while he and his gang are getting ready to shoot at the strikers’ tents to intimidate them. No strong conviction motivates him; rather, he says that he came along because some friends at the pool hall suggested it (IDB 738). His convictionless participation underscores Mac’s characterization of what motivates vigilantes: “They like to be cruel. They like to hurt people, and they always give it a nice name, patriotism or protecting the constitution.” If they assist the owners, it’s not out of principle; rather, it’s because doing so licenses them to “burn houses and torture and beat people with no danger. And that’s what they want to do, anyway. They’ve got not guts; they’ll only shoot from cover, or gang a man when they’re ten to one” (IDB 657). True to form, some vigilantes shoot and kill Joy from a safe distance, and at the end of the novel, they do the same to Jim.

The vigilantes are a menace, but Steinbeck does not set up his camera among their ranks as he does with the strikers. There are good reasons to think he had trouble writing from that perspective. However, in a short story called “The Vigilante,” he attempts to

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60 When he first took a crack at writing about the California’s migrant families, he produced a 70,000-word manuscript under the title of “L’Affaire Lettuceberg” about the 1936 Lettuce Strikes in his hometown, Salinas. Steinbeck was outraged at the persecution the workers suffered at the hands of authorities and vigilante groups, and “L’Affaire” was
capture their mindset. The story opens in the aftermath of a lynching with a member of the mob, Mike, coming out of the frenzy and gazing on the man they’ve murdered. He looks at the scene but feels that “[h]e wasn’t seeing enough of it [. . . .] His brain told him this was a terrible and important affair, but his eyes and feelings didn’t agree. It was just ordinary.”⁶¹ *Ordinary* is an unexpected word to use at the sight of a corpse dangling from a tree, but it does not mean Mike is bored by the scene, as though he’s participated in so many lynchings as to no longer find them noteworthy. Instead, participating in the mob had sent him into a frenzy that promised some break with the normal order of things, and now that the thing is done, he is coming to the disappointing realization that nothing has fundamentally changed in his life. He helped do this terrible deed, but his life is strangely untouched by it. He feels neither remorse from having helped torture and kill a man, nor shame (or pride) at his participation, nor even the fear of punishment, as he knows full well that the sheriff will not pursue the matter. Mike’s disappointment at the meaninglessness of the killing soon gives way to a feeling of loneliness, and he goes to a nearby bar to seek company. For him, the lynching offered the false, fleeting satisfaction of doing something seemingly remarkable and feeling himself part of a unified crowd.

Steinbeck casts the vigilante’s experience of group belonging in terms of ecstasy and his return to the ordinary like coming out of a trance. “You look like you been

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walking in your sleep,” the bartender tells Mike, who says “[t]hat’s just how he feels.”\textsuperscript{62}

The idea that people could be taken over en masse by a fugue state seemed to resolve a confusion for Steinbeck—how could seemingly normal, good-natured people could band together to commit atrocities? In an early version of his phalanx argument, he cites a different lynching and comments that when the group is stimulated to viciousness, it can “eliminate the kindly natures of its units.”\textsuperscript{63} However from a phenomenological standpoint such an explanation is unsatisfying because it suspends first-person experience entirely. Beauvoir and Sartre fill in the gaps because both wrote about the anxiety that can move people to cruelty.

In \textit{The Ethics of Ambiguity}, Beauvoir lays out a progression of worldviews based on how a person can fail to come to grips with their contingency and freedom.\textsuperscript{64} The first she calls the sub-man (\textit{sous-homme}), an inversion of Nietzsche’s super-man (not to be confused with the SS racial fiction of \textit{Der Untermensch}). This label designates a person who flees his freedom by taking “refuge in the ready-made values of the serious world.” However, the sub-man does so without attachment to any values, making him politically pliable: “One day, a monarchist, the next day, an anarchist, he is more readily anti-semitic, anti-clerical, or anti-republican.” The sub-man will latch onto any value because he does not strive to realize the value itself so much as to oppose the projects of others. This contrarianism is not principled; rather, it is a flight from his own defining trait, namely, his inability to envision a project: “No project has meaning in the world disclose by such an existence [. . . .] The sub-man makes his way across a world deprived of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[62] ibid.
\item[63] Steinbeck, \textit{A Life in Letters}, 75.
\item[64] Beauvoir would look back on this progression as flawed insofar as it treats only the moral significance of the personalities and lacks any historical detail. However, I see this same quality as a strength in that it makes the categories a portable heuristic, not tied to particular situations. See \textit{After the War}, 67.
\end{footnotes}
meaning toward a death which merely confirms his long negation of himself.”65 Living for nothing, the sub-man thinks it good sport to reduce other people to a similar level of insignificance.

In Anti-Semite and Jew, Sartre addresses the social dimension of the vigilante personality in his analysis of the will to hate driving the antisemitic worldview. Antisemitism, he argues, is based not on some qualities about Jews; rather, hating Jews is an alibi for the antisemite’s fearful relationship to his or her own freedom. Afraid of “every kind of solitariness,” antisemites, like vigilantes, take comfort both in being what they already are and in being members of the crowd. The “goal” of antisemitism and all other bigotries is “to create an elite of the ordinary.”66 They are proudly mediocre because it assures them they are nobody in particular, neither more nor less than the average sort of person in their group. (One of Sartre’s innovations in this essay is to give Heidegger’s das Man a political edge). Authentic freedom entails the anxiety of undertaking a project without guarantee of success, as well as offering something to others and making oneself available to their judgements. The antisemite and the vigilante retreat from this anxiety and solitude: “He wants his personality to melt suddenly into the group and be carried away by collective torrent.”67 For antisemites and vigilantes, sadism is an ersatz project that they take up in the safety of groups and drop as soon as they are out of them.

Sartre and Beauvoir shed light on how the vigilante-personality is chosen in flight from anxiety and solitude, and viewing In Dubious Battle through an existentialist lens

65 Beauvoir, Ethics of Ambiguity, 44-5.
66 Sartre, Anti-Semite and Jew, 22-3.
67 Ibid. 30
reveals what I want to call the vigilante temptation. The novel features plenty of situations in which characters do not become outright vigilantes but find themselves drawn toward the vigilante attitude. Jim’s late father, a former slaughter-house worker, is a case in point. Fed up with the indignities and immiseration of his lot in life, he lashed out by fighting police and trying to dynamite his old workplace, but the problem is that driven by rage, he could not find a cause to commit himself to. “He never took any position that lasted” (IDB 761). Jim remembers a time his father was brawling in the street and got smashed on the head. When Jim found him, he was “walking in big circles,” a (typically Steinbeckian) heavy-handed symbol for the directionlessness of the father’s rage. It is not hard to imagine that under different influences, he might have been seduced by the company and purpose offered by vigilantism. But where there is temptation there is also a countervailing urge to opt for the more virtuous course, and the novel offers a better mode of group-belonging in the figure of the strikers.

3.6 Conversion to Authenticity

Just as Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s phenomenological analyses constitute a kind of “vice ethics” of the vigilante personality, which Steinbeck describes but does not adequately explained, so his sentimentalized vision of solidarity stages the ethics of freedom that Sartre, influenced by Beauvoir, would move toward in the late ’40s.68 Being and Nothingness famously ends with Sartre announcing a subsequent work on ethics that never ended up appearing, but in 1983 his executor, Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre, published his notes for the book under the title Cahiers pour une morale (translated to English as Notebooks for an Ethics in 1992). It is always a dodgy prospect to make critical hay out

68 See Sonia Kruks, “Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre about Freedom.”
writings an author decided not to publish, but my interest in them here is for their suggestive quality.

The most important theme for my purposes is conversion, a word that recurs throughout the notebooks and appears in Being and Nothingness, where it seems to have been a late addition. Section II of Chapter 3 (“Concrete Relations with the Other”) details how the struggle between two consciousnesses can manifest in indifference, desire, hatred, and sadism, and if that were all to be said on the matter, it would be a decidedly grim view of human relations. But in a footnote at the very end of the section, Sartre says that this is not his final word on intersubjectivity: “These considerations do not rule out the possibility of a morality of deliverance and salvation. But this can be achieved only after a radical conversion, which we cannot discuss here” (BN 543; EN 453). The conversion he has in mind is from inauthenticity to authenticity, and to say there are theological overtones in Sartre’s footnote would be an understatement. In her marvelous study of the religious inheritance of atheistic existentialism, Noreen Khawaja argues that “the philosophical notion of personal authenticity developed by existential thinkers and the religious notion of conversion developed in Protestant theology” do not just bear a superficial resemblance; they “are actually part of the same history.” Sartre (among others) inherits and transforms a fundamentally Protestant discourse of personal salvation in which “decision has come to be a bearer of spiritual value.”69 A committed atheist, Sartre would reject the theological framework of his spiritual ancestors, but thinking of authenticity in terms of conversion sheds light on In Dubious Battle.

69 Khawaja, The Religion of Existence, 68.
For Sartre the conversion to authenticity has both a personal dimension (an intensification of experience) and an interpersonal one (replacing the agonistic view of intersubjectivity with a warmer, more communitarian one). Although I will discuss them separately below, the discussions will bleed into one; indeed, what I have called two “dimensions” might better be thought of as two faces of the same spiritual movement, for lack of a better term. Finally, a word of caution—Sartre is clear about what authenticity is not. For one, it is not an end one may aim at: “If you seek authenticity for authenticity's sake, you are no longer authentic.”\footnote{Sartre, \textit{Notebooks for an Ethics}, 4.} One cannot try to be authentic because authenticity is not a state. For this same reason, one cannot arrive at authenticity, as though it is a higher plane of consciousness or a step toward enlightenment. Instead, authenticity is a qualify of action.

At the personal level, the conversion entails an intensification of one’s experience, which means becoming more responsive to—more alive to—one’s situation. To understand this aspect of authenticity, recall the discussion of inauthenticity in \textit{Being and Nothingness}. Authenticity for Sartre would overcome the dialectic of bad faith and sincerity. As I argued in the previous chapter, in bad faith, one flees one’s freedom either by regarding oneself determined by circumstances or by imagining an airy, empty freedom totally unmoored from facticity. Seeing someone in this sort of bad faith (Sartre’s example of the homosexual in denial) can provoke accusations of insincerity, such as the friend who admonishes, “Admit that you are a homosexual!” But this corrective attitude, sincerity, is also ultimately another manifestation of bad faith because it would try to transform airy, empty freedom into the thing-like passivity of the former
kind of bad faith. In other words, from the vantage point of authenticity, there is no meaningful difference bad faith and sincerity—they are both modes of inauthenticity in that they are attempts to *be* something rather than own up to one’s contingency and freedom. Is there any way out of this damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don’t vision of the self? For Sartre, authenticity is primarily a quality of action, not an attribute of self-identity.

A great deal of confusion might be avoided if instead of using the Heidegger-Sartrean noun form (*Eigentlichkeit*, *l’authenticité*), we stick to the adverbial form, because while one cannot *be* authentic, one can act *authentically*. When one acts authentically, one acts directly on one’s situation, without accompanying it with the thought that one is being the sort of person who acts in such and such a way. Sartre uses the example of giving water to a thirsty person: “I see that poor fellow who is thirsty, I give him water because water immediately appears as desirable for him.” This sort of action is authentic, but if “I give him water because my Me is one that does good,” it is inauthentic.71 An observer might not be able to tell the difference, or at least would have trouble, because the distinction is to be found not in the motions I perform, but in the spirit in which I perform them. Am I doing good out of the sense of duty or satisfaction that comes from doing good, or am I responding to the other’s needs without a second thought? In fact, “without a second thought” is a sound English idiom that captures the distinction Sartre is making.72

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71 Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 480.
72 Moral philosophers have a great deal to say about this distinction. A good introduction to such discussions is Michael Stocker’s influential paper, “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories.” Stocker uses the example of visiting a friend in a hospital. If the visitor explains they came not out of concern for the patient, but because it is their moral duty to check in on friends, the patient might rightfully feel there is something cold and morally egotistical about the visitor. See Stocker, “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories.”
Such action is an intensification of experience because in the moment of acting authentically, one is attuned to the possibilities available in the specific situation one finds oneself in, rather than clinging to a self-image that can blind a person to their options. Acting authentically, one takes on “a waxlike flexibility depending on circumstances” instead of holding fast to a reified vision of one’s identity. Sartre is particularly alert to how authenticity can manifest in situations of hardship, and this attunement to one’s situation signals “an affirmative and even joyful approach to existence” insofar authentic action transforms despair into courage.

Conversion is expressed in In Dubious Battle in the motif of waking up. Before Jim is admitted to the party, he must undergo an interview with Harry Nilson, who comments on how Jim acts “half asleep.” Jim tells him, “I feel dead. Everything in the past is gone,” and he explains that his mother and father have both died and that he has given up his only residence to join the party. When pressed to explain why he wants to join the Party, Jim tells Harry about how while he was in prison (on a trumped-up charge), he met members of the Party. “Their lives weren’t messes. They were working toward something. I want to work toward something. I feel dead. I thought I might get alive again.” Just this conversation is stirring enough for Harry to notice a change in Jim. “You’re waking up, Jim. You’re looking better” (IDB 537-9).

The novel frequently uses the metaphor of waking to indicate the alertness that accompanies the dawning of a sense of purpose, especially as an alternative to fits of rage. Soon after arriving in the Torgas Valley, Jim and Mac successfully get the men talking about strike, but it is just talk until old Dan falls through a faulty ladder and

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73 Sartre, Notebooks for an Ethics, 474.
74 Khawaja, The Religion of Existence, 63
breaks his hip. The men are outraged that one of them, and an old man at that, should suffer such a serious injury because he’s been given shoddy equipment. “The growl of the men, and the growl of their anger arose. Their eyes were fierce.” They are about to attack a supervisor, but Jim seizes the spotlight and tells them that they need to help Dan. “The men seemed to awaken from a sleep” and set to building a make-shift stretcher and carrying Dan to safety. In this scene, waking up means becoming alert to their surroundings (the injured man, the materials available to make a stretcher), but just as importantly, it means the group does not give into its impulse toward frantic violence. Jim diverts their anger and appetite for vengeance into a positive, caring project, and having begun to act in unison, they soon go on strike (IDB 607).

Although Sartre says authenticity is not a state, the novel challenges this claim in the figure of Mac, the experienced field agent, whose defining trait seems to be the “waxlike flexibility” that Sartre described. “We just have to use any material we can pick up,” he tells Jim, and this sentence explains not only his approach to organizing but his whole modus vivendi. He is keenly attuned to the opportunities offered in any situation. He advises Jim to start smoking because offering and bumming cigarettes is one of the easiest ways to strike up a conversation. When he and Jim visit a small orchard owner to get permission for the strikers to camp on his land, Mac heaps praise on the man’s dogs, sensing that will be the easiest way to win the man over. In his ability to work every situation he finds himself in, he is an instance of “the man of skill” type that repeatedly appears in Steinbeck’s fiction, but he puts a uniquely political twist on the figure.75 The material he works is other people. Authenticity may not be a state, but in the figure of

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75 See Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck, 104.
Mac we see how it might be, as Marjorie Grene suggests, a virtue (in the Aristotelian sense of a cultivated disposition).\textsuperscript{76}

But while Mac is opportunistic, he is not cynical. At one point Doc Burton says tells him, “You’re a mystery to me. You imitate any speech you’re taking part in. When you’re with London and Dakin [two of the strike leaders] you talk the way they do. You’re an actor.” Mac responds that he’s not an actor at all. “Speech has a kind of feel about it. I get the feel, and it comes out, perfectly naturally. I don’t try to do it. I don’t think I could help doing it” (IDB 639). His gift for blending into the company of others anticipates Highsmith’s Tom Ripley, but as we will see, whereas Tom Ripley assiduously rehearses his imitations, Mac effortlessly slides into the idiom of other men. According to Peter Lisca, Mac and Jim “voluntarily renounce their individuality” in order to pursue the revolution, but that is not quite correct.\textsuperscript{77} While it is true that they seem to have overcome a concern for exploring the recesses of their own self (in the mode of Proust, say), from an existentialist perspective, their total commitment to the ultimate goal of revolution and their attunement to whatever in their situation can facilitate it speaks to what I am calling here an intensified experience. Or put differently, they renounce (if they ever had) a bourgeois vision of the individual, and in compensation they receive a more vivid attunement to the present and future.

They also receive a more hopeful vision of relations with other people, and this takes me to the second, interpersonal dimension of the conversion of authenticity, by which a warmer, more communitarian vision of the social replaces the agonistic view of consciousnesses locked in combat. When Jim joins the party, Harry Nilson warns him

\textsuperscript{76} See Grene, “Authenticity: An Existential Virtue.”
\textsuperscript{77} Lisca 121
that he does not know what he’s getting himself into, to which responds that he has nothing to lose. Harry’s reply is auspicious: “‘Nothing except hatred,’ Harry said quietly. ‘You’re going to be surprised when you see that you stop hating people. I don’t know why it is, but that’s what usually happens’” (IDB 540). Indeed, the novel presents several situations in which Jim or Mac might get angry and confront people, but instead they restrain themselves to take a more generous approach to others.

After taking a job on the orchards to get closer to the men, a supervisor scolds Jim for working slowly. Jim snaps at the man and the two almost come into conflict, but Jim checks himself and half-apologizes, restoring peace for the moment (IDB 583). A similar incident occurs later once the strikers have set up camp on a small orchard-owner’s farm. Some of the strikers have been tasked with guarding the property against vigilantes, but Mac discovers they’re all resting in the barn. “Mac spluttered with anger, but he quickly controlled himself, and when he spoke his voice was soft and friendly” (IDB 680). Such acts of restraint reflect the dedication of party operatives to furthering their agenda by avoiding petty conflicts, but it would be a mistake to diminish them for that reason. Although the example of giving water to a thirsty man I cited earlier would seem to privilege spontaneous action, Sartre does not expound a Romantic, expressive individualism in which being true to oneself means “espousing the inner elan, the voice or impulse.”\textsuperscript{78} Giving a thirsty man water because one is attuned to his freedom does not entail that one must strive to be spontaneous in all situations. The fact that Mac and Jim have committed themselves to human liberation provides the motivation to check their

\textsuperscript{78} Taylor, 	extit{Sources of the Self}, 374.
ugly feelings and exchange them for more tender ones, thereby avoiding the combative struggle for recognition that marks inauthentic modes

3.7 Sentimental Realism

Another corollary of conversion that bears on *In Dubious Battle* is what might be thought of as liberating objectification. According to Thomas Anderson, “Conversion removes attempts at domination and conflict, because the converted individual renounces attempts to be in total control of her own being [. . . .] The fact that others objectify her and thus give her a dimension of being, her being-object, that she cannot control does not ‘trouble’ her.”79 Before conversion, one feels alienated by the other’s look, which steals my world from me. But after conversion, what previously might have been experienced as theft by the other is experienced instead as generosity from me to the other, and vice versa. Put differently, conversion makes reciprocity palatable. One does not mind being used by the (likewise converted) other, nor of using them, because both of us trust that we are on the same team.80

Using people as an expression of respect is a recurring theme in the novel. Jim repeatedly tells Mac that he wants to be of service to the cause, and Mac tells him outright, “I’ll use you more and more [. . . .] I’ll use you right down to the bone” (IDB 603). The comment is not sardonic, and it even ends up being prophetic. In the final scene of the novel, the vigilantes trick Mac and Jim into coming into open view on a field and open fire. Jim is struck in the head and killed instantly, but Mac is safe. He carries Jim’s corpse back to camp and props it up for all the other men to see, then he launches

79 Anderson, *Sartre’s Two Ethics*, 65.
80 “The team” is one of the terms Sartre would turn to when describing concerted group behavior in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. 

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into a speech. “His voice was high monotonous. ‘This guy didn’t want nothing for himself—’ he began. His knuckles were white, where he grasped the rail. ‘Comrades! He didn’t want nothing for himself—’” (IDB 793). This final sentence of the novel is the first time Mac openly addresses the other strikers as “Comrades,” and given how capable he has shown himself at reading people throughout the novel, it’s a good bet that a many of the men would accept the label and join the Party. It is also the second time Mac uses the corpse of a comrade to further the cause, and looking at the first occasion further bridges what I have called “liberating objectification” and sentimentalism.

The first casualty of the fruit-pickers strike is the scrappy rabble-rouser Joy, who comes to the Torgas Valley on the same train as a group of scabs whom the owners have hired. Joy wins several of them over to the strikers’ side, and when he gets off the train with his new men in tow, vigilantes who are hiding in some stores shoot and kill Joy. Some of the strikers advise leaving the body so as not to tamper with the crime scene. But Mac understands that the police are aligned with business interests and insists that the strikers recover the body. He also understands that with some good stage management, Joy’s death has the potential to invigorate the strikers, and he begins planning a martyr’s funeral. This kind of calculation leads some of the men to accuse him of being “a cold-blooded bastard,” but Mac insists he is honoring his dead friend (IDB 655). “Joy wanted to work, and he didn’t know how [...] and now he’s got a chance to work” (IDB 656). Unlike the men who are uncomfortable with capitalizing on a corpse, Mac knew Joy well, and there is good reason to think that his calculation is anything but cold-blooded.

The next day, Joy is lying in a coffin when Mac asks to see the body. The request strikes Doc Burton as out of character. “Sometimes I think you realists are the most
sentimental people in the world” (686), he says. Mac is a realist in the sense that he uses every means available to further the workers’ revolution, so he snorts at Doc: “If you think this is sentiment, you’re nuts.” He explains that he wants to see if the body is fit to be displayed—if it will arouse the right sort of passion in the strikers. Nevertheless, Doc seems to have been at least partly right because the sight of Joy’s corpse moves Mac to an impromptu eulogy: “‘He was such a good little guy,’ he said. ‘He didn’t want nothing for himself. Y’see, he wasn’t very bright. But some way he got it into his head that something was wrong. He didn’t see why food had to be dumped and left to rot while people were starving. Poor little fool, he could never understand that’” (IDB 687). To the satisfaction of the doctor, who eyes Mac with “a curious, half-sardonic, half-kindly smile” of the told-you-so variety, the calculating party operator lapses into hackneyed mawkishness.

Mac’s outburst of sentimentality is not, as Doc Burton implies, a deviation from his coolheaded realism. He and his friends have already agreed to devote themselves to the cause, and Mac recognizes that honoring that pact means honoring it in death. Commenting on the final scene, when Mac displays Jim’s corpse, Will Watson notes that it was standard for union halls in the 1920s and ‘30s to feature a picture of Joe Hill, a labor organizer and songwriter who was executed by the firing squad in 1915. His final words, “Don’t mourn, organize!,” became a rallying cry for labor activists, and they register a sense of mission regarding how one should treat the dead that agrees with Mac’s conduct.81 Jodi Dean similarly argues that although to anticommunists, “the instrumentalism of comrade relations appears horrifying,” among those who adopt the

81 Watson, “Written in Disorder: John Steinbeck’s In Dubious Battle and ‘The Big Strike’,” 41-3.
label “comrade,” such willingness to use others and be used by them speaks to a profound
sense of conviction to collective action.\footnote{Dean, \textit{Comrade: An Essay on Political
Belonging}, 79.} Mac’s objectification of Joy’s and Jim’s corpses, far from being desecration, is an act of adoration.

\section*{3.8 Conclusion}

The shortcomings of the novel’s vision of solidarity are glaring. Jim explains that when he was first introduced to Communist ideas, it was while sharing a cell with Communists: “When I got in jail, there were five other men in the same cell, picked up at the same time—a Mexican and a Negro and a Jew and a couple of plain mongrel Americans like me” (IDB 549). The sentence is doubly disappointing because not only does it suggest Mexican, Negro, and Jew stand apart from plain mongrel Americans, but also it reads an unfulfilled promise: we never see a nonwhite character in the novel. While Gavin Jones recently argued that Steinbeck is sensitive to race (particularly indigenous, Mexican, and East Asian), \textit{In Dubious Battle} represents a world that is entirely white.\footnote{Jones, \textit{Reclaiming John Steinbeck}.} And this racial blindspot is matched by the exclusion of women that I discussed earlier.

Steinbeck’s white, male vision of sentimental community leaves much to be desired, but it nevertheless represents an aspirational vision of solidarity in which commonness of purpose is leavened with an emotional attachment to others. The vision of intersubjectivity in \textit{In Dubious Battle} stands in sharp contrast to the famous final line of Sartre’s \textit{No Exit}, “Hell is other people.” Though it shows a sociological tunnel vision, the novel’s sentimental picture of political belonging evokes a different version of
existentialism, more aptly captured in the final line of *The Second Sex*: “Within the given world, it is up to man to make the reign of freedom triumph; to carry off this supreme victory, men and women must, among other things and beyond their natural differentiations, unequivocally affirm their brotherhood.” While we should not overlook Steinbeck’s limited social view in this novel, appreciating his vision of fraternal solidarity help us see a strain of existentialism in which group belonging, rather than degrading one’s individual existence, affords a higher sort of individualism.

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84 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 766
4. Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* (1953): Existential Naturalism

Steinbeck presents a vision of authenticity in which a person seizes his freedom by joining with others in a common project, resisting the temptation to succumb either to the anonymous solidarity of the crowd or the loneliness of going it alone. But this vision of authenticity is premised on other people treating one as capable of such a commitment, which is to say some baseline symmetry between oneself and others.¹ What if this symmetry is denied from the start?

This question permeates the writings of Richard Wright and is brought out in his commentary on a passage from William James. Discussing the human need for recognition, James wrote, “If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met ‘cut us dead,’ and acted as if we were non-existent things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us.” Wright remarks, “the American Negro has come as near being the victim of a complete rejection as our society has been able to work out, for the dehumanized image of the Negro which white Americans carry in their minds [. . .] exclude the contemporary Negro as truly as though he were kept in a steel prison, and doom even those Negros who are as yet unborn.”² The word *doom* is significant. The rejection of Blacks from full political participation is bound to affect one’s sense of the possible, casting a pall of fatalism over one’s life.

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¹ “Whereas Euromodernity offers resources for whites to live ethical life through dialectics of Self and Other, those in the dimension Fanon describes as “the zone of nonbeing” discover no symmetrical relationship as a basis of recognition with those ‘above’.” (Gordon, “Wright’s Afromodern Search for Political Freedom,” 39).

² Wright, “Introduction,” xxxii-xxxiii
Sitting for an interview conducted in the Fall of 1960, just months before he died, Wright was asked if his novel *The Outsider* (1953) concerns “the theme of implacable fate.” He agrees fate is one of the novel’s themes and says, “I did not want to write an existentialist novel.”³ On the face of it, the sentiment seems unproblematic. What could be more at odds with the existentialist emphasis on individual freedom than the idea that outcomes are determined in advance? Sartre had charged François Mauriac with undercutting characters’ freedom by circumscribing them in “[d]estiny, encompassing and exceeding character, and representing within Nature [. . .] the power of the Supernatural.”⁴ Where there is destiny, presumably there can be at best the illusion of freedom. In fact, despite Wright’s claim, the novel is existentialist through and through, but in its theme of “implacable fate” it is also naturalist. In this chapter, I show how *The Outsider*’s “naturalist existentialism” is in fact a Black existentialism describing the lived experience of constrained agency.

*The Outsider* presents the ultimately failed quest of its anti-hero, Cross Damon, to become an autonomous agent. The novel opens with an epigraph from Job 21.5 in which Job, describing his torments, says, “Mark me, and be astonished, And lay your hand upon your mouth.” Job suffered thanks to a wager between God and Satan, and the mixture of the holy and the demonic in the name “Cross Damon” makes this connection. But whereas Job’s calamities befall him from without, Cross suffers because of his profound sense of dread and his self-sabotaging desires. The idea of stopping one’s mouth is reflected in the novel by Cross’s feeling that his misery is compounded by his inability to

³ Wright, *Conversations with Richard Wright*, 209.
unburden himself: “If only he could talk to somebody! To wander always alone in this desert was too much” (O 713). The Outsider’s paradoxical themes of self-assertion and fatalism expresses Wright’s Black existentialism, which combines a Europeanexistentialist focus on autonomy with a literary naturalistic sense of decline.

Cross is one of those “people fated, like Job, to live a never-ending debate between themselves and their sense of what they believed life should be,” and his is a story of suffering that is as incomprehensible as it is unavoidable (O 387). Trapped in a marriage he resents, browbeaten by his overbearing mother, and threatened with legal action by his pregnant, underage mistress, when the novel opens, Cross is holed up in his Chicago apartment and drinking himself numb, trying to screw up the courage to kill himself. A fortuitous subway accident lets him fake his death and escape his entanglements, but far from feeling liberated, he is more lost than ever in this newfound freedom. By chance he runs into an old friend, and without a second-thought he kills the man (the first of four murders) to protect his secret. He flees to Brooklyn, where he strikes up a friendship with a low-level Communist Party member, and the Party enlist Cross to participate in a scheme to take down a local fascist: one of the CP leaders lives in an apartment building owned by a white supremacist, and Cross is asked to stay at the communist’s apartment and provoke an illegal eviction. The fascist and communist end up coming to blows, and Cross, resenting both for their domineering ways, kills them. Cross eventually kills another communist leader before confessing his crimes to a woman he has fallen for, driving her to leap from a window to her death. At the novel’s conclusion, he is assassinated by party agents.
4.1 Naturalism and Human Freedom

Wright has often been classified as a naturalist novelist, and given that naturalism is a notoriously slippery generic label, a short discussion is in order. As a historical phenomenon, it arose in the late nineteenth-century, roughly halfway between the highpoints of realism and modernism, and critics have tended to align it with one or the other. George Becker folds naturalism into realism on the grounds that naturalism’s penchant for the sordid and unpleasant constitutes a “stark realism.” Raymond Williams quotes an 1881 newspaper that described this “starkness” less generously as “that unnecessarily faithful portrayal of offensive incidents.” On the other side, George Lukács regards naturalism as slippery slope toward modernism insofar as he thinks both represent a breakdown of realism. Naturalism’s brutish characters, tossed about by forces they cannot understand let alone control, lead to the modernist fascination with psychopathology, which Lukács sees as an abortive protest against the socially destructive effects of capitalism. Moreover, naturalism’s documentary drive anticipates what Lukács regards as the modernist obsession with atomized details that are not integrated into the novel’s totality. In spite of their differences, most critics agree with Malcolm Cowley’s description of naturalism as a mode governed by “pessimistic determinism: “The effect of Naturalism as a doctrine is to subtract from literature the whole notion of human responsibility.” Naturalism casts the person as the victim of impersonal forces (biology, socio-economic constraints) that are so overpowering as to snuff out any flicker of self-determination.

5 Becker, “Modern Literary Realism as a Literary Movement,” 35.
6 Williams, The Long Revolution, 275
8 Lukács makes his most succinct argument to this effect in “Narrate or Describe?”
9 Cowley, “‘Not men’: A Natural History of American Naturalism.” 417
But in his fiction, Wright did not subtract agency and responsibility. He does not accept the “beast within” vision of humanity characteristic of nineteenth-century naturalism, nor does he espouse (as it is sometimes claimed) a crude socio-economic determinism of the American revival of naturalism in the ’30s. Instead, he participates in an American left naturalism that reveals “the waste of individual potential because of the conditioning forces of life.” This naturalism shares with its nineteenth-century French ancestor the inevitability of failure and degradation, but it is not expressive of a European bourgeois fear of déclassement; instead, it represents an attempt to understand one’s own miserable position by revealing the social forces that have shaped one’s destiny, and as such it is a critical naturalism. Early in Wright’s first and most successful novel, *Native Son* (1940), Bigger Thomas and his friends stare up at a skywriting plane. “Them white boys sure can fly,” one of them says. “‘Yeah,’ Bigger said, wistfully. ‘They get a chance to do everything.’” When Beauvoir read the novel (on the recommendation of Sylvia Beach, who knew Beauvoir liked violent stories), this scene struck her “as a new version of predestination.” The poor Black youths, raised in segregated Chicago, are condemned to a life of poverty and cannot hope to become pilots. How does that awareness shape their relationship to their own freedom? Or to use Wright’s question, “What quality of will must a Negro possess to live and die with dignity in a country that denied his humanity?” Far from denying human freedom, Wright’s fatalistic fiction explores the way an agent acts when agency is denied.

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12 On naturalism as déclassement, see Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism*, 148-50.
13 Wright, *Native Son*, 459.
14 Fabre, “An Interview with Simone de Beauvoir,” 3.
15 Wright, *Black Boy*, 324-5, Hereafter cited parenthetically as BB.
These are eminently existentialist concerns. Though Wright claims he didn’t want to write an existentialist novel, the fingerprints of existentialism are all over *The Outsider*: most obviously in epigraphs quoting Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as well as a description of the main characters’ library (“Your Nietzsche, your Hegel, your Jaspers, your Heidegger, your Husserl, your Kierkegaard, and your Dostoevsky” (O 820). Some of the novel’s recurring lines evoke Sartre. Wright’s “Man is nothing in particular” smacks of Sartre’s “man is a useless passion.” Others recall the Beauvoir of *The Second Sex*. The novel’s anti-hero, Cross Damon, repeatedly lusts after “woman as body of woman,” recalling Beauvoir’s description of one of the myths of female sexuality, which holds that woman’s “body is grasped not as the emanation of a subjectivity but as a thing weighted in its immanence; this body must not radiate to the rest of the world, it must not promise anything but itself.” At another point, the stubbornly independent Cross scorns his wife’s dependence on him: “Men made themselves and women were made only through men,” he thinks, in a sentence that encapsulates both his misogyny and the central argument of *The Second Sex* (O 421). Reviewing the novel, Arna Bontemps wrote that Wright “has had a roll in the hay with the existentialism of Sartre, and apparently he liked it.” Whether approving or lamenting the influence, most critics have agreed.

**4.2 A Confluence of Two Existentialisms**

Though *The Outsider* clearly participates in the European existentialist tradition, it is also a landmark in the Black existentialist tradition. Frantz Fanon is best remembered as

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It is unlikely Wright read *The Second Sex* given his limited French and the fact that the English translation appeared on February 24th, 1953, just weeks before *The Outsider* hit bookstore on March 18th. Nevertheless, it is likely that Wright discussed the book with Beauvoir, and Wright biographer Michel Fabre notes that it was the book of Beauvoir that most interested him. See Gillman, “The Man Behind the Feminist Bible”; Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 321.

17 Quoted in Rowley, *Richard Wright*, 408.
the thinker who enlists French existentialism to interrogate anti-Black racism, but the two streams of existentialism first meet in the figure of Wright.

Wright’s interest in European existentialism dates to the early 1940s when he and his friend Ralph Ellison discussed Miguel de Unamuno’s *The Tragic Sense of Life*, and Ellison subsequently mentioned to Wright the new existentialist theatre that was brewing in France. After he published *Native Son* in 1940 and became, almost overnight, the most successful Black writer in American history, Wright found himself in the inner circle of New York’s intelligentsia, and through his friend Dorothy Norman (an important publisher, photographer, and civil rights activist), he was introduced to European intellectual developments by an enviable cast of acquaintances. In late 1944, he attended a soirée at Norman’s home in which Hannah Arendt and Paul Tillich talked about existential philosophy. A little over a year later, he met Jean-Paul Sartre who was in the USA for several weeks, and shortly after that he visited Paris on a visa procured at the invitation of Gertrude Stein, with bureaucratic delays smoothed over by Claude Lévi-Strauss (then cultural attaché in New York). In Paris he met Simone de Beauvoir and a number of other prominent French intellectuals. Wright and Beauvoir got along particularly well, and when she came to the USA in spring 1947, he introduced her to several important American writers (including Nelson Algren) and guided her around Harlem. She would dedicate her memoir of the time, *America Day by Day*, to Wright and his wife Ellen.18 After the Wrights emigrated to Paris for good in 1947, they remained close to Sartre and Beauvoir for years.19

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18 Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 299-300, 309
The Outsider was the culmination of Wright’s acquaintance with European existentialism, but for decades critics faulted the novel “as a regrettable concession to literary fashion or as an unexpected turn towards an alien, non-black philosophy.”\textsuperscript{20} This unfavorable opinion began to shift with Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic (1993), in which he argues that Wright’s post-emigration writing constitutes a shrewd investigation into blackness and modernity that cuts across national lines. Gilroy ends his chapter on Wright by asking, “What would it mean to read Wright intertextually with Genet, Beauvoir, Sartre, and the other Parisians with whom he was in dialogue?”\textsuperscript{21} He does not try to answer that question, but a number of scholars have taken up the challenge.

Treatments of Wright’s relationship to French existentialism fall into three camps. First are those who tease out Wright’s influence on the existentialists, an inversion of the older idea that Wright was the passive recipient of their ideas. Margaret Simons (1997) finds Wright’s fingerprints on Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, specifically in how his explication of the psychic effects of racism on Black Americans provided Beauvoir with a model to describe the formation of female subjectivity under patriarchy.\textsuperscript{22} Paying attention to the fanfare that accompanied Wright’s arrival in Paris, Laurence Cossu-Beaumont argues that Wright’s impact on French existentialism was twofold: on the one hand, his discovery in his autobiography Black Boy (1945) that he could use “words as weapons” helped fortify Sartre’s emerging idea about the writer’s duty to be committed, a

\textsuperscript{20} Fabre, “Richard Wright and the French Existentialists,” 39.
\textsuperscript{21} Gilroy, The Black Atlantic, 186.
\textsuperscript{22} Simons, “Richard Wright, Simone de Beauvoir, and The Second Sex,” 176-7
point underscored both by Sartre’s repeated invocations of Wright in What is Literature? and by the decision to publish Black Boy in installments in Les Temps Modernes.23

On the other hand, Wright introduced a serious consideration of race and racism into French existentialist thought, an influence Beauvoir acknowledged.24 Robert Bernasconi pursues a similar line of inquiry and shows how Wright is a catalyst to Beauvoir’s racial awakening. Bernasconi is careful to argue neither that Wright is incidental to Beauvoir’s self-transformation nor that she is the passive recipient of his lessons; rather, their relationship exemplifies the virtues of friendship in that Wright was able to teach Beauvoir about American racial struggles only because Beauvoir “showed herself willing to learn from” him.25 Wright’s influence on French ideas about racism is also taken up by Lauren du Graf, who shows that Wright was more involved that previously acknowledged in the composition of Sartre’s Jim Crow Play, The Respectful Prostitute.26

Although these studies recover Wright’s importance to French existentialism, it is worth noting that Beauvoir, Sartre, and associated French writers never downplayed their appreciation of Wright. Any forgetting of Wright’s importance to French circles is mainly on the part of American critics and can be chalked up to a combination of factors: the framing of Wright as first and foremost a writer in the African-American literary tradition, the American canonization of existentialism as an exclusively European tradition, and the decline of interest in existentialism as field worth arguing over.27

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24 Fabre, “An Interview with Simone DeBeauvoir,” 3. Recently Meryl Altman has argued that the surrealist interest in primitivism had paved the way for Beauvoir’s receptivity to issues of race. See Altman, Beauvoir in Time, chapter 4 (“Beauvoir and Blackness”).
25 Bernasconi, “Richard Wright as Educator,” 168.
26 Du Graf, “Existentialism’s ‘White Problem’: Richard Wright and Jean-Paul Sartre’s The Respectful Prostitute.”
27 George Cotkin argues existentialism’s transition “from vogue to canon” took place in the latter half of the 1950s, and he singles out Walter Kaufmann’s anthology Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre for keeping existentialism
While this first camp focuses on Wright’s influence on French thinkers, the second asks how Wright and the existentialists illuminate one another. Typically these studies pair him with a single French thinker. For instance, Steven J. Rubin argues that Wright’s depiction of revolt overlaps with that of Camus. But the existentialist most often paired with Wright is Simone de Beauvoir. George Yancy shows how Beauvoir’s notion of “the serious man” dovetails with Wright’s insistence that racism is a white problem (not a black one) and uses this framework to read the autobiography of Fredrick Douglass. Sarah Relyea and Lori J. Marso each argue that Beauvoir and Wright offer non-essentialist visions of identity that are attuned to the ways sexism and racism (respectively) condition people’s subjectivities. It is beyond my scope to go into these studies, but it is worth noting they rely on what Kathryn Sophia Belle (formerly Kathryn T. Gines) calls with reference to Wright and the French existentialists the “race/gender analogy”: they see the marginalized consciousness of black men as comparable to that of white women, and in so doing they overlook the unique perspective of black women. This second camp is concerned with particular issues related to political subjectivity rather than with revisiting existentialism as such.

My sympathy’s lie with the third camp, which argues that Wright was an existentialist before he encountered the word. Such is the position of Belle as well as Michel Fabre, Wright’s most exhaustive biographer, both of whom show that French existentialism did
not so much introduce Wright to new thoughts so much as helped him consolidate and clarify existing interests.31 Admittedly, Wright disavowed the label “existentialist” in an interview in 1949, declaring “I am not an ‘existentialist,’” but he undermines this assertion when he finishes the thought by saying, “not even Sartre is in an absolute sense.”32 If Sartre is not an existentialist, nobody is. Based on the obvious engagement with existentialist ideas in *The Outsider*, it would appear that Wright was uncomfortable with the modishness of the label and not the ideas.

There are several reasons to conclude he was an existentialist before he knew the word. In an article written to mark Wright’s emigration to France, Constance Webb wrote an article pondering what impact the relocation would have on his writing and mused that, “The Existentialists explain Wright, and Wright explains the Existentialists.”33 She does not elaborate, but given the fact that she and her husband, C. L. R. James, were friends with Wright, she was in a good position to make such a judgement. James himself would later recall Wright proudly displaying his shelf full of Kierkegaard, saying, “Everything that he writes in those books, I knew before I had them.”34 The idea that Wright was an existentialist before he knew it was also echoed by Ralph Ellison. While acknowledging that *The Outsider* is Wright’s most obvious example of his engagement with existentialist ideas, Ellison says that “he was writing better existentialist fiction when he was writing *Uncle Tom’s Children*” (a collection of short stories Wright published in 1938).35 Sartre and Beauvoir would probably grant this point because in the

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32 Wright, *Conversations with Richard Wright*, 137.
34 James, “Black Studies and the Contemporary Student,” 196.
35 Ellison, “An Interview with Ralph Ellison,” 84
premier issue of *Les Temps Modernes*, they published “Fire and Cloud” ("La feu dans la nueë"), a story from *Uncle Tom’s Children* featuring the sort of high-stakes choice that fascinated the existentialists: a Southern black preacher must choose between instructing his parish to join a Communist-led protest and standing down in accordance with the wishes of the white town officials. It is clear that Wright was finding his own way toward existentialism before he encountered the term, but what is his existentialism and how was he led to it?

These questions take us to the Black existentialist tradition. I already noted that Franz Fanon has long been regarded as the most prominent Black existentialist thinker, but this tradition runs much deeper, and it has been made visible largely through the efforts of philosopher Lewis R. Gordon. He has argued that many Black thinkers were doing existentialism without calling it such, and he has documented the many thinkers working on blackness who have continued to draw on French existentialist ideas about commitment, responsibility, bad faith, alienation, embodiment, and so on—work that challenges the idea that existentialism has been consigned to the archive.

One way to compare the two traditions is to show where they come from. European existentialism arises among trained philosophers in reaction to persistent prejudices in Western philosophy—dissatisfaction with the Hegelian system, the primacy of *theoria* over *praxis*, the withdrawal from the social into the seclusion of the solitary self

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36 Important figures in this movement include US writers including Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison (particularly *The Bluest Eye* [1970]), Cornell West, as well as the genre of the Blues. Others include leading figures in the Négritude movement centered in Paris in the 1950s (Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, Léopold Senghor); in South Africa, Steve Bantu Biko and Noel Manganyi. 1953 was a significant year for Black existentialist novels. In addition to Wright’s *The Outsider*, it saw the publication of the Barbadian George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*, featuring an introduction by Wright, and the French-Tunisian Albert Memmi’s *Pillar of Salt* (*La Statue de Sel*), with a preface by Albert Camus.

Gordon offers a concise overview in his article “Black Existentialism.”
characteristic of *philosophia prima*. Black existentialist thought, on the other hand, arises from the lived experience of the oppression and contradictions of racial modernity. Gordon recounts how early in his career he put out a call for papers on black existentialist philosophy, and among the submissions were those that challenged the term’s viability on the grounds that existentialism was first and foremost a European phenomenon. “In my replies to the skeptics,” writes Gordon, “I asked them if slaves did not wonder about freedom; suffer anguish; notice paradoxes of responsibility; have concerns about agency, tremors of broken sociality, or a burning desire for liberation.”

Gordon’s calls on these critics to reexamine their understanding of not just existentialism but of philosophy, of where it comes from and what it’s for.

Black existentialism might take its name from the European tradition, but Gordon insists that as a body of thought it is not derivative: “Black existentialism would relate to European existentialism or white existentialism not as the latter standing as a universality in relation to which the former is a particularity, but rather of both as particularities of something greater than themselves.”

This justification is aimed at professional philosophers, whose discipline is circumspect about who and what it admits. But Gordon’s remarks should reassure literary scholars who, far more inviting of new voices, might worry that an existentialist discourse colonizes Black voices by reducing them to a European framework. Instead, existentialism of any flavor should be understood as a rediscovery of the act of philosophizing, understood in the broadest sense.

The reorientation called for can be understood by looking at one of the founding myths of French existentialism. Beauvoir describes an evening in 1933 when she and

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37 Lewis R. Gordon, *Existentia Africana* 7
Sartre were at the Bec de Gaz bar with their friend Raymond Aron, who was back in Paris after spending a year in Berlin studying the relatively young philosophical school known as phenomenology. They ordered apricot martinis, the house specialty, and Aron explained to Sartre, “‘You see, my dear fellow, if you are a phenomenologist, you can talk about this cocktail and make philosophy out of it!’ Sartre turned pale with emotion at this.”

He was struck by this promise that philosophy could be grabbed by the ankles and pulled back down to earth where it might illuminate the concrete experiences of everyday life. For Sartre, phenomenology offered a justification and method for such philosophizing.

But Black existentialist thinkers come to a similar position by reflecting on their lived experience. From a Black existential perspective, concepts in European existentialism, take on an a concrete, literal valence. Consider some of Heidegger’s technical terms in Being and Time. The plantation slave, living under “a conditionally commuted death sentence,” would have little difficulty understanding how being-toward-death is constitutive of subjectivity. The indentured sharecropper who labors under unplayable debts, or the young Black man (like Native Son’s Bigger Thomas) who is regarded a criminal until proven innocent, or the Black maid who works under suspicion of stealing the silverware—such figures would surely find something familiar in the idea that Schuld (guilt/debt) is a fundamental feature of Dasein’s orientation to the world. It is beyond my purposes to pursue these parallels in depth, but it would be fruitful to draw more such comparisons, for instance, the Sartrean conjunction of gazing and shame

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39 Beauvoir, Prime of Life 135.
40 JanMohamed, The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death, 19.
(famously taken up by Fanon’s “look, a Negro!” analysis) or how the arbitrary, irrational quality of racist oppression recalls various visions of the absurd.

4.3. **“Colored Man”**

*The Outsider* is not an obvious inclusion in the Black existentialist tradition, not (as one might expect) because of Wright’s hesitations about existentialism; rather, because of the novel’s hesitations about blackness. Cross Damon repeatedly disavows the importance of his race: “Were there not somewhere in this world rebels with whom he could feel at home, men who are outsiders not because they had been born black and poor, but because they had thought their way through the many veils of illusion?” (O 396); “There was no racial tone to his reactions; he was just a man, any man” (455); “Cross’s opportunistic rejection of his former life had been spurred by his shame at what a paltry man he had made of himself [. . . .] His consciousness of the color of his skin played no role in it” (524-5). “Could he allow her to love him for his Negritude when being a Negro was the least important thing in his life?” (678-9). Wright seems to go out of his way to distance himself in this novel from the “race novelist” label that had been attached to him.

Some critics argue that *The Outsider* represents Wright’s attempt to write universal themes. In one of the rare glowing reviews of the novel, Granville Hicks wrote, “The leading character is, to be sure, a Negro, but his principal problems have nothing to do with his race. They are pre-eminently the problems of the human being as such, for this is, so far as I can recall, one of the first consciously existentialist novels to be written by
an American.” Mae Henderson similarly draws a distinction between a novel’s dealing with the “racial dilemma” as opposed to the “human condition,” and Shoshana Knapp argues that we do a disservice to the novel if we read Damon as defined by his race. These thinkers all seem to assume writing about race and writing about the human condition as such are mutually exclusive tasks.

There is no reason to uphold this distinction. To be sure, Wright tired of being pigeon-holed as a “race novelist,” and in his next novel, *Savage Holiday* (1954), his main characters are white. But Wright did not want to leave race aside in *The Outsider*. One of the titles he considered while writing was “Colored Man,” and in a letter to Ralph Ellison describing his new novel, he wrote, “I’ve waded right out into the question of the Negro’s relationship to the Western world.” The dichotomy of “race novel” vs “human condition novel” is false and leads to some of the confusion. Wright was trying to use Black experience as a lens to consider the human condition, and Tommie Shelbie gets it right when he claims, “Wright is reflecting upon the human condition through Black characters, representing Black individuals, even those facing oppressive conditions and violent treatment, as all-too-human embodiments of universal motifs.” Cross Damon is not meant to represent Black people, but he is meant to have, by virtue of his Blackness, access to a particularly critical perspective on society.

This is made clear in Cross’s exchanges with Ely Houston, the District Attorney and the Porfiry Petrovich to Cross’s Raskolnikov. Like Dostoevsky’s police inspector,

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41 Hicks, “The Portrait of a Man Searching,” 1.
43 Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 368
45 Shelby, 123.
Houston figures out that Cross is the criminal he is looking for, but not before several run-ins in which the two play a cat-and-mouse game in which they discuss crime and guilt at a high level of abstraction. Houston has a hunched back, and the self-consciousness that physical feature instills sets him apart from mainstream white American society, giving him an appreciation for the psychological distance Blacks have in American society. He voices the novel’s fullest expression of the connection between Blackness and outsider-status: “The way Negroes were transported to this country and sold into slavery, then stripped of their tribal culture and held in bondage; and then allowed, so teasingly and over so long a period of time, to be sucked into our way of life is something which resembles the rise of all men from whatever it was we came from” (O 499). Black Americans are a bellwether of the transformations of modernity has in store for all, in other words. Their ambivalent situation in regard to white modernity gives them “a double vision, for, being Negroes, they are going to be both inside and outside of our culture at the same time” (O 500).

This “double vision” has been well-explored in Africana studies, most notably in Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy quotes this very phrase and argues that for Wright it is a product of “the Nietzschean idea of perspectival ways of knowing.”46 This is true. Wright did not believe that Blackness offered any wisdom or lessons in itself, as though the mere fact of being marginalized bestowed clarity; rather, he thought it held the potential to open the eyes of those thoughtful individuals (like himself) to see a Gestalt where others saw particulars. In *Black Boy* he describes this perspectival shift as follows: “In my dealings with whites I was conscious of the entirety of my relations with them,

and they were conscious only of what was happening at a given moment. I had to keep remembering what others took for granted; I had to think out what others felt” (BB 187-8). Having to think instead of feel and see totality where others saw particulars can offer some Blacks a critical perspective on white society. Cross himself says as much when he wonders what will become of Black subjectivity if full equality is ever achieved: “Once the Negro has won his so-called rights, he is going to be confronted with a truly knotty problem. . . Will he be able to settle down and live the normal, vulgar, day-to-day life of the average white American? Or will he still cling to this sense of outsidedness?” (O 501). It is clear that Cross hopes for the latter.

But casting double vision as a way of knowing, as Cross and Gilroy do, conceals its agential dimension. How does it manifest in one’s practical being-in-the world? The most dramatic expression is Cross’s comfort with rash murders: when his friend Joe spots him after he is supposedly dead, Cross kills him without delay. When he sees the communist and fascist figures fighting, he seizes the opportunity to murder both. Even his own faked death is not the result of any meticulous planning—the subway crash happens, and he just happens to lose his coat near a body about this same size, leading authorities to assume the body is his. These are not gratuitous acts so much as unpremeditated ones, and Cross’s ability to seize on an opportunity is not a testament to his commitment (as it is for Mac in In Dubious Battle), but to his detachment.

Another offshoot of this detachment is Cross’s feeling that he cannot unburden himself, though he very much wants to. “He yearned to talk to someone; he felt his mere telling his story would have helped [. . .] He had sharp need of a confidant, and yet he knew that if he had had an ideal confidant before whom he could lay his whole story, he
would have instantly regretted it, would have murdered his confidant the moment after he had confided to him his shame” (O 382). Coming early in the novel, this passages anticipates a number of moments in which Cross stifles himself on the assumption that he will not be understood or believed. And to compound his problems, when he does finally tell Eva, a women with whom he has fallen in love, the story of his crimes, he is so distraught that he trembles and sweats, making her think he is deliriously babbling. Cross’s sense that he is fated to isolation ends up being confirmed. This loss of voice is particularly significant in the Black existential tradition.

4.4 “How in hell did you happen?”

Because Black existentialism arises from an attempt to clarify one’s own experience, the “autobiographical moment” plays an central role. Autobiography exposes a contradiction in racist reason: “How could the black, who by definition was not fully human and hence without a point of view, produce a portrait of his or her point of view?”47 Black autobiography is underwritten by a complicated phenomenology of objectification. At the first level, the anti-Black imperative compels Blacks to objectify themselves, a spiritual violence Wright illustrates in recounting an incident form his youth. For a time, he worked as a bellboy in a seedy Memphis hotel, and one of his duties involved bootlegging liquor to white prostitutes (this was in the Prohibition era), which involved seeing the women naked while they entertained clients. During one delivery, he inadvertently glances at one of the naked women, and that small glimmer of consciousness outrages her john: “‘Nigger, what in hell are you looking at?’ the white man asked, raising himself upon his elbows. ‘Nothing, sir,’ I answered, looking suddenly

miles deep into the blank wall of the room” (BB 194). His inadvertent, focused gaze offends the white man because it reveals “a consciousness on my part that infuriated white people,” and the man’s outburst prompts Wright to replace it with a blank gaze that, staring “miles deep into the blank wall,” projected a minimal consciousness that could be satisfied by such meager fare.  

Black autobiography takes this oppressive self-objectification and overlays it with a liberating one. In the act of writing one’s experience of acting like and being treated as an object, the Black autobiographer objectifies himself again, but this time at a higher order. Now the objectification becomes a matter of facing the previous oppression in courage and defiance, and also of inviting others to take up the same position. As Sartre notes, for Wright’s Black readers, this invitation entails seeing “[t]he same childhood, the same difficulties, the same complexes [. . .] In trying to become clear about his personal situation, he clarifies theirs for them.”  

This affirmative autobiographical moment resembles what would be termed “consciousness raising” by US feminists in the 1960s. Wright’s white readers may find their consciousness clarified by disaffirming their experience; Wright’s task with regard to white readers is “implicating them and making them take stock of their responsibilities. He must make them indignant and ashamed.”  

Autobiography is not the sum of Black existentialist thought, but it is an important achievement given the forces militating against an affirmative appropriation of Black subjectivity.

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48 Ibid, 187.
49 Sartre, “For Whom Does One Write?,” 79.
50 Sartre, “For Whom Does One Write?,” 80.
The Outsider’s autobiographical elements have often been noted: both Wright and Cross have overbearing, Seventh-Day Adventist mothers who disapprove of their lifestyle; both move from Chicago to New York, and when Cross tries to conceal his identity, he pretends to be from Memphis, a city Wright lived in as a teenager; both have unhappy first marriages; both run afoul of the Communist Party; both feel themselves intellectually isolated. But The Outsider uses a philosophical voice that is at odds with that of his previous writings. Uncle Tom’s Children and Native Son are written in the objective style typical of existential realism that I described in the introduction: the narrator is like a camera sitting on the main character’s shoulder, seeing what they see, recording their thoughts, but with no perspective or privileged knowledge beyond what the main character’s have. In his non-fiction, such as Black Boy and various journalistic pieces, Wright uses a different sort of “objective” voice, according to his own idiosyncratic use of the term. It calls for its own discussion before turning to the voice in The Outsider.

In Black Boy, he recounts how he grew up a bookish misfit in Jim Crow Mississippi, an experience that taught him to keep quiet to avoid the judgement of others. When he moved to Chicago as a young man, he was used to this self-imposed silence. “Emotionally, I was withdrawn from the objective world; my desires floated loosely within the walls of my consciousness, contained and controlled” (BB 278). “The objective world” here means the opposite of consciousness, much in the same way that Sartre argues that consciousness is in itself nothing other than a digestive power that fills itself up on the external world. Wright locked himself up in his own head, lost interest in

51 For an overview of critical discussions about the autobiographical elements of the novel, see Henderson, “Drama and Denial in The Outsider,” 388.
things, lost a desire to share his perspective with others. He adopted a stoical attitude in
which he practiced being unaffected, but he eventually came to regret that attitude. Later
he met people who shared his interests, and it was liberating. He was able to throw
himself back into the world—the objective world—and become a professional writer as a
result.

He further develops this sense of “objective” in a 1956 speech he delivered to the
Congress of Black Writers and Artists held in Paris. He begins by acknowledging that the
political climate is tense. Black intellectuals were trying to chart a path toward
decolonization, and they were circumspect about how colonized nations might cast off
the imperial yokes of France and Britain without find themselves under the thumb of
either the USA or USSR. William Maxwell has documented the paranoia that marked this
climate, in such venues as the Café Tournon, a meeting place for Black intellectuals:
“Spy stories ricocheted around the walls and stained everyone inside. Regulars disagreed
on who betrayed whom for which intelligence agency.”52 Wright himself had been under
suspicion of working with the US government (unfairly according to Maxwell), and
given his acrimonious break with the Communist Party USA, he knew how hard it was
simply to speak and be heard. He begins his speech to the Congress by acknowledging
“the suspicious, uneasy climate” of the times and how fear of being unfairly accused of
one thing or another tempts a speaker to be cagey and defensive. Wright rejects this
temptation as defeatist. He promises instead to speak objectively, but he immediately

acknowledges that “there is no such thing as objectivity, no such objective fact as objectivity.” How then will he be speak objectivity?

Adopting an “objective attitude” might sound like at attempt to escape one’s subjective positions, but for Wright it is just the opposite; it means assuming one’s subjective position and speaking from it unguardedly, trusting others to listen generously.

If others care to assume my mental stance and, through empathy, duplicate the atmosphere in which I speak, if they can imaginatively grasp the factors in my environment and a sense of the impulses motivating me, they will, if they are of a mind to, be able to see, more or less, what I’ve seen, will be capable of apprehending the same general aspects and tones of reality that comprise my world, that world that I share daily with all other men. By revealing the assumptions behind my statements, I’m striving to convert you to my outlook, to its essential humaneness, to the generality and reasonableness of my arguments.

The word “if” appears three times in the first sentence, along with such hedges as “more or less” and “general aspect and tones of reality,” driving home how even a provisional understanding of another’s position is not an easy thing; it requires sustained and generous attention. But the burden is not only on the audience. The speaker, too, must overcome the temptation to speak evasively and instead talk honestly and courageously.

While the objectivity characterizing Wright’s non-fiction is not the same as that of his early fiction, the two converge in a prose aesthetic that prizes ease of reading and the exposition of a single point of view, whether that be Bigger Thomas in Native Son, Big Boy in “Big Boy Leaves Home” (the first story of Uncle Tom’s Children), or Wright himself in Black Boy and his various addresses. Wright regarded voice as something one discovers or claims rather than simply has, so before I discuss how the narration of The Outsider veers from this pattern, I must further pursue the theme of Wright’s discovery of

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53 Wright, White Man, Listen!, 703.
54 Ibid., 704.
his own voice. Three currents in his life help explain how this uneducated Black man from Jim Crow Mississippi learned to value and formulate his own perspective.

The first is the Communist Party of America, in particular the Chicago John Reed Club and its short-lived publication, *Left Front* (1933-35). Wright describes how he attended a John Reed club meeting to humor a Jewish friend, doubtful that white intellectuals could overcome their own prejudices and take him seriously. To his surprise, he was greeted as an equal, and when he mentioned he dabbled in writing, they asked him to sit in on an editorial meeting for *Left Front*. That magazine, like its more famous cousin publication, the *New Masses*, welcomed amateur writers on the conviction that everybody has a valid perspective on the class struggle. In *The Culture Front*, Michael Denning shows just how inviting such publications were to amateurs, even those who had little writing experience or formal education (Wright himself never got past grade 8). One call for submissions in the *New Masses* read, “Do not be passive. Write. Your life in mind, mill and farm is of deathless significance in the history of the world. Tell us about it in the same language you use in writing a letter. It may be literature—it often is. Write. Persist. Struggle.” 55 For Wright, the trust put in him that his perspective mattered and the promise of intellectual community was transformative: “I had lived so utterly isolated a life that the club filled for me a need that could not be imagined by the white members who were becoming disgusted with it, whose normal living had given them what I was so desperately trying to get.” 56 He learned from the John Reed club that he had something to say, and even after he left the Communist Party, he had nothing but praise for the education it provided.

55 Quoted in Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 204.
56 Wright, *Black Boy*, 308.
The second factor that helped Wright develop his voice was his acquaintance with the Chicago School of sociology. It is not clear how precisely Wright came into contact with its members, but in the thirties, he was employed by a subsection of the Works Progress Administration called the Federal Arts Project, a relief scheme owing its existence to the New Deal that provided artists a low but reliable salary to create works of public interest. Wright wrote some ethnographic essays, and it is likely these efforts brought him into contact with the Chicago school. Whatever the reason, Wright maintained close connections with faculty, and when Horace Cayton and St. Clare Drake published *Black Metropolis: A Study in Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945), a landmark text in urban sociology and African-American studies, Wright, then at the height of his fame, penned an introduction.

When he met the grand old man of American sociology, Robert E. Park, in the early forties, Wright recalls how the seventy-seven-year-old professor stood up to greet him and asked, “How in hell did you happen?” The answer might have come from Park’s own writing on “the marginal man,” a concept that much impressed Wright. Park theorizes that migration produces the marginal man, who stands between two cultures and “learns to look upon the world in which he was born and bred with something of the detachment of a stranger.” Given that Wright had taken part in the Great Migration and then emigrated to France later, the idea left a lasting impression on him, and it is a short distance from the American sociological figure of the marginal man to the French existentialist figure of *l’étranger*.

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Founded in 1892, the University of Chicago’s department of sociology was the cradle of American sociology, and in the first half of the twentieth century, it was known for its pioneering research into urban society, juvenile delinquency, and symbolic interactionism (a term coined by Blumer, based on his promulgation of Mead’s ideas, to describe a paradigm of sociological research that studies the social meaning of everyday behavior). In Wright’s day, the Chicago school was known for an ecological approach that studied how individual personalities develop by detaching themselves from their environments, and Carla Cappetti has argued that two of the school’s signature forms of “data” illuminate Wright’s work: the informant, a member of a community who explains to the sociologist how the community works, and “the participant-observer,” the researcher who immerses herself in the scene of study, recognizing that it is too nuanced and dynamic to study from afar.\textsuperscript{60} This approach to sociology looked beyond cold data to the lived experience of those in the community being studied, and it further legitimated the first-personal perspective, especially from those in historically neglected groups.

The last, most diffuse factor in Wright’s claiming of his voice is the lived fact of Blackness. White supremacy militates against black reclamation of experience, which is why such experience becomes philosophically important in the Black existentialist tradition. In asserting this claim, Gordon embraces an axiom that has often been used to dismiss Black thought: “White intellectuals provide theory; black intellectuals provide experience.”\textsuperscript{61} It is only a dismissal if one sells experience cheap, which existentialism of any stripe rejects. It is said that white supremacy objectifies Blacks, but objectification is not monochromatic, as though one is treated either as a human, entitled to equal

\textsuperscript{60} Cappetti, “Sociology of an Existence: Wright and the Chicago School,” 265.
\textsuperscript{61} Gordon, Existentia Africana, 29.
consideration as the speaker, or as a thing. Rather, anti-Black objectification often takes the form of enforced immaturity, which in the case of a Black male means being treated and addressed as “boy.” The man-boy distinction is Wright’s preferred framework for exploring the claim to Black experience, and the extent to which the theme occupied him is suggested by glancing at some of his titles: “Big Boy Leaves Home,” Native Son, Black Boy, “The Man Who Was Almost a Man,” “Big Black Good Man,” “Man of All Work,” “The Man Who Killed a Shadow,” “The Man Who Went to Chicago.” The working title “Colored Man” recalled Wright’s previous book (Black Boy) and also signals a new stage of maturity.62

4.5 The Metaphysical Voice

If claiming his voice was so important to Wright throughout his career, then how does The Outsider veer from it, and what are the larger implications of that deviation?

An entry point is the semantic recursiveness of the narration: “his consciousness stirring vaguely with the desire for desire” (393), “woman as body of woman was not in his consciousness now, but there was rolling terribly through his memory a memory of it” (411), “a hope of hope” (471), “feeling proud that he was conscious of their consciousness,” “proud of his pride” (775). Wright may have been channeling Gertrude Stein, whom he held in high regard and with whom he struck up an intellectual alliance, a most unlikely one given their vastly different backgrounds—she was a cosmopolitan, upper middle class New England Jewish lesbian; he was a straight, Southern Black man with little formal education and a decidedly provincial upbringing. Nevertheless, Wright learned from Stein to appreciate Black vernacular as a literary language, based almost

62 Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, 368.
entirely on the Black-narrated “Melanchta” section of Stein’s *Three Lives* (1909). Stein used tautology to create a hypnotic effect, and her most enduring lines—“a rose is a rose is a rose” and “there’s no there there”—have a gnomic quality, seeming to offer some gem of insight if one can only find the right way to understand, and at the same time prompting a suspicion that they don’t mean anything at all. A line such as, “Cross was proud and was proud of his pride and knew it” has a similar effect (775). Cross is not only proud, but he is proud that he is proud, and he *knows* that he is proud that he is proud. What can this possibly mean? Yet it does not immediately announce itself as nonsense either. The tightly controlled, objective voice that is so important in Wright’s oeuvre is faltering.

The Stein comparison only takes us so far—Wright seems uninterested in the mellifluous, incantatory dimension of speech Stein is after. Instead, the reflexivity suggests a probing quality, as though an experience (like that of pride) is insufficient or naive, and further excavation is called for, even if it turns up more of the same. Put differently, Wright is not aiming at a modernism of literary artistry; rather, he is dabbling in what in France in the ‘40s was called the metaphysical novel. This will be an odd claim if one understands “metaphysical novel” in the sense Beauvoir describes in “Literature and Metaphysics” (1946). Her version is in line with what I described as existential realism in the introduction: “the novelist claims to reconstitute on an imaginary plane this experience itself as it appears prior to any elucidation.” For Beauvoir, a novel is metaphysical when it draws the reader in, presenting the world it all its ambiguity and opacity as something to be disclosed by a character-agent. Beauvoir

64 Beauvoir, “Literature and Metaphysics,” 270.
distances the metaphysical novel from both the \textit{roman à thèse} that stages a “fully constituted, self-sufficient system,” and the “psychological novel” “devoted to illustrating Ribot, Bergson, or Freud.”\textsuperscript{65} In short, for Beauvoir a metaphysical novel does not purport to explain or expound; rather, it appeals to the reader’s freedom by inviting her to disclose the world through the adventure of reading.

Wright’s metaphysical tendency in \textit{The Outsider} is more in line with Merleau-Ponty. Wright had met Merleau-Ponty a handful of times, but he never read him, so there is no question of influence here. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty’s article “Metaphysics and the Novel” (1945), his most complete statement about a “metaphysical novel,” is a review of Beauvoir’s \textit{L’Invitée (She Came to Stay)} from 1943, so the distance between his vision and Beauvoir’s is a matter of degree. At any rate, I do not claim \textit{The Outsider} is a metaphysical novel \textit{per se}, just that it borrows elements from it. Merleau-Ponty elevates the novel to the heights of philosophy by redefining what “metaphysics” means. “Classical metaphysics could pass for a specialty with which literature had nothing to do because metaphysics operated on the basis of uncontested rationalism, convinced it could make the world and human life understood by an arrangement of concepts.”\textsuperscript{66} Existentialism has discovered that metaphysics is more generalized and less strictly rational: “Man is metaphysical in his very being, in his loves, in his hates, in his individual and collective history. And metaphysics is no longer the occupation of a few hours per month, as Descartes said; it is present, as Pascal thought, in the heart’s slightest movement.”\textsuperscript{67} If we stopped here, the label “metaphysics” would do little more than

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{65} Ibid. 272, 273.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Merleau-Ponty, “Metaphysics and the Novel,” 27.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 28.
\end{itemize}
anoint fiction with the gravity of philosophy, challenging an idea that was already old-fashioned by the 1940s, namely, the idea that novels are nothing but entertainments, good for passing the time but hardly edifying.

To an extent, that is what Merleau-Ponty is doing in the article, and he is specifically defending the unconventional sexual arrangements in Beauvoir’s novel against prudish audiences who might think it lurid trash. The metaphysical element that Merleau-Ponty locates concerns a Hegelian reconceptualizing of the ordinary affects of the novel: “The dramatic situation of L’Invitée could be set forth in psychological terms: Xavière is coquettish, Pierre desires her, and Françoise is jealous. This would not be wrong, it would be merely superficial.”68 The metaphysical comes on the scene when these superficial interpretations are read as expressions of characters’ relationship to their own freedom and to the ontology of Self and Other: “What the characters in this book discover is inherent individuality, the Hegelian self which seeks the death of the other.”69 Paying attention to the interplay of self and other that are expressed in but not contained by the ordinary emotions reveals a truer sort of morality than the moralizer knows. “True morality does not consist in following exterior rules or in respecting objective values: there are no ways to be just or to be saved. One would do better to pay less attention to the unusual situation of the three characters in L’Invitée and more to the good faith, the loyalty to promises, the respect for others, the generosity and the seriousness of the two principals.”70 In other words, for Merleau-Ponty calling a novel “metaphysical” transforms ordinary reading in two ways. First, it enacts a kind of Nietzschean

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68 Ibid., 32.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 40
“revaluation of values” that salvages immoral content from the priggish critic’s wastebasket by endowing it with an extra-moral significance. Second, it bifurcates the ordinary content by casting it as surface concealing a depth.

In “The Metaphysical in Man,” Merleau-Ponty explains this second point further. “Metaphysical consciousness has no other objects than those of experience: this world, other people, human history, truth, culture. But instead of taking them as all settled, as consequences with no premises, as if they were self-evident, it rediscovers their fundamental strangeness to me and the miracle of their appearing.”

Metaphysical consciousness defamiliarizes meaning (as opposed to the Russian formalist defamiliarization of sensory perception), and this act has a communicative dimension because uprooting the individual consciousness makes it available to others, an operation Merleau-Ponty describes as “our strange ability to enter into others and re-enact their deeds.” Metaphysical consciousness means becoming aware of our own individual finitude and that of other people, but also leaping across the void discovered to lie between us, making my perspective neither merely my own nor mistaking it for a best, truest framing of the world.

The semantic recursiveness of The Outsider reflects the metaphysical novel’s uprooting of subjectivity. A sentence like, “Cross was proud and was proud of his pride and knew it,” may not uncover Hegelian depths, but it suggests an unsatisfactoriness of the surface, as though the sentence “Cross was proud” is superficial and calls for elaboration. Wright is no longer writing in the “objective” style as I characterized it above. The narrator focalizes Cross Damon’s consciousness, but there is another layer of

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72 Ibid.
voice. Is it the voice of another who suggests his experience is superficial, or does it voice another dimension of his own consciousness? It is not clear. Take another example: Cross is on his way to a hotel to see Hilton, another Communist Party member. “Was he in? And what would he say to Hilton when he found him? He did not know. He was in the throes of an irrational compulsion to see Hilton” (683). The first three sentences are straightforward focalization, consistent with the impersonal, camera-like narratorial conventions of existential realism. But does Cross think he is in the throes of an irrational compulsion? Or is the narrator telling us that he is in the throes of this compulsion without himself realizing it? The novel is riddled with such passages that raise the question of whether we are in the first- or third-person.

This technique, free indirect discourse, produces a number of effects. Flaubert is often credited with inventing the technique, and he uses it both to pass judgement on his characters and to de-subjectivize experience by transform characters’ thoughts into aesthetic objects. Wright is not ironically condemning Damon in his use of the technique; instead, he uses the technique to metaphysically ground Damon’s experience. Other critics have noted these shifts in voice but not done justice to the ambiguity. Michel Faber regarded them simply as imperfections, as though Wright let his writing get away from him. Mae Henderson, more in line with my purposes, reads the shifts from third restricted to third person omniscient as part of the novel’s strategy to stage Cross’s “inability to transcend his environment.” She further argues that the novel combines currents of naturalism and existentialism: “If existentialism, which posits personal freedom, correlates with the third person restricted voice, then naturalism, which limits

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73 See Jameson, Antinomies of Realism, 178-9.
74 Faber, Unfinished Quest, 372.
personal freedom, correlates with the omniscient voice.” The suggestion is appealing, but it does not go far enough. For one, it relies on an oversimplified version of existentialism. More importantly, it treats existentialism and naturalism as fundamentally incompatible worldviews, a dichotomy that also finds expression in Henderson’s treating what I see as ambiguous narrative voicing as alternating between clear-cut versions of the third person.

Instead, the ambiguity of the voice is a face of the novel’s fatalism. Fatalism is not just the inevitability of an outcome; it also names the idea that one does not know what one is doing, that a person cannot get a grip on their actions. When Cross murders one man, it is after he has already bashed him to the ground and defeated him. The text reads, “Cross stared for a moment. He was not through. The imperious feeling that had impelled him to action was not fulfilled” (O 612). It is tempting to read the last sentence as the voice of an omniscient narrator, but it might also be Cross’s own sense that he cannot get a hold of himself. Regardless of the reading one might settle on, it is clear that Cross cannot bring his understanding and his will in line, and in that sense he is not an agent in the strict sense. Christine Korsgaard writes that “in order to be an agent, you need to be unified—you need to put your whole self, so to speak, behind your movements [. . . .] Otherwise, you are just a mere heap of impulses, and not an agent at all.” The competing voices stage this fracturing of unity and loss of self-determination.

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76 Korsgaard, Self- Constitution, 213.
4.6 Conclusion

It would seem there is little hope for authenticity in this fatalistic vision of agency. Insofar as Wright offers a positive vision for self-determination and relations with others, it comes in a sappy dying speech in which Cross says, “Alone a man is nothing. . . Man is a promise that he must never break. . .” (O 839). We have to get along, not go it alone, be good to one another—fine enough lessons, but hardly befitting the high philosophical pretensions of the novel. This empty cant is the result of Wright’s retreat from political affiliation. He was not that species of intellectual who moved from the Communist Party to the American right, like Dos Passos, Max Eastman, and various writers associated with Partisan Review. Rather, Wright seems to espouse what Amanda Anderson has called a “bleak liberalism”: a commitment to the liberal values of equality, freedom, and both individual and collective self-actualization, but embraced as a last resort in light of horrors of the 1930s and ‘40s.77

On the other hand, what I have called Wright’s critical naturalism exposes the wasted potential of the individual, and this critique aligns with what Gilroy terms a “politics of fulfillment” that is often expressed in Black thought: this is a politics that asks the West to make good on its ideals in the hopes that “a future society will be able to realize the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished.”78 From this perspective, formulating a vision of authenticity is a secondary concern because the vision of individual and group self-actualization is already known—it’s the Enlightenment ideals that imperial societies preached but allowed to be practiced only by

77 Anderson, Bleak Liberalism, 18-45.
78 Gilroy, The Black Atlantic, 37.
a select few. The picture of constrained agency presented in a existential naturalism is more concerned with the pathologies of agency that result from an oppressive situation.
5. “He’s Just a Nothing”: Skepticism in Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955)

Patricia Highsmith never met Beauvoir or Sartre. In the late ‘40s, before she had published a novel, she expected to meet Beauvoir at a party in New York, but it did not pan out.¹ She read Sartre’s *What is Literature?* and praised it in the highest terms (“I occasionally feel as though I hold art itself in my hands!”). I have found no evidence that she ever read Beauvoir, but Beauvoir read her. In *All Said and Done* (the fourth and final volume of her autobiography), Beauvoir praises Highsmith’s novels for how they “begin by creating surroundings, an atmosphere and a set of characters that are sufficiently probable for me to be able to believe in their existence.” She appreciates what narrative theorists now call Highsmith’s “world building,” but in accordance with her phenomenological conviction that world is disclosed through agency, Beauvoir finds that the “objective world” (my term) alone is not enough (most science fiction fails to interest her for this reason). The fictional world needs to be traversed by interesting characters, and Beauvoir stipulates that among Highsmith’s novels, she finds herself drawn to those that feature a murder. The others have heroes whose psychology is too conventional to hold her attention. She is drawn to Highsmith’s “endearing criminals” (*attachants criminels*).²

Beauvoir no doubt has in mind Tom Ripley, the anti-hero of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, (published 1955 and translated as *Monsieur Ripley* in 1956), and the four subsequent novels of Highsmith’s so-called “Ripliad.” At first glance, Tom is the very image of the existentialist hero. A conman whose MO is impersonation, he intuitively

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¹ Wilson, *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith*, 136.
² Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 172.
grasps the Sartrean critique of sincerity. He understands that identity is an illusion and that a person can become whomever they like by acting the part. In a recent article comparing Highsmith and Iris Murdoch, Sabrina Lovibond argues that while both are “mediators of the existentialist sensibility” who inherit the Sartrean theme of contingency, they take it in different directions. Murdoch criticizes Sartre (and existentialism more broadly) for what she regards as its horror of “the gluey excess of the existent world” and its valorization of the “free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave” individual.³ But Lovibond argues that Highsmith embraces that vision by writing criminal-heroes who feel unbound by ordinary attachments such that they regard them as nothing more than resources they can deploy in their selfish pursuits. Although I think Lovibond makes the philosopher’s mistake of taking novelistic creation for argument, she correctly links Highsmith to the early Sartre in their shared fascination with detachment. However whereas someone like Roquentin is afflicted with a metaphysical nausea at contingency that leaves him unable to connect to the world around him, Tom cultivates his detachment.

Tom embodies that sort of false authenticity I described at the end of the first chapter, in which in the name of self-possession, one views the world as a hostile force from which one must withdraw (Lovibond calls it an “angry Platonism”). In this chapter, I cast this false authenticity as an expression of Stanley Cavell’s idea of “skepticism with respect to the other,” which is “not a generalized intellectual lack, but a stance I take in the face of the other’s opacity and the demand the other’s expression places upon me; I

call skepticism my denial or annihilation of the other." This ethical skepticism does not
open a rift between me and other people—the rift is already there. The fact of our
separateness, the fact that you are you and I am me, underlies and is exposed in ethical
skepticism, which is an inexpugnable, ever-standing threat. However, this threat also has
its “moral,” which is that rather than be discouraged by incompleteness, “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).” Cavell is strikingly existentialist here. Without using the word, he is
describing Geworfenheit, thrownness: the idea that people are thrown into a world in
which one must act without guarantees. But while one can courageously shoulder this
finitude, one can also shrink from it, “flee” it, to use one of Sartre’s preferred verbs. That
is what Tom does. The Talented Mr. Ripley shows Tom cultivating this skepticism to gain
a kind of freedom that ends up, despite itself, being another form of bad faith.

5.1 Existentialism and the Thriller

Highsmith did not inspire the existentialists like Steinbeck, nor was she in direct
collection with them like Wright. But she was, to borrow Lovibond’s words, a
mediator of the existentialist sensibility. But of course there are many such mediators.
Even if we restrict the field to American novelists, a number of authors have either laid
claim to existentialism or been regarded as proponents: Norman Mailer, Ralph Ellison,
Joseph Heller, J. D. Salinger, Flannery O’Connor, and Walker Percy address such issues
as rebellion, conformity, absurdity, and the anxiety that gnaws at human existence. Why

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4 Stanley Cavell, “What is the Scandal of Skepticism?,” 150.
5 Ibid 139.
focus on Highsmith? Unlike most of the writers I just listed, Highsmith is not a “philosophical” writer, in the sense that she does not adopt the voice of the philosopher. Her narrators do not pontificate about existence and the abyss, her dialogue is spare on ponderous abstractions. Her talent lay in her ability to draw a reader in and, when she wanted to discuss philosophical themes, do so with a light touch. She was a suspense writer through and through.

Suspense fiction or thrillers (I use them synonymously) dovetail with existentialism at both the philosophical and literary level. A short detour through Heidegger can bring out the philosophical dimensions. The affectively charged words that give the genre its names—suspense, thrills—speak to the shiver of fear or anxiety that one gets from, to use Highsmith’s description of the genre, “stories with a threat of violent physical action and danger, or the danger and action itself.”⁶ The sense of uneasiness is not so different from Heidegger’s characterization of anxiety (Angst). He distinguishes fear and anxiety by the presence of an object: if the feeling has an object, it is fear; if there is no object, it is anxiety. A stranger following me through a park can occasion fear, but if I get the same sense of disturbance when I’m fully aware that nobody is around, it is anxiety. Importantly for Heidegger, anxiety is the more basic of the two feelings (“Fear is Angst which has fallen prey to the ‘world’). Fear, he explains, is about me being threatened, but the feeling of fear focuses on the thing “out there” that threatens while marginalizing that which is being threatened (that is, me). But anxiety registers that it is me who is threatened.⁷ Anxiety, precisely because it has no object,

⁶ Highsmith, Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction, 3.
⁷ Heidegger, Being and Time, 177.
brings me into focus, and it has the potential to recall Dasein from its lostness in the
world back to its ownmost (‘authentic’) concern for itself.

In the course of this discussion, Heidegger indulges in a typology of fear that
hints at the importance of the thriller to existentialist thought. There are any number of
variations of fear, Heidegger says, but he discusses three: alarm [Erschreken], horror
[Graven], and terror [Entsetzen]. Alarm results from the anticipated suddenness of a
‘known and familiar’ threat, which ‘bursts into heedful being-in-the-world in its
case of “not right now, but at any moment.”’ By contrast, horror is the fear that
accompanies a threat that has disclosed itself, but which is unfamiliar. To put it more
clearly, the object of alarm is identifiable, but what is not known is when it will burst
onto the scene. With horror, it is the other way around: the object is not identifiable, but it
has already shown itself in its threatening character. If I know a poisonous snake is in my
house but do not know where, I am alarmed; if I something bites me but I don’t see it, I
feel horror. The third modality, terror, is the synthesis of the most frightening aspects of
alarm and horror; “when something threatening is encountered in the aspect of the
horrible, and at the same time is encountered as something alarming, suddenness, fear
becomes terror.” Put differently, the “object” of terror is neither known nor present. Its
only attribute seems to be that it exists, but if we take seriously the Kantian maxim that
existence is not a predicate, then this characterization will not do. It would seem that
terror, like anxiety, has no object at all. In fact, it seems like this species of fear that
Heidegger calls “terror” is indistinguishable from how he describes anxiety.

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8 Heidegger, Being and Time, 133.
Could it be that fear is actually just as existentially profound as anxiety? What Heidegger calls terror I would like to suggest is the heightened state of threat characteristic of the thriller. The most important feature of a thriller is its promise of the feeling of anxious uncertainty about how things will turn out. To move toward the literary side of existentialism, a curious sentence appears in one of the earliest primers on existentialism to appear in English. In L'esistenzialismo (1942), translated as Existentialism (1946), the Italian philosopher Guido de Ruggiero wrote, “Existentialism deals with existence in the manner of a thriller.” 9 Whereas other philosophical movements deal with impersonal rules of reason, history, etc., existentialism quickens philosophy with the pulse of life. The term translated as “thriller,” romanzi gialli, refers to a line of pulp fiction published by Mondadori since 1929. “Every book of Il Giallo Mondadori [“Mondadori Yellow”] was characterized by a yellow cover, and in the majority of cases was an Italian translation of American or British crime and mystery stories by such authors as: Agatha Christie, Edgar Allan Poe, Raymond Chandler, the fictional Ellery Queen, Rex Stout and Ed McBain, etc.” 10 Ruggiero’s book predated Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s “existentialist offensive,” and it concerns mainly Germanic Existenzphilosophie. Nevertheless, his reference to the thriller-like quality of existentialist thought was insightful. “Why shouldn’t I read a série noir or giallo?,” Beauvoir asks, responding to an imagined critic who might say reading such works is a waste of time. 11

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9 Ruggiero, Existentialism, 19.
11 Beauvoir, All Said and Done, 173. Translation adjusted. The French original reads: “Pourquoi ne lirais-je pas une série noir ou un giallo?”
Indeed, the American thriller is at the very origins of French interest in American fiction. Take Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* (1931). Faulkner dashed off this lurid crime novel in a bid to cash in on the market for detective stories, and American critics have long been embarrassed by it. But in France, it was the first of his novels to be translated (in 1933), and his French publishers gave it the stamp of quality by soliciting a preface from André Malraux, who praised the novel as “the intrusion of Greek tragedy into the detective story.”12 Dashiell Hammett, James Cain, Horace McCoy, and plenty of lesser names likewise enjoyed a French readership. It is generally agreed that by the early ’50s, the French had fallen out of love with the American novel such that Natalie Sarraute could write in 1956 that the “New American Novel” had once nourished French writers, but “[n]ow that he has more or less assimilated these exotic foods […] the French reader, as well, is no longer interested.”13 Such claims might be true for Faulkner and other “literary” authors, but the American crime novel kept going strong. In the foreign category of *Le grand prix de littérature policière*, France’s most prestigious award for crime fiction, American novels won every year in the 1950s, and in the 1957, the award went to Highsmith for *Monsieur Ripley*.

5.2 The Literary Background of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

If *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) were adapted for the stage, it would contain three acts. The first act, covering chapters 1 to 12, would open with Tom being pursued by an unknown man who turns out to be Richard Greenleaf. Mr. Greenleaf hires Tom to

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12 Malraux, “A Preface for Faulkner’s Sanctuary,” 94. For a discussion of how Gallimard positioned Faulkner as a great author in France, see Gisèle Sapiro, “Faulkner in France; or, How to Introduce a Peripheral Unknown Author in the Center of the World Republic of Letters.”


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persuade his son, Dickie, to return to the US and take up his place in the family shipbuilding business. Tom sets off for Italy and manages to meet Dickie, whom Tom realizes looks rather like himself. The two become close, but Tom ultimately recognizes that he will not succeed in his mission. The act would end with Tom murdering Dickie and dumping his corpse in the sea. Act 2 (Chapters 13-21) would follow Tom as he assumes Dickie’s identity: his dress, his voice, even his most minute mannerisms. An old friend of Dickie, Freddie Miles, sniffs out the impersonation, and Tom kills him, too. When the police come around to question “Dickie” about that murder, Tom successfully passes himself off as Dickie Greenleaf, and the police mention they believe Tom Ripley is missing and suspect “Dickie” has something to do with it. Act 2 ends with Tom abandoning his Dickie persona and becoming Tom again. The final act (chapters 22 to 30) would follow Tom as he convinces everybody he only seemed to be missing. In fact (he claims), he had been touring the Italian countryside on his own. He provides just enough hints that Dickie was depressed that Dickie’s father and closest friend conclude he had probably committed suicide. Encouraged by his success, Tom forges Dickie’s will, bequeathing his sizable fortune to himself. The story ends with Tom traveling to Greece, worried that the police are about to apprehend him. When he realizes he has gotten away with everything, he orders the taxi driver to take him to a hotel: “Il meglio Albergo. Il meglio, il meglio!”

The underachiever who fixates on someone more glamorous is a fixture in all three of Highsmith’s novels before *The Talented Mr. Ripley. Strangers on a Train* (1950), her fame-making first novel, features the shiftless, alcoholic Bruno. He knows that he looks like “a young man of responsibility and character, probably with a promising
future.” In fact, he is “pathless” and “frustrated in his hunger for a meaning of his life.”

He decides to kill the former fiancée of Guy, the stranger he meets on the train, because in his depravity, he thinks it will help his friend and give his own life purpose.

Highsmith’s second novel, *The Price of Salt* (1952), is about a department store clerk, Therese, who despite being only nineteen feels the “hopelessness of herself, of ever being the person she wanted to be and of doing the things that person would do.”

She is attracted to the more glamorous Carol in part because of her self-possession. Carol returns her affections, but she faults Therese for retreating from first-hand experience.

When Therese admires a kitschy miniature Dutch village outside a roadside restaurant in Pennsylvania, Carol scolds her: “It’s practically as good as being in Holland to you [. . . .] How do you ever expect to create anything if you get all your experiences second hand?”

In Highsmith’s third novel, *The Blunderer* (1954), the unhappily married Walter Stackhouse obsesses over a newspaper article about a woman who was found murdered. Suspecting the husband (correctly, as it turns out), Walter fixates on the man and fantasizes about copying his crime. By the time Highsmith started planning *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, she had plenty of experience writing the downcast loser who vampirizes someone else. The character of Thomas Ripley stands out in Highsmith’s oeuvre not because he is an aberration, but because he is the clearest distillation of the obsessive, amoral anti-hero she was drawn to.

*The Talented Mr. Ripley* is part Dostoevsky, part Henry James. Highsmith was a lifelong admirer of Dostoevsky, whom she called “My master!” and regarded as a muse.

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14 Highsmith, *Strangers on a Train*, 68.
15 Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 12. The novel is a pioneering representation of a lesbian relationship, and Highsmith published it pseudonymously. In 2016, it was adapted for the screen under the title *Carol* (directed by Todd Haynes) starring Mara Rooney and Cate Blanchett.
16 Ibid., 151-2
“He helps me a great deal,” she wrote in a diary entry from 1947, before she’d begun her first novel: “He makes me say what I want.” In her twenties, Highsmith made ends meet by working as a comic book writer, and while it taught her how to plot a story, she found the work boring. Reading Dostoevsky seemed to reassure her that one could write unambiguously evil characters without sacrificing literary merit, and this sentiment showed in the journal she kept while composing Ripley: “What I predicted I would once do, I am doing already in this very book (Tom Ripley), that is, showing the unequivocal trump of evil over good, and rejoicing in it. I shall make my readers rejoice in it, too.”

Highsmith did not belong to that strain of American novelist who thinks commercial success undermines artistic pretensions. She was not embarrassed to write mass-market novels. Indeed, at the height of her career, she wrote that “the beauty of the suspense genre is that a writer can write profound thoughts and have some sections without physical action if he wishes to,” though such elements were not required. *Crime and Punishment*, she writes, is “a splendid example of this” combination, and she speculates that if Dostoevsky were writing in her time, his books would be shelved in the suspense section. Throughout her life, she was pleased when reviewers favorably compared her to the Russian master.

James’s influence shows up in his preoccupation with the question, *What is an American, particularly an American in Europe?* His *The Ambassadors* (1903) addresses this question, and it was Highsmith’s model for *Ripley*, a point she drives home by mentioning it twice in her novel. The two stories share the same premise: a rich American

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17 Highsmith, *Her Diaries and Notebooks* 413, 384
19 Highsmith, *Her Diaries and Notebooks*, 418, 633
20 Ibid., 559
family hires someone to go to Europe and bring home a prodigal son. For James’s hired man, Strether, the European experience is an awakening that reveals how he had let life trickle through his fingers while occupying himself with the spiritually empty busying about typical of New England industrialists. Tom Ripley is younger than Strether, just twenty-five, and he knows his life is passing him by, which is why he leaps at the opportunity to go to Europe. Europe eventually satisfies his longing for Culture, but only after he has overcome the sham sophistication of the American *haute bohème*. When he arrives in Italy and finds himself moving in their circles, Tom is initially overwhelmed. Their money, their wordliness, the casualness of their appreciation for exotic dishes and liquors, the comfort with which they move about the great centers of European civilization—all of this stirs in him a desperate longing to belong. But soon Tom realizes that even this higher echelon of American society is unappreciative of Europe’s offerings.

The expatriate set are not quite “ugly Americans,” but they certainly lack tact and their refinement is specious. Dickie Greenleaf, the man Tom is meant to convince to return to the States, is the embodiment of this deficiency. He is a self-styled painter, but his hackneyed attempts make Tom “wince with an almost personal shame.”21 At first Dickie seemed to speak Italian elegantly, making “graceful gestures as if he were leading an orchestra in a legato,” but after just a few months study, Tom has surpassed him (he realizes, for instance, that Dickie never used the subjunctive correctly) (TMR 80, 129). Dickie doesn’t think twice about holding up a bus full of Italians to chat with an old friend, but Tom does. And when they go to Rome, Tom is eager to see the museums while Dickie seems wholly uninterested (TMR 62). Tom approaches Italy in the spirit of

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21 Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, 58. Hereafter cited parenthetically as TMR.
a young lord undertaking the Grand Tour, who under the tutelage of his cicerone would
visit cathedrals and museums to become a man of culture. But the other Americans think
more about espresso machines, refrigerators, Gucci leather goods, and Fiat sportscars.
They are at home in the post-War Italy that will soon emerge as a world leader in
consumer design, known for streamlined appliances, luxury bags, and flashy, fussy
sportscars.\footnote{Menand, \textit{The Free World}, 715-21} It is not only envy that drives Tom to murder Dickie and steal his identity.
Tom thinks he would be a better Dickie.

Tom Ripley is a villain in the mold of Gilbert Osmond, the pretentious scoundrel
of James’s \textit{Portrait of a Lady}. Osmond is the consummate dandy—his exquisite style and
practiced elegance embodies European sophistication, but he is in fact an American who
lives entirely for the impression he makes on others, whom he uses to prop up his
narcissism. Tom Ripley is cut from the same cloth, and he has nothing but disdain for
those other Americans whose attention he craves. In one scene, after he has murdered
Dickie and taken over his persona and fortune, Dickie is dining alone in a Roman
nightclub when another American comes to greet him. Tom gives a cryptic response to
the man’s question about why he is dining alone. “The American nodded a little blankly,
and Tom could see that he was stymied for anything intelligent to say, as uneasy as any
small-town American in the presence of cosmopolitan poise and sobriety, money and
good clothes, even if the clothes were on another American” (TMR 127). Tom does not
try to pass himself off as a European; rather, like Gilbert he tries to be a cosmopolitan
who outdoes European sophisticates at their own game.
5.3 “He’s just a nothing, which is worse”

Tom Ripley clings to Dickie Greenleaf, more than professional duty requires. Dickie’s confidante and “faute de mieux” girlfriend, Marge Sherwood, notices, and she floats the idea that Tom is gay. In a letter, Dickie assures her Tom is “really not a bad guy” (this is the 1950s) and she should put her mind at ease. Marge responds to Dickie by conceding, “All right, he may not be queer. He’s just a nothing, which is worse” (TMR 123). What Marge does not realize is that she has not been corresponding with Dickie. Tom has murdered him and assumed his identity.

Tom Ripley’s “nothing” quality has been overshadowed by his complicated sexuality. Matthew Levay points out that “Ripley’s queerness is the novel’s open secret,” and by the same token, the novel “questions the idea that sexuality serves as a defining individual characteristic, or that it communicates anything unique about Ripley’s criminality.”

Tom’s obvious interest in Dickie, his protests-too-much denials of being queer, his painful recollections of his aunt calling him a “sissy”: Highsmith sprinkles the novel with these breadcrumbs, and much of the critical literature has gathered them up. Anthony Minghella’s 1999 adaptation of the novel also plays up this angle by adding some embellishments that encourage audiences to attribute Tom’s sociopathy to the repressive homophobia of the fifties. Tom’s “nothing” quality has not received the same level of scrutiny despite being a feature that critics regularly notice. In a 1974 review of the third Ripley novel, Paul Barker notes that Tom is “a bit of a zombie. There is a

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23 Levay, Violent Minds, 205-6.
deadness, even if it’s a tantalizing deadness, at the heart of the characterization.”  

Other critics have described him variously as “a man without a self” and an “empty vessel.”  

Or they have commented on his “blankness of character.”  

Peter Messent observes that Tom “is hollow at the center, a self composed of external props.”  

The mystery of Tom’s personality lies not in what he represses, but in the feeling that there nothing there to repress.

This hollowness poses a literary conundrum. The novel’s third person narration focalizes Tom’s consciousness, a perspective that often makes readers see the complexities of character, but readers of The Talented Mr. Ripley consistently come away with just the opposite impression. What psychological depths can be plumbed in someone who is “just a nothing”? While composing the novel, Highsmith toyed with a number of pulpy titles: “Pursuit of Evil,” “The Thrill Boys,” and “Business is my Pleasure.”  

In choosing the title The Talented Mr. Ripley, she casts the novel as a character study, and reviewers responded in kind by praising the balance of character development and story. Daniel George commends its handling of plot while stressing that “to call this novel a thriller is not to underestimate it as a novel of character.”  

Writing for The Tatler and Bystander, Elizabeth Bowen also stressed its success as a character portrait, “Patricia Highsmith has brought off something astonishing [. . .] And, appalled as one is by Tom’s goings-on, he holds one’s interest firmly, if not one’s sympathies.” The novel is a gripping portrait of Tom Ripley despite his seeming too shallow to sustain such a study.

25 Barker, “Death Game.”  
26 Hubley, “A Portrait of the Artist: The Novels of Patricia Highsmith,” 126  
27 Targan, “Identity Theft: The Amoral Vision of Patricia Highsmith,” 214  
28 Horsley, Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction, 134  
30 Wilson, Beautiful Shadow, 191.  
31 George, “New Novels.”
In one sense, Tom would agree that he is a nothing. Early in the novel, he has the familiar misgivings of young people who have yet to make a splash. When Mr. Greenleaf tells Tom about how his son Dickie spends his time sailing and painting on the Italian coast, Tom regretfully compares Dickie’s luxurious existence to his own. “Dickie was probably having the time of his life over there. An income, a house, a boat [. . . ] Dickie was lucky. What was he himself doing at twenty-five? Living from week to week. No bank account.” (TMR 12). Dickie’s full and satisfying life seems a far cry from the underachieving emptiness of his own. But it would be too simple to say that Tom’s nothingness results only from his lack of worldly success, because even after he has appropriated Dickie’s fortune, he still thinks of himself as a nobody. Or more precisely, Tom so thoroughly internalizes the identity of Dickie Greenleaf that he comes to think of “Tom Ripley” as a pathetic alter ego. Two thirds of the way through the novel, Tom falls victim to his own success as an imposter. He has not only withdrawn money using Dickie’s ID, but he even convincingly passes as Dickie in an interview with the Italian police. After they question “Dickie” (Tom masquerading as Dickie) about the mysterious death of his friend Freddie, the police begin to suspect he has something to do with the disappearance of another, Tom Ripley. Tom realizes he has just one option: to present himself to the police as Tom Ripley and make it seem as though Dickie Greenleaf committed suicide.

The plan is sensible, but the prospect is deflating. “He hated becoming Thomas Ripley again, hated being a nobody, hated putting on his old set of habits again, and feeling that people looked down on him and were bored with him unless he put on an act for them, like a clown, feeling incompetent and incapable of doing anything with himself
except entertaining people for minutes at a time” (TMR 179). This resentment about having to “put on an act” to be worthy of others’ attention is almost entirely delusional. Rather than them looking down on him, Tom privately scorns most of the people he meets. On first seeing a photograph of Dickie, Tom “could not help the feeling that Richard was not very intelligent” (TMR 22). When his New York friends come to wish him a bon voyage, he silently deplores the “the riffraff, the vulgarians, the slobs” (TMR 32). He loathes Marge in spite of her friendliness, well before her comment about him being a nothing. However few people ever get a glimpse of this animus because one of Tom’s talents is his fastidious commitment to hiding his reactions behind a facade of false humility and good manners.

5.4 Shame and Solitude

Tom’s Dostoveskian tendency to at one moment crave attention while feeling unworthy of it, and at the next to look down on others, disdaining to show himself to them, stems from his shame. Sartre offers the most famous existentialist account of shame in *Being and Nothingness*, where he presents it as a mode of alienation: “the Other is the indispensable intermediary between me and myself: I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other” (BN 308; EN 260). Shame is a two-part process: I appear to the other as an object, and knowing that I appear so, I subjectively “actualize” or “realize” (both Sartrean verbs) my objecthood. That is, in shame my subjectivity is filtered through my awareness of my object being, and this same structure can also manifest pride (Sartre’s Genet book is his richest exploration of this dynamic). Sartre’s account illuminates the social dimension of shame, but it is flawed: he describes shame in terms of misdeeds, such as “some clumsy or vulgar gesture” or getting caught spying through a
keyhole (BN 308; EN 260). But what about those situations in which the source of shame is not an action at all, like being ashamed of one’s country? And in many cases, one commits a deed (putting elbows on the table, say) and only by being educated in shame learns it was a clumsy or vulgar.

Cavell’s discussion of shame in “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear” is a helpful counterpoint, although he is not in direct conversation with Sartre. A curious feature of shame, Cavell explains, is that often seems “arbitrary”: “It is familiar to find that what mortifies one person seems wholly unimportant to another: think of being ashamed of one’s origins, one’s accent, one’s ignorance, one’s skin, one’s clothes, one’s legs or teeth.” Explaining shame by its causes only takes us so far, since often what causes a person shame seems to others entirely normal, and sometimes people seem brazen when others think they ought to be ashamed.

The phenomenology of shame is more interesting: “shame is the specific discomfort produced by the sense of being looked at, the avoidance of the sight of others is the reflex it produces [. . .] Under shame, what must be covered up is not your deed, but yourself.” According to Cavell, shame is “the most primitive, the most private, of emotions,” an emotion that emerges alongside individuality itself: “With the discovery of the individual [. . .] there is simultaneous discovery of the isolation of the individual; his presence to himself, but simultaneously to others.” To be fair Sartre acknowledges this dimension: “Shame is the feeling of an original fall, not in virtue of having committed this or that misdeed, but merely by virtue of having ‘fallen’ into the world, in the midst of

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32 Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear,” 263.
33 Ibid. 256.
34 Ibid., 263
things, and of needing the Other’s mediation to be what I am” (BN 392; EN 328). Cavell helps to bring out a strain that Sartre obscures somewhat with his examples of peeping Toms and vulgar gestures; namely, that shame is the price of personhood.

In Cavell’s and Sartre’s accounts, shame is tantamount to what Heidegger in *Being and Time* calls a *Grundbefindlichkeit*, a “foundational mood”. Heidegger intends by the term an affective experience that is rarer and more profound than others, and that has the potential to jolt a person into clarity about their own finitude. For Heidegger, this emotion is anxiety, and as I suggested earlier, unlike fear it has no object and descends on a person for no reason: it “can arise in the most harmless situations.”35 Having no distinct cause and therefore no distinct cure, anxiety posits no danger, yet it leaves a person feeling helpless all the same. In a sense, the cause of anxiety is the whole world insofar as nothing in it can save me from this feeling. The overwhelming sense of isolation—or rather, individualization—that comes with anxiety is what makes it fundamental for Heidegger. Both anxiety and shame are a shuddering feeling of exposure. In anxiety, it is my exposure to the fact I will cease to be (Heidegger) or that I am condemned to freedom (Sartre); in shame (Cavell, Sartre) it is my exposure to other people. At any rate, both foundational moods confront a person with his or her discrete existence.

In Heidegger’s thought, anxiety can be overtly experienced, but for the most part a person “experiences” it by fleeing from it, so it gets diffused into myriad unpleasant but more or less familiar emotions: annoyance, fear, horror, terror, and so on.36 In *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, shame is similarly plastic. Tom rarely feels outright shame, but he

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36 Joseph Fell reads Angst as having both an “overt” and a “latent” form. See Fell, “The Familiar and the Strange: On the Limits of Praxis in the Early Heidegger.”
frequently experiences discomfort at being exposed to others. A telling scene comes early in the novel when he is dining with the Greenleafs. He lies through his teeth the entire visit—about his education, his relationship to Dickie, his job. But when asked about his childhood, he truthfully tells them, “My parents died when I was very small. I was raised by my aunt in Boston.” At ease until this moment, Tom suddenly feels a twinge: “That had been the only time tonight when he had felt uncomfortable, unreal, the way he might have felt if he had been lying, yet it had been practically the only thing he had said that was true” (TMR 23). This lying-like feeling does not reflect any misdeed. It is the shameful recoil Tom experiences at having revealed himself. Over the next few minutes, the twinge of discomfort metastasizes such that when Tom looks at Mr. Greenleaf, he feels “a sudden terror of him, an impulse to attack him before he was attacked” (TMR 23-4). A short time later, this fight-or-flight reaction becomes “a cold fear [. . .] running over Tom’s body” (TMR 24). Discomfort becomes terror, which becomes cold fear, but all at base express shame, the aversion to being known.

The fluidity of shame is also visible in Tom’s experiences of boredom and loneliness. Early in the novel, he takes stock of how little he has accomplished and feels “bored, god-damned bloody bored, bored, bored!” (TMR 12). At other times, boredom emerges as an index of his friendless desolation. After Tom has soured on Dickie, just before he murders him, the two take a trip to San Remo, but the atmosphere of genuine friendship has vanished. “To Tom, Dickie’s polite cheerfulness on the train was like the cheerfulness of a host who has loathed his guest and is afraid the guest realizes it, and who tries to make it up at the last minutes. Tom had never before in his life felt like an unwelcome, boring guest” (TMR 92). Tom feels he is boring rather than himself feeling
bored, but this inversion amounts to the same thing. “We are nearly always bored with those whom we bore,” wrote François de la Rochefoucauld, and Tom’s sense that he bores Dickie (we do not know what Dickie thinks) stems from his feeling of isolation from him. He thinks they are out of harmony and incapable of acknowledging one another. Tom’s unbearable recognition of his finitude is, as we will see, one of the temptations of skepticism.

I have argued that Cavell’s shame and Heidegger’s anxiety are isomorphic insofar as both (a) disclose a person to herself as an individual, and (b) underlie a range of discomforts that fall short of full-blown existential solitude. Feeling bored and feeling boring are also manifestations of these more profound affects. It is worth noting that boredom has long contended with anxiety as the signature mood of modernity. To take just one telling instance: Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927) gives anxiety a pivotal role in disclosing the individual as individual. However in his lecture course *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* from 1929-30, he swapped out *Angst* and replaced it with *Langeweile*, boredom or *ennui*. An in-depth account of modernity’s moods is beyond the range of my project, but I mention the pivotal role sometimes granted to boredom to make the point that there is no reason we should try locate just one foundational mood. The important thing is to recognize that the various moods that affect Tom Ripley (discomfort, terror, cold fear, boredom, shame) are united by how they mark his experience of being alone, as though outside the community of humans altogether.

Nevertheless, in a few rare moments, his solitude becomes explicit. Like Roquentin reeling with nausea at the sight of chestnut tree’s roots, Tom at one point feels his isolation as a bodily sensation: “He was alone. That was the only important thing. He
began to feel a tingling fear at the end of his spine, tingling over his buttocks” (TMR 89). At other times, his loneliness looms before him like an inescapable fate: “[h]e was lonely [. . . .] He had imagined himself acquiring a bright new circle of friends with whom he would start a new life with new attitudes, standards, and habits that would be far better and clearer than those he had had all his life. Now he realized that it couldn’t be. He would have to keep a distance from people, always” (TMR 174). These passages draw out the existentialist dimension of what Cavell calls “the standing threat of skepticism.”

The threat of skepticism is not, as I said earlier, the doubt that I and the other might be separate—our difference, our mutually exclusive finitudes, is a priori, which is why skepticism is a standing threat or, if you like, an unsolvable problem. Ethical skepticism recoils against this reality, as though it is a problem that might be solved or avoided altogether. Existentialism (to paint with a broad brush) tends to understand finitude in terms of the temporal extension of an individual life. How do I live in the face of death? How can I claim a world I was born into contingently? These are these sorts of disquieting questions that permeate existential anxiety, and the social world fades into the background. But Tom’s anxiety is lateral to the arc of his life between birth and death. His anxiety—or to use the term I started out with, his profound shame—registers a discontent with his finitude in relation to other people. His disquieting questions are How can I live in the sight of others? How do I live without them?

5.5 Shame and Performance

Because he recoils from his social existence, Tom tends to see his interaction with others in terms of performance he must put on in an attempt to avoid the intimacy he has

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37 Cavell, “What is the Scandal of Skepticism?,” 134
barred himself in advance. While this tendency is benign in his interactions with strangers, it sets the stage for his murder of Dickie.

Recognition is a two-way street. Cavell writes that “recognizing a person depends upon allowing oneself to be recognized by him.” Here recognition is not meant in the sense of mere acquaintanceship—knowing someone’s name, remembering having seen them before, etc. Rather, it requires acknowledging how one stands in relation to another. What is our relationship? What kind we reasonably expect from one another? Cavell cites the opening scene of *King Lear*, in which Gloucester admits that Edmund is his bastard son. Gloucester’s acknowledgement is stunted because it only goes as far as to admit that Gloucester has a bastard, that he has fathered a bastard. “He does not acknowledge *him*, as a son or a person, with *his* feelings of illegitimacy and being cast out.” Edmund’s later villainy is revenge for this lack of acknowledgement, and Gloucester’s failure to see gets literalized in his later blinding. The point here is that recognition requires acknowledging how you and another count to one another, which means recognition is always also self-recognition. In shame, a person shrinks from another’s acknowledgement while also failing to acknowledge that person and oneself.

We see Tom’s inability or unwillingness to recognize himself in the way he understands interaction with strangers in terms of putting on a show. On the ship from America to Europe, he buys a woolen cap and contemplates how by wearing it at various angles he can alter others’ opinions of him: “A cap was the most versatile of headgears [. . .] He could look like a country gentleman, a thug, an Englishman, a Frenchman, or a plain American eccentric” (TMR 35). Although this reflection on clothing seems

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38 Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*,” 256
39 Ibid., 254.
lighthearted enough, it leads into a gloomier thought: “He had always thought he had the world’s dullest face, a thoroughly forgettable face with a look of docility that he could not understand, and a look also of vague fright that he had never been able to erase” (TMR 35). Two points in this sentence call for comment. First, Tom’s perception that his face is at once “thoroughly forgettable” and also has a look of “vague fright” puts a fine point on my argument from the previous section that his shame has the existential magnitude that is usually ascribed to Angst, with “vague fright” corresponding to the objectless alarm of anxiety and “thoroughly forgettable” to an individuality that feels itself fading into oblivion. Second, in alternating between lamenting the dullness of his face and fantasizing about the versatility of a cap, Tom reveals just how much the regard of others weighs on him—how he feels called upon to justify himself without knowing how to go about it. In this regard he is a member of a modernist boy’s club that also includes Conrad’s Lord Jim, fumbling to explain his desertion at his trial; Kafka’s Joseph K., struggling to understand what he’s on trial for; and Eliot’s Prufrock, wondering, “When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall, / Then how should I begin [. . . .] “And how should I presume?”

The corollary of Tom’s habit of viewing himself as a performer is treating others as an audience, passive observers to be kept at arm’s length. Wearing his woolen cap on the ship, he keeps to himself, contemplating his past and future. When another passenger, a young Englishwoman, invites him to play bridge, he relishes in politely refusing her: “His aloofness, he knew, was causing a little comment among the passengers” (TMR 41). Later when he becomes Dickie Greenleaf, he continues to cultivate an air of unapproachability. He goes out to restaurants and theaters by himself, but takes care to
limit his conversations with other people to small talk. On one occasion, Tom is dining in Rome by himself when an American couple he had met in Paris approaches him. The man asks if he is alone, and Tom responds, “Yes. I have a yearly date here with myself [. . . ] I celebrate a certain anniversary” (TMR 127). The anniversary is pure fiction, but it helps conjure the image of thoughtful solitude that Tom wants to project.

Even when this aloofness leads to actual loneliness, it proves flexible enough to hold its allure. After Tom has become so comfortable playing Dickie that the charm starts to wear off, Tom soothes his isolation by folding it back into his aloofness. “He altered his behavior slightly, to accord with the role of a more detached observer of life [. . . ] There was a faint air of sadness about him now. He enjoyed the change. He imagined that he looked like a young man who had had an unhappy love affair or some kind of emotional disaster, and was trying to recuperate in a civilized way, by visiting some of the more beautiful places on the earth” (TMR 174). Tom’s self-aestheticizing ensures that he can stave off genuine loneliness by channeling it into a performance of solitude.

While Tom’s habit of theatricalizing himself and others is relatively harmless in anonymous, public situations, it leads him into difficulty in situations requiring more intimacy. The first hint comes in the scene described earlier in which Tom is at the Greenleaf’s home and told the truth about his childhood, leading to his escalating discomfort. Mr. Greenleaf offers Tom a brandy, but Tom is in a daze: “It’s like a movie, Tom thought. In a minute, Mr. Greenleaf or somebody else’s voice would say, “Okay, cut!” and he would relax again” (TMR 24). The fact that this thought crosses Tom’s mind at the same time as his feeling of alarm is intensifying testifies to his tendency to reject the personal disclosures that are required in intimate situations. Later on, Tom drops the
explicitly cinematic comparisons, but his compulsion to pretend remains. In his first day in the fictional town of Mongibello, shortly after he contrives to run into Dickie Greenleaf, Dickie asks Tom if he will rent a house. “‘I don’t know,’ Tom said undecisively, as if he had been considering it” (TMR 46). Shortly thereafter Marge points out her house in the distance to Tom. “It was hopeless to pick it out from the other houses, but Tom pretended he saw it” (TMR 48).

These little pretenses might be explained by Tom feeling embarrassed about being a fish out of water, but the trouble is that Tom never stops performing. A particularly odd scene occurs early in his friendship with Dickie when Tom feels the need to impress Dickie by putting on a one-man dumb show. The awkwardness of the show can only be captured by relating it in full:

He struck a pose with one hand on his hip, one foot extended. “This is Lady Assburden sampling the American subway. She’s never even been in the underground in London, but she wants to take back some American experiences.” Tom did it all in pantomime, searching for a coin, finding it didn’t go into the slot, buying a token, puzzling over which stairs to go down, registering alarm at the noise and the long express ride, puzzling again as to how to get out of the place—here Marge came out, and Dickie told her it was an Englishwoman in the subway, but Marge didn’t seem to get it and asked, “What?”—walking through a door which could only be the door of the men’s room from her twitching horror of this and that, which augmented until she fainted. Tom fainted gracefully on the terrace glider. (TMR 57)

Anthony Minghella’s film adaptation cuts the scene entirely, and it is not hard to see why. Including it would add a distinctly vaudevillian, if not campy, note that would be at odds with the slow-burning menace. In the novel, Dickie applauds the performance, but Marge “stood there looking a little blank.” Most people would share this reaction: Tom’s

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40 In its place, the film includes a scene in which Tom Ripley (Matt Damon) does an impression of the senior Mr. Greenleaf that Dickie Greenleaf (Jude Law) finds chillingly convincing.
act is too involved, too rehearsed, too demanding of drawn-out spectatorship on the part of his hosts. There is an embarrassing tactlessness to the performance, and one wonders if Dickie’s enthusiastic response is genuine, or if he is forcing a reaction to humor Tom. Once he has finished his one-man show, Tom says he will do another act sometime, but Dickie abruptly changes the topic and asks Marge, “Dinner ready?”

Tom’s commitment to performance requires constant calculation and self-control. He cannot allow himself any spontaneous candor, and he reels when he catches himself in a moment of it. Frequently mirrors are involved in such moments. In the scene in Dickie’s parents’ home when Tom feels anxious and unreal, he strolls past a mirror and is disconcerted to see “that his mouth was turned down at the corners” (TMR 26). At this point in the novel he is still unpracticed at controlling his reactions, but as the novel goes on, impersonating Dickie Greenleaf will teach him to hone his self-control. “Now, from the moment when he got out of bed and went to brush his teeth, he was Dickie, brushing his teeth with his right elbow jutted out, Dickie rotating the eggshell on his spoon for the last bite. Dickie invariably putting back the first tie he pulled off the rack and selecting a second” (TMR 130). The comfort he feels when seeing himself bringing off his performance of Dickie contrasts sharply to the dismay he feels when catching himself in a moment of unguarded expression.

The contrast supports Anthony Hilfer’s observation that “Tom is pleased with himself in direct ratio to his ability to stand outside this self, objectify it, play it as a role.”41 Presuming he has total control over what he reveals to others, Tom cannot reconcile himself to passionate expression. For instance, when he learns the Italian police

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want to question “Dickie” about Tom Ripley’s whereabouts, Tom “caught sight of himself in the mirror, the corners of his mouth turned down, his eyes anxious and scared.” At this point, his reaction is no different from the mirror scene described earlier, but then we read, “[h]e looked as if he were trying to convey the emotions of fear and shock by his posture and his expression, and because the way he looked was involuntary and real, he became suddenly twice as frightened” (TMR 179). It is as though after months of impersonating Dickie, Tom has lost all awareness of the fact that people do not constantly regulate every detail of themselves. In regarding himself always as a performer, Tom fails to understand that people’s relationship to the world (to others and to themselves) is not exclusively one of controlled calculation.

5.6 Tom’s Lethal Skepticism

“[T]he truth of skepticism or what I might call the moral of skepticism,” Cavell writes, “is that the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing.” Skepticism is usually thought of as a disposition in which one tests knowledge claims by questioning received opinion and probing seemingly obvious claims. But Cavell suggests that ethical skepticism (or skepticism with regard to other people) is not primarily about knowledge so much as it is with the manner in which we inhabit a common Lebenswelt. In this vision, before skepticism names programmatic doubting, it indicates a denial of our shared humanity. The shame that drives Tom to regard his life as series of performances and to balk at intimacy with other people is another name for this humanity-denying skepticism.

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Its most chilling expression comes in a scene that foreshadows Tom’s murder of Dickie. Tom invites Dickie to go in with him on a harebrained scheme to get a free trip to Paris. He has met a dodgy Italian who wants to smuggle drugs by train. The drugs are to be hidden in coffins, and he needs two young men to pose as corpses while they’re transported to Paris. Tom leaps at the opportunity, and uncharacteristically, he feels no subsequent pangs of discomfort or panic for candidly expressing a desire. But Dickie is understandably leery, and Tom’s reaction to Dickie’s reticence is peculiar: “Come with me and I’ll show you the man,” he urges. And again, “If you don’t believe me, at least look at him” (TMR 82). It never even occurs to Tom that Dickie is unenthusiastic about the scheme. He chalks Dickie’s opposition up to his not believing the offer is genuine. Dickie reluctantly agrees to meet the man, seemingly to humor Tom, and even after he has turned the man down, Tom continues to badger Dickie, saying: “Well, at least it’s true, you see!” and “I just wanted you to see that it’s true at least. I hope you see” (TMR 84). Tom simply cannot imagine that Dickie does not want to do the same thing he does.

By insisting Dickie recognize the genuineness of the offer, Tom obscures the source of their disagreement. He diverts what is fundamentally a question of judgement into a question of knowledge. Tom is so inured to avoiding intimacy that when he finally reveals a sincere desire, he cannot recognize it merely as his own preference. He takes it for granted that he and the person he takes into his confidence should be in complete accord. In a later episode, shortly before he murders Dickie, Tom fumes to himself about “Dickie’s inhuman stubbornness,” casting Dickie as the moral monster: “He had offered Dickie friendship, companionship, and respect, everything he had to offer” (TMR 95). In his narcissism, Tom takes friendship to mean a harmony so total as to overcome
individual finitude, but in fact it means he oscillates rapidly between retreating from his own subject position and mistaking it for objective fact. This is why when Dickie refuses the proposal, Tom experiences it as a refusal of reality. “The sense of frustration and inarticulateness was agony to Tom. And the fact that they were being looked at [. . . .] Tom wanted to explain it, wanted to break through to Dickie so he would understand and they would feel the same way” (TMR 85). Tom finds disagreement intolerable, and he usually avoids it by hiding his own opinions. But Tom had felt a genuine attachment to Dickie and in his all-or-nothing Mitsein, it does not occur to him that disagreement with Dickie is possible, so he regards a simple difference of preferences as both a rejection of reality itself and also a denuding (“the fact they were being looked at”). The reminder that he and Dickie are different people wounds Tom.

In a plot that features two murders, it is curious that the episode that follows this seemingly minor disagreement is, as Eric Targan writes, “the key moment in the novel.”43 Tom is cast into a speechless reverie. “He felt tongue-tied. He stared at Dickie’s blue eyes that were [. . .] nothing but little pieces of blue jelly with a black dot in them, meaningless, without relation to him” (TMR 85). His skepticism gets expressed here as a reduction of Dickie’s body to brute matter. Wittgenstein writes, “The human body is the best picture of the human soul,” which I take to mean that there is no ghostly image of a soul hiding behind the flesh that endows it with humanity. 44 Our recognition of humans is immediate; it does not need to be derived or postulated. Sartre makes a similar point, less succinctly, when he writes that “the objecthood” of the Other “must refer not to an original solitude out of my reach, but to a fundamental connection in which the Other is

manifested in some way other than through the knowledge I gain of him (BN 348; 292). The upshot is the same: another person appears to us first as *another person*, not as a lump of human-shaped matter, and they only become dehumanized through the skeptical withdrawal of the recognition our common humanity. Looking blankly at Dickie, Tom thinks, “You were supposed to see the soul through the eyes, to see love through the eyes, the one place you could look at another human being and see what really went on inside, and in Dickie’s eyes Tom saw nothing more now than he would have seen if he had looked at the hard, bloodless surface of a mirror” (TMR 85). The withdrawal of recognition could not be expressed more clearly.

Tom’s dehumanizing gaze serves as a prelude to his murdering Dickie, and the image of the “hard, bloodless surface of a mirror” underscores the relational quality of recognition. Tom’s refusal to acknowledge Dickie is at the same time his failure to acknowledge himself. This disappointment does not stop at Dickie. It leads into a skeptical epiphany. As I said earlier, nothing could be more obvious than that I cannot get inside your head, see your green, feel your pain. The trouble is that the skeptic regards this truth as discovery. “Why,” asks Cavell, “does the skeptic—how can he—take what he has discovered to be some extraordinary, and hitherto unnoticed, fact?”45 But this is how it is for Tom. The spat with Dickie “struck Tom like a horrible truth, true for all time, true for the people he had known in the past and for those he would know in the future: each had stood and would stand before him, and he would know time and time again that he would never know them, and the worst was that there would always be the illusion, for a time, that he did know them, and that he and they were completely in

harmony and alike” (TMR 86). The “wordless shock” marks the moment Tom becomes aware of his solitude. But the fact that he thought he and another could ever be “completely in harmony and alike” shows that he already inhabited the skeptical position before he felt damned to friendlessness.

5.7 Becoming Dickie Greenleaf

Why does Tom assume Dickie Greenleaf’s identity? No doubt the fortuitous resemblance of Tom and Dickie is one reason: “They were the same height, and very much the same weight, Dickie perhaps a bit heavier, and they wore the same size bathrobe, socks, and probably shirts” (TMR 65). While the similarity sets the idea of replacing Dickie in motion, it does not account for the meticulousness of Tom’s performance when, for instance, at a restaurant “he broke his bread as Dickie did, thrust his fork into his mouth with his left hand as Dickie did” (TMR 127); or when talking to police officers who never met the real Dickie Greenleaf, Tom “ran his fingers through his hair, as Dickie sometimes did when he was irritated” (TMR 161).

The meticulousness of Tom’s impersonation is also absent from the most common critical interpretation, which attributes Tom’s grift to class envy. To be sure, The Talented Mr. Ripley is as an American counterpart to what Francis Mulhern calls the “condition of culture” novel, which are British novels that figure class conflict in terms of a struggle between the cultured and the philistines. Tom’s being an orphan raised by an aunt would support this reading given that Mulhern isolates that particular family dynamic in this brand of class-anxiety novel.46 Horsley Lee mines the same vein when he argues that Tom “kills in the first instance to rectify the social and economic injustices

46 See Mulhern, Figures of Catastrophe: The Condition of Culture Novel.
inflicted on him by the circumstances of his birth.”47 (129). He later elaborates that Tom “desires the means and leisure to cultivate aesthetic consciousness,” a point attested to by Tom’s love of art and his teaching himself French by reading Malraux’s *Le Musée Imaginaire*. Given his tastes, Horsley continues, “Tom commits murders that are perhaps most of all to be seen as a means of securing the inherited wealth he lacks” (136). Slavoj Žižek, referring to the sequels of the first *Ripley*, likewise notes that Tom “does what is necessary to attain his goal (a quiet life in an exclusive Paris suburb),” and Edward Shannon argues that Highsmith’s novel “focuses the reader’s attention on the political and economic contexts that define Tom Ripley, who is first and foremost bent on ascending the ladder of class and privilege” (17). Class envy undeniably plays a part in the novel, but it does not explain the subtleties of Ripley’s performance. Benjamin Magnum is correct to point out that “the deceptive subtleties of Ripley’s character frustrate the idea that a ‘critique’ of American narratives of social mobility underwrite this narrative” (790). The political and economic context are the conditions for this plot, but they do not account for how painstakingly Tom throws himself into his performance of Dickie.

One resource existentialism offers for thinking about meticulous pretending is Sartre’s example of the waiter. To get a sense of the waiter’s attention to detail, it is necessary to quote Sartre at length:

His movements are animated and intent, a bit too precise, a bit too quick; he approaches the customers with a bit too much animation; he leans forward a bit too attentively, his voice and his eyes expressing an interest in the customer’s order that is a bit too solicitous. Finally, here he is, on his way back and attempting in his attitude to imitate the inflexible exactitude of some kind of

automaton, while carrying his tray with the recklessness characteristic of a
tightrope walker, holding it in a constantly unstable and constantly disrupted
equilibrium, which he constantly restores with a light movement of his arm and
hand. His behavior throughout strikes us as an act. He concentrates on his
successive movement as if they were mechanisms, each one of them governing
the others; his facial expression and even his voices seem to be mechanical; he
adopts the pitiless nimbleness and rapidity of things. He is playing, amusing
himself. But what, then, is he playing at? One does not need to watch him for long
to realize: he is playing at being a café waiter (BN 102-3, EN 94).

The most striking detail in the passage is the emphasis on detail: everything the waiter
does is a bit too much. Some commentators have read this emphasis as speaking to a
possibility of resistance on the waiter’s part—that by excessively playing the role of
waiter, he makes himself uncanny and exposes the artifice, but that is not Sartre’s point.\footnote{See Bernasconi, \textit{How to Read Sartre}, 35-43; Žižek, \textit{Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism}, 355-6.}
The reason Sartre claims the waiter performs the role of waiter with gusto is that he
wishes to present himself as entirely contained by, as having no subjectivity beyond, that
role. “A grocer who dreams if offensive to the buyer,” writes Sartre, and by the same
token, a good waiter tries to “actualize” (réaliser) being a waiter. That verb, réaliser, is
cognate with reify, and the sense of making waiter a thing (not a subject position) is
partly what Sartre is driving at when he compares the waiters to an automaton and his
gestures to movements as mechanisms. The performance of waiter is mean to illustrate
how in bad faith, a person retreats from freedom and imagines themselves a thing.

The idea that the waiter flees his freedom by enacting the role partly explains
Tom’s impersonation, because focusing on the here-and-now details of being Dickie fills
up his attention, leaving no room for the nagging feelings of shame and boredom that
disturbed him before. “It was impossible ever to be lonely or bored, he thought, so long
as he was Dickie Greenleaf” (TMR 116). But Sartre’s waiter example only takes us so
far. *Waiter* is a generic role, one any number of people can take on because it stresses a certain impersonality, but *Dickie Greenleaf* is a not. Indeed, by consciously taking on the character of Dickie and not a more generic role, Tom would seem to be overcoming the bad faith that Sartre would have us believe the waiter exhibits. That bad faith consists in his deceiving himself that he nothing more than a waiter, but Tom is fully aware that he is throwing himself into his Dickie performance. The daring he displays in the venture, the awareness that, “If you wanted to be cheerful, or melancholic, or wistful, or thoughtful, or courteous, you simply had to *act* those things with every gesture” would suggest that far from taking on a role in bad faith, Tom is authentically assuming his Dickie persona (TMR 180). But that cannot be right. One of the themes throughout this dissertation is that authenticity is not synonymous with distancing oneself from social norms or carrying out some extreme acts. Bad faith is “an activity of *distraction*,” writes Sartre, in that in bad faith, a person’s attention flickers: “on the one hand to maintain and to notice the thing to be hidden, and on the other, to push away and to veil it” (BN 95-6; EN 87, 89). Tom’s meticulous Dickie performance is likewise a distraction, and in that sense a more intense form of bad faith than Sartre discusses.

Drawing on Hannah Arendt’s distinction between loneliness and solitude illuminates what performing as Dickie does for Tom “Solitude is that human situation in which I keep myself company. Loneliness comes about when I am alone without being able to split up into the two-in-one, without being able to keep myself company.”49 The case of Tom Ripley throws a spanner in the works. In his Dickie-persona, Tom enjoys his solitude. On vacation in Paris, Tom wanders the streets and marvels at how it “was

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strange to feel so alone, and yet so much a part of things.” “He felt alone, yet not at all lonely” while flâneuring in Rome (TMR 129). Arendt referred to the kind of solitude that allows for a contemplative evaluation of life—the kind of solitude that monks, philosophers, and writers cherish. But Tom’s solitude is a prolonged exercise in distraction, a retreat from himself: “He was himself and yet not himself. He felt blameless and free, despite the fact that he consciously controlled every move he made” (TMR 130). He does not keep himself company so much as he watches himself from an imagined distance.

Tom’s Dickie-persona is marked primarily by a “cheerful equanimity” in all situations—the very opposite of the anxious, bored, lonely character of “Thomas Ripley,” and for this reason the Dickie persona functions for Tom as Heidegger’s Man. Das Man is the way a person lives when not anxiously confronting her own unique finitude. It relieves a person of the pressures of deciding how to live: “because [das Man] presents every judgement and decision as its own, it takes the responsibility of Da-sein away from it.”50 In leading us away from our own individuality, Das Man furnishes us with an abundance of average expectations: “what is proper, what is allowed, and what is not. Of what is granted success and what is not.”51 The persona of Dickie attracts Tom because it has the same sort of comforting insouciance that Heidegger’s Dasein seeks in Das Man.

In fact, despite Dickie’s privilege, he is not otherwise a remarkable person. He is one of “thousands of lousy amateur painters” despite a professed interest in art (53). Nor does he seem interested in the museums Tom aches to visit (63). He speaks Italian passably well, but Tom realizes after just six lessons “that his Italian was on par with

50 Heidegger, Being and Time, 119.
51 Ibid.
Dickie’s,” and as I mentioned earlier, Dickie never used the subjunctive correctly (so Tom also avoids learning it). Surely this is due to a lack of attention, but Tom observes that the subjunctive is used “after an expression of fearing.” One suspects the carefree Dickie is not attuned to that emotion. In fact, despite his attraction to Dickie, Tom does not seem to find him very interesting. Early in their friendship he pegs Dickie as “a young man who was not particularly brainy” (TMR 59). When Dickie extols Italian culture for appreciating the joys of people-watching, Tom merely nods. “He had heard it before. He was waiting for something profound and original from Dickie” (TMR 63). Aside from being wealthy, Dickie seems like an average, unremarkable person. Dickie seems to Tom to lack anxiety or shame, so that the Dickie persona offers Tom a reprieve from his own inadequate self.

5.8 Conclusion

Tom gets away with everything: with impersonating Dickie in an interview with a police officer then “impersonating” himself in another interview with the same officer; with writing letters on Dickie’s typewriter in Dickie’s voice; with staging Dickie’s suicide; with forging a will bequeathing all of Dickie’s fortune to himself. The novel puts the reader in the awkward position of rooting for a bastard, so in the finale of the novel he asks his taxi driver to take him to the best hotel, it comes as a shock. As a rule, readers can go along with the bad guy so long as he gets reforms or, more satisfyingly, gets his comeuppance. What are we to make of Tom getting neither?

Tom’s apparent success comes at the cost of constant vigilance. In the lead up to the triumphant final scene, Tom is convinced the police are about to apprehend him, and every face he sees is a threat. The mood is suffocating, which is no doubt part of the
reason he is so relieved to realize he is free. But this freedom is nothing more than an escape from legal consequence. In fact, Tom has damned himself to friendlessness, paranoia, and constant self-discipline. He enjoys a certain kind of autonomy, but it’s an autonomy without authenticity. The philosopher David Velleman draws this distinction by way of discussing D. W. Winnicott’s idea of the “false self.” A person is false, Winnicott writes, when they laugh at what they think they should laugh at, care about what they think they are supposed to care about. Such a person is motivated entirely by what they should be for others, and as such this person “has a problem with autonomy, but his problem is one of excess: he is overly self-controlled, overly deliberate; his grip on the reins of his behavior is too tight, not too loose.”52 Authenticity was supposed to embellish autonomy, but in the case of Tom Ripley, he is inauthentic precisely because he is too autonomous.

52 Velleman, “Identification and Identity,” 338.
6. Conclusion: Existentialism and Modernism in Dialogue

Bridging the divide between existentialism and modernism enriches both. Modernist studies stands to gain both a deeper sense of its own history and a more expansive vision of ethics. On the historical side, modernist studies coalesced as a field decades after the prime of such figures as Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Woolf, and Faulkner, and it was predicated on preserving high art from contamination by mass culture.¹ The field has moved past this division, and in so doing it has caught up to French existentialism, which had already broken down the high/low culture division in the ‘40s. *Les Temps Modernes*, the leading journal of French existentialism, was named after Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, and Sartre, Beauvoir and company were enthusiastic about the political potential of mass media and the philosophical richness of popular film, music (notably jazz), and commercial fiction. And as I have shown in this dissertation, their philosophical investigations of fictional realism defies the modernist-realist divide that has come under so much stress in recent years. In this regard, existentialism represents a vast, barely tapped resource for contemporary scholars who wish to reconsider realism.

At the theoretical level, modernist studies would also better historicize itself by reconsidering its debt to existentialism. It is well known that modernist studies was an eager recipient of French poststructuralism. Barthes’s *texte scriptible*, Kristeva’s idea of the revolutionary power of poetic language, Derrida’s engagement with Artaud and Joyce—French theory opened new paths of investigation for modernist studies that are still explored to this day, even as poststructuralism has waned. But French theory arose in

¹ Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide* is the classic study of this division.
large measure as a reaction to Sartre’s dominance over the intellectual field. François Dosse writes that with the rise of structuralism, “Existentialism, as a philosophy of subjectivity and of the subject, came under attack and the subject and conscience gave way to rules, codes, and structure.” Tilottama Rajan has shown that despite poststructuralism’s near total silence about existentialism, these movements preserved a style of thinking pioneered by Sartre. This same erasure plays out in the history of French feminism, where the Beauvoir of The Second Sex was either ignored or dismissed “as a theoretical dinosaur.” It would take a full study to develop these lines of inquiry, but there are plenty of indications that existentialism is the black hole at the center of the poststructuralist universe, exerting an inescapable pull but only indirectly observable. To the extent that modernist studies has been shaped by an encounter with French theory, a rediscovery of existentialism promises to enrich the field’s history.

Existentialism also offers modernism a more expansive ethics by presenting a vision of moral agency to compliment the entrenched ethics of alterity. Scholars of modernism prize alterity because they see it as continuous with the modernist emphasis on textuality: “the task of representing otherness,” writes Dorothy Hale, “is worked out as a formal problem.” But no amount of recognizing the other’s difference will show me how I should act. Already in 1988, Wayne Booth complained that the discourse of “otherness” made a strawman of the self by casting it as an insular, imperious entity in desperate need of rupture: “from birth onward our growth depends so deeply on our ability to internalize other selves that one must be puzzled by those who talk about the

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3 See Rajan, Deconstruction and the Remainders of Phenomenology: Sartre, Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard.
4 Moi, Simone de Beauvoir, 201.
5 Hale, The Novel and the New Ethics, 10.
self as somehow independent, individual, unsocial.” Rediscovering existentialism—or for those scholars who came of age after the 1980s, it might be better to say discovering existentialism for the first time—can address this gap because the relation of self-to-self and self-to-other are abiding concerns.

Existentialism, too, stands to benefit by being recontextualized within modernism. In today’s academy, existentialism exists in a state of suspended animation. Most philosophy departments offer an undergraduate existentialism survey class, sometimes cross-listed in other departments. With few exceptions they end with Sartre, Beauvoir, or Fanon, indicating it is not considered a living subject that inspires argument and development. And while it is generally admitted that existentialism has a literary side in such figures as Dostoevsky, Rilke, Kafka, even these get taught “philosophically.” The Father Zossima section of The Brothers Karamazov, for instance, is regularly taught to students as an argument about morality in the absence of God. Little, if any, attention is given to the presentation of moral agency of the characters of realist fiction. Aside from shortchanging fiction’s distinct mode of disclosure, such a philosophical approach ends up doing a disservice to Sartre in particular, who frequently gets dismissed as a derivative, less rigorous imitator of Heidegger rather than a thinker who moves fluidly between more literary and more systematic modes of argument.

Attending to the American influence on and mediation of French existentialism alters the conventional story of existentialism. It is often understood as a theology for atheists (Gabriel Marcel having largely fallen out of the curriculum) and as a doctrine of 4 ds: dread, despair, death, and dauntlessness. These terms are George Cotkin’s

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6 Booth, The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction, 69.
coordinates in *Existential America*, and they allow him to bridge American figures like Emerson and Melville with European existentialists without insisting on lines of direct influence. The “four Ds” are helpful, but they shortchange the way American fiction stages the sort of concrete, situated ethics of agency that separates existentialism from a philosophy of first principles and system-building.

With modernist studies having taken on the role of investigating modernity more broadly, attending to Franco-American existentialism sheds light on a moral dimension of this epoch that often goes unacknowledged in literary studies: the central place of authenticity as an ethical ideal. It obtains particularly in France and America given the central place their national ideologies give to liberty. Literary studies, particularly in its Foucauldian expressions, tends to mistrust any discussion of ethical ideals, especially those that center the individual, as a hangover of bourgeois, moralizing discourse rather than topics worthy of head-on discussion. But dismissing the phenomenological dimensions of agency and ethics is not the same thing as defeating it. Recovering the existentialist attunement to the experience of moral and immoral agency promises to clarify the ethical norms of our era.
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Biography

Kevin Spencer attended the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada from 1998 to 2004, receiving a BA (honors) in English in 2002 and an MA in English in 2004. He subsequently attended Western University (formerly The University of Western Ontario) from 2006 to 2008 where he received a MA in Theory and Criticism in 2009. His article “Existential Realism: Reading American Novels the French Way” will appear in *Contemporary Literature* volume 62, number 4 in late 2022. He previously co-authored an article with Hyoung Youb Kim, “The Same Shape and Different Functions: based on the Consonants ㅇ and ㆁ” that appeared in *언어학 연구 (Studies in Linguistics)* Vol. 34, no 1. January 2015. 21-34. From 2011 to 2015, Kevin was a professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Korea University, Sejong Campus in Sejong City, Korea where he received the Excellent Teaching Award in 2011. At Duke University, he also was awarded funding to attend the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell University in 2019, and he also received Myra and William Boone Fellowship (2021-22). Beginning in August 2022, he will take up the position of Assistant Professor in the School of English Studies, College of Liberal Arts at Wenzhou-Kean University in Wenzhou, China.