

**REVIEWING OTHERNESS:  
REPRESENTATIONS and THEORIES of  
UGLINESS in MODERN FRENCH CULTURE**

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PhD Dissertation

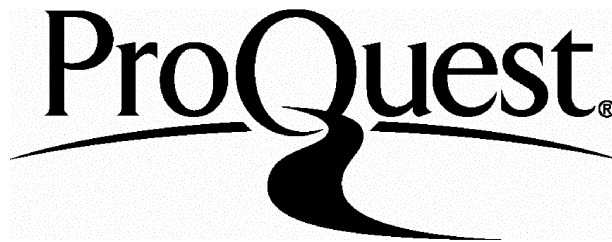
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## ABSTRACT

### **Reviewing Otherness: Representations And Theories Of Ugliness In Modern French Culture**

This dissertation explores the issue of ugliness in modern French culture. Within a broad framework of the relation between the self and the other, it seeks to answer the following questions: what is ugliness? how is it perceived? where is it found? why is it important? In contrast to traditional ideas about ugliness, where it is seen merely as beauty's opposite, the discussion focuses on areas of literature, art and theoretical debate in which the ugly warrants attention on its own, more positive terms. To this end, five distinct areas of study are proposed as follows:

1. Caricature as 'the art of ugliness'. The deployment of ugliness as a political weapon and as a means of negotiating social identity in emerging bourgeois culture after 1789.
2. The nose as support for the architecture of the face and as the cornerstone for a topography of human history where the world is seen as a face. Exceptional noses as points of radical discontinuity in totalising narratives of the collective self.
3. The turning point for ugliness in France. Romantic aesthetics and the movement of the ugly from the 'ridiculous' to the sublime.
4. The rôle of ugliness in the precarious domain of existential identity. The revelation, through ugliness-related nausea, of contingency. Sartre's theory of the Other and the alienation of the self by means of 'the look'.
5. Ugliness as a gendered negative value positioned on the side of women. Feminist re-consideration and re-writing of that situation as a way of revaluing ugliness – and women themselves – positively.

The approach adopted does not claim to give an exhaustive account of ugliness; rather, it offers a series of perspectives which together indicate the strategic importance and cultural significance of the ugly in France from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

To my father and my grandmother,  
who never had the chance to study as I have done.

And for Justin.



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## CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>		iv
<i>Note to the Reader</i>		vi
Introduction		1
Chapter 1	Caricature and the Ugly Other	17
	<i>Works cited</i>	67
Chapter 2	On the Nose	70
	<i>Works cited</i>	106
Chapter 3	From the Ridiculous to the Sublime	108
	<i>Works cited</i>	145
Chapter 4	Ugliness is an Existential Issue: Sartrean Nausea and the Hell of Other People	146
	<i>Works cited</i>	204
Chapter 5	Reviewing and Revaluing Ugliness on the Side of Women	207
	<i>Works cited</i>	247
Conclusion		249
<i>Full Bibliography</i>		258

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Illustration	Source
1	Leonardo da Vinci: caricature of an old man laughing	Champfleury (1880) <i>Histoire de la caricature sous la Réforme et la Ligue. Louis XIII à Louis XVI</i> (Paris: Dentu), 107.
2	Charles Le Brun: 'La Tranquillité', c. 1668	Montagu, Jennifer (1994) <i>The Expression of the Passions. The Origin and Influence of Charles Le Brun's 'Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière'</i> (New Haven & London: Yale University Press), 18.
3	Charles Le Brun: 'Le mépris et la haine', c. 1668.	Montagu (1994: 133).
4	Albrecht Dürer: studies of heads, woodcut, 1528. (from <i>Vier Bücher von Menschlicher Proportion</i> , Bk. III).	Posner, Donald (1971) <i>Annibale Carracci: A study in the reform of Italian painting around 1590</i> , vol. 1 (London: Phaidon), Fig. 62.
5	Albrecht Dürer: study of heads, pen and ink, c. 1513.	Hoffman, Werner (1957) <i>Caricature from Leonardo to Picasso</i> (London: John Calder), 17.
6	Anonymous revolutionary caricature: 'Père Oquet', 1789.	Baecque, Antoine de (1988) <i>La Caricature révolutionnaire</i> (Paris: Presses du CNRS), 88.
7	Anon.: Marie-Antoinette as a harpy, 1789.	De Baecque (1988: 187).
8	Anon.: 'La Poule d'Autriche', 1791.	De Baecque (1988: 187).
9	Anon.: 'L'Égout Royal', 1791.	De Baecque (1988: 180).
10	Anon.: 'Ah! Le maudit animal', c 1791.	De Baecque (1988: 184).
11	Anon.: Harpie aveugle, 1791.	Langlois, Claude (1988) <i>La Caricature contre-révolutionnaire</i> (Paris: Presses du CNRS), 74.
12	Charles Philipon: sketches, 1831.	Gerd Unverfehrt, ed. (1980) <i>La Caricature. Bildsatire in Frankreich 1830-1835</i> , exhibition catalogue, Kunstgeschichtliches Seminar der Universität Göttingen (Göttingen: Erich Goltze), 99.
13	Honoré Daumier: 'Gargantua', 1831.	Hyman, Timothy and Roger Malbert (2000) <i>Carnavalesque</i> , National Touring Exhibitions catalogue (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing), 58.
14	Charles-Joseph Traviès: 'Hercule Vainqueur', 1834.	Grand-Carteret (1888: 207).
15	Charles-Joseph Traviès: 'Pot de Mélassé', 1832.	Grand-Carteret (1888: 199).
16	Henry Monnier: Bourgeoise, 1832.	Monnier, Henry (1832) <i>Physiologie du bourgeois</i> (Paris: Aubert), 82.

- 17      Honoré Daumier: From the series *The Public at the Exhibition*, 1864.      Wechsler, Judith (1982) *A Human Comedy. Physiognomy and Caricature in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Paris* (London: Thames and Hudson), 119.
- 18      Honoré Daumier: 'Robert Macaire agent matrimonial' from the *Caricaturana* series (1836-38).      Daumier, Honoré (1926) *Les Cent Robert Macaire d'Honoré Daumier*, pref. Florent Fels (Paris: L'Art et le Livre), no. 13.
- 19      Anon.: Mayeux as Narcissus, 1831.      Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes microfiche collection. There are various alternative catalogues for the Mayeux caricatures. Mayeux as Narcissus is listed under the Meunié series as no. 64 and under the 'Histoire complete [sic] de M. Mayeux' series as no. 55.
- 20      Charles-Joseph Traviès: 'Qu'en dites-vous, la petite chatte...?', 1831.      Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes microfiche. The caricatures of Mayeux specific to Traviès appear in a numbered series entitled 'Facéties de M. Mayeux' of which this is no. 30. Meunié series no. 132.
- 21      Charles-Joseph Traviès: 'Out of the question, my dear...', 1831.      Wechsler (1982: 83).
- 22      Honoré Daumier: Henry Monnier in the rôle of Joseph Prudhomme, 1852.      Wechsler (1982:113).
- 23      Henry Monnier: double caricature of Joseph Prudhomme and Henry Monnier, 1871.      Wechsler (1982:129).
- 24      Anon: Portrait of Cyrano de Bergerac      Edmond Rostand (1990) *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Paris: Livre de Poche), 161.
- 25      Abraham Bosse: 'Le Capitaine Fracasse', engraving, date unknown.      Hoffman (1957: 73).
- 26      Edmond Rostand: sketch of Cyrano      Rostand, Edmond (1991) *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Paris: Larousse), 13.

## **NOTE TO THE READER**

To minimise the number of footnotes, references are given in author-date format with a list of works cited at the end of each chapter. A full bibliography is also given after the final conclusion. Dates in square brackets indicate date of first publication.

All French sources are quoted in French. In chapter 5, however, certain texts by Hélène Cixous which I have been unable to find in the original are quoted in English.

Emphasis within quoted extracts is original unless otherwise stated.

## Introduction

A conventional approach to ugliness would be to see it as beauty's opposite. In keeping with the binary logic that underpins and structures Western thought, beauty and ugliness then fall swiftly into line with an entire tradition of culturally-coded binarisms that privilege one term over the other: ancient Greek notions of purity and impurity, for example, Christian beliefs about good and evil, or Cartesian ideas about the mind and the body. Such oppositions can do no more than offer a negative theory of the ugly which tells us nothing about it other than what it is not. It would be possible to accumulate a vast array of material on this basis, but to do so as an end in itself would merely confirm what we know already. By contrast, the avenues of ugliness proposed in this dissertation – caricature, the nose, the sublime, existential nausea and ugliness in women's writing – do not begin and end with ideas about beauty; rather they explore areas of literature, art and theoretical discussion in which the ugly warrants attention on its own terms. An approach such as this makes no claim to give an exhaustive account of ugliness, either chronologically or in terms of comprehensive coverage; rather it offers a series of perspectives which together indicate the strategic importance and cultural significance of the ugly in France ranging from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

### *What is ugliness?*

From the point of view of the practical gardener, there is no such thing as a weed, merely a plant that is growing in the wrong place. One has simply to remove it. From the point of the 'theoretical gardener', however, a herbaceous border that has been lovingly tended and organised will be wrecked (if only temporarily) by the pernicious presence of just one unwelcome plant. The proud display of an entire flower bed is as nothing compared to the impact on the gardener of that one stray stalk. The weed is there when it absolutely does not belong there. It is, to borrow the famous phrase from Mary Douglas, matter out of place (Douglas 1984: 35).<sup>1</sup> Not only does the weed

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<sup>1</sup> The formulation of ugliness in terms of matter out of place was first made by Mark Cousins in his inspirational lecture series on 'The Ugly' given at the Architectural Association in London during the

ruin the whole effect, it also calls into question the relation between the gardener and his 'world'. The ordering processes which enabled the gardener to create the border in the first place can no longer be taken for granted. Instead of quietly conforming to the gardener's own design – offering an admirable reflection of the gardener's input, with each plant in its appointed place – the border suddenly now seems out of control. Even if the gardener pulls up the offending stalk, it is unlikely to be the end of the story. Weeds are notoriously difficult to eliminate and the gardener will know that the root systems will produce further shoots with the potential to invade the horticultural space still further. And of course being a weed, this plant always grows more vigorously than the average petunia.

This metaphorical account of the effect of a weed in an otherwise well-kept garden is intended to establish, in simple terms, a preliminary framework for this investigation into ugliness. The gardener is the self, the garden the world according to the self, and the weed is the invasive other.<sup>2</sup> A world that satisfies the horticultural requirements of the self will appear pleasing (always remembering, of course, that not all gardeners want the same gardens), whereas any unwelcome otherness which detracts from that world has the potential to appear ugly. The weed metaphor usefully serves to demonstrate the way in which the ugly exists materially on the same level as everything else: it is a plant among plants and appears ugly only in so far as it is perceived as being in the wrong place. At the same time, however, it manifests certain qualities that set it apart from the rest of the garden.

The principle disruptive power of the weed lies in its negative relation with the gardener, in the way it troubles the relation between the self and the world. The fact that the gardener no longer feels in control of the situation betrays an acute sense of ontological insecurity to which he or she must react defensively by seeking to remove the offending vegetation. Then there is the capacity of the weed to ruin the space around it, to smother other plants which would otherwise grow harmoniously in accordance with a pre-determined planting scheme. In other words, the weed refuses

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academic year 1994-5. Cousins's strong psychoanalytic reading of the ugly appears in the *AA Files* (nos. 28-30).

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of clarity, I use the terms 'self' and 'other' here in a non-specific way. The underlying complexities of the self-other relation (in terms of the various different formulations of that relation

to conform to the prevailing aesthetic of that particular border and simply does not sit prettily amongst the flowers. The weed is also characterised by its contingency: it is a gratuitous presence and there is no logical explanation as to why it should grow precisely there where, as far as the gardener is concerned, it most definitely should not be growing. On the positive side, however, there is the matter of its exceptional vigour: the weed, taken on its own terms, is remarkably enterprising and successful even though it is at odds with the overall aesthetic of the cultivated garden. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the weed, for all its unwelcomeness, serves to confirm the rôle of the gardener as a gardener; it gives him or her a sense of self. The gardener needs the weed. The weed would not be a weed at all were it not for the gardener. Both of these arguments will be discussed in more detail in part 2 of chapter 4, where the relation between the gardener and the weed is considered in terms of the relation between the anti-semitic and the Jew in Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946).

The gardener's predicament – the position of the self in relation to the ugly other within the context of (horti)culture – can be interpreted in a number of other ways. On a personal and practical level, the self organises external reality, wherever possible, in such a way as to conform to its own self-image. All is well as long as external reality exists in accordance with that self-image, or at least in no way actively opposes it. The ugly other does not fit in with this narcissistic organisational logic. It reflects negatively on an otherwise positive self-image and so causes the self to assert, with some urgency, its sense that this is 'not me'. In political terms this means that the self must assume control of the surroundings by seeking to impose its own order, by imposing the primacy of a certain perspective. The other can then be seen in terms of a political opponent which creates *disorder* and which does not share that perspective. The problem of order/disorder is a question of respecting/flouting certain sets of rules. These rules, exercised on a personal level, are nevertheless socially determined. Ugliness thus poses a problem not just for the individual, but also for the collective self. Despite the fact that the perception of the ugly might seem to be an entirely subjective matter (the old argument about beauty/ugliness in the eye of the beholder), it inevitably has a much wider significance. In addition, the problem of the self in

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and in so far as these are relevant to the ugly) will be explored further in the context of each of the



relation to the ugly other is a matter for aesthetics. This last assertion, however, requires some careful qualification.

The ugly, as I have said, has traditionally been seen as beauty's opposite. This assumption is problematic on both sides in that it consistently devalues the ugly, but at the same time fails to value the beautiful enough because it makes of beauty a merely relative notion. I shall illustrate the nature of this dual problematic through a brief discussion of the popular aesthetics of the fairytale followed by a critique of fairytale beauty and ugliness from the perspective of Immanuel Kant.

*Traditional readings of beauty and ugliness: Charles Perrault (1628-1703)*

The process whereby ugliness is subsumed to beauty in Western culture – and the limitations this imposes – can be demonstrated most clearly with reference to the folk tale and its fictional stereotypes. Here the positive/negative lineage of beauty and ugliness is systematically invoked to strengthen identification with the forces of good and rejection of the forces of evil: virtuous princesses are young and beautiful, wicked fairies are old and ugly. Princes are handsome and charming, or if they are not to begin with, they are usually required to be so in the end. In this strictly codified context, where good characters live happily ever after, ugliness is required to serve first as a foil for beauty and then to give way to a totalising (and totalitarian) narrative of the beautiful. Charles Perrault's 'Riquet à la houppe' offers a good illustration of the assimilation of the ugly in this way.

Perrault's text recounts the tale of a beautiful but stupid princess who longs for brains (like those of her ugly younger sister) and of Riquet à la houppe, the deformed, ugly, but clever and charming prince. Beauty is shown to feel incomplete without brains and brains to feel incomplete without beauty. Already there is a sense that the primary logic of the tale concerns only the perfection of beauty. Sure enough, the ugly soon defers to the beautiful: the prince falls in love with the princess but she, although intrigued, cannot fall in love with him because he is physically ugly. Ugliness thus poses a seemingly insuperable physical obstacle to desire. The

impossibility of the situation is resolved, however, through the gift of a wish granted to each of the characters at birth by their respective fairy godmothers. This intervention enables the ugly prince to wish brains on his beloved beauty and the daft princess to wish beauty on her hunchbacked, limping, cross-eyed, large-nosed suitor. Once both parties are ‘whole’ (clever and good-looking), mutual love and admiration blossoms, and a marriage takes place through which the continuity of beauty is presumably assured. The ugly younger sister who had previously always outshone her older sister in terms of personality is conveniently forgotten. The younger sister’s ugliness, like that of Riquet, is nothing more than an irksome moment in the narrative of the beautiful.

Perrault’s fairytale romance reaffirms, in a systematic way, the primacy of classical canons of beauty: harmony (the mutual love between Riquet and the princess), symmetry (comparable attractiveness and cleverness on both sides) and proportion (external beauty as a guarantee of internal virtue in terms of intelligence). In the end ugliness is written out of the story, while beauty gets the looks and the brains. There is a suggestion at the end of the tale, however, presented as hearsay, that Riquet’s physical appearance does not in fact change at all and that the transformation from ugly to beautiful is more apparent than real. Even if that is the case, it does not really matter, since it does not change the way in which Riquet is *perceived*: to all intents and purposes he is now seen as beautiful.

### *The Kantian objection*

It is important to note at this point that the presumed ‘beauty’ of Perrault’s characters is not beautiful as far as pure aesthetics is concerned. Kant would insist that the qualities displayed by the fairytale protagonists in no way meet the requirements of a pure judgement of taste which alone can determine whether or not a thing is beautiful. Taste in this sense, according to the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), ‘is the ability to judge an object, or a way of presenting it, by means of a liking or disliking *devoid of all interest*. The object of such a liking is called *beautiful*’ (Kant 1987: §5, 53).<sup>3</sup> The like or dislike of fairytale characters is not of this order at all, since it is

fundamentally linked to a liking for the good which *does* entail some element of interest, such as a prior concept of what the object is supposed to be (a lovely princess, a charming prince). We cannot, and are not supposed to, interpret fairytale stereotypes in an impartial way. The charm and emotion they elicit is part of the meaning and therefore an integral part of the narrative of fairytale beauty. This is not the same as Kantian beauty which is judged by pure taste and is not influenced by charm or emotion although, as Kant recognises, these may be connected with a liking for the beautiful. There is thus room for potential confusion between two orders of beauty: one that is universal and pure and judged in an absolutely disinterested way, and another that involves empirical liking and is therefore explicitly *not* disinterested or universal. Kant formulates the problem as follows:

And yet, (though beauty should actually concern only form), charms are frequently not only included with beauty, as a contribution toward a universal aesthetic liking, but are even themselves passed off as beauties, so that the matter of the liking is passed off as the form. This is a misunderstanding [...] (§13, 69).

Fairytale beauty and, by extension, all popular conceptions of beauty ‘misunderstand’ beauty in precisely this way. For Kant such beauties are not true beauties. This view was developed by Mark Cousins in his lectures on the ugly where he maintained that, since ugliness cannot fulfil Kant’s criteria for true beauty – universal liking arrived at without reference to any prior concept or form of interest – it does not belong in the register of aesthetics *at all*. Clearly if the Kantian rules for ideal beauty are strictly applied, this is right. But Kantian aesthetic theory, whilst it sets up the conditions of possibility for pure beauty and pure judgements of taste, also takes account of empirical beauties and corresponding empirical judgements; the point being that the *Critique of Judgement* does not situate the latter outside aesthetics altogether:

Aesthetic judgments, just like theoretical (i.e., logical) ones, can be divided into empirical and pure. Aesthetic judgments are empirical if they assert that an object or a way of presenting it is agreeable or disagreeable; they are pure if

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<sup>3</sup> All further references to the *Critique of Judgement* will be to the 1987 translation by Werner S.

they assert that is is beautiful. Empirical aesthetic judgments are judgments of sense (material aesthetic judgments); only pure aesthetic judgments (since they are formal) are properly judgments of taste. (§14, 69)

If this analysis seems to labour the point about the existence of two orders of aesthetics, it does so in order to establish the terms of reference for an important element of discussion in this dissertation which will ask where French perceptions of the ugly stand in relation to the Kantian distinction between the empirical and the pure. My contention is that French aesthetics has not toed this Kantian line because it celebrates the power of the ugly to transform and enliven art.<sup>4</sup>

*Non-traditional readings of ugliness: Michel Tournier*

If ugliness in French culture is an aesthetic issue in the non-Kantian sense, it is also involved in more immediate sociological and political questions. In this broader cultural context, however, there is a marked reluctance to refer to ugliness as such. It is acceptable to speak of ugliness in relation to art. It is less acceptable to speak of it in relation to 'real life', especially where judgements about other people are concerned. The category of ugliness still exists, but other, more sophisticated ways are found to express it (or possibly to conceal it). For this reason, ugliness as ugliness occurs in its most undisguised form in stories for children. In the case of 'Riquet à la houppe', the mechanisms behind judgements of ugliness are naturalised and subsumed automatically to a 'universal' discourse of goodness and beauty. Contemporary re-writings of children's stories show that such pretensions to universality are in fact loaded with culture-specific prejudice in terms of gender, race, age, class and – most importantly in the present context – the unashamed categorisation of physical appearance. Michel Tournier's creative re-writing of the story of the three kings, *Les Rois mages* (1983), engages openly with Western notions of ugliness, denaturalising them with deceptive simplicity.

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Pluhar and will be given in the form (section number [§], page number).

<sup>4</sup> The problem with pure Kantian aesthetics is that it has no object; instead, it outlines the conditions of possibility for such an object, namely a perceiving subject capable of absolute disinterestedness. If such a person does not exist, the underlying message of the *Critique of Judgement* is that there is, as

The first section of Tournier's book tells the story of king Gaspard of Méroé, 'Le roi nègre amoureux'. One day Gaspard is returning to his palace through the zoo when he sees a large crowd gathered around the baboon enclosure. He stops to enquire why and is told that it is because of the two blond slaves he had purchased for the zoo at the slave market. The slaves are on display with the baboons, each in a segregated area of the enclosure: 'les mâles d'un côté, les guenons de l'autre' (Tournier 1983: 16). The word 'guenon' in French has the dual meaning of 'female monkey' and also 'frightful woman', or 'hag'. The female slave does indeed look bad since she, like the male slave, is being pelted by the jeering crowd with watermelon skins and rotten food. Gaspard orders that the slaves be brought before him and finds he cannot take his eyes off the woman, despite her appearance:

Et pourtant, comme elle était laide, avec sa peau marbrée de bleus, rougie par endroits, livide ailleurs, avec ses grandes oreilles décollées que ses cheveux de filasse cachaient mal, avec son long nez pointu qui pendait tristement vers le sol! Tout le contraire des beautés noires de son harem, si lisses qu'elles paraissaient sculptées dans le bois d'ébène ou la pierre obsidienne. Gaspard éprouvait un mélange de pitié et de répulsion devant ces êtres si différents venus du bout du monde. (17)<sup>5</sup>

Tournier's text effects a complete reversal of cultural perspective. White colonialist behaviour towards slaves – treating them as animals rather than people, subjecting them to physical abuse – is now the province of a dominant black population. Culturally determined standards for human beauty are similarly transposed. The white woman's pale skin, her big ears and long, pointed nose all serve as distinctive features of racial otherness and hence, in the eyes of the abusive crowd, as indices of inferiority and of ugliness. But at the same time, the crowd, like the king, is drawn towards these ugly cultural others despite its sense of repulsion.

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yet, no art in the pure sense. Kant offers what seems to be an impossible ideal, a standard which all art and art criticism have so far failed to meet.

<sup>5</sup> In Tournier's earlier version of the story, *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar* (1980: 22), Biltine is described not as ugly, but as 'un être physiquement insolite, inquiétant et vaguement répugnant'. It is interesting that in this 'adult' version of the story, the word 'laid(e)' does not seem appropriate. In the context of a more sophisticated narrative it would appear too simplistic, too vague and somehow too childish.

Gaspard asks for the female slave, Biltine, to appear before him. When she does so, he experiences an intense and unexpected existential transformation:

Ils restaient l'un en face de l'autre à s'observer, l'esclave blanche et le roi nègre. Et Gaspard sentait s'opérer en lui un changement extraordinaire: à force de regarder Biltine, ce n'était plus Biltine qu'il voyait, c'était lui-même tel que Biltine devait le voir. 'Si claire, si lumineuse, pensait-il, comme elle doit me trouver noir!' Et pour la première fois, une tristesse et une sorte de honte – de la honte, oui – lui venait au coeur d'être un nègre. 'Elle doit avoir envie de se jeter dans mes bras autant que de plonger dans un tonneau de goudron!' (Tournier 1983: 21)

Suddenly, Gaspard no longer sees himself with his own eyes, but with those of Biltine. In existential terms, he allows himself to be defined as ugly by the look of the Other. This situation forms the basis for Sartre's play 'Huis Clos', which dramatises the notion that 'hell is other people' in the sense that other people's negative judgements can make life hell if one accepts the judgement communicated by the look. Sartre's theory of the look and the way it can constitute a person as ugly will be discussed in chapter 4. Gaspard's evocation of a barrel of tar – and the suggestion that Biltine would not wish to throw herself into Gaspard's arms any more than she would want to dive into it – might also be taken as an indirect reference to Sartre's theory of sliminess in which slimy substances such as honey, glue, or indeed 'la poix' (meaning pitch, or in liquid form, tar), evoke a sense of existential disgust. Again this will be explored in more detail in chapter 4.

The mechanism of disgust, which consists in simultaneous attraction and repulsion to something or someone, is overcome in Gaspard's case by his desire for Biltine. Despite his natural aversion to the blond, Phoenician slave, Gaspard decides to sleep with her (this much to the disgust of his existing harem). He orders a succulent meal of lamb's tail to be served in honour of the occasion (lamb's tail being the finest food that his kingdom can offer). Having shared this great delicacy with Biltine, Gaspard moves to embrace her, at which point she gets up and vomits over the balustrade. She insists that it is the food which has disagreed with her – the primal disgust response

is, after all, food-related – but Gaspard does not believe her: ‘Non, ce n’était pas la queue de brebis qui avait fait vomir de dégoût la femme qu’il aimait!’ (Tournier 1983: 23).<sup>6</sup> He is convinced that Biltine is sickened to the stomach by what he now sees as his ‘negritude’.<sup>7</sup>

That disgust is a fundamental aspect of this study of ugliness is evident from the fact that it recurs in one form or another in every chapter: as bourgeois bad taste in chapter 1, as nausea associated with Naturalism in chapter 2, as a paradoxical experience of attraction and repulsion comparable to the experience of the sublime in chapter 3, as existential nausea in chapter 4 and finally, as a horror of the maternal body in chapter 5. Disgust, to varying degrees in these five different contexts, provides a supporting theme for the overarching self-other (gardener-weed) relation proposed as a framework for this dissertation. Within this framework, the contrasting ‘children’s versions’ of ugliness in Tournier’s *Les Rois mages* and Perrault’s ‘Riquet à la houppe’, together with a brief discussion of Kant’s third *Critique*, are intended to signal the underlying complexities of ugliness and to indicate areas of thought in which issues of ugliness are most likely to arise, namely aesthetics, (racial) politics, sociology and (existential) psychology. A study of this kind, which sets out to explore major aspects of ugliness in modern French culture, cannot hope to follow up each of these lines of enquiry exhaustively; rather, they will form a series of theoretical threads to be picked up selectively as and when the context demands.

Ugliness in France has always flourished at a popular, ‘empirical’ level, but only gained credibility in serious intellectual discussion at the end of the eighteenth century. The reasons for this shift originate in the years of growing political unrest which culminated in the 1789 Revolution. Up until this moment high culture, or as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu terms it, ‘legitimate culture’, did not take the ugly seriously since the aristocracy, or ‘dominant class’ who controlled that culture had no incentive for doing so. Ugliness for them was part of a devalued culture associated with lower social status (and hence also poor living conditions, health and hygiene),

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<sup>6</sup> In the earlier version of the story, Biltine is also violently sick after sex with Gaspard, but overcomes her initial horror and, when both are intoxicated with incense and alcohol, indulges in ‘race-reversal’ games where she whitens his face with kaolin and blackens her own with soot.

<sup>7</sup> Again this is a reversal of cultural perspective on Tournier’s part. The term ‘negritude’ is used strategically in French-speaking non-white culture to denote non-whiteness in a positive way.

and they had every reason to maintain that distinction in order to guarantee their own social identity. The Revolution, however, with its ideals of liberty, fraternity and above all equality, violently exorcised that distinction and thereby won a right of passage for the so-called ‘ugly’ (the vulgar, the popular) into the field of legitimate political action and hence also culture. The collapse of the old feudal hierarchy and its rigorous system of exclusion based on social class brought with it the realisation that political power could, and now did reside on the side of the so-called ugly. The effect of this was the transfer of perceptions of ugliness in the revolutionary imagination from the *Tiers état* onto the aristocracy. This re-allocation was made highly visible by means of caricature, an artistic medium which, in itself, had been re-appropriated from the aristocratic world of the salon.

Chapter 1 juxtaposes an analysis of caricature in the early years of the Revolution (1789-1792) with a corresponding analysis of caricature during the reign of Louis-Philippe (1830-1848) to illustrate a significant change in the deployment of ugliness over time. In the 1830s it was no longer a question of fighting for political equality, but rather of struggling to establish social identity in relation to emerging bourgeois culture. The Revolution’s strong visual narrative of political abnormality (in terms of grotesques, monsters and animal hybrids) gave way to what Michel Foucault has described as the ‘monstre banalisé’ of the nineteenth century. Without the rigid certainties of the *ancien régime*, positions within the social hierarchy had to be negotiated. The subtleties of this process were reflected in various artistic forms such as the illustrated texts of the *Codes* and *Physiologies*, but most memorably in the images of the caricaturists whose work was published in the caricature journals of the Maison Aubert. After 1835, when Louis-Philippe imposed the *loi de cautionnement* and effectively prohibited political caricature, the focus of caricature shifted from the bourgeois king to the bourgeois public. This shift is analysed in terms of its impact on bourgeois spectators and on the caricaturists themselves. Theories of laughter reveal that the effect of caricature was highly ambivalent, particularly where the fictional emblematic characters of Macaire, Mayeux and Prudhomme were concerned. In seeking to undermine the dominant social class, these characters unwittingly also reinforced its position of power. The complexities of this situation are explored in relation to the rôle of the scapegoat (*pharmakos*) in ancient Greece and in relation to



Plato's pharmacy as discussed by Derrida in *La Dissemination*, where the *pharmakon* is both poison and remedy.

The position of caricature in 19<sup>th</sup>-century France was ambivalent not only in terms of its effect on the spectator, but also in terms of its status in the hierarchy of art. The sheer brilliance of Daumier in particular placed caricature ('the art of ugliness') in a curious position by representing moral, social and political uglinesses so 'beautifully'.<sup>8</sup> Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnick consider the problem as follows:

One man's decorum is another man's intolerable hierarchy. If it was possible to see the caste system of French art – with the Beaux Arts in one place, the avant-garde in another, and the caricature journals somewhere in between – as an essentially happy division of labor, it was also possible to see it as a neurotic segregation of the organic elements of art. (1991: 123)

The concluding part of the chapter sees 'the art of ugliness' moving from the position of low art towards high art on the basis that ugliness and caricature share the strategies of perception which gave rise to the representational techniques of Modernism.<sup>9</sup>

Public appreciation of caricature in nineteenth-century France relied to a great extent on shared familiarity with the principles of physiognomy. To caricaturists and viewers alike, one of the most salient physiognomic features of the human face was the nose. With this in mind, chapter 2 consists in an analysis of notorious noses in French literature from the philosophical nose of Cleopatra in Pascal's *Pensées* (c. 1670) to the theatrical nose of Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897). The chapter considers the possibility that an ugly nose might be seen in terms of the contingency of the singular: it is a chance occurrence, or discontinuity, which disrupts totalising narratives such as a unified view of history, culture-specific notions of identity, or the

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<sup>8</sup> The important distinction between the ugliness *in* a work of art and the ugliness *of* a work of art is discussed by Michel Ribon in his wide-ranging study, *Archipel de la Laideur. Essai sur l'art et la laideur* (1995: 10).

<sup>9</sup> It is tempting to situate this shift from low to high in direct relation to the Kantian distinction between empirical and pure art, but this would be a mistake since the so-called high art of Modernism still does not meet Kant's transcendental expectations for the beautiful.

Western narrative of beauty.<sup>10</sup> Issues of intertextuality and creative re-writing give rise to a concept of the nose as a ‘polysemic protuberance’ which stands in for the sword, the pen, and also the penis. Other readings of the nose are characterised by ambivalence: ugly noses are a focus for both ridicule and respect. In the context of Romanticism in France, this duality produces noses on the faces of heroic characters (such as Rostand’s *Cyrano*) which are seen as grotesque and sublime.

Chapter 3 traces the development of the relation between ugliness and the sublime from The Terror of 1789 to AIDS writing in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The chapter, like Edmund Burke’s sublime, might be said in some ways to ‘turn on pain’. It also turns on the work of Victor Hugo, since, where ugliness is concerned, most roads in France lead either to, or from, his vision of the grotesque and the sublime, famously presented in the *Préface de Cromwell* (1827). Hugo’s ‘manifesto’ not only theorised the ugly (as the grotesque) in opposition to the sublime, rather than the beautiful, it also signalled the possibility of an aesthetics of ugliness *as* the sublime that was to be taken up by Lyotard as a principle of avant-garde art.

The theoretical section of the chapter explores the philosophical problem, posed by the experience of the sublime, of how to bridge the gap between immanence and transcendence. Kant theorises the gap – referred to by Derrida as ‘la coupure pure’ – in terms of imagination and reason. Reason must always predominate for Kant because, in his view, the imagination cannot produce an adequate image of the totality (God). The sublime thus signals the failure of representation. Lyotard’s theory of avant-garde art tries to resolve this situation by rehabilitating the imagination specifically through the power of the ugly to shock in such a way that the habitual relation between the mind and time is undone. The subject of the sublime is left in a state of destitution, haunted by the unanswerable question ‘Arrive-t-il?’. Lyotard’s temporal sublime provides the point of departure for the last part of the chapter, which explores the sublime in terms of the ‘ugliness’ of AIDS in the work of Pascal de Duve. Here the position of relative safety common to all aesthetic accounts of the sublime is abolished and the fear of death, which for Burke stands as the ultimate

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<sup>10</sup> A poster campaign for the National Geographic Channel on the London Underground in February 2000 put forward a similar argument from the point of view of science: ‘The great tragedy of science is the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact’.

source of sublime feeling, is experienced for real. The concluding discussion considers the implications of this for the experience and the representation of the self.

Chapter 4 approaches ugliness from the point of view of Sartrean philosophy and examines the rôle of ugliness in the precarious domain of existential identity. Whereas chapter 2 looks at ugliness in terms of historical contingency, unprecedented genius and the disruption of grand narratives, here contingency is absolute and taken as a given: there is no God, there is no pre-ordained logic of cause and effect, and there can never be a reassuring continuity in narratives of the self. Contingency, like the sublime, is un(re)presentable, but it does leave a nauseating taste in the mouth, according to Sartre. The 'taste' of contingency is experienced whenever the relationship of negation which sustains consciousness against the world of brute existence threatens to collapse. Its most intimate manifestation is the taste of saliva – the taste of one's own body – where consciousness is as close to existence as it is possible to get. This confusion of mind and matter leads to a primary nausea occasioned in phenomenological terms by a slimy substance that is neither solid, nor liquid, neither me, nor not-me. The ambivalence of this sensation, and of the 'object' which causes it, recalls the pervasive nausea in relation to existence experienced by Antoine Roquentin in *La Nausée* (1938). Significantly, Roquentin views existence as ugly.

The first part of chapter 4 establishes a theoretical framework for existential ugliness in terms of nausea as it appears in *La Nausée* and in terms of Sartre's general theory of consciousness in *L'Être et le néant* (1943). In particular, it considers how Sartre's thoughts on sliminess, the obscene and the ungraceful might be seen as an attempt to theorise the ugly. Existential ugliness is also explored from the point of view of psychoanalytic readings of disgust, taboo, abjection and the 'monstrous feminine'. The second part of the chapter considers the implications for ugliness of Sartre's theory of 'the look' and of 'the Other'. The negative double of a 'being-for-others' that is ugly or shameful is analysed in terms of the Freudian uncanny. The concluding part of the chapter focuses on Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946), where the idea that 'hell is other people' is developed in relation to the situation of the Jew and the anti-semitic. This section raises important issues

concerning judgements of ugliness as a form of racism, not just against Jews, but against all social groups that are stigmatised as Other, including women.

Chapter 5 takes up the notion of woman as Other as theorised by Simone de Beauvoir and examines the ways in which the status of otherness sets up a 'privileged' relation between women and ugliness. The first part of the discussion considers the problem from the point of view of contemporary feminist theory, where the masculine subject of the symbolic order is seen to construct ugliness as a gendered negative value by placing it as other alongside/in place of woman in relation to itself. In order to remain symbolically disembodied, Cartesian 'man' situates corporeality on the side of women with the result that either women *are* their bodies, or they are nothing. There is only one form of subjectivity and that, according to Luce Irigaray, is monolithically masculine and male. From the point of view of this phallogentric logic, a woman's sex – and by extension her whole being – represents 'l'horreur du rien à voir', or the lack of a penis. In terms of Cousins's definition of ugliness as matter out of place (see p. 1), women are made ugly on two counts: first, for existing in and through a symbolic order which is not theirs to inhabit (they are there are should not be there); second, for lacking a penis (in psychoanalytic terms they represent the awful reality of something which is not there and should be). Both these forms of ugliness are considered in relation to Cousins's analysis of negation in the context of the novel by Gaston Leroux, *The Phantom of the Opera*, in which the ghost of opera-house has no nose.

The second part of chapter 5 looks at ugliness in the work of Hélène Cixous. Beginning with the Medusa who laughs and proudly displays her sex, Cixous sets out to rewrite the phallogentric view of women as ugly. Unusually, her work deals explicitly with the problem of ugliness and seeks, through a practice of feminine writing, to revalue it as a way of opening up a space for women within the symbolic order. She draws inspiration, in particular, from the Brazilian writer, Clarice Lispector, from whom she claims to have learned 'the two great lessons for living': slowness and ugliness. The nature of these lessons, and the way they find expression in the aesthetics and politics of Cixous's work, form the basis for the remaining discussion.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Caricature And The Ugly Other

‘Ugliness [...] is a stigma that is focussed in social situations’ (Erving Goffman, *Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*).

Feuilletez son oeuvre, et vous verrez défiler devant vos yeux, dans sa réalité fantastique et saisissante, tout ce qu’une grande ville contient de vivantes monstruosités. (Baudelaire on Daumier, *De l’Essence du rire*).

Stigma, according to Erving Goffman (1990: 12-13), constitutes ‘a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity’. Virtual social identity is a characterisation ‘in effect’ which results from measuring an individual against pre-established social categories and making assumptions on the basis of first impressions. Actual social identity describes the set of attributes that that person *in fact* possesses.<sup>1</sup> When such attributes are of a less desirable kind, Goffman argues, the person concerned is ‘reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one’ (12). Not all undesirable attributes are at issue, however. Stigma – and the particular type of stigma that is ugliness – relate only to elements of ‘undesired differentness’ (13) which are seen by so-called ‘normals’ as incongruous with the stereotyped cultural category to which it is felt a given person should belong. We use different sets of criteria for judging nuns and football players, for example. Society continually pigeon-holes people according to the ‘role repertoires’ or profiles it has developed for any given set of individuals. The possibility of stigma and of ugliness involves deviation from these culturally coded norms. The relation between such norms and deviations can also be viewed in terms of the relation between the self and the other.<sup>2</sup> Following Goffman, this chapter will consider the self-other relation not so much in terms of two fixed sets of individuals – the stigmatized (the

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis on ugliness as a factor in social identity in this opening chapter is not intended to limit the scope of this study exclusively to issues of sociology. As the American psychoanalyst, Heinz Lichtenstein has argued, humanity is faced with a dilemma between social identity that is objectifiable, conditioned and potentially dehumanising on one side, and existential identity, which is irreducible and concerns the actuality of being on the other (quoted in Guy Rosolato 1976: 24). Issues of existential identity will be discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>2</sup> See also my introduction where the self-other relation is formulated in terms of the gardener and the weed.

ugly) and the normal – but as ‘a pervasive two-role social process’ in which ‘the normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives’ (163-4). In French culture there is one cultural perspective above all that lends itself to this sort of analysis and that is caricature, which not only engages with, but is in itself also the product of perceptions of the norm and deviations from it. The same, I would suggest, is true for ugliness. As the critic Paul Gaultier (1906: 3) has argued: ‘la caricature, que beaucoup tiennent pour un art du rire, est à coup sûr un art de la laideur’.

*Ugliness, caricature and the development of modern aesthetic theory*

In 1947, the Russian academic Lydiia Krestovskaia (writing in French as Lydie Krestovsky) signalled the emergence of a new aesthetic of ugliness in modern art. She saw ugliness in terms of a positive, creative force governed by three key processes – deformation, disintegration and dehumanisation – and argued that ‘[l]’homme est non seulement diminué et détrôné par cette nouvelle esthétique, mais encore *réduit à la caricature*, au grotesque qui tuent la Beauté du corps, de la face, de l’image de Dieu’ (emphasis added, Krestovsky 1947: 13). The aesthetic of ugliness leads to caricature, Krestovsky suggests, and does so on the basis of a strategy of deviation which involves, specifically, ‘écarts de la norme’ (14). These ‘écarts’, although primarily visual in nature, as the term ‘*deformation*’ implies, are also deeply political, in that they involve the disintegration of an ordered ‘whole’ (the individual body and by implication also the body politic), and moral (they relate to a loss of the quality of ‘humanity’). The Christian metaphor of the Fall implicit in Krestovsky’s argument suggests that the essence of modernity in art is a deliberate turning away from the image of God towards a degraded representation that is distorted and distant from it.

Krestovsky’s implied reference to original sin in the context of serious art governed by the techniques of caricature contrasts starkly with Baudelaire’s formulation of a ‘comique absolu’ in ‘De l’Essence du rire’ (1855) where he insists, paradoxically, that ‘Le comique ne peut être absolu que relativement à *l’humanité déchu*e’ (emphasis added, Baudelaire 1962: 254). It is Baudelaire’s contention that caricature is incomprehensible to an innocent mind. In order for the spectator to laugh, he or she must be able to grasp both the image and the likeness that has been

lost, the degraded representation of reality and the ideal. Baudelaire revels in 'satanic' laughter (as opposed to a childlike 'joie de plante'), whereas Krestovsky expresses a nostalgia for lost innocence and views modern art as a form of caricature that 'kills the face of God'.<sup>3</sup> Both arguments, however, point to an important biblical origin for an aesthetics of caricature, comic or otherwise. This can be found in Genesis I, vs 26-27: 'God said "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness [...]." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.' There is no room for caricature in a pre-lapsarian paradise, since image and likeness, like God and man, are one. After the Fall, however, the two are irrevocably divided and this division informs all subsequent attempts at representation. This sense of an originary discrepancy had, of course, haunted pre-Christian discussions concerning the nature of representation. Plato was deeply suspicious of all forms of mimesis, since he saw them as degraded and potentially degrading copies of the Ideal. Poetry and painting were therefore banned from his Republic.

The problematic difference between image and likeness is one which also preoccupies Michel Tournier.<sup>4</sup> Tournier insists that image and likeness, despite their semantic proximity, are not the same. The problem is formulated clearly in *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar* by Tournier's self-professed 'iconophile', King Balthazar:

On ne saurait trop méditer les premières lignes de la Genèse, dit-il. *Dieu fit l'homme à son image et à sa ressemblance*. Pourquoi ses deux mots? Quelle différence y a-t-il entre l'image et la ressemblance? C'est sans doute que la ressemblance comprend tout l'être – corps et âme – tandis que l'image n'est qu'un masque superficiel et peut-être trompeur. (Tournier 1980: 45)

<sup>3</sup> Baudelaire's argument is at odds with the initial conclusion drawn by Kris and Gombrich in their essay *Caricature* that the true roots of caricature lie in 'the eternal child in all of us' (1940: 27). Eternal childhood is understood in terms of the freedom of young minds in which rules and values have not yet been established. For Baudelaire, this is precisely the state of innocence which precludes any appreciation of caricature (and hence too any possibility of being able to produce it). The roots of caricature can be found in childhood only to the extent that children are 'des Satans en herbe' (Baudelaire 1962: 253).

<sup>4</sup> See Michael Worton, 'The genesis of fiction: origin as theme and problem in Tournier's work' in *Michel Tournier* (Worton 1995: 68-88).



According to Balthazar, the whole history of Western imitative art is a tale of complicity in the celebration of image without likeness, since, after the Fall, the likeness was lost and all that remained was man as a false image of God. In the present context, this begs the question of the status of the caricatural image, which does not carry the same pretensions to likeness as traditional art because it actively seeks to expose the deception of the mask.

Ernst Kris and Ernst Gombrich argue in their essay on *Caricature* (1940) that what marks the beginning of caricature is the loss of originary similarity and the discovery that this is not essential to likeness. In contrast to the Christian problematic where the image remains and the likeness is lost, caricature succeeds in capturing likeness by all but losing the 'image' (in the mimetic sense). One of the earliest definitions of caricature given by a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italian critic confirms this: 'caricature', he argues, 'seeks to discover a likeness in deformity; in this way [...] it comes nearer to truth than does reality' (quoted in Kris 1953: 175). The man credited with this crucial discovery, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italian artist Annibale Carracci (1560-1609), recognised that individual features could be distorted without sacrificing likeness in the whole thus enabling him to achieve what Gombrich and Kris (1940: 12) consider to be the real aim of the true caricaturist; that is, 'to transform the whole man into a completely new and ridiculous figure which nevertheless resembles the original in a striking and surprising way'.<sup>5</sup> The difference between the catastrophic Christian fall from grace and the systematic refusal to produce an exact likeness that is caricature can perhaps best be described in terms of Plato's objection to mimetic art. The distorting process of caricature is a wilfully 'bad' copy of the original 'bad copy' that is ugly (sinful) humanity.

Caricature at its inception at the end of the Italian Renaissance and for a long time afterwards, was not taken seriously, since it appeared to be a humorous, but

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<sup>5</sup> There is clearly a problem here with the meaning of the word 'likeness'. The Christian image/likeness distinction does not map onto the similarity/likeness distinction drawn by Kris and Gombrich in which 'likeness' is used in the sense of the Christian 'image'. This is confusing. I would suggest, therefore, that Kris and Gombrich's 'likeness' might best be understood as 'equivalence'. Whilst this may seem to complicate matters unnecessarily – adding another level of meaning to a lexical area already fraught with difficulty – it serves to clarify the way caricature functions. The suggestion that caricature involves finding equivalences allows for the play of sameness and difference which will be discussed later in relation to Derrida's *pharmakon*.

ultimately harmless form of artistic expression designed to amuse the upper classes. With hindsight, however, it has been described by Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnick (1991: 101) as one of the founding gestures of modern art in that it represents 'an assault on the decorum of style'. Varnedoe and Gopnick thus effectively restate Krestovsky's argument about the role of ugliness in art specifically in terms of caricature. The nature of the 'assault' perpetrated by its inventor and his brother Agostino, was twofold: first, their caricatures deviated from the long-established tradition of satirical metamorphosis which portrayed only comic *types* and second, they departed radically from the classical style of painting of which they were acknowledged masters. There had, of course, been numerous earlier examples of satirical caricature, such as the figure of Silenus in ancient Greece, or the gargoyles grimacing from the roofs of medieval churches, but these were generalised forms of the comic or the grotesque and were not intended to refer back to specific living individuals. What distinguished the caricatures produced by the Carracci was the fact that they were instantly recognisable. The 'misdemeanour' of the brothers in relation to classicism was that their caricatured portraits could not easily be reconciled with the traditional norms of harmony, symmetry and proportion associated with classical beauty. In defence of caricature, Annibale is reported to have said:

Is not the caricaturist's task exactly the same as the classical artist's? Both see the lasting truth beneath the surface of mere outward appearance. Both try to help nature accomplish its plan. The one may strive to visualise the perfect form and to realise it in his work, the other to grasp the perfect deformity, and thus reveal the very essence of a personality. A good caricature, like every work of art, is more true to life than reality itself. (Quoted in Gombrich and Kris 1940: 11-12)

It is clear from this that Annibale's conception of art was ahead of its time. His sense of the freedom to interpret so-called nature, to find the likeness *beneath* surface appearances, can thus be seen as an important founding gesture not only of caricature, but also of modern art.

Annibale Carracci's theory of classical art versus caricature took another unprecedented step: it acknowledged the fact that deviation from norms is at the root of *all* forms of expression, whether the aim of the artist is to represent beauty or ugliness. Caricature is thus not defined in opposition to an ideal of beauty, nor is beauty defined in opposition to ugliness. In both cases, the defining element is the perceptual presence of the norm. As Varnedoe and Gopnick (1991: 419 f/n 50) put it: 'caricature takes place not by a simple routine of distortion, but through a dialogue between a generic norm and a particular face'. In his article 'The rationale of deformation', the Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim makes a similar point at a more general level. Given that all artistic representation is located within the field of perceptual dynamics, he argues, caricature is simply 'a spectacular demonstration of artistic expression by deviation', one which he likens to a 'pathological' symptom of how art in general makes its points (Arnheim 1983: 320). As with the exaggerations and deviations associated with pathology, caricature has a way of making us understand and also question what is normal.

Arnheim's fascination with morphological deviation also formed an important part of the physiognomic consciousness of the Italian Renaissance that led to the birth of caricature. The most significant precursor in this respect was Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) whose *Treatise on Painting* advocated the study of a vast array of human facial features in order to catalogue them according to type. Leonardo's methodology consisted in establishing a series of empirical physiognomic norms; once these had been internalised by the artist, he needed only to observe and record deviations from those norms in order to be able to draw a particular face. According to Vasari, Leonardo was particularly fascinated by eccentric faces from the lower classes: 'La rencontre de quelque homme à tête bizarre ou expressive, portant barbe ou cheveux singuliers, lui faisait un tel plaisir qu'il se serait volontiers pris à le suivre un jour entier; et il se le rappelait si bien qu'il le dessinait ensuite comme s'il eût posé devant lui' (quoted in Champfleury 1880: 110). Leonardo also took great delight in recording the way faces were distorted by laughter (Fig. 1). Lomazzo tells of Leonardo inviting peasants to dine, telling them amusing stories until they laughed and then leaving the room so as to draw them as caricatures. He would then return to the table with the sketches to make the guests laugh more.



Fig. 1: Leonardo da Vinci, caricature of an old man laughing.

The contortions of the face associated with laughter are not so much a matter of physiognomy (which deals with the permanent features of the face) as of pathognomy (which examines the passions and emotions as revealed by fleeting expressions). The principles of pathognomy were briefly explored by Descartes in his treatise *Des Passions de l'âme* (1649), where he argued that what he termed the 'esprits du cerveau' controlled the flow of 'esprits animaux' within the muscles.<sup>6</sup> A more detailed study of pathognomy was made a generation later by the artist Charles Le Brun, whose illustrated lecture to the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in 1668 greatly influenced artists throughout Europe. In particular, as Jennifer Montagu observes in *The Expression of the Passions. The Origin and Influence of Charles le Brun's 'Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière'* (1994: 19), the three elements on which Le Brun's theory was based – a study of the heads of ancient rulers and philosophers and their characters, the comparison of the heads of men and animals, and studies of the eyes of men and animals – were 'a boon to caricaturists'.

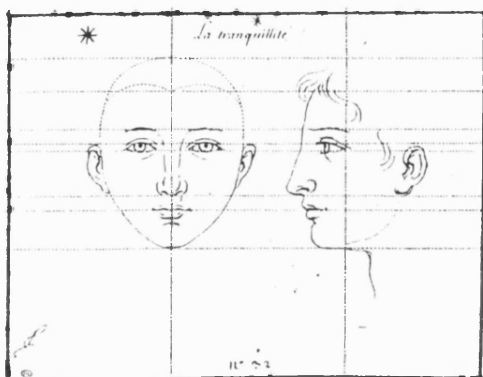


Fig. 2: Le Brun, 'La Tranquillité', c. 1668

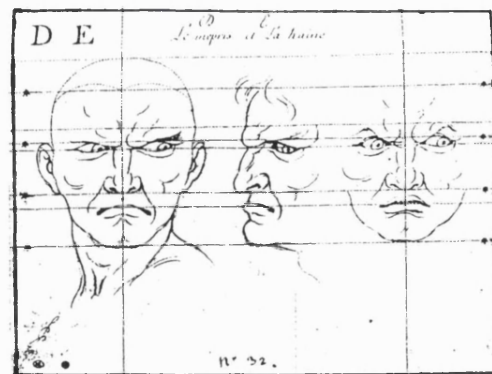


Fig. 3: Le Brun, 'Le mépris et la haine', c. 1668

<sup>6</sup> Descartes (1988 Art. 11 and Art. 13: 161-4). See also Jennifer Montagu (1994: 17).

Le Brun's study of hate is especially interesting in the context of ugliness, since it is seen specifically as 'une émotion causée par les esprits qui incitent l'Âme à vouloir être séparée des objets qui se présentent à elle comme nuisibles' (Le Brun, quoted in Montagu 1994: 114). The accompanying drawings show how scorn and hate cause the features to become distorted from the facial 'norm' of tranquillity (Figs. 2 and 3). Unlike Leonardo, whose method involved close observation of real faces, Le Brun hoped to gain an understanding of the principles governing the 'activities of the soul' and their outward manifestations so that he could capture 'perfect' facial expressions without reference to the idiosyncrasies of nature. In this respect, Le Brun's methodology resembled that of the German painter and engraver, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) whose study of facial norms and deviations involved experimenting with mathematical distortions, rather than observing nature. His schematic diagrams set out to demonstrate that a normal human face conforms to a series of horizontal lines and that faces which deviate significantly from the horizontal look deformed (Fig. 4).

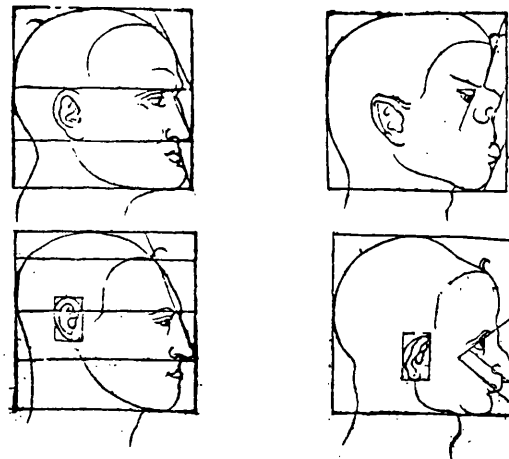


Fig. 4: Albrecht Dürer, studies of heads, woodcut, 1528.

Whilst Dürer may simply have been experimenting with abstract variations, the potential for racial prejudice implicit in these drawings cannot be ignored. Visual norms, such as the standard facial features of a given race, are loaded both culturally and politically. The problem is clearly illustrated by Dürer's sketch of a series of heads with an idealised Greek profile in the front, several awkward, exaggerated profiles behind it, and lastly the head of a negro (Fig. 5).

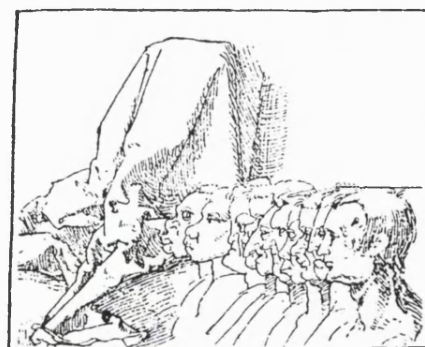


Fig 5: Albrecht Dürer, studies of heads, pen and ink, c. 1513.

The drawing has been interpreted by Werner Hofmann (1957: 17) as a hierarchy of physiognomy ranging (front to back) from the beautiful to the ugly. If this is the case, then it is a disturbing example of how Western, culturally specific ideas about beauty based on physiognomic norms can be used to initiate discourses of racism.<sup>7</sup>

*Foucauldian abnormality: caricature and the pretension to power*

Norms are not neutral and they are not natural. Similarly, the forms of abnormality which support and are created by such norms (the exceptions that prove the rule) are also 'loaded' and artificial. In his 1974-1975 lecture series entitled 'Les Anormaux' Michel Foucault explores the way in which the 'modern' notion of abnormality – essentially a behavioural and moral category, rather than a visual one – has evolved.<sup>8</sup> Abnormality is the product of a specific 'medico-legal expertise', he argues, which operates somewhere between medical knowledge and judicial power (the traditional legislative sources of abnormality within the oppositional discursive frameworks of sickness/health and delinquency/innocence respectively). The 'pouvoir de normalisation' responsible for generating modern notions of abnormality derives from neither of these traditional sources of power, rather

C'est quelque chose qui vient s'insérer entre eux, assurer leur jonction, mais qui vient d'ailleurs, avec des termes autres, des normes autres, des règles de formation autres. [...] Ce n'est pas à des délinquents ou à des innocents que

<sup>7</sup> The issue of racism on the basis of physiological differences – in particular the perceived 'ugliness' of the Jewish nose – will be discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>8</sup> 'Modern' in Foucault's terms means subsequent to 'L'Âge Classique' which he dates broadly in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

s'adresse l'expertise médico-légale, ce n'est pas à des malades opposés à des non-malades. C'est à quelque chose qui est, je crois, la catégorie des 'anormaux'; ou, si vous voulez, c'est dans ce champ non pas d'opposition, mais de gradation du normal à l'anormal, que se déploie effectivement l'expertise médico-légale. (Foucault 1999: 38)

This third instance of power proposed by Foucault has developed in order to control the individual who is abnormal in contrast to the criminal (who is subject to the power of the judicial system), or the sick person (whose health is controlled by the medical establishment).<sup>9</sup>

An important aspect of this new technique of power is that it operates from within. Instead of excluding abnormality (as would be the case historically for the leper), the medico-legal hybridised power incorporates abnormality according to the 'plague' model: 'Il ne s'agit pas d'une exclusion, il s'agit d'une quarantaine. Il ne s'agit pas de chasser, il s'agit au contraire d'établir, de fixer, de donner son lieu, d'assigner des places, de définir des présences, et des présences quadrillés. Non pas rejet, mais inclusion' (Foucault 1999: 43). Foucault's analysis implies the formation of a cultural model which theorises both itself and its other in order to limit the scope of otherness.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the leper model, which is negative, the plague model – developed during the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – is essentially positive. With reference to George Canguilhem's *Le Normal et le Pathologique* (Paris: 1972), Foucault argues that 'la norme se définit non pas du tout comme une loi naturelle, mais par le rôle d'exigence et de coercition qu'elle est capable d'exercer' (46). As a consequence, and crucially for Foucault, the norm carries within it a pretension to power.

Foucault's argument draws attention to the way in which, in the West, the point of origin of power – the king, for example – is effectively 'disqualified' by his physical appearance. Instead of standing as a figure of dignity and majesty, the monarch appears infamous, ridiculous and grotesque. Foucault's understanding of the term 'grotesque' is quite specific: he uses it to designate the situation in which an

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault has a quite specific reason for wanting to explore the nature of this third legislative power for abnormality, namely to understand the history of normalisation as it applies to sexuality.

individual is invested with the effects of power, whilst possessing none of the intrinsic qualities to suggest that he should wield it. As such, the grotesque monarch is seen as ‘ubuesque’, a term borrowed from Alfred Jarry’s scandalous tyrant, King Ubu. The Larousse definition of ‘ubuesque’, reprinted in *Les Anormaux*, is given as follows: ‘Se dit de ce qui, par son caractère grotesque, absurde ou caricatural, rappelle le personnage d’Ubu’ (Foucault 1999: 26). Foucault’s archetypal moral monsters are inherently caricatural.

Abnormality for Foucault is a product of infrastructural and not superstructural power. It is also linked to a set of specific historical conditions, notably the shift from the feudal system in which repressive forces operate from the outside to a system in which the structures of power are integrated. Foucault’s analysis of changes in the structures of power in French culture over time also reveals changes in the underlying mechanisms of caricature, which itself exposes power relations in the context of specific historical circumstances. As Champfleury observes in his *Histoire de la caricature moderne* (1871: vii): ‘La caricature est avec le journal le cri des citoyens’ (‘citizen’, of course, being the required term of address among *sans-culottes*). It represents the crowd and plays a decisive role only in times of political unrest: ‘la caricature n’est significative qu’aux époques de révolte et d’insurrection’ (1871: viii). The most obvious focus for the Foucaudian transition of power from external to internal force – the 1789 Revolution – also proved to be a turning point in the history of French caricature.

### *Monstrous monarchs (1789-1792)*

For Foucault, the overarching figure of abnormality is the monster, which is ‘essentiellement le mixte’ and moreover ‘le mixte de deux règnes, règne animal et règne humain’ (1999: 58). The monster for Foucault is a juridical notion defined by violation of the law – both the law of society and the law of nature. In the past, he argues, it represented an extreme case which combined the biologically impossible with the legally forbidden and so revealed the law’s limit. This archetypal monster stands as ‘le grand modèle de tous les petits écarts’, the principle of intelligibility of

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<sup>10</sup> The implications of this for 19<sup>th</sup>-century French caricature are significant and will be discussed later



all forms of anomaly and one to which 19<sup>th</sup>-century medical and legal discourse returned time and again (1999: 52). The foremost juridical monster is the tyrannical monarch and foremost among tyrannical monarchs, according to Foucault, is Louis XVI: 'la chute de Louis XVI et la problématisation de la figure du roi marquent un point décisif dans cette histoire des monstres humains. Tous les monstres humains sont les descendants de Louis XVI' (1999: 87).

The figure of the monstrous king in Foucault's argument is accompanied by a second regal monster, Marie-Antoinette, 'la figure de la débauche, de la débauche sexuelle et, en particulier, de l'inceste' (91). To this, Foucault adds a third figure of monstrosity which emerges from anti-jacobin, counter-revolutionary literature: 'le monstre qui rompt le pact social par la révolte' (91). The criminality of the monarch is located in the order of abuse of power – he breaks the social contract from above – whereas 'le monstre populaire' breaks the social contract from below. This third monster, I would argue – the popular monster characterised by an attitude of revolt – can be seen as the 'monster of caricature' (whether revolutionary or counter-revolutionary).

Caricatures and human monsters have a good deal in common. In a purely physical sense they are both associated with morphological deviations, with imperfections that call attention to themselves because they break through the boundaries of culturally acceptable oddity. Nature, or the artist's hand, is seen to have exaggerated too much. Monstrosity is not simply a question of aberrant morphology, however. The traditional view of the monster, as the latin etymology of the word suggests, is that it serves as a warning and as a means of revelation. Caricature too reveals: by means of its comic exaggerations, it exposes cultural norms and warns against the shortcomings of those who fail to live up to them. Purely physical abnormality is seen as part of a broader cultural understanding of the monster as a moral category in which men and women are seen to behave rather badly.

Up until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Foucault argues, physical monstrosity invited suspicion of criminality – it was read in one direction only – whereas at this crucial

moment in French history, that reading suddenly became reversible: criminality invited suspicion of monstrosity. The reversible relation between reprehensible behaviour and unprepossessing appearance was not a new idea, however. Giambattista della Porta's 1586 influential treatise on human physiognomy had made comparisons between the heads of men and animals inferring similarity of disposition from physical resemblance, an example of this being: 'All parrots are talkers, all men with such noses are like parrots, therefore all such men are talkers'.<sup>11</sup> In this context, the revolutionary caricature of the fictional refractory priest, Père Oquet is exemplary (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Anonymous caricature, 'Père Oquet', 1789.

The technique of physiognomical syllogism, discussed by della Porta and so well illustrated by the caricature of Le Père Oquet, in turn owed much to the human-animal comparisons contained in an earlier, pseudo-Aristotelian treatise on physiognomy. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, physiognomical thought came to the fore once again through the work of the Swiss minister, Johann Gaspard Lavater whose 1781 essay on physiognomy appeared in French translation (The Hague: *Essai sur la physiognomonie, destiné à faire connoître l'homme & à le faire aimer*) that same year. Lavater's general proposition concerning the harmony between moral beauty and physical beauty is given as follows: 'La beauté & la laideur du visage ont un rapport étroit avec la constitution morale de l'Homme: ainsi plus il est moralement bon, plus il est beau; plus il est moralement mauvais, plus il est laid' (Lavater 1781,

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Judith Wechsler (1982: 179 f/n 12).

vol. I, seizième fragment, 135).<sup>12</sup> All moral dissoluteness, Lavater insisted, has a negative effect on the physique, altering it, aggravating it and ultimately degrading it (the word used in the Hague translation is in fact *dérèglement*, which, in line with Foucault, suggests acts of rule- or law-breaking). 'Le dérèglement s'accroît de degrés en degrés, & produit alors des caricatures [sic] variées selon la nature du vice dominant' (Lavater 1781: 143).

Despite the obvious 'dérèglements' of the Bourbon monarchs in the eyes of the revolutionaries, these did not translate immediately into caricatures of Louis XVI. As Antoine de Baecque has argued in *La Caricature révolutionnaire* (1988), royal power is traditionally maintained by a cultural taboo surrounding the king's person. The monarch is a sacred object, who must remain untouchable and untouched. Surprisingly, in the context of revolutionary fervour, this last taboo survived relatively intact during the first year of the Revolution. Public loathing was directed instead against Marie-Antoinette, who was hated for a number of reasons, not least because she was a foreigner. This hatred was expressed in the first instance in a press campaign which began with the publication in 1784 of a satirical pamphlet – clearly referring to Marie-Antoinette – describing the discovery of the wild beast of Chile. The illustrators exploited a contemporary fashion for portraying unfamiliar animals and folkloric monsters (such as the beast of Gévaudan which terrorised people in remote areas of the Massif Central and sent a shiver of fear throughout France from 1765 onwards) by substituting the head of the much-discussed, but never-seen beast of Chile with that of the Queen. A crumpled declaration of human rights – to which Marie-Antoinette was said to be strongly opposed – was placed between its claws (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Anon., Marie-Antoinette as a harpy, 1789.

<sup>12</sup> In this, Lavater repeats the ancient Greek ideological principle of *kalokagathia* according to which the beautiful was necessarily an expression of the good.

Xenophobic reactions to Marie-Antoinette also took the form of the verbal/visual pun. The lexical proximity of the French words for Austria and for ostrich – *Autriche* and *autruche* – quickly led to images of the queen as an ostrich, shown in Figure 8 unable to swallow the Constitution:

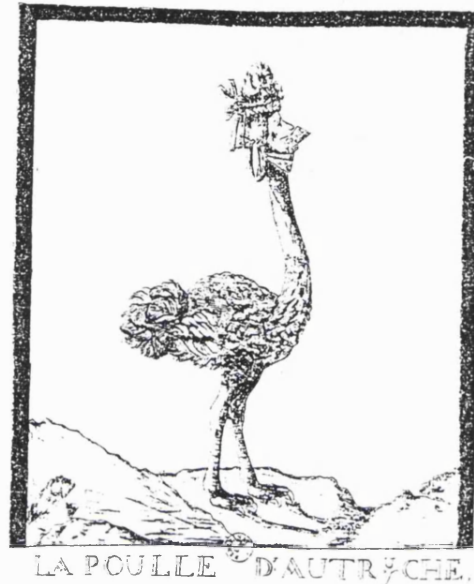


Fig. 8: Anon., 'La Poulle d'Autriche', 1791.

*Digere les sergent avec facilité, mais la constitution j'en puis à l'ave*

Representations of the queen's taste for swallowing up all that the revolutionaries fought for did not stop at her attempt to eat the Constitution. Caricature's royal bestiary frequently characterised Marie-Antoinette – verbally and visually – as a man-eating monster. The text accompanying an engraving by Villeneuve in 1793 describes her as a panther 'à la bouche fétide et infecte recelant une langue cruelle aimant le sang des Français' (de Baecque 1988: 186). The full-blooded 'cannibal' queen was also portrayed as having a voracious appetite for sex that did not conform to the rules of conventional morality: she was guilty, according to contemporary sources, of adultery, homosexuality and incest. Foucault maintains that it is in fact the issue of incest which predominates in discussions of Marie-Antoinette's monarchical monstrosity. This is perhaps because her antics so obviously perverted the revolutionary metaphor of 'fraternity'. But, as David Hirsch has pointed out in his essay 'Liberty, Equality, Monstrosity' (1996: 117), fraternity in its revolutionary sense is in any case at odds with literal kinship ties because it suggests equality on the basis of citizens' constitutional or natural rights as members of *the human race*, rather than on common subjection or filiation to the ideology of the private family. Marie-Antoinette's sexual exploits could be said to have exposed that contradiction and to





shown in a compromising political situation – trying to abdicate all responsibility for state affairs when things turn nasty by running away – and are seen to be guilty of moral, as well as political misdemeanours. It is important to remember that although serious revolutionary issues were at stake, the emerging media (newspapers, pamphlets and caricatures) were also very much commercial enterprises that responded to public demand for images which commented upon the political situation, but which also contained a strong element of human, or rather, for our purposes, *inhuman* interest.

After the escape attempt by the royal family, which was intercepted at Varennes, the king became indissolubly linked with the profane, a fact which led to his rapid caricatural metamorphosis into a pig (Fig. 10).

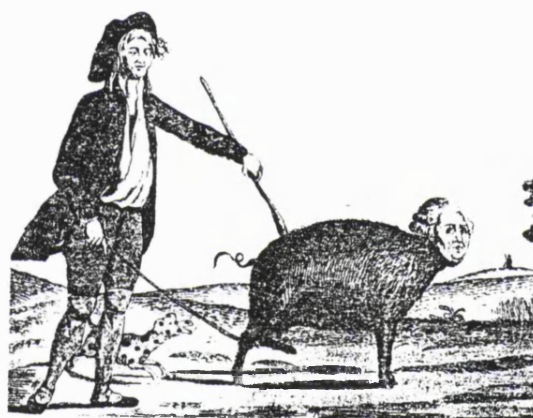


Fig. 10: Anon., 'Ah! le maudit animal', c. 1791.

This human-animal hybrid was used to imply that the monarchy was mired in its own moral and political filth and also to indicate royal gluttony. While the impoverished citizens of France starved, Louis XVI, like all aristocrats only more so, was seen to be leading a life of self-indulgent excess.<sup>13</sup> The sense of outrage generated by such obvious social inequality contributed a further layer of monstrosity to France's increasingly desacralised monarch.

Counter-revolutionary caricature, meanwhile, invoked monsters of its own, although to a significantly lesser extent. The most fearful creature in its political

<sup>13</sup> According to Champfleury in *Histoire de la caricature sous la République, l'Empire et la Restauration* (1874: 195-6), Louis XVI was dubbed 'le Gourmand' and represented as the Rabelaisian monster, Gargantua: a double reference to greed and oppression on the part of the aristocracy.

bestiary was that of the blind harpy of the Constitution (Fig. 11). Whereas the mythological harpy combined a woman's head and torso with a bird's wings and claws (as in the human rights declaration-trampling image of Marie-Antoinette), this harpy retains only the last vestiges of womanhood in the form of two sets of pendulous breasts combined with the wings and tail, not of a bird, but of a dragon. Her oversized rosary has broken allowing the beads – each of them a decree of the Constitution – to fall to the ground where, according to the announcement for the image in the *Journal de la cour et de la ville*, they are collected and gleefully burned by a small spirit. The miscegenation characteristic of all monsters is taken to extremes here. This creature refuses to be categorised even within certain recognisable categories of teratology: it is a harpy-dragon-Medusa-man-demon all at once and thus an impossibly monstrous monster that exceeds even its own mythological monstrosity.



Fig. 11: Anon., 'Harpie aveugle', 1791.

The spiralling hyperbole of both counter-revolutionary and revolutionary caricature came to an end after the fall of the monarchy in August 1792. Under the revolutionary government, and especially following Robespierre's rise to power in June 1793, all forms of representation were subject to draconian controls. Robespierre's denunciation of any attempt to deceive the people made conditions for the production and dissemination of images increasingly dangerous and the number of caricatures diminished rapidly.<sup>14</sup> After this, caricature did not play a decisive role

<sup>14</sup> The issue of representation during The Terror will be discussed in chapter 3.

in French culture again until the July Revolution of 1830. In the meantime, the absolute silence in caricatural terms imposed by the Terror was succeeded by a period of relative calm described by Champfleury (1871: viii) in terms of the watchful rest of a sleeping cat: 'la caricature dort comme les chats, et au moindre mouvement politique, son oeil vert apparaît à travers les cils de ses paupières'. Political caricature in France was waiting to spring into action and did so in response to a growing realisation that successive imperial and royal administrations had failed to respect the ideals of the Revolution. Matters came to a head during 'les trois glorieuses' (July 27-29, 1830), when rioting broke out on the streets of Paris in protest against Charles X's systematic abuse of power and his failure to respect the Charter of 1814. Liberals and Republicans emerged victorious and united to proclaim Louis-Philippe as king. The bourgeois revolution thus instituted a bourgeois monarch, who modelled himself on the typical, prosperous bourgeois citizen. This created a distinct impression of symbolic consubstantiality between the king and the middle classes. From the point of view of the caricaturists, this synecdochic relationship was to prove highly significant.<sup>15</sup>

On his accession, Louis-Philippe accepted a revised version of the Charter which enshrined, among other things, the freedom of the press and hence also the freedom of the caricature journals of the Maison Aubert that were to become the moral watchdog of the constitutional monarchy. In November 1830, three months after Louis-Philippe took office, the lithographer, caricaturist, journalist and co-founder of the Maison Aubert, Charles Philipon, launched the first of the satirical journals, the weekly newspaper *La Caricature*. Philipon and the caricaturists who worked with him were staunch Republicans and well aware that, despite appearances, Louis-Philippe was not following the Republican agenda he claimed to represent. The founding of *La Caricature* marked the beginning of a sustained press campaign to denounce this hypocrisy. The bourgeois king who affected bourgeois manners did so in the eyes of the caricaturists only to conceal monarchist values: efforts to do away with pomp and ceremony did nothing to alter the fact that Louis-Philippe was surrounded by a new 'aristocracy' of wealthy bourgeois who lead a privileged

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<sup>15</sup> This important point will be developed in the section relating to caricature after 1835, 'La caricature de moeurs'.



existence at the expense of everyone else. The caricaturists felt betrayed and disillusioned by a figurehead who espoused Republican ideals in name only.

The antagonistic relationship between the caricaturists and the king was a Foucaudian struggle in that the implied norms on either side – the values of the republic versus those of the monarchy – carried with them a certain ‘pretension to power’. The norms were primarily political, but they entailed a reciprocal moral judgement memorably expressed by the caricaturists in visual terms. In the cultural context of 1830s Paris, the issue of norms, or rather of normative types of behaviour, proved singularly translatable into visual form. Given the lasting influence of physiognomy in 19<sup>th</sup>-century France this was perhaps to be expected: the ‘scientific’ studies by Lavater, which were immensely popular, had shown how moral qualities could be inferred from physical characteristics and this physiognomic legacy gave the caricaturists a pre-established and easily accessible repertoire of morally loaded gestures with which to convey their sense of outrage against Louis-Philippe. Caricature in the 1830s possessed a unique capacity for expressing moral judgements in visual terms for political reasons. Aside from this practical and direct application, caricature also operated on an indirect, theoretical level in that it functioned, as Foucault argues, as the visual analogue of power.

It is Foucault’s contention that, in the West, the origins of the effects of power – the monarchy and the law – are inherently caricatural and appear grotesque, or ‘ubuesque’. The Foucaudian grotesque designates a precise category of historical and political analysis in which ‘le pouvoir politique [...] s’est donné effectivement la possibilité de transmettre ses effets, bien plus, de trouver l’origine de ses effets, dans un coin qui est manifestement, explicitement, volontairement disqualifié par l’odieux, l’infâme ou le ridicule’ (Foucault 1999: 12). Power is shown to be abject, infamous, ubuesque, or simply ridiculous not as a means of undermining the authority representing it, but as a way of showing its inevitability. The West, argues Foucault ‘a finalement conféré un pouvoir incontrôlé, dans son appareil de justice, à la parodie’ (14). While Foucault has a particular form of parody in mind – the discourse of psychiatry and its emergence as a ‘pouvoir de normalisation’ – the parodic framework

for power he establishes works well as an illustration of the power struggle between Louis-Philippe and the Republican caricaturists.

The conflict between king and caricaturists was a conflict played out between two forms of parody – France’s ‘grotesque’ monarch on one side and caricatures of him on the other – both of which laid claim to power. In the post-revolutionary context, the exercise of power was a matter of seizing and maintaining control over public opinion, rather than quelling opposition by physical force. It was a conflict of kingship which Louis-Philippe often lost. As Champfleury observes in *Histoire de la caricature moderne*, the true ‘king’ of France was the one nominated by the people as the defender of their cause. Until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, he argues, there were memorable moments of caricature, but no memorable caricaturists: ‘Le peuple n’a pas encore choisi un défenseur hardi, en lui disant: “Tu seras roi”’ (Champfleury 1871: xi). Under the July Monarchy, however, that situation changed. By subscribing to the caricature newspapers, the ‘people’ effectively nominated Philipon and his caricaturists as their champions. The caricaturists thus became ‘kings’. At the same time they also became, from the point of view of the king and his government, symbolically indistinguishable from their creative output, a fact which brought with it considerable adverse consequences.<sup>16</sup>

Under Louis-Philippe’s reign the conflict of kingship was mostly fought in the court of law. According to Foucault, one of the principal functions of ubiquitous authority is to assert the law by punishing those who transgress, or rather by punishing the ‘conduites irrégulières’ of delinquent individuals. In the case of the caricaturists, their delinquent and abnormal behaviour was the production of caricatures which exposed the parodic nature of the king or of his government, a gesture which might be described in Foucauldian terms as representing the ‘souveraineté infâme’ of Louis-Philippe and the ‘grotesque administratif’ of his government. Despite the Charter of 1830, certain notorious visual attacks on the monarchy were treated as criminal acts

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<sup>16</sup> The slippage between caricaturists and caricatures is a significant factor in the development of caricature under the July Monarchy. In the early years of Louis-Philippe’s reign, the caricaturists clearly identified themselves with the message their caricatures conveyed, but distanced themselves absolutely from the uglinesses they exposed. In the later years, however, when caricature turned its attention to bourgeois culture in general (rather than the king in particular) that situation changed and they found themselves attacking the very middle classes to which they belonged. This point will be taken up later in this chapter in the section relating to the work of Henry Monnier.

resulting in heavy fines for the newspapers in which the images were published and prison sentences for the caricaturist concerned. This situation corresponds closely to Foucault's analysis of crime under pre-revolutionary law: 'Dans tout crime [...] affrontement de forces, révolte, insurrection contre le souverain. Dans le moindre crime, un petit fragment de régicide' (76). Although Louis-Philippe's response was less drastic than the excessive forms of revenge exacted by the feudal monarchs described by Foucault, the principle of criminality remained the same. Political caricatures were symbolic acts of regicide and the caricaturists were considered to be criminals. Conscious of the rights granted to the press in the Charter, Louis-Philippe was at first reluctant to be seen to infringe them by curtailing its freedom. The negative public image generated by constant visual vilification from the caricaturists proved too much, however. The caricatures became subject to increasing censorship.

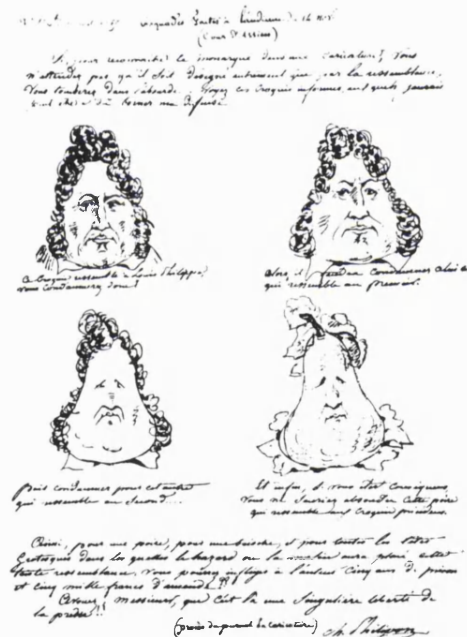


Fig. 12: Charles Philippon, sketches, November 1831.

In November 1831, Philippon was famously brought to trial for offending the dignity of the monarch. In his defence, he drew a series of four sketches of the king, asking the court at which point the representation changed from a caricature to a criminal act. The four images showed Louis-Philippe in varying degrees of 'pearhood' inspired by the resemblance of his head shape to that of a pear and by the fact that 'poire' in French means 'fool' (Fig. 12). Philippon argued that if each image resembled the last and that that in itself was not offensive, he could not be guilty of *lèse majesté*. The court disagreed. He was fined 2,000 francs and sentenced to six months in prison. The pear nonetheless came to be one of the most effective political

weapons against Louis-Philippe, undermining his credibility as it made fun of his unfortunate physiognomy. Indeed, Philipon's visual/verbal pun captured public imagination to such an extent that references to it continued to appear in numerous other caricatures and even in graffiti outside the capital throughout Louis-Philippe's reign. The merest hint of a propensity towards pearhood was instantly recognisable as an implied criticism of France's hapless monarch.

Philipon's act of Foucaudian 'regicide' was closely followed by another that was similarly punished by a heavy fine and a six-month prison sentence for the criminal concerned. The offending image was the notorious portrayal of Louis-Philippe as Gargantua by Honoré Daumier (Fig. 13). As a constitutional monarch, Louis-Philippe was poised in an ambiguous position between two political orders, the old regime and the new. The caricaturists were well aware of this fact and that, as a representative of power, he was thus a curious hybrid. Daumier's infamous caricature, deliberately played on this political hybridity by reactivating an old reference to Bourbon gluttony.<sup>17</sup> Gargantua is shown in all his pearhood – the shape of the head is a clear reference to Philipon's pun – sitting on a *chaise percée*, which in itself stands as a symbol of social inequality, since only the wealthiest homes boasted such luxury. Money taken from impoverished citizens is transported by overfed, but miniature Gargantuas (loyal members of Louis-Philippe's government) to the monster's mouth. Meanwhile, previously-consumed funds are defecated in the form of medals and honours onto the waiting crowd of mini-Gargantuas below.



Fig. 13: Daumier, 'Gargantua', 1831.

<sup>17</sup> See note 13.

The court cases of Philipon and Daumier serve to highlight a situation in which two diametrically opposed sets of norms and deviations (or self-other relations) came into conflict. On one side, the king defended his position as the embodiment of the constitutionally sanctioned norm and criminalised the caricaturists for deviating from it; on the other, the caricaturists felt that the Republican views they expressed were the legitimate 'norm' from which Louis-Philippe deviated. The legal battle was, of course, won by the king. The moral victory, however, belonged to the caricaturists. Unable to tolerate the fact that his public image was being damaged on a daily basis, Louis-Philippe tried various strategies in order to restore it. The high-profile court cases merely served to make of Louis-Philippe a laughing stock, although the fines imposed did cause *La Caricature* to fold. The weekly journal was duly replaced in 1832 by a satirical daily, *Le Charivari*.<sup>18</sup> Louis-Philippe's response to this was to secretly fund a rival journal, *La Charge*, in the hope of neutralising opposition by beating the caricaturists at their own game. This gesture, however, backfired. The effect of *La Charge* was to create what Richard Terdiman (1985: 159) has termed an atmosphere of 'diffuse disaffection from the régime'. In response to the government journal, *Le Charivari* began to shift its own emphasis from political to social satire and in doing so attracted a new and much wider readership. This second group, which was less politicised and more traditionalist than the original body of Republican readers, was nonetheless critical of the monarchy and suffering from what Balzac described as 'désenchantement'.<sup>19</sup> Once again, Louis-Philippe's counter-initiative failed to achieve the desired outcome.

From the point of view of 'the disenchanted', the figure for political and moral abnormality embodied in the person of Louis-Philippe bore only a faint resemblance to the Foucaudian archetypal monster, Louis XVI. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century monster, as Foucault (1999: 53) observes, was nothing more than 'un monstre quotidien, un monstre banalisé', or 'un monstre pâle'. As an illustration of just how far the aristocratic monster had been tamed, a caricature by Charles-Joseph Traviès shows Louis-Philippe in the form of a pear-shaped Hercules with the city of Paris in ruins at his feet (Fig. 14).

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<sup>18</sup> The word 'charivari' means a mock serenade made by banging pots and kettles.



Fig. 14: Traviès, 'Hercule Vainqueur', 1834.

The lion's head mask referred to in the caption – but which looks suspiciously like the head of a sheep – has been removed to reveal yet another pear-head profile. A meaningful crack between the name 'Hercules' and the epithet 'the victor' has developed in the plinth; and Hercules' tail is about to knock over a rotund crock, which in itself refers to another earlier image of Louis-Philippe by Traviès – the crock of molasses (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15: Traviès, 'Pot de Mélasse', 1832.

<sup>19</sup> See Terdiman (1985: 158-9).

The pear on the top is sufficient to reveal the identity of the crock, but the complexity of the image goes well beyond this by now familiar device. The crock itself is no ordinary kitchen vessel; rather it is used by Traviès to refer to the huge portable receptacles known as ‘tinettes’ used to transport faecal matter from Parisian homes before the introduction of a public sewerage system.<sup>20</sup> Thus the content of the crock is clearly not ‘mélasse’, but ‘merde’. Meanwhile the phrase ‘être dans la mélasse’ in French means to be ‘in a fix’ or ‘in the soup’, a fact which in itself is only a short step away from being ‘dans la merde’. A further layer of meaning is added by the fact that during the 1789 Revolution the image of the empty pot or ‘cruche’ had generated its own satirical neologism – the ‘aristocruche’ – a term, according to one revolutionary pamphlet, ‘très propre à caractériser le Bourgeois de Paris qui s’est laissé gagner par des opinions des Aristocrates, et se rend l’éternel écho de leurs mauvais sophismes’ (quoted in de Baecque 1988: 136).

These images by Traviès represent the culmination of a profound change in France’s political imaginary dating back to the early years of the Revolution (we recall here the caricature of the royal family wading out of Versailles through the sewers). The monarch is no longer a monster, but an abject object of ridicule and disgust. The empty bourgeois vessel of the revolutionary ‘aristocruche’ is now ‘full of shit’ and stupid as well. With this transformation, monstrosity changes its aspect too. It is no longer a terrifying Other living on the outside and threatening to come in, but rather something that is already inside, already a part of the structure of society. If Louis-Philippe positioned himself as a literal embodiment of wider bourgeois values by affecting bourgeois tastes and manners, this in turn made of the bourgeoisie a diffuse embodiment of its monarch. This identification between the king and the middle classes, and the fact that the caricaturists recognised it, proved crucial to the development of caricature under the July Monarchy. When, as a last resort, Louis-Philippe reinstated strict censorship laws against any material which might be seen to discredit either himself or his government further, the caricaturists were forced to pursue more subtle avenues of attack. They abandoned the direct critique of the *portrait charge* and began to express their objections indirectly by satirising bourgeois society as a whole.

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<sup>20</sup> See Gabriel P. Weisberg (1993) ‘In deep shit. The coded images of Traviès in the July Monarchy’,



*Caricature after 1835: 'la caricature de mœurs'*

The transition from political caricature to what Baudelaire termed 'la caricature de mœurs' highlighted a new range of issues in Parisian society. The caricature of manners played on weaknesses and insecurities as political caricature had done, but bourgeois vulnerability at the time had less to do with politics than with all-important questions of social identity. There was a new sense of the city as a social theatre where the hierarchical codes of the *ancien régime* had given way to what James Cuno (1983: 349) describes as 'more anonymous, uncentered, and undifferentiated codes of infinite nuances'. A shift had taken place from 'assigned identity' to a more precarious situation of 'achieved identity'.<sup>21</sup> Amid the uncertainties, positions within the social hierarchy were up for grabs. The role of caricature in this new system, according to Cuno, was 'to mark out and define specific codes of distinction by which to identify certain social types and thus provide the means for articulating one's own identity as belonging to, or as being in opposition to, these types' (349). In other words, caricature was now concerned with social stereotypes or norms.

The personal stakes in this undertaking, for bourgeois consumers and for the caricaturists themselves, were high, since the other on which critical attention was now focused was also, to all intents and purposes, the self. This delicate situation explains the popularity of emblematic types, rather than caricatures of specific individuals: strong fictional identities established by such types could be painfully accurate in their criticisms of bourgeois life and yet were seen to be fictitious, thus enabling everyone to recognise everyone else in them without having to acknowledge them as portraits of themselves. The emblematic types also proved popular because they appealed to a public predisposed towards ugliness by literary Romanticism and especially by Victor Hugo's celebration of the grotesque in the figure of the hunchbacked hero of *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831).<sup>22</sup> According to Champfleury, the French nation as a whole had acquired a taste for contemplating 'une sorte de Quasimodo grimaçant' (1871: xvii). The three emblematic figures identified by

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*Art Journal* 52:3, 36-40.

<sup>21</sup> See Peter Brook (1977) 'On the text of the city', *Oppositions* 8, 7-11 (quoted in Cuno 1983: 349).

<sup>22</sup> The novel explicitly relates to the events of the July Revolution. As Louis Chevalier notes, the original manuscript began with the words 'Il y a aujourd'hui, vingt-cinq juillet 1830...' (in Hugo 1974:



Champfleury as portraying the bourgeoisie most faithfully were the characters Macaire, Mayeux and Prudhomme (as represented most memorably in the work of Honoré Daumier, Joseph Traviès and Henry Monnier respectively). These characters were designed to expose systematically all forms of bourgeois ugliness by portraying typical aspects of class-specific behaviour, gesture or expression in an amusing, but critical way. This led Champfleury (1871: xii) to refer to the three caricaturists as ‘les démolisseurs de la bourgeoisie’. The function of their highly successful emblematic characters, however, proved to be less destructive than Champfleury supposed. Despite its criticisms, the caricatural deformation of bourgeois manners also served to strengthen the formation of bourgeois identity.

### *The physiology of distinction*

The 1830s in France and particularly in Paris was, as noted above, a time of change and uncertainty among the middle classes. Everything was open to negotiation and the problem of defining the self was acute. In relation to what and to whom? According to which set of rules? In *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (1972), the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu notes how, in transitional situations, seemingly negligible details of social behaviour take on particular significance:

Si toutes les sociétés (et, chose significative, toutes les ‘institutions totalitaires’, comme dit Goffman, qui entendent réaliser un travail de ‘déculturation’ et de ‘reculturation’) attachent un tel prix aux détails en apparence les plus insignifiants de la *tenue*, du *maintien*, des *manières* corporelles et verbales, c’est que, traitant le corps comme une mémoire, elles lui confient sous une forme abrégée et pratique, c’est-à-dire mémotechnique, les principes fondamentaux de l’arbitraire culturel. (Bourdieu 1972: 197)

In his later work, *La Distinction* (1979), Bourdieu explores the phenomenon further and argues that the distinctive signs of affiliation to a particular social group create a class-specific ‘habitus’ which reveals itself through bodily ‘hexis’:

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22). Hugo subsequently amended this date because rioting began in Paris two days later and work on the novel had to be delayed by several months.

Dimension fondamentale du sens de l'orientation sociale, l'hexis corporelle est une manière pratique d'éprouver et d'exprimer le sens que l'on a [...] de sa propre *valeur sociale*: le rapport que l'on entretient avec le monde social et la place que l'on s'y attribue [...] se déclare [...] à travers [...] la place que l'on occupe *avec son corps dans l'espace physique* [...] *et avec sa parole dans le temps*. (Bourdieu 1979: 552)

According to Bourdieu, the social class most acutely aware of the need to hold itself and express itself correctly in French culture in the 1970s was the petty bourgeoisie. His analysis applies equally to French culture in the 1830s, despite the obvious changes in material circumstances. It is no accident, Bourdieu argues, that this social group is designated by the adjective 'petit': 'Petits soucis, petits besoins, le petit-bourgeois est un bourgeois que vit petitement. Son *hexis* corporelle même, où s'exprime toute sa relation objective au monde social, est d'un homme qui doit se faire petit pour passer par la porte étroite qui donne accès à la bourgeoisie' (390). Bourdieu describes the petit bourgeois as strict, sober, discreet, severe in manner of dress and in manner of speech, and lacking in stature, breadth and largesse as a result. There is nothing natural about the petite bourgeoisie Bourdieu describes and for this reason, I would suggest, it is, as a class, always already a caricature in that it relentlessly models itself on a hyper-correct (and hence distorted) version of the bourgeois hegemonic norm.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the caricaturists played mercilessly on petit-bourgeois efforts to incorporate the values of the bourgeoisie in this exaggerated way. Monnier's *Physiologie du bourgeois* (1832), for example, portrays an aspiring (petit-)bourgeois family which corresponds in every detail to Bourdieu's analysis. The bourgeoisie, obsessed with appearances, forces her husband to wear stiff shirt collars so that he resembles a bouquet of flowers. The fussiness of her own toilette shows clear signs of trying too hard. In every respect she is seen to overcompensate for that which she is not so that, unlike her genuine counterpart, the 'femme comme il faut', she becomes a caricature of that to which she aspires (Fig. 16).

De la Bourgeoise, de son esprit et de ses  
mœurs.



Fig 16: Monnier, 'La Bourgeoise', 1832.

The bourgeois, meanwhile, is described as overfed, obtuse, vain, politically naïve, culturally ignorant, intellectually vacant and socially competitive. In particular, in a chapter entitled 'la manie du portrait', Monnier satirises the relationship between the bourgeois and the artist. With little else to occupy his time, the bourgeois '*se fait faire*' along with endless representations of his wife and children. It is as though the bourgeois household required a proliferation of images of itself as a constant source of reassurance and a guarantee of its identity. Significantly, however, the artist is not permitted to paint what he sees – a M. Tabarot 'tout rouge', for example – he must paint according to the self-image of the sitter.

There was a similar discrepancy between what the caricaturists saw and the way in which the objects of their caricature saw themselves and wished to be seen. The caricaturists saw the bourgeoisie as ugly and ridiculous whereas, apparently oblivious to such criticism, they remained utterly enamoured of themselves. Of all the caricaturists, Daumier was most acutely aware of the irony of this situation (Fig. 17).



Fig. 17: Daumier, 'There's no doubt about it, it certainly is my profile; but I shall always regret that the artist had the obstinacy to omit my spectacles', from *The public at the Exhibition*, 1864.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Caption quoted in Wechsler (1982: 119).

In this caricature from 1864, Daumier sets out to represent the complexity of the relationship between caricature and 'caricaturee'. The corpulent bourgeois takes issue only with the absence of spectacles, thus revealing a narrowness of vision and an assumption of direct equivalence between reality and representation which the implied sculptor does not share. From the perspective of the bourgeois, the spectacle-less bust is an inferior copy; what he cannot see is that it is a copy of a reality that is already a caricature i.e. himself. Through the omission of the spectacles, Daumier is exposing the demand for absolute equivalence as a nonsense and the bourgeois who makes that demand as a fool. And yet the bourgeois takes himself deadly seriously: he can interpret art only in terms of a narcissistic self-image and manipulates his relation to it in order to preserve that image. If it is an accurate copy of the way he chooses to see himself, then it acts as a direct confirmation of the self. If it deviates from this expectation, it is bad art. The mechanisms of identification or non-identification thus serve to protect the bourgeois self-image regardless. Daumier's bourgeois is incapable of making true aesthetic judgements (in the purely disinterested Kantian sense) and instead makes only relativistic judgements of taste based on profound self-interest.

### *Robert Macaire*

In 'De l'Essence du rire' Baudelaire describes the emergence of Daumier's emblematic figure, Robert Macaire, as 'l'inauguration décisive de la caricature de moeurs' (1962: 279). Macaire was one of the July Monarchy's most 'complete' satirical figures, in that he drew on verbal, visual and gestural forms of caricature. This archetypal figure of the con-man was first made famous by the actor Frédéric Lemaître at the Ambigu theatre in 1823.<sup>24</sup> Macaire developed into a satire of the July Monarchy and all it stood for, in particular its unscrupulous pursuit of wealth. The stage figure was taken up by Daumier, who produced a famous series of lithographs published under the title *Caricaturana* in *Le Charivari* between August 1836 and November 1838 (Fig. 18).

<sup>24</sup> Lemaître had based his character, in turn, on another character from a bad melodrama entitled 'L'Auberge des Adrets'. According to the preface by Florent Fels to the collected volume of Daumier's Macaire caricatures entitled *Les cent Robert Macaire*, Lemaître succeeded in transforming a brigand into an epic character, an 'héros du vol et désinvolte assassin' (Daumier 1926: 2).

The stereotypical 'floueur' (swindler) Macaire served as the model for at least two of the popular *Physiologies* (satirical profiles of cultural stereotypes published in the 1830s and 40s by Philipon). In Philipon's *Physiologie du floueur* (1845?: 9) Macaire is not named, but fits the description of the 'floueur' whose vocation, 'flouer', is defined as a 'synonyme de voler, tromper, attraper...'.<sup>25</sup> The *Physiologie du Robert Macaire*, written under the pseudonym 'James Rousseau', continues the theme of unscrupulous dealings and offers an explanation as to why the figure of the con-man should be so significant:

Robert-Macaire ne pouvait apparaître dans un autre temps que le nôtre. Il est bien l'enfant de ce siècle; il est l'incarnation de notre époque positive, égoïste, avare, menteuse, vantarde, et, disons le mot, il est ici parfaitement à sa place – essentiellement *blagueuse* ('Rousseau' 1842: 5).

According to this analysis, Macaire is the product of a cynical age. He embodies all the worst characteristics of a particular phase of history (encroaching capitalism) and as such, the text implies, should serve as a cautionary tale for the times, or indeed for 'our' times. The 'nôtre' is important. Macaire is represented here as 'one of us'; a rhetorical ploy, of course, but also an indication that 'le macairisme' was not considered aberrant behaviour, but rather the norm.<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 18: Daumier, 'Robert Macaire agent matrimoniale', *Caricaturana* series (1836-38), no. 13. Macaire is shown facilitating a potential marital union which will prove financially advantageous to all concerned, including himself.

<sup>25</sup> No date is given in the work itself. I have followed that suggested in the British Library catalogue, which similarly appears with a query.

<sup>26</sup> The term 'macairisme', according to Florent Fels, still retained its full pejorative force in the 1920s (see preface to Daumier: 1926).

The purpose of the three-fold Macaire (gestural, verbal, visual) was to convey a strong moral and political message, to stir consciences and ultimately to bring about social change. Daumier, like the other caricaturists, was determined to make a difference. The critic Paul Gaultier describes them as a group of frustrated idealists anxious to communicate this frustration by giving material expression to vice through the strategic deployment of ugliness:

[...] le caricaturiste recherche la laideur moins pour elle-même, et parce qu'il s'y complaît, que par colère d'idéal froissé. Revanche sur le monde tel qu'il est, de la perfection souhaitée, la charge, loin de provenir d'une condescendance au mal, ne rabaisse la nature que pour mettre mieux en évidence ce qui la sépare de l'idéal rêvé. (Gaultier 1906: 35)<sup>27</sup>

The positioning of caricatures in relation to society as 'one of us' (as opposed to 'one of them') suggests that the relationship between caricature and the bourgeois public was not – as Champfleury believed – necessarily one of outright hostility. People bought the caricature newspapers, after all, and laughed at them. Laughter in fact provides the key to understanding the complexity of the reciprocal relation that existed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century between identity and image, between the bourgeois self and the caricatural other.

### *The ambivalence of laughter*

It is no straightforward matter to determine the precise nature of the laughter provoked by 19<sup>th</sup>-century caricature, since the position of the spectator in relation to the comic ugliness it portrayed was as nuanced as his or her position in relation to the bourgeois norm. It is important to note at this point that, in contrast to the general appeal of the caricatures of the Revolution, the caricature of manners functioned specifically in relation to what Erving Goffman (1990: 173) terms the 'virtual middle class ideal'. Thus, the uglinesses at which people were invited to laugh were specifically bourgeois uglinesses involving judgements of taste in the sociological

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<sup>27</sup> Gaultier refers here to 'la charge', which, strictly speaking, relates to political caricature. In the context of his own argument, however, it is clear that the charged portrait is understood to refer to caricature in general.

sense. These judgements were influenced by issues of social identity and not of aesthetics as defined by Kant in the third *Critique*.<sup>28</sup> Laughter in this context was the product of judgements conditioned by self-interest, a point supported by Baudelaire, who observes in 'De l'Essence du rire' (originally conceived as a *Physiologie du rire*) that laughter is 'satanic' because it is a sign of a sense of superiority over others acquired only after one's own pseudo-biblical fall from grace. The comic, for Baudelaire, is found not in the 'object', but in the contradictory nature of the laughter that greets it. At once a sign of infinite greatness (in relation to lesser creatures) and a sign of infinite misery (in relation to the 'Supreme being'), 'c'est du choc pertetuel de ces deux infinis que se dégage le rire' (Baudelaire 1962: 250-1). Far from being an innocent pleasure, the appreciation of caricature requires both a sense of one's own moral lapse and the shameless ability to place oneself higher up on the moral ladder than other people (it takes one to know one, as it were). It is in this sense that the emblematic characters were seen as 'one of us'. They were amusing only in so far as they had fallen from grace further than the bourgeois public imagined itself to have fallen.

In his analysis of the laughter associated with caricature, Paul Gaultier argues that the spectator laughs at images which in real life would prove disturbing because they are represented through caricature as fictions: 'Ambiguë entre le réel et la fiction, l'exagération caricaturale emprunte à l'un son intérêt, à l'autre sa sécurité, en nous proposant une réalité enlaidie, qui est une laideur irréaliste' (Gaultier 1906: 50). The intermediary status of caricature, according to Gaultier, enables it to give an illusion of reality, but one which then passes judgement on itself. The viewer is thus poised between pleasure and pain, where exaggeration offers a reassuring fiction to the imagination and so acts as a kind of 'emotional anaesthetic' which permits laughter, while at the same time threatening to put an end to this affective immunity 'en versant

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<sup>28</sup> Bourdieu would, of course, strongly disagree with this division of aesthetics and sociology, since the aim of *La Distinction* is to call into question the purity of Kantian taste and to show that philosophy deceives itself as to the disinterestedness of its powers of aesthetic judgement. Far from rising above empiricism and historicism – the stigmatised positions which threaten the very existence of philosophical activity – Kantian distinction is merely another form of 'ce dégoût viscéral de la vulgarité qui définit le goût pur comme *rapport social incorporé*, devenu nature' (Bourdieu 1979: 585). In Bourdieu's view, the Kantian critique of judgement is deeply conditioned by sociological factors which cannot be ignored.

dans l'horrible' where laughter turns to dread (51).<sup>29</sup> The laughter associated with caricature is always double: superficial amusement betrays hidden fears.

The double-edged character of laughter is taken up in Ernst Kris's psychoanalytic account of comedy, where he argues that 'the comic originates in the conflict between instinctual trends and the superego's repudiation of them' (Kris 1953: 182) and is poised between pleasure and unpleasure (mental pain). Within this broad framework of comedy, the specific quality of caricature, according to Kris, is that it forms a close alliance between a witty façade (the comic comparison between the original and the distorted copy) and a more destructive tendency (the desire to annihilate the individual it portrays). In order for the comic, and hence also caricature, to succeed it must combine two factors: first the claims of instinctual life must be satisfied by the content (the spectator must collude in the negative judgement being passed); second, the objections of the superego must be satisfied by the manner of its disguise (potential feelings of guilt at the will to destroy are assuaged by the belief that it is only a joke). Kris develops the relation between the ego and the superego into a comparison between the comic and the sublime on the basis of mental expenditure: the comic, of which the pathological parallel is mania, involves the triumph of the ego over the superego; the sublime, by contrast, of which the pathological correlate is ecstasy, involves the surrender of the ego to the superego. Thus the comic reduces mental expenditure ('I'm on top of the situation'), whereas the sublime entails a surplus ('The situation is on top of me'). In either case, the ego is shown to be hovering precariously between pleasure and pain, a fact which would account for the proximity of the sublime and the 'ridiculous'. A slight movement in either direction tips the balance in favour of one scenario or the other. Ugliness, I would argue, is implicated in both.<sup>30</sup>

A further foray into psychoanalysis is invited by Gaultier (1906: 45), who argues that a noisily conscious sense of superiority over the 'malheurs figurés' of an exaggerated caricature betrays a hidden realisation that the fictional other is also a reflection of the self. The specular nature of caricature had already been noted by

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<sup>29</sup> The ambivalence of the spectator poised between pleasure and pain in the face of ugliness immediately suggests a link with the Burkean account of the sublime. The position of ugliness in relation to sublimity will be explored in chapter 3.



Champfleury (1871 xii), who observed that '[l]'homme s'irrite de trouver sans cesse sa figure réfléchi par un miroir où n'apparaissent que ses difformités morales'. This suggests a defensive reaction on the part of spectators who did not wish to be reminded of their shortcomings. Viewed in psychoanalytic terms, this reaction might be taken as an indication that caricature poses a threat to narcissism or, more specifically, to the narcissistic fantasy of the ideal ego. This fantasy projection, described by the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut as a 'grandiose ego', manifests itself in a number of different, privileged forms, namely as an instance of intelligence, knowledge, virtue, power, sex [appeal], the body beautiful and also of independence, or self-sufficiency.<sup>31</sup> According to Guy Rosolato (1976: 15) in his essay on narcissism: 'Tout ce qui vient, dans un mouvement centripète, corroborer la toute-puissance de ces idéaux, appartenant au Moi Idéal, provoque un accroissement de l'estime de soi. Tout manque produit une "blessure narcissique"' (15). The caricature of manners could and did inflict just such a 'blessure', but for this to become apparent required the bourgeois ego to recognise in such images a negative reflection of itself. The fact was that the majority of people had no wish to do so. For strategic reasons, ugliness was not seen as part of bourgeois reality, since to accept that the 'virtual middle class ideal' was flawed would be to undermine the middle-classes whose identity consisted in striving to attain it. The emerging bourgeoisie, which was only just beginning to take stock of its new position of power, had no interest in conceiving of itself as being under threat or in any way ugly. An anonymous caricature of the emblematic character Mayeux posing as Narcissus (Fig. 19) serves to illustrate the deluded love-affair between the bourgeoisie and its self-image.

### *Mayeux: the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Thersites*

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century public took ownership of ugliness, in the sense that they purchased the caricature journals, but they did not take responsibility for it. As far as they were concerned, the images they contained were humorous reflection of other people's greed, hypocrisy, vanity and credulity. Caricature thus fulfilled an important social function as a scapegoat for collective failings. The emblematic character who carried

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<sup>30</sup> The rôle of ugliness within the sublime will, as noted earlier, be developed in chapter 3.

<sup>31</sup> Kohut is cited in Guy Rosolato (1976: 15).



Fig. 19: Anon., 'Ah! Dieu! je conçois maintenant l'histoire du beau Narcisse!', 11 June 1831.<sup>32</sup>

the burden of petit-bourgeois ugliness most literally – in the form of a hunched back – was Joseph Traviès's creation, Monsieur Mayeux. Traviès's foul-mouthed, lewd, priapic personage was intended as a savage indictment of the former revolutionary turned power-hungry petit-bourgeois. Failure to achieve political success led him to exert what little power he did possess in the form of tyranny over women (Fig. 20).

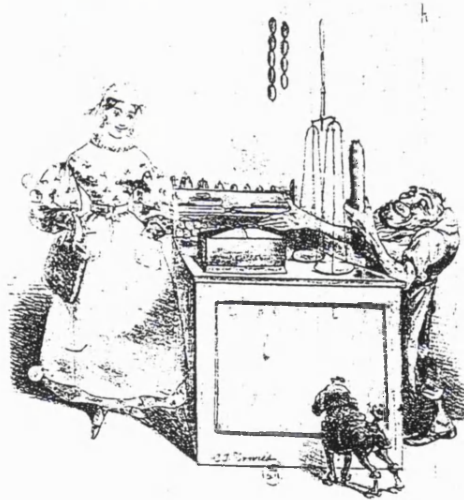


Fig. 20: 'Mayeux Charcutier' (1831). 'Qu'en dites vous, la petite chatte, est-y beau celui là?'<sup>33</sup>

He was intended to shock and offend, but at the same time could not be taken too seriously, partly because he was fictional and partly because of the comic tradition to

<sup>32</sup> The Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes, offers various alternative catalogues for the Mayeux caricatures. Mayeux as Narcissus is listed under the Meunié series as no. 64 and under the 'Histoire complete [sic] de M. Mayeux' series as no. 55.

<sup>33</sup> The caricatures of Mayeux specific to Traviès appear in a numbered series entitled 'Facéties de M. Mayeux' of which this is no. 30. Meunié series no. 132.

which he belonged: that of Pulcinella, Punch, Maccus and Priapus, referred to by Champfleury as ‘cette génération difforme, facétieuse et cynique’ (195). In addition, Mayeux’s obvious physical abnormality was a convenient device which masked the fact that he conformed in every other respect to reprehensible patterns of behaviour that had become normalised. This situation is summed up in an image by Traviès in which laughter is invited at the obvious physical incongruity of the potential coupling of a loathsome Mayeux with an attractive young woman (Fig. 21).



Fig 21: ‘Out of the question, my dear. I’m on duty now...Later perhaps’.<sup>34</sup>

Attention is drawn away from the more seemly bourgeois in the background, although he in fact provides a vital clue as to the meaning of the picture. His status and moral position in relation to the young woman is no different from that of Mayeux – both are supposedly upstanding members of bourgeois society – and his expression of disgust at Mayeux’s dishonourable intentions smacks of hypocrisy (what is he doing there, after all? Does his face not betray some sense that *he* should be the one to accompany the young woman?). His gaze from the back of the picture towards the central couple is intended to mirror the gaze of the bourgeois viewer outside the picture looking in, but both are engaged in passing judgement on Mayeux for the wrong reasons. Whilst the bourgeois viewer inside and outside the picture reacts negatively to Mayeux’s appearance, thus enjoying a sense of superiority and

<sup>34</sup> Caption quoted in Wechsler (1982: 83).

baudelairean one-upmanship, the distance between them and Mayeux in terms of acceptable bourgeois behaviour is minimal.

The subtleties of Traviès's strategy were acknowledged in an article by Bazin in the *Gazette de Paris* in 1859, which places Mayeux in the tradition of all the hunchbacks to have mocked humanity since Aesop and Thersites. Traviès's malformed outsider was in fact

celui qui a le meilleur jugé les événements de notre époque, qui semblait avoir personnifié en lui nos colères, nos enthousiasmes, nos crédulités, le type de 1830 et de 1831, le masque dans lequel, tous tant que nous sommes, nous pouvions sans chagrin nous reconnaître, parce que nous placions sur son compte, je dirais mieux sur son dos, toutes nos folies, toutes nos bévues. (quoted in Champfleury 1871: 203).

In other words, Mayeux performed a specific function as a scapegoat, drawing derisive laughter onto his physical deformity and so obscuring his moral position as an accurate representative of that society, an insider perceived (wrongly) as an outsider.

In *Les règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (1992), Bourdieu likens the rôle of Thersites to that of the anti-intellectual within the intellectual field. The ancient Greek Thersites of Homer's *Iliad*, however, was not only a voice of dissent, but also, significantly in the context of this dissertation, the prototype for ugliness in antiquity. As Robert Garland observes in *The Eye of the Beholder* (1995: 80), Thersites is identified as 'the ugliest (*aischistos*) man who came beneath Ilion'. A measure of his importance is the fact that the description of his character is more detailed than any other in the poem: 'He dragged one foot (*pholkos*), being lame (*chôlos*) in one leg. His shoulders were hunched (*kurtô*) and they were gathered around his chest. His head above was pointed (*phoxos*), and straggly, woolly hair sprouted therefrom' (*Iliad* II 217-19, quoted in Garland 1995: 80). Homer's ugly, coarsely-spoken footsoldier is the only member of the Achaian army with the courage to voice the general feeling of discontent at the greed and ineptitude of its leader,

Agamemnon. For this reason, the figure of Thersites attracted interest among the Cynics, who opposed the Greek ideology of *kalokagathia* (where the beautiful is seen as an expression of the good), and used ugliness as a strategy for provocation.<sup>35</sup> In the belief that the only good was virtue won by self-control and independence from wordly needs (including, presumably, the need for external beauty), they chose to have themselves portrayed as old and ugly, reinforcing their unconventional ideas with unconventional appearances.<sup>36</sup> This wilful distortion of *kalokagathia* can be seen as a form of philosophical caricature which aimed to expose the ideological norm.

In the *Iliad*, Thersites is beaten for his troubles by Odysseus, a gesture which unifies the army in derisive laughter at a moment of extreme tension. His intervention thus has the opposite effect to that which he intended. Thersites is forced into a rôle which serves the interests of those in power. The same is also true of Traviès's Monsieur Mayeux, whose excessive ugliness (as compared to the other famous emblematic characters) places him firmly in the tradition of Old Comedy where physical abnormality was relentlessly targeted as a means of catharsis. Despite the fact that Mayeux mocked the *petit-bourgeoisie*, he effectively relieved them of the burden of social ugliness and so, like Thersites, unwittingly reinforced the dominant position of those he sought to undermine.

The figure of the scapegoat in ancient Greece does not, in fact, begin with Thersites; rather the beating he receives at the hands of Odysseus harks back to the scapegoat ritual of the *pharmakos*. In *La Dissemination* (1972), Jacques Derrida explores the meaning of this ancient ceremony via fragments from the satirical poet, Hipponax, incorporated into a detailed account by Tzetzes:

Le (rituel du) *pharmakos* était une de ces anciennes pratiques de purification. Si une calamité s'abattait sur la cité, exprimant le courroux de dieu, famine, peste ou toute autre catastrophe, ils conduisaient comme à un sacrifice l'homme le plus laid de tous en manière de purification et comme remède aux souffrances de la cité. (Tzetzes, quoted in Derrida 1979: 152)

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<sup>35</sup> The Cynic school was founded by the philosopher Antisthenes (?445-365 B.C.).

The scapegoat, who is explicitly the ugliest man of all, fulfils the rôle of expiation for the sins of the city. At times of crisis, he (and it seems the *pharmakos* was always a man) is cast out, beaten and burned to death in order that the city may be purified. The ritual expulsion of the 'personification of evil' developed into an annual event re-enacted each year on the sixth day of the festival of Thargelia. In a substantial footnote, Derrida cites J. P. Vernant's *Ambiguïté et renversement, sur la structure énigmatique d'Oedipe-Roi* (1970), where the scapegoat ritual of Thargelia is considered in terms of its 'symmetrical inverse': the 'institution' of ostracism.<sup>37</sup> Vernant's description of the threat posed to the city from above by Oedipus and from below by the *pharmacos* [sic] bears a striking resemblance to Foucault's theory of the two outlaws – despotic kings and criminals – who break the social pact from above and below.<sup>38</sup> The passage from Vernant reads as follows:

Dans la personne de l'ostracisé, la Cité expulse qui en elle est trop élevé et incarne le mal qui peut lui venir par le haut. Dans celle du *pharmacos*, elle expulse ce qu'elle comporte de plus vil et qui incarne le mal qui commence par le bas. Par ce double et complémentaire rejet, elle se délimite elle-même par rapport à un au-delà et un en-deçà. Elle prend la mesure propre de l'humain en opposition d'un côté au divin et à l'héroïque, de l'autre au bestial et au monstrueux. (quoted in Derrida 1979: 150)

The 'double and complementary rejection' also applies, as I have argued in relation to the Foucaudian model, to the mechanisms of revolutionary caricature in France during the Revolution of 1789 and following that of 1830. What emerges from Vernant's text is a clear indication that the institution of ostracism is strongly normative and that it originates from an implied middle ground. In relation specifically to French culture in the context of the 1789 Revolution, Foucault makes the same point explicitly: the two great forms of outlaw, 'le souverain despotique et le peuple révolté' inhabit the field of anomaly 'selon la pensée bourgeoise et la politique

<sup>36</sup> See Paul Zanker (1995: 32).

<sup>37</sup> The outcast without becomes the outcast within and so resembles the Foucaudian development of power structures from the model of exclusion (the leper) to that of inclusion/containment (plague). Derrida makes it clear that discussion of Oedipus in the context of the scapegoat is not, strictly speaking, psychoanalytic.

<sup>38</sup> Foucault does not refer to Vernant in the lecture of 29 January 1975 where this argument is formulated.

bourgeoise' (Foucault 1999: 97). Perceptions of ugliness on which ancient Greek ostracism and post-Revolutionary abnormality in France are based are determined by the middle classes.

In terms of ugly appearance and social function, the pre-eminent figure of the scapegoat in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Paris was without doubt M. Mayeux: as the ugliest of all the caricatures (in the sense that he was the figure with the most obvious physical deformity), his exclusion from the 'virtual middle class ideal' was more radical than that of Robert Macaire and he, more than any other emblematic character, was called upon to shoulder the burden of responsibility for the shortcomings of the Parisian bourgeoisie. Mayeux as *pharmakos* serves to designate what belongs outside bourgeois culture. In Derridean terms, his function is to make the inaugural gesture of the 'logic' of self-identity; that is, to confirm that 'l'étant est ce qu'il est, le dehors est dehors et le dedans dedans' (Derrida 1979: 147). In this capacity, however, the *pharmakos*/Mayeux also threatens the purity of the inside (bourgeois hegemony) by the very fact that it depends on his exteriority for its completion. The inside cannot constitute itself as inside without the outside. The *pharmakos* is thus a 'dangerous supplement', an inessential surplus which is potentially harmful because it is seen as something which should not have encroached upon what is already supposed to be a plenitude. It is there when it should not (have to) be there and so participates psychologically, as well as physically, in the domain of the ugly as defined by Mark Cousins (see introduction).

For Derrida, the dangerous supplement of Plato's philosophy is writing, which opposes speech (Socrates never wrote) by replacing it with something that purports to be the same, but is fundamentally different. 'L'écriture n'est pas la répétition vivante du vivant' (1979: 156), he argues, and in this it is like painting, which also aims at, but fails to achieve 'ressemblance'. Writing and painting are 'toutes deux en effet appréhendées comme techniques mimétiques, l'art étant d'abord déterminé comme *mimesis*' (157). As imitation, they are only what they are in so far as they are lacking, since the essence of imitation is not to be the same as the original. Thus, argues Derrida, imitation is 'mauvaise par essence' (160). If it produced copies that were not bad, then it would not be good as imitation. At the beginning of this chapter, I argued

that caricature can be seen in terms of a bad copy (a graphic distortion) of a bad copy (imperfect humanity). In this, I would suggest, it embraces the ambivalence of imitation. It is good as imitation because it is not like the original, yet not so unlike that it is not recognisable. Caricature, as a form of twisted mimesis, is undecidably good and bad at the same time.

Derrida relates the notion of undecidability to the Greek word *pharmakon* which signifies both remedy and poison and therefore follows the impossible logic of and/or (the *pharmakos* as described by Tzetzes is also seen as remedy).<sup>39</sup> In addition, *pharmakon* means paint, as in artificial colour, the 'stuff' of imitation. All of these significations, I would suggest, converge in the art of caricature, not least because of the function attributed by Derrida to the *pharmakon* which is seen as the movement, the site and the play of difference. It is the place where opposites oppose and cross over into each other: '(âme/corps, bien/mal, dedans/dehors, mémoire/oubli, parole/écriture)' (145). To this list I would add 'self/other' and suggest that the caricature of manners presents to culture, in heightened form, the spectacle of undecidability. In the case of Mayeux, in particular, that undecidability leads straight back to the *pharmakos*, the insider perceived wrongly as an outsider.

#### *Monnier and Prudhomme*

'Etudions le laid, messieurs, étudions le laid!' (Henry  
Monnier, *Mémoires de Monsieur Joseph Prudhomme*)<sup>40</sup>

The undecidability of the self-other in relation to the *pharmakos/pharmakon* that was caricature in 19<sup>th</sup>-century France lead to certain unforeseen consequences for the bourgeois public and for the caricaturists themselves. After the *loi de cautionnement* in 1835 banning all defamatory images of the king, the caricaturists continued their savage attack on everything they despised about bourgeois culture in general. Reactions to their visual critique, however, suggest that it was not always received as it was intended. The bourgeois consumers who subscribed to the caricature journals

<sup>39</sup> The impossible logic of and/or informs Victor Hugo's theory of the grotesque and the sublime (see chapter 3) and is subsequently taken up in the poetry of Baudelaire.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Richard Terdiman (1985: 149).



and those who gathered to view the images displayed in the window of the Maison Aubert – situated in the fashionable Galerie Véro-Dodat in Paris – enjoyed the images and did not appear to take them personally. The fictionality of the popular emblematic characters enabled spectators to distance themselves from the characters portrayed even though they identified with every minor detail of the cultural codes at play within and around them. Paradoxically, then, from the point of view of the bourgeois public, the caricatures *confirmed* their identity in the very act of attempting to undermine it. As for the caricaturists, the third of Champfleury's 'démolisseurs de la bourgeoisie', Henry Monnier, eventually fell victim to his famous caricatural creation, Joseph Prudhomme. The phenomenal success (and endless repetition) of images of Prudhomme gave rise to a situation which might be compared to the logic of Derrida's dangerous supplement. The position of the 'father' of Prudhomme was gradually usurped by that of his 'son', who was different from Monnier, but also visibly the same.<sup>41</sup>

A quintessential 'bourgeois' in the negative sense, Prudhomme first appeared on the stage in 1830 in *La Famille improvisée*, a play written and enacted by Monnier himself. Prudhomme was a typical self-satisfied man of a certain age who embodied everything about the bourgeoisie that Monnier loathed: laziness, self-indulgence and boredom. In the souvenir programme for 'Le Triomphe de Monsieur Prudhomme' (June 1904), Louis Morin acknowledges Monnier's creation as 'la plus haute figure de la comédie du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, l'entité qui personnifie l'ère dominatrice de la médiocrité parvenue'. For Morin, Prudhomme was the synthesis of all forms of idiotic pretension and a crystallisation of bourgeois foolishness. The portrayal was a huge success and generally considered such an accurate reflection of reality that the name Prudhomme became synonymous with the social type it was designed to satirise, entering the canons of 19<sup>th</sup>-century French ugliness as a linguistic concept and a travesty of its etymology: the 11<sup>th</sup>-century word 'prozdome' meant courageous and worthy of respect; the 12<sup>th</sup>-century term 'preudome' also designated someone who was gallant and courageous; the 13<sup>th</sup> century word 'preud'ome' extended the meaning to describe a man who was an expert in his particular profession. These

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<sup>41</sup> Derrida formulates the father-son problematic in relation to speech and writing personified by the Egyptian sun god, Ammon, and his son, the inventor of writing, Thoth. The son is seen as 'l'écriture

positive connotations were irreversibly transformed by Monnier's caricature into the exact opposite around 1830 when a 'prudhomme' became, according to the *Trésor de la langue française*, a 'bourgeois médiocre et vaniteux qui aime faire des déclarations emphatiques, solennelles dont le contenu est niais et banal'.<sup>42</sup> Evidence of the widespread acceptance of Monnier's pejorative connotation is found in the numerous derivations that also emerged at the time, such as prud'hom(m)al, prudhommerie, prudhommisme, prudhommesque(ment) and even the verb prudhommer.



Fig. 22: Daumier, Henry Monnier in the rôle of Joseph Prudhomme, 1852.

During Prudhomme's long lifetime, continued most notably in the caricatures of Daumier (Fig. 22) (and not Monnier himself) between 1852 and 1870, the relationship between Monnier and his character became increasingly strained. What had begun as a minutely-observed satire eventually took over Monnier's life. Judith Wechsler (1982: 128-9) has traced Monnier's decline as the result of excessive identification with his creation. Although the image of Prudhomme which Monnier had originally chosen to represent had been critical and the distance between caricaturist and caricature was clear, over time that distinction became blurred. As the

parricide' and the father as 'première victime et ultime ressource' of the now orphaned writing (Derrida 1979: 168).

<sup>42</sup> Etymological examples, 1830 definition and derivations are all given in *Trésor de la Langue Française du XIX<sup>e</sup> et du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

critics and the public grew tired of the character, Monnier the man could not escape from a projection of part of himself. A particularly poignant illustration of this can be seen in Monnier's double portrait of himself and of Prudhomme: the two are virtually identical (Fig. 23). In the end, as the contemporary critic Paul de Saint-Victor put it: 'Le masque avait mangé le visage' (quoted in Wechsler 1982: 129).



Fig. 23: Monnier, (right) Joseph Prudhomme (left) Monnier in conversation, 1871.

Monnier's fate is curiously similar to that which befalls the artist Basil Hallward in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).<sup>43</sup> For Hallward the painting of Dorian becomes the defining work of his life, the absolute summit of his achievement and ultimately the cause of his murder by the very person it portrays. For Monnier, Prudhomme was also a defining creation, the caricature for which he was best known and yet also the caricature which eventually seemed to drag him down with it. The significant difference, of course, is that Hallward portrays his ideal of beauty in someone else, whereas Monnier portrayed a certain type of bourgeois ugliness that turned out to be indistinguishable from himself. In this respect, Monnier's position comes closer, in the end, to that of Dorian who, in response to Hallward's disillusioned description of the portrait as 'the face of a satyr', replies: 'It is the face of my soul' (Wilde 1998: 157). For Monnier, the all-important distance between creator and ugly creation was lost as if to confirm in advance the underlying truth of Wilde's novel, summed up by Dorian: 'How ugly it all was! And how horribly real ugliness made things!' (124).

The tragedy for Dorian Gray is that ‘the visible emblem of conscience’ (91), as he describes it, does not make a difference until it is too late. Monnier’s ‘emblem of conscience’ also appeared to make little difference, since Parisian society took refuge in the ambiguity of fictional satire and chose to view it as a generalised criticism with no immediate personal relevance. As the *Trésor* indicates, Prudhomme was ultimately a commodity which could be consumed verbally as well as visually, along with everything else. As with all novelties, the charm eventually wore off and the public grew tired of the character. Monnier himself was unable to abandon it.<sup>44</sup>

### *Conclusions*

The aim of this chapter has been to explore ugliness in terms of caricature and vice versa on the basis that they share an analogous position in relation to culture and specifically in relation to cultural norms. Fundamental to both ugliness and caricature is the perception of abnormality, which is theorised by Foucault in terms of the monster. The monster is excessively ugly and also inherently caricatural or ‘ubuesque’. The reason for its caricatural status, apart from exaggerated physique, is that in the West it embodies structures of power which lie, like kings and caricatures/caricaturists, outside the ‘law’. Outside the law, but progressively integrated into society, the monstrous caricature gives way to the relative banality of bourgeois ugliness. Drastic Foucaudian formulations of the self and the other are transformed in 19<sup>th</sup>-century France by a set of circumstances where extreme political otherness no longer exists. The monstrous moral/political other (Louis XVI) becomes a reflection of the bourgeois self (Louis-Philippe). For this reason, responses on the part of the bourgeoisie to post-1835 caricature and the generalised uglinesses it portrays are highly ambivalent. The undecidability of the ugly other finds expression in nervous laughter which hesitates between ‘satanic’, Baudelairean pleasure and the pain of wounded narcissism. The figure of the scapegoat (emblematic caricature) offers a possible means of catharsis, but this too is double-edged: as Derrida shows, the *pharmakos* is also a *pharmakon* (remedy *and* poison) which follows the logic of the supplement and threatens to replace what it repeats.

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<sup>43</sup> I owe this point to Professor Michael Worton.

<sup>44</sup> Prudhomme was, however, the longest surviving of the emblematic figures. He reappeared continually in one form or another from 1830-1870.

Finally, the problem remains in respect of both ugliness and caricature as to how to situate them aesthetically. Is caricature art? Is ugliness the stuff of art? In my introduction, I outlined the way Kantian aesthetics distinguishes between pure and empirical judgements of taste. Goffman defines ugliness as ‘a stigma that is focussed in social situations’ involving the perception of deviation from cultural norms. These norms are not neutral or natural. Like the *portrait charge* or caricature, they are ‘loaded’, in which case, neither caricature nor ugliness belong in the realm of pure aesthetics governed by absolute disinterestedness. They can never aspire to the universality demanded of art by Kant. And yet, the effect of ugliness as portrayed through caricature is to expose cultural norms (which would otherwise remain hidden and invisible) by revealing likeness through unlikeness. The image is lost but the equivalence remains and this equivalence contains more truth than any copy, since it is in the nature of the copy not to resemble the original. In this way, ugliness and caricature achieve indirectly and unexpectedly, but with far greater force for all that, something of the universality that so-called ‘beauty’ and ‘fine art’ traditionally seek to achieve directly and with painstaking inevitability.<sup>45</sup>

The alliance of ugliness and caricature also calls into question the timing of the emergence of Modernism identified by Roger Fry as the moment when a dichotomy was created between ‘fidelity to appearance’ and ‘purely aesthetic criteria’. Fry’s resolutely anti-realist stance rejects mimesis as a measure for art and argues in favour of ‘the reestablishment of purely aesthetic criteria’ on the basis of ‘the rediscovery of the principles of structural design and harmony’ (Fry 1927, quoted in Nochlin 1973: 98). This was achieved, according to Fry, by the impressionist art of Cézanne, Gauguin and van Gogh. Fry describes the circumstances of this aesthetic milestone as follows:

Impressionism marked the climax of a movement which had been going on more or less steadily from the thirteenth century – the tendency to approximate the forms of art more and more exactly to the totality of appearance. When once representation had been pushed to this point where further development was impossible, it was inevitable that artists should turn round and question the validity of the fundamental assumption that art aimed at representation; and the

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<sup>45</sup> The hesitation with regard to beauty and fine art is intended to take account of the fact that although

moment the question was fairly posed it became clear that the pseudo-scientific assumption that fidelity to appearance was the measure of art had no logical foundation. From that moment on it became evident that art had arrived at a critical point [...] (quoted in Nochlin 1973: 98).

As someone to whom Linda Nochlin refers as ‘one of the founding fathers of Modernism’ (1973: 97), we might assume that Fry must be right about this. I would venture to suggest however, that the passage quoted above concerns not impressionism, but caricature, and that this revolution in art was consciously inaugurated not by Cézanne, but by Annibale Carracci. According to Nochlin (1973: 98), it was Fry who ‘laid the foundation stone for the Modernist critical position’ by calling for ‘the ultimate purification of the temple of art from realist profanation’. In order to secure this division of the ‘sacred’ from the ‘profane’, Fry recognised the need for new criteria of judgment and renewed aesthetic sensibilities on the part of the judging subject. In this, his aim is close to that of Kant. If caricature and ugliness are shown to satisfy the requirements of Fry’s purist position by fulfilling the function he ascribed to Impressionism, then might they not also satisfy to some extent the requirements of Kant?

This places caricature and ugliness in a curious position, since their roots, as I have shown, are firmly embedded in empirical norms, and yet the summit of their achievement is to inaugurate the purist aesthetic associated with Modernism. We recall at this point the arguments put forward by Krestovsky and Varnedoe and Gopnick at the beginning of this chapter: Krestovsky makes claims for ugliness, governed by the techniques of caricature, as a new aesthetic principle for modern art; Varnedoe and Gopnick make similar claims for a pivotal rôle in avant-garde art on behalf of caricature.<sup>46</sup> There is every suggestion, then, that the movement of ugliness and of caricature is from ‘low’ to ‘high’ art status, from the Kantian empirical towards the pure. But they can never arrive, as it were, since neither can satisfy the requirement of disinterestedness: it is in the nature of caricature to be tendentious and in the nature of ugliness to repel. The shift from low to high and the resistance to that

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claims are made in this quarter for aesthetic purity, such claims would still be rejected by Kant.

shift on the part of the purist is illustrated by an important exhibition of caricature held at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1888 and by the reaction of the critic Maurice de Seigneur to what he saw there. That the exhibition was held within what was considered the stronghold of aesthetic standards in France in itself indicates the importance of caricature. The reaction of Maurice Seigneur is equally telling: ‘Après Courbet, Manet; après Manet, la caricature, quoi de plus logique! À quand le tour d’une exposition pornographique?’<sup>47</sup> Caricature, like Manet’s ‘Olympia’, had made it through the the doors of the establishment and had been greeted with the same sense of outrage.

Even if they do not quite make it in pure aesthetic terms, it seems that ugliness and caricature are at the centre of a profound shake-up in Western art. In Hugo’s Romantic manifesto, the *Préface de Cromwell* (1827), he describes how the grotesque (which includes all forms of dramatic caricature) marches towards modernity: ‘[c]’est d’abord une invasion, une irruption, un débordement; c’est un torrent qui a rompu sa digue’ (Hugo 1973: 208). If by now we accept the close alliance of caricature and ugliness in French culture, this description suggests another way of looking at ugliness in terms of a sudden and overwhelming refusal to respect boundaries. Through its excess, ugliness as the grotesque is seen to effect a radical break with aesthetic tradition. It is presented as a principle of discontinuity which will form the basis for discussion in chapter 2.

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<sup>46</sup> Significantly, Varnedoe and Gopnick do not, as one might expect, draw an explicit distinction between caricature as caricature and caricature as technique. Caricature is seen as an art form worthy of consideration in its own right.

<sup>47</sup> Seigneur’s article, ‘L’Exposition de la Caricature et de la peinture de mœurs au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle’ (*Artiste*, 1888, 433-439) is quoted by Aimée Brown Price (1983: 365).

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## CHAPTER 2

### On The Nose

In Lavater's essay on physiognomy, which profoundly influenced ideas on ugliness in France from the moment it appeared in translation in 1781, the single most important facial feature in determining whether or not a face is beautiful is considered to be the nose. Described as '*la retombée du cerveau*' (Lavater 1781: 299) – '*retombée*', a term borrowed from Gothic architecture, meaning the spring of an arch or vault – it is the nose which is thought to reflect most closely the structure of the mind. In terms of external appearance, Lavater's architectural nasal metaphor serves to show how the nose protects the face against collapse: '*C'est sur le nez que repose proprement la voûte du front, dont le point écraserait sans cela impitoyablement & les joues & la bouche*' (299). Lavater details the characteristics of the ideal nose and even goes so far as to suggest the possibility of '*un nez surhumain*' (316) which would express the character of all the virtues. He is faced with the problem, however, of how to account for deformed noses among men of great merit such as Socrates, Boerhave and Lairesse whose noses openly defy the grand physiognomic narrative of beauty allied with virtue. Lavater's answer is to focus attention on the greatness of the men and thus in effect to place the exceptional noses outside the laws of physiognomy. But the problem is not solved. This chapter will address the issue of exceptional noses and develop the notion of what I have termed '*Lavater's dilemma*'; that is, the problem of how to situate ugly noses within a general framework of physiognomical rules or, more broadly, the problem of the ugly other in relation to totalising narratives of the collective self.

#### *Cleopatra's nose*

The most important French philosophical nose makes its entrance in Pascal's *Pensées* (1670). The occasion for its appearance is a meditation, in the context of human vanity, on the logic of cause and effect in matters of love. Following Corneille, Pascal attributes the cause of love to a '*Je ne sais quoi*', to an indefinable, inexpressible *something*, which is nevertheless powerful enough to force the subject into the

condition of loving.<sup>1</sup> There is no logical reason behind this amorous cause – Pascal attributes it to sheer vanity on the part of humanity – but the effects of the attention to vain detail involved are quite disastrous: ‘Et les effets en sont effroyables’ (Pascal 1991: 163). Princes, armies and indeed the whole world can be moved by a ‘je ne sais quoi’ that is so slight as to be unrecognisable, or rather *almost* unrecognisable. In order to have an effect, the ‘je ne sais quoi’ must at least be recognised by someone. What Pascal is referring to here is a matter of contingency: chance will dictate whether a certain someone will notice that certain something that is itself a chance phenomenon. The example he uses to illustrate the point is intended to appear entirely arbitrary: ‘Le nez de Cléopâtre s’il eût été plus court toute la face de la terre aurait changé’ (163). While a thousand ships were launched to fight the Trojan War by a famous face – that of Helen of Troy – the course of history, Pascal suggests, might equally hinge upon Cleopatra’s nose. The historical reality of the nose is not important: it is merely a contingent factor which lured Antony away from his wife and distracted him from military matters. Whether or not a causal link can be established between the nose and Antony’s subsequent defeat by his brother-in-law, Octavian, at the battle of Actium – and the implications of this for the Roman Empire – is not the issue and no mention of it is made. What is at issue is the problem of human vanity and the way in which external physical (and to Pascal, irrelevant) features condition human responses and actions. His brief aphorism seeks to demonstrate the illogicality of a logic of cause and effect which hinges on the perception of mere beauty.

Interestingly, Pascal does not see history as a chronology, but in spatial terms. The link with temporality is broken in favour of a topography of history symbolised by the human face. And at the centre of this imaginary world face is Cleopatra’s imaginary nose – a nose which we are to assume is exquisitely attractive for being just the right length. But what length the perfect nose? Pascal’s answer would be that there is none, since beauty is entirely the product of a cultural imagination, an imagination so dangerous, moreover, that once it is captured, it takes control of human destiny: ‘L’imagination dispose de tout. Elle fait la beauté, la justice et le bonheur qui est le tout du monde’ (Pascal 1991: 177). The world understood as a face

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<sup>1</sup> The passage from Corneille is as follows: ‘Souvent je ne sais quoi, qu’on ne peut exprimer,/Nous

is entirely at the mercy of a paradoxical system of thought that has its foundations in what can at best be described as a 'je ne sais quoi'. We don't know what the certain something is, since it has no specific material qualities, yet it has devastating material consequences. Although the force of the 'je ne sais quoi' in the case of Antony and Cleopatra is, of course, that of sexual desire, there is no true logic of cause and effect between this desire (or love, as Pascal calls it) and Antony's defeat at Actium, or indeed any number of contingent events that might conceivably be pinned onto Cleopatra's nose. The illogicality that Pascal is seeking to expose is that of an imaginary logic, which makes of this nose the keystone of history. And yet this imaginary logic of vanity supports the entire architecture of Western thought by analogy with the nose that supports the architecture of Cleopatra's face.

The context of Pascal's aphorism is, as I have said, that of human vanity and love. Within this context, Pascal makes a quite specific, but contradictory point: he is saying effectively 'this is how history works', but in terms that render such an assumption quite illogical and undermine the authority of the imagination which authorised such a history in the first place. Of course Cleopatra's nose cannot be held responsible for world events and yet we behave as though it is. History is presented ironically by Pascal as a grand narrative of beauty which rests on that certain something for which the sole guarantee is human vanity. What Pascal means by vanity is the power of the human imagination to assume authority where there is none and to defer to it when there is no good reason for doing so. It is a constant process of mystification based on external appearances that has become a second (and to Pascal, greatly inferior) nature. The mechanism of mystification is one which can only function if everyone agrees, consciously or not, to collude in it. Thus, ermine-clad magistrates in grand palaces of justice and doctors wearing surpluses and mules can lay claim to authority only by wearing the recognized trappings of authenticity, whereas for Pascal

S'ils avaient la véritable justice et si les médecins avaient le vrai art de guérir, ils n'auraient que faire de bonnets carrés. La majesté de ces sciences serait assez vénérable d'elle-même. Mais ayant que des sciences imaginaires il faut

qu'ils prennent ces vains instruments, qui frappent l'imagination, à laquelle ils ont affaire. Et par là en effet ils attirent le respect. (Pascal 1991: 176-7)

Pascal is criticising the way in which the imagination values external physical appearance as an indication of an implied inner spiritual reality, when in fact the nature of Cleopatra's nose should be an irrelevance compared to the beauty (or purity) of her soul.

*The contingent nose as discontinuity*

Another way of looking at Cleopatra's nose is to stress its contingency in terms of singularity. This nose has an effect because it is radically different from other noses. It is a point of discontinuity in the causal succession of events and through its intervention, history (including the history of philosophical thought) is disrupted. Such is the view of the Marxist philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, who takes the argument a stage further to include Pascal himself as a 'Cleopatra's nose': 'L'auteur de l'observation sur le nez de Cléopâtre fut lui-même une espèce de nez de Cléopâtre, à savoir un génie philosophique et religieux, un point de discontinuité, une rupture imprévue dans l'histoire de la culture' (Kolakowski 1975: 115). There is nothing in Kolakowski's argument to suggest that a singular nose must be beautiful. Rather it points towards a nose that refuses to fit in with a pre-established grand narrative. In Kolakowski's text, this narrative is a politically totalising one, whereas Pascal's underlying assumption is that the grand narrative is constructed according to a supposed logic of cause and effect based on illusory beauty and vanity i.e. it is moral and aesthetic. These positions are not mutually exclusive and indeed, by allowing them to inform each other, it becomes possible to argue that a random point of perceived discontinuity can be understood in terms of the ugly other.

I have assumed up to this point that the imagination must necessarily construct the world according to a narrative of beauty, since I have taken the beauty of the bearer of Pascal's nose, Cleopatra, as a given.<sup>2</sup> But the illusory nature of the imagination,

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<sup>2</sup> Historically Cleopatra was indeed considered a great beauty. In ancient Egypt a woman's nose was seen as the key to that beauty, evidence of this being that the crime of adultery by a woman was punishable by cutting off the woman's nose to ensure that she was left permanently and irrevocably

according to Pascal, would equally allow for a nose that was ugly. In fact, the case for an ugly nose as a point of radical discontinuity is arguably a stronger one, since such a nose would be more difficult to incorporate into the imaginary grand narrative figured by Pascal as the face of the world as the product of vanity. Although Pascal's argument assumes a beautiful nose, its beauty is to be understood in terms of a problematic 'je ne sais quoi', which is in itself the cause and effect of a dangerous, misleading imagination; meanwhile, the possibility of an ugly nose is relegated to the status of a 'what if?' since, in the context of vanity, the face is necessarily constructed as beautiful. It is therefore a matter of great importance whether that nose is beautiful or ugly. The nose as 'je ne sais quoi' under the condition of 'what if?' is thus potentially the most subversive concept imaginable; and yet it is presented as the creation of an imagination whose totalising project cannot imagine it as anything but beautiful.

Kolakowski's argument places discontinuity, or the contingency of the singular – which I interpret here as one of the principal conditions for ugliness – at the top of the agenda.<sup>3</sup> His starting point is this: since there can be no historical explanation of philosophical ideas, there can be no explicative method. We rely instead on a 'fabula mundi' which liberates us from 'fact fetishism' by inventing a plausible genetic explanation that fits our ideas in the present. This artificial historicity renders 'real history' superfluous, since facts are defined by structures and not the other way round. Thus 'la transparence et la continuité même du processus historique ne se produit que grâce aux idées préconçues et aux "catégories" établies d'avance et [...] il n'y a pas de passage, logiquement justifiable, entre "les faits" (à supposer qu'il y en a encore) et la description "globale" du cours des événements' (Kolakowski 1975: 114). Empirically speaking, then, all that remains of history is Cleopatra's nose; that is, the contingency of the singular that will not fit in with a totalising historical narrative (or any other ideologically motivated 'truth'). As long as a given 'fact' can be seamlessly woven into the fabric of history, it tells us nothing, since it merely forms part of an illusion of historical necessity. An element which will not harmonise with the totality, such as an ugly nose on the face of history, exposes that illusion.

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disfigured and therefore unlikely to repeat the offence. Attempts were made to rectify such facial damage, however, and it is for this reason that the earliest records of rhinoplasty can be traced to the Egyptians.

This explains why we reject ‘Cleopatra’s nose’: our rejection of this nose is a refusal of contingency in favour of a more reassuring ‘fabula mundi’.

*The failure of historical biography*

Kolakowski does not say as much, but there is literary evidence to support the view that those who reject the contingency of Cleopatra’s nose are in fact those whose interests are best served by preserving the fiction of its necessity, namely those who hold power in society: the bourgeoisie. Such evidence is given by Jean-Paul Sartre in *La Nausée*.<sup>4</sup> Roquentin, the narrator-diarist of the novel, has travelled to the seaside town of Bouville in order to pursue a biographical research project concerning an 18<sup>th</sup>-century former resident, the marquis de Rollebon. Already at the outset, Roquentin recognises that his historical undertaking is flawed: ‘je commence à croire qu’on ne peut jamais rien prouver. Ce sont des hypothèses honnêtes et qui rendent compte des faits: mais je sens si bien qu’elles viennent de moi, qu’elles sont tout simplement une manière d’unifier mes connaissances. Pas une lueur ne vient du côté de Rollebon’ (Sartre 1938: 28). In Kolakowski’s terms, Roquentin is taking a pragmatist approach to history in which the past is a projection of the present and ‘la connaissance du passé [...] est utile seulement dans la mesure dans laquelle il se laisse insérer dans une construction cohérente’ (Kolakowski 1975: 114). Roquentin’s unease (or incipient nausea) is the result of a growing realisation that any such coherence is impossible. The people of Bouville, by contrast, adopt what Kolakowski would describe as a Cartesian approach to history; that is, they place their faith in a constructed ‘fabula mundi’ which perpetuates the past in such a way as to generate meaning in the present and has no need of historical facts. The Bouville museum, and especially the Bordurin-Renaudas portrait gallery, is a monument to this approach.

The celebrated gallery contains images of local dignitaries from Bouville’s past, among them a portrait by Bordurin of Olivier Blévine, whose life had been devoted ‘au rétablissement de l’Ordre’ (Sartre 1938: 131). Roquentin finds the portrait disturbing. Its subject always appears too large or too small and hangs awkwardly

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<sup>3</sup> Kolakowski himself makes no such connection between ugliness and contingency, however.

<sup>4</sup> The novel as a whole, and the issue of contingency in existential terms, will be discussed in detail in chapter 4.



next to the portrait of another bourgeois luminary, Jean Parrottin. Finally Roquentin discovers the reason why: the *Satirique Bouvillois* reveals that Blévine was incredibly short. At only 1.53m in height, the portraitist had been obliged to create an optical illusion of size in order to harmonise Blévine with the proportions of Parrottin. Blévine therefore appears surrounded by small objects which make him look larger. The discovery of this deception leaves Roquentin more disillusioned with 'history' than ever. He leaves the celebrated gallery of Bouville's rich and famous with the words 'adieu, Salauds' (135) and shortly thereafter abandons the Rollebon project for good. Roquentin's disillusionment and the failure of Blévine to prolong his life's work – the creation of order – for posterity can perhaps best be explained with reference, once again, to Kolakowski who argues that

aucun ordre ne peut surgir de la cumulation du savoir, [...] le nez de Cléopâtre est tout ce qui reste dans l'histoire strictement empirique, parfaitement épurée des événements arbitraires; le nez de Cléopâtre, c'est-à-dire la succession des événements où il y a la causalité, bien sûr, mais où la continuité se rompt à chaque instant puisqu'aucune analyse de la 'totalité' ne peut supprimer la contingence du singulier ni le rendre intelligible. (Kolakowski 1975: 114)

Blévine is a Cleopatra's nose whose diminutive stature cannot be harmonised with the collective provincial illusion of bourgeois greatness. Despite the efforts on the part of Bordurin to conceal the size of his subject, Blévine's smallness becomes for Roquentin the overriding empirical detail, a rupture in the bourgeois cultural history (fiction) of Bouville.

In terms of Kolakowski's argument, Roquentin's pragmatist approach to history creates the meaning of the past as seen from the present in such a way that the past becomes a 'work of art'. Roquentin himself views his biographical efforts as 'un travail de pure imagination' (Sartre 1938: 28). The Cartesian approach of the Bouville bourgeoisie, by contrast, involves inventing a past, or 'fabula mundi', which serves to perpetuate bourgeois values in the present. In either case, contingency (Cleopatra's nose/Blévine's size) is overlooked. Roquentin's disillusionment reveals that if we choose to cling to a 'Cleopatra's nose' in the belief that it represents the last bastion

of causality, we will be sadly deceived, because totality as continuity cannot suppress the contingency of the singular, nor render it intelligible (the 'je ne sais quoi' in different guise). In the absence of a viable explicative method in the history of culture, we are forced back towards the concept of chance, which at least makes no claims to be able to explain anything. Contingency, according to Kolakowski, is 'un renoncement justifié' (117).<sup>5</sup> It is not that explanations are not possible, or that causality does not exist, but rather that the historical development of philosophy cannot be explained in this way:

le développement historique de la philosophie est parsemé de points innombrables de rupture et chaque acte créateur, chaque individu créateur en est un. Ces discontinuités ou mutations, ces nez de Cléopâtre, sont comme mouvements des atomes d'Epicure: les atomes s'écartent de la ligne droite à partir d'un certain lieu, par conséquent ils ne peuvent pas se trouver n'importe où dans l'instant; pourtant leur direction reste imprévisible. (117)

In addition to the static image of contingency (ugliness) as a Cleopatra's nose, Kolakowski introduces a secondary dynamic model. Ugliness as contingency can also be seen as a system of Epicurean atoms moving at random, but in relation to a fixed norm ('la ligne droite'). If we take that norm as a social 'ligne droite', rather than as a law of physics, then it becomes apparent that Kolakowskian contingency is relative, not absolute.<sup>6</sup> This leads to an important point concerning the ugly: if society embraces contingency, if 'anything goes', then there can be no ugliness and indeed, no society. For this reason, society has a vital interest in continuing to defend itself against the contingency of the ugly other. Kolakowski observes how society clings to its own little 'sacred histories', without noses, which follow a particular direction, contain logical meanings and move according to regular rhythms, because it cannot logically accept contingency. It cannot do without the sacred histories because they form a part of cultural identity: 'L'histoire sans continuité et sans direction serait inutilisable, mais notre culture ne pourrait pas survivre sans la faire utilisable, sans s'identifier elle-même à travers "son" passé, sans s'approprier ce passé en tant que

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<sup>5</sup> *La Nausée* was conceived by Sartre as a 'factum sur la contingence' (see 'Notice' to *La Nausée* by Contat and Rybalka in Sartre [1981: 1659]).

doué d'un sens et d'identité [sic] ininterrompue' (119). That this identity is illusory, based on pure imagination, is a problem that Roquentin comes to recognise all too clearly.

The problem of illusory identity is also raised, but not elaborated upon, in Pascal's *Pensées*. Kolakowski suggests that Pascal does not pursue this line of thought because such an insight belongs to the profane history of antiquity which can have no place in the sacred history of Christianity that predominates in Pascal's thinking. The primary Christian history is too sacred a narrative for Pascal to admit the possibility of it being subject to chance and contingency. Kolakowski thus implies that within Pascal's own text the statement regarding Cleopatra's nose is in itself a Cleopatra's nose (in the sense of a point of discontinuity), since it does not fit in with the sacred history of Christianity as seamless: Pascal, he claims, would refute any suggestion that the succession of events in the history of Christianity was governed by anything other than logical necessity.<sup>7</sup>

Together with the notion of Pascal himself as a Cleopatra's nose, there are at least three levels of Kolakowskian 'nosiness' (discontinuity) at work in and around the *Pensées*: the textual nose itself, the 'nosiness' of that nose and the 'nosiness' of the author of the nose; this in addition, of course, to the originary disjunction between the textual nose and the original nose on the real Cleopatra's face, between signifier and signified. I am not concerned here with the latter problem of signification. Rather, I wish to borrow Kolakowski's theory of the significance of the nose in history to explain and elaborate upon the role of ugliness in French literature. At the start of this chapter I made the claim that the most important philosophical nose belonged to Pascal's Cleopatra. The nose that has captured the French *literary* imagination, however, is that of Edmond Rostand's character, Cyrano de Bergerac.

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<sup>6</sup> The case for absolute contingency and hence for radical ugliness is made by Sartre and will be discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>7</sup> However, the scriptures teach that 'The stone which the builders rejected/ Has become the chief cornerstone' (Psalm 118), a fact of which Jesus reminds his disciples as reported in the Gospels and on several other occasions in the New Testament. The 'stone' which will not fit is the very stone which supports the Christian faith.

*Cyrano's noses*

Rostand's Cyrano thrust his way onto the Paris stage on 28 December 1897 and in doing so established a powerful nasal liaison with the 'real' Cyrano – a previously relatively obscure 17<sup>th</sup>-century author (1619-1655) – and brought him back into the limelight. He did so via the intermediary of a third Cyrano, created in an essay by Théophile Gautier in *Les Grotesques* (1844). Gautier's essay was written in the context of a quite specific literary agenda, namely the retrospective Romantic reaction against the staid conventions of 17<sup>th</sup>-century French Classicism. The historical Cyrano de Bergerac is the focus for one of twelve biographical chapters published originally by Gautier in *La France Littéraire* in 1834 and 1835. The biographies were intended by the journal to offer 'le portrait et la vie de nos vieux poètes français tels Villon, Théophile, Saint-Amant ou autres analogues' (quoted in Freeman 1995: 16). Gautier, however, with characteristic excess, made the most of the opportunity to celebrate examples of work which could be recruited to support the cause of Romanticism over and against the continuing strictures of Classicism in the 1830s. He identified in Cyrano de Bergerac's work a 'Cleopatra's nose' – a point of significant deviation from Classical norms and moreover written by someone who really was thought to possess a nose worthy of Pascal's 'what if?' (i.e. an ugly nose).

*Internoses 1*

Rostand drew inspiration for his Cyrano initially from Gautier's essay in *Les Grotesques*, which begins with a comic 'nose-ology' of the real Cyrano occasioned by an illustration in a volume of Bergerac's writing 'où se voit son portrait en taille-douce, la dimension gigantesque et la forme singulière de son nez' (Gautier 1844: 289). Gautier describes the singular nose of Cyrano in terms of a Himalayan mountain, a tapir's trunk, or the beak of a bird of prey. He is struck, in particular, by the fact that the tip of the nose is divided into two: 'Cela fait comme deux nez distincts dans une même face, ce qui est trop pour la coutume' (290). It is at this point that the issue of the nose begins to turn more obviously on the question of physical ugliness: Cyrano's nose was evidently not beautiful, as the nose of Cleopatra was supposed to be; it was large and comical (though not as large and comical as Gautier

would have us believe). This nose was an obvious point of discontinuity with the rest of his face and deviated sufficiently from visual norms of perception to provoke teasing by his contemporaries. D'Assoucy (1605-75) wrote that 'Son nez, large par sa tige et recourbé, représentait celui de ces babillards jaunes et verts qu'on apporte de l'Amérique' (quoted in Edward Freeman 1995: 20), while Gilles Ménage (1613-92) maintained that 'son nez, qu'il avait tout défiguré, lui a fait tuer plus de dix personnes. Il ne pouvait souffrir qu'on le regardât, et il faisait mettre aussitôt l'épée à la main' (Ménage 1789: 337). An engraved portrait of Cyrano from the Bibliothèque Nationale does indeed show a large, beak-like nose, but it does not appear to be the monstrous deformity, or source of embarrassment that both his contemporaries and Gautier suggest (Fig. 24). Rather it seems that the nose provided the focus for other less tangible and more outrageous aspects of Cyrano's existence.

The eminent nose-ophile François-Bernard Michel has noted in *Du Nez* (1993: 47), that the nose has always functioned as a focus for iconoclastic hatred.<sup>8</sup> Gautier describes the historical Cyrano as 'notre jeune débauché', as an atheist in Paris, where he became notorious for womanising and duelling to the point where 'son plus particulier ami', Le Bret, felt it necessary to remove him from harm's way by enlisting him in the army. Gautier's turn of phrase here hints at a possible homosexual relationship with Le Bret, although Le Bret himself claimed to have had to rescue Cyrano from another 'dangereux penchant', which remained unspecified, but has been interpreted by Jacques Prévot as a homosexual relationship with d'Assoucy. If nothing else, it seems clear that Cyrano's prodigious and uncertain sexuality gained him a reputation for being a libertine. Cyrano's supposed libertinage is more interesting, however, as a reflection of his intellectual non-conformity (his status as a 'Cleopatra's nose'). He studied under the Epicurean physicist and philosopher, Gassendi (1592-1655), who encouraged radical free thinking, bold assertions and the pursuit of scientific knowledge, all of which found expression in Cyrano's writing.<sup>9</sup> According to Madeleine Alcover, his major literary works, *L'Autre monde ou les états et empires de la lune* (published in 1656, a year after his

<sup>8</sup> Michel is president of the Académie européenne d'allergologie and a specialist in nasal blockages.

<sup>9</sup> It is tempting to suggest here that Cyrano might have modelled himself on the Epicurean atom, especially since he confounded any notion of a fixed identity by operating under a number of different names including permutations of Cyrano de Bergerac such as de Bergerac, de Bergerac Cyrano and de

death) and *Les États et empires du soleil* (1662), had they been published unexpurgated, 'l'eût conduit au bûcher, soyons-en sûrs' (quoted in Freeman 1995: 19). *La Lune* was available in the 17<sup>th</sup> century only as a version carefully pruned by Le Bret – the complete version was not in fact available until 1921.



Fig. 24: Anon., portrait of Cyrano de Bergerac, Bibliothèque Nationale.

Thus in no respect did the historical Cyrano fit in with contemporary standards of behaviour, thought or creativity. The large excrescence on his face therefore stands metonymically for his position in, or rather conspicuously protruding beyond, the confines of 17<sup>th</sup>-century social and literary orthodoxy. Cyrano was considered ugly literally and intellectually and that ugliness has been symbolised ever since by an inordinately large nose. Without the duality of this real and symbolic nose, Cyrano would have remained obscure. Cyrano's nose and Cyrano himself as nose together provide a significant point of reference for the discourse of ugliness in French culture. Not only does the word 'nez' occupy a position in the French language that has no English equivalent, as I shall discuss later, a specifically ugly nose also serves as a point of intersection between appearance and reality, between ideology (Kolakowski) and the aesthetic (Pascal), or between rational discourse and the discourses of comedy, satire and caricature. The nose in France is a polysemic protuberance which offers a concrete focus for all that ugliness implies.

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Cyrano de Bergerac in addition to Alexandre de Cyrano de Bergerac, Hercule de Bergerac and Savinien de Cyrano (listed in Freeman 1995: 18).

*The polysemic protuberance and its accretions*

Nasal theory in 17<sup>th</sup>-century France derived from Greek and Roman physiognomical thought which gave the nose a dual meaning, literal and figurative. As Coleman O. Parsons has shown in his 1934 article on 'The nose of Cyrano de Bergerac', the Latin roots identify the nose as the source of wisdom and wit, respect and raillery. While the positive 'nasutus' denoted the possession of a large nose, or of wit and wisdom, 'nasus' was used negatively as a term of mockery. Thus the bearer of a large nose could function both as the source and as the recipient of criticism, the subject and object of ugliness. That this duality exists is fundamental to the workings of ugliness: it is at once deadly serious and highly amusing, or rather it is highly amusing because it is deadly serious. As discussed in chapter 1, laughter provides a strategy of defence against the ugly as a potential threat.

The notion of the nose as threat arises most obviously where issues of race are involved. Parsons's article does not address these issues, despite citing examples of the discourse of superiority associated with big noses from the Old Testament onwards. In Leviticus (21:18), for example, Hebrew law states that among others barred from offering the bread of God are 'a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose'. Whilst the latter might refer to a specific deformity, it could, and I think does, suggest 'not Jewish' (i.e. it debars anyone from a race with so-called 'flat noses').<sup>10</sup> Parsons gives another example of the big nose as a mark of superiority taken from the 17<sup>th</sup>-century theologian, Théophile Raynaud: 'Quo ergo nasus erit prolixior, eo erit vberioris iudicij ac sapientiae nota' (the longer the nose, the superior the judgement and wisdom – my rough translation; quoted in Parsons 1934: 226). The justification given for this is that a large nose was thought to secrete a greater volume of mucous which was taken as an indication of increased powers of imagination, rational thought and general intelligence.

It is interesting here to note the use of the adjective 'prolix' (literally, 'which flows forth'). The 17<sup>th</sup>-century interpretation of prolix connotes purity. Parsons quotes an

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<sup>10</sup> The question of the Jewish nose in the context of racism will be taken up in chapter 4 in relation to Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive*.

example from one of the prologues published in 1610 by the actor de Bruscombille (pseudonym for Des Lauriers), who wrote:

Mais dites-moy, ie vous prie, *Nonne experientia patet?* Que ses petits auortõs de nez ne sont que des sentines & cloaques, puant & infets en tout genre de putrefaction, où au cõtraire les nez faits sur le modelle du mien, sont les alambics & tuyaux par où se vuide tout ce qui pourroit *mentis animaeque functiones impedire*. (quoted in Parsons 1934: 226-7)<sup>11</sup>

The act of discharging mucous from the nose was viewed as a means of purifying the soul. Consequently, the greater the volume of impure mucous produced, the purer the soul of the individual concerned; larger noses were thought to be better suited for this purpose. Pascal's reference to the sneeze suggests a similar line of thought regarding the purification of the soul via the nose: 'L'éternuement absorbe toutes les fonctions de l'âme, aussi bien que la besogne' (Pascal 1991: 442). By contrast with 'la besogne' (sex), which is seen as entirely voluntary, the involuntary sneeze represents for Pascal a nobler form of bodily expression. The nasal associations of prolixity in France subsequently transferred to the verbal sphere of long-windedness. The nose became the source of words, lots of them, most famously in the case of the poet with panache, Rostand's 19<sup>th</sup>-century character, Cyrano.

### *Internoses 2*

Although Rostand's Cyrano is portrayed sympathetically, the author drew visual inspiration from the caricatured stereotype of Captain Fracasse, a self-important military man typically portrayed strutting along and puffing hot air (empty words). Rostand's attention was first drawn to Captain Fracasse by Gautier, who described the real Cyrano as a matamore (swashbuckler, braggart) of the city 'qui a tout le style et toutes les manières du capitaine Fracasse' (Gautier 1844: 312). It is clear that Rostand's visual conception of Cyrano is based on an engraving of Captain Fracasse by Abraham Bosse (1602-1676) (Fig. 25).

<sup>11</sup> From *Les Oeuvres de Bruscombille* (Rouen, 1635). Des Lauriers was famous for his satirical prologues, which were delivered before performances at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. The prologues





Fig. 25: Abraham Bosse, 'Le Capitaine Fracasse', engraving.

Bosse's original was in turn derived from the *Commedia dell'Arte* figure of 'Il Capitano' described by Howard Daniel (1965: 29) as a military braggart descended from the stock character of Roman comedies, the 'Miles Gloriosus'. The *Commedia dell'Arte* figure carried an enormous sword, wore an exaggerated ruff, big boots and a large moustache and sported a prodigious nose. Bosse's captain, however, deviates from the stereotype in one significant respect – the nose is not a nose, but a diminutive penis. The intention is to demean the character and to undermine his sense of self-importance by implying a lack of sexual prowess. To emphasise the point, the strategically-placed stubby handle of an otherwise large sword is poised at the crotch, pointing downwards, unlike the implied pseudo-manhood of the rest of the sword, which protrudes backwards at an erectile angle. Bosse's engraving establishes an important series of equivalences between the nose, the penis and the sword, all of which have become a part of the Cyrano myth (by which I mean the wealth of associations that has grown up around the 'real' Cyrano and his 19<sup>th</sup>-century fictional counterpart).<sup>12</sup> There remains one further potential equivalence, and this is supplied by Gautier's text in which the real Cyrano exchanges the sword for the pen and sublimates aggressive tendencies into poetry. Gautier describes how 'le même

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imitated the style of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, satirising social types and the less refined side of life, as in this case – snot.

<sup>12</sup> The equivalence of the penis and the nose forms the basis for discussion of the 'no-nose' in chapter 5, where the absence of a nose/a penis is read psychoanalytically as a sign of castration and hence as a problem relating to the situation of women.

caractère de hardiesse extravagante et spirituelle se retrouve dans tous ses ouvrages; chaque phrase est un duel avec la raison' (Gautier 1844: 307). Moreover, Cyrano the poet is seen as fighting a battle against prevailing tastes, such that his work becomes a monument to bad taste in the positive sense of a verbal rebellion against what Gautier sees as stultifying Classical tradition. Hence, when Gautier describes Cyrano's work as comprising 'tout ce que le mauvais goût espagnol a de démesuré, le mauvais goût italien d'ingénieux et de chatoyant, le mauvais goût français de froid et de maniéré,' he is paying him a compliment (Gautier 1844: 308).

It is this aspect of literary bravado that appeals to Rostand also and it is clear from his drawing of Cyrano that he wishes to play down the sexual innuendo (Fig. 26). For instance, the sword handle is no longer visible – it is hidden beneath a large cloak. The backward pointing blade is draped in folds of fabric, which, in combination with heeled boots, frills at the ankles and pointed toes, suggests a strutting cockerel. The ruff is preserved, but the head above it looks straight ahead and the nose is hooked, downturned and although large, clearly not meant to suggest a penis.



Fig. 26: Rostand's sketch of Cyrano

The blatant substitutions operating in Bosse's image of Captain Fracasse are deliberately hidden. Similarly, the system of equivalences between the nose, the sword, the pen and the penis can still be read into the play, but the references are less overtly sexualised. The textual Cyrano's nose is the source of aggression (he can tolerate no reference to it), of production (it is the reason for and subject of his

poetry) and lastly of seduction (the nose which renders sex out of the question instead pours forth poetry, which ultimately wins the heart of Roxane). Not only is the nose at the centre of the play, the nature of that nose is crucial: it is necessarily ugly. This is a play that turns on the perception of human ugliness. Although Captain Fracasse serves as an intertext (or his nose as an 'internose'), Bosse's image sets out to vilify ugliness as pretension, whereas Rostand's text ennobles ugliness as the source of creativity.<sup>13</sup>

Rostand's character is the culmination of a series of large noses which nudge each other back and forth across the centuries in a complex interplay of 'nasal' texts (including visual texts, such as that of Bosse – whose name itself means 'hunchback' and so shares in another web of associations concerned with ugliness). Wherever an egregious nose occurs, ugliness in one form or another (physical, moral, sexual, political, aesthetic) is always present, marking a point of discontinuity which cannot be incorporated by the logic of cause and effect. Moreover, these texts are involved in a process of writing and rewriting that does not respect the chronology of history either. I return at this point to the issue raised by Kolakowski regarding the construction of history either as 'fabula mundi', or as creative act. The former works chronologically forwards to build up a genetic explanation for the present; the latter in effect works backwards by projecting the present onto the past. The noses of the two Cyranos can be understood in terms of both: Parsons's study of 'the accretions by which that worthy nose has grown to the proportions and the celebrity conferred on it by Edmond Rostand' (Parsons 1934: 226) offers a genetic interpretation of the stage nose, while Nicholas Cronk suggests that Cyrano the man (and by implication also his nose) owes his celebrity to the 'pleasing paradox' that Rostand's 'wilfully inaccurate and anachronistic play did more to restore [his] literary fortunes [...] than all the positivistic literary criticism of the Sorbonne professors' (in Rostand 1996: xv). A third possibility is to see both noses as meta-noses outside history which belong neither to the man, nor the stage character, but to a culture which cannot see its own imperfections without squinting sideways. By this I mean that ugliness, like

<sup>13</sup> Cyrano's exaggerated nose immediately invites comparison with the stereotyped Jewish nose, not least because the first performance of the play in 1897 followed soon after the notorious Dreyfus Affair. The Jewish army officer, Alfred Dreyfus, was convicted of espionage in 1894. Public opinion was fierce and divided on the question of his guilt. Rostand, a committed 'dreyfusard', defended the

the end of one's nose, cannot be seen by the collective viewing subject for what it is – a radical point of discontinuity – despite the fact that objectively speaking, it is as plain as the nose on culture's face.

*The duc de Roquelaure. Ugliness as no nose to ugliness as big nose*

Aside from Gautier's hyperbolic portrayal of Cyrano in the context of the Romantic celebration of the grotesque and the sublime, French literary history includes another influential nexus of nasal texts – namely those surrounding the duc de Roquelaure.<sup>14</sup> According to Parsons, *Le Momus françois ou les aventures divertissantes du Duc de Roquelaure*, written by Antoine LeRoy and first published in Cologne in 1727, became a repository for numerous contemporary 'nose anecdotes'. The first edition of *Le Momus* described the duc's nose as 'plat & accrasé entre ses deux yeux, de manière qu'on auroit eû bien de la peine à le discerner, si deux larges narines toujours barbouillées de tabac n'eussent frappé la veüe' (quoted in Parsons 1934: 230). The real duc, born in 1617, was a contemporary of the real Cyrano with a reputation for bravery, a bold sense of humour and a fondness for practical jokes. The nature of his nose is uncertain. Despite the fact that the 1727 textual duc had an excessively flat nose his legend lived on to inspire a vaudeville in 1836 entitled *Roquelaure, ou l'homme le plus laid de France* in which he is described as 'Monsieur Grand-Nez'.<sup>15</sup>

The physiognomical change that occurs in the Roquelaure legend is significant in that it traces the shift in the representation of ugliness from (almost) no nose to big nose. The reason for this shift can be attributed to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic predilection for excess, which does not allow for absence or lack. The timing of the Roquelaure vaudeville (1836) would suggest that the decision to change the hero's appearance was influenced by the move towards immensity signalled in Victor Hugo's Romantic 'manifesto', the *Préface de Cromwell* (1827). Up until this point,

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(wrongly accused) officer and his play can be read in part as a strong refutation of anti-semitism in France.

<sup>14</sup> The significance of the grotesque and the sublime in French culture is discussed in more detail in chapter 3. In chapter 4, the wife of Roquentin's biographical subject, the marquis de Rollebon, is one Mlle de Roquelaure.

<sup>15</sup> *Roquelaure, ou l'homme le plus laid de France* by de Leuven, de Livry and Lhérie was performed at the Théâtre de la Gaité. A detailed comparative study of the vaudeville and of Rostand's play by Julius Schmidt concludes, on the basis that the two plots are virtually identical, that Rostand must have been inspired by *Roquelaure* (see Parsons 1934: 231-2).

the representation of ugliness in terms of the nose had tended to focus on the inferiority of no-nose or small-nose status. This can be explained in part by the pathology of common contagious diseases such as leprosy and syphilis, both of which can result in the loss of soft tissue and bone, most conspicuously when they affect the bridge of the nose. The loss of a nose as a result of what was euphemistically known as 'duelling' signalled that a person was suffering from the more advanced stages of syphilis. As an obvious sign of what conventional morality considered to be immoral behaviour, the loss of a nose was ugly. The connotations of leprosy, by contrast, were not so much indicative of immorality as of poverty, poor living conditions and an attendant lack of hygiene – the 'uglinesses' of lower class existence, which the more affluent section of society preferred not to see.

Cyrano de Bergerac the man was mocked for having a big nose, whereas ugliness in his *texts* is associated unequivocally with small noses. For Cyrano, according to Gautier, 'le mérite se mesure à la longueur du nez' to the extent that he wished to establish as a principle that 'tout le monde devait avoir un grand nez, et que les camus étaient d'informes avortons, des créatures à peine ébauchées et dont la nature rougissait' (Gautier 1844: 292). Big noses for Cyrano are thus an index of human worth, but also, on a more sinister level, a guarantee of access to structures of power and domination. The moon dwellers in *États et empires de la lune*, who use their large noses as sundials, also practise a crude and ultimately nonsensical form of eugenics – the castration of all male babies born with small noses. Their method makes no sense, of course, because *all* babies are born with small noses. In their defence, the lunarians invoke three centuries of empirical wisdom which they claim has taught them that a big nose is a sign that 'Céans loge un homme spirituel, prudent, courtois, affable, généreux et libéral; et qu'un petit est le bouchon des vices opposés; c'est pourquoi des camus on bâtit les Eunuques par ce que la république aime mieux n'avoir point d'enfants d'eux que d'en avoir de semblables à eux' (quoted in Freeman 1995: 43-4). Although Cyrano's text was written in a comic vein, there is here a clear indication of the power of the nose to create and subvert ideologies. The lunarians reverse the polarity of the big nose from a negative focus of mockery (in the wider social context of Cyrano the man) to a positive source of power (and tyranny) over the fictional *camusards* of the moon. By means of this

inversion they assert the pre-eminent position of the nose as a fulcrum of cultural value.

### *An English nose*

It would appear that the function of the nose as a cultural indicator is not purely a French phenomenon. A notorious example of ugliness as noselessness emerged in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England with the publication of Henry Fielding's *Amelia* (1751) in which the heroine's nose is 'beat to pieces' in a carriage accident. Despite the fact that a similar accident had befallen Fielding's wife in real life, contemporary critics vehemently attacked this aspect of the novel on the grounds that it was not sufficiently realistic. In other words, what contemporary aesthetics demanded was a falsification in keeping with standards of beauty, which in themselves were entirely constructed. As Geoffrey Day argues in his chapter on *Amelia's* nose in *From Fiction to the Novel*, this amounted to an ideological manipulation of truth based on those aspects of reality considered by 18<sup>th</sup>-century bourgeois readers to be suitable material for a novel. Deformity was not among them. Day cites an essay by the critic John Aikin and his sister, Anna Laetitia Barbauld to confirm this: 'Deformity is always disgusting, and the imagination cannot reconcile it with the idea of a favourite character; therefore the poet and romance-writer are full justified in giving a larger share of beauty to their principal figures than is usually met with in common life' (quoted in Day 1987: 68). On the specific circumstance of *Amelias'* nose, they comment that 'whenever it does recur to the imagination we are hurt and disgusted' (68).

The drama of disgust associated with deformity was precisely the element that was later to be assimilated into the creative process by the Romantics in France.<sup>16</sup> Whereas Aikin and Barbauld demanded fictional protagonists who were more than averagely beautiful, nearly a century later, the Romantic tradition in France – especially the novels of Victor Hugo – favoured principal characters who were strikingly ugly: the hunchback, Quasimodo, in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, for example, or

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<sup>16</sup> The issue of disgust cannot, however, be confined to bourgeois horror of deformity. Other aspects of disgust, in particular its manifestation as existential nausea, are discussed in chapter 4.

the facially disfigured (and noseless) Gwynplaine in *L'Homme qui rit*.<sup>17</sup> For Fielding, however, adverse reactions to his noseless heroine proved too much and in the second edition (1762), Amelia's nose was reconstructed by a surgeon. By contrast, readers did not object to Sterne's Tristram Shandy, whose nose is crushed flat by a male midwife (Dr Slop) attempting, as was common practice, to deliver him with forceps without being able to see (for decency's sake) what he was doing. As Geoffrey Day (1987: 69) observes, it seems that heroes may be noseless, but heroines must not.<sup>18</sup>

Squeamishness that was apparently the result of aesthetic concerns among the English 18<sup>th</sup>-century readership in fact reflected a requirement for the perpetuation of an ideologically motivated truth. This 'truth' was constructed specifically to avoid confrontation with unsavoury details that could not be harmonised with the smooth illusion of bourgeois existence. The most that readers and critics could tolerate was a sympathetic representation of generalised wretchedness that kept the specifics of any form of social hardship, such as deformity, poverty and misery, at a distance. Ugliness in England was thus perceived in terms of the close up. John Aikin and Laetitia Barbauld again sum the situation up in their comparison between Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682) and Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747). The description of the wrinkled hag by Otway, they object, offers too much detail: 'Here is extreme wretchedness, and instead of melting into pity we turn away with aversion' (quoted in Day 1987: 72). Richardson's treatment of the character, Belvedira, however, is sufficiently distanced to allow the two critics to respond with sympathy: 'we are struck and affected with the general face of ruin, but we are not brought near enough to discern the ugliness of its features [...] had she been represented as really sunk into low life, had we seen her employed in the most servile offices of poverty, our compassion would have given way to contempt and disgust' (72).

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<sup>17</sup> Despite their appearance, Hugo's protagonists are never condemned to sheer ugliness, since their unappealing exterior is combined, in accordance with his Romantic manifesto, with spiritual sublimity. In general, it seems that heroes and heroines can get away with being ugly because their status in any given text allows space for the development of character. The same cannot be said of minor characters whose impact on the reader must be the product of literary shorthand techniques such as the stereotype. Stereotyped ugliness among minor characters frequently appears in 19<sup>th</sup>-century French literature, invariably as a means of indicating negative traits. (I owe this series of points concerning the differing treatment of ugliness among major/minor literary characters to a conversation with Professor Ziva Ben-Porat of Tel Aviv University. Her cognitive study of the meaning of the Jewish nose will be discussed in chapter 4).

<sup>18</sup> The issue of ugliness in relation to gender will be discussed in chapter 5.

*Naturalism and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century nauseast*<sup>19</sup>

The issue of proximity in relation to the literary sensibilities of the two English 18<sup>th</sup>-century critics provides a useful point of comparison with the situation in 19<sup>th</sup>-century France where the Romantic tradition of grotesque sublimity was succeeded in the mid-1860s by a novelistic approach that thrived on ugliness seen close up: Naturalism. The principal theorist of naturalism, Emile Zola, revelled in the sort of detail that Aikin and Barbauld considered disgusting. Motivated in part by a rejection of the Romantic recuperation of the ugly by the sublime, Zola insisted in the name of objectivity on giving ugliness its due.<sup>20</sup> His first novel, *La Confession de Claude* (1865), aimed to show, among other things, ‘combien une vraie mansarde est laide’ (see Becker 1972: 24). Zola wanted to tell it like it was, warts and all – and in fact, wherever possible, to give his readers more warts than ‘all’ – a strategy which led to the notorious headline in *Le Figaro* of 23 January 1868: ‘La littérature putride’. The critic who wrote the ensuing article, Louis Ulbach, was responding to the publication of *Thérèse Raquin*, a novel in which it was felt that Zola had gone too far with scenes of adultery, murder and graphic details of the drowned victim’s decaying corpse on the mortuary slab.<sup>21</sup> Ulbach argued that Zola had taken the easy option in novelistic terms, since in his view, it was much easier to write a brutal novel filled with crime and prostitution than to create a work that was ‘émouvant sans écoeurer’ (quoted in David Bell 1995: 122). But the nauseating aspect of Zola’s writing formed a large part of its appeal and Zola knew it. With the vast dynastic framework of the twenty Rougon-Macquart novels (1871-1893), many of which were best sellers at the time, Zola created a 19<sup>th</sup>-century soap opera which fed the morbid sense of fascination in a reading public hungry for lurid detail and salacious ‘gossip’. This was not the sentimental readership of the Romantic novel of the 1830s, nor indeed the nostalgically appreciative audience of the swashbuckling *Cyrano* of 1897. Naturalism effected a radical break with the Romantic tradition, a significant fact excluded from

<sup>19</sup> The term ‘nauseast’ – ‘someone whose horizon is constituted by nausea’ – is borrowed from David Trotter (1996: 257).

<sup>20</sup> Though, of course, Zola’s claims to objectivity were overstated and misleading: the perspective he offered his readers consistently gave ugliness *more* than its due.

<sup>21</sup> Ulbach was a friend of Zola’s and had a financial interest in the publishing house that brought out *Thérèse Raquin*. Thus, despite his apparent critique of Zola, there was a hidden agenda. Given the nature of contemporary journalistic and literary polemics, Ulbach and Zola were both aware that adverse publicity would almost certainly contribute to a ‘succès de scandale’. See Bell (1995: 131).



the 'fabula mundi' of Rostand's play. Thus, despite the high profile of Cyrano's nose, what is missing from the play is the genuinely ugly nose of Cleopatra (in the Kolakowskian sense). I shall return to this point, and to Rostand's Cyrano, later.

The emergence of Naturalism, as David Trotter argues in his article on 'Modernity and its discontents' (1996: 256), signalled a new relation to modern life. The fact that contemporary audiences were able to enjoy the sense of nausea generated by Naturalism was an indication that the relationship between the collective self (the bourgeoisie) and its previously unacceptable other (the lower classes) had changed. Trotter suggests that the 19<sup>th</sup>-century nauseast was the product of profound disturbances in the symbolic and social universe. What is really at stake, then, when nausea is on the agenda is the problem of identity. As I have argued in chapter 1, 19<sup>th</sup>-century France (as seen most conspicuously in the social 'theatre' of Paris) had lost the sense of security afforded by the feudal monarchy and was urgently involved in a series of complex social re-negotiations. By 1870, circumstances were once again in a state of flux. National boundaries were under threat from Prussia, Napoleon suffered a humiliating defeat by the German army at Sedan on September 1, the Empire collapsed on September 4 when the Third Republic was declared. Meanwhile the German invasion continued and, despite the fiercely resisted four-month siege of Paris, the German Empire was proclaimed at Versailles on 18 January 1871. The elected and strongly monarchist *Assemblée nationale* which convened there in February 1871 signed a peace deal allowing German troops to occupy the capital. Staunch republicans in Paris, where living conditions had become poor and food scarce, formed *La Commune* to oppose this deal. A second siege of Paris followed in March-May 1871 culminating in 'la semaine sanglante' when the Army of Versailles finally entered the city. The taste for nausea among the French public, I would suggest, was symptomatic of collective unease surrounding these overwhelming national events. The nauseast of the 1870s was the product of a new wave of contingent circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

Collective political unease cannot be translated directly into everyday individual reading preferences, however. People may have felt sick with fear at the prospect of

occupation by the German army, but their choice of literature was influenced to a great extent by changes in scientific thinking and the impact of those changes on contemporary aesthetics, neither of which had anything to do with the Franco-Prussian war. The strong current of Positivist thought, initiated by Auguste Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42), had placed great emphasis on the value of empirical observation. This was the age of scrupulous attention to detail. Already familiar with Realism's demand for 'la sincérité dans l'art', the public was predisposed to be able to stomach Naturalism, the more extreme form of Realism championed by Zola. Naturalism, under the pretext of complete scientific objectivity, indulged the public taste for visceral writing. No longer satisfied with verbal evocations of visual detail, it set about trying to infuse literature with a sense of smell as well. As David Trotter puts it: 'bad smells were Naturalism's great contribution to world literature' (1996: 257). The introduction of a new imaginary dimension of unpleasant odour can also be seen, in the present context of the nose, as Zola's contribution to the French nasal tradition. In addition, Zola belongs unwittingly to the disjunctive tradition (if there can be such a thing) of Cleopatra's noses; that is, his work represents a radical departure from the Romantic aesthetic which had dominated the first half of the century.

Bad smells in Zola's fiction assume the presence of the nauseated nose. They invite disgust responses. Professor Paul Rozin of the University of Pennsylvania, America's so-called 'Dr Disgust', has argued that disgust is 'the emotion of civilisation'.<sup>23</sup> It is a learned response which emerges when we perceive contamination. Babies and young children have not yet developed a sense of contamination and happily put *everything* in their mouths. In the case of older children and adults, who do perceive contamination, disgust manifests itself primarily as a 'get out of my mouth' emotion. By extension, disgust is also a 'get out of my nose' reaction, although we cannot register a bad smell until it is too late: by the time we have smelled it, it is already inside us. Whilst a disgusting object can be kept at bay through the distance implied by sight, if that object smells bad it has already got

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<sup>22</sup> It can be argued, of course, as Sartre does, that contingency is a given, but collective consciousness tends to gloss over this fact and to construct, as Kolakowski argues, coherent, if contrived, narratives.

<sup>23</sup> References to Rozin's work are taken from an interview conducted by Professor Susan Greenfield for the series 'Brain Story' screened on BBC2 on 25 July 2000.

past the subject's defences.<sup>24</sup> The dissolution of the offending object into a smell signals the potential dissolution of the subject also. Psychologically, the visual close-up to which Aikin and Barbauld objected is as nothing compared to its nasal counterpart. The bad smell turns an already ugly object ('this is not me') into something utterly disgusting ('this is not me', but disastrously, 'it is also me'). Images of the brain scanned during disgust reactions show that it is enough to see someone else being disgusted for the brain to register disgust in the anterior insular. The same part of the brain is also active when we react to something unpleasant in the gut, either literally or metaphorically. What, then, is the status of the textual bad smell? If we do not actually see someone being disgusted and if we cannot smell the smell in question, are we really disgusted at all? Is the power of imagination on the part of the reader sufficient to create a genuine disgust reaction? I would suggest that it is not. It was Kant's contention in the *Critique of Judgement* that disgust is the only form of ugliness which cannot be presented aesthetically. What is distinctive about Zola's bad smells is their capacity to present us with 'liminal disgust'; that is, disgust which is not quite disgust and which can still be presented aesthetically.<sup>25</sup>

Since disgust is primarily a gut reaction it seems appropriate that Zola's ultimate novel of disgust and of bad smells should be found in *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873). The protagonist, Florent, is obliged to take up the job of inspector at Les Halles, the central market in Paris. In winter, the task of overseeing the market is tolerable to the senses. The stalls are presented in the manner of relatively odour-free still lifes, a view facilitated in the novel by the artist, Claude Lantier for whom the market is a powerful source of visual inspiration. Lantier's new aesthetic – which is also that of Naturalism – sees raw existence as the stuff of art. Offal is a thing of beauty. The lungs of slaughtered animals, contemplated in minute detail, transport Lantier into a state of ecstasy: 'il demeurait en extase, en face des grands mous pendus aux crocs de la criée. Il expliqua souvent [...] que rien n'était plus beau' (Zola 1979: 262-3). The

<sup>24</sup> See Trotter (1996: 257).

<sup>25</sup> The case for the aesthetic appeal of textual stench is put by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), where he argues that 'no smells or tastes can produce a grand sensation, except excessive bitters and intolerable stench. It is true that these affections of the smell and taste, when they are in their full force, and lean directly upon the sensory, are simply painful, and accompanied with no sort of delight; but when they are moderated, as in a description or narrative, they become sources of the sublime, as genuine as any other, and upon the very same principle of moderated pain' (Burke 1906: 135).

'rose tendre' and 'carmin vif' of the bloody guts and the way the entrails fall into sinewy folds invites comparison for Lantier with the 'satin moiré' of a dancer's pleated skirts. He sees the delicate fibres of the lungs as an object of sensuality: 'Il parlait de gaze, de dentelle laissant voir la hanche d'une jolie femme' (Zola 1979: 263).<sup>26</sup> Lantier dreams of a colossal painting of the two child urchins who inhabit the market, Marjolin and Cadine, embracing each other on a heap of food. For the artist, as for Zola, such a work would represent a radical break with aesthetic tradition: 'il voyait là un manifeste artistique, le positivisme de l'art, l'art moderne tout expérimental et tout matérialiste; il y voyait encore une satire de la peinture à idées, un soufflet donné aux vieilles écoles' (263).<sup>27</sup> Lantier's appreciation of the market is entirely visual and he remains untroubled by offensive odours. Florent, by contrast, experiences Les Halles most powerfully through his sense of smell.

As soon as the winter frosts have passed, the still lifes begin to decompose and invade Florent's nostrils until finally, in the heat of June, he is overcome by their pestilential stench. Worst of all is the smell of rotting fish: 'Son estomac étroit d'homme maigre se révoltait, en passant devant ces étalages de poissons mouillés à grande eau, qu'un coup de chaleur gâtait. Ils le nourrissaient de leurs senteurs fortes, le suffoquaient, comme s'il avait eu une indigestion d'odeurs' (Zola 1979: 201). Florent's indigestion is not merely physiological. It is also, as Zola's 'Ébauche' for the novel indicates, political:

L'idée générale est: le ventre [...] le ventre de l'humanité et par extension la bourgeoisie digérant, ruminant, cuvant en paix ses joies et honnêtetés moyennes; – enfin le ventre dans l'Empire [...] le contentement solide et large de la faim [...] la bourgeoisie appuyant solidement l'Empire, parce que l'Empire lui donne sa pâtée, la bedaine pleine et heureuse se ballonnant au soleil... (Zola 1979: 449).

<sup>26</sup> The opulent sensuality of raw flesh is found in the work of the contemporary artist Alexa Wright. I am reminded in particular of 'Precious' – Wright's painting of an open, richly red, flesh wound, in which a brilliant jewel is embedded.

<sup>27</sup> The essence of such a groundbreaking work would be its celebration of incongruity: the sentimentality of children embracing set against the realist detail of raw meat or fish (though, of course, the latter could also be seen as harking back to the elaborate composite fish/vegetable images of Rudolf II by Arcimboldo).

Zola envisaged a symbolic division between 'les Maigres' (the Republicans) and 'les Gras' (the bourgeois monarchists and bonapartists combined). Florent's thinness stands, therefore, as a political statement of reproach against bourgeois affluence. His indigestion, situated as it is in the very stomach of Paris, represents the rumblings of Republican discontent. As far as Florent is concerned, the wealthy, well-fed bourgeoisie stinks in both senses of the word.

In *Le Ventre de Paris* Zola combines two discourses which might be seen in terms of Cleopatra's nose: one political, the other aesthetic. The dissident political beliefs of Florent are expressed at the most fundamental level through his sense of smell. The nausea generated by offensive odours, the movement of his own stomach towards his mouth, symbolises revolution, or a radical disruption of the social order. At the same time, the fact that his is a politics of the malodorous marketplace is, in itself, an aesthetic development, or a break with tradition. Florent's perspective is a source of literary innovation – the visceral text that reeks – whereas Lantier's penchant for the still life is not necessarily a new departure for visual art (his intended masterpiece, the picture of Marjolin and Cadine, is still hopelessly sentimental). Lantier does not qualify as a Cleopatra's nose since his approach, despite his claims for it, is not sufficiently disruptive. Thus, I would suggest, it is the would-be revolutionary, not the painter who creates the greatest disturbance politically, aesthetically and, of course, nasally.

### *Popular nose-ology*

The nose in French operates with remarkable metonymic versatility. It can, and frequently does, stand in for the face, the head and the whole person, as in 'rire au nez de quelqu'un' (to laugh in someone's face), 'baisser/lever le nez' (to lower/raise one's head) and 'mettre le nez dehors' (to venture outside). Whereas in English we might fling words back in someone's face, in French it is a question of throwing it at their nose (jeter quelque chose au nez). To slam the door in someone's face in English is to shut it on their nose in French (fermer la porte au nez) from which also derives the phrase 'se casser le nez' (to not find someone at home). The English expression of irritation with another person involving 'having it up to here' with them becomes in

French a question of having them in your nose ('avoir quelqu'un dans le nez'). And to win hands down in English is a case in French of winning with your fingers in your nose (gagner les doigts dans le nez)! The French nose belongs above all to the domain of popular idiom and of the nasal applications listed in the *Trésor de la langue française du XIX<sup>e</sup> au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* the majority are associated with connotations that are either pejorative or negative. It is no surprise, therefore, to find frequent examples of popular nose phraseology in Zola's novels, particularly in those that portray the less salubrious side of Parisian life.

In *L'Assommoir* (1876/7), which traces the inexorable decline of Gervaise Coupeau and her family into poverty and alcoholism, nose phraseology appears frequently. Gervaise's daughter, Nana, finds her drinking in l'Assommoir, 'le nez dans la goutte', furious at Nana 'parce que la jeunesse, qui a le bec tourné à une autre friandise, ne comprend pas la boisson' (Zola 1969: 377). The collective nose of the Lorilleux, Gervaise's sister-in-law and her husband, serves throughout the second half of the novel as an indication of social status. From Chapter 7 onwards, 'le nez des Lorilleux' is a source of great amusement followed by great humiliation in the Coupeau household. On the occasion of Gervaise's name day, a gargantuan feast is held where 'Le nez des Lorilleux les égayait à l'avance' (220). Maman Coupeau sits opposite the door in order to savour the visible effects of jealousy aroused by gastronomic excess in the face of presumed (and actual) poverty. Her patience is rewarded: 'Quel pif! dit la vieille femme [...] Quand elle [Madame Lorilleux] a aperçu la table, tenez! sa figure s'est tortillée comme ça [...]' (223). When Gervaise's fortunes change, however, the Lorilleux revel in her decline and their self-satisfied contempt is expressed once again through the nose: 'Les Lorilleux, maintenant, affectaient de se boucher le nez, en passant devant sa chambre' and Gervaise can now be certain, if she asks them for any favours, 'de recevoir la porte sur le nez' (351). On a popular level the nose has to bear the brunt figuratively and often literally of injury and insult, whereas on a more serious conceptual level (in aesthetic theory, for example) it tends to be seen positively. As a point of articulation, then, the nose is strikingly ambivalent and contradictory.

Early linguistic nose-lore dictates that big noses are viewed positively, and diminutive or even absent noses are universally bad. Littré cites an example from the 14<sup>th</sup> century: 'Car trop a laide face cil qui n'a point de nez'. A 16<sup>th</sup>-century proverb similarly upholds the view that 'Qui coupe son nez defigure son visage'. Again in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Pasquier suggests that Frenchmen are particularly sensitive to nasal status and that the most effective insult is one that threatens to reduce its size: 'Voulez-vous en françois braver un homme; vous dites que vous le ferez bien camus, ou que vous lui rendrez le nez aussi plat comme une andouille'. In the context of such an aggressive stance, the additional reference to 'andouille' (for which *Le Robert* gives the slang meaning 'membre viril') makes it hard to ignore the implied threat of castration. Large noses are read as a sign of correspondingly large penises and an indication of virility. As such, they are to be taken seriously. At the same time, however, this obviously sensitive area of male affairs is open to raillery, precisely because of its vulnerability. Thus, large noses are also a focus of comedy: the traditional gesture of mockery in French is 'faire un pied de nez à quelqu'un', meaning literally to put the thumb of one hand on the nose and the thumb of the other hand on the little finger of the first to produce a 'nose' a foot long.

The nose in French is also ubiquitous at the most basic linguistic level. It is present in the rhymes of Rostand's play, as in Cyrano's tirade against Le Vicomte in Act I, Scene 4: 'tel nez' is rhymed with 'tenez' (ll 315-316) and 'du nez' is rhymed with 'vous pétunez', 'cheminée', 'entraînée' (ll 327-30).<sup>28</sup> The point may seem somewhat obvious, but its creative potential was clearly not lost on the public. On 12<sup>th</sup> February, 1898, a one-act parody inspired by Rostand's acknowledged masterpiece appeared entitled 'Cyraunez de Blairgerac'.<sup>29</sup> It was a play 'presqu'en vers tirés du nez de MM. Gerny & Briollet', its supposed authors, which unashamedly exploited popular phraseology and the capacity of the nose for punning. Cyraunez's first monologue is provoked by a pun on the liaison between the words 'un' and 'effort': 'Vous avez un – nez-fort!!' (14). The game becomes endless, darting from idiomatic usage such as 'votre nez remue' (you are lying, as with Pinocchio), to slang such as 'un blair' and 'un pareil pif', to innuendo: 'Ah! qu'il a bien raison, le dicton populaire, /Qui prétend qu'un grand nez fait un grand...caractère' (20).

<sup>28</sup> All references to Rostand's play are taken from the Larousse edition (Rostand 1991).

A large nose is always 'in the face' of the observer because it interferes with the choreography of social space. Through no fault of its own, a big nose necessarily intrudes. It is too much too soon, as Cyrano laments to Le Bret in Rostand's play: 'Il m'interdit/ Le rêve d'être aimé même par une laide,/ Ce nez qui d'un quart d'heure en tous lieux me précède' (I, 5, ll 494-496). The nose is a point of temporal as well as spatial discontinuity here. It arrives before it is supposed to do so – an anachronism that is ugly because of its untimely intrusion. Moreover, it intrudes into a play which is in itself anachronistic and wilfully so, as Cronk has observed, in that it harks back to Romanticism at a time when *fin-de-siècle* positivism had triumphed. It is important to stress, however, that this temporal disjunction was almost universally seen as a good thing.<sup>30</sup> People had been nauseated enough aesthetically by Naturalism and politically by the Franco-Prussian war and its aftermath. Bourgeois society was once again divided in its loyalties, this time over the Dreyfus affair, and the public craved some sort of synthesis. Rostand's Cyrano proved immensely successful precisely because it fulfilled that need. It was met by bourgeois traditionalists with a joyful sense of relief, captured in the words of the critic Francisque Sarcey:

Quel bonheur! quel bonheur! Nous allons donc enfin être débarrassés et des brouillards scandinaves et des études psychologiques trop minutieuses, et des brutalités voulues du drame réaliste. Voilà le joyeux soleil de la vieille Gaule qui, après une longue nuit, remonte à l'horizon. Cela fait plaisir; cela rafraîchit le sang. (*le Temps*, 3 January 1898; quoted in Rostand 1991: 339)

The bourgeois public wanted heroism and a return to traditional values as a way of shoring up their severely eroded sense of Frenchness. The swashbuckling 17<sup>th</sup>-century hero with a penchant for poetry was seen to do just that.

<sup>29</sup> The full title of the piece was *Cyraunez de Blairgerac. Parodie du chef-d'oeuvre de M. Ed. Rostand*.

<sup>30</sup> With the exception of a lone critic, Jehan Rictus, who savagely criticised the play for its irrelevance. 'Véritablement, qu'est-ce que vous voulez que ça foute aux "Gueules-noires" de la Mine et des hauts-fourneaux, aux étioles des bureaux, aux serfs des magasins, des fabriques ou des usines, courbés chaque jour sous la fatigue écoeurante du labeur automatique sans amour et sous la loi inexorable du salariat, qu'est-ce que vous voulez que ça leur foute *Cyrano de Bergerac* [...] pour faire bon poids?'. Rictus was equally scathing about the Academy, whom he referred to as a complacent and 'palpitante élite' (quoted in Freeman 1995: 65).



*Rostand's Cyrano*

According to Edward Freeman, 'the question that every general reader, spectator or filmgoer wants to know the answer to, but almost every French *érudit* considers it undignified to ponder even for a second' is the *size* of Cyrano de Bergerac's nose. (Freeman 1995: 20). The size of Cyrano's nose, I would suggest, is precisely a measure of its ugliness. Neither of the above responses takes the nose, or the issue of ugliness surrounding it, seriously. The sophisticated *érudit* dismisses the significance of ugliness altogether. The general audience, by placing undue emphasis on a quantitative rather than a qualitative assessment of ugliness, also misses the point somewhat. The visual dimensions of Cyrano's nose, which clearly did deviate from perceptual norms significantly (i.e. it was big) are not really the issue, since the physical size of the nose was not sufficient to warrant the mythical proportions it has since gained. Instead the nature of the nose is determined verbally – it is an effect of language, not physiology. The *érudits* are right to dismiss the physical proportions of the nose as an irrelevance, but the question of size in terms of the cultural space occupied matters a great deal. Compared with other body parts, the nose in the French language and cultural imagination consistently looms large.

Earlier I argued, in relation to the work of the historical Cyrano, that big noses functioned as a fulcrum of cultural value turning negative nasal judgements into positive ones. The positive/negative duality of the nose is a key factor for Rostand's *Cyrano* also. Whilst retaining the comic element of negative nose lore (the nose as trunk, beak, geographical feature, monument, for example), Rostand, basing his argument indirectly on the writing of the historical Cyrano, also uses an alternative nose-ology to revalue the nose (and the hero behind it) positively. In Act I, scene 4, Cyrano berates Le Fâcheux in the following terms:

- Vil camus, sot camard, tête plate, apprenez  
Que je m'enorgueillis d'un pareil appendice,  
Attendu qu'un grand nez est proprement l'indice  
D'un homme affable, bon, courtois, spirituel,

Libéral, courageux, tel que je suis [...] (II 292-296)<sup>31</sup>

In situations of confrontation with other men, Cyrano invariably perceives his nose as a mark of distinction asserting that ‘c’est moralement que j’ai mes élégances’ (I, 4, l 370), whereas when it comes to discussions of his love for Roxane, his framework of reference changes: no longer the sword-wielding, arrogant soldier on a perpetual quest for ‘panache’, he is overcome with acute self-consciousness and an overwhelming concern for popular aesthetics. The nose as a source of bravado becomes a source of shame.

Cyrano’s celebration of his exceptional nose – his refusal to reject its contingency – reverts, where his love for Roxane is concerned, to the context of Pascal’s Cleopatra: the world constructed according to a narrative of vanity. Among men, Cyrano’s rational self asserts the beauty of his inner spiritual reality over the ugliness of his external physical appearance. In relation to Roxane, however, the opposite is true. Cyrano’s imagination (of which Pascal would disapprove) makes of his own nose a Cleopatra’s nose in the negative sense. If only it had been shorter... In a moment of emotional despair, Cyrano confides to Le Bret: ‘Mon ami, j’ai de mauvaises heures! / De me sentir si laid, parfois, tout seul...’ (I, 5, ll 527-8) and in answer to Le Bret’s enquiry as to whether Cyrano is crying about this, he responds:

Ah! Non, cela, jamais! Non, ce serait trop laid,  
Si le long de ce nez une larme coulait!  
Je ne laisserai pas, tant que j’en serai maître,  
La divine beauté des larmes se commettre  
Avec tant de laideur grossière! Vois-tu bien,  
Les larmes, il n’est rien de plus sublime, rien,  
Et je ne voudrais pas qu’excitant la risée,  
Une seule, par moi, fût ridiculisée!... (I, 5, ll 529-536)

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<sup>31</sup> Rostand based this speech on Gautier’s gloss of the work of the historical Cyrano, who wrote: ‘qu’un grand nez est, à la porte de chez nous, une enseigne qui dit: Céans loge un homme spirituel, prudent, courtois, affable, généreux et libéral’ (see above p. 88).

Cyrano's pseudo-Romantic vision of poetic tears falling from a prosaic nose is intended to reflect the Hugolian dialectic of the sublime and the grotesque. If the tears are sublime, then we are to assume that the nose is grotesque. But Cyrano's nose is more complex than this brief, indirect reference to Victor Hugo's Romantic manifesto suggests. As with the poles of any dialectical opposition, the negative term is part of the definition of the positive term it supports. The nose is not only grotesque, it is also sublime. Cyrano's lament that he is too ugly to be loved 'même par une laide' (I, 5, l 495) implies that his ugliness is more than ugly. It has already entered the realm of excess and boundlessness inhabited by the sublime. Furthermore, the nose as source of word-play and wit is linked to the all-important notion of 'panache' described by Rostand as 'un sourire par lequel on s'excuse d'être sublime'. It is a sublimely poetic nose endowed with all the qualities the 'face sans gloire' of Le Fâcheux, 'dénuee [...] De fierté, d'envol,/ De lyrisme, de pittoresque, d'étincelle,/de somptuosité, de Nez enfin' (I, 4, ll 300-302), apparently lacks. We are meant to enjoy the virtuosity of this nose and to see it as sublime despite/because of its ugliness. The ambivalence is part of its meaning.

The last act of the play confirms with fourteen years of unrequited love between Cyrano and Roxanne that Cyrano has no need of Roxanne's beauty as a foil to his ugliness or of her sublimity (in terms of spiritual purity) to complete his grotesqueness. As a romantic hero, a champion of both the sublime and the grotesque (or the sublime as grotesque), he becomes entirely self-sufficient. Hugo's requirement, as set out in the *Préface de Cromwell*, that the modern muse of poetry should take a broader perspective and recognise that 'tout dans la création n'est pas humainement beau, que le laid y existe à côté du beau, le difforme près du gracieux, le grotesque au revers du sublime, le mal avec le bien' (Hugo 1973: 191), is in the end fulfilled in Rostand's play single-nosedly, as it were, by Cyrano. In the end. Up until the death of Christian, however (IV, 10), Cyrano relies on the presumed sublimity of Christian's looks to complement his fine mind. When Christian laments his lack of eloquence, Cyrano replies: 'Je t'en prête!/ Toi, du charme physique et vainqueur, prête-m'-en:/ Et faisons à nous deux un héros de roman!' (II, 10, ll 1129-31). The experiment works in that Roxane falls in love with Christian, but is doomed to fail when it becomes clear that she loves Christian for his (i.e. Cyrano's) mind as

expressed through letters sent to her from the battlefield at Arras. Roxane's motive for risking her life to visit Christian there, she claims, is '[(...) De demander pardon, puisqu'il se peut qu'on meure!)/ De t'avoir fait d'abord, dans ma frivolité,/ L'insulte de t'aimer pour ta seule beauté!' (IV, 8, ll 2122-2124). In declaring that she loves him only for his soul, she proves herself to be less influenced by external appearances than Cyrano had supposed. His assumption that she would reject his love on the grounds of ugliness is shown to be false. Ugliness for Cyrano is now nothing more than a pretext.

With Christian's death following only two scenes after Roxane's apology, Cyrano is given the luxury of ten years and an entire act remaining in which to openly declare his love for Roxane. Why, then, does he remain distant? It has been suggested by critics that he was in fact in love with Christian, not Roxane, but I would argue that his actions can best be explained in terms of an aesthetic (re)statement by Rostand of the ideals of Romantic drama. The key to this lies in the implied message of Christian's name. Rostand's text derives its conclusion from a second important element of Hugo's manifesto – the insistence on a 'new' poetic drama born of the Christian body and soul duality:

Du jour où le christianisme a dit à l'homme: Tu es double, tu es composé de deux êtres, l'un périssable, l'autre immortel, l'un charnel, l'autre éthéré, l'un enchaîné par les appétits, les besoins et les passions, l'autre emporté sur les ailes de l'enthousiasme et de la rêverie, celui-ci enfin toujours courbé vers la terre, sa mère, celui-là sans cesse élané vers le ciel, sa patrie; de ce jour le drame a été créé. (Hugo 1973: 222-223).

Once Christian is dead, the tension between body and soul finds expression in the character of Cyrano alone. Like Hugo's ugly heroes Quasimodo and Gwynplaine, Cyrano can achieve sublime immortality only through a supreme and sustained act of self-denial (loving chastely), which upholds the value of ugliness within the poetics of the sublime. Were he to fall into the arms of Roxane at the end, the last vestiges of

ugliness – the grotesque that sustains the sublime – would be lost.<sup>32</sup> Cyrano therefore categorically rejects the fairytale ending she offers. In response to Roxane's declaration of love, Cyrano replies:

Non! Car c'est dans le conte  
Que lorsqu'on dit: Je t'aime! au prince plein de honte,  
Il sent sa laideur fondre à ces mots de soleil...  
Mais tu t'apercevrais que je reste pareil. (V, 6, ll 2508-2511)

Cyrano's obstinate defence of ugliness is an aesthetic not a personal choice. It is not that he cannot love Roxane because he is ugly, but rather that he chooses not to fall in love with her for fear of ceasing to be ugly.

### *Conclusion*

Cyrano's nose is not a Cleopatra's nose in the Kolakowskian sense. Despite its ugliness, it is a unifying nose both within the play and in the wider context of French literary tradition. Cyrano's distinctive facial feature is intended to serve as a point of synthesis. In bringing together selected (nasal) texts from the past it generates what Kolakowski might describe as a 'fabula mundi' of Frenchness. Rostand's nostalgic celebration of a mythical Golden Age portrays French society unified by the concept of 'panache' (Cyrano's guiding principle in life and the last word he utters before death). Panache is defined by Rostand thus: 'l'esprit de la bravoure [...] la pudeur de l'héroïsme, comme un sourire par lequel on s'excuse d'être sublime. [...] le panache, c'est souvent, dans un sacrifice qu'on fait, une consolation d'attitude qu'on se donne' (quoted in Freeman 1995: 53-64). By harking back to Romantic aesthetics and to an imaginary heroic era infused with the spirit of sublimity, Rostand smoothes over the harsh realism of the immediate literary past – there are no Naturalist noses, or bad smells to offend those noses, here – in order that a seamless narrative of nationhood might emerge at a time when a coherent sense of national identity seemed in doubt. Described by one contemporary journalist as 'une fanfare de pantalons rouges' signalling the reawakening of French nationalism, the play offered a reassuring

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<sup>32</sup> The same is true of Quasimodo in relation to Esmeralda and of Gwynplaine in relation to Dea. The

antidote to political and social upheaval post-1870.<sup>33</sup> Far from looking forward into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Cyrano de Bergerac* represented a welcome return to a less turbulent, fictionalised past. The critic Jules Lemaître, writing for the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1898, declared 'que le mérite de cette ravissante comédie, c'est, sans rien "ouvrir" du tout [...] de prolonger, d'unir et de fondre en elle sans effort, et certes avec éclat, et même avec originalité, trois siècles de fantaisie comique et de grâce morale' (quoted in Rostand 1991: 340). Viewed in the terms of Kolakowski's Cleopatra, Rostand's *Cyrano* and its celebrated nose constitute a rejection of contingency and the wilful creation of a grand narrative in which Romanticised literary history is fused into a fin-de-siècle image of eternally heroic Frenchness. Nevertheless, even though this nose does not change the face of the world, in the sense that it looks back not forward, there is one final nasal liaison to be made between the real Cyrano and Pascal's Cleopatra: had his nose been shorter, Rostand's play would never have been written.

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love of the male heroes for these women is never consummated.

<sup>33</sup> The quotation is given by Jules Lemaître in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1 February 1898 (see Rostand 1991: 340).

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## CHAPTER 3

### From The Ridiculous To The Sublime

There is a consistent movement in French culture – aesthetically and politically – from what might broadly be termed the ridiculous (caricature, ugliness, the grotesque) towards the sublime. At the end of chapter 1, the position of ugliness and caricature is seen to have shifted from ‘low’ towards ‘high’ art status. At the end of chapter 2, Cyrano’s grotesque nose becomes sublime. Its discontinuity on the level of the particular and the material achieves continuity on the level of universal ‘panache’ or sublimity. This chapter will explore further the nature of this transition from immanence to transcendence and attempt to argue a case for ugliness as part of the sublime. Up until this point, the term ‘ugliness’ has been used without comment in preference to ‘the ugly’. The reason for this is that ‘ugliness’ seems to me to emphasise a negative relation between the subject and the object, whereas ‘the ugly’ tends to locate that ugliness firmly on the side of the object.<sup>1</sup> In the context of a discussion of *the sublime*, however, it seems appropriate to establish some sort of parity and to elevate ugliness to the philosophical status of *the ugly*. The change of emphasis from negative relation to negative object, from abstract to concrete is entirely appropriate since, as this chapter seeks to show, the ugly functions as the material aspect of the sublime.

#### *Ugliness and Comedy*

Popular wisdom in France, as in England, indicates that the distance separating the ridiculous and the sublime is minimal. In the *Préface de Cromwell* (1827), Victor Hugo quotes Napoleon as saying ‘[d]u sublime au ridicule il n’y a qu’un pas’ (Hugo 1973: 227). The *encyclopédiste* Jean-François Marmontel (1723-1799) was of the opinion that ‘[e]n général, le ridicule touche au sublime; et, pour marcher sur la limite qui les sépare, sans la passer jamais, il faut bien prendre garde à soi’ (quoted in Littré 1958). Notions of the ridiculous and the sublime derive from ancient Greek dramatic theory which, in contrast to the views expressed by Marmontel or Napoleon, drew a

clear distinction between comedy and tragedy. Aristotle's *Poetics* divides poetic mimesis into two types according to the characters of the poets in question: the more dignified among them took noble actions and noble agents as their subject; the lighter poets, writing in the coarse iambic metre of abuse, took as their subject the misdeeds of base men. The first group provided the basis for a theory of tragedy, the highest form of drama, whereas the poetry of the second group belonged to the lowest category in Aristotle's hierarchy – comedy.

Aristotle was careful, however, to further subdivide comedy on ethical grounds. It was acceptable to direct laughter at fictionalised universal ugliness, but not to mock an ugly individual, since that would cause pain. Aristotle's argument runs as follows:

Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type; it does not, however, involve the full range of villainy, but only the ludicrous, a subdivision of the ugly or base. The ludicrous consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not give pain. (Aristotle *Poetics*, chapter 5, quoted in Lauter 1964: 13-14)

The comic mask does not give pain, but it is not clear who is spared: the actor or the audience? Aristotle's qualification of comedy in this way relates closely to the matter of pain raised in chapter 1 concerning the emergence of the particular form of comic mimesis that is caricature ('the art of ugliness'). The essence of the early satirical portraits produced by the Carracci brothers in Renaissance Italy was that they portrayed individuals not types. In France, the *portrait charge* was entertaining only in so far as it was personalised. Indeed, savage caricatures of kings were a means of inflicting political damage or 'pain'. When increasing censorship during the reign of Louis-Philippe forced the caricaturists to revert to fictionalised universals, they might be said to have returned to an Aristotelian ethical position with respect to the Parisian bourgeoisie, but the relationship between the caricatures and the spectators (or in terms of Greek drama, the actors and the audience) was not straightforward. Psychoanalytic accounts of comedy, which I have used in chapter 1 to explain

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'the sublime' is misleading for the same reasons. Strictly speaking, it refers to a relation not

reactions to ugliness portrayed through caricature, emphasise the double-edged character of the laughter it provokes. The effect of comedy is to generate conflicting feelings of pleasure and unpleasure (mental pain) in the spectator. Similarly, the emblematic figures of Macaire, Mayeux and Prudhomme caused pain as well as pleasure, since their fictionality did not prevent a sophisticated Parisian public from recognising that at some level they were also destructive images of itself. The laughter associated with caricature places the spectator in a state of emotional ambivalence. At any moment, the pleasure of feeling a sense of superiority over the ugliness represented can turn to the pain of recognition that the fictional universal also applies to the individual self. Theories of the sublime, which also indicate emotional ambivalence, move in the opposite direction: they begin with individual pain and move towards universal pleasure.

The ambivalence of emotional responses to the ridiculous and the sublime reveals their fundamental instability as distinct concepts. This can be seen from the fact that in French culture, the sublime is haunted by its ironic double. Alongside the established association of the sublime with all that is noble, excellent and virtuous, there is a parallel tradition of inversion in which the meaning of 'sublime' signifies its opposite. In 16<sup>th</sup>-century Parisian slang, 'sublime' became a 'nom que se donnent certains ouvriers qui ne font rien d'utile, mais se livrent à la boisson, contractent des dettes qu'ils ne paient pas, et se font gloire de leurs vices et de leur paresse' (Littré 1958). Such was the prevalence of this wilful inversion of meaning that it produced its own 'ism' – 'sublimisme'. Nor, it seems, was this ironic meaning simply a passing trend. Numerous examples in Wartburg's *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (1966) show that the word sublime in its degraded sense was still widely used throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> In keeping with the binary tradition of Western culture, the sublime is seen to be caught up in a dialectical relationship with its other: the base or low. In France, the most significant other of the

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an object, as Kant points out in the *Critique of Judgement*.

<sup>2</sup> Examples (and dates) include *sublimé* n.m.: 'ivrogne fieffé' (1849, 1889), 'ouvrier qui ne fait rien d'utile' (1888); *sublimier* vb.: 's'élever au plus haut degré dans le vice' (1867, 1896). Wartburg gives further slang derivations: the verb 'sublimier' is also used to describe someone who works at night; a 'sublimeur' is a studious pupil.

sublime, popularised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Victor Hugo – though present in various comic guises since antiquity – takes the specific form of the grotesque, or the ugly.<sup>3</sup>

*Definitions of the sublime: Burke and Kant*

Aside from their connection as two sides of a binary opposition, the reason why the ridiculous can so easily tip over into the sublime and vice versa is that they share a common moment of pain.<sup>4</sup> The issue of pain is raised on the side of the sublime by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). For Burke, the feeling of the sublime is caused by pain in its capacity as an emissary of the ‘king of terrors’ – death (Burke 1906: 91). Burke defines the sublime in a preliminary way as follows:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (Burke, ‘Of the passions which belong to self-preservation’, 1906: 91)

The experience of the sublime is produced only when we are confronted with *ideas* of pain and danger, not actual pain and danger. Nevertheless, Burke argues, since terror, real or otherwise, is an apprehension of pain and ultimately also of death, ‘it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain’ (1906: 108). Given that the emotion of the sublime ‘turns on pain’ (103), it is not accompanied by ‘positive pleasure’, but by a feeling of negative pleasure that Burke terms ‘delight’. The most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime for Burke is ‘a sort of delightful horror’ (123).<sup>5</sup>

The Kantian account of the sublime as presented in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) retains the notion of ambivalence, but refines Burke’s argument considerably.

<sup>3</sup> Hugo’s important theory of the sublime and the grotesque will be discussed later. The conflation of the grotesque and the ugly at this stage is justified by their mutual involvement in comedy and in caricature.

<sup>4</sup> It could be argued that they operate equally in relation to pleasure, but the pleasure afforded on either side is qualitatively very different.

<sup>5</sup> The laughter which expresses the pleasure that accompanies the ridiculous (in the form of caricature as discussed in chapter 1), although ambivalent, is not of this order.

In the first instance, Kant explores 'the mathematically sublime', which concerns what is 'absolutely large' in the sense that it is 'large beyond all comparison' (Kant 1987: §25, 103). Crucially, however, the sublime is not an object as such. It consists in the effect of absolute magnitude upon the subject. The sublime is thus a relation between the subject and an 'impossible object' or, to use the terms set out in the introduction to this dissertation, between the self and the other. The ambivalence of the relation stems from a conflict within the mind between the imagination, which struggles to encompass the absolute magnitude and fails, and reason, which is able to grasp the concept of infinity as a totality. This gives rise to feelings of displeasure on the side of the imagination and feelings of pleasure on the side of reason. There are thus two moments in the Kantian sublime which are described, with respect to nature, in terms of mental agitation: 'This agitation (above all at its inception) can be compared with a vibration, i.e., with a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object' (§ 27, 115). The imagination gives rise to a feeling of 'pain' in the Burkean sense to the extent that the impossible object appears as 'an abyss in which [it] is afraid to lose itself' (§ 27, 115), but reason gives rise to a feeling of pleasure in so far as the failure of the imagination reveals its true vocation; that is, to make itself adequate to the object. For Kant, where sublimity is concerned, reason must always win over the imagination. This creates considerable difficulties in the field of representation, since it calls into question the status of the image (the product of the imagination). For this reason, the Kantian sublime has been rejected by French aesthetics and described by Lyotard as a 'disaster' for the imagination.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the 'mathematically sublime', Kant distinguishes a second type of sublimity – much closer to the Burkean account – namely 'the dynamically sublime in nature'. This involves the perception of nature as might and a subsequent sense of superiority over that might. Nature is mighty or powerful in so far as we are afraid of it. If the fear is genuine, if we really are in fear of our lives, then we are not in a position to judge nature aesthetically because we are in a state of actual or anticipated pain. Genuine fear for Kant, as for Burke, precludes feelings of the sublime which must be experienced from a position of relative safety. Once we are safe, we are free to make an aesthetic judgement of sublimity which refers not so much to the sense of

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<sup>6</sup> Lyotard's objections will be discussed in more detail later.

sense of fear aroused by nature's might as to our own strength and capacity to dominate nature. We begin to see how the concept of sublimity concerns not only pain (in the form of fear), but also ideas of power. Here, once again, the sublime is but a short step away from the ridiculous. In chapter 1, I showed how Foucault reveals that the origins of power in the West are inherently caricatural and grotesque. If caricature is the embodiment of power and the sublime is, to some extent, the feeling of power, the two might easily become confused, or called upon to support each other, especially since the sublime cannot be represented. Kant's 'General comment on the exposition of aesthetic reflective judgments' would seem to allow for this possibility also. The expansion of the soul afforded by the abstract nature of sublimity in the Jewish religion is contrasted sharply with fanaticism. In the case of religion, the exhibition of sublimity is 'wholly negative as regards the sensible' because 'the imagination finds nothing beyond the sensible that could support it' (§29, 135), whereas fanaticism 'is the *delusion [Wahn] of wanting to SEE something beyond all bounds of sensibility*, i.e., of dreaming according to principles (raving with reason)' (§29, 135). This delusion that a positive exhibition of a sublime idea is possible surpasses the sheer madness of enthusiasm, according to Kant, and approaches mania. As such, it is 'least of all compatible with the sublime, because it is ridiculous in a somber [...] way' (§29, 136). The sombre ridiculousness of Kantian mania, I would suggest, points to a caricatural abuse of power.

### *The 1789 Revolution*

Given the timing of the publication of Kant's third *Critique* (1790), it seems appropriate to link Kant's discussion of the way sublime feeling can degenerate into fanaticism to the extreme events of the 1789 Revolution in France. Kant himself, however, greeted the Revolution with enthusiasm and his critique of fanatical misconceptions of sublimity cannot be taken as a direct attack on revolutionary excesses. Contemporary theories of sublimity were in fact based on the writings of Burke, even though his *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790) showed that he

was fiercely opposed to what he saw as the 'malignant spirit of subversion' and anarchy that fuelled it (quoted in Burke 1906: xxvi).<sup>7</sup>

In chapter 1, my analysis of caricature during the Revolution ended abruptly in 1792 with the rise of the *Commune insurrectionnelle* led by Danton and the fall of the monarchy on 10 August. Immediately those who produced and distributed caricatures placed themselves at risk, since Robespierre objected strongly to 'false representations' of any kind. In particular, he denounced what he considered to be 'insolentes parodies' which might distort his vision of 'le drame sublime de la Révolution' (quoted in Huet 1988: 794). The sudden disappearance of caricatures from the streets of Paris effectively signalled an end to 'the ridiculous' and the beginning of events which led to the The Terror, instigated by Robespierre, in 1793.

The sublimity of the Revolution turned on pain (the guillotine), power, and lastly on the problem of representation. How were the revolutionaries to communicate the principles of the sublime revolutionary cause to the people in a concrete way? This is also the problem indirectly posed by Kant, who maintains, in relation to the enthusiasm of the Jewish people for its religion, that '[i]t is [...] a mistake to worry that depriving this presentation [of the moral law] of whatever could commend it to the senses will result in its carrying with it no more than a cold and lifeless approval without any moving force or emotion' (135).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Kant argues, it is the other way round. So strong is 'the unmistakable and indelible idea of morality' it has no need of 'images and childish devices' (135). If governments grant such 'accessories' to religions, it is as a means of controlling enthusiasm, not encouraging it. This, of course, relies on the fact that the idea of the moral law is accepted universally in the first place. In France, such universal acceptance of the 'moral law' of the Revolution could not be taken for granted. For this reason, and against Robespierre's better judgment, the Revolution was conducted in accordance with what Kant might

<sup>7</sup> A translation of Burke's *Enquiry* by Abbé DesFrançois was available in Paris in 1765. Burke's ideas were also taken up enthusiastically by Diderot and incorporated into his comments on the paintings of Vernet in the *Salon de 1767* (see introduction to Burke [1958: cxxi-cxxii] by J. T. Boulton). In addition, the ideas contained in Burke's *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756), which specifically denounced the aristocracy as despotism in all but name, must have resonated with the ideals of the revolutionaries.

<sup>8</sup> Kant's 'General Comment' sections in the *Critique of Judgement* appear without § numbers. All references to such sections will be given simply as page numbers.

consider to be a 'false sublime'; that is, as a political imperative seeking to impose itself as a transcendent truth by means of the image.<sup>9</sup>

In 'Le Sacré du Printemps: essai sur le sublime et la Terreur' (1988), Marie-Hélène Huet describes the Revolution in terms of a spectacle, or a series of staged representations. Revolutionary ideology operated a palimpsest effect, she argues, whereby it continually effaced one set of representations with another. As part of the Fête de la Raison on 20 Brumaire, An II (10 November, 1793) – a festival which aimed to eradicate Christianity – a 'simulacre mobile' was chosen to represent Reason. In Kantian terms, it might be said that the decision to represent reason was the result of a collective '*delusion [Wahn] of wanting to SEE something beyond all bounds of sensibility*' (Cf. p. 113). It was decided that Reason should be represented by a woman and that a different woman should fulfil the role each year. The sensual, feminine embodiment of Reason failed to achieve the desired effect. It achieved instead the effect of arousing desire and turned into a cult. Robespierre tried to end this hurriedly on 18 floréal, An II (7 May, 1794) by replacing it with a cult of the 'Supreme Being'. He ceremonially burned a statue of 'Atheism' to invoke symbolically a higher instance of power, though not as a move to reinstate God; rather, the gesture was intended to impose, in different guise, the power of revolutionary ideology. It did not succeed, demonstrating yet again the failure of representation in respect of the 'sublime'.<sup>10</sup> In a last violent effort to establish the sublimity of the revolutionary cause, Robespierre instigated the final and most extreme phase of The Terror.<sup>11</sup> During this period of summary justice, officially sanctioned by the *loi du 22 prairial* (10 June, 1794) and ending with the fall of Robespierre on 27 July 1794, his vision of the sublime drama of the Revolution reached its height. Those suspected of disloyalty to the Revolution were guillotined *en masse* without trial. It was the moment when, according to Huet (1988: 793), 'La Terreur, comme le sublime, s'installe [...] dans un au-delà de la représentation'. All attempts to create an aesthetic of the sublime (improper though it was in Kantian terms) were abandoned.

<sup>9</sup> This is not intended as a condemnation of the ideals of the Revolution, but only as a comparison between the manner of its presentation and the Kantian sublime (which has no need of an object to support it).

<sup>10</sup> The implications of the failure of representation in a non-revolutionary context will be discussed again later in relation to the work of Slavoj Žižek.



The 'sublimity' of The Terror drew its power from the very real threat of pain and death. Edmund Burke's categorical statement on the subject of power in the *Enquiry* might equally have been a declaration of principle on the part of Robespierre: 'I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power. And this branch rises [...] from terror, the common stock of every thing that is sublime' (Burke 1906: 115). But the sublimity of the Revolution as a reign of sheer terror did not last. After Robespierre's execution on 28 July 1794, it descended once more into theatricality, or as Huet (1988: 799) puts it: 'la théâtralisation grotesque l'emporte sur le sublime'.<sup>12</sup>

### *Victor Hugo*

The most famous theorist of the grotesque and the sublime, Victor Hugo, stood accused, along with other Romantic writers, of inflicting a '93 littéraire' on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century reading public (Hugo 1969: XII, 306).<sup>13</sup> Hugo was under attack by critics who had grown tired of the Romantic aesthetic which dominated literary output to such an extent that they viewed it as a new reign of terror.<sup>14</sup> In *William Shakespeare* (1864), Hugo chose to reinterpret the insult as an acknowledgment of the connection between the political revolutionaries of 1789 and the literary 'revolutionaries' of the 1830s. Referring to the Revolution as the 'créatrice du troisième monde', Hugo noted that it remained 'à être représentée dans l'art' (1969: XII, 221), implying, of course, that Romantic literature – and his own in particular – would fulfil this rôle. Projecting his own aesthetic back in time, Hugo suggested that, like himself, the revolutionaries 'sentaient le monstre sublime en eux. Ils avaient le bouillonnement intérieur du fait immense' (1969: XII, 306). Such a claim to filiation with the defining event in modern French history is somewhat overblown (though excused, perhaps, by the context of retaliation); nonetheless, the new aesthetic proposed by Hugo in his *Préface de Cromwell* (1827), though not a 'revolution', remains an important point of reference in French culture.

<sup>11</sup> The Terror had already begun after the fall of the Girondins in June 1793.

<sup>12</sup> Huet's opposition of the grotesque and the sublime in a pre-Romantic context reveals the extent to which the Romantic theorisation of that opposition has continued to influence French critical thought.

<sup>13</sup> The reference is, of course, to 1793.

<sup>14</sup> They were not, as yet, in a position to criticise Hugo's novel *Quatrevingt-treize*, since it was not published until 1874.

Hugo's theory drew together disparate ideas on the grotesque and the sublime which, had been circulating in various guises in France since the 16<sup>th</sup> century and gave them a new twist. Instead of granting the sublime pride of place and relegating the grotesque to a greatly inferior position as had always been the case in the past – with the notable exception of Rabelais – Hugo recognised that the grotesque could in fact serve as a creative force of equal or even higher status. In proposing this change of priority, he opened up new a perspective on art – one which reverberated throughout his own century and on into the next.<sup>15</sup> It was not a matter of reverting to the visceral grotesque of Rabelais, however. Although Hugo admired Rabelais greatly, including him among the list of geniuses in *William Shakespeare*, his relentless return to bodily basics in Hugo's view robbed humanity of the attributes of the sublime (dignity, modesty, honour, virtue and spirit), leaving only 'la jouissance animale toute crue, l'impureté toute pure' (1969: XII, 185). Rabelais's great discovery may have been 'le ventre', but the trouble was, argued Hugo, 'le ventre mange l'homme' (185). He summed up Rabelais's work politely in latin: '*Totus homo fit excrementum*' (man becomes nothing but excrement) (1969: XII, 185). Such a complete abandonment of the traditional sublime so closely associated with Christian ethics was not, on the face of it, acceptable to Hugo.

And yet the 'fumier' to which everything is reduced in his 'critique' of Rabelais's genius in 1864 had appeared previously – though in more generalised terms – in Hugo's 1827 *Préface* as the basis for the regeneration of art:

Il faut se garder de jeter un oeil dédaigneux sur cette époque où était en germe tout ce qui depuis a porté fruit, sur ce temps dont les moindres écrivains, si l'on nous passe une expression triviale mais franche, ont fait fumier pour la moisson qui devait suivre. Le moyen âge est entré sur le bas-empire. (Hugo 1973: 189-90)

Hugo recognised that the 'muse épique' of the ancients, magnificent though she was, offered only a limited perspective on art by mercilessly imposing a duty to imitate a

<sup>15</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, emphasis on the importance of the grotesque in relation to the sublime influenced Théophile Gautier and was famously recast by Baudelaire in terms of 'Spleen' and 'l'Idéal'. In the 20<sup>th</sup>

certain type of beauty (symmetrical, harmonious and in proportion). Over time, this systematic requirement reduced the beautiful to the level of mere convention. Hugo's declared aim in the *Préface* was to rescue art from the monotony of this type of beauty and to propose in its place a 'double basis' for creativity with infinitely broader horizons:

[...] la muse moderne verra les choses d'un coup d'oeil plus haut et plus large. Elle sentira que tout dans la création n'est pas humainement *beau*, que le laid y existe à côté du beau, le difforme près du gracieux, le grotesque au revers du sublime, le mal avec le bien, l'ombre avec la lumière. (Hugo 1973: 191)<sup>16</sup>

This dual structure of 'l'harmonie des contraires' (223) was itself susceptible to predictability, however, and critics have often accused Hugo of overusing it. Such criticism, however, says more about the way Hugo's work has been read than about the way it was written. It is easy to assume, once a precedent has been set, that one simple binarism will follow another: Quasimodo and Esmeralda in *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), for example, or Gwynplaine and Dea in *L'Homme qui rit* (1869). In each case we are presented with a grotesque-sublime coupling of ugly male and beautiful female characters. The formula is deceptively simple. Quasimodo is in fact more intimately connected to the cathedral than to the beautiful gypsy, Esmeralda; and the cathedral, though sublime in its spiritual capacity, is not beautiful. It is a curious agglomeration of the work of 'vandal' archbishops and architects who have, over the centuries, made of the building a 'chimera'. The ugly Quasimodo meanwhile is morally beautiful, and nowhere more so than at the moment when he rescues Esmeralda from wrongful execution:

...en ce moment-là Quasimodo avait vraiment sa beauté. Il était beau, oui, cet orphelin, cet enfant trouvé, ce rebut, il se sentait auguste et fort, il regardait en face cette société dont il était banni, et dans laquelle il intervenait si puissamment, cette justice humaine à laquelle il avait arraché sa proie, tous ces tigres forcés de mâcher à vide, ces sbires, ces juges, ces bourreaux, toute cette

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century it also formed the mainspring for Lyotard's theory of the avant-garde which will be discussed later in this chapter.

force du roi qu'il venait de briser, lui infime, avec la force de Dieu. (Hugo 1974: 449)

Quasimodo's 'powerful intervention', the act of rescuing beauty from the clutches of the establishment, reflects Hugo's own stated aims in the *Préface*. It is the intervention of the ugly into the aesthetics of the sublime in order to save beauty from certain and wrongful death. After this definitive gesture – a moral and aesthetic victory for Quasimodo – the place of the ugly within the sublime is assured, even sanctified by God. From an aesthetic point of view, then, Quasimodo has no need of Esmeralda. In the end, she is hanged and her body is taken to the Montfaucon cave to rot beside the bodies of others who have died on the gibbets of Paris. Quasimodo disappears and is later found, a deformed skeleton clasped tightly around the remains of Esmeralda. But, unlike the other 'carcasses hideuses' in the cave, Quasimodo's body shows no signs of violence, thus indicating that he was not executed, but *chose* to die next to the woman he loved.

In *L'Homme qui rit*, Hugo presents another pairing of the grotesque and the sublime in the two characters of Gwynplaine, whose face is hideously disfigured, and Dea, who is supremely beautiful but blind. Both are orphans who have grown up together in the care of the wandering philosopher/playwright, Ursus. From the moment when the young Gwynplaine rescues Dea, then a tiny infant, from the frozen corpse of her mother in the snow, the two children remain utterly devoted to each other and blissfully happy together. But the idealised complementarity of the two characters does not conceal the fact that they belong to different orders of existence and hence to two different orders of narrative presence. Gwynplaine, because of his overwhelming physical appearance, belongs inescapably to the world of materiality, whereas Dea is ethereal and insubstantial:

Pour Gwynplaine Dea était la splendeur. Pour Dea Gwynplaine était la présence.

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<sup>16</sup> It is important here to signal the fact that Hugo's notion of the grotesque both includes the ugly and is interchangeable with it.

La présence, profond mystère qui divinise l'invisible et d'où résulte cet autre mystère, la confiance. Il n'y a dans les religions que cela d'irréductible.  
(Hugo 1982: I, 357)

It is tempting to assume that Gwynplaine's tangible presence requires Dea's spirituality, but as the above makes clear, this is not the case. In terms of the aesthetics of the grotesque and the sublime, Gwynplaine, like Quasimodo, has no need of Dea, though on an affective level within the narrative, again like Quasimodo, he believes that he does and that it is his duty to protect her:

Il se disait que, monstre, il n'avait pas droit à l'amour. Hydre idolâtrée par l'astre, il était de son devoir d'éclairer cette étoile aveugle.

Une fois il dit à Dea:

— Tu sais que je suis très laid.

— Je sais que tu es sublime, répondit-elle. (Hugo 1982: I, 365).

Dea's awkward turn of phrase here – the word 'sublime' does not fit with her normal idiolect and seems to come from a narrative voice other than her own – indicates that the relationship between the grotesque and the sublime, or the ugly and the beautiful is not simply a matter of an idealised pairing between two perfectly complementary characters. Hugo's text makes it clear that Gwynplaine already has sublimity on his side. This explains why the 'together-at-last' formula at the end of the novel does not seem entirely appropriate. In one sense it confirms a straightforward union of opposing principles: when the sickly Dea fades away and dies on board a cargo boat bound for Holland, Gwynplaine chooses to follow her into death by walking overboard. But this conventional reading tends to flatten the alternative and much more powerful aesthetic of the grotesque *as* sublime present in the novel. On the face of it, Hugo seems reluctant to dispense with traditional sublimity altogether; instead he equivocates, allowing grotesque sublimity to develop without ever quite giving it the last word. Nonetheless, the stark contrast between the lifeless conclusion and the energy of the rest of the novel invites the reader to call its overly tidy binarism into question. Hugo's concealed message is that a reductive formulation of the grotesque and the sublime cannot and *must not* survive. It is better to drown it than to allow it to

suppress the creative energy needed to guarantee progress in art. This interpretation is at odds with the familiar view of Hugo as father of many well-loved and well-worn antitheses. The suggestion that there is also a deeply subversive aesthetic at play in his work requires some justification.

There is considerable evidence to support the view that Hugo, who is seldom credited with a sense of irony, treated binary oppositions ironically. In *William Shakespeare* (1864), for example, Hugo ends a discussion of the 'réflexion double' of genius by quoting Jonathan Forbes – '*Totus in antithesi*' (1969: XII, 236). One reading of this would simply see this as restatement of the *concordia discors* strategy. A more interesting reading, however, would recognise that Hugo is playing games. Rather than an affirmation of the power of binarism on the level of what is said – which would mean that Hugo simply falls into his own trap (the systematisation of beauty) – it can be read as an admission of wilful duplicity at the level of enunciation, in the *way* it is said. This would mean an acknowledgement of ironic intent, a statement by Hugo to the effect that 'I am not saying what I appear to be saying'. The sheer profusion of antithesis in Hugo's writing has lulled critics into a false sense of boredom. Looked at more closely, I would argue, Hugo consistently undoes antitheses, as here, when he is writing about Shakespeare:

L'antithèse de Shakespeare, c'est l'antithèse universelle; toujours et partout, c'est l'ubiquité de l'antinomie; la vie et la mort, le froid et le chaud, le juste et l'injuste, l'ange et le démon, le ciel et la terre, *la fleur et la foudre, la mélodie et l'harmonie*, l'esprit et la chair, le grand et le petit, *l'océan et l'envie, l'écume et la bave, l'ouragan et le sifflet*, le moi et le non-moi, l'objectif et le subjectif, *le prodige et le miracle*, le type et le monstre, *l'âme et l'ombre*. (Hugo 1969: XII, 237; emphasis added)

Where is the antithesis between a flower and lightning, between melody and harmony, between the ocean and desire, or between foam and saliva, the prodigy and the miracle, the soul and the shadow? Hugo seems to be flinging together elements of language that are not opposites. Why? To demonstrate that the structure of language is not necessarily binary, but *differential* in nature – and this long before the advent of

structural linguistics. Hugo also seems to have had a proto-Saussurian awareness of the arbitrary relation between words and things (signs and their referents). The remarkable poem *Réponse à un acte d'accusation* (the theoretical Hugo at his best and on the defensive) demonstrates this clearly. Here the poet defends the freedom of the artist to choose his own words against a reactionary *Académie* and its fossilized *Lexique* of acceptable terminology. Rather than watch the French language sink back into a pre-Revolutionary state where 'Les mots, bien ou mals nés, vivaient parqués en castes' (1900: 30), he declares his intention to initiate a revolution in language that will overturn the hierarchy of words definitively and set language free. 'Pas de mot où l'idée au vol pur/ Ne puisse se poser, toute humide d'azur!' (1900: 31): ideas in flight can settle on whichever words they choose. The connection between them is not fixed and predictable, just as the relation between the Hugolian grotesque and sublime, as argued above, is also subject to variation.

Hugo's awareness of the instability of language means that we cannot take the grotesque and the sublime antithesis only at face value. In the *Préface*, Hugo writes: 'dans la pensée des modernes [...] le grotesque a un rôle immense. Il y est partout; d'une part, il crée le difforme et l'horrible; de l'autre, le comique et le bouffon' (1973: 199). It is apparent, even in this brief definition, that the grotesque does more than simply fulfil the role of antithetical other to the sublime. It generates attributes of its own. In addition to incorporating 'tous les ridicules, toutes les infirmités, toutes les laideurs' (207), it also contains all the passions, vices and crimes personified by any number of villainous characters from the French stage. Although Hugo attempts to distribute qualities between the grotesque and the sublime evenhandedly, the sublime consistently loses out to an enthusiastic 'débordement' (208) on the side of the grotesque. As the *Préface* progresses the initial opposition is superseded. In calling on the resources of the grotesque – its 'débordement', as well as 'sa verve, sa vigueur, sa sève de création' (211) – Hugo increasingly invests in it the power of the sublime. To this end it is self-sufficient, both grotesque *and* sublime. The sublime meanwhile – a conflation with the beauty of antiquity – although it appears to act as an antithetical other for the grotesque, turns out to be a rhetorical ploy to conceal the disqualified, empty beauty of the past while Hugo surreptitiously replaces it with a new beauty that is also ugly, or a new sublime that is also grotesque.

One of the most important aspects of the new sublime for Hugo is its proximity to genius. In *William Shakespeare*, authors of genius are characterised as ‘monstres du sublime’ (Hugo 1969: XII, 263). Where works of genius are concerned, argues Hugo, ‘jamais de solution de continuité’ (225). They are one-offs in history, rather like Kolakowski’s ‘noses of Cleopatra’ and, as discussed in chapter 2, the points of discontinuity in history can also be seen in terms of ugliness. An association between ugliness and genius is also present in Hugo’s work – they meet in his conception of the infinite. In the *Préface*, ugliness is shown to exceed Hugo’s initial numerical estimate; rather than being limited to just one thousand forms, it is seen as ‘un détail d’un grand ensemble qui nous échappe, et qui s’harmonise, non pas avec l’homme, mais avec la création toute entière’ (Hugo 1973: 208). The ugly detail that escapes participates in the infinite. Meanwhile, in *William Shakespeare*, each and every genius is a ‘promontoire dans l’infini’ (Hugo 1969 XII: 144), a link between humanity and God (where God is ‘le moi de l’infini’). Genius as a mere ugly detail allows Hugo to offer a tentative solution to the Kantian problem, re-examined by Derrida in *La Vérité en peinture* (1978), of how to bridge the gap between immanence and transcendence: ‘L’atome trait d’union, l’atome universel, l’atome lien des mondes, existe-t-il? N’est-ce point là la grande âme?’ (Hugo 1969: XII, 225). In contrast to his initial claims for genius as monstrous, monolithic, even abyssal, the magnitude of genius now seems impossibly small. If, however, we assume that the minuscule ‘trait d’union’ can be seen as monstrous as well, it becomes possible to situate Hugo’s ‘monsters of the sublime’ in direct relation to the Kantian problematic. Indeed the *Critique of Judgement* specifically allows for such vast discrepancies of scale within the sublime: ‘nothing in nature can be given, however large we may judge it, that could not, when considered in a different relation, be degraded all the way to the infinitely small, nor conversely anything so small that it could not, when compared with still smaller standards, be expanded for our imagination all the way to the magnitude of a world’ (§25, 106).

Derrida’s analysis of the Kantian problem, the ‘Sans de la coupure pure’, concludes with a discussion of the ‘cut’ from the point of view of the sublime and the colossal. The colossal for Kant is not the same as the monstrous, but borders on it. Whereas the monstrous is simply too large for the purpose that constitutes its concept



(and cannot therefore be represented), the colossal is 'the mere exhibition of a concept if that concept is almost too large for any exhibition (i.e. if it borders on the relatively monstrous)' (Kant 1987: §26, 109). Derrida raises the obvious question which arises here as to where the cut-off point between them lies: 'où délimiter le trait du *presque trop*?' (Derrida 1978: 144). Could Hugo's proposed 'trait d'union' – genius – qualify? Derrida's answer is inconclusive: the 'almost too big' is determined by its relative indetermination 'comme presque trop grand au regard, si on pouvait encore dire, de la prise, de l'appréhension, de notre pouvoir d'appréhension' (144). This suggests, in parenthesis, a link with the word *appréhension* as fear: 'le colossal fait presque peur, il inquiète à partir d'une relative indétermination: qu'est-ce qui vient? qu'est-ce qui va arriver?' (144). It is a temporal question of sublimity which will be taken up again by Lyotard. To return to the colossal: if it is almost too big, but not too big for our power of apprehension, then there must be some means of making itself felt, even if it pushes the imagination to the limit. In the end, Derrida equivocates on this issue:

La taille du colosse n'est ni culture [the work of genius?] ni nature ['l'infini?'], à la fois l'une et l'autre. Il est peut-être, entre le présentable et l'imprésentable, le passage autant que l'irréductibilité de l'une à l'autre. Taille, bordure, bords de coupure, ce qui passe et se passe, sans passer, de l'une à l'autre. (164-5)

And what of the nature of this sublime of the colossal? The sublime of the colossal, I would suggest, can be seen in terms of the Hugolian 'atome trait d'union', in which case it is possible to argue that what bridges the Kantian gap between immanence and transcendence, whether on a large or on a small scale, is ugliness. The 'almost unrepresentable' of 'not quite culture' indicates the possibility of an ethical vocation for attempting to present what emerges at the limits of culture, what culture is unable or unwilling to comprehend. Derrida hints at this too: 'Ce concept s'annonce et se dérobe à la présentation sur scène. On le dirait, en raison de sa taille presque excessive, obscène' (143). I shall return to this important point later in this chapter.

*Ugly sublimity and avant-garde art*

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the creative energy of the Hugolian grotesque-sublime, far from dissipating, reappears in further theories of avant-garde art. In *L'Inhumain* Lyotard theorises the avant-garde in terms of sublimity, but a sublimity endowed with shock value which shares with the Hugolian grotesque notions of ugliness, 'bad taste' and monstrosity:

Les imperfections mêmes, les entorses au goût, la laideur ont leur part dans l'effet de choc. L'art n'imité pas la nature, il crée un monde à côté, *eine Zwischenwelt*, dira Paul Klee, *eine Nebenwelt* pourrait-on dire, où le monstrueux et l'informe ont leur droit puisqu'ils peuvent être sublimes. (Lyotard 1988: 108)<sup>17</sup>

Avant-garde art for Lyotard is the culmination of romantic modernity in that it completes the process of destabilising the link between the sensible and the intelligible (Kantian immanence and transcendence). It does so by abandoning the aesthetics of the beautiful in favour of an aesthetic of ugly sublimity that shocks: 'ses oeuvres semblent au public de goût des "monstres", des objets "informes", des entités purement "negatives"' (137). Art thus moves explicitly beyond taste and beyond beauty. Instead of offering reassurance to (implied bourgeois) viewers by colluding in a system of static 'art appreciation' that conforms to expectation and supports narcissism, avant-garde works insist on a lack of continuity between themselves and what has gone before, between tradition and innovation. In doing so, they also radically alter the relation between the viewing subject and the object. There is no longer any possibility for comfortable – if indeed any – identification:

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<sup>17</sup> Lyotard acknowledges the connection between the avant-garde sublime and Romanticism, but claims that in this the most influential precursors are Burke and, to a lesser extent, Kant (not Hugo). The terms Lyotard includes within his definitions of the sublime, however, seem to follow on from Hugo's grotesque. While the Hugolian grotesque as such has no place in Lyotard's argument, key components of it – ugliness, monstrosity and bad taste, for example – are included, as is the notion of the sublime as a kind of rule-breaking excess, or 'dérèglement' associated with genius. 'Dérèglement' is also the principle behind moral deformity and ugliness for Lavater (see chapter 1). Too much 'dérèglement' leads to caricature...

La communauté sociale ne se reconnaît pas dans les oeuvres, elle les ignore, elle les rejette comme incompréhensibles, puis elle accepte que l'avant-garde intellectuelle les conserve dans les musées comme des traces de tentatives qui portent témoignage de la puissance de l'esprit et de son dénuement. (Lyotard 1988: 112)

Avant-garde art is characterised above all, in Lyotard's view, by ambivalence. It has the potential to empower the mind, but also to leave it destitute. This sense of ambivalence – in different forms – is fundamental to all accounts of the sublime: as noted earlier, Burke describes the sublime in terms of an experience of 'delightful horror' or 'tranquillity tinged with terror' (Burke 1906: 181); the Kantian sublime involves a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object (§27, 115).

### *The failure of representation*

I began this chapter by choosing to interpret the sublime in a specifically non-Kantian way. In doing so my aim was to reassert the importance of the imagination in keeping with Lyotard's objection to the 'désastre que subit l'imagination dans le sentiment sublime' in Kant (Lyotard 1988: 148). The Kantian sublime, he implies, effectively throws the baby away with the bath water: the relegation of the imagination to secondary status devalues the forms without which the material base that is a constant feature of French sublimity – matter or presence – is lost altogether. In *L'Inhumain* Lyotard poses the problem thus:

Comme toute présentation consiste dans la 'mise en forme' de la matière des données, le désastre subi par l'imagination peut s'entendre comme le signe que les formes ne sont pas pertinentes pour le sentiment sublime. Mais, dès lors, qu'en est-il de la matière, si les formes ne sont plus là pour la rendre *présentable*? Qu'en est-il de la présence? (1988: 148)

The Kantian sublime, he argues, breaks up the beautiful marriage between the imagination and the understanding by signalling that the imagination is lacking. Its intervention sacrifices aesthetics for ethics.

The sublime for Kant ‘consists merely in a *relation*’ in which ‘we judge the sensible [element] in the presentation of nature to be suitable for a possible supersensible use’ (126). As noted earlier, it operates as a way of mediating between two distinct planes, one immanent, the other transcendent. The experience of the sublime involves a two-stage process in which, first of all, the imagination strives to comprehend by degrees an ‘object’ which is absolutely large, but is doomed to failure ‘because an absolute totality of an endless progression is impossible’ (§26, 112). In the second stage reason, which ‘demands totality for all given magnitudes’ (§26, 111) is able to think the infinite without contradiction. For Kant this means that it must have within itself a supersensible power, a natural attunement with the realm of ethics, or God. The imagination, whose objects reside in the world of individual forms, is inherently unable to achieve this overarching view. It is seen by Kant as inadequate from the point of view of the true moral vocation of the sublime: ‘For what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason’ (§23, 99). The sublime, unlike beauty, is solely within the mind of the judging subject and there is no point looking for it in the sensible world. It is, by its very nature, unrepresentable.

Following Kant – and in contrast to Lyotard – Slavoj Žižek interprets the philosophical problem of the sublime as a crisis of representation in which

...in principle, the gap separating phenomenal, empirical objects of experience from the Thing-in-itself is insurmountable – that is, no empirical object, no representation [*Vorstellung*] of it can adequately present [*darstellen*] the Thing (the suprasensible Idea); but the Sublime is an object in which we can experience this very impossibility, this permanent failure of the representation to reach after the Thing. (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*; Žižek 1989: 203)

The sublime is thus the paradox of an object which provides a negative representation of what is unrepresentable – negative in the sense that it can only point towards the unrepresentable in terms of what it is not. Žižek describes it as a ‘successful presentation by means of failure’ (204) which fills the gap, in a negative way, between phenomenon and what Kant terms ‘noumenon’ (the Thing in itself). It is a way of mediating between the sensible and the intelligible of antiquity, or between man and God.

As a term of mediation, argues Žižek, the sublime must follow the immediacy of beauty. In a sense sublimity takes over from beauty. With the help of Yirmiahu Yovel and Hegel, Žižek locates this moment at the juncture of the Greek religion (of beauty) and the Jewish religion (of sublimity). Whereas the ancient Greeks posited a plurality of gods as the immediate spiritual essence of the world, the Jewish religion abolished this positivity, replacing immanent deities with a transcendent God of absolute negativity. This transition inaugurated a crisis of representation in which humanity was faced with the problem of how to give a sense of the absolute without recourse to embodiment in person (no son of God in Judaism, of course) or representation in art (no graven images).<sup>18</sup> The answer to this problem: a negative presentation, via the sublime, of the inadequacy of material reality to approximate to God, the Idea, the suprasensible, or whatever name is chosen for the Thing that lies beyond.<sup>19</sup>

But what if there is no Thing beyond? What if the experience of radical negativity *is* the Thing in itself? Žižek refers to this possibility as an overused Hegelian speculative twist in which ‘the negative experience of the Thing must change into the experience of the Thing-in-itself as radical negativity’ (206). The experience of the sublime will remain the same; it is simply a question of subtracting the transcendent proposition that something positive exists beyond it. In the absence of a transcendent positive entity, the negativity of the representation in itself becomes positive in that it overcomes the failure of phenomenality because phenomenality is all there is. Thus, according to Žižek, the status of the sublime object is displaced. It is no longer an

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<sup>18</sup> Kant also suggests that the most sublime passage in Jewish Law is the prohibition of graven images, or likenesses. Other texts on sublimity (notably Longinus) propose the ultimate demonstration of sublimity as the *fiat lux*.

empirical object whose inadequacy acts as a guarantee for a transcendent Thing; rather it is an object which now replaces that empty Thing: 'the Sublime is an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing' (206). Hegel's articulation of this situation takes the form of an 'infinite judgement' in which the subject and predicate are radically incompatible and incomparable: 'the Spirit is a bone', for example (quoted in Žižek: 207). The place for ugliness within the sublime, or indeed *as* the sublime, once again becomes apparent. 'We are dealing,' argues Žižek, 'with a miserable "little piece of the Real" – the Spirit *is* the inert, dead skull [...] Herein lies the "last secret" of dialectical speculation: [...] in the fact that this very negativity, to attain its "being-for-itself", must embody itself again in some miserable, radically contingent corporeal leftover' (207). It is this 'radically contingent corporeal leftover', I would argue, that constitutes ugliness. It is also, as Žižek realises, what constitutes subjectivity.

Hegel's speculative proposition that 'the Spirit is a bone' elicits a strong reaction. According to Žižek, it 'provokes in us a sentiment of radical, unbearable contradiction; it offers an image of grotesque discord, of an extremely negative relationship' (207).<sup>20</sup> The reason why the reaction is so strong is that the grotesque discord coincides with subjectivity itself: subjectivity can only be realised through the 'absolute maladjustment of the predicate in relation to the subject' (207). The sense of intolerable discontinuity characteristic of the ugly here is what makes the subject present. Instead of a negative relation between transcendent sublimity and phenomenal reality (as in Kant) we now have a situation where the negative relation is located between the subject and the ugly object. The problem of ugliness is thus caught up in the problem of subjectivity.

Žižek turns for confirmation of the relation between the 'miserable little piece of the real' and the subject, or rather between the rigid inertia of the object and the negativity of the subject, to Lacan's theorisation of fantasy. In Lacanian terms, he argues, the bone is 'the objectification of a certain lack', a Thing which 'occupies the place where the signifier is lacking', 'the fantasy-object [which] fills out the lack in

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<sup>19</sup> The problem of the image in relation to a lost originary likeness is raised in chapter 1. Might not caricature ('the art of ugliness') also be seen as a different, but nevertheless legitimate form of 'negative presentation' alongside the sublime?

the Other (the signifier's order)' (208). Where signifying representation fails, the object steps in to embody it. If, for Lacan, the subject is *nothing but* the impossibility of its own signifying representation, then its correlative, the corporeal leftover, is vital. Without it, the subject is not only unthinkable, it is not at all. Sublimity as subjectivity requires the ugly.

### *The Sublime and Time*

While Žižek's discussion focusses on sublimity and the failure of representation, Lyotard is concerned with sublimity as a temporal problem. *L'Inhumain* explores the way in which avant-garde art attempts to present the unrepresentable in the sense of 'rendering present' in the here and *now*, whereas the Hegelian bone is present in Žižek's argument only in as much as it is physically *there*. For Lyotard 'le sublime est suscité par la menace que plus rien n'arrive' (1988: 110). In this he takes his cue from Burke's *Enquiry* in which the most extreme passion – greater still than the positive pleasure derived from beauty – is terror and in particular the terror of impending death which constitutes, in the context of ugliness, the ultimate threat to the continuity of the human subject. 'Ce qui terrifie', argues Lyotard, 'c'est que le *Il arrive que* n'arrive pas, cesse d'arriver' (110).<sup>21</sup> The effect of this curtailment of all futurity is to intensify emotion to the highest degree and it is for this reason – intensification, rather than elevation – that Lyotard looks to Burke's account of the sublime. As with other theories of French sublimity, Lyotard is seeking to identify the ultimate source of heightened aesthetic feeling, to capture the greatest moment of creative energy in order to secure the future of art. To this end, the subject cannot be left stranded in a state of abject terror and 'pain' caused by extreme danger, since aesthetic feeling must also involve a degree of pleasure. Burke's solution is to modify terror so that it 'is not conversant about the present destruction of the person', whereas Lyotard proposes to mediate sheer terror through art: 'En éloignant cette menace, l'art procure un plaisir de soulagement, de délice. Grâce à lui, l'âme est rendue à l'agitation entre la vie et la mort, et cette agitation est sa santé et sa vie' (1988: 111).

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<sup>20</sup> This problem will be raised again in chapter 4 in terms of the 'existential oxymoron'.

Of course the 'terror' evoked by avant-garde works is not real – gallery-goers do not take their lives in their hands when they view an exhibition – and the ambivalent oscillation of the sublime between life and death remains purely aesthetic in nature. What happens, then, when this aestheticised life-death experience has to be confronted for real, say, in the face of one's own imminent death? From the perspective of a life in which the future is taken for granted – where there is no need to feel passionate about being alive or being in good health – the most powerful source of the sublime is found in ideas associated with death. The point is made by Burke:

The ideas of *pain*, *sickness*, and *death* fill the mind with strong emotions of horror; but *life* and *health*, though they put us in a capacity of being affected by pleasure, make no such impression by the simple enjoyment. The passions therefore which are conversant about the preservation of the individual turn chiefly on *pain* and *danger*, and they are the most powerful of all the passions. (Burke 1906: 91).

From the perspective of death, however, there is a significant shift of emphasis with regard to the sublime: the source of creative energy with which it is invariably associated now derives as much from an urgent need to revalue life and health as it does from the terror of sickness and death. The experience of the sublime is, in effect, doubled in that the intensity of aesthetic sublimity from a position of relative safety must now also take account of the real possibility of dying. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, one of the strongest examples of 'dual sublimity' of this kind can be found in the aesthetic response to HIV and AIDS. Efforts to represent and even theorise death and dying from this, more than from any other life-threatening illness are shaped by a curious relation to time. With new combination drug therapies, and in the absence of any long history of AIDS, time in the individual sense is an unknown quantity. We recall here Lyotard's formulation of the sublime in avant-garde art as a form of destitution in which the relation between the mind and time is undone. AIDS writing, poised between fear of death and affirmation of life, is uniquely placed to be

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Derrida's discussion of the fear aroused by the colossal (p. 124). It seems that Lyotard is taking the relative indeterminacy of Derrida's 'qu'est-ce qui vient?' and 'qu'est-ce qui va arriver?' a stage further by asking whether anything will happen *at all*.



able to address this issue. The remaining part of this chapter will therefore focus on the work of the Belgian writer Pascal de Duve, who died in April 1993, aged 29, as a result of AIDS.<sup>22</sup>

*'Les mots et les maux'<sup>23</sup>: the contemporary ethics of the sublime*

*Si ce que 'l'on ne peut dire,  
il faut le taire',  
L. Wittgenstein*

*alors,  
Ce que l'on peut taire,  
il faut le dire.  
Pascal de Duve*

Epigraph to *L'Orage de vivre* (de Duve 1994)

Kant's transcendental, idealist account of the sublime, as Lyotard observes, ultimately sacrifices aesthetics for ethics. Imagination loses out to reason because it is seen as inadequate to the task of fulfilling the moral vocation of mental attunement to the idea of the totality – God. In the context of a strong 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophical tradition of the absurdity of human existence – the absence of God or of any totalising project whatsoever – the ethics of the French sublime is not concerned with establishing a connection to the Almighty, but rather with formulating an ethical view of society. The French sublime also differs from that of Kant in that it specifically tries to incorporate the materiality of the imagination that Kant leaves behind. In the discussion which follows, I shall try to show how Pascal de Duve's work both recontextualises and rematerialises sublimity through a different relationship to the world and to the 'ugliness' of AIDS.

#### *i) Recontextualising the sublime*

De Duve's engagement with the aesthetics of the sublime is, for the most part, not explicit and yet, as a teacher of philosophy, it seems likely that an awareness of the philosophical discourse on the sublime – particularly that of Lyotard – informs his

<sup>22</sup> The discussion which follows was inspired by Ross Chambers's Cassal lecture on French Language and Culture, 'Aids Witnessing as a cultural practice: Pascal de Duve's *Cargo vie*, or the turning of a trope', given at the Institute of Romance Studies in December 1997.

<sup>23</sup> The phrase is borrowed from the title of de Duve's last notebook, dated 1993 (in *L'Orage de vivre*).

writing on a number of levels.<sup>24</sup> As the epigraph to *L'Orage de vivre* makes clear, de Duve is determined to speak about those things which cannot be said, since he recognises that within Wittgenstein's 'cannot' is also an expression of 'should not'. His project is therefore to speak about the things which are there, but 'should not' be said in the sense that they are culturally taboo – to talk openly about homosexuality and to address the reality of AIDS – and also to try to say what cannot be said, in the sense that it is entirely resistant to representation regardless of culturally-imposed limits. In the first case, de Duve's writing closely follows Lyotard's interpretation of the sublime in relation to avant garde art which involves a calculated act of rule-breaking, or what Lyotard terms in *L'Inhumain* 'dérèglement'. Through the deployment of 'les entorses au goût, la laideur' the artist sets out to shock, but in doing so also creates another world in which what might be considered monstrous in the original context becomes sublime (Lyotard 1988: 108). From the point of view of culture one possible 'laideur' is HIV/AIDS and it is this 'unspeakable' reality that de Duve tries to confront in *Cargo vie* (1993), both as something which should not be said and, more problematically (from the point of view of language), as something which cannot be said.

De Duve's text takes the form of a journal written on board a cargo ship which sets sail from Le Havre to collect bananas from the West Indies in May 1992 and returns to France on 22 June. The simple circularity of the voyage belies de Duve's own situation, however; even as he embarks upon it, he knows that he is dying from AIDS-related encephalopathy. At 28, his life is about to be short-circuited and he sets out, therefore, to distance himself from it in order to discover it with the greatest intensity and at the same time to realise his vocation as the 'porte-plume de [s]es frères sidérés qui se calfeutrent dans le mutisme' (de Duve 1993: 65). De Duve intends to speak out about his illness, to present that cultural 'laideur' which might be considered shocking, but he finds that he cannot do so either in writing or in person. When he writes, it becomes clear that none of the available discourses can do justice to the enormity of his situation or enable him to find an appropriate register: medical terminology seems too abstract and scientific, whereas slang seems too concrete and too raw: 'J'ai une encéphalopathie, une inexorable atrophie corticale et subcorticale.

<sup>24</sup> The possible link between de Duve's work and that of Lyotard was pointed out to me by Chambers

Pour être simple: je me fais bouffer le gris du cerveau' (42). When he speaks to the other passengers on board, he feels compelled to find ways of explaining his 'défaillances cérébrales' without reference to his actual condition. On a visit to the ship's engine room, for example, de Duve suffers a blackout, but dismisses it as 'un banal accès d'hypoglycémie' (62).

In *L'Inhumain* (1988), Lyotard proposes a number of different functions for sublimity in art. At stake in the aesthetic of the sublime in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, he argues, is the capacity of art to bear witness to 'ce qu'il y a d'indéterminé' (1988: 113). As Chambers has shown, *Cargo vie* is above all an act of witnessing, specifically of witnessing a disease that is culturally 'obscene', metaphorically 'off-stage' (Chambers 1998: 3).<sup>25</sup> People do not want to hear about it and consequently there are no appropriate ways of talking about it directly. From the point of view of language, then, AIDS is 'indeterminate' and the witnessing subject, 'conscious of having to make use of discursive means that do not correspond to the actuality the witness wishes to make known [feels] a sense of referential as well as rhetorical inadequacy' (Chambers 1998: 4). This is reminiscent of Žižek's characterisation of the sublime as the experience of the failure of representation to reach after the Thing, but 'the Thing' that de Duve reaches after is not God. Rather *Cargo vie* is an attempt, in the terms of Lyotard's sublime, 'de présenter qu'il y a de l'imprésentable' (Lyotard 1988: 112), or to find a way through words to convey that there is something for which there are no words, to bear witness to the reality of AIDS when the (readily acceptable) discourses available are inadequate to the task.

In *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), Elaine Scarry analyses pain as an anomalous state for which there is no object and which cannot therefore be represented. Any state that is permanently objectless, she argues, will lead to an attempt to fill the gap by means of invention, that is, through the objectifying power of the imagination. What may be the case, she suggests is that

'pain' and 'imagining' constitute extreme conditions of, on the one hand, intentionality as a state and, on the other, intentionality as self-objectification;

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(1998: 17).

and that between these two boundary conditions all the other more familiar, binary acts-and-objects are located. That is, pain and imagining are the 'framing events' within whose boundaries all other perceptual, somatic, and emotional events occur; thus, between the two extremes can be mapped the whole terrain of the human psyche. (Scarry 1985: 164-5)

Scarry's proposed 'framing events' for the human psyche not only describe the extremes of de Duve's personal situation, but also offer a convincing account of the mechanism of the sublime as theorised by Lyotard. From a state without an object (pain), the sublime moves to an 'object' without a state (in the physical sense). The movement of the sublime, framed at either extreme by pain and imagining, is thus a movement from the experience of sheer unrepresentability into the field of representation, from destitution to creativity, from fear of death to affirmation of life.<sup>26</sup> To borrow Scarry's subtitle, this dual movement can be seen in terms of the making and unmaking, or rather unmaking and remaking of the world. Physical pain has no object and so 'unmakes' the world and the subject with it.<sup>27</sup> There is no way for de Duve to express his physical, as opposed to psychological, suffering (he can only describe what happens; he cannot say how it feels). The powerful way in which he is able to verbalise hatred of his former lover, 'E.', testifies to this distinction. Physical pain leaves de Duve utterly destitute. At a loss for words, he takes recourse in the power of imagination which, as becomes clear in the course of the journal, gives him the world back.

AIDS brings with it fear and suffering, but it also changes de Duve's perspective on life and leads him to live it more intensely, more passionately than ever. For this reason, the pain of 'sida mon calvaire' is transformed into an imaginary lover, 'sida mon amour' (129). In a letter to Nicole, the one passenger on board ship to whom de

<sup>25</sup> Cf. the obscenity of the colossal in Derrida (see p. 124 above).

<sup>26</sup> This argument contradicts the Kantian account of the sublime, but confirms that of Lyotard in that it privileges the imagination and invests in it the power to 'remake the world'.

<sup>27</sup> It is important here to note that Scarry makes a distinction between physical pain and *psychological* pain: '*Psychological* suffering,' she argues, 'though often difficult for any one person to express, *does* have referential content, *is* susceptible to verbal objectification, and is so habitually depicted in art that [...] there is virtually no piece of literature that is *not* about suffering, no piece of literature which does not stand by ready to assist us' (Scarry 1985: 11). Nevertheless, I would argue along with Edmund Burke, that psychological pain is analogous to physical pain and that to consider one in terms of the other is still valid; this not least because of the rôle played by the imagination.

Duve feels close, he explains this transformation: ‘En effet, après le traumatisme initial, mon sida est rapidement devenu une passion exaltante, qui changea ma vie, sur laquelle j’ouvre tous les jours, de plus en plus, des yeux émerveillés’ (88). This experience of ‘émerveillement’ occasioned by the personal tragedy of AIDS corresponds closely to Lyotard’s definition of the feeling of the sublime:

Voici donc comment s’analyse le sentiment sublime: un objet très grand, très puissant, menaçant donc de priver l’âme de tout *Il arrive*, la frappe d’‘étonnement’ (à de moindres degrés d’intensité, l’âme est saisi d’admiration, de vénération, de respect). Elle est stupide, immobilisé, comme morte. En éloignant cette menace, l’art procure un plaisir de soulagement, de délice. Grâce à lui, l’âme est rendue à l’agitation entre la vie et la mort, et cette agitation est sa santé et sa vie. (Lyotard: 1988: 111)

De Duve ‘removes the menace’ of AIDS for himself and for others through the message of ‘émerveillement’ and the creation of positive imagery. Although the imaginative transformation of a terminal illness into a lover, as de Duve recognises, might in itself appear shocking – “‘Sida mon amour.’ Comment oser ce cri passionné?’ (149) – it is as nothing compared to the grim alternative of ‘sida mon calvaire’. Ross Chambers reads de Duve’s sublimation of AIDS in this way as ‘an exercise in equivocation, a catachrestic substitution of something that, in the circumstances, can be relatively easily said and heard – a kind of messenger “dove” – for the “pigeon” of a more unspeakable and loathsome reality’ (Chambers 1998: 16).<sup>28</sup>

There is in fact more than one ‘pigeon of loathsome reality’, or ugliness in *Cargo vie*. As I have said, from the point of view of culture that ugliness is AIDS. From the point of view of the author, however, AIDS is not irredeemably ugly since it has freed him from the hegemony of habitual ways of seeing and in doing so has enabled his writing to enter the true stakes of art as seen by Lyotard, namely ‘faire voir ce qui fait

<sup>28</sup> The ‘bird-play’ here is suggested by a parallel between the voyage of discovery to the New World made by Columbus (whose name in his native Italian means ‘pigeon’) during which he may have taken or brought back the syphilis spirochete, and the voyage of discovery across the Atlantic made 500 years later by de Duve (whose Flemish origins indicate a link between ‘Duve’ and the Dutch word ‘duif’, or dove) and who was carrying with him the HIV virus. See Chambers (1998: 1).

voir, et non ce qui est visible' (Lyotard 1988: 113). For de Duve ugliness has two faces: that of death, but more hateful still, that of E., de Duve's former lover. After a passionate, year-long affair E., who was himself HIV positive, ended the relationship abruptly when de Duve first became ill. De Duve cannot forgive him on a personal level for the betrayal of his love and his trust, and for the impersonal mode of rejection – over the telephone – but more than this, he cannot forgive him for his absolute moral cowardice, his refusal to face up to the reality of AIDS: 'tu faisais toujours comme si le sida n'existait pas. Le sujet était tabou. Alors il ne fallait surtout pas qu'E., en personne, fût associé de près ou de loin à un sidéen' (75). E. now haunts de Duve's nightmares as a hideous, mask-like face with the moral status of a Sartrean *salaud*:

Pour Sartre '*les salauds sont (...) des gens qui mettent leur liberté à se faire reconnaître comme bons par les autres, alors qu'en réalité ils sont mauvais à cause de leur activité même*'. E., tu es un salaud au sens sartrien. Derrière une façade fleurie et soignée, tu caches une ruine de laideur. (115)

That ugliness consists in turning his back in an impersonal way on the loathsome reality of AIDS like so many others – 'il y en a tellement comme toi...' (115). Far more shocking to de Duve, however, is the realisation that E. has no sense of personal moral responsibility either. He is guilty not only of crimes against de Duve's humanity, but against the humanity of other people too: against his ten-year-old son and the child's mother, and against a young lover whom he knowingly infected with HIV. 'Ces deux choses ignobles, je les vois comme d'immenses crapauds entachant la gemme qu'était ton coeur', de Duve writes, adding that E.'s behaviour towards him has only served to make the toads 'encore plus laids' (120). There is no place for this kind of ugliness anywhere in de Duve's sublime.

Where, then, is de Duve's sublime? As a declared agnostic – an 'émerveilliste abstentionnel' – he rejects ontological arguments in favour of dogmatic human autonomy (there is no God), but also those in favour of an equally dogmatic heteronomy (there is a God and He is everything). De Duve reaches this conclusion

having studied Kant's *Critique of pure reason*, one of the few philosophical texts, he argues, which 'bien lu, postule l'humilité intellectuelle' (60). He keeps it by his bed. One of the consequences of his (in)decision is a refusal to choose between immanence and transcendence. He disagrees with Sartre's conviction that "'L'en-soi et le pour-soi sont inconciliables en un seul être". Comment Sartre, qui compte parmi les grands auxquels j'aime me référer (notamment pour sa philosophie de la liberté et pour son éthique), a-t-il pu être si *réducteur* à propos de ce sujet délicat?', he asks (59-60). For de Duve 'La Vie est une immanence transcendante; la Mort est une transcendance immanente' (71). The status of metaphysics is uncertain. Adorno, at the end of *Negative Dialectics*, states that the thought which accompanies the fall of metaphysics cannot proceed other than via 'micrologies'. Lyotard defines these 'micrologies' thus: 'La micrologie inscrit l'occurrence d'une pensée comme l'impensé qui reste à penser dans le déclin de la grande pensée philosophique' (1988: 114-5). In one of his characteristic word-plays, de Duve proposes a new genre for *Cargo vie*, that of the 'journal infime' (as opposed to 'intime') containing 'beaucoup d'espaces blancs où se loge l'invisible, l'indicible' (94).<sup>29</sup> The sublime object of Kant's third *Critique* which is 'large absolutely', is replaced by an object which is infinitely small – HIV. In the middle of the ocean, listening to an expansive work of art in the form of Saint-Saëns's third organ symphony, de Duve observes: 'Toute cette grandeur m'a fait réaliser que pour l'Absolu, notre navire devait être microscopique. Et moi j'étais une poussière encore plus petite, hébergeant un être invisible qui était en train de me tuer à son aise' (44). De Duve clearly has a sense that there is a source of the sublime at the other end of the scale which is contained, in Russian doll-like fashion, inside the innermost layer of minuteness within himself.<sup>30</sup> Whereas traditional accounts of the sublime emphasise its negativity (the measure of its greatness is seen in terms of the abyss between man and God), de Duve's sublime has a more positive character: HIV-positive, of course, but also positive in that there

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Quasimodo's sublime moment of greatness when he is also described as 'infime' in *Notre-Dame de Paris* (see p. 119 above).

<sup>30</sup> Prompted by de Duve's own fondness for phoneme substitutions, I cannot help noticing here the proximity of VIH to VH (Victor Hugo) and the parallel between the invisibility of the virus and Hugo's formulation of genius as the 'atome trait d'union' that bridges the gap between immanence and transcendence in the context of the sublime. The suggestion of an affinity with Hugo is supported by the fact that de Duve quotes a fragment of one of Hugo's poems in which death and beauty appear as twin sisters 'également terribles et fécondes/ Ayant la même énigme et le même secret' (de Duve 1993: 28).

is no gap between it and the subject. The sublime object, though still transcendent, is also immanent – it is within de Duve's own body.

De Duve's experience of the sublime is also positive in that it enables him to pass on a message of wonderment, but, as he realises, the sense of wonderment, or what Lyotard terms 'étonnement', is experienced with the greatest intensity only when our relation to time is fundamentally altered:

Frères et soeurs d'infortune, ne négligez pas de puiser dans les ressources qu'offre cette maladie à votre sensibilité. Ouvrez les yeux pour vous émerveiller des grandes choses et surtout des petites, toutes celles dont ceux que la Mort ne courtise pas encore, ceux pour qui la Mort est lointaine et abstraite, ne peuvent véritablement jouir comme nous le pouvons. Sidéens de tous les pays, grisons-nous de ce privilège, pour mieux combattre nos souffrances que je ne veux nullement minimiser. (De Duve 1993: 149)

In Lyotard's terms this 'jouissance ambivalente' (Lyotard 1988: 112) resembles the response of the viewer to avant-garde works of art where the 'artist' (HIV/AIDS) creates an 'event' (a terminal illness) from which the 'viewer' no longer seeks to derive an ethical benefit, but rather to intensify his or her capacity for emotion and insight. De Duve himself acknowledges, in a limited way, that HIV is an 'artist' when he writes 'VIH, c'est un peu toi qui écris ici' (21).<sup>31</sup> For the most part, however, de Duve does not elevate AIDS to the status of an artist; at most it is a paradoxical muse who takes life away and gives it back through art. Whether as artist or muse, AIDS fulfils Lyotard's avant-garde task, which is to shatter the habitual relation between the mind and time by robbing the subject of all sense of futurity: 'La tâche avant-gardiste reste de défaire la présomption de l'esprit par rapport au temps. Le sentiment sublime est le nom de ce dénuement' (Lyotard 1988: 118). The ugliness that is AIDS from the point of view of culture is thus part of the structure of sublimity in that it is instrumental in inflicting on the subject the radical discontinuity of the self in relation to time that *is* the experience of the sublime.

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<sup>31</sup> Later, he confers the rôle of artist not on AIDS, but on death: 'La Mort fait déjà de l'art en moi – mon sida est-il autre chose que son oeuvre en création?' (135).



ii) *Rematerialising the sublime*

In *L'Orage de vivre* (1994), a collection of notebooks written between 1987-1993 relating to events from 1985 and published posthumously in 1994, one of de Duve's main preoccupations is his relationship with writing and specifically with the materiality of words. Although word-play and punning form an important element in *Cargo vie* as part of its message (V.I.R.U.S. will one day have six letters, he hopes and become S.U.R.V.I.E.), in *L'Orage de vivre*, de Duve undertakes a more self-conscious, though more fragmented reflection on the nature of writing itself. He prefers to call himself a 'scripteur' rather than a writer: 'L'important, c'est que je me débarrasse de ce que j'ai à dire en le couchant sur le papier. La différence entre un écrivain et moi, c'est qu'il ne veut se débarrasser de rien du tout' (1994: 81).<sup>32</sup> De Duve is not using words merely for the sake of 'écrivainité', as he terms it (1993: 78), but in order to realise the potential of a personal 'désarroi absolu'. There is a sense of great urgency behind his decision to write, though because of the variety of texts that form *L'Orage de vivre* (a scattered series of notes, beginnings of shorts stories, projects for novels not necessarily in chronological order) the precise nature of the 'désarroi absolu' remains ambiguous. It refers both to the emotional turmoil preceding de Duve's decision to live openly as a gay man – 'ne plus vivre ma vie comme on remonte un escalator qui descend' (16) – and to the extreme distress following the discovery that he is HIV positive. In either case: 'Le désarroi absolu potentialise toutes les forces d'un être. Il provoque la révolte, la création, l'audace; il est le principal instigateur de "premiers pas" libérateurs' (1994: 90). In changing his relationship with the world, through choice and later through necessity, de Duve also comes to recognise the material importance of changing his relationship to language:

Je ne suis pas de ce monde. Aussi est-ce normal que je cherche refuge aux confins de chaque mot que je crée, camouflets infligés avec plaisir à l'orthodoxie verbale qui n'est que l'instrument de l'embrigadement de l'humain dans l'impersonnel et la grisaille. (116-7)

<sup>32</sup> De Duve's objection is to the 'vanity' of the 'écrivain' who writes 'in vain'. This is not so much arrogance on de Duve's part as an expression of dissatisfaction with the sound of (part of) the word.

To this end, de Duve invokes words as monsters of the sublime (echoing, perhaps, Hugo's formulation of genius). The reader is presented without comment with words that make monstrous claims to committing symbolic acts of violence against the whiteness of the page which refer, in turn, to monstrous acts of violence against real people that are made to appear more monstrous still because the perpetrator – the pen – is seen to enjoy them: 'Oui, les mots violent la virginité des feuilles blanches, d'un viol délicieux et premier, le stylo livre son encre en une éjaculation qui n'en finit pas' (70). From de Duve's point of view, however, words are monstrous because they appear as marauding hordes on the brink of invasion with the potential, on occasion, to overwhelm him by their sheer presence. 'Les mots sont les monstres aussi', he argues, 'en ce que dès leur apparition, ils se moquent de leur origine et se montrent dramatiquement autonomes, méconnaissables pour leur scripteur, père occasionnel ou plutôt accidentel' (1994: 71). The monsters become sublime at moments when de Duve catches himself in the act of doing violence to them even as they themselves violate the virginal page:

Sentiments et passions, secrets de l'âme s'unissent pour violer les mots, les forcer à être farouches, sublimes, ensembles. Combinaisons magiques, impérialisme du coeur au détriment du langage fonctionnel. Tel se veut cet écrit, délicieux détournement de la logistique linguistique [...] (1994: 95)

Although this might appear to be nothing more than gratuitous violence done to language through language, the aggressiveness of the text is not a sign of moral recklessness or a case of mere verbal shock tactics. The text at its most violent is an expression of de Duve at his most vulnerable and the materiality of words in fact enables de Duve as defiant *scripteur* to pursue a concealed dialogue with a de Duve 'en lancinante détresse' (70). Immediately preceding the verbal 'rape scene', and in absolute contrast to it, a whispered conversation between the two de Duves takes place in which:

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'Scripteur' is one proposed solution to the emptiness he hears in it. In *Cargo vie*, however, he adopts another title: 'Sus aux écrivanteux, je préfère être qualifié d'écrivain' (1993: 52).

[c]haque fredonnement du stylo sur le papier blanc sera comme un chuchotement d'encouragement de moi-même à cet autre moi-même, par le truchement de la matérialité naissante des mots. (70)

Even more revealing, perhaps, than the words on the page are the numerous blank spaces in the text (both *Cargo vie* and *L'Orage de vivre* are printed as a series of discrete paragraphs). De Duve draws attention to their importance himself in *Cargo vie*, a 'journal infime – avec beaucoup d'espaces blancs où se loge, invisible, l'indicible' (1993: 94).

There are other ways, too, of attempting to say through language that there are things language cannot say directly (of expressing sublimity through art's attempt to present the idea that there is an unpresentable); that is, through the conflation of words to create neologisms which draw attention to their material origins and to the multiple meanings they contain. In *Cargo vie* De Duve refers to the burial at sea of E.'s letters as a ritual of '*enmèrement*' (56) and wishes that his own ashes might be scattered in a corresponding '*encièlement*' (63); the idyllic dream of their relationship has become a '*cauchemerde*' (78) since the moment when E. changed his mind – 'tu as changé d'à-vie' (136); de Duve distances his own writing from that of the '*écrivanteux*' beset by '*écrivantité*' (78); and seeks to lessen the fear experienced by fellow 'sidéens' by suggesting that 'notre maladie n'est pas fatalement *éprouvable*' (94). These too are calculated acts of 'violence' done to and through language, referentially less so, but grammatically more so than the 'rape of the page'. It is through such material interventions in-(between) and through language, that de Duve succeeds in rematerialising the sublime. Where Lyotard insists, somewhat wordily, that the feeling of the sublime is the destitution which accompanies the undoing of the relation to time, de Duve is able to express that feeling in the final notebook of *L'Orage de vivre* when he writes, quite simply: 'je m'heure' (1994: 170).

### Conclusion

There is a distinct incongruity in this chapter between the grand discourses of the sublime with which it begins and the intensely personal narrative of the sublime with

which it ends. The ‘absolutely large’ of the Kantian sublime becomes the sublime of the infinitely small of HIV in the work of de Duve and so establishes an unlikely (and certainly anachronistic) kind of polarity. In this concluding section, I would like to consider where, in the vast conceptual space this polarity opens up, the self might be located and what the experience of the self might be.

Kant’s account of the experience of the sublime in nature situates the subject on one side and the thing that cannot be represented on the other. This relation is enacted in the conflicting relation between reason and imagination, where ‘the thing’ (the transcendent proposition) is seen as ‘an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself’ (§27, 115). Even though ‘the thing’ is conceptually ‘above’ the subject, it opens up an abyssal space *beneath* it as far as the imagination is concerned. Reason, by contrast, rises to the challenge of the sublime by making itself adequate to the thing, thus in effect saving the imaginative self from plunging into the ‘abyss’. The final moment of the Kantian sublime sees only one self – the now ‘exalted’ reasoning self – which is now mentally attuned to the sublime.

De Duve’s situation adds two further dimensions to the experience of the sublime. The first of these can be viewed in spatial terms. Whilst the Kantian horizon of transcendence is not abandoned (de Duve declares himself an ‘émerveilliste abstentionnel’, see p. 137 above), the prospect of absolute immanence – the infinite smallness of HIV within the body – opens up another, equally dizzying prospect. HIV creates an abyss *within* the self. The other is inside, but the very fact of its being inside means that it is also part of the self. The self is thus experienced as the other, a disturbing fact reflected in de Duve’s restless relation to language. Troubled by uncertainty with respect to himself, he is also troubled about ways to relate to words. His decision not to call himself an ‘écrivain’, but an ‘écrivain’ is significant here. It is one way of expressing, and refusing to give in to, the sense of desolation created by an other within himself which has no object (other than himself). The overdetermined meaning of ‘écrivain’ for de Duve is as unacceptable, I would suggest, as his now overdetermined self.

The second dimension de Duve brings to the experience of the sublime is a sense of destitution with respect to time. Again, this causes him to experience himself as other in the sense that he is both already dying and still living at the same time. The concealed dialogue between the defiant 'scripteur' and the de Duve 'en lancinante détresse' in *L'Orage de vivre* might be taken as evidence of this temporal conflict. In *L'Inhumain*, Lyotard locates the sublime feeling in the undoing of 'la présomption de l'esprit par rapport au temps' (see above p. 139). When this happens, I would suggest, the self genuinely under threat is suddenly experienced as utterly contingent. The question is no longer one of relative indetermination – Derrida's 'qu'est-ce qui vient? qu'est-ce qui vient arriver?' (see above p. 124) – but of absolute indetermination – Lyotard's 'Arrive-t-il?' (Lyotard 1988: 110 and p. 130 above). This sudden intuition is a radicalised and intensified moment of the contingency from which existentialist philosophy – the subject of chapter 4 – proceeds as a given.

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## CHAPTER 4

### **Ugliness Is An Existential Issue: Sartrean Nausea And The Hell Of Other People**

Western philosophy has always been reluctant to address the problem of ugliness directly and on its own terms. The ancient Greek physiognomical value system of *Kalokagathia*, whereby the beautiful was seen as an expression of the good, merely made of ugliness a negative aesthetic and moral value. Its specificities were effectively flattened. Problems arose with such theories, however, when those specificities could not be flattened easily, as was the case with Socrates. The revered philosopher of the platonic dialogues was notoriously ugly. His appearance was often compared to that of the the satyr, Silenus, which meant that his greatness as a philosopher was seen to be sharply at odds with his face. This fact presented something of dilemma for physiognomy: either the tradition of *Kalokagathia* was flawed, or Socrates was the exception that proved the rule. The respective *Symposia* of Plato and Xenophon, in which the problem of Socrates's ugliness is discussed, pursued the latter line of thought. His physical disadvantage was dismissed as mere surface appearance in order to focus more sharply on inner human qualities. Socrates was, after all, an exceptional man. The ugliness of the philosopher was shown to have no bearing on his philosophy and the case was closed.

It was reopened in 1986, however, by Alain Buisine in his study of the most famous ugly philosopher in France, Jean-Paul Sartre. Buisine's book, *Laideurs de Sartre*, was described by one critic – whose view is reproduced with some glee on the back cover – as 'ce livre scandaleux. Le plus scandaleux, sans doute, qui ait été écrit sur Sartre'.<sup>1</sup> The scandalous nature of the book lies in the fact that it dares to suggest that Sartre's own physical ugliness profoundly influenced his philosophy: 'il s'agit', states Buisine, 'd'intégrer le corps du sujet dans son corpus, de montrer comment Sartre va faire de sa propre laideur un objet philosophique' (Buisine 1986: 9). Of course, he adds in parenthesis, once Sartre's ugliness becomes such a philosophical object, the object is no longer commensurable with its cause. Buisine thus recognises

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<sup>1</sup> Comment made by Philippe Bonnefis.

the perverse nature of his own enterprise. He insists nonetheless that Sartre's relationship with the image in his work would not have been as complex and ambiguous as it is were it not for his troubled relationship with his own face.

Buisine's study documents and comments upon physical details concerning Sartre the man in relation to thematic elements of his work that are assumed to be ugly. It does not attempt to analyse the nature of that presumed ugliness either empirically or philosophically. In this chapter I take the view that the ugliness of Sartre the man is a matter of pure contingency, whereas ugliness in his philosophical writing is not. The ugly for Sartre is part of a phenomenological structure through which the fact of contingency – the starting point for existential philosophy – reveals itself. In this capacity, ugliness represents an important philosophical (and not merely thematic) aspect of Sartre's work. The aim of this chapter is to explore the relationship between the self and the other in this context. Part one looks at the issue of ugliness and existential nausea, and at ways in which manifestations of nausea (disgust, sliminess, the obscene and the ungraceful) forge links with ugliness. Part two examines Sartre's theory of the Other and of being-for-others, and the way in which the self is objectified and alienated by 'the look'.

## PART 1: UGLINESS and NAUSEA

The question of ugliness in existential terms calls, in the first instance, for a re-examination of the notions of the self and of the other. In *L'Être et le néant* (1943) Sartre takes a cautious approach towards the word 'self' to avoid any confusion between the existential self and the traditional notions of selfhood that conform to the law of identity ( $A=A$ ). For Sartre 'le *soi* ne peut être saisi comme un existant réel: le sujet ne peut *être* soi, car la coïncidence avec soi fait [...] disparaître le soi' (Sartre 1943: 115).<sup>2</sup> The distinction being made here is the distinction between the subject as consciousness and the subject as embodied existence. For Sartre these two aspects of 'the self' co-exist, but do not coincide since consciousness cannot *be* sheer matter any more than matter can *be* consciousness: '[l]e *soi* représente donc une distance idéale dans l'immanence du sujet par rapport à lui-même, une façon de *ne pas être sa propre*

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<sup>2</sup> All further references to *L'Être et le Néant* will be given simply as (EN page number).



*coïncidence*, d'échapper à l'identité tout en la posant comme unité' (EN 115). This law of separation, the ontological foundation of consciousness as consciousness of something, is designated by Sartre as being *for-itself* ('pour-soi'), which arises through the negation of physical being *in-itself* ('en-soi'). Thus the world of being in-itself can be seen as the ground of otherness against which the figure of being for-itself appears.<sup>3</sup> The for-itself (consciousness) transcends the in-itself (the body) in order to become itself, a fact which leads to the apparently chiasmic assertion that the for-itself is not what it is and is what it is not, a situation neatly explained by Andrew Leak:

[...] the body is constantly gone past (*dépassé*) and is, as such, the past (*le passé*). In its eruption towards its own possibilities, the *pour-soi* nihilates what it *is* and projects itself towards what it *is* not yet. Within the unity of the same project, the *pour-soi* flees one *en-soi* in a futile attempt at recoincedence with another: the aim of human reality is to achieve the impossible perfection of being that is described as *en-soi-pour-soi*, or God. (Leak 1989: 7)<sup>4</sup>

This, as I shall discuss shortly, is precisely the drama of the self–other relation in *La Nausée*. The diary of Antoine Roquentin documents his experience of negotiating 'the self' (the for-itself) in relation to the first 'other' (the physical world in-itself) and then seeking to escape towards another 'other' (the disembodied in-itself of a rag-time song).

The for-itself's necessary connection with the in-itself is termed by Sartre its 'facticity' (we cannot escape the fact of our being in the world), but the fact of being *this particular* in-itself, as opposed to any other, is entirely contingent (without reason, without cause and without necessity). In the normal course of events, where the for-itself is engaged in the actions of everyday life, its facticity is obscured. In particular, the body appears to consciousness in its capacity as an instrument for carrying out such everyday actions, rather than as a contingent object. We do not

<sup>3</sup> The in-itself is only one form of existential 'otherness', however, and is not referred to by Sartre as such in order to avoid confusion with his concept of *the Other*, or the world of other people. Sartre's important discourse of *the Other* will be discussed in Part 2.

experience a hand as a thing that just happens to be there, but as an integral part of our individual daily 'projects' of, say, picking up a glass, typing, or turning a key. It is only under more unusual circumstances – such as when we experience physical pleasure or pain – that the body makes its presence clearly felt.<sup>5</sup> At other times the in-itself as a factual existence for the for-itself maintains only a vague, low-level presence described by Sartre in terms of an insipid taste, or rather *our own* insipid taste. This unobtrusive, but insidious taste of facticity (which in turn reveals contingency) is, for Sartre, the basis for existential nausea. The terms of nausea are set out in *L'Être et le Néant* as follows:

Cette saisie perpétuelle par mon pour-soi d'un goût *fade* et sans distance qui m'accompagne jusque dans mes efforts pour m'en délivrer et qui est *mon* goût, c'est ce que nous avons décrit ailleurs sous le nom de *Nausée*. Une nausée discrète et insurmontable révèle perpétuellement mon corps à ma conscience: il peut arriver que nous recherchions l'agréable ou la douleur physique pour nous en délivrer, mais dès que la douleur ou l'agréable sont existés par la conscience, ils manifestent à leur tour sa facticité et sa contingence et c'est sur fond de nausée qu'ils se dévoilent. (EN 387)

Far from being a metaphor derived from empirical 'écoeurements physiologiques', argues Sartre, this form of nausea is *the* Nausea on which all other nauseas are founded. The nauseating experience of rotten meat, blood, excrement and the like – and the subsequent need to vomit – is an extreme manifestation of a profound existential disgust that is always already there.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The term 'nihilate' or 'nihilation' is coined by Sartre in order to differentiate its specific existential meaning from philosophical negation in general. The relation between the *for-itself* and the *in-itself* nevertheless remains a relation of negation and not one of opposition.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the mental pleasure and pain associated with the experience of the sublime (see chapter 3).

<sup>6</sup> Existential disgust must be distinguished carefully from bourgeois notions of disgust (bad taste). As a manifestation of existential nausea it is a fundamental aspect of human reality which should not be confused with objects that merely offend bourgeois sensibilities. For this reason, Sartre qualifies the taste of nausea as being '*fade*' or dull, rather than '*mauvais*' or bad. I shall return to the issue of disgust in more detail later.

*La Nausée* (1938)

‘La Nausée, c’est l’Existence qui se dévoile –  
et ça n’est pas beau à voir, l’Existence.’

(Sartre: *prière d’insérer* for first edition of *La Nausée*)

The semi-comic, semi-ironic tone of the *prière d’insérer* makes it hard to determine exactly what Sartre means when he says that Existence is ‘pas beau à voir’. The phrase is used both metaphorically and colloquially here. From the point of view of existentialist philosophy, however, existence simply *is* and is therefore not susceptible to any judgements, aesthetic or otherwise. To say that existence is not beautiful can therefore simply be read as a way of stating this fundamental principle, in which case there is no place here for ugliness either. The fact that Existence (with a capital ‘E’) is ‘pas beau à voir’, however, immediately implies an onlooker who evaluates. Existence in *La Nausée* is, then, the world of what Sartre calls ‘human reality’; that is, the world as it appears to consciousness, rather than a philosophical ‘everything there is’. The ‘I’ who looks in this case is the fictional author/narrator, Antoine Roquentin, whose view of human reality at the end of the novel, transformed by the experience of Nausea, invites a retrospective reappraisal of that nausea specifically in terms of ugliness. In order to establish grounds for reading *La Nausée* from the beginning as a novel about ugliness, it is worth stating this view at the outset. As Roquentin enjoys one last drink in the *Rendez-vous des Cheminots* before returning to Paris, he makes the following observation:

Tous les objets qui m’entouraient étaient faits de la même matière que moi, d’une espèce de souffrance moche. *Le monde était si laid*, hors de moi, si laids ces verres sales sur les tables, et les taches brunes sur la glace et le tablier de Madeleine et l’air aimable du gros amoureux de la patronne, *si laide l’existence même du monde*, que je me sentais à l’aise, en famille. (emphasis added; Sartre 1938: 242)

For Roquentin the world is ugly, existence is ugly and he now realises that it is the ugliness of existence that he has been grappling with all along. The ugly for

Roquentin, as for Sartre, is the manifestation of the contingency of existence revealed through the experience of nausea. Encounters in the novel with obscenity, viscosity and the disgusting are all symptomatic of this underlying truth. In the light of this, it seems appropriate to read *La Nausée* as a novel about ugliness, or rather as a phenomenological study of contingency which has the ugly as its object and nausea as the human response to that object. Thus a fundamental connection is established between the condition of existence as contingency on the one hand and the evidence of that condition through ugliness and nausea on the other.

For Sartre, the principle focus of theoretical attention when writing *La Nausée* was always the problem of contingency.<sup>7</sup> He referred to the work as a ‘factum sur la contingence’. It was intended to address the question, raised later in *Les Mots* (written in 1963), of his sense of absolute superfluity in contrast to the apparent ‘necessity’ of his bourgeois family background. His reflections on this aspect of contingency were always haunted by a sense of ugliness. The ‘comedy’ of comfortable, conventional bourgeois life described in *Les Mots* – a comedy in which Sartre the child was able to play his rôle to perfection – was overshadowed by a growing conviction that ‘[i]l y avait un envers horrible des choses’ (Sartre 1964a: 83). Sartre’s fear of this horrible underside of reality was, he claimed, one of the only authentic aspects of his childhood existence. The origin of the fear was a feeling of being ‘de trop’, a sense of being utterly contingent and unnecessary, which revealed itself to consciousness through ugliness. This confirmed ugliness, in supposedly autobiographical terms, as the physical correlative of Sartre’s theory of contingency.<sup>8</sup>

### *Contingency*

At this point it is important to establish in more detail just what Sartre’s theory of contingency is. The best definition, according to Sartre scholars Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, is given in *La Nausée*:

<sup>7</sup> See ‘Notice’ to *La Nausée* by Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka in Sartre (1981: 1659).

<sup>8</sup> I use this example from *Les Mots* as an illustration of the continued significance in Sartre’s work of the connection between ugliness and contingency. Unlike Alain Buisine, it is not my intention to reinforce a specifically autobiographical link, since the status of autobiography, from an existential point of view, is highly problematic. If the for-itself is constituted by transcending both the in-itself and the past, then an ‘autobiographical self’ is something of an existential anomaly.

L'essentiel c'est la contingence. Je veux dire que, par définition, l'existence n'est pas la nécessité. Exister, c'est *être là*, simplement; les existants apparaissent, se laissent *rencontrer*, mais on ne peut jamais les *déduire*. Il y a des gens, je crois, qui ont compris ça. Seulement ils ont essayé de surmonter cette contingence en inventant un être nécessaire et cause de soi. Or aucun être nécessaire ne peut expliquer l'existence: la contingence n'est pas un faux-semblant, une apparence qu'on peut dissiper; c'est l'absolu, par conséquent la gratuité parfaite. Tout est gratuit, ce jardin, cette ville et moi-même. (Sartre 1938: 184-5)

Contingency is the simple fact of being there for which (in the absence of God) there is no reason, no cause and no necessity. It is the condition of human freedom and a terrifying prospect which some (or indeed most) people try to conceal by pretending to themselves that their existence is necessary in some way – by acting out the ‘comedy’ of bourgeois family life, for example. Sartre refers to this inauthentic mode of existence as living in ‘bad faith’. But contingency, freedom and the responsibility that comes with that freedom are inescapable facts and however much an individual (or an entire ‘civilised’ society) might deny them, there is always the danger that they will be revealed unexpectedly. This is what happens in *La Nausée* to Roquentin for whom nausea is the figure for the experience of this revelation. The passage quoted above continues: ‘Quand il arrive qu’on s’en rende compte, ça vous tourne le coeur et tout se met à flotter [...]: voilà la Nausée’ (Sartre 1938: 185). Nausea describes the visceral response to intimations of contingency, but it is not a direct response to contingency itself, since contingency is an abstract metaphysical state. What Roquentin does not recognise at this stage is that there is a missing phenomenological link between nausea as response and contingency as abstraction. That link, as he acknowledges at the end of the novel, is ugliness.

Given the emphasis placed by phenomenology on the powerful effect of the object – Husserl’s ‘donation originaire’ – we might expect that the nature of ugliness as a phenomenological link could be determined by focussing attention on the objects which trigger Roquentin’s nausea attacks. The list of such ‘objects’ includes a khmer statuette, a pebble, Roquentin’s own face in the mirror, other people’s faces and

hands, colour combinations (such as cousin Adolphe's mauve braces against the blue of his shirt or the chocolate brown of the café walls), the bourgeois streets of Bouville (as opposed to the industrialised boulevard Noir), fog, humanism, a tram seat and a tree root in the park. The list is surprising in that none of the objects is intrinsically ugly in the conventional sense. Nor do they appear to have anything in common. The only consistent feature is their relation to Roquentin. These are not ugly objects in-themselves, but they are ugly for-Roquentin. The starting point for ugliness, then, as far as the reader is concerned, is not the object but the subject. There is something unusual about the way Roquentin relates to the world of objects.<sup>9</sup>

In *L'Imaginaire* (1940), Sartre identifies two modes of consciousness through which the subject relates to the world: perception (where the object is real and present) and imagination (where the object is unreal and absent). The object of perception is radically distinct from the object of imagination and, as far as Sartre is concerned, there seems little room for confusion. Either the object is actually there physically, or it isn't. But, as Christina Howells (1979: 4) observes, imagination and perception are necessarily inter-dependent and the act of perception implies the possibility of imagining more than is actually there. It is this possibility, she argues, which provides the key to Sartre's concept of human freedom. The question of freedom is not discussed in detail in *La Nausée*, rather what is at issue is the underlying condition of that freedom: contingency. The problem facing Roquentin (and Sartre) is how to represent the fact of contingency when it is not an object of perception. The answer lies in the imagination.

Roquentin's diary does not describe what he *sees* in his encounters with 'ugly' objects, so much as what he *imagines*. To this extent his attitude towards objects is aesthetic, as opposed to what Sartre terms the 'attitude réalisante' of perception. Roquentin's nausea is not just about the contingency of existence, therefore, but about the creative process as well (he is, as we learn from his diary, a biographer disillusioned with biography). What he unwittingly achieves is the transformation of brute existence (real objects which 'reek' of contingency) into art (unreal objects of the imagination); that is, in more conventional terms, the transformation of ugliness

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<sup>9</sup> However, as I shall go on to discuss, the situation from Roquentin's point of view is reversed. He

into some sort of 'beauty'. Roquentin's journal can thus be seen as a reflection of Sartre's own position with regard to aesthetics: 'Le réel n'est jamais beau. La beauté est une valeur qui ne saurait jamais s'appliquer qu'à l'imaginaire et qui comporte la néantisation du monde dans sa structure essentielle' (*L'Imaginaire*; quoted in Howells 1979: 7). However, the world of the imagination evoked by Roquentin for most of the novel is plainly *not* beautiful. If his imagining consciousness gives rise to a work of art, it is in anticipation of Francis Bacon rather than in homage to centuries of classical loveliness. But Roquentin does not acknowledge this achievement. Instead he is looking to find an *analogon* of beauty which will deliver him from perception and hence too from the intimations of contingency that make him nauseous.

The term *analogon* is used by Sartre to designate an object which is present to the senses, but which refers to an 'aesthetic object' which is absent. The performance of a symphony, for example, is the *analogon* of the symphony itself which exists outside time and space. Similarly, the song 'Some of these days' in *La Nausée* is the *analogon* of the music which exists beyond time and space also. This is the aesthetic object Roquentin enthusiastically pursues because it constitutes an antidote to nausea. He does not realise that another, more interesting art object has already emerged which exists, unsettlingly, *between* imagination and perception. The key feature of existential nausea is its in-betweenness, whether it arises in the 'space' between the two modes of consciousness (perceiving and imagining), or in the equally negligible space between the *pour-soi* and the *en-soi*. This fact helps to explain why Roquentin's nausea attacks are accompanied by a sense of profound disgust. Disgust, like nausea, is founded on ambivalence and in-betweenness.

### *Existential disgust*

On a perceptual level, disgust in *La Nausée* precedes nausea. It is the primary affective state which Roquentin only later names as Nausea. This shift from disgust to nausea can be seen most clearly in his initial encounter with the pebble and in his subsequent analysis of it. In the opening 'Feuillet sans date' Roquentin notes: 'Il y

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feels that there is something unusual about the way objects relate to *him*.

avait quelque chose que j'ai vu et qui m'a dégoûté, mais je ne sais plus si je regardais la mer ou le galet' (Sartre 1938: 12). The object of disgust is uncertain, it could be the sea, or it could be the pebble. We do not yet know. It is not until at least 48 hours later that Roquentin is able to formulate the experience more clearly:

Maintenant je vois; je me rappelle mieux ce que j'ai senti l'autre jour, au bord de la mer, quand je tenais ce galet. C'était une espèce d'écoeurement douceâtre. Que c'était donc désagréable! Et cela venait du galet, j'en suis sûr, cela passait du galet dans mes mains. Oui, c'est cela, c'est bien cela: une sorte de nausée dans les mains. (24)

Roquentin is nauseated by the fact that the pebble has touched him, rather than the other way round. It has ceased to be an object which he perceives as a projection of his own impulses (such as the impulse to pick up a stone to play ducks and drakes), but has taken on a 'life' of its own. As such, Roquentin conceives of a certain horror for the object and a fear of its potential to contaminate him:

Les objets, cela ne devrait pas *toucher*, puisque cela ne vit pas. On s'en sert, on les remet en place, on vit au milieu d'eux: ils sont utiles, rien de plus. Et moi, ils me touchent, c'est insupportable. J'ai peur d'entrer en contact avec eux tout comme s'ils étaient des bêtes vivantes. (24)

Roquentin insists that he is not mad, though he is an eminently suitable candidate for the Freudian psychoanalyst's chair. His 'symptoms', nausea and disgust, are strikingly similar to those attributed by Freud to 'obsessional' patients suffering from what he suggests might be called 'taboo sickness'.

For Freud, as for other psychoanalytic thinkers, there is a fundamental connection between the notions of taboo and disgust. Freud's discussions of taboo in the collection of essays entitled *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13) lead him to conclude, among other things, that the word 'taboo' has always had a double meaning and that 'the prohibitions of taboo are to be understood as consequences of an emotional ambivalence' (Freud 1990a: 123). The meaning of taboo for us, argues Freud, is



contradictory: on the one hand it means 'sacred' or 'consecrated'; on the other it means 'uncanny', 'dangerous', 'forbidden' and 'unclean'. Regardless of how the taboo object is categorised, reactions to it are the same. The taboo object is surrounded by prohibitions – primarily against any form of touching – because it is feared that the object has the power of infection or contagion. In the case of the obsessional patient, the 'touching phobia' extends to a prohibition against any contact whatsoever, be it physical or mental. The conscious prohibition conflicts, however, with a strong instinctual desire to touch the object as well. This conflict between the conscious and the unconscious mind leads to an ambivalent attitude towards the taboo object: the subject, according to Freud, 'is constantly wishing to perform this act (the touching), [and looks upon it as his supreme enjoyment, but he must not perform it] and detests it as well' (Freud 1990a: 83).<sup>10</sup>

Disgust is also an expression of a prohibition. It is an affective state characterised, like taboo, by emotional ambivalence. In 'The paths to symptom-formation' Freud analyses disgust in terms of the regression of the libido in search of a point of satisfaction in the past that is no longer acceptable to the subject: 'What was once a satisfaction to the subject is, indeed, bound to arouse his resistance or his disgust today' (Freud 1963, vol. XVI: 366). He gives the example of how a dislike of drinking milk can turn to disgust at the formation of skin on the top because it conjures up the memory of the skin of the mother's breast. Freud's example of alimentary disgust is taken up by Julia Kristeva in her essay on abjection, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980). The warm milk, according to Kristeva, is a sign of parental desire, which the subject rejects by vomiting, or spitting it out in order to 'give birth' to the self. Disgust and nausea form part of Kristeva's theory of the 'abject' where the abject is an ambivalent 'pôle d'appel et de répulsion' (Kristeva 1980: 9). It is neither subject nor object, but it constitutes a necessary opposition to 'je'. Abjection arises when subjectivity becomes an object for the self. This occurs when the sense of limit (the edge of subjectivity) ceases to be and the self cannot define itself in terms of what it is not. (This can also be seen in terms of the necessary relationship of negation between the for-itself and the in-itself in existentialist philosophy. Roquentin's nausea is the figure through which that relation is problematised in *La Nausée*). According to Kristeva, what was previously perceived as being beyond the self is now suddenly

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<sup>10</sup> The words in square brackets were omitted from the second edition of Freud's Complete Works.

here. In the face of an abject object, such as a corpse, the subject experiences 'l'effondrement d'un monde qui a effacé ses limites' (Kristeva 1980: 11). The corpse is not an inanimate object in the usual sense because we cannot define ourselves in relation to it as we would do with other objects; that is, in terms of 'I am not it'. This leads to Kristeva's much-quoted definition of abjection as 'ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. L'entre-deux, l'ambigu, le mixte' (Kristeva 1980: 12).<sup>11</sup>

Abject objects that are seen as disgusting in *La Nausée* satisfy all but one of the Kristevan criteria: they disturb identity and order, refuse to respect limits and exist ambiguously, but – crucially – they are not disgusting at all in the conventional sense. The objects which evoke Roquentin's disgust (among others, the pebble, the tram seat, the tree root) are perfectly normal. At the same time, he finds nothing disgusting in objects which would arouse disgust in other people. This discrepancy in the sense of disgust can be seen in the opposing responses of Roquentin and Anny to his predilection for picking things up from the ground:

J'aime beaucoup ramasser les marrons, les vieilles loques, surtout les papiers. Il m'est agréable de les prendre, de fermer ma main sur eux; pour un peu je les porterais à ma bouche, comme font les enfants. Anny entrain dans des colères blanches quand je soulevais par un coin des papiers lourds et somptueux, mais probablement salis de merde. (Sartre 1938: 23)

The prospect of carrying pieces of paper that are 'probably fouled with shit' to his mouth is pleasing to Roquentin, whereas Anny, like most people, finds this utterly abhorrent. The fact that the objects with which Roquentin associates disgust are not in themselves disgusting is highly significant. It indicates that disgust in *La Nausée* is not to be seen in a conventional way. The 'conventionally disgusting' would include sociological disgust as analysed by Pierre Bourdieu in *La Distinction* (1979) where tastes ('les goûts') are a manifestation of class difference determined negatively through disgust ('dégoûts'): 'les goûts sont sans doute avant tout des *dégoûts*, faits

<sup>11</sup> As David Trotter (1996: 269) has rightly pointed out, this argument is appealing, but also potentially weak, because it is so general. There is thus a marked tendency among critics to bundle all that is interstitial into the 'space' opened up by abjection. I am borrowing abjection here only in order to

d'horreur ou d'intolérance viscérales ("c'est à vomir") pour les autres goûts, les goûts des autres' (Bourdieu 1979: 60).<sup>12</sup> The 'others' referred to by Bourdieu are most likely to be those whose tastes do not conform to the 'legitimate tastes' of the dominant classes (i.e. the bourgeoisie). Sartrean disgust does not conform to this model. However, for all Sartre's claims that empirical disgust is an expression of anterior existential nausea (and by implication that it has nothing to do with empirical experiences such as class distinction), there are clear indications that disgust, nausea and the theory of 'le visqueux' are linked to culture-specific perceptions. In particular, they reproduce the traditional association of the female body with fleshiness and formlessness. In this respect, existential disgust fails to transcend the culturally-determined attitudes from which Sartre consciously seeks to dissociate it.

In Sartrean philosophy, rather than in the novel *La Nausée*, disgust and the prohibitions surrounding objects which cause that disgust are not prior to nausea (as they appear to be to Roquentin), but follow it. I return to the passage from *L'Être et le Néant* where Sartre makes precisely this point:

Loin que nous devions comprendre ce terme de *nausée* comme une métaphore tirée de nos écoeulements physiologiques, c'est, au contraire, sur son fondement que se produisent toutes les nausées concrètes et empiriques (nausées devant la viande pourrie, le sang frais, les excréments, etc.) qui nous conduisent au vomissement. (EN 387)<sup>13</sup>

If nausea is anterior to disgust, what is the nature of that originary nausea? Sartre did not write an explicit theory of the subject – *La Nausée* is it – although the key to understanding existential nausea can be found in a fascinating and somewhat

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forge a link between disgust, nausea and taboo and to indicate how 'in-betweenness' (which I associate with Sartrean nausea) might be seen to problematise the self-other relation.

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting in passing that the English translations of 'goût' and 'dégoût' as taste and disgust respectively do not do justice to the lexical proximity of the French. The English equivalent for 'dégoût' in this context is merely 'bad taste', which does not carry the same visceral force.

<sup>13</sup> William Miller's interpretation of this statement in *The Anatomy of Disgust* drastically oversimplifies the meaning. Miller 'expands' Sartre's argument to the point of meaningless generality when he writes: 'Sartre's Roquentin is not merely using disgust metaphorically when he describes his condition as nausea. He feels it and finds everything around him to elicit it' (Miller 1997: 29). Miller does not pursue Sartrean disgust any further – on the basis of his conviction that existential disgust is nothing more than an expression of '*Tedium Vitae*' and therefore little more than a pose.

incongruous section at the end of *L'Être et le Néant* on 'le visqueux', which, I would argue, might usefully be seen as an attempt by Sartre to theorise ugliness.<sup>14</sup>

### *Sliminess 1*

The section on sliminess appears under the subtitle 'De la Qualité comme Révélatrice de l'Être'. In it, Sartre, following Bachelard, attempts to psychoanalyse things, rather than people, in order to reveal the secret, ontological meanings of their objective qualities. Taking the example of the symbolic connection between 'visqueux' as a signifier for moral baseness and sliminess as a material quality, Sartre argues that the relation between them cannot be explained purely on the basis of projection.<sup>15</sup> It is impossible to derive the value of the psychic symbolism of 'slimy' from the brute quality of a slimy object and equally impossible to project the meaning of the object in terms of a knowledge of psychic attitudes towards 'slimy' individuals. By extension, then, the negative value of ugliness cannot be derived from the ugly object. The sliminess (or ugliness) exists somewhere *between* the two and neither is reducible to the terms of the other (in the same way that the pour-soi cannot be reduced to being en-soi without the complete collapse of the self). The original project of the pour-soi in relation to the en-soi, Sartre argues, is one of appropriation; that is, the slimy is perceived as 'visqueux à posséder' (EN 667). This act of appropriation and possession is also one of assimilation: 'le lien originel de moi au visqueux est que je projette d'être fondement de son être, en tant qu'il est moi-même idéalement. Dès l'origine donc, il apparaît comme un possible moi-même à fonder' (EN 667). This unconventional line of argument can be seen as a highly idiosyncratic interpretation of the relation between the self and the other, or the self and the ugly (in general Sartrean terms between the pour-soi and the en-soi or, specifically here, the psychic and the material). There is a certain generosity on the side of the slimy, 'a bestowal of self', as Sartre puts it, but despite this the project of appropriation on the part of the

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<sup>14</sup> The French term 'le visqueux' has wider connotations than the direct English translation 'viscosity'. Hazel Barnes flags this in her translation as follows: '[visqueux] at times comes closer to the English "sticky", but I have consistently used the word "slimy" in translating because the figurative meaning of "slimy" appears to be identical in both languages' (in Sartre 1993: 604). For this reason, I too adopt the word 'slimy'.

<sup>15</sup> It is no coincidence, I think, that Sartre chooses to focus his argument at the outset on a value judgement – baseness – which is closely associated with ugliness. This connection will be explored again in Part 2.

for-itself can never, and indeed must never, succeed. Thus 'le visqueux se laisse saisir comme ce dont je manque, il se laisse palper par une enquête appropriative; c'est à cette ébauche d'appropriation qu'il laisse découvrir sa viscosité. Elle est opaque parce que, précisément, si la forme signifiante est éveillée dans le visqueux par le pour-soi, c'est avec toute sa viscosité qu'il vient la remplir' (EN 668). The objective quality that comes back to us is neither physical nor psychic. Rather it transcends that opposition 'en se découvrant à nous comme l'expression ontologique du monde tout entier' (EN 668); that is, as an expression of the relation between the for-itself and the in-itself.

The mode of being of sliminess is slow, sticky and essentially ambiguous because slime is a 'substance entre deux états' (EN 669) that is neither liquid nor solid. It is characterised by a fluidity that is always in slow motion and moving downwards, deflating, or sinking. Sartre gives as examples honey sliding off a spoon into a jar, a child's toy which whistles when inflated and groans as it deflates, and a woman's breasts flattening out against her body when she lies on her back.<sup>16</sup> From this it is clear that Sartre's slime is not just a mucoid substance, but any material that is soft, yielding and compressible. What is also striking is the suggestion that viscosity relates specifically to the female body and not to adipose human tissue in general.

### *The Obscene and the Ungraceful*

Less gender-specific flab is reserved for Sartre's definition of the obscene in which the purposeful movement of the body is at odds with the inertia of undulating flesh, as with 'certains dandinements involontaires de la croupe' (EN 452).<sup>17</sup> A fat backside which does not appear to participate in the act of walking, or indeed any body tissue which shows some flabbiness in its movements, 'exhibe une facticité surabondante par rapport à la présence effective qu'exige la situation' (EN 452). The same can be

<sup>16</sup> The word Sartre uses is the ungainly 'raplatissement' which resonates somewhat unfortunately (though for Sartre quite deliberately) with the word 'raplapla' meaning (of a person) lacking in energy or washed out.

<sup>17</sup> By 'less gender-specific', I mean that a woman's body is not referred to as such. Nevertheless, popular perceptions of the physiology of European bodies would readily place superfluous flesh around the hips of women (and around the middle of men!). Sartre and Roquentin would seem to share a certain horror of the fleshiness of women's bodies. In *La Nausée*, the library is a nausea-free zone until the arrival of 'la grosse dame'. Andrew Leak has pointed out that elsewhere in Sartre's fiction 'the word "chair" (flesh) is almost exclusively reserved for the female body' (Leak 1989: 25-6).

said of that kind of Being-for-Others which belongs 'au *genre* du disgracieux' (EN 450), where the voluntary *gestures* of the individual concerned seem badly adapted to a given situation:

Le maladroit libère inopportunément sa facticité et la place soudain sous notre vue: là où nous attendions à saisir une clé de la situation, émanant spontanément de la situation même, nous rencontrons soudain la contingence injustifiable d'une présence inadaptée; nous sommes mis en face de l'existence d'un existant. (EN 451)

The ungraceful is not yet the obscene but, I would argue, it is already ugly. Leaving aside the gestural element, Sartre's formulation of the ungraceful serves as an excellent existential definition of physical ugliness.

The experience of ugliness involves a sudden encounter with 'la contingence injustifiable d'une présence inadaptée' (whatever form that lack of adaptation might take and whatever that presence might consist in) and an unwarranted face-to-face with 'l'existence d'un existant'.<sup>18</sup> In order for the ungraceful to become obscene (and for the ugly to become more profoundly ugly), ungainliness must detract from this situation in a specific way. For Sartre the difference lies in the complete absence of desire:

Et cette chair révélée est spécifiquement obscène lorsqu'elle se découvre à quelqu'un qui n'est pas en état de désir et *sans exciter son désir*. Une désadaptation particulière qui détruit la situation dans le temps même où je la saisis et qui me livre l'épanouissement inerte de la chair comme une brusque apparition sous le mince vêtement des gestes qui l'habillent, alors que je ne suis pas, par rapport à cette chair, en état de désir: voilà ce que je nommerai l'obscène. (EN 452)

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<sup>18</sup> The notion of 'une présence inadaptée' is entirely consistent with Mark Cousins's definition of the ugly object as 'matter out of place'. It is also equally 'anthropological' since, in terms of contingency, there can be no such thing as an unadapted presence. All presences are equally contingent. The unadapted presence is a failure to adapt *to* something, in this case the human situation.

There is a sense here that Sartre is protesting too much about the absence of desire. In psychoanalytic terms, this indicates something of a cover-up. Conscious efforts on the part of the ego and the defences to reject obscenity (ugliness) betray a secret desire to embrace it. As Mark Cousins argues in his analysis of 'The ugly': 'There is another story, more obscure and obscene, about the relation between the unconscious and ugliness. It is an account of the ecstasy which the unconscious enjoys in all that is dirty, horrifying and disgusting – that is, ugliness as an unbearable pleasure' (Autumn 1994: 64). This unconscious delight accounts for Roquentin's ambivalent reactions in *La Nausée*. He finds objects which elicit nausea disgusting and does not actively seek them out, but he does look forward to stumbling across them. The famous unsolicited encounter with the tree root in the park leads leads him to new heights of nausea which he describes in terms of an 'extase horrible' and a 'jouissance atroce' (Sartre 1938: 184 and 185).

If desire is the key issue in distinguishing between the obscene and the ungraceful, it also marks the difference between the obscene and the disgusting. Whereas desire is emphatically absent from the Sartrean obscene, it is a vital component of the ambivalence of disgust. Disgust, whether for Sartre, Freud, Kristeva, or in the 18<sup>th</sup> century for Kant, consists in a mixed emotional response where feelings of attraction vie with those of repulsion towards the disgusting object. The Kantian definition of disgust in fact specifically turns on ugliness. Disgust for Kant is the only form of ugliness that cannot be redeemed by aesthetics:

There is only one kind of ugliness that cannot be presented in conformity with nature without obliterating all aesthetic liking and hence artistic beauty: that ugliness which arouses *disgust*. For in that strange sensation, which rests on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it insisted, as it were, on our enjoying it even though that is just what we are forcefully resisting; and hence the artistic presentation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation from the nature of this object itself so that it cannot possibly be considered beautiful. (Kant 1987: §48, 180).

This structure of reluctant enjoyment, as we shall see, is also a fundamental aspect of Sartrean sliminess.

### *Sliminess 2*

Sartre attempts to describe what he terms ‘le grand secteur ontologique de la viscosité’ (EN 673), where the meaning of the slimy resides in a *pre*-ontological comprehension of the relation between the for-itself and the in-itself (the self and the other), but the terms in which the encounter with slime is expressed – possession, compromise, tactile fascination, feminine revenge – are overtly sexualised and gendered. It is clear that the subject position of the for-itself in relation to slime is considered masculine and that the object position of the slime is considered that of a clinging femininity, which appears ‘docile’ but is in fact stickily predatory. Just when the (masculine) for-itself believes it possesses the slimy, the slimy possesses *it*, thus reversing the terms of a relation in which the for-itself constitutes itself as the assimilating and creative power. According to the for-itself, it is the for-itself that absorbs the in-itself and not the other way round (Roquentin is happy to touch objects, but not be touched by them), yet the slimy in-itself (the feminine other) challenges that assumption:

[...] le Pour-soi est soudain *compromis*. J’écarte les mains, je veux lâcher le visqueux et il adhère à moi, il me pompe, il m’aspire [...] c’est une activité molle, baveuse et féminine d’aspiration, il vit obscurément sous mes doigts et je sens comme un vertige, il m’attire en lui comme le fond d’un précipice pourrait m’attirer. (EN 671)

In positioning the for-itself above an abyss, Sartre is not only invoking the nausea of vertigo, but also harking back, consciously or not, to the Kantian sublime in nature where an excessive ‘thing’ appears to the imagination as ‘an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself’ (Kant 1987: §27, 115). The attraction to and repulsion from the slimy object is no longer entirely visceral (i.e. a matter of disgust). It now corresponds to the respective poles of attraction and repulsion described in Kant’s account of the sublime, where reason is attracted to an excessive object



because the object serves to prove reason's mastery of it, while the imagination is repelled because it is overwhelmed by its inability to comprehend that same object. Sartrean disgust hovers between Kantian disgust and the natural sublime and so positions itself between two possible situations where either the imagination or reason (disgust or the sublime respectively) predominates. In so far as Sartrean slime can also be seen as the ugly object, it is thus both disgusting and sublime. Whilst the creative power of the for-itself to define itself through assimilation of the in-itself is compromised philosophically by slime, it is not compromised *imaginatively*. Herein lies the important difference between the theoretical legacy of Kant and the aesthetic tradition in France: the disgusting and the sublime are not necessarily of a different order, either in theory or in practice. The visceral is not abandoned in favour of 'pure' aesthetics, nor is imagination subordinated to reason.

### *The monstrous feminine*

Sartrean slime is a prime example of the un-Kantian tendency to position the disgusting on the same aesthetic plane as that of the sublime. 'Le visqueux' is an imaginative theory that seeks to combine a rational explanation for the construction (or destruction) of the for-itself by the in-itself with visual and visceral imagery. Indeed the fearful prospect of the dissolution of the self it describes has a certain cinematic quality:

Toucher du visqueux, c'est risquer de se diluer en viscosité.

Or, cette dilution, par elle-même est déjà effrayante, parce qu'elle est absorption du Pour-soi par l'En-soi comme de l'encre par un buvard. Mais, *en outre*, il est effrayant, à tant faire que de se métamorphoser en chose, que ce soit précisément une métamorphose *en* visqueux. (EN 672)

One might argue here that the Sartrean encounter with slime closely resembles a horror film scenario in which the human protagonist is terrorised by an encroaching, monstrous other. Feminised slime can then usefully be compared with theories of the 'monstrous feminine'.

Barbara Creed's feminist, psychoanalytic reading of the modern horror film emphasises at the outset the importance of gender in the construction of monstrosity. Following Kristeva, she shows how the subject of the symbolic order (of language) is constantly beset by abjection 'which fascinates desire but must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation' (Creed 1993: 10). Creed considers the construction of abjection in relation to Kristeva's notions of the border, the mother-child dyad and the feminine body. Most horror films, she argues, construct a border between the 'clean and proper body' that is fully symbolic and free of a debt to nature (such as the Sartrean for-itself would like to be), and the 'abject body' which has lost form and integrity (like the viscous). A woman's body, by virtue of its maternal functions, is more likely to signify the abject and therefore, Creed argues, 'the notion of the maternal female body is central to the construction of the border in the horror film' (Creed 1993: 11). Similarly, I would argue, the notion of the material female body is also central to the construction of the border between the for-itself and the in-itself for Sartre.

Let us look at this comparison in more detail. The earliest experiences of abjection occur, according to Kristeva, when the child attempts to break away from the mother. This separation is a precondition of narcissism and must take place if the child is to become a separate subject. But the mother is reluctant to let go and the child must struggle to break free. This conflict is enacted in horror films where the monstrous-feminine prevents that originary separation and so denies the 'child' the right to accede to the symbolic. It is also the conflict described by Sartre where the for-itself is unable to escape from the sticky embrace of slime, like a wasp caught in jam:

[...] c'est une attrape: le glissement est *sucé* par la substance glissante, et il laisse sur moi des traces. Le visqueux apparaît comme un liquide vu dans un cauchemar et dont toutes les propriétés s'animent d'une sorte de vie et se retourneraient contre moi. Le visqueux, c'est la revanche de l'En-soi. Revanche douceâtre et féminine qui se symbolisera sur un autre plan par la qualité de *sucré*. (EN 671)

Sugary sliminess symbolizes the 'sugary death' of the for-itself, according to Sartre. In terms of abjection it is the mother figure which threatens to subsume the totality of

the subject (she doesn't just castrate the child, she swallows it up whole). But instead of asserting an urgent desire to get away, the for-itself is held back by the realisation that

[...] le visqueux c'est *moi*, du seul fait que j'ai ébauché une appropriation de la substance visqueuse. Cette succion du visqueux que je sens sur mes mains ébauche comme une *continuité* de la substance visqueuse à moi-même. Ces longues et molles colonnes de substance qui tombent de moi jusqu'à la nappe visqueuse (lorsque, par exemple, après y avoir plongé ma main, je l'en arrache) symbolisent comme une coulée de moi-même vers le visqueux. Et l'hystérésis que je constate dans la fusion de la base de ces colonnes, avec la nappe, symbolise comme la résistance de mon être à l'absorption de l'En-soi.

(EN 671-2)

Thus in one sense the for-itself wishes to get away, but in another wishes to preserve the continuity between itself and the slimy. In abjection too the child wishes to preserve the blissful, archaic relation with the mother-child dyad as well as struggling to break free. The bid for freedom is assured in the end by the imposition of the symbolic law of the father (the order of language and of the phallus). According to Kristeva, the symbolic universe intervenes in the mother-child dyad through prohibitions which transform the liminal substances associated with it into a maternal universe of 'filth'; that is, of the excremental and the menstrual (see Creed 1993: 12). Images of blood, vomit, pus and shit (all of which can be gathered under the generic title of 'slime') signify the split between the two orders and evoke responses of disgust and loathing because they threaten the subject as constituted symbolically. As Creed has observed, however, the primary disgust response from an audience in a horror film is situated within the symbolic, it is culturally and socially constructed, whereas the other side of disgust – the hidden drama of desire – operates at a more archaic level where bodily wastes associated with the dyadic mother-child relationship are eminently pleasurable. The viewer therefore enjoys seeing the taboo on filth broken.

Creed considers the horror film to be a form of 'modern defilement rite' which attempts to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, in particular the mother and the maternal universe. We recall here the Freudian notion of taboo and the Sartrean concern that '[t]oucher du visqueux, c'est risquer de se diluer en viscosité' (EN 672). Horror films involve representations of the maternal body as abject, but also effect a reconciliation with it through the pleasurable underside of disgust. Sartre's slime scenario is equally ambivalent: representations of slime as the horrific other into which the for-itself might sink and drown are countered by the recognition that the slimy is part of the self.

Sartre's account of sliminess makes no mention of the mother as such. Instead the maternal body inhabits the text as a diffuse presence signalled by a glaring absence. For instance, when Sartre makes his grandest claims for slime – that it transcends all distinctions between the psychic and the physical, between brute existence and the meanings of the world, that it is nothing less than 'un sens possible de l'être' (674) – the context that is given is clearly that of the mother-child dyad. The infant is referred to and we expect to see the mother too, but she is replaced, astonishingly, with honey or glue and then by 'tous les objets qui entourent l'enfant' (EN 674):

La première expérience que l'enfant peut faire du visqueux l'enrichit [...] psychologiquement et moralement: il n'aura pas besoin d'attendre l'âge d'homme pour découvrir le genre de bassesse agglutinante que l'on nomme, au figuré, 'visqueux': elle est là, auprès de lui, dans la viscosité même du miel ou de la glu. Ce que nous disons du visqueux vaut pour tous les objets qui entourent l'enfant: la simple révélation de leur matière étend son horizon jusqu'aux extrêmes limites de l'être [...] (EN 674)

The maternal body is written out of the text as though there were a taboo against touching it textually. At the very moment when its presence is most felt – not least because Sartre's original list of slimy objects includes the fleshiness of a woman's breasts – it is not acknowledged. The mother, like all objects surrounding the child, is seen as the substance of an originary, pre-sexual encounter with 'matter and forms'

that reveals being to the infant.<sup>19</sup> She is merely one of ‘un ensemble de *clés* pour déchiffrer l’être de tous les faits humains’ (EN 674). The maternal body here is ‘abjected’ in the Kristevan sense to the extent that it constitutes the horizon of undecidability between ‘me’ and ‘not me’. It is part of an undifferentiated primal slime from which the for-itself emerges.

For Sartre this primal slime is the archetype of ugliness. All empirical interpretations of the slimy (as baseness, the disgusting, the obscene) refer back to the originary glutinous ‘soup’ which Sartre describes as ‘une structure objective du monde en même temps qu’une antivaleur’ (EN 673). There are thus two orders of existential ugliness: one belongs to ‘le grand secteur ontologique de la viscosité’ (673) and the other is a manifestation of that sliminess in the phenomenal context of human reality. In answer to his own question – ‘Comment faut-il donc concevoir cette immense symbolique universelle qui se traduit par nos répugnances, nos haines, nos sympathies, nos attirances pour des objets dont la matérialité devrait, par principe, demeurer non-signifiante?’ (EN 667) – Sartre has constructed a theory of ugliness that includes the universal and the particular. However, in Sartre’s discussion of sliminess, the first specific reference to ugliness, which follows on immediately from the revelation of being to the child by the unacknowledged mother, appears to contradict this by indicating that ugliness belongs on the side of the particular only:

Cela ne signifie point qu’il *connaisse* à l’origine les ‘laideurs’ de la vie, les ‘caractères’ ou, au contraire, les ‘beautés’, de l’existence. Simplement il [l’enfant] est en possession de tous les *sens de l’être* dont laideurs et beautés, conduites, traits psychiques, relations sexuelles, etc., ne seront jamais que des exemplifications particulières. (EN 674)

Why does Sartre deny ugliness as a universal here? Everywhere else in the theory of sliminess and in the diary of nausea occasioned by ugliness in *La Nausée*, ugliness appears to belong to ‘le grand secteur ontologique de la viscosité’ (EN 673). This point of conflict can be explained with reference to the problem of representation. Ugliness, like slime, serves for Sartre as a *figure* for an a priori category that is

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<sup>19</sup> Whilst Sartre acknowledges Freud here, he argues that the revelation of being precedes and

unrepresentable. The only evidence for that unrepresentable ontological region is found in the particular, hence the only way of expressing it through language is by describing it in terms of the particular; that is, by means of familiar linguistic formulations of experiences that are known. This difficulty is implicit in Sartre's claim that '[l]e visqueux se découvre de lui-même comme "beaucoup plus que le visqueux"' (EN 674). In effect Sartre is saying 'I can only give you slime, but you must take my word for it that there is more to it than that'. The particularities of slime represent a necessary theoretical compromise which requires its 'horrible image' to stand in retrospectively for the universal category of slime that precedes it. As readers we are placed in a chicken and egg situation with Sartre arguing in favour of the *a priori* universal chicken but offering us only an *a posteriori* raw egg as proof. Hegel would not hesitate to reassure us here that particulars are not just particulars, but also unchangeable universals and that the one cannot be without the other: 'The unchangeable, which comes to consciousness', he argues, 'is in fact at the same time affected by particularity, and is only present with this latter' (Hegel 1977: 252). The reason for this is that our 'unhappy consciousness' is itself divided. It is able to grasp the unchangeable, but always remains conscious of the opposite – its own particularity. In the light of this, I would argue, Sartre's claim that ugliness can never be more than a particular exemplification in no way precludes its universality.

### *La Nausée 2*

I return at this point to *La Nausée* and to a micro-event in Roquentin's day-to-day existence with universal implications. It occurs at the beginning of lunch with the Autodidact when a fly lands on the tablecloth and Roquentin decides to swat it:

Je vais lui rendre le service de l'écraser. Elle ne voit pas surgir cet index géant dont les poils dorés brillent au soleil.

– Ne la tuez pas, monsieur! s'écria l'Autodidacte.

Elle éclate, ses petites tripes blanches sortent de son ventre; je l'ai débarrassée de l'existence. Je dis sèchement à l'Autodidact:

– C'était un service à lui rendre. (Sartre 1938: 147)

Roquentin does not comment on the fly other than to narrate its demise – for him it is of no significance – but it contains in miniature elements which will be amplified during the course of the interminable lunch until Roquentin reaches the point in the novel of maximum nausea. From the fly's point of view, Roquentin's attempt to relieve it of the burden of existence succeeds. It dies. From his own point of view, however, the gesture is a failure: the insides of the fly ooze out onto the table making it exist *all the more*. The first sentence of the following paragraph reveals that the minute act of murder has had a momentous effect: 'Pourquoi suis-je ici?' (147). Nausea has been bypassed here and the oozing innards of the fly lead Roquentin directly to the fundamental unanswerable question at the heart of contingency: 'why am I here?'

The Sartrean ugly 'object' that causes nausea and the revelation of contingency is characterised not by what it is (a definite thing), but by what it is not. The ugly object is an indefinite thing in that it lacks definition absolutely. The inside oozes out either literally, as in the case of the swatted fly, or imaginatively, in Roquentin's mind. Whenever the 'content' refuses to remain within the 'form' visually, verbally or conceptually, Roquentin loses intellectual control over the world and feels queasy. Significantly, though, he never actually vomits. Sartrean nausea thus has no definite object either to precipitate the sensation, or to prove that it has taken place. In this respect, nausea is an ideal rhetorical figure because it is always a liminal experience: the expression of the inside wanting to get out, but not actually getting there. The problem of not crossing the threshold is also the drama of consciousness in relation to brute existence: there is a tension in the relation between the for-itself and the world of objects. The for-itself wants to exist as an object in order that it might acquire the necessity of tangible existence, but it cannot because, as we have seen, the structure of negation (or 'nihilation') is what enables it to exist as consciousness *of* something in the first place. Thus whenever the threshold is approached, whenever consciousness attempts to lose itself in the world of matter, it fails to vomit, as it were, and is overcome instead with nausea, which is infinitely worse, since it does not solve the problem. If Roquentin were to be sick, he would have achieved, at least in part, his aim of becoming an object in-itself.

*Husserl*

In addition to placing Roquentin on a fast track to contingency, the squashed fly incident can be used to establish an important connection with Sartre's short essay, 'Une idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie de Husserl: l'intentionnalité' (written in January 1939). The verb used to describe the way the hapless fly's entrails emerge from its body – 'éclater' – starts to take on a new significance when looked at in the light of Sartre's reading of Husserl. The essay denounces what Sartre terms the 'alimentary philosophy' of realism and of idealism in which objects are 'eaten', 'digested' and then 'assimilated' by the mind so that they become the 'content' of consciousness. For Sartre, as for Husserl, this makes no sense. Objects are not reducible to consciousness any more than consciousness is reducible to a set of objects. Consciousness, which arises at the same time as the world of objects, is linked to that world by a relationship of absolute exteriority whereby it exists as consciousness only in so far as it is conscious *of* that world as other. The name given by Husserl to this necessary relationship of consciousness to the world is 'intentionality'. Consciousness for Husserl is an irreducible fact which cannot be accounted for through any physical image except perhaps, Sartre suggests, 'l'image rapide et obscure de l'éclatement' (my emphasis; Sartre 1947: 30). He continues:

Connaître, c'est 's'éclater vers', s'arracher à la moite intimité gastrique pour filer, là-bas, par-delà soi, vers ce qui n'est pas soi, là-bas, près de l'arbre et cependant hors de lui, car il m'échappe et me repousse et je ne peux pas plus me perdre en lui qu'il ne se peut diluer en moi: hors de lui, hors de moi. (Sartre 1947: 30)

Contained in this brief passage is the key to interpreting the dynamics of existential nausea and its physical cause (ugliness) in *La Nausée*. Such a bold claim in respect of a few lines of text, of course, requires some justification.

First, let us take the verb 'éclater'. In the essay on intentionality, this is reserved solely for the movement of consciousness towards the world. It is not reversible. The world of objects without consciousness cannot, in theory, 'burst forth' towards



consciousness; and yet, I would argue, this is precisely what appears to happen in *La Nausée*. The fly's demise dramatises, from the side of the object, the phenomenology of consciousness.<sup>20</sup> This micro-event exemplifies on a small scale the movement on a grand scale of the whole of existence towards Roquentin. The ugly object, which causes him to feel nauseous, explodes itself towards him and not the other way round. Existence out-exists the capacity of his consciousness to contain it thereby demonstrating that neither 'digestive philosophy' nor Antoine Roquentin can assimilate everything there is.<sup>21</sup> But Roquentin does not know this to begin with. He learns this lesson only through a crisis of intentionality in which his consciousness still labours under what Sartre considers to be the realist/idealist illusion that 'connaître, c'est manger' (Sartre 1947: 29). *La Nausée* is an account of how Roquentin attempts and fails to 'eat' objects in this way. The realisation of this failure finally dawns on him during the scene in the park involving a tree root.

In this famous existential encounter between man and root (the subject and the object), Roquentin becomes aware of the futility of trying to reduce existence to the content of consciousness. He is defeated, amongst other things, by the failure of the colour black. This is the ultimate moment of nausea when, to borrow David Trotter's phrase (1996: 257), 'the bottom falls out of looking':

Je ne le voyais pas simplement ce noir: la vue, c'est une invention abstraite, une idée nettoyée, simplifiée, une idée d'homme. Ce noir-là, présence amorphe et veule, débordait, de loin, la vue, l'odorat et le goût. Mais cette richesse tournait en confusion et finalement ça n'était plus rien parce que c'était trop. (Sartre 1938: 184)

This plunges Roquentin into the 'extase horrible' mentioned above in which both he and the root are caught between two existential possibilities: absolute interiority and absolute exteriority. Neither is reduced to the other, but neither has been thrown out by the other either (in contrast to the clear-cut Husserlian tree encounter where subject and object are of necessity mutually exclusive). Still enjoying the exquisite tension, Roquentin continues:

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<sup>20</sup> According to Husserl's argument (as presented by Sartre) the fly thus achieves the impossible.

J'aurais voulu m'arracher à cette atroce jouissance, mais je n'imaginai même pas que cela fût possible; j'étais dedans; la souche noire *ne passait pas*, elle restait là, dans mes yeux, comme un morceau trop gros reste en travers d'un gosier. Je ne pouvais ni l'accepter ni la refuser. (185)

This is clearly the moment when, in anticipation of the essay on Husserl, digestive philosophy founders and phenomenology comes into its own.<sup>22</sup>

Alimentary knowledge of the tree is only one way for consciousness to be conscious of it. We might also love, fear or hate the tree, according to Sartre, and these would be other forms of intentionality, other ways for consciousness to transcend itself. Interestingly, the mode of discovery Sartre chooses to develop most fully in the essay is that which relates most closely to the problem of ugliness – hatred. 'Haïr autrui', he maintains, 'c'est une manière de s'éclater vers lui, c'est se trouver soudain en face d'un étranger dont on vit, dont on souffre d'abord la qualité objective de "haïssable"' (Sartre 1947: 31-2).<sup>23</sup> Crucially for the phenomenologist, this mode of discovery does not come from the side of the perceiving subject, it comes from the side of the object. If an object seems ugly to us, it is because it *is* ugly:

Ce sont les choses qui se dévoilent soudain à nous comme haïssables, sympathiques, horribles, aimables. C'est une *propriété* de ce masque japonais que d'être terrible, une inépuisable, irréductible propriété qui constitue sa nature même, – et non la somme de nos réactions subjectives à un morceau de bois sculpté. (Sartre 1947: 32).

Sartre expresses a sense of gratitude towards Husserl for reinstalling horror and charm *in things* and hence for delivering us from the interiority of Proust. Ugliness – in the form of that which is hateful or horrible – is 'out there' waiting for us to find

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<sup>21</sup> There is here an implied critique of the Kantian sublime (see chapter 3).

<sup>22</sup> It is also the moment when nausea enters the realm of the Sartrean sublime. Roquentin's 'extase horrible' and the 'atroce jouissance' which follows closely resemble the Burkean sense of 'delightful horror'.

<sup>23</sup> This highly questionable line of argument should not be taken as an indication of Sartre's political convictions. His view on hatred of other people – and the racism behind it – are discussed at length in *Réflexions sur la question juive*. This will be discussed in Part 2.

it.<sup>24</sup> And find it is what Roquentin does in *La Nausée*, not just in individual objects, but in existence as a whole. As we have seen, the objects which appear to cause his nausea are not in themselves ugly from the point of view of human reality. Existence is apparently ugly from its own point of view and it thus imposes itself on Roquentin as a mode of perception that is coming to get him, rather than the other way round. It must be stressed, however, that this reversal of intentionality is an aesthetic device and not a serious statement of Sartre's theoretical conviction. It serves here to explain retrospectively the creative methodology of *La Nausée*.

### *Roquentin's relation to ugliness*

Roquentin is an ideal starting point for a study of ugliness because he too studies ugliness. Indeed, I would argue that it is his fascination with ugliness that predisposes him to nausea in the first place. The reason why Roquentin goes to Bouville is that it is the birthplace of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century diplomat, the Marquis de Rollebon, whose biography he attempts to write and then subsequently abandons. Before Roquentin becomes disillusioned with this biographical project, he considers Rollebon not only as the sole reason for his presence in the northern seaside town, but also as his sole reason for existing at all (Roquentin is in limbo after several years abroad). He is attracted to the historical figure for a number of reasons, but foremost among these is the fact that Rollebon was considered extremely ugly.

The Marquis is introduced into the novel without preamble in the following terms: 'M. de Rollebon était fort laid. La reine Marie-Antoinette l'appelait volontiers sa "chère guenon"' (Sartre 1938: 26). This quotation from the historian Germain Berger continues with further details concerning the life of the unprepossessing rogue marquis, not least his remarkable ability to seduce women. Rollebon was involved in all manner of sexual and political intrigue at court, a fact which necessitated a hasty departure overseas following 'l'affaire du Collier'. On his return, he enjoyed a

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<sup>24</sup> This is a view which sociologists in particular would strenuously refute. Sartre himself disagrees with it theoretically also. In his discussion of values in *L'Être et le néant* (1943: 38), for example, he insists that it is only with the emergence in the world of the 'for-itself', or the human subject as consciousness, that meanings are made and values imposed. Here, however, he is acknowledging Husserl's contribution to aesthetics.

position of privilege at court once more through his association with the duchess of Angoulême. Then, aged 70, he married the 18-year-old Mlle de Roquelaure.<sup>25</sup> Shortly thereafter, Rollebon was accused of treason. He remained imprisoned without trial for five years and died in captivity. It is on the basis of this brief account that Roquentin claims to have been 'seduced' by Rollebon: 'Comme il m'a paru séduisant et comme, tout de suite, sur ce peu de mots, je l'ai aimé! C'est pour lui, pour ce petit bonhomme, que je suis ici' (Sartre 1938: 26).

Were it not for Rollebon, Roquentin would have 'settled' in Paris or Marseille, the diary entry tells us. The verb he uses is 'se fixer' which implies, too, that he feels the need for fixity, for a sense of solidity in his existence: after several years abroad he, like the marquis, is a wanderer who must make a new start in life. It is clear from this that Roquentin identifies to some extent with Rollebon. Roquentin is ugly – or so people tell him – and after the end of his affair with Anny, the sexual prowess of the wayward marquis is cause for a certain admiration. Coincidentally, there is also a recurring common phoneme in the lives of Roquentin and his biographical subject: Rollebon marries a Roquelaure and is later compared – on account of his inept attempts at shaving and his efforts to conceal his smallpox-pitted complexion with white-lead makeup – to a Roquefort cheese. A textual solidarity is also established through the continuity of the sound 'roc' in the names *Roquentin*, *Roquelaure* and *Roquefort*; the irony of this being that the last thing the documentary evidence concerning Rollebon can offer is solidity. 'Ce qui manque dans tous ces témoignages,' Roquentin notes, 'c'est la fermeté, la consistance' (Sartre 1938: 27).

After 1801, Roquentin finds it increasingly difficult to comprehend his biographical subject as presented in the various historical sources. They simply do not fit together to produce a coherent narrative surrounding the man.<sup>26</sup> In any case, Roquentin notes, 'l'homme commence à m'ennuyer. C'est au livre que je m'attache' (Sartre 1938: 27). Rollebon becomes the pretext for a much more pleasurable undertaking, 'un travail de pure imagination' (28). The focus of this revised project,

<sup>25</sup> Assuming that Berger's account is historically accurate, the marriage with Mlle de Roquelaure would lend Rollebon another connection with ugliness, since his young bride was no doubt related to the infamous duc de Roquelaure, 'l'homme le plus laid de France' (see chapter 2).

<sup>26</sup> See also my discussion of Roquentin's disillusionment with his project in 'The failure of historical biography' (chapter 2).

however, shifts in the course of the novel from Rollebon to Roquentin himself as he becomes increasingly absorbed with a sense of his own existence, an existence specifically confined to the present moment and in which there is no place for history. As far as Roquentin is concerned, if he can find no point of origin in his own life, then he cannot possibly find one in the life of Rollebon and there is no point looking for it any longer. Rollebon is consigned to oblivion when Roquentin declares that the past does not exist. In the same moment Roquentin is condemned to do nothing but exist:

Je jetai un regard anxieux autour de moi: du présent, rien d'autre que du présent. Des meubles légers et solides, encroûtés dans leur présent, une table, un lit, une armoire à glace – et moi-même. La vraie nature du présent se dévoilait: il était ce qui existe, et tout ce qui n'était pas présent n'existait pas. Le passé n'existait pas. (137)

With this declaration, Roquentin effectively divests himself of Rollebon and his pronounced physical ugliness and faces up to the prospect of a different order of ugliness altogether: ugliness as a manifestation of existential nausea.

Nausea for Roquentin is a two-stage process which is first visceral and then intellectual. It is characterised initially by a ghastly sagging sensation as the physical world, including the human body, appears to lose all definition at which point consciousness, through its very apprehension of this ontological droop, becomes aware that it is not, and never can be, pure matter. With this comes the dual revelation of facticity (the necessary connection between the for-itself and the in-itself) and of contingency (the fact of being *this particular* for-itself, rather than another and therefore not in any way necessary). The way in which facticity and contingency are revealed to Roquentin in the course of the novel is through a disruption of the habitual relation between consciousness and existence. In the normal course of events this is a relation of (deceptive) instrumentality in which the world of objects appears to conform to the ordering processes of human reality, especially those which operate through visual perception, whereas the existential crisis explored in *La Nausée* is

inaugurated by a crisis of looking (we recall here Sartre's comment from the *prière d'insérer*, 'ce n'est pas beau à voir, l'Existence').

Roquentin looks too hard and for too long and so causes all the usual frameworks of perception to collapse leaving behind an amorphous mass and an ontological mess.<sup>27</sup> In the second part of the introduction to the Gallimard edition of *La Nausée*, Geneviève Idt expresses this crisis of looking as follows: 'Ce que Sartre met en scène, c'est moins le spectacle que le regard, surnuméraire et trop fixe, sous lequel la perception s'ordonne mal, ne s'ordonne pas ou se défait' (in Sartre 1981: xxiv). Roquentin stares the face off things so that perspective is lost – although certain details are seen up close and alarmingly in focus, the overall image is distorted and blurred at the edges – unlike the Naturalist observer who pays attention to minute detail in order that the image should remain in focus throughout.<sup>28</sup> As a result of this intense looking the distance between Roquentin and the objects he contemplates (the negation internal to reflexive consciousness) becomes almost negligible so that the for-itself appears to collapse into the in-itself of existence and vice versa.

Roquentin's experience of this existential collapse between the for-itself and the in-itself occurs not just in relation external objects (pebbles, tree roots, tram seats), but also in relation to the in-itself of his own body, or rather the in-itself of his own face in the mirror. According to other people, Roquentin is ugly. He, however, finds it hard to determine whether this is really the case because, with the onset of nausea, visual perceptions become strangely distorted. What he sees in the mirror is not a face, but a 'chose grise' (31). It has ceased to be a recognisable image invested with human meaning. The intentionality of Roquentin's gaze as a being for-itself loses its

<sup>27</sup> For a brilliant 'stroll' past Roquentin's mirror image, see Trotter (1996: 256-7).

There are, it seems, other contributory factors which might help to explain the peculiar intensity of Roquentin's gaze in *La Nausée*. Contat and Rybalka (in Sartre 1981: 1667) refer to hallucinations experienced by Sartre during his 'crise mescalinienne' of 1935. Geneviève Idt suggests that Sartre may have parodied the realist method of minute observation (Flaubert supposedly taught Maupassant how to 'observe' correctly by sitting him under a tree and asking him to describe it for two hours).

<sup>28</sup> There is an important distinction between Sartrean nausea and the nausea associated with Naturalism. Despite frequent objections to Sartre's novels on the grounds of their presumed Naturalism (see Contat/Rybalka in Sartre 1981: xiv), Sartre insisted that his work should not be read as Naturalist fiction (and by implication that his nausea should not be read as Naturalist nausea). Sartrean nausea as the experience of facticity and contingency has nothing to do with determinism and inescapable heredity in the novels of Naturalism's great nauseast, Emile Zola, even though the terms in which it is expressed are strikingly similar. Naturalist 'nausea' is not theorised in the same way and does not carry the same philosophical significance. For a discussion of Naturalist nausea (disgust) see chapter 2.

hold on his face as a being in-itself so that judgements about its beauty or ugliness (human value judgements) are impossible to make:

Je ne peux même pas décider s'il est beau ou laid. Je pense qu'il est laid, parce qu'on me l'a dit. Mais cela ne me frappe pas. Au fond je suis même choqué qu'on puisse lui attribuer des qualités de ce genre, comme si on appelait beau ou laid un morceau de terre ou bien un bloc de rocher. (32)

Roquentin's indecision gives rise to an implied set of questions: 'do I see myself reflexively as a person, or non-reflexively as a thing? Is this face ugly, or *is* it, full stop?' What Roquentin experiences as he looks in the mirror is the transition from the first set of possibilities to the second. This is indicated by a growing sense of dehumanisation and a corresponding loss of definition. When he considers his red hair, there is a brief moment of reassurance – 'C'est une couleur nette au moins: je suis content d'être roux' (32) –, but the features soften as his gaze moves downwards – 'il ne rencontre rien de ferme, il s'ensable' – until finally they disappear completely: 'il ne reste plus rien d'humain' (33). The Roquentin in the mirror is no longer a man, but a mass of flesh without meaning.

According to Alain Buisine, the mirror episode in *La Nausée* stands as the ultimate paradigm for the Sartrean imaginary. By looking long and hard in the mirror, he argues, 'le sujet médusé assiste à l'obscène remontée d'une chair qui est en-deçà du sens, à un retour littéralement insignifiant de l'organique et même de l'inorganique, du géologique, du primitif, à une montée de l'aquatique dans le reflet du visage' (Buisine 1986: 96). The for-itself is paralysed by the obscene image of flesh beyond meaning. There is clearly semantic interplay here too: 'méduser' means to paralyse; the mythological figure believed to produce paralysis was, of course, Medusa; and she gave her name, 'Méduse', to the jellyfish. Buisine draws attention to another mirror passage in Sartre's 'autobiography', *Les Mots*, where the young Sartre leaves the world of smiles and social convention to pull faces in the mirror. He experiences a similar sense of liquefaction to that of Roquentin. Instead of seeing the familiar contours of his face, he finds himself confronted by the gelatinous form of a jellyfish.

Sartre claims never to have got over the lesson that the mirror taught him: 'j'étais horriblement naturel' (quoted in Buisine 1986: 97).<sup>29</sup>

*Ugliness is next to shapelessness*

The key to nausea and its revelation of the contingency of human existence in general for Sartre as for Roquentin is flesh without form. Such formlessness has been unequivocally associated since ancient Greek times with ugliness. A passage from the neo-platonist philosopher Plotinus makes this connection clear:

All shapelessness whose kind admits of pattern and form, as long as it remains outside of Reason and Idea, is ugly by that very isolation from the Divine-Thought. And this is the Absolute Ugly: an ugly thing is something that has not been entirely mastered by pattern, that is by Reason, the Matter not yielding at all points and in all respects to Ideal-Form. (Plotinus *Ennead I*, Sixth Tractate, 'Beauty', quoted in Hofstadter and Kuhns 1976: 143)

Plotinus links absence of shape with ugliness in general, whereas earlier Greek philosophy viewed the problem of shapeless matter specifically in terms of gender. In his *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle argues that male and female are distinguished by 'a certain ability and inability': semen possesses the 'principle' of the 'form' which gives shape to matter; the female merely receives the semen and is unable to cause it to take shape (Aristotle 1943: 765b). Aristotle goes on to claim that the failure of semen to achieve mastery over female material results in deficient offspring. In extreme cases the 'diversiform embryo' leads to the birth of monstrosities; in the normal course of events, it gives rise to females: 'we should look upon the female state as being as it were a deformity, though one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature', Aristotle suggests (1943: 775a). One might expect that a biologically suspect claim such as this would soon be discredited and forgotten, but the association between formlessness, ugliness and the female sex persists not only in *La Nausée*, but also, as we have seen in Sartre's theory of sliminess.

<sup>29</sup> The discovery of 'nature', horrible though it seems in the context of bourgeois family civility, is in fact for Sartre the discovery of 'vulgarity' as a *positive* value. For a discussion of Sartre's revaluation of the vulgar, see Stuart Zane Charmé (1991).



Roquentin's experience of nausea in the mirror episode involves a horrifying reappraisal of his relationship with his own flesh. Towards the end of the diary entry it becomes apparent that his face is nothing more to him than meat without meaning:

Je plaque ma main gauche contre ma joue, je tire sur la peau; je me fais la grimace. Toute une moitié de mon visage cède, la moitié gauche de la bouche se tord et s'enfle, en découvrant une dent, l'orbite s'ouvre sur un globe blanc, sur une chair rose et saignante. (Sartre 1938: 33)

As I have noted above (f/n 17), the word 'chair' in Sartre's work is mostly associated with the female body. That being the case, the sense of partial liquefaction for Roquentin and for the young Sartre in *Les Mots* as they grimace into the mirror indicates that existential nausea not only dissolves the self, but feminises it at the same time.<sup>30</sup>

The primary register of ugliness – one that relates to the world of the human form and to human value – becomes increasingly irrelevant the closer Roquentin comes to seeing himself as an inanimate object. But he never quite gets there, just as he never succeeds in escaping nausea into the state of pure being he idealises in the song 'Some of these days'. Roquentin's lot is to be caught perpetually between a rock (existence in-itself) and a hard place (the diamond-like quality of being beyond existence symbolised by the song). He aspires to *be* the way the song *is*; that is, utterly free of unnecessary clutter, but finds himself in a world of superfluous stuff whose gratuitous existence makes him queasy. Roquentin comes to recognise, however, that the essential feature of his nausea is absolute contingency from which he cannot be exempted:

La contingence n'est pas un faux semblant, une apparence qu'on peut dissiper; c'est l'absolu, par conséquent la gratuité parfaite. Tout est gratuit, ce jardin, cette ville et moi-même. Quand il arrive qu'on s'en rende compte, ça vous tourne le coeur et tout se met à flotter [...]: voilà la Nausée. (Sartre 1938: 185)

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<sup>30</sup> The issue of ugliness and its relation to gender will be discussed in chapter 5. Another mirror scene, which appears in the work of Clarice Lispector and is analysed by Hélène Cixous, shows how Roquentin's looking-glass nausea might be re-written from the point of view of women.

Roquentin's existential credibility starts to falter, however, when he claims to be the nausea: 'La Nausée [...] c'est moi' (178). It is part of him, but it is not all of him, just as contingency and material existence are aspects of himself, but are not him as a whole. Roquentin does not make this distinction until the end of the novel. Elsewhere, as far as he is concerned: Nausea = contingency = existence = me. But when he takes one last drink in the *Rendez-vous des Cheminots*, he makes the crucial observation quoted at the beginning of this discussion of *La Nausée*:

Le monde était si laid, hors de moi, si laids ces verres sales sur les tables, et les taches brunes sur la glace et le tablier de Madeleine et l'air aimable du gros amoureux de la patronne, si laide l'existence même du monde, que je me sentais à l'aise, en famille. (242)

In saying this, Roquentin is making two fundamental points: existence is ugly, but it is not me, since it is 'hors de moi'. Ugliness, like the pervasive nausea in the novel, is a mediating term between the world according to the for-itself and the world in-itself. It is an expression of mutual indigestibility. As Sartre puts it in the essay on Husserl, the relation between the tree and the self is such that 'je ne peux pas plus me perdre en lui qu'il ne se peut diluer en moi: hors de lui, hors de moi' (Sartre 1947: 30). The relation of mutual exteriority between the for-itself and the world of the in-itself (the self and the other) is unsettling, but ultimately unthreatening. The relation between the self and the Sartrean Other, however, has the potential to alienate the self and place it in a position of otherness and of 'danger'. This more threatening – and politically more problematic – formulation of the self-other relation will form the basis for discussion in Part 2.

## PART 2: THE LOOK and the OTHER

The fundamental relation between the self and the Other, referred to in *L'Être et le Néant* as 'being-for-others', can best be approached through Sartre's concept of 'the look'. The self-other relation from this point of view cannot be explained in terms of a simple subject-object relation, with the self as viewing subject and the Other as viewed object, since the Other can return the look and in doing so objectifies the subject. Thus, argues Sartre, the truth of 'Seeing-the-other' is also 'Being-seen-by-the-other': it works both ways. Indeed the look of the Other is what defines the self. Sartre illustrates this with reference to a viewing subject peeping through a keyhole:

Imaginons que j'en sois venu, par jalousie, par intérêt, par vice, à coller mon oreille contre une porte, à regarder par le trou d'une serrure. Je suis seul et sur le plan de la conscience non-thétique (de) moi. Cela signifie d'abord qu'il n'y a pas de *moi* pour habiter ma conscience. Rien, donc, à quoi je puisse rapporter mes actes pour les qualifier. Ils ne sont nullement *connus*, mais *je les suis* et, de ce seul fait, ils portent en eux-mêmes leur totale justification. (EN 305)

In this moment of isolation, I *am* my jealousy, I do not *know* it, according to Sartre. I am in a situation, but I have no being, since I am nothing but consciousness of what is going on behind the door. The sound of footsteps in the hall, however, causes a profound modification in my structure: it causes my self to come into being. Suddenly '*je me vois parce qu'on me voit*' (EN 306), but the self that comes into being at this moment escapes from me because it has its foundation outside myself in the look of the Other. It is an alienated self. Nevertheless I do not reject this strange image of myself, since without it I would remain a pure nothingness (consciousness of the world, rather than consciousness *in* it).

The alienated image enables me to see the self that I *am* without *knowing* it. Sartre suggests that there are two moments when I am made acutely aware of this image: when I experience feelings of pride or of shame. In other words, my sense of self is strongest when I feel myself evaluated either positively or negatively by the look of the Other. Sartre's keyhole model for the creation of the alienated self predisposes his

argument to focus on shame, however, since we are taught from an early age that spying on other people is not something of which we should feel proud. His account therefore emphasises the negative evaluation of the Other's look experienced through shame, which is '*la reconnaissance de ce que je suis bien cet objet qu'autrui regarde et juge*' (EN 307). In this moment of shame and solidification I become alienated from my own freedom because the Other as a look has transcended my transcendence: '*Me saisir comme vu, en effet, c'est me saisir comme vu dans le monde et à partir du monde*' (EN 309). I am no longer entirely master of my situation, Sartre argues. Although I still assume myself and my own possibilities, I am now haunted by a 'phantom-outline' of my being-for-the-Other as well.<sup>31</sup> It is clear from the direction of Sartre's argument that the phantom outline is far more likely to be a negative image than a positive one and that the Sartrean self tends to feel itself objectified more readily as shameful and ugly. The condition of my being is dependent on a freedom that is not my own and, I would argue, the condition of my being ugly is dependent on a negative external double.

The Sartrean keyhole scenario and the imposition of a 'phantom-outline' immediately invites comparison with the psychoanalytic model of the psyche. The phantom outline attributed by Sartre to 'the Other' closely resembles the 'external' agency theorised by Freud in terms of the superego. The superego originates in a modification of the ego which occurs as part of the socialisation process during which the child internalises the rules of society. Once this has been achieved, following the resolution of the castration complex, the superego functions as a conscience which passes judgement (from the point of view of society) on the performance of the ego. The sense of shame experienced by the Sartrean voyeur can be seen in terms of the effect of this form of self-censorship, especially given that Sartre's account does not require 'the Other' to be physically present. It is enough for the voyeur to 'hear footsteps in the hall' for him to feel guilty about spying. With this sudden onset of reflexive awareness, consciousness becomes alienated from itself and now sees someone who is both 'me and not me'; that is, an ambivalent double. This sense of ambivalence towards an alienated self suggests another link with Freud, this time with his 1919 essay '*Das "Unheimliche"*' (The 'Uncanny').

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<sup>31</sup> The term used in *L'Être et le Néant* is '*esquisse-fantôme de mon être*' (EN: 311).

*The Uncanny*

Freud's essay is uncharacteristic in that it addresses the phenomenon of the double not just in relation to a theory of the mind, but also in relation to aesthetics. The significance of this undertaking in relation to Sartre lies in the fact that its preoccupations are strikingly similar to those areas of Sartrean theory and fiction associated with ugliness. Of course, it is possible to borrow 'Das Unheimliche' to support a variety of claims: Harold Bloom, for example, has suggested that it should be seen as Freud's theory of the sublime. I am not recruiting it here as a theory of ugliness, but, as Hélène Cixous has argued, the effect of Freud's text is to question the repressive ideological boundaries of aesthetics and challenge the notion that aesthetics should deal only with positive sentiment. One of the sentiments to be cast aside, she maintains, is that which accompanies ugliness: 'Aesthetics deals with *positive* and casts aside contrary sentiments (ugliness as a positive value has scarcely a place in this tradition)' (Cixous 1976: 528). Cixous implies that the banishment of ugliness to the margins of a traditional aesthetics of beauty is a situation which needs to be re-examined and that 'Das "Unheimliche"' goes some way towards doing just that.

Freud draws his literary evidence, in particular, from the work of E.T.A Hoffmann, 'the unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature' (Freud 1990b: 354). Freud observes how, in Hoffmann's tales there is a frequent 'doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self' (354), where the subject identifies with someone else to the point where he is no longer sure which is his own self, or where he substitutes an extraneous self for his own. A similar dissolution of the boundaries of the self occurs also in *La Nausée* when Roquentin ceases to see himself as distinct from the world of objects, when existence for-itself and existence in-itself are no longer clearly delineated. The problem of boundaries is repeated too in Sartre's theory of relations with others, where the for-itself becomes caught up in a dialectical exchange of looks with the Other and is thus constantly in a position of having to assert being-for-itself over being-for-others in order not to become alienated from itself. The Sartrean for-itself recognises its being-for-others, however, without *knowing* it (since it cannot know itself from another's point of view). In this respect, being-for-others is both

familiar and unfamiliar to the self and so shares the sense of ambivalence associated with the Freudian uncanny which is both 'heimlich' ('homely') and 'unheimlich' ('strange').

The important difference between the alienated Sartrean self and the Freudian double associated with the uncanny is the point of origin: for Sartre, it originates with the Other, whereas for Freud, it originates within the self. In Freud's essay, the uncanny is seen as an effect of the defences which project the *manifest* motivation for the figure of the double – those elements which the ego now finds unacceptable – outwards so that they appear to the ego as something foreign. The quality of uncanniness, Freud concludes, 'can only come from the fact of the "double" being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted – a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect. The "double" has become a thing of terror [...]' (Freud 1990b: 358). The earlier mental stage referred to is that of primary narcissism in children and primitive man, 'a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people' (358). At this stage, the double functioned as a guarantee against the destruction of the ego, a validation of self-love, but in order to pass from this stage to that of independent selfhood, the double had to be repressed. The fact of repression means that it is susceptible to return in later life, but it does so as an alienated form which terrifies where it once reassured. Thus the uncanny for Freud is 'in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression' (Freud 1990b: 363-4). This explains the meaning of Schelling's definition of the uncanny as 'something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light' (364) or, in the words of Mark Cousins, something which is there and shouldn't be there. Something ugly.

If we accept that the uncanny is in some way also ugly, then the empirical and literary phenomena associated with uncanniness can be seen as aspects of ugliness. According to Freud, we experience the uncanny most readily when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced. There is a certain infantile element in this, he argues, one which also dominates the minds of neurotics, and that is 'the over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality' (Freud 1990b:

367). This over-accentuation of psychical reality, I would argue, is the precondition for Roquentin's experience of nausea. If the pebble, the tree root and the tram seat were to remain what they are materially, then Roquentin's diary would degenerate into sheer banality. Instead, in terms of Sartrean theory, Roquentin's perceiving consciousness is overtaken by his imagining consciousness. Another feature of the uncanny contributed to Freud's text by Jentsch is that uncanny feelings are awakened in particular 'when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one' (Freud 1990b: 354). Once again, this aspect of the uncanny relates closely to Sartre's theory and Roquentin's experience. Nausea occurs when the for-itself collapses into the in-itself; that is, when an animate object threatens to become an inanimate one. We see this most obviously during the scene where Roquentin contemplates his own reflection in the mirror: 'Les yeux, le nez et la bouche disparaissent: il ne reste plus rien d'humain', Roquentin observes (Sartre 1938: 33). What is left is a textured mineral surface that is at once utterly alien and totally familiar: 'C'est une carte géologique en relief. Et, malgré tout, ce monde lunaire m'est familier. Je ne peux pas dire que j'en reconnaisse les détails. Mais l'ensemble me fait une impression de déjà vu' (33). Roquentin experiences the return of something old and familiar (his face as an object in-itself) as something which now seems strange or 'unheimlich' (no longer invested with human meaning). Indeed, in this respect, the mirror encounter might almost be seen as an exercise in the uncanny. Herein lies a clue to a hidden element of Sartrean humour in *La Nausée*.

Sartre was clearly familiar with the terms of Freud's essay and not only exploited, but at times also parodied them. A case in point is the 'textbook' uncanny moment – a reversal of the mirror scene above – when the inanimate hovers on the brink of becoming animate. Roquentin observes how the statue of Impétraz in the Cour des Hypothèques 'ne vit pas, non, mais il n'est pas non plus inanimé' (Sartre 1938: 48). The moment when the terms of Roquentin's experience are so close to those of 'Das Unheimliche' is also a moment which is decidedly prosaic. There is a definite sense here that Sartre is parodying Freud and as though to prove the point, Roquentin continues to smoke his pipe unperturbed. Having said that, inanimate objects in *La Nausée* are uncanny when Sartre goes beyond Freud; that is, they become 'animate'

in the sense of taking on an imaginative textual life of their own, as in the case of the tram seat:

Je murmure: c'est une banquette, un peu comme un exorcisme. Mais le mot reste sur mes lèvres: il refuse d'aller se poser sur la chose. Elle reste ce qu'elle est, avec sa peluche rouge, milliers de petites pattes rouges, en l'air, toutes raides, de petites pattes mortes. Cet énorme ventre tourné en l'air, sanglant, ballonné – boursoufflé avec toutes ses pattes mortes, ventre qui flotte dans cette boîte, dans ce ciel gris, ce n'est pas une banquette. Ça pourrait tout aussi bien être un âne mort [...] (Sartre 1938: 176-7)

The tram seat for Roquentin is an ablative absolute, a 'having been animate' animal or insect, which is now a decaying, bloated corpse. Textually it is more alive than ever and yet it is explicitly dead. This, I would argue, represents a nod to Freud for whom death, dead bodies and the return of the dead are all associated with uncanny feelings. In deference to this, perhaps, Roquentin does experience a ghastly *frisson* – which we might take to be a genuine sense of the uncanny – on seeing the cashier in the café Mably:

La caissière est à son comptoir. Je la connais bien: elle est rousse comme moi; elle a une maladie dans le ventre. Elle pourrit doucement sous ses jupes avec un sourire mélancolique, semblable à l'odeur de violette que dégagent parfois les corps en décomposition. Un frisson me parcourt de la tête aux pieds [...]. (Sartre 1938: 84)

The 'Sartrean uncanny' here plays mercilessly on the undecidability between the animate and the inanimate. It also draws attention to the notion that the female body, and the female genitals in particular, can be seen as uncanny. Freud observes how 'neurotic men declare that there is something uncanny about the female genital organs' in that 'this *unheimlich* place [...] is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings' (Freud 1990b: 368). The female body becomes strange through a



process of repression characteristic of the male gaze which sees woman as both castrated and potentially castrating.<sup>32</sup>

Yet another aspect of the Freudian uncanny relevant to *La Nausée* is the fact that it involves a class of frightening things which *recur*. It is not so much the thing that recurs which strikes us as uncanny, however, nor indeed the fact of the repetition, but rather, argues Freud, the discovery of an inner 'compulsion to repeat'. This compulsion, which is seen as a drive to repeat experiences which cause the ego 'un-pleasure' – just as Roquentin is compelled to seek out nausea even though it nauseates him – is discussed by Freud in his 1920 essay 'Beyond the pleasure principle'. The essay puts forward the argument that the drive to repeat experiences which cause the ego un-pleasure is in fact stronger than the pleasure principle which had previously dominated Freud's theory of the mind. Un-pleasure is the result of repression whereby instinctual demands that are not compatible with the demands of the ego are held back at lower levels of psychical development, but continue to struggle to achieve satisfaction. When they do so, either directly or substitutively, the source of that satisfaction is perceived by the ego as unpleasurable in the same way that the resurgence of repressed infantile complexes are offensive to the ego in Freud's account of the uncanny. The compulsion to repeat negative experiences in 'Beyond the pleasure principle' is theorised as part of a so-called 'death drive' (*Thanatos*) which ostensibly opposes the life drives (*Eros*), but, as Elisabeth Bronfen puts it, 'even as the ego disavows its own mortality the primary processes are governed by conservative instincts that strive to return to a pre-animate state' (in Wright 1998: 54-5). We are thus returned to the uncanny and to Sartre via the ambivalence and uncertainty of paradox. The un-pleasurable might therefore be seen in terms of the nauseating or ugly which is as fascinating (for Roquentin) as it is repulsive.

Finally, Freud's account of the uncanny emphasises the superstitious dread associated with the 'evil eye' which, significantly in relation to Sartre, projects a feeling of envy by means of a look. Freud explains how 'a feeling like this betrays

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<sup>32</sup> Roquentin clearly shares that male gaze here. There is also a persistent horror of female flesh in Sartre's work more generally (especially the theory of sliminess and its relation to nausea discussed

itself by a look' and that such a look is most powerful 'when a man is prominent owing to noticeable, and particularly owing to unattractive, attributes' (Freud 1990b: 362). In other words, if the person who casts the evil eye is ugly, then the intensity and hence the effect of the look is strengthened so that 'what is feared is thus a secret intention of doing harm' (Freud 1990b: 362). The issue of the evil eye, or rather the power of ugliness as prophecy, is explored by Sartre in his essay on Tintoretto, 'Le séquéstré de Venise' (1964b). Tintoretto is portrayed as a renegade painter whose work was entirely at odds with the prevailing aesthetic of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian art which favoured the reassuring spectacle offered by the work of Titian. Tintoretto painted what the Venetians saw, but would not acknowledge: 'Cet Art est laid, méchant, nocturne' (Sartre 1964b: 332). Titian painted what they *wanted to see* and so, in Sartre's view, committed 'la plus grande trahison, la Beauté' (340). At the height of the city's power, wealth and grandeur, its citizens demanded the reassurance of Beauty (with a capital B) and rejected the anxiety provoked by Tintoretto's revelation of 'un monde absurde et hasardeux où tout peut arriver' (in other words, Sartrean contingency) (342). Sartre compares the prevailing mentality in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Venice to his own fear of flying:

[...] de temps en temps la peur se réveille – tout particulièrement lorsque mes compagnons sont aussi laids que moi; mais il suffit qu'une belle jeune femme soit du voyage ou un beau garçon ou un couple charmant et qui s'aime: la peur s'évanouit; la laideur est une prophétie: il y a en elle je ne sais quel extrémisme qui veut porter la négation jusqu'à l'horreur. Le Beau paraît indestructible; son image sacrée nous protège: tant qu'il demeurera parmi nous, la catastrophe n'aura pas lieu. (Sartre 1964b: 341-2)

The airborne Sartre, in a state of anxiety, demands an external source of optimism which other ugly passengers cannot provide. Their ugliness, like the painting of Tintoretto for the Venetians, transforms vague fears into a dire premonition of death. Sartre therefore directs his gaze towards attractive fellow passengers in the same way the Venetians preferred to contemplate the paintings of Titian. The implication here is that the mere aspect of unprepossessing people and paintings is akin to staring death

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above). Feminist readings of this aspect of the uncanny note how the mother's body is a site of

in the face and that against such overwhelming odds, a reciprocal, self-affirming look is impossible. Ugliness appears to impose itself as an absolute over which the perceiving subject has no control. The emergence of ugliness as an independent prophet of doom is not typical of the Sartrean look, however. In situations where anxiety is less acute and where the superstitious imagination does not run riot, ugliness is created by the look of the Other, a situation clearly demonstrated by the readers in the public library in *La Nausée*.

### *The look in the library*

One of the consequences of writing *La Nausée* in the form of a first person narrative is that 'events' are described by Roquentin from a purely personal point of view. His private sphere of nausea and ugliness is not subjected to external scrutiny. Towards the end of the novel, however, there is an incident where ugliness is publicly exposed and judged by other people. It takes place in the library, a curious official space where enforced silence and limited movement isolate and intensify the Sartrean look.

The library scene serves as an important point of reference for a discussion of the theoretical relation between the look, the Other and the issue of ugliness. It highlights the significance of a collective look which is otherwise absent from Roquentin's diary. The object on which that look is focussed is explicitly given as ugliness – not existential ugliness as discussed in the first part of this chapter, but ugliness as it appears in the world; in this case the *moral* ugliness of touching schoolboys and masturbating in public. The perpetrator of this moral crime in the eyes of the Others – the librarian and the other readers – is the Autodidact. In the first instance, the Others are aware that something untoward is about to happen, but pretend to be reading furiously and do not look up from their books. They do not need to. The Autodidact anticipates their look and is conscious of the way it already constitutes him as shameful before the fact – he can hear the footsteps in the hall, as it were – and so, 'par instants, il s'interrompait et jetait derrière lui un regard inquiet' (Sartre 1938: 229).

The drama of the scene, although focussed on a pivotal act, is in fact found in the exchange of meaningful glances. Roquentin looks up to catch sight of the Autodidact 'penché sur son jeune voisin, les yeux dans les yeux' (229). He is acutely aware that 'quelque chose d'ignoble allait se produire' (instigated in his view by the boys and not by the Autodidact) and he is concerned to prevent it, but does not quite know how best to do so. Action seems appropriate – he could deliver a friendly slap on the Autodidact's shoulder and engage him in conversation – but instead he merely looks on. The Autodidact looks back at him: 'au même moment, il surprit mon regard. Il cessa tout net de parler et pinça ses lèvres d'un air irrité. Découragé, je détournai rapidement les yeux et repris mon journal, par contenance' (229). The Autodidact has caught Roquentin watching him. His is now the look of the Other for Roquentin and, for a brief moment, the shaming look is reversed. Roquentin averts his gaze, but it is immediately replaced by that of the fat woman, who now stares at the Autodidact openly: 'Cependant la grosse dame avait repoussé son livre et levé la tête. Elle semblait fascinée' (229). Roquentin's stolen glances are contrasted now with the 'lourds regards' of the other readers. He cannot bring himself to look squarely at the Autodidact, but catches a glimpse of what is going on from the corner of his eye:

En tournant légèrement la tête, je parvins à attraper du coin de l'oeil quelque chose: c'était une main, la petite main blanche qui s'était tout à l'heure glissée le long de la table. A présent elle reposait sur le dos, détendue, douce et sensuelle, elle avait l'indolente nudité d'une baigneuse qui se chauffe au soleil. Un objet brun et velu s'en approcha, hésitant. C'était un gros doigt jauni par le tabac; il avait, près de cette main, toute la disgrâce d'un sexe mâle. Il s'arrêta un instant, rigide, pointant vers la paume fragile, puis, tout d'un coup, timidement, il se mit à le caresser. (230)

Roquentin interprets the hesitant gestures on the part of the Autodidact as evidence of his sense of shame and, specifically, of his moral ugliness: 'on eût dit qu'il était conscient de sa laideur' (230). At this moment, Roquentin sees the Autodidact through the eyes of the Autodidact seeing himself being seen by the Others. Roquentin's text focusses on the sexual act of hands touching on the table and on the complexity of the look exchanged above the table in an effort to distract attention

from the disappearance of the Autodidact's other hand *under* the table. Roquentin tries to catch the Autodidact's eye, to warn him that he is being watched, but the Autodidact, smiling, has closed his eyes and in doing so has rejected the self-alienation that the looks of the Others seek to impose. Whilst the Autodidact momentarily escapes these objectifying looks in order to be himself as he appears to himself, the fact of closing his eyes means that he is objectified utterly by the Others. He does not return their look and engage in the dialectics of transcendence transcended and so abdicates his responsibility and his freedom.

The first verbal response to the situation is that of the outraged librarian, who shouts: 'Je vous ai vu' (231). He continues with a tirade that includes the threat of legal action: 'Il y a des tribunaux, en France, pour les gens de votre espèce'. The judgement of the court, however, is already superfluous, since the look of the Others in the library is judge and jury in itself. Roquentin's neighbour repeats the librarian's accusation: 'je l'ai vu' (232). With this corroboration of visual evidence, the librarian feels able to formulate a collective indictment: 'On vous a vu, sale bonhomme!' He rams the point home with his fist on the Autodidact's nose. During this assault Roquentin sees nothing but the Autodidact's eyes, which he describes as 'magnifiques yeux béants de douleur et de honte' (233). In the end, then, the Autodidact is forced to accept the judgement contained in the look of the Others and to feel ashamed and ugly, or rather 'dirty', since the insults against him repeat the accusation that he is 'sale'.<sup>33</sup>

The situation of the self in relation to the look of the Other within a broad 'legal' framework is explored at length in Sartre's play, 'Huis clos' (In Camera), first performed in May 1944.<sup>34</sup> Here, once again, ignoble acts are 'on trial', but the perpetrators of those acts are dead and hence no longer free to become anything other than what they are already in the eyes of their fellow deceased. In *Un Théâtre de situations*, Sartre discusses his famous statement that the play was intended to show

<sup>33</sup> We are returned, once again, to the anthropological notion of dirt as 'matter out of place'. There are two sets of conditions for this, according to Mary Douglas: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Where there is dirt, there is system, she argues. In the case of the Autodidact, the system is conventional morality and his behaviour, as an inappropriate element in that system, is the contravention that constitutes 'dirt' (see Douglas 1984: 35).

<sup>34</sup> 'Huis clos' was written in autumn 1943 and published initially under the title 'Les Autres' in *L'Arbalète* 8, Spring 1944.

how 'l'enfer, c'est les autres' (Sartre 1973: 238). This phrase, he argued, had been much misunderstood. He did not mean that relations with others are inevitably infernal, but rather that relations with others can become distorted in such a way that the Other becomes hell for us. This happens when we are too dependent on other people's judgements and too reluctant to define ourselves. There are, argues Sartre, 'une quantité de gens dans le monde qui sont en enfer parce qu'ils dépendent trop du jugement d'autrui' (1973: 238). They are 'dead' to their own possibilities and their freedom has congealed (the phrase Sartre uses to describe this is 'encroûtement de la liberté'). They choose to *exist* the opinions that other people have formed of them. Sartre does not deny the significance of the Other in determining who we are – 'les autres sont au fond ce qu'il y a de plus important en nous-mêmes pour notre propre connaissance de nous-mêmes' (238) – but that is only half the story.

In *L'Être et le Néant*, Sartre argues that 'mon être-objet ou être-pour-autrui est profondément différent de mon être-pour-moi' (EN 319-20) and that the way in which I am objectified by others does not in fact refer to myself at all. Sartre illustrates the point with reference to evil, or '*méchanceté*'.<sup>35</sup> The qualification 'evil', he argues, characterizes me as an *in-itself* and, as a mode of qualification, is entirely inappropriate for me as a being *for-itself*, since 'je ne suis pas plus méchant, pour moi-même, que je ne "suis" fonctionnaire ou médecin' (EN 320); that is, I am for myself my own possibilities, rather than a fixed entity. The qualification of 'evil' which originates with the Other is a judgement *for-him* and so cannot constitute me as an evil object for myself. As soon as I return the look, I am no longer an object at all. The point is considered with reference, specifically, to ugliness:

...le regard [...] apparaît sur fond de destruction de l'objet qui le manifeste. Si ce passant gros et laid qui s'avance vers moi en sautillant me regarde tout à coup, c'en est fait de sa laideur et de son obésité et de ses sautilllements; pendant le temps que je me sens regardé il est pur liberté médiatrice entre moi-

<sup>35</sup> The notion of '*méchanceté*' in French is closely associated with ugliness. The descriptions in *Notre-Dame de Paris* of one of the most famous ugly characters in 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature, Hugo's Quasimodo, confirms this: when he is first introduced, a woman onlooker observes that he is 'aussi méchant que laid' (Hugo 1974: 89). Later we are told: 'Il était méchant en effet, parce qu'il était sauvage; il était sauvage parce qu'il était laid' (207).

même et moi. L'être-regardé ne saurait donc *dépendre* de l'objet qui manifeste le regard. (my underlining; EN 323).

This presupposes, however, that the ugly, overweight shuffler-by does not define himself in terms of ugliness or obesity in any way and that he does not acknowledge his being-for-others at all. The ugly man, by returning the look, lays claim to his own freedom so that other people are powerless against him. If this were always the case, then the underlying argument of 'Huis clos' would be meaningless. Hell could not be other people because other people would have absolutely no power over us, nor we over them.

The look is complicated by the fact that we do not enjoy the luxury of such certainty, but rather, 'sans cesse ballottés de l'être-regard à l'être-regardé, tombant de l'un à l'autre par des révolutions alternées, nous sommes toujours, quelle que soit l'attitude adoptée, en état d'instabilité par rapport à Autrui' (EN 459). This dialectic of the self and the Other takes the form of a perpetual conflict in which the look of the Other places the self in the position of being responsible for his or her being-for-others without being the foundation of it. The being-for-others that I am is thus utterly contingent for me and yet I am nonetheless the reason why that being comes into being in the eyes of the Other in the first place. To the extent that I am revealed to myself as responsible for my being, I wish to recover this being that is presented to me by the Other by seizing hold of it in order to become my own foundation. In this way, I might be able to escape the feeling of being permanently stalked by contingency. The prospect of recuperating this being-for-others is both tantalizing and edged with fear: 'if only I could reach out and grasp it', but also 'what happens if I meet this stranger who is my own being?',<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Being-for-others, as discussed earlier, is experienced as something uncanny; that is, the self is seen as something which is familiar and unfamiliar, an alienated double that was once 'heimlich' (for-me) and now appears 'unheimlich' (for-others).

*Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946)

In 1946, Sartre published an important polemical text in which he analysed the dialectic of the self and the Other in terms of the relation between the anti-semitic and the Jew. *Réflexions sur la question juive* contains many of the elements of Sartre's work which have been explored in this chapter in terms of ugliness. I do not mean to suggest that, on this basis, we can now turn to the *Réflexions* and re-read Jewishness as ugliness, since this would smack of the anti-semitism Sartre's essay seeks to expose. Rather, what I intend to show in the last part of this chapter is the way that the artificial construct of 'the Jew' shares with the ugly the status of otherness.

The fact cannot be ignored that the discourse of ugliness, in so far as it relates to negative judgements made about other people, readily lends itself to appropriation by the discourse of racism. Sartre himself indicated that his reflections on the Jewish question were to be taken as an analysis of racism more generally. Blacks, Arabs, Asians and women are all referred to directly as its potential victims, since they too are liable to be constructed by a white, bourgeois, patriarchal gaze as other.<sup>37</sup> Clearly there is a potential problem here of simply gathering any kind of perceived alterity under the rubric of otherness and in doing so denying the positive specificities of such alterity. Sartre addresses this issue from the point of view of the democrat who, he argues, 'manque le singulier: l'individu n'est pour lui qu'une somme de traits universels. Il s'ensuit que sa défense du Juif sauve le Juif en tant qu'homme et l'anéantit en tant que Juif' (Sartre 1954: 76). According to this liberal way of thinking, the particularities of the individual are subsumed by the overarching notion of 'humanity', whereas for the anti-semitic, the individual must be destroyed as a human being so as to leave *the Jew*. Clearly some kind of balance needs to be struck if Jews are to retain their fundamental humanity as well as their Jewishness. How is this to be achieved? First and foremost, Sartre implies, by understanding and taking responsibility for the mechanisms of anti-semitism that operate in all of us.

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<sup>37</sup> The issue of homosexuality is not mentioned specifically by Sartre in the *Réflexions*, though it would be appropriate here to include gays and lesbians among those whom society constructs as other. Sartre himself made this assumption and in his later work explored homosexual otherness extensively. See especially *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (1952).



Sartre's fundamental argument is that 'the Jew' is created by society and more especially by a collective look which causes in him a profound alienation from the others and from himself:<sup>38</sup>

Ce sont nos yeux qui lui renvoient l'image inacceptable qu'il veut se dissimuler. Ce sont nos paroles et nos gestes – *toutes* nos paroles et *tous* nos gestes, notre antisémitisme, mais tout aussi bien notre libéralisme condescendant – qui l'ont empoisonné jusqu'aux moelles; c'est nous qui le contraignons à *se choisir juif*. (Sartre 1954: 167-8).

The designation of an individual or group of individuals as ugly, I would argue, similarly engages society and the 'ugly individual(s)' in the workings of anti-semitism in the broader sense. The ugly individual, like 'the Jew' is the product of a relation between the 'self' (anti-semitic society) and the other ('the enemy') in which the look of the self must always be seen to 'win'. The Jew is thus placed in a perpetual position of inferiority. In order for such a hierarchy to be maintained, however, his presence is still necessary. Without it, anti-semitic society – and specifically *class* society – would no longer exist:

[...] l'existence du Juif lui est absolument nécessaire: à qui donc, sans cela, serait-il supérieur? Mieux encore: c'est en face du Juif et du Juif seul que l'antisémite se réalise comme sujet de droit. [...] Ainsi l'antisémite a-t-il ce malheur d'avoir un besoin vital de l'ennemi qu'il veut détruire. (33-4)

I return at this point to the self-other relation as discussed in the introduction where I drew an analogy with the relation between the gardener and the weed. It was my contention that the gardener needs the weed to act as a guarantee for his or her rôle as a gardener and that without the gardener, the weed would not be a weed at all, but a plant among other plants. Clearly the gardener-weed model is a massive oversimplification and I do not wish to suggest in any way that Jews are 'weeds', but rather that the situation of the Jew in 1940s France as described by Sartre is

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<sup>38</sup> Sartre uses the masculine pronoun throughout the essay since, in referring to 'the Jew', he is referring to a generic concept rather than to a gendered individual. For an English speaker, however,

comparable (in some respects) to the situation of the plant that is *seen as* a weed by the gardener. Sartre's argument is, of course, infinitely more subtle than the gardener-weed analogy and it deals with important political and social implications which, in the context of an introduction, could only be touched upon.

Given these reservations, let us consider first of all how the notion that 'the gardener needs the weed' is dealt with in the *Réflexions*. Sartre maintains that the democrat is right to a certain extent in maintaining that 'c'est l'antisémite qui *fait* le Juif' (84). What the democrat does not see, however, is that society *as a whole* is responsible for creating 'the Jew'. Even though not everybody considers themselves to be antisemitic (gardeners), they are implicated in the activity of the antisemite (gardener) by virtue of the fact that they make up the collective social space ('[horti]culture') in which racism (a fascistic kind of gardening) is situated. Antisemitism, argues Sartre, is 'l'expression d'une société primitive, aveugle et diffuse qui subsiste à l'état latent dans la collectivité légale' (84). I shall return to the reasons why antisemitism is a primitive collective issue shortly; but before doing so, I shall briefly reinforce the second element of the gardener-weed analogy, namely the idea that, were it not for the gardener, the weed would not be a weed at all, but a plant among plants. As I have noted, the link between the weed and the Jew is made only on the basis of a comparable *situation*. In the *Réflexions*, Sartre insists that 'le Juif est en situation de Juif parce qu'il vit au sein d'une collectivité qui le tient pour Juif' (88). By contrast: 'quand les Juifs sont entre eux [...] chacun d'eux n'est, pour les autres et, par suite, pour lui-même, rien de plus qu'un homme' (124-5).<sup>39</sup>

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this poses certain difficulties when commenting on Sartre's text. For the sake of ease in integrating quotations from the *Réflexions*, I shall, where appropriate, continue to use a masculine grammar.

<sup>39</sup> The work of the Israeli academic, Ziva Ben-Porat, supports this last point. The semitic nose, so often seen by Christians as a defining physical sign of Jewishness, is not necessarily viewed in the same way by Jews themselves. Professor Ben-Porat's cognitive trials (conducted among Jewish, Moslem and Christian participants) provide statistical evidence of 'relative freedom from the generally assumed tyranny of stereotypes' (Ben-Porat 1998). In response to a contemporary Hebrew poem by Moshe Dor in which a certain Khalif is described as having a 'prototypical semitic nose curving/ Like the beak of a hawk', 84% of participants ignored the stereotype, even when asked specifically about the nose's relevance for an ideological interpretation. In addition to analysing responses to a poetic source, Ben-Porat conducted a series of experiments using visual stimuli (pictures of faces). She found that respondents commented consistently on noses only when the stereotype was activated by isolating the nose through schematic images. Other less directional images of heads (with more or less prominent noses) elicited far less predictable responses. This led Ben-Porat to the conclusion that 'we are cognitively competent to deal with stereotypes if so motivated', but that we should beware of 'hasty conclusions drawn from the use of a stereotype in non-stereotyped discourse'.

These observations are taken from the text of a paper presented at the conference entitled 'Cognitive Intertextuality' held at the University of Tel Aviv, 30 December 1998 – 1 January 1999.

Let us turn now to consider antisemitism as an existential problem and look at the ways in which the issues raised in the *Réflexions* can be linked specifically to ugliness. The underlying argument throughout Sartre's text is that all antisemitism is a manifestation of fear in the face of the human condition. The basic elements of that condition are that, given the fact of contingency, humanity is free to make choices in a given situation and that it must therefore bear the weight of total responsibility. Antisemitism and all forms of racism are a sign of bad faith, of not wanting to take that responsibility. The other, whatever human form that other may take (including the ugly), is used in bad faith as a pretext for avoiding the condition of the for-itself and as a means of founding the illusion of rock-like stability in-itself. The existence of the other

[...] permet simplement à l'antisémite d'étouffer dans l'oeuf ses angoisses en se persuadant que sa place a toujours été marquée dans le monde, qu'elle l'attendait et qu'il a, de tradition, le droit de l'occuper. L'anti-sémitisme, en un mot, c'est la peur devant la condition humaine. L'antisémite est l'homme qui veut être roc impitoyable, torrent furieux, foudre dévastatrice: tout sauf un homme. (65)

It is in respect of this innate human fear of freedom and responsibility that racism is seen as a primitive collective issue. Manifestations of that fear in specific situations inevitably take on more concrete forms. The ancient world enacted the ritual of the scapegoat (see chapter 1) in order to delineate the social self from the asocial (ugly) other. There was a clear sense of who belonged inside the city and who should be driven outside it. 'Scapegoat rituals' in modern society have become internalised and more diffuse – they are aimed at groups rather than specific individuals – though the exclusions they impose are no less crude in the end.

Sartre argues that antisemitism is in effect 'un snobisme du pauvre' (30); that is, an expression of dissatisfaction with the inequalities of class society. The urban petit-bourgeois in France – the 'fonctionnaire', the 'employé' and the 'petit commerçant' –

possesses little in the way of material and symbolic capital.<sup>40</sup> Hatred of the Jew enables members of the *petit-bourgeoisie* to indulge a sense of one-upmanship and position themselves higher up in the social hierarchy on the basis of a certain mythical notion of 'Frenchness' that the Jew cannot possibly attain. 'L'antisémite se définit', according to Sartre, 'par la possession concrète et irrationnelle des biens de la Nation' (135). In so far as it is related to issues of class, this aspect of antisemitism also applies to judgements about ugliness, since there is no doubt that many judgements of ugliness are linked primarily to a sense of class distinction. In *Vulgarity and Civility* (1991: 87), Stuart Zane Charmé explores Sartre's notion of 'black humanism' or 'pessimistic naturalism' whereby the post-revolutionary bourgeoisie developed an ideology of 'distinction' which devalued nature and idealised culture and civility.<sup>41</sup> Sartre was strongly opposed to such an ideology, according to Charmé, and so created a corresponding notion of vulgarity as a critical foil: 'Vulgarity and distinction [...] are two aspects of an identical reality' (from *L'Idiot de la famille*; quoted in Charmé 1991: 88). This leads us to Charmé's notion of the existential oxymoron. Earlier in this chapter I argued that an unbearable contradiction could be seen in terms of ugliness and that it hovers over more than one existential division (the for-itself/in-itself division and the self/other). For Charmé it occurs at a more general level at the limits of nature and culture where it ties selfhood with 'civilized vulgarity' and 'vulgar civility'. He describes how Sartre 'was constantly aware of the various ways in which vulgarity oozes through the cracks of civility, as can be seen in his ideas about themes such as obscenity, ugliness, scatology, laughter and body odours' (1991: 7). Such visceral notions of vulgarity might seem remote from our discussion of the position of ugliness as comparable to that of the Jew. These, after all, are fundamental aspects of human nature and are common to all races, but antisemitic attitudes, as Sartre demonstrates, would not have it so.

Among the reasons given by people whom Sartre questioned about their dislike of Jews, the following list of objections proved typical: 'Je les déteste parce qu'ils sont intéressés, intrigants, *collants*, *visqueux*, sans tact, etc.' (my emphasis; Sartre 1954:

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<sup>40</sup> The term 'symbolic capital' is not Sartre's, but that of Pierre Bourdieu. It neatly summarises what Sartre explains at greater length in the *Réflexions* (Sartre 1946: 31).

12). In the light of Sartre's theory of sliminess in *L'Être et le Néant*, the presence of the words 'collants' (sticky) and 'visqueux' (slimy) here is significant. Sliminess, as I have shown, is closely associated with ideas of ugliness, not least because it carries connotations of 'bassesse' or moral baseness, which can be linked, once again, with class distinctions. Sartre's argument in *L'Être et le Néant* shows how, for the European adult, the experience of certain types of behaviour or of certain moral qualities which displease in some way – a smile, a thought, a handshake, a feeling, for example – can be reduced to a sensory intuition of 'sliminess'. A connection is then established between the feeling of displeasure and sliminess so that slime functions as a 'symbole de toute une classe de sentiments et d'attitudes humaines' (EN 666) which can subsequently be projected back onto other people. We begin to see here how the negative quality of sliminess might be projected by the antisemite onto the Jew, although the Jew is never explicitly mentioned by Sartre in the discussion of sliminess.

For Sartre, the 'gesture' of retrospective projection is highly problematic because it takes for granted what it ought to explain, namely 'une relation symbolique entre la viscosité et la bassesse de certains individus' (EN 666). He argues that it is impossible to derive the value of the psychic symbolism of 'slimy' from the brute quality of the *this* (from *a* Jew, as opposed to *the* Jew) and that it is equally impossible to project the meaning of the *this* in terms of a *knowledge* of psychic attitudes (the antisemite cannot *know* the Jew from the Jew's point of view). Sartre does not resolve this complex problem in *L'Être et le Néant*, but describes in the *Réflexions* how it functions in relation to antisemitic reactions to *knowing*, rather than seeing, that another person is Jewish:

Il y a un dégoût du Juif, comme il y a un dégoût du Chinois ou du nègre chez certaines gens. Et ce n'est donc pas du corps que naît cette répulsion puisque vous pouvez fort bien aimer une Juive si vous ignorez sa race, mais elle vient au corps par l'esprit; c'est un engagement de l'âme, mais si profond et si total qu'il s'étend au physiologique, comme c'est le cas dans l'hystérie.

Cet engagement n'est pas provoqué par l'expérience. (Sartre 1954: 12)

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<sup>41</sup> The notion of distinction is examined in depth in Bourdieu's Marxist/sociological critique of Kantian

Sartre pessimistically ascribes this prior mental antipathy towards a group and not an individual as an innate predisposition towards antisemitism and concludes that: 'Loin que l'expérience engendre la notion de Juif, c'est celle-ci qui éclaire l'expérience au contraire; si le Juif n'existait pas, l'antisémitisme l'inventerait' (Sartre 1954: 14-15).

Despite Sartre's theoretical argument that the body is not the source of antisemitic disgust, this is not the way the situation is *perceived* by the antisemite. Since the only distinctive ethnic characteristics of the Jew are physical, he observes, 'l'antisémite s'est emparé de ce fait et l'a transformé en mythe: il prétend déceler son ennemi sur un simple coup d'oeil' (Sartre 1954: 146). While Sartre is able to demonstrate rationally that racial theory and its attendant physiognomy collapses because the Jew is not 'une totalité indécomposable' who necessarily combines all the accentuated features of stereotypical Jewishness – 'un nez courbe, les oreilles décollées, les lèvres épaisses' (74) – this does nothing to alter the way in which racial stereotypes persist in the mind of the antisemite. Typical physical characteristics of the head, whether they occur together or not, are still taken as a sign of Jewishness. The nose in particular, as I have argued in Chapter 2, is taken as a strong indicator of difference in French culture and one which is frequently associated with both Jewishness and ugliness.<sup>42</sup>

To return to the idea that the antisemite would invent the Jew if the Jew did not exist, if, following Sartre, we consider the antisemite (from his own point of view) as the incarnation of Good and the Jew as the corresponding incarnation of Evil, it is possible once again to establish a connection with ugliness. The antisemitic notion of Good is assumed as a given – it is a fossilized value maintained in bad faith – and it only remains, therefore, for the (self-appointed) sacred 'Knight of Good' to destroy Evil. Such a project, instead of acknowledging freedom and responsibility, reveals how the cowardly Knight assumes his own identity to be fixed and beyond question. He focusses attention not on himself but on the presumed source of Evil – the Jew: 'l'antisémite a décidé du Mal pour n'avoir pas à décider du Bien' (Sartre 1954: 53). With the backing of an entire tradition of associating the good with the beautiful in

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judgement, *La Distinction* (1979). References to Sartre in this work are surprisingly minimal.

<sup>42</sup> Though, as I have noted in relation to the work of Professor Ben-Porat, this is not the case in Jewish, or in other semitic or Mediterranean cultures.

Western culture from the ancient Greek *Kalokagathia* onwards, I would argue that the Sartrean battle of Good against Evil in the *Réflexions* can also be seen as a battle of beauty against ugliness. The implications of this for Western aesthetics are far-reaching, since they reveal the possibility that throughout history the self-styled 'aesthete' antisemite has deluded himself about his motives and has decided on what is Evil/ugly in order expressly not to make a decision about Beauty. The conviction that beauty (with a small b) is something fixed, immutable, reassuring and therefore somehow *authentic* is thus an illusion. As with the explanation by projection of the connection between sliminess and baseness, the presumed connection between beauty and goodness takes for granted what it ought to explain.

Sartre himself does not speculate about aesthetics in this way, since his concern in writing the *Réflexions* is political and social. The discourse of Good is not explored in terms of beauty, but in terms of its collusion with racism. Nevertheless, if we continue to uphold the view that, in questioning the link between the beautiful and the good, Sartre is also questioning the fundamental assumptions of traditional aesthetics, then, I would argue, he is also approaching Kantian territory. Given that the overall Sartrean aesthetic is distinctly un-Kantian (in that it embraces nausea, disgust, sliminess, the ungraceful and the obscene – all of which can be seen as manifestations of ugliness), this potential convergence is surprising. But if there is common ground between Sartre and Kant, in so far as both philosophers challenge Western notions of beauty, the similarity ends here and their respective conclusions are radically different. Whereas Kant, in the third Critique, puts forward an argument for a transcendent ideal of beauty, Sartre's work seems to argue, implicitly rather than explicitly, for a transcendental 'ideal' of ugliness; that is, for an *a priori* category of existential nausea that is intrinsically ugly and which is revealed to consciousness through empirical uglinesses. The consequences of this underlying Sartrean position can be seen most clearly in so-called 'postmodern' theories of the sublime such as that of François Lyotard, as discussed in chapter 3. Lyotard in turn owes much to French Romanticism and its revaluation of the grotesque as a source of inspiration and a means of driving art forwards and out of the creative rut carved out by traditional notions of beauty. In this sense, then, Sartre's treatment of ugliness speaks of an underlying and enduring romanticism in French philosophical thought.

In conclusion, however, I retain the conviction that Sartrean ugliness is first and foremost an existential, rather than an aesthetic, issue. It can best be summed up as a form of lived existential oxymoron or unbearable contradiction between two states: between the for-itself and the in-itself (consciousness and the object), between the for-itself and another for-itself (the dialectics of transcendence transcended), and between the self and the Other (the self as objectified by the look). Ugliness for Sartre is a negative value that is coded socially, aesthetically and racially, as well as deriving from the negation internal to consciousness which constitutes the self. It is also a gendered issue, as the earlier discussion of sliminess demonstrates; this despite Sartre's evident sensitivity to the oppression of social groups (including women) on the basis of their perceived otherness. Taking the otherness of women as a starting point, chapter 5 will explore ugliness – and women's reappropriation and revaluation of it – from the point of view of feminist theory and literature.



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## CHAPTER 5

### Reviewing And Revaluing Ugliness On The Side Of Women

In this final chapter the broad framework of the self-other relation that has informed this study of ugliness will be explored specifically from the point of view of women. A sense of ugliness emerges whenever there is a perceived or unconscious need for urgent differentiation between the self and the other. There is, of course, more than one kind of otherness. The question is raised by Hélène Cixous in her influential essay 'Sorties' (1975), where she draws a distinction between what is absolutely the 'other', and which cannot therefore be theorised, and what History has called 'other', that is, a kind of alterity that is conceived dialectically. This second, relative other enters into a hierarchical relationship with 'the same', which rules, names, defines and assigns its other according to what she terms an 'inexorable plot of racism' (in Cixous and Clément 1987: 71). Cixous compares this to the Hegelian system which, she argues, reproduces the mechanism of the death struggle and reduces a 'person' to a 'nobody' and to the position of the 'other'. There can be no master without a slave, just as there can be 'no "Frenchmen" without wogs, no Nazis without Jews, no property without exclusion' (71).<sup>1</sup> The implied irony of the master/slave dialectic, Cixous observes, is that the *body* of that which is strange must not disappear in order that the master might dominate and reappropriate its force. Cixous's text begins by tracing the origin of all hierarchical oppositions back to the fundamental man/woman couple, a fact which indicates that her discussion of the master/slave dialectic is to be understood not exclusively, but at least in part, as a dialectic between the sexes.<sup>2</sup> The other for Cixous is also 'woman'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Since the publication by Simone de Beauvoir of *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949, the use of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic to describe the relationship between men and women under patriarchy is well known. Following on from the discussion of racism in chapter 4, what is interesting about Cixous's essay is the fact that she makes explicit the connection between the oppression of women and the structure of racism generally.

<sup>2</sup> That is not to say that Cixous draws a rigid distinction on the basis of presumed biological difference. As this chapter will go on to discuss, sexual difference is far from being a matter of biology only.

<sup>3</sup> I use inverted commas here to indicate the gesture of essentialising women. It has become increasingly difficult to write about 'woman', or indeed about 'man', without considerable hesitation as to what is implied. As feminist thought has progressed, the word woman has become inadequate to the task of multiple referentiality demanded of it. In speaking of woman, does one speak of biology, of gender, of a collective notion, of a strategic political alliance, of an individual? Such issues of problematic referentiality are by now familiar. I raise them at the outset to signal awareness of the

The situation of woman as other in patriarchal society was first explored by Simone de Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949). In the introduction to her study she noted that the category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself and that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other. She saw no reason why this duality should be attached to the division of the sexes and yet, she argued, human society constructs itself as male and defines itself against woman as Other. By effacing the distinction between nature and culture – by conflating the fact of being female with a notion of ‘eternal femininity’ – patriarchal society transforms a contingent set of circumstances into a situation with all the appearance of immutable truth. Beauvoir famously challenged the assumption that human destiny is linked to anatomy, that gender is the necessary consequence of biological sex, with the assertion that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’. To become a ‘woman’, to assume a certain gender position, is quite distinct from being born female. Gender is a cultural construction that is acquired not innate. At its limit, according to Judith Butler, Beauvoir’s ‘sex/gender distinction implies a radical heteronomy of natural bodies and constructed genders with the consequence that “being” female and “being” a woman are two very different sorts of being’ (Butler 1998: 31). Despite feminist insistence on the arbitrary link between these two orders of being, patriarchal culture has consistently tried to preserve the fiction of their identity with the result that women have been unable to interpret themselves or realize their own sets of cultural possibilities beyond the facticity of their bodies.

Following on from the discussion in chapter 4, it can be argued that woman as Other serves to obscure the fundamental contingency of the human condition, to act as a screen against absolute, untheorisable otherness. In this, women are necessarily closer to the conditions associated with ugliness since they, like the forms of ugliness described by Sartre in *La Nausée*, function as a form of intermediate otherness, a physical boundary which guards against metaphysical truth. More immediately, women are also closer to ugliness because their existence in patriarchal society is necessarily *embodied*. In chapter 4, the mind/body split in terms of the Sartrean ‘pour-soi/en-soi’ division was considered in relation to the self in general. In this chapter, however, that split is seen to be re-allocated specifically between the sexes.

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problem and to avoid the necessity in my own discussion for excessively nervous use of terminology

Consciousness, or the 'pour-soi', is on the side of men. Embodiedness, or the 'en-soi' is on the side of women. Sartrean philosophy in fact lends itself to this interpretation since the state of embodiedness manifests itself in his work most forcefully through physical experiences associated with forms of ugliness (sliminess, the sense of disgust, the obscene) which are seen specifically as 'feminine'.<sup>4</sup> While the ugly other need not necessarily be coded as feminine, the fact that society is patriarchal – that the subject of philosophy and of consciousness is masculine – means that all forms of otherness undergo patriarchal effects and, given that the fundamental model for binary opposition in Western culture, as suggested by Cixous, is that of the male/female couple, are liable to be feminised.<sup>5</sup>

The discussion that follows will approach the question of ugliness from two directions. First, it will consider the way in which patriarchy (and more specifically, the masculine subject of the symbolic order) constructs ugliness as a gendered negative value by positioning it as other alongside/in place of woman in relation to itself. Second, it will look at ugliness from the point of view of women as presented by contemporary French feminist theory – above all in the work of Hélène Cixous – which identifies and exposes the mechanisms of patriarchal 'uglification' and then uses them strategically to revalue both ugliness and women themselves positively.

### *Corporeally determined woman and her 'privileged' relation to ugliness*

The proximity of women to ugliness comes about because rational Cartesian 'man', in order to remain symbolically disembodied, requires a specific kind of Other, described by Judith Butler as 'corporeally determined "woman"' (Butler 1998: 37). By situating corporeality on the side of women, the disembodied 'I' is left free to identify with non-corporeal realities such as the soul, consciousness and transcendence. Whilst this gives Cartesian man unrivalled access to religion, subjectivity and philosophy, it means that his own body becomes Other for him (the pour-soi/en-soi division discussed in chapter 4). Inhabiting a body without a sense of

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that we are, for the time being, stuck with.

<sup>4</sup> This especially in the case of slime, which is described by Sartre as a 'feminine sucking' and 'clinging femininity'.

being that body means that the masculine 'I' represses that body and becomes alienated from it. This leads readily to the conclusion, according to Butler, that others *are* their bodies: 'The body rendered as Other – the body repressed or denied and, then, projected – reemerges for this "I" as the view of Others as essentially body. Hence, women become the Other; they come to embody corporeality itself' (37-8). Cartesian, patriarchal man thus effectively ensures in psychic terms that he has no body and that woman is nothing but her body.

The 'gift' of such corporeality is not unconditional. Women receive their bodies not as their own to exist as they choose, but as bodies which are given as coded in order that they might act as a guarantee for the masculine subject in a particular way. This creates an impossible paradox: women *are* their bodies, but they are alienated from this state of corporeality, since it is demanded of their bodies in advance that they fulfil certain cultural expectations, above all that they participate in a certain kind of 'beauty' already legislated for by masculine desire. The tyranny of this kind of 'beauty' is that, regardless of historical specificities, standards will always be set in such a way that all women fail to reach them most of the time. Women live their lives in a state of ugliness, convinced that their bodies are not sufficiently attractive.<sup>6</sup> Despite appearances, the ideal of beauty in the West is more concerned with issues of power than with looks. A strategy, which on the surface reflects deeply-held beliefs about shared 'aesthetic' ideals of physical perfection, in fact functions to ensure that women remain politically weakened. As a woman in patriarchal society, one can have beauty but not knowledge, or knowledge but not beauty. People generally acquire more power with age, but that increase in power is undermined for women by a sense

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<sup>5</sup> The terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' throughout this discussion are not intended to relate directly to men and women, but refer more generally to conditions experienced by both men and women in patriarchal society.

<sup>6</sup> The problem begins in adolescence, as is evidenced by the growing numbers of young women, convinced that 'thin is beautiful', who suffer from eating disorders (see Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* 1991: 179-217). Concern about the problem at national level in the UK led government health officials to meet with women's magazine editors during spring 2000. In response to issues raised, the June 2000 issue of *Marie Claire* featured prominent discussions of 'the ideal body shape' and ran articles exposing the devastating effects of women's obsession with thinness. The regular fashion feature, however, offered readers 101 variations on the minute bikini modelled by an extremely thin adolescent girl. In addition to eating disorders affecting mainly women, doctors have recently diagnosed a rare psychiatric condition, related to obsessive-compulsive disorder, known as 'Body Dysmorphic Disorder', which affects men also. Sufferers from BDD are tormented by what they believe to be major physical imperfections and become obsessed by their own ugliness, sometimes even to the point of suicide (see Sadgrove 1997: 62-63).

that they are becoming less and less attractive physically.<sup>7</sup> Not only this, women are made to see this as a personal failure, a situation summed up by Coco Chanel's remark to the effect that nature gives one the face one has at twenty, whereas one has earned the face one has at forty.

Women's experience of being the Other is thus double: their inferior position in the hierarchy of the Self – Other is superseded by a more immediate framework of judgement specific to women in which their bodies are other to them, but not on their terms. Whereas men experience their bodies as 'not me' – and in this they too are victims of culture – the sense of 'not me' is not the same as the 'not me' experienced by women. The 'not me' imposed on men is constitutive of subjectivity and although it may be uncomfortable to live (with) this existential oxymoron there is at least some trade-off in terms of an acquired 'I' and the possibility of transcending physicality. The 'not me' imposed on women, having already been used for this purpose, cannot be used in the same way again, since either 'woman' *is* her body, or she is nothing. The sense of alienation from the body offers no trade-off for women, nor is there any possibility of viewing the imperfect body as external without compromising the sense of self as it is given under patriarchy.

Women's alienation from their bodies and their 'privileged' relation to ugliness – a heightened sense of inferiority in *physical* terms but with political consequences – is an artificial situation which stems from their position as the inferior Other against whom the singular, historically masculine subject is defined. Simone de Beauvoir's practical answer to the problem of gendered otherness and its consequent reduction of women to an 'Eternal Feminine' was to demand equality with men. This view has since been challenged, however, among others by Luce Irigaray who maintains that the question of the other in the Western tradition has been poorly formulated. In a culture where the model of subjectivity is monolithically masculine and male, a demand for equality, according to Irigaray, is merely a return to the same: 'l'autre y est toujours l'autre du même et non un autre sujet irréductible à lui et de dignité équivalente' (Irigaray 1998: lecture handout). There is no place in this model for other forms of subjectivity and, despite tangible differences between the sexes, sexual

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<sup>7</sup> The same is also true of men, but at a much later age and to a far lesser extent.



difference in the cultural imaginary of the West does not yet exist. The female sex, 'qui n'est pas *un* sexe,' Irigaray argues, 'est compté comme *pas de* sexe' (Irigaray 1977: 26). The function of women in the Western imaginary is to serve as 'négatif, envers, revers, du seul sexe visible et morphologiquement désignable' (26). The imaginary here is understood in Lacanian terms to refer to a narcissistic order of mirror-images in which the individual seeks to preserve the illusion of self-identity through sameness. Irigaray describes this as the 'specular logic of the same' in which the epistemological subject finds confirmation of his identity through seeing his own reflection in a 'mirror' of which woman is the tain. The woman as other supports the narcissistic self, while remaining invisible both to him (who sees his own reflection) and to herself (she is the reflective material).

Irigaray's project is to bring about change in the cultural imaginary – specifically to inaugurate a distinct feminine sexual economy in the form of 'the Other of the Other' – by intervening in the order of the symbolic.<sup>8</sup> The Symbolic, as theorised by Lacan, is the order of language and of culture which arises out of the naming of things. Once a thing is named, identification with that thing as a thing is no longer possible, since the name stands in its place. Naming the body, for instance, as Ellie Ragland-Sullivan (1998: 421) points out, 'alienates it, castrates its momentary pleasure of an illusionary wholeness and any Imaginary fusion it maintains with an "object". In linking names to things', she argues, 'the word kills the thing as unmediated presence' (421).<sup>9</sup> The symbolic order goes against Hegel's phenomenological concept of the 'Spirit as a bone' (discussed in chapter 3), functioning instead as a means of asserting that 'the Spirit is *not* a bone' and thus in effect, restating the hierarchical Cartesian distinction between transcendence and immanence, between man and woman. But the 'bone' or the 'thing' that is killed off is not simply matter in general. Feminist theory has shown that the originary murder here is specifically an act of matricide. I shall return to this important point later.

<sup>8</sup> Irigaray's 'Other of the Other' is not to be confused with absolute otherness as defined by Cixous; rather she is calling for an other which is equivalent to – but not the same as – the other designated by the masculine subject. This is not a simple reversal of the terms of the existing hierarchy, since that would repeat its fundamental flaws from the point of view of women, but rather an attempt to establish an independent 'feminine economy'.

<sup>9</sup> The view that naming must necessarily kill the thing, as I shall discuss later in this chapter, is a view challenged by Cixous. Since we cannot live outside language, we must find ways of resurrecting 'the thing' through new forms of expression and by writing specifically about the things the symbolic order fails to describe adequately, such as its own relationship to the mother or to ugliness.

Irigaray criticises Lacan for his assumption that the female is an immutable support for the discursive system of the symbolic and for the reality of the imaginary. Lacan's theory, she argues in *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977), is an 'ahistorical conflation' which fails to take account of the physical reality which resists symbolisation – that is, the relation between real women and women in the symbolic. Any discussion of 'real women' must take account of the Real as theorised by Lacan. This third strand in his triadic system (Imaginary, Symbolic, Real) is perhaps the most difficult to describe. It is not a re-formulation of Freud's reality principle, which resists and endlessly postpones desire, rather it takes the Freudian recalcitrance of nature merely as its point of origin. The 'object' in the realm of the Real is the fantasy of originary and unattainable Oneness – which explains why real effects are felt in the Imaginary – but the Real does not refer to that object as such, since it is in the nature of this object to be irretrievably lost. Instead its effects are felt around other objects, especially the body, where the experience of 'jouissance' acts as a reminder of that inaugural loss. The Real thus bespeaks, but does not signify, the impossible. It therefore designates what lies outside the symbolic process altogether.

Real women too exist outside the symbolic, or rather they are excluded from it, but must live in and through it nonetheless, since it is the order of culture and of society. This impossible situation, as presented by Irigaray, creates the conditions under which women appear ugly.<sup>10</sup> From the point of view of phallogentric, specular logic, she argues, a woman's sex – and by extension her whole being – represents 'l'horreur du rien à voir', the lack of a penis (Irigaray 1977: 25).<sup>11</sup> If we consider this view in relation to Mark Cousins's formulation of the ugly, women appear to themselves as something which is there and should not be there (a real woman in the symbolic order), but their lack of a penis also represents to patriarchal eyes the awful reality of something which is not there and should be. The primacy of the masculine gaze thus transforms real women into ugly women on two counts: once for trespassing on patriarchal territory by simply being there, once for not possessing the symbolic attribute of presumed maleness. In chapter 2, 'On the Nose', I demonstrated in

<sup>10</sup> Irigaray does not discuss ugliness as such, but I interpret the psychoanalytic view of woman as lack with which she takes issue as an important historical basis for seeing women as ugly.

<sup>11</sup> Strictly speaking this view derives from the lack according to the Freudian phallogentric model, rather than from that of Lacan, which, as Ellie Ragland-Sullivan (1998: 423) points out, does not theorise the lack as a missing penis, but as a 'lack-in-being' common to both sexes.

relation to the two *Cyranos de Bergerac* (the man and the character of Rostand's play) that a system of equivalences exists between the penis, the sword, the pen and the nose. Having no penis can be made visible by having no nose and having no nose can be taken as an indication of a 'missing' penis (this last, not least because of the effects of syphilis). The discussion in chapter 2 focussed on men. Here, however, I want to consider the implications of an absent nose in relation to the psychoanalytic view of women as lacking a penis and Irigaray's formulation of that lack as 'l'horreur du rien à voir'.

*Mark Cousins on negation: there is a 'no-nose'*

In his analysis of Gaston Leroux's novel, *The Phantom of the Opera*, Cousins explores the significance of philosophical negation in relation to the fact that the ghost of the opera house has no nose. The sight of the absent nose is horrible to see, but it is not not-there, it is excessively there: it is ugly. The issue of presence and absence is not mutually exclusive. Indeed, Cousins argues, 'negation is the enemy of this kind of clarity. It refuses to be simply the opposite of affirmation. At the very moment when negation denies the existence of an object (There is no nose here...), behind the back of the proposition it creates a "negative object", the shadow of an object which isn't there' (Cousins, Summer 1995: 4).<sup>12</sup> We might take that 'negative object' in the context of the present discussion to be the 'ghost' of women in relation to patriarchy, in which case arguments in favour of ghosts offer valuable insight into the feminist project of revaluing ugliness. The theoretical basis for this project closely resembles Cousins's contention that '[t]he existence of objects, and the modalities of their existence, must be viewed not exclusively from the point of view of presence but from the point of view of its "ghost" – the negative world of inverse objects' (5). This strategy of using negation (or hierarchical opposition) against itself in the context of ugliness occupies an important position in contemporary French women's writing especially, as I shall show in part 2, in the work of Hélène Cixous.

According to Cousins, the singular and decisive operation of affirmation – 'there is a nose' or 'there is no nose' – is not symmetrical with that of negation – 'there is a

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<sup>12</sup> All further references to this article will be given simply as page numbers in the text.

no-nose' or 'there is no "no-nose"'. Affirmation and negation are not symmetrical because, unlike affirmation, '[n]egation keeps open a relation to the ghosts of objects, to a world of shadows without objects' (5). Negation, he insists, 'must be regarded as a productive force rather than a limitation, or privation, of objects there might be for experience' (5). From a feminist perspective, this could be taken as a means of conferring upon the negative object (woman) a valid existence. Nevertheless such objects are not yet available to consciousness in the same way that 'real women' do not yet exist in the symbolic order: they are either ugly, or invisible. The form of negation discussed by Cousins, however, operates exclusively at the level of the unconscious and it is only here, he argues, that the experience of the negative object is 'positive, real and direct' (5). If, therefore, the 'female ghost' is to be resurrected, changes must be made in the collective unconscious. The implication here is that the problem of ugliness can be tackled most effectively using the framework of psychoanalysis.

In France, psychoanalytic theory has had a lasting and decisive influence over certain areas of women's writing, where it is underpinned by detailed, and often also professional knowledge of both Freud and Lacan. In particular, Lacan's tripartite theory of the mind (Imaginary, Symbolic, Real) provides the key point of reference for debate. The direction taken by some contemporary feminist thinking in relation to Lacan is clearly signalled by Irigaray's critique of the symbolic order and her call for the creation of a specifically female imaginary (see p. 212 above). As far as the call for social change is concerned – and hence the implications for ugliness as an important point of engagement within that project – it has long been recognised that this can best be achieved in and through strategic intervention in the symbolic order, the order of language and of culture, which is also, in Lacan's account, that of the unconscious.<sup>13</sup> The specific ways in which women's writing has tried to resurrect the female ghost and to effect change in and through language will be explored later in this chapter.

Cousins's analysis of the missing nose (understood here also as the woman's missing penis) asks why it is so ugly. In this case, he argues, the missing object is

equivalent to an excess. The glaring absence of this particular object 'underwhelms', rather than overwhelms the subject, but the outcome in both cases is the same: the missing object poses a threat to subjectivity (which, from a feminist point of view, is seen as exclusively masculine). Whereas the excessive object engulfs the subject so that the sense of 'not me' on which subjectivity is founded is obliterated, the missing object destroys the subject by taking away the foundation. Too much becomes too little. Psychoanalytically, absence is conceived in terms of loss in two ways: the 'lost object' can be traced back to the sense of unity with the mother symbolised by the breast, or it can be considered in respect of the punishment of castration (threatened in the case of men, already inflicted in the case of women). Cousins argues that loss can easily be experienced as punishment and punishment can easily take the form of loss. In either case, 'the subject is threatened with the loss, not of a thing, but of something which was included in the definition of the thing. Without it I am not' (5). Ugliness resides in the threat it poses to subjectivity. Contemporary feminist theory would not dispute the applicability of this argument to the construction of masculine subjectivity, but it does not apply to women for two reasons: first, there is as yet no feminine 'I' to speak of/from; second, the construction of female sexuality on the basis of a missing penis is all too obviously a product of 'phallogocentrism'.<sup>14</sup>

The lack in being exposed by the missing object takes two differing forms and two differing logics, according to Cousins: that of the ghost and that of the mask. I have suggested above that the image of the ghost can be compared to the image of 'woman' (as opposed to real woman). In addition, I would suggest that woman under patriarchy is not just a ghost, but a ghost who is also wearing a mask. Although there are two differing logics at work here, they end up in the same place. Cousins describes the ghost and its effects as follows:

The ghost is a trace of representation which lacks the means to come into existence. It haunts us. That is, it robs us of our conviction that we exist. If it

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<sup>13</sup> The structural similarities between language and the unconscious are well known, not least due to Lacan's much-quoted statement: 'the unconscious is structured like a language'.

<sup>14</sup> The term, coined by Irigaray, is a conflation of the feminist critique of patriarchy on the grounds of phallogocentrism (which privileges the phallus as the universal arbiter of sexuality) and the deconstructionist critique of logocentrism (which privileges the Word as the ultimate arbiter of truth and where the privileged signifier is also the phallus). For a more detailed description see Wright (1998: 316-318).

touches us, its coldness robs us of the heat of our substance. Even to see it is to begin to lose our sight of the world, for it transforms the relation between what is normally seen and what is not seen. In seeing negative objects we lose our footing in existence. (5)

Women too lack the means to come into existence in that they have no place in the symbolic order. They are the 'dark continent' or the underworld – the realm of ghosts.<sup>15</sup> They are the underworld, but are required to remain outside it, to stand as gatekeepers against themselves. As such, they must wear a face (and by extension a whole body) that is not their own, but given under patriarchy. In other words, they must wear a mask.

Empirical debate about the mask, such as that discussed by Naomi Wolf in relation to the 'The Beauty Myth' (1991), views it as a falsely beautiful exterior that conceals the real woman beneath. Wolf invokes the figure of the 'iron maiden', a medieval instrument of torture and of death used exclusively for the punishment of women. The iron maiden consisted of a body-shaped casket painted on the outside to resemble a 'beautiful' woman, but on the inside a series of long metal spikes were positioned so as to pierce the woman's body when the casket was closed. The victim frequently died of her wounds, or of starvation. Wolf compares the situation of medieval victims of the iron maiden to that of modern women under the tyranny of the beauty myth: the painted smile on the outside – the image of the beautiful woman according to men – symbolises the destruction of what lives within. Persuasive though this argument is in the context of practical everyday life, I would argue from a theoretical point of view that so-called beauty is not the primary issue. The powerful sense of obligation among women to fulfil a 'duty to beauty' rests on a prior conviction of ugliness. Women step *willingly* into their body-shaped caskets because they have already been

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<sup>15</sup> The connection I make between women and ghosts is prompted by Cixous's reading of the Freudian uncanny in 'Fiction and its Phantoms', where the ghost is seen as the direct figure of the uncanny. 'The Ghost', Cixous argues, 'is the fiction of our relationship to death, concretized by the spectre in literature' (Cixous 1976: 542). Death is viewed literally, but also figuratively in terms of 'an immense system' that operates within the relationship of presence to absence (543). The movement from presence to absence is traced by Cixous in Freud's 'minimisation' of the doll Olympia from Hoffman's tale. In relation to the self – which in Cixous's text is understood as the masculine self – Olympia represents 'the ghostly figure of nonfulfillment and repression, and not the double as counterpart or reflection, but rather the doll that is neither dead nor alive' (540).

made to wear another mask – that of ugliness. Women are seen first of all as Medusas not maidens.

Cousins's ghost, whose 'coldness robs us of the heat of our substance' and who causes us to 'lose our footing in existence', freezes 'us' out of existence. Alternatively, from a feminist perspective, the ghost might be said to be a female ghost who kills men by turning them to stone. In 'Le rire de la Méduse', Hélène Cixous offers a powerful interpretation of the way women are constructed by patriarchy as irredeemably ugly. Irigaray's 'horreur du rien à voir' (the horror of the absent penis/no-nose) is formulated in Cixous's essay in terms of a white colonialist discourse of racism: 'l'horreur du noir' (Cixous 1975a: 41). Cixous speaks of the relationship between men and women as a form of apartheid in which women are told: 'parce qu tu es Afrique, tu es noire. Ton continent est noir. Le noir est dangereux. Dans le noir tu ne vois rien, tu as peur. Ne bouge pas parce que tu risques de tomber' (41). Women are thus told that they are the inhabitants of the dark continent (the ghosts of the underworld), but they are also told to be afraid of the dark (to fear ghosts); that is, to hate each other and never to venture into the the darkness. Cixous describes this as a form of 'anti-narcissism' inflicted through fear and causing self-loathing.<sup>16</sup> The hateful visage – the mask – given to woman by patriarchy, argues Cixous, is that of the Medusa, the ugliest woman known to man, so ugly in fact that one glimpse of her face turned men to stone. Women find themselves trapped, according to Cixous, between the horrifying myths of the Medusa and the abyss, between the snake-haired gorgon and the abyss of the black unknown. It is here that the differing forms and differing logics of lack as described by Cousins might be seen to come together. Women are the ghosts who must wear ugly masks.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note in this connection Freud's observations on the failure of female narcissism. According to Freud, neurotic women patients who believe themselves to be ugly use organic inferiority or imperfection as a pretext for avoiding sex. A woman of this sort – who is frequently more attractive than average, beautiful even – views herself as 'ugly, deformed, or lacking in charm, so that no-one could love her' (Freud 'On Narcissism', in the *Complete Psychological Works*, SE vol. XIV, 99). What Freud failed to realise was that the symptoms he attributed to 'hysterical women' are common to almost all women. His explanation of those symptoms was also fundamentally flawed. As Cixous's Medusa theory shows, the sense of ugliness does not originate with women at all.

<sup>17</sup> The word mask ultimately derives from Arabic 'maskharah', meaning clown, and from 'sakhira', meaning mockery. I mention this here only to raise the question, in relation to the mask of the Medusa, of who gets the last laugh, the feminine 'clown' or the masculine spectator. Who is mocking whom? Is this a sound basis for relationships between men and women?

The mask appears, according to Cousins, when the face – the exterior – ceases to signify, but it cannot cloak or contain existence. In this, the mask might usefully be compared to Georges Bataille's definition of formlessness, where it would represent a last-ditch attempt on the part of philosophy to impose form on a formless world:

Il faudrait en effet, pour que les hommes académiques soient contents, que l'univers prenne forme. La philosophie entière n'a pas d'autre but: il s'agit de donner une redingote à ce qui est, une redingote mathématique. Par contre affirmer que l'univers ne ressemble à rien et n'est qu'*informe* revient à dire que l'univers est quelque chose comme une araignée ou un crachat. (Bataille 1970: 217).

When philosophy's mathematical frock-coat fails to impose form, reality is no longer contained and appears as the most abject other: as an insect, or as spittle. The 'frock-coat' reserved specifically for concealing the reality of women – the mask of the Medusa – can thus be seen as the site of the potential failure of philosophy and of its subject (viewed by feminism as universally masculine) to overcoat its slimy, arachnid inside: woman.<sup>18</sup>

The masculine relation to the other is always one of exteriority, constructed on the basis of an indispensable sense of 'not me', whereas the feminine relation to the other, as explored by Cixous and others, is more open and ultimately less limiting. In her 1984 lecture entitled 'Extreme Fidelity', Cixous notes that 'it is much easier to inflict on men than on women the horror of the inside' (in Sellers 1988: 18). This is perhaps because women's situation in relation to 'the law' (of the phallus and of patriarchy) is always ambiguous, like that of Kafka's Josef K. in 'Before the Law'. The little man from the country, whom Cixous views as 'partly feminine', does not go inside. What is more, it is uncertain whether there *is* an inside. In any case, Cixous argues, 'there is a prohibition against the inside which is absolute' (16). The man who

<sup>18</sup> In Greek mythology, the maiden Arachne challenged Athena to a weaving contest and was turned into a spider for her presumption. Spittle here is reminiscent of the formlessness and femininity of Sartrean slime. Both elements – insect and bodily fluid – might be seen to combine in the fly-swatting scene in *La Nausée* (discussed in chapter 4) where Roquentin squashes a fly and observes its innards oozing out onto the table. I would go so far as to suggest here that the image of the oozing insect is perhaps *the* figure for ugliness. It appears also in Rilke's *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge* and in Clarice Lispector's *La Passion selon G. H.*



remains before the law (outside the inside), is in fact already inside another inside, that of the law itself, just as women (as themselves) are outside the symbolic order (the law), but must exist within it. The prohibition against the inside (their own inside as opposed to the inside of the law), according to Cixous, derives from an archaic scene of pleasure – Eve in the garden of Eden who *tastes* the apple – which must be punished because a positive relation to the inside ‘is something which threatens society and must be controlled’ (17). Politically it would be too risky for patriarchal society to allow women to discover the positive underside of negation; that is, to recapture some of the ‘productive force’ of the unconscious by revaluing ugliness consciously. This, I would argue, is precisely why the issue of ugliness in women’s writing is of such strategic importance.

Cixous insists that the so-called ‘dark continent’ (the inside) is neither black nor inexplorable. The Medusa who laughs invites women to explore it and to *show* it through writing: ‘on va leur *montrer* nos sextes!’ (Cixous 1975a: 47). The gesture of showing the female sex as text and text as sex flies in the face of the symbolic and of psychoanalysis. If women’s genitals represent to men the horror of castration then, Cixous implies, let women declare themselves ‘castrated and proud!’. Freud, were he still alive, would have to reconsider his position. In ‘Civilization and its Discontents’ (published in 1930), Freud’s brief discussion of beauty in humans observes that such beauty derives from ‘the field of sexual feeling’, but whereas ‘beauty’ and ‘attraction’ are originally attributes of the sexual object, he deems it worthy of remark that ‘the genitals themselves, the sight of which is always exciting, are nevertheless hardly ever judged to be beautiful’ (Freud 1985: 271). Freud’s argument does not distinguish here between male and female genitals, though his earlier essay on ‘The “Uncanny”’ (1919, see chapter 4) located the site of *Unheimlichkeit* for neurotic men specifically in the female genital organs, and of course the entire weight of symbolism behind psychoanalysis privileges the penis over the vagina. Freudian psychoanalysis constructs women’s genitals as lacking, as uncanny and as ugly. Cixous’s exuberant ‘sexts’ set out to rewrite that phallogentric view. Her work also exposes patriarchal gestures of ‘uglification’ more generally – in terms of the exclusion from the Symbolic of that which is considered beneath its dignity – and seeks, through a practice of feminine writing which specifically incorporates the ugly, to reclaim that

ugliness in order to open up a space for the other within the symbolic and to create the conditions in which social change for both men and women might become a real possibility.<sup>19</sup>

*Ugliness in the work of Hélène Cixous*

Cixous's concept of ugliness is difficult to define, not least because one of the fundamental aspects of her writing is that it resists the kind of closure such a definition would require. In her early work, the ugly makes its presence felt above all through the materiality of the text, the sound of the words on the page. Claudine Guégan Fisher draws attention to the fact that in *Les Commencements* (1970) Cixous plays with the homophony of 'laid' and 'lait' (Fisher 1988: 61-67). Milk is ugly, but ugly is also milk, the originary source of nourishment for the infant. Meaning shifts from one signifier to another, yet sounds the same to the 'reading ear' called for by Cixous's writing. The frequent use of the genitive 'de' after 'lait' generates ugliness in the feminine between words also, as when the narrator's grandmother criticises her daughter for not breastfeeding her granddaughter and pours scorn on 'les femmes qui sont jeunes et plates et qui se déplacent en balançant les hanches rebelles et froissent la dignité du Lait de Femme' (Cixous 1970: 126). The breastfeeding woman is overlaid with ugliness in/by the text. Although this negative judgement is implied by the grandmother's description of the behaviour of rebellious young women, it is imposed not by them, but by the mechanism of language itself. The moment of involuntary uglification on the part of the grandmother – 'Lait de Femme'/laide femme – might be interpreted as a textual re-presentation of the way in which the symbolic order places an ugly mask on the faces of women and, in particular, on the face of the 'maternal' mother.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> I avoid the term 'écriture féminine' here, a term first proposed by Cixous, but from which she has subsequently distanced herself because of its potential to re-essentialise women and also to exclude men. 'Écriture féminine' is a term that, although strategically useful in the first instance, has proved in some respects to be self-limiting.

<sup>20</sup> The tautology is deliberate, since this particular section of the novel focuses on the generational conflict between women over the issue of different ways of mothering.

Cixous returns many times and in various ways to explore the connection between the mother and the ugly established in her early work.<sup>21</sup> In 'La venue à l'écriture' (first published in 1976), her creative account of how she came to be a writer, she speaks, from the point of view of her body, of how she is 'la fille du lait et du miel' (Cixous 1986: 61). The daughter of milk and honey is also, phonically, the daughter of the ugly, the daughter, then, of an 'ugly' mother.<sup>22</sup> Addressing the reader, or herself, she acknowledges the mother's lack of beauty in the accepted sense, but brackets it off along with Freud. The mother possesses another kind of beauty that has no need of narcissistic confirmation: a vivacious beauty of the flesh, of the belly, and of unselfish love:

Il y a de la mère en toi si tu t'aimes. Si tu aimes. Si tu aimes, tu t'aimes aussi. Voici la femme d'amour: celle qui aime toute femme en elle-même. (Pas la 'belle' femme dont parle l'oncle Freud, la belle au miroir, la belle qui s'aime tellement que plus personne ne peut l'aimer assez, pas la reine de beauté.) Elle ne se regarde pas, elle ne se mesure pas, elle ne s'examine pas, pas l'image, pas l'exemplaire. La chair vibrante, le ventre enchanté, la femme enceinte de tout l'amour. (62)

The mother is neither beautiful, nor vain (as Freud would have her), but vibrant and filled with love for others, for herself and for the (m)others within herself. Thus, if she is 'ugly' in patriarchal eyes, she is fiercely defended and revalued in Cixous's writing.

Emphasis on the mother and on the mother's body in the work of Cixous and other contemporary French women writers is a key area of theoretical engagement, since the foundation of patriarchy and of the symbolic order in/through which they seek to effect change is seen to rest, as I have said, on an originary act of 'matricide' (see p.

<sup>21</sup> It should be stressed, however, that the connection with the mother established on the basis of milk is not exclusive to the mother. In *Les Commencements*, the narrator's lover, the figure of Saint George from Titian's painting, possesses the capacity to produce his own forms of nourishment. The name Saint-Georges in French is fragmented by the text into diverse components including both 'sein' (breast) and 'gorge' (throat) (Cixous 1970: 125). The narrator's ears at one point are 'gonflées du lait de sa voix' (134).

<sup>22</sup> The Biblical allusion here inscribes her, of course, in a patriarchal tradition also.

212 above). Cixous's analysis of 'The dawn of Phallogentrism' in 'Sorties' begins with the following quotation from Freud:

[...] it happened that the matriarchal structure of society was replaced by a patriarchal one. This naturally brought with it a revolution in the existing state of the law. An echo of this revolution can still be heard, I think, in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. This turning from the mother to the father, however, signifies above all a victory of spirituality over the sense – that is to say, a step forward in culture, since maternity is proved by the senses whereas paternity is a surmise based on a deduction and a premiss. (from *Moses and Monotheism*, quoted in Cixous and Clément 1987: 100)

As Morag Shiach has observed, Freud's argument about the development of patriarchy was not new. Bachofen and Engels had put forward similar arguments before him. These analyses of matriarchy, Shiach argues, do not have to be taken as literally or historically true: 'we can read them instead as a mythological positing of origins, or as narratives that seek to represent the development of patriarchy as progress, a movement from the sensual to the spiritual, and thus as emblematic of civilization' (Shiach 1991: 11). We return, then, to Cartesian 'man' and corporeally determined 'woman', but now even she is under threat. In 'Sorties', Cixous argues that whenever the question of ontology is raised, whenever we ask 'what is it?' and so initiate the search for intended meaning, woman is excluded from the calculations:<sup>23</sup> 'Ultimately the world of "being" can function while precluding the mother. No need for a mother, as long as there is some motherliness: and it is the father, then, who acts the part, who is the mother. Either woman is passive or she does not exist. What is left of her is unthinkable, unthought' (in Cixous and Clément 1987: 64). It is the unthinkable, the unthought resulting from woman's non-existence, that interests Cixous most. The statement that woman is either passive or non-existent can be reformulated, I would argue, in terms of beauty: either woman is beautiful or she does not exist. Clearly this suggestion requires some clarification – I shall come to this in a moment – but if we accept provisionally that this might be a viable reading of

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<sup>23</sup> This indicates that the question 'what is a woman?' posed by Beauvoir at the beginning of *The Second Sex* is impossible, under the present conditions, to answer. It is also, perhaps, the wrong question altogether.

Cixous's rather bald statement then, following a parallel binary logic, it would also be possible to make the positive claim that if woman is ugly she *does* exist. This last speculation on my part offers a clue as to why Cixous might attach such importance to ugliness in her work: it is not simply a matter of aesthetics, but of life and death.

*Either woman is beautiful or she does not exist*

The leap from 'either woman is passive or she does not exist' to 'either woman is beautiful or she does not exist' to the conclusion that 'if woman is ugly she *does* exist' rests on a number of assumptions. First, let us consider the relation between beauty and passivity. The 'beauty' substituted here for passivity has nothing to do with pure Kantian beauty and everything to do with issues of gender and of power. In *The Beauty Myth* Naomi Wolf argues that what the male myth of female beauty really seeks to control is not the way women look but the way they behave. The beauty myth perpetuates what Beauvoir described as the 'Eternal Feminine' – an inert, timeless and generic definition of 'Woman' as passive – which, as Wolf argues, 'is not about women at all [but] about men's institutions and institutional power' (Wolf 1991: 13). In order to appear beautiful, women must passively renounce their claim to the structures which might give them access to power, in particular the pursuit of knowledge. The philosopher Immanuel Kant, in his non-philosophical *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime* (1763), argued that 'a woman who has a head full of Greek, like Madame Dacier, or carries on fundamental controversies about mechanics, like the Marquise de Châtelet, might as well even have a beard; for perhaps that would express more obviously the mien of profundity for which she strives' (Kant 1960: 78). In seeking to establish an intellectual identity in an 18<sup>th</sup>-century context, such women risked losing their sexual identity – such as it was – altogether. Within a rigid gendered social structure, either they remained 'women', or they were liable to be caricatured as men in which case they were seen as ugly because they were a threat and therefore no longer an object of male desire. Clearly it is anachronistic to situate Kant's text within what is essentially a 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century debate. Nevertheless the clarity of his argument, unself-conscious as it is, provides a useful point of comparison.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century as now, one of the surest ways of causing grave offense is to cast aspersions about a person's gender. For women especially, it is also a strong verbal and visual technique for representing them as ugly.<sup>24</sup> The caricature of the Ugly Feminist, for example, devalues her appearance in order to criticise her refusal to be constrained by prescribed codes of 'feminine' behaviour. Naomi Wolf describes how the Victorian feminist, Lucy Stone, viewed by supporters as 'a prototype of womanly grace', was criticised by detractors for being 'a big masculine woman, wearing boots, smoking a cigar, swearing like a trooper' (quoted in Wolf 1991: 18). This crude device of representing a woman who did not conform to cultural norms as ugly by characterising her as a man signals her symbolic death *as a woman*. It is in this sense that woman is either 'beautiful' (well-behaved) or she does not exist.

In her lecture on 'The School of the Dead' in *Three Steps on the ladder of writing*, Cixous observes that 'when we say to a woman that she is a man or to a man that he is a woman, it's a terrible insult', the reason being that our sense of self is conditioned by 'extremely strong identifications' (Cixous 1993: 51). Cixous describes this situation as one of 'legalized and and general delusion' in which fiction takes the place of reality (51). The imposition of the name of 'woman' or of 'man' causes 'upsets' which Cixous views as at once intimate, individual, and political. This is why, she argues, 'consciously or unconsciously we constantly try to save ourselves from this naming' (51). But we cannot avoid the names because without them we lose our foothold altogether. Without the name 'women' feminism would become utterly destabilized before it had achieved its aims in the sense that feminist theory would be so far in advance of social reality that it would have dispensed with 'woman' before she could be said to have existed at all. What remains, therefore, is to bring woman into existence, to replace passivity and beauty with activity and strategic 'ugliness'. This ugliness is ugly only in so far as it does not conform to pre-assigned gender rôles. It is ugly from the point of view of patriarchy. For Cixous, however, ugliness reclaimed is a new kind of 'beauty' which plays the symbolic at its own game. Patriarchal 'beauty' conceived in terms of ugliness and redefined positively undermines the power of the symbolic to represent woman as ugly, since the original meaning of ugliness is multiplied and destabilised by using binary logic against itself.

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<sup>24</sup> Condemnatory images of men as women are equally destructive but, I would argue, they do not produce the same effect and are not described as ugly.

This strategy is described by Irigaray in terms of an alternative and playful form of mimesis where women assume the gender rôle assigned to them deliberately and differently:

Jouer de la mimésis, c'est donc, pour une femme, tenter de retrouver le lieu de son exploitation par le discours, sans s'y laisser simplement réduire. C'est se resoumettre [...] à des 'idées', notamment d'elle, élaborées dans/par une logique masculine, mais pour faire 'apparaître', par un effet de répétition ludique, ce qui devrait rester occulté: le recouvrement d'une possible opération du féminin dans le langage. (Irigaray 1977: 74)

Re-reading Plato, Irigaray argues that there are in fact two types of mimesis: mimesis as production (music, for example) and mimesis as imitation and reproduction. The history of philosophy has privileged the latter, reducing women to the level of the bad copy (a pale imitation of men), whereas Irigaray insists on a return to the first form of mimesis in order that writing in the feminine might emerge and hence also that real social change might become possible. It is in this respect too that the issue of ugliness can be seen as a matter of 'life' and 'death'. If women assume and reinterpret ugliness – if the man-made Medusas can laugh – they can also be said to *exist* on their own terms.

### *Clarice Lispector*

A l'école de Clarice Lispector, nous apprenons l'approche.  
Nous prenons les leçons des choses. Les leçons d'appeler, de  
se laisser appeler. Les leçons de laisser venir, de recevoir.  
Les deux grandes leçons de vivre: *la lenteur et la laideur*.

(Hélène Cixous, 'L'approche de Clarice Lispector')

Cixous's concern for matters ugly is evident from 1970 onwards, but her ideas really take shape only following the discovery of Clarice Lispector. She compares this discovery to stumbling unexpectedly on Kafka at the age of 38 or 40 having never heard of him and describes the experience of reading *The Passion according to G. H.* as 'one of the great emotions of my existence' (quoted in Penrod: 11). It is Cixous's

inspired and creative re-reading of ugliness with/through Lispector which interests me in the discussion that follows.

Lispector's approach to ugliness is highly significant for Cixous because it opens up the possibility for political change and aesthetic development (though for Cixous, political and aesthetic concerns go hand in hand in any case). The reversal of the meaning of ugliness from a negative judgement to a celebration of that which the symbolic fails to acknowledge is seen as an important political strategy. Given that ugliness in patriarchal society is on the side of women, to revalue ugliness is also to defend and empower women. Lispector's treatment of ugliness also calls for forms of attention that are uniquely feminine. Ugliness therefore provides a new source of creative energy specific to women's writing, or to what Cixous has termed in the past '*écriture féminine*'. The important point to remember is that it is these broad political and aesthetic concerns that are at stake whenever Cixous addresses the issue of ugliness.

### *La Chose*

Ugliness for Cixous in '*L'approche de Clarice Lispector*' is explored through the relationship to '*la chose, l'autre*' (Cixous 1986: 119). The ugly thing/the other is that which fails to support the narcissistic gaze, which is granted no positive status and which therefore seems not to exist. And yet, this ugly other is, first and foremost, real and very much alive. According to Cixous, Lispector teaches us how to approach this ugly other:

Aimer le vrai du vivant, ce qui semble *ingrat* aux yeux narcisse, le sans-prestige, le sans-actualité, aimer l'origine, s'intéresser personnellement à l'impersonnel, à l'animal, à la chose. (Cixous 1986: 115)

It is a question of personal engagement and of learning to love '*la chose*' without looking for enhancement of the self. In order to achieve this, we need to learn to see differently through writing and to write differently through seeing. Thus, on one side



the key to 'la chose' is to be found in words, or rather 'das Wort'.<sup>25</sup> Cixous draws on Heidegger to explain her point: '*Das Wort lässt das Ding als Ding anwesen. Dieses Lassen heiße die Bedingnis*'. [The word allows the thing to be present as thing. Let us call this allowing-the-thing-to-be-itself 'enthingment'] (from 'Das Wort' in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*; quoted in Cixous 1986: 120; my translation).<sup>26</sup> According to Cixous, Lispector '*be-dingt das Ding zu Ding*' [enthings the thing into a thing] (120). The splitting of the verb 'be-dingt' here is important, since it places it at one remove from 'bedingt', meaning limited or conditioned. Lispector's gesture of entthingment is intended precisely to give the thing freedom from constraint and to grant it equal status with the subject who sees it. In this, both Lispector and Cixous might be seen as advocating a return to phenomenology, allowing the differential quality of the object (in relation to its name) to speak for itself. This point can perhaps best be explained with reference to the work of Francis Ponge.

The condition of all awareness for Ponge (as for Sartre) is contingency, a problem which can be approached on a human scale only through encounters between the world and the self (or in terms of the present discussion between the ugly other and the self). Ponge insists that the source of human happiness lies in the affirmation of contingency; that is, in the recognition that words are things and vice versa.<sup>27</sup> In *La Fabrique du pré*, he writes:

Si nous *aimons* les choses, c'est que nous les re-connaissons, je veux dire que nous les ressentons *à la fois* comme semblables à ce que notre mémoire avait conservé d'elles (et qui était inclus dans leur nom) et comme différentes de cette notion simplifiée et utilitaire (représentée par leur nom, le mot qui les désigne.)

Ce qui nous fait *reconnaître* une chose *comme chose*, c'est exactement le sentiment qu'elle est différente de son nom, du mot qui la désigne...

(quoted in Ponge 1979: 21)

<sup>25</sup> On the other side it is to be found in ways of seeing. Cixous deals with this aspect of 'la chose' in considerable detail and in diverse texts which will be discussed in the next and in succeeding sections.

<sup>26</sup> In this, as suggested in the section 'Corporeally determined woman', Cixous's method goes against an interpretation of the symbolic as the order of names which kills things off.

<sup>27</sup> In effect, Ponge thus champions the cause of the existential oxymoron discussed in chapter 4.

This view not only anticipates Cixous's emphasis on the word in relation to the thing, it also shares her generosity towards the thing and her recognition that if it is to exist at all it must be re-cognised. Thus Cixous's 'feminist phenomenology', if one can call it that, does not share the pessimistic view of the symbolic as an order of names which *necessarily* kills things off. There is a sense of optimism, I would suggest, in the possibility of new connections between the thing and the word which might in turn give rise to a new relationship between the self and the other, between men and women.

*A feminine form of attention: la lenteur*

Alongside the lesson of ugliness, Lispector teaches the lesson of slowness. Cixous sees slowness as an antidote to the heedless rapidity of the symbolic which has eyes only for those things which sustain it unproblematically. Because of this, much that is present in the world remains invisible and overlooked. This includes women. When Cixous describes the situation of 'la chose' *almost* existing in a windowless space where it *almost* has a face, but is not seen, she is describing the situation of women. The 'almost' here is important. Women are not entirely invisible or non-existent. They are a hovering presence that is close at hand and familiar, but at the same time unknown. Women in the symbolic are seen as uncanny.<sup>28</sup> What is called for is the capacity to give the thing time to show itself: 'non pour absorber la chose, l'autre, mais pour laisser la chose se présenter. La laisser produire ses vingt-quatre visages' (Cixous 1986: 120).<sup>29</sup> The windowless space requires a window and, for Cixous, that window is provided by Clarice who waits patiently for the thing to appear. In *Agua viva*, Lispector describes this as taking charge of the world in a way which demands 'beaucoup de patience. Je dois attendre le jour où une fourmi m'apparaîtra' (quoted in Cixous 1986: 137). Patience is an art of slowness that Cixous sees as specific to women as her observations on Lispector's wait for the ant clearly demonstrate:

<sup>28</sup> The connection between the hovering presence of women on the borders of the symbolic and the uncanny is not made explicit by Cixous. Emphasis on the familiar/unfamiliar aspect of women in the symbolic/real, however, would suggest that a link with what is *(un)heimlich* is not inappropriate here.

<sup>29</sup> Cixous's text appears modest in comparison with Hugo's claim in the *Préface de Cromwell* that 'Le beau n'a qu'un type; le laid en a mille' (Hugo 1973: 207).

Il faut une attente assez grande pour sauver la fourmi. Une attente assez précise, puissante, assez femme.

Et les femmes?

Et il faut une attente aussi puissamment pensante, ouverte, en direction des êtres tellement proches, tellement femmiliers qu'ils en sont oubliés, pour qu'arrive le jour où les femmes qui ont toujours été – là, viennent enfin à apparaître.

(Cixous 1986: 137-8)

Disconcertingly, when Lispector leads Cixous back to the most insignificant detail, the political stakes are in fact at their highest. A woman's unique capacity to save the ant is also the unique capacity of women to save women from invisibility. With Lispector, Cixous rehearses at the level of the (apparent) utmost simplicity – the level of the ant – the failure of the symbolic to acknowledge the specificity of women.

### *Taking life too symbolically*

For Cixous, this failure in the symbolic has had disastrous aesthetic as well as political consequences. By overlooking the real (not just in the Lacanian sense) language has become impoverished to the point where it hears only itself. Self-sufficient words, detached from reality, are mere translations, translations of translations (in the manner of inferior Platonic copies):

[...] nous perdons le don, nous n'entendons plus ce que les choses veulent nous dire encore, nous traduisons, nous traduisons, tout est traduction et réduction, il ne reste presque plus rien de la mer qu'on mot sans eaux: car nous avons aussi traduit les mots, nous les avons vidés de leurs paroles, séchés, réduits, embaumés, et ils ne peuvent plus nous rappeler comment ils surgissaient des choses autrefois comme l'éclat de leur rire essentiel [...] (Cixous 1986: 123).

The loss of the ability to let things speak has brought us to the brink of disaster. Almost nothing remains of 'La mer(e)' (the sea/the mother) with the result that we can no longer hear the laughter of the real. For Cixous, I would argue, the antidote to

the failure of laughter in the symbolic is a return to the Medusa – the ugly – who laughs still. If we are to recover laughter, then, we must approach that which the symbolic rejects as ugly.

To approach the ugly mask of the Medusa requires courage and a willingness to take risks. Once again, Cixous finds these qualities in the work of Lispector:

Il y a le risque-Clarice. Clarisque: à travers l'horrible jusqu'à la Joie. Car Clarice a la splendeur effrayante d'oser le réel, qui n'est pas beau, qui n'est pas organisé, d'oser le vivant, qui n'est pas symbolisé, qui n'est pas personnel, d'être dans le noyau de l'*est* qui est sans moi, d'écrire au courir des signes sans histoire. (Cixous 1986: 136)

It is not a question of confronting ugliness, but of crossing through it in order to attain 'la Joie', to rediscover laughter and by implication also 'jouissance'. Clarice 'dares the real', according to Cixous, a real which is specifically 'pas beau'.<sup>30</sup> To all intents and purposes the real is ugly, but Cixous, without signalling the fact, is reluctant to label it as such; the reason being, I would suggest, that an important aspect of her project to revalue ugliness involves changing the meaning of the word. To this end, 'laid' and 'laideur' in Cixous's work are almost never used pejoratively or negatively. There is always 'lait' in 'laid' and other beauty in 'laideur' and, in order to preserve this positivity, what is viewed as ugly in the symbolic is described not named.

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<sup>30</sup> The terms in which Lispector describes her methodology are strikingly similar to those employed by Lyotard in relation to the sublime (see chapter 3). In *La Passion selon G. H.* Lispector describes her sense of liberation 'parce que je fais bon marché d'une entorse à l'esthétique' (quoted in Cixous 1986: 135). Lyotard's list of shock effects of the sublime in *L'Inhumain* includes 'Les imperfections mêmes, les entorses au goût, la laideur' (Lyotard 1988: 108). In *Agua Viva* Lispector writes: 'Je veux l'inconclu. Je veux le désordre organique profond qui pourtant donne à pressentir un ordre sous-jacent' (quoted in Cixous 1986: 136). Lyotard too, looks for art which creates 'un monde à côté, *eine Zwischenwelt* [...] *eine Nebenwelt* pourrait-on dire, où le monstrueux et l'informe ont leur droit puisqu'ils peuvent être sublimes' (Lyotard 1988: 108). The two lines of thought are so close – down to the fact that Lispector declares in *Agua Viva*: 'J'atteins un plan plus élevé d'humanité. Ou de déshumanité – l'it' (quoted in Cixous 1986: 137) – that Lyotard might almost have drawn inspiration for his own *L'Inhumain* directly from Lispector.

*The non-beautiful mother*

Despite a vision of a future in which reclaimed ugliness will guarantee a positive situation for women in society, Cixous does acknowledge ugliness as it is deployed at present; that is, negatively and more especially as a means of abjection. Cixous, along with Kristeva and Irigaray, locates the site of abjection primarily with the mother and with her body. In the novel *Souffles* (1975), Cixous does not shy away from representing the violence and cruelty to which the mother is subjected by the symbolic order. According to Lynn Kettler Penrod (1996: 70), *Souffles*, which was published in the same year as 'The Laugh of the Medusa', can be seen as its fictional companion piece. Cixous herself describes the novel as a 'Méditation et psaume sur la passion d'une femme' (Cixous 1975b: back cover). This is passion in both senses of the word: intense sexual feeling and the suffering of a female Christ – the mother on whom the 'church' of subjectivity is founded. One of the most striking passages in the novel concerns an erotic scene of torture and abasement in which the heavily pregnant mother, naked and on all fours, is tied up in the centre of a crowded amphitheatre. The female narrator, assisted by several male executioners who are 'beaux, épais, bêtes' (Cixous 1975b: 58), orchestrates an 'opera' in three acts: torture; mutual anal intercourse between 'Samson' (the mother who also has a penis) and the narrator (who uses her fingers); and a final act of 'éventrement', which never takes place because the fantasy ends too soon.<sup>31</sup>

The scene ranges between sadistic pleasure on a grand scale in which the entire frenzied audience participates and moments of intense physical and emotional intimacy between the narrator and the mother only. Love and loathing are focused throughout on a body which the narrator demands should be ugly, or rather specifically 'non-beautiful', in order that it should become in the end all the more attractive: 'Au lieu d'un corps elle se permet cette enveloppe informe. Et j'aime. Sans grâce, sans proportions, sans mobilité, qu'elle pèse là de son inerte et montagnaise part de chair, de toute la gravité de la non-beauté' (Cixous 1975b: 53). The narrator

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<sup>31</sup> The scene begins with the words 'All passion spent' from Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. Implicit throughout is the suggestion that the narrator is the figure of Delilah, the mistress who betrays the herculean Samson to the Philistines (Judges 16) by telling them that his superhuman strength will be lost if his head is shaven. One important difference between the Bible story and Cixous's creative rewriting of it is that 'Samson' the mother *keeps* her hair.

specifies non-beauty, as opposed to ugliness, in order that ugliness might become visible as a positive notion distinct from ugliness as defined by patriarchy. This stipulation, I would argue, echoes the creation of a new beauty (or other ugliness) in 'Le rire de la Méduse'. The narrator of *Souffles* insists, somewhat ungrammatically: 'Sans lignes, sans contour. Sa non-beauté, pas une laideur; une cassure voluptueuse et glacée sur laquelle s'édifie une nouvelle beauté' (Cixous 1975b: 53-4). Here the suspension of the conventional meaning of ugliness is made explicit. It is replaced, quite deliberately, by 'non-beauty' – that is, ugliness as it appears in the symbolic – leaving ugliness as a positive value free to join the new beauty.

The scene is punctuated by the cries of the mother whose voice seems to call the narrator to join her, to return to her: 'Cette voix! En mourir! Un désir de ramper, de rentrer dans la terre, dans la chair' (57). But the desire to join the mother's body is swiftly replaced with the desire to torture it, a movement which, I would suggest, is intended to represent the movement from a feminine to a masculine subject position. Whereas the feminine aspect of the narrator envisages a return to the mother, a desire to reach the 'inside', the masculine aspect chooses to enact a violent separation from the mother, to go 'outside'.<sup>32</sup> The now masculine narrator wishes to see the desired 'body of the enemy' offered to 'ma faim affolée' (where the liaison suggests not only a frenzied hunger, but a frenzied woman/wife also):

[...] depuis si longtemps je le voulais réduit à notre vouloir, pieds et poings arrimés à quatre colonnes, dans la position d'un boeuf à écorcher, nu, vivant, la face naguère splendide tordue d'angoisse, me voir salivant d'avance repaître mes yeux de cette hideur qui est mon oeuvre, en baver. Quel amour! (57)

The 'Quel amour!' reads both as a 'genuine' statement of masculine desire and as an ironic statement of feminine condemnation of that desire. Whilst the (masculine) narrator is salivating at the prospect of seeing the mother tortured, another voice in a different (feminine) tone can be heard which speaks the same words but implies the full horror of that destructive intent. This is no longer the feminine narrator who envisaged an end to symbolic non-beauty at the beginning of the scene; rather, urged

on by the collective will – ‘notre vouloir’ – she speaks from the point of view of the masculine symbolic and revels in her own hideous artistic creation.

### *Rembrandt*

The passage from *Souffles* quoted above is complex and perhaps best explained with reference to two later essays by Cixous which focus on ugliness in the work of Rembrandt: ‘Le Dernier Tableau ou le Portrait de Dieu’ (1983) in *Entre l’Ecriture* and ‘Bathsheba or the interior Bible’ in *Stigmata. Escaping texts* (1998). The later of these texts, which includes a discussion of Rembrandt’s ‘The slaughtered ox’ (1655) (in French ‘Le boeuf écorché’), considers the suspended, flayed carcass of the ox as a representation of our ‘nuditude’; that is, our anonymous humanity.<sup>33</sup> We adore the painting, Cixous suggests, because it is a picture of our mortality. She describes the ox in terms which might also apply, retrospectively, to the mother in the torture scene of *Souffles*: the ox is beautiful, it is a ‘gigantic ingot of flesh’, it tells us about captivity. ‘This is the Passion according to Rembrandt’, Cixous suggests, but the mourning for its death is accompanied by transfiguration. This too creates a link with the transition from the condition of non-beauty to one of ‘new beauty’ (other ugliness) proposed by the narrator of *Souffles*. The mother who was held ‘dans la position d’un boeuf à écorcher’ has been transfigured in Rembrandt’s painting into the ‘nature morte’ of the already flayed ox. She has become a masterpiece of Western art.

The sense of horror evoked by the image of flesh without skin is intended to convey a certain truth about humanity. It confronts us with the inside: raw meat instead of signification. This, as Mark Cousins has argued, is the moment of ugliness when ‘the inside of the object bursts traumatically through the subject’s own phantasy of what makes up the inside’ (Cousins 1995: 3). The reassurance of skin, the mask which acts as a guarantee of selfhood on the surface – just as women, constructed as ugly on the outside, support masculine subjectivity – is suddenly lost. Cixous’s nuditude is absolute. It is not just a question of wearing no clothes, but of removing

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<sup>32</sup> The movement from outside to inside and back is an important theme in Cixous’s work. It is described in more detail in the fictional setting of the novel *Dedans* (1969).

the last layer of human reality available to the Western imaginary. There is no possibility for mirror identification here.

*Painting and writing*

‘Il y a des peintres qui sont pour moi les voyageurs  
de la vérité. Ils m’ont donné des leçons.’

(‘Le Dernier Tableau ou le Portrait de Dieu’)

In ‘Le Dernier Tableau ou le Portrait de Dieu’, Cixous expresses the wish to be able to write the way Rembrandt paints; that is, to share ‘[l]e souci de fidélité. Fidélité à ce qui existe. A tout ce qui existe. Et la fidélité, c’est le respect égal de ce qui nous *paraît* beau et de ce qui nous *paraît* laid. Je dis bien *paraît*’ (Cixous 1983: 188). By going beyond the semblance of ugliness, Cixous aims to discover, like Rembrandt, the beauty of the non-beautiful: ‘Le laid regardé avec respect et sans haine et sans dégoût est égal au “beau”. Le non-beau est aussi beau’ (188).<sup>34</sup> But more than this, she suggests, there is no greater beauty than the beauty of ugliness, both in painting and in writing. It is a question of learning to love the ugly, a lesson often taught by painting, but which writing has yet to understand fully. It must be remembered that Cixous envisages bringing about social change through ‘writing differently’; that is, writing from and on the side of the feminine. Thus, despite her preoccupation with the *aesthetics* of ugliness in ‘Le Dernier Tableau’, there is a strong underlying *political* motive for exploring it. This can be glimpsed in the text where Cixous refers to respect for ugliness in painting as a kind of justice, a great leveller of objects. Justice is seen to be done for existence as a whole, for ‘[t]out ce qui est: la cathédrale, le meule de foin, les tournesols, la vermine, les paysans, la chaise, le boeuf écorché, l’homme écorché, le cafard’ (188). Once again, she returns, among other things, to the flayed corpse. This time, however, she is more obviously concerned with the way in which its ugly reality might make a difference to writing, than with the earlier preoccupation with the abjection of the mother. Cixous does not abandon her initial

<sup>33</sup> The word ‘negritude’, used by French-speaking African and Caribbean writers to describe the fact of being black positively, also springs to mind here.

<sup>34</sup> The beauty of the non-beautiful is also anticipated before the mortification of the mother in *Souffles*. This is one of the rare moments when ‘laid’ is used to mean ugly in the patriarchal sense. It is,



passion for ugliness and its proximity to the mother's body, but the raw presentation of the uglified mother in *Souffles* is now part of a wider project which seeks, through a practice of feminine writing, to create space for a specifically feminine imaginary and hence to facilitate the conditions for social change. In other words, Cixous's politics of writing is established through an aesthetic of ugliness which, in her later work, is no longer specific to women – it now includes 'l'homme écorché' – but which has the uglification of women as its point of origin and continues on their behalf to revalue ugliness positively.

*Seeing things as they really are*

In 'Le Dernier tableau' Cixous seems to suggest that ugliness belongs with the sublime (see also chapter 3), stating that: 'Tout ce qui *est* (regardé justement) est bien. Est passionnant. Est "terrible". La vie est terrible. Terriblement belle, terriblement cruelle. Tout est merveilleusement terrible, à qui regarde les choses telles qu'elles sont' (Cixous 1983: 189). Seeing things as they are is not self-evident and requires the qualities of patience and courage, which build on the lessons of slowness and ugliness learned from Lispector. Patience in 'Le Dernier tableau' is described by Cixous as '[ce] que l'on doit avoir pour s'approcher du non-ostensible, de l'infime, de l'insignifiant, pour découvrir le ver comme étoile sans éclat' (189).<sup>35</sup> This form of attention to simple detail enables us to see 'l'oeuf absolu'; that is, the egg without the chicken, without signs, the bare egg, the egg in all its eggness. Patience is presented by Cixous as a way of meditating on reality in such a way that we might eventually catch sight of God. On its own, however, it is not enough. We must also have the courage to be afraid and to face what Cixous considers to be our two greatest fears: the fear of being hurt and the fear of attaining a state of joy, exultation and adoration. Rembrandt and Genet are both credited with possessing 'le courage de trembler et de suer et de pleurer' (190). Lispector – or Cixous's reading of Lispector – demonstrates the courage to love that which is considered disgusting and hence also the extraordinary capacity to write like a painter:

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however, treated with respect and superseded in the following sentence by Cixous's term for patriarchal ugliness, 'le non-beau'.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. my discussion of 'infime' in chapter 3 with reference to Quasimodo and de Duve.

[...] il faut avoir le courage d'avoir le dégoût et l'amour du mendiant amputé d'une jambe, le dégoût et l'amour du moignon, l'horreur du rat qui est aussi acceptation du rat. Pour qui écrit, accepter le rat, demande un effort beaucoup plus grand que pour qui a accepté d'avance le rat, a commencé à le peindre. Qui écrit peut très bien se cacher les yeux. (Cixous 1983: 190)

Like some kind of latterday saint, Lispector's mortification of the mind, in the sense of forcing herself to think the unthinkable positively (as opposed to Saint Catherine of Siena who drank the undrinkable and rejoiced in the Lord), leaves Cixous in awe.<sup>36</sup> She seeks to 'canonise' Lispector, I suggest, in order to sanctify the parameters of a new canon of world art and to legitimise her implicit demand for a re-reading, or re-viewing, of the existing canon of Western art in terms of positive ugliness.

#### 'Ness'

In order to see things as they really are, we must return to what Lispector calls the 'matière première' of existence: the dehumanised 'it' (*Agua Viva*, quoted in Cixous 1986: 137). For Cixous, the 'it' is found, I would suggest, in the '-ness' of the object, in the qualities that make it what it is, such as the 'eggness' of the egg. That is not to say that the egg should be essentialised – any undertaking to speak of 'ness', be it eggness, orangeness, or womanness (or indeed manness), runs the risk of becoming self-defeating in this regard, and this applies to ugliness too – but rather it is in taking the time to discover the qualities of '-ness' that we will discover what eggs, oranges and women are really like.

Curiously, in *Les Commencements*, Cixous herself draws attention to the meaning of '-ness'. There is a brief discussion of the suffix in relation to the word 'Papness', a neologism which comes to the narrator in a dream and refers, along with a second neologism, 'Bosslé', to her grandmother. The narrator defines *Papness* as follows:

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<sup>36</sup> Saint Catherine's saintly feat of asceticism was to suck pus from the wounds of beggars. Again, I owe this point to Mark Cousins who, in his lecture on Ugliness and Disgust (2 December 1994) offered a memorable description of certain saints as 'spectacular sportspeople engaged in a permanent Olympics organised around the disgusting'.

[...] mot anglais qui n'existe pas, reconnaissable par le suffixe anglais -ness, qui assure (l'hypostase) la divinisation substantivée des corps les plus humbles: pap, qui sans ness ne serait qu'un tétou ou quelque bouillie d'avoine ou de blé, devient ainsi l'essence même de l'acte nourricier, la définition de la mamelle Reine. (Cixous 1970: 130)

If we recall the connection between milk and ugly in Cixous's early writing, then ugly is, in a sense, already present in 'pap', 'la mamelle Reine'.<sup>37</sup> The addition of '-ness' thus elevates both what is pap and what is ugly – '[l]es corps les plus humbles' – to the level of the divine. Given Cixous's fluency in English and her tendency to write with multilingual associations in mind, it is not too much to suggest that the properties of '-ness' still circulate throughout her later consideration of the ugly. This is, of course, a big claim for small suffix, but it can be supported by a strong current in Cixous's thought which strives, with help from Lispector, and with good humour, towards elevating the ugly, like the grandmother, to the status of 'High-ness'.

Behind Cixous's project of revaluing ugliness is one fundamental concern: a desire to shake the foundations of the self-other relation in such a way as to abolish the repressive structures which impoverish relations between men and women, between women and other women, men and other men, and between humanity and the world. Inspired by the work of Lispector, her approach to this universal problem is to consider ways of transforming our relation to the other via ugliness on a small scale. This is 'l'école du plus-près' where attention is given to the tiniest detail, to the 'presque' which is present, but overlooked (Cixous 1986: 124). In 'L'approche de Clarice Lispector', Cixous discovers in Lispector's writing a sublime of the everyday where it is possible to be overwhelmed just as comprehensively by an egg as by a mountain. It requires a remarkable effort to find splendour in an object one might eat for breakfast, in a tortoise rather than a rose, but Lispector is prepared to make that effort and in doing so, according to Cixous, enables us to see that which was already present, but invisible.

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<sup>37</sup> The grandmother, as we have seen, is a fierce advocate of breastfeeding.

*Invisibility and Rilke*

The problem of invisibility is one which affects not only everyday objects like eggs, or flowers, but also women: 'le problème des fleurs est celui des femmes maternelles et indispensables: elles sont là. Elles sont tellement là' (Cixous 1986: 132). Excessive presence at one level of reality (the material) is negated by absence at another (the symbolic). Cixous refers in this connection to Rilke's character Abelone in *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*.<sup>38</sup> She quotes Brigge's first impressions of Abelone:

Abelone était toujours là. C'était même son tort le plus grave [...] Abelone était là et on usait d'elle tant bien que mal. Mais tout à coup je me demandai: pourquoi Abelone est là? Chacun de nous a pourtant une certaine raison d'être, ici, même si elle n'est pas toujours à première vue apparente, comme, par exemple, l'utilité de Mlle Oxe. Mais pourquoi Abelone était-elle toujours là? (Cixous 1986: 132).

Cixous speaks only of the sheer existence of Abelone, but in Rilke's text this is a preliminary stage only. Abelone is not a silent lump of flesh, she has the gift of song that leads Brigge to compare her voice to that of an angel who sings with a masculine voice: '...there was something masculine in her voice, a radiant, celestial masculinity' (Rilke 1984: 117). Brigge falls in love with Abelone, but will not speak of her because he fears that harm would come from the telling. He is acutely sensitive to the failure of language in relation to all women who have led lives that are not of their own choosing. They retain a certain inner radiance, but he cannot, even as a poet, find words to do them justice: 'It is as if they had destroyed beforehand the words in which they might be described' (Rilke 1984: 129).

For Brigge, Abelone's excessive presence is transformed by her voice into an angelic, masculine beauty. She *becomes* beautiful. Rilke, however, is deeply mistrustful of angels and of beauty which are angelic and beautiful right from the start. The first of his *Duino Elegies* warns that

[...] das Schöne ist nichts  
 als des Schrecklichen Anfang, denn wir noch grade ertragen,  
 und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäht,  
 uns zu zerstören. Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich.

[Beauty's nothing  
 but beginning of Terror we're still just able to bear,  
 and why we adore it so is because it serenely  
 disdains to destroy us. Every angel is terrible]. (Rilke 1963)

Rilke's Angel is not the angel from the Christian heaven, however. In a letter to his Polish translator, he wrote that:

The Angel of the Elegies is the creature in whom that transformation of the visible into the invisible we are performing already appears completed...The Angel of the Elegies is the being who vouches for the recognition of a higher degree of reality in the invisible. – Therefore 'terrible' to us, because we, its lovers and transformers, still cling to the visible. (quoted in Rilke 1963: 101)

The realisation that making the visible invisible renders it fearful or terrible thereby impoverishing our existence as a whole is evident in Cixous's concern to revalue ugliness. It is only by confronting the things we do not (want to) see that we will cease to be afraid. This conviction is also behind Kristeva's theory of abjection and Irigaray's critique of 'l'horreur du rien à voir'. There is a strong sense in the work of these feminist writers that social change can come about only through fearless contemplation of culture's other in forms of otherness specific to women as other, such as the mother's body (Kristeva), the female genitals (Irigaray), or ugliness (Cixous).

Given Cixous's admiration for the work of Rilke, it is no coincidence, I would suggest, that in *Les Commencements*, the narrator's lover, Saint-Georges, is both

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<sup>38</sup> Rilke is another writer/poet whom Cixous greatly admires. His work is seen as an outstanding

angel and dragon. The novel is introduced in terms of a holy war in reverse, 'cette guerre sainte à l'envers', in which Saint-Georges is double: 'lumière et ombre, ange et dragon' (Cixous 1970: 13).<sup>39</sup> He has the feathers of the angel and the scales of the dragon. At the narrator's insistence, neither aspect of the picture by Titian from which he emerges is permitted to 'kill' the other: 'S'il accepte l'ange, il refuse le dragon, et la narratrice le contraint, par guerre, à l'accepter' (13). In this, the narrator draws support from the artist Klee, whose painting subverts the logic of Titian's Saint-Georges visually, through radically dislocated perspective, and verbally by way of a generic title: 'Un visage et aussi celui d'un corps' (15).<sup>40</sup> The reintegration of the double (the uncanny ghost, the ugly other) produces a 'third body' by creating space for a new way of seeing the other. This third body is intended to complement that of the novel *Le Troisième Corps* (also published in 1970) and it is Cixous's contention that 'autant que *Le Troisième Corps*, *Les Commencements* sont une histoire d'oeil' (Cixous 1970: 13). This reference to Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil* gives an indication as to the direction the gaze of the eye might take; that is, towards what is ugly, horrifying, obscene. Accordingly, Cixous describes how 'la narratrice, hantée par l'oeil de la Loi, l'oeil du maître, fixe, force l'oeil (déloyal) du dieu animal, pénètre dans le secret de ses canaux jusqu'à la "noire phosphorescence bestiale" du sacré' (Cixous 1970: 13-14). This third eye, in defiance of the Law (of society), stares hard into the eyes of its 'animal' other and discovers a form of the sacred in the hidden depths of what would otherwise be considered profane. *Les Commencements* is about daring to look at and into the ugly other so that the 'beast' might reveal its 'beauty'.

### *Facing up to Clarice*

The gift of looking fearlessly in this way is given to Cixous by Lispector. In *Vivre l'orange* (1979), she describes the moment of revelation when Clarice gives her the world, the moment when 'l'écriture se dévisageait' (1979: 51). In what might be seen as a rewriting of the mirror scene in Sartre's *La Nausée* where Roquentin, horrified by his own reflection, loses his hold on reality, Cixous, oblivious to the mirror,

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example of feminine writing.

<sup>39</sup> The theme of the double also forms one of the main elements in Freud's analysis of the Uncanny (see chapter 4).

watches, also horrified, as Clarice takes the face off writing and gives her reality back.<sup>41</sup> Instead of clinging onto the symbolic and willing the features to signify, as does Roquentin, she experiences the painful wrench as Clarice removes all the faces that make up a 'face' in order to show that what counts in the order of signification is not what is really there: 'L'essentiel à me signifier: tous les visages qu'un visage se met jusqu'au visage' (Cixous 1979: 51). The surface that Roquentin clings to is precisely the surface that had led Cixous to despair. During ten years in over-published solitude, 'sans voir un seul visage de femme humaine' (49), she had become frozen. Roquentin's torment (the 'inhumanity' of features which no longer signify) is Cixous's salvation (she sees humanity at last in the face of a real woman). Whereas Roquentin's gaze adheres to the outside of his face, Cixous had been despondent because '[s]a vue n'arrivait pas aux choses' (49). The ugliness that Roquentin would rather not see and which makes him nauseous, is precisely the 'ugliness' that Cixous had longed to catch sight of without knowing it. It is a moment for her of great discovery: 'je voyais le visage se dé-visager. Me révéler le sens. Sa vérité, – me dévisager de toutes ses figures. J'ai compris que je comprenais. C'était pour moi que le visage se découvrait' (51). The reality of the face is not external, but can be found only when its true 'nuditude' is exposed, when sheer ugliness is seen up close.<sup>42</sup>

In offering Cixous the sight of the face as it is, Lispector abolishes physiognomy and all it stands for – the meaning of the inside fixed permanently on the outside – for ever. She gives her back the entire world, symbolised by the orange: 'Ensuite elle m'a montré un fruit, qui m'était devenu étranger, et elle m'a rendu la vue de ce fruit. Elle me l'a lu, avec sa voix humide et tendre, elle l'a appelé: *laranja*' (53). Lispector calls the orange, not in the sense of naming it, but of calling to it, asking it to come forward and to show itself. This gives Cixous great hope. At the same time she recognises that Clarice is a rare voice and that most of us have forgotten how to 'call to the orange'. Lest we imagine that Cixous is merely apostrophising her fruit bowl, she reminds us of the real issues here:

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<sup>40</sup> I am reminded here of Sartre's analysis of Renaissance painting in 'Le séquestré de Venise' (see chapter 4), where his strong objections to Titian's idealism are contrasted with a vehement defence of ugly reality in the work of Tintoretto.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. chapter 4, 'Ugliness is next to shapelessness', p. 179-80.

- Est-il possible que nous ne sachions plus comment appeler une orange? Comment s'appellent les femmes? quand elles sont dévoilées?
- Nous n'osons plus savoir – Appeler. Car nous ne savons plus comment faire pour ne pas oublier la vie en essayant de ne pas rappeler la mort, nous ne savons plus comment sauver la vie de la mort, nous ne savons pas comment faire pour ne pas oublier les mortes sans oublier la vie [...] (Cixous 1979: 91)

We have forgotten how to call to women as they really are. This failure is also a failure of knowledge, which cannot sustain death within life, or life within death. Death for Cixous is the ultimate ugliness, not a source of 'non-beauty' in the symbolic seen only negatively, but a positive element that we must fearlessly remember. Only when we are able to overcome the fear of the ugly in all its forms will we be able to 'live the orange' to the full. As things stand we are even afraid of flowers. The beautiful reality of a rose is destroyed, Cixous suggests, if we cannot make space alongside it for the awful reality of human cruelty and pain. This is what she means when she writes: 'A l'école de Clarice, nous apprenons à être contemporaines d'une rose vivante, et des camps de concentration' (101). Only then will the meaning of the rose emerge in all its roseness. In Cixous's eyes, we are living miserable 'half lives'. Her writing challenges us all (and women in particular) to take risks and dare to seek out the difficult half (the ugly). In doing so, we will restore the integrity of the more obviously beautiful and much more besides. Such a strategy revalues the power of ugliness as what I have called 'existential oxymoron' (see chapter 4). As things stand, we are fatally weakened by the unbearable incongruity of a grammar of life that cannot sustain conflict. If opposing elements are valued equally, however, and if we allow them to co-exist, rather than conflict with each other, then we will have a sound basis for our relation to the other.

### *Conclusion*

Cixous laments the fact that 'nous renonçons à nos jardins' (93), which she views as a space where we might learn to love the other. She envisages a garden tended in a 'manière-femme' (107) where the gardener and the plants do not exist in a relation of

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<sup>42</sup> Sartre and Cixous are in agreement over this, as his defence of Tintoretto against Titian would



subject to object (in contrast to the model for ugliness outlined in my introduction). Rather it is an intersubjective space in which the rôle of the (female) gardener is given thus:

[...] toucher le coeur vivant des choses, être touchée, aller vivre dans le tout près, se rendre par de tendres attentives lenteurs jusqu'à la région du toucher, lentement se laisser porter, par la force d'attraction d'une rose, attirée jusqu'au sein de la région des roses, rester longtemps dans l'espace du parfum, apprendre à se laisser donner par les choses ce qu'elles sont au plein vivant d'elles mêmes. (107)

This is not some rarefied rose garden, however, since Cixous's conception of the rose includes the extreme 'ugliness' of the Nazi death camps. A garden such as this calls for a special kind of gardener, specifically one with the courage to be able to inhale the scent of life and of death from a single flower; that is, a fearless gardener who embraces life more fully because she does not shy away from the acrid smell of charred flesh. The ability to sustain this contradiction enables the gardener to *see* roses differently also so that what is true of the rose is true also of a woman and of the whole of humanity: 'Toute rose vraiment *vue* est humaine. Aimer une rose humainement exige un long travail, l'expérience traversée de l'invivable: vient ensuite le moment où toute la patience que l'invivre nous a coûté, une rose nous la rend en passion vivable' (101). Cixous pays tribute to Lispector for teaching her to see in this way and to *des femmes* (the publisher) for leaving windows open for others to do the same. Implicit in her praise is the recognition that the capacity to see differently rests, for the moment, among women.

Seeing differently for Cixous calls for an ability to accept contradiction. As I have argued in this chapter and in chapter 4, the sense of ugliness arises when the self seeks urgent differentiation from the other. The privileged site for the emergence of ugliness is thus, by definition, contradiction ('existential oxymoron'). In their situation as other, women already exist at the level of contradiction in that they are part of the social order (the symbolic), but also designated by the masculine subject as

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suggest. Sartre is fascinated by ugliness. Roquentin, though curious, is less convinced.

outside it. They thus fulfil the cultural function of the anomaly. Catherine Clément examines this problem in *The Newly Born Woman*, where she considers the position of women in relation to other more obvious forms of anomaly identified by anthropology: people afflicted with madness, or perversion, or those whom we label, according to Marcel Mauss, 'neurotics, ecstasies, outsiders, carnies, drifters, jugglers and acrobats' (quoted in Clément 1988: 7). Such people, who exist in the interstices of symbolic systems, acquire 'a dangerous symbolic mobility' which, although it presents a danger in some cases to themselves, is 'also dangerous – or *productive* – for the cultural order itself, since it affects the very structure whose lacunae it reflects' (Clément 1988: 7, my emphasis). Clément argues that women, more than any others, are placed in the bizarre position of embodying this group of anomalies which reveals the cracks in the overall symbolic system. Thus, when she quotes Lévi-Strauss, it is understood that his observations on anomaly are applied by her to the situation of women: 'The group asks and even compels these people to represent certain forms of compromise, unrealizable on the collective level, to simulate imaginary transitions, to embody incompatible syntheses' (Lévi-Strauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie*.[sic] *Unrealizable compromises, imaginary transitions, incompatible syntheses*; quoted in Clément 1987: 7). As wives and mothers, women follow the rules of society and are part of culture, and yet the periodicity of their bodies – 'the epitome of paradox' (8), of order and disorder – means that they also take part in something which is not contained within culture. The uncertain position of women in relation to culture and to 'nature' is an old argument. What is significant about it in the context of the present discussion (where ugliness is seen as a form of contradiction or fundamental incongruity) is the capacity of women to cope with that contradiction.

For women, living an 'existential oxymoron' is the norm with the consequence that their experience of that which symbolic systems reject as ugly is unconsciously one of familiarity. Women relate to ugliness differently and in ways which are not necessarily negative. Thus, when anthropologists argue that anomaly is dangerous, but also productive, they might be seen as ascribing differing attitudes towards ugliness to men and women respectively. Ugliness as the half of the contradiction that the masculine symbolic rejects is dangerous because it threatens always to reverse the

political hierarchy. Ugliness as the contradiction which echoes the feminine position is not a threat, but a source of validation and of potential creativity. This, I would argue, is what underlies Cixous's thinking on ugliness. It is worth reclaiming the ugly because it can make a positive contribution to the situation of real women both politically and aesthetically. Cixous describes how, in *Agua Viva*, Lispector is able to transform wildflowers in a vase (effectively weeds) into an object of beauty. She quotes Lispector: 'Ce sont des fleurs du champ et qui sont nées sans qu'on les plante. Elles sont jaunes. Mais ma cuisinière a dit : qu'elles sont laides. Parce qu'il est difficile d'aimer ce qui est misérable' (Cixous: 1986: 135). Just as the weed for Lispector is no longer a weed, ugliness for Cixous is no longer ugly. Perhaps in the end, women's capacity to sustain contradiction will enable them to view ugliness positively also.

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## Conclusion

‘Il y aurait, à notre avis, un livre bien nouveau  
à faire sur l’emploi du grotesque dans les arts’  
(Victor Hugo, *Préface de Cromwell*)

‘Ce livre a été fait plusieurs fois, et ne pouvait  
être très intéressant’ (Maurice Souriau,  
commentary on the *Préface*)

This ‘dialogue’ between Hugo’s text and Souriau’s commentary on the subject of the grotesque in the 1897 edition of the *Préface* can also be seen as a dispute about the way forward for future studies of ugliness. Souriau objects to Hugo’s proposed book on the grounds that it would be too much of a good thing and that ‘le grotesque continu’ would inevitably produce ‘une impression désagréable’ (Hugo 1973: 203).<sup>1</sup> Too well-versed perhaps in the aesthetics of the grotesque and the sublime, Souriau appears to have leapt to the wrong conclusion. His objection rests on the assumption that Hugo is calling for a book on the grotesque alone, even though Hugo makes it clear that this is not the case:

Nous dirons seulement ici que, comme objectif auprès du sublime, comme moyen de contraste, le grotesque est, selon nous, la plus riche source que la nature puisse ouvrir à l’art. [...] Il semble [...] que le grotesque soit un temps d’arrêt, un terme de comparaison, un point de départ d’où l’on s’élève vers le beau avec une perception plus fraîche et plus excitée. (Hugo 1973: 203)

For once, Hugo’s broad brush approach does not go far enough in that the proposed context for further study of the ugly is limited to the domain of the arts. What has emerged from this study of ugliness in modern French culture is that not only is there an aesthetics of ugliness, there is also a politics and indeed a metaphysics of ugliness to be considered as well. In this concluding section, I aim to outline the terms of these three orders of ugliness and to indicate how they might serve as a basis for further research. Before doing so, however, it is important to establish an overall sense of the dynamics of the ugly as presented in this dissertation.

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<sup>1</sup> Of the three examples of ‘disagreeable’ books on the grotesque named by Souriau, two are explicitly about caricature – the point at which this study of ugliness began.

*The dynamics of the ugly*

The point of contention in the ‘dispute’ between Hugo and Souriau is whether ugliness should be considered as ugly on its own, or as part of an opposition. To my mind – and clearly to the minds of Hugo and Souriau (whatever he writes in his commentary) – there can be little doubt about this. Ugliness is always double. It has two aspects: one negative, the other positive. Indeed, what makes the ugly ugly is the fact that it embodies incongruity in a radical and deeply unsettling way. This fact is apparent in every chapter of this dissertation. In chapter 1, caricature as ‘the art of ugliness’ both undermines and reinforces social identity. The laughter it evokes is fundamentally ambivalent. Its position in relation to the hierarchy of art moves from low to high. In chapter 2, the ugly (large) nose is a focus for both ridicule and respect. It is at once grotesque and sublime. As I have shown in chapter 3, the ugly (as the grotesque) for Hugo is also the source of the sublime. Meanwhile, the concept of the sublime, according to Kant, is itself already double: it consists in a relation between immanence and transcendence, between the imagination and reason. In the God-less world of existentialist philosophy discussed in chapter 4, ugliness continues to occupy an ambivalent position, this time between Sartrean immanence (the ‘en-soi’) and transcendence (the ‘pour-soi’ of consciousness). It provides the material connection between contingency and nausea. The figure for ugliness in Sartrean theory is slime, which is neither liquid, nor solid. It clings stickily to the self, but also collapses back into itself as other. Finally in chapter 5, ugliness is shown to be on the side of the material, placed there by Cartesian ‘man’ as other alongside/in place of ‘woman’. The position of women in relation to the symbolic systems of patriarchal culture is seen as fundamentally paradoxical in that women must live in and through such systems, yet remain outside them. Their experience is thus one of contradiction: they must exist as other, and as ugly, or not at all.

Where does this catalogue of incongruity, ambivalence and contradiction leave the self-other relation described in my introduction? The rôle of ugliness, I would suggest, is to trouble that relation, and indeed to trouble the entire system of binary oppositions on which Western thought is founded. We conceive of ugliness as other, but it refuses to stay as other by turning consistently towards the transcendent

categories we choose to identify with the self. In this, I would suggest, ugliness might be seen as a measure of humanity. It shadows the human condition and reveals the limits of its aspirations. In doing so it also reveals the limits of art, since, in Kantian terms, art is not a measure of the object, but of the power of the subject to judge the object. There is thus much at stake in our understanding of the ugly. The issue, as Cousins has observed, is how to make a friend of ugliness. Such a friendship is possible, I would suggest, because, however negatively we think we see ugliness, it is always already double. It is a question, then, of looking for the other face of the ugly, a search which has informed the whole of this dissertation and the results of which can be seen, in differing ways, in each of the five areas of ugliness studied.

### *Three orders of ugliness*

#### *i) A politics of ugliness*

It is no straightforward matter to try to disentangle ideology from aesthetics. Kant understood the problem clearly and attempted to offer a solution in the *Critique of Judgement* by demonstrating that there is a difference between pure and empirical aesthetic judgements. In other words, Kant showed that what we call aesthetics is, in fact, political.<sup>2</sup> Nearly two centuries later, Bourdieu's 'answer' to Kant took the form of a sociological critique of judgement, *La Distinction*. This rewriting of empirical judgement indicates that Bourdieu did not see what Kant saw, namely that there was something fundamentally wrong with aesthetics. I want here to offer one possible explanation for this state of affairs, since, I would suggest, a large part of the problematic of ugliness can be mapped out between the respective horizons of Bourdieu and Kant; that is, between immanence and transcendence.

Western culture has theorised itself since antiquity as inferior in relation to the world of Ideas. Humanity according to Plato is a flawed copy of the original, a mere approximation, which defines itself negatively against the divine. This primal difference inaugurates ugliness as a failure in terms of representation. The monotheistic version of events goes further in that it offers an explanation for this

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to the political here in the broadest sense to indicate a 'humanised' aesthetics.



failure: sin. Humanity is God's ugly other. This inaugurates a second order of ugliness in terms of morality. Such an unfavourable comparison between man and God does not serve humanity well, with the result that it has looked for alternative ways to interpret the human condition. One possibility has been to defer ugliness downwards; that is, for humanity to set itself up as the measure of all things and to transfer judgements about ugliness onto another other. In doing so, ideas about aesthetics have 'slipped' from the realm of transcendence to that of immanence, or in Kantian terms, from the pure to the empirical. Beauty is no longer universal because it has become caught up in the particularities of human affairs. This is precisely the point made in the *Critique of Judgement*. There is a sense that humanity has misconstrued aesthetics, itself and God. It has taken itself as the measure of the divine with the result that beauty no longer constitutes an absolute, but has become instead a normative proposition. Aesthetics is really socio-politics and so gives rise to a third order of ugliness: the ugliness produced by normative judgements related to society. The traditional formulation of ugliness as beauty's opposite, I would suggest, belongs here.<sup>3</sup> It is the product of an 'integrated aesthetics' which has nothing to do with pure art and everything to do with society.

One aspect of the socio-politics of ugliness which deserves special attention – if only to discredit it on the grounds of banality – is bourgeois ugliness. There is a danger that discussions of ugliness might never move beyond this vast, but conceptually limited arena. The reason why bourgeois ugliness has a tendency to proliferate is that the majority of discourses on and of ugliness originate on the side of power which, in the post-revolutionary French context, is monopolised by the bourgeoisie. Ugliness of this order is infinitely varied in that it relies on (what appear to be) individual subjective judgements, but it is essentially inflexible. Not only has it already subtracted the proposition of transcendence, it has replaced that horizon by what Erving Goffman terms the 'virtual middle class ideal' (see chapter 1). Here there is no external ideal to which everyone might refer and upon which all might agree. Instead the borders of both the self and of art are policed by culture-specific, middle-class normative judgements. Most popular discussions concerning ugliness are of this normative, pseudo-aesthetic order. If this were the beginning and end of the matter,

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<sup>3</sup> The implication being that this beauty is not beauty at all, but a socialised norm.

there would be little point in pursuing it further. Studies of ugliness would amount to no more than a tour of bourgeois banality, which might be summed up in the words of the Goncourts: 'Le laid, toujours le laid! Et le laid sans son grand caractère, le laid sans la beauté du laid!'<sup>4</sup>

The Goncourt objection echoes a wider conviction in French culture that ugliness needs to be rescued not just from the clutches of the bourgeoisie, but from the kind of self-referentiality bourgeois culture perpetuates. It is too important to be allowed to remain on this level. Behind this imperative, I would suggest, is a strong sense of the connection between ugliness and the self. With the failure of beauty, in the sense that it has slid inexorably towards humanity, identification between the self and the beautiful has become more and more problematic. We might almost say that one has collapsed into the other. Ugliness represents a way out of this situation. If the transcendent proposition can be restored to aesthetics via ugliness, the borders of the self might then be reopened.

The above suggestion concerning the redefinition of aesthetics via ugliness also holds true for the redefinition of women in the context of patriarchy. In contrast to the overwhelming negativity of a politics of ugliness that passes itself off as aesthetics, there is, as I have shown in chapter 5, a strongly positive politics of ugliness in certain areas of feminist writing, notably in the work of Cixous. Cixous rejects what she terms non-beauty (judgements of ugliness passed on women from the point of view of patriarchal culture) and replaces it with an ugliness revalued. This revaluation of ugliness on the side of women is accompanied by a feminist aesthetics of ugliness. Once again, it becomes hard to disentangle aesthetics from the political, but the nature of that 'confusion' is entirely constructive this time. Whilst I have highlighted the way in which Cixous proposes an alternative theory and practice of ugliness, there is more work to be done on the way this positive strategy finds expression in her writing. Despite its importance, this aspect of her work has not, to my knowledge,

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<sup>4</sup> From Edmond and Jules de Goncourt's *Journal: mémoires de la vie littéraire* (1851-95), entry dated 18 September 1867. I owe this reference to David Trotter. In *Cooking with Mud: the Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction* (2000), he cites this comment from the Goncourts in the context of a discussion of Courbet's 'Femme au Perroquet' (to which the diary entry is a response). Interestingly, the translation given in Trotter's book specifically refers to *bourgeois* ugliness, a qualification which is perhaps implied, but does not appear in the French original (see Trotter 2000: 83).

received sustained critical attention. As a consequence, the influence of Cixousian ugliness on contemporary feminist fiction has also been neglected.

*ii) An aesthetics of ugliness*

The founding father of the aesthetics of ugliness in France is undoubtedly Victor Hugo. I began this study by rejecting the traditional view of ugliness as beauty's opposite. My reason for doing so was that such a view merely established ugliness as the negative term in a series of familiar binarisms which could tell us nothing new and nothing specific about it. Thanks to Hugo, if the ugly now has an 'opposite' at all, it is not the beautiful, but the sublime. Hugo's great achievement, I would suggest, is to have effected a grand union of the ugly (the grotesque) and the sublime *within the sphere of representation*. The two great unrepresentables of Western culture – that which cannot be represented (sublimity) and that which should not be represented (ugliness) – are brought together to form a creative alliance which attempts to span the Kantian gap between immanence and transcendence. This, I think, is the principle way in which French aesthetics, taking its cue from Hugo, has avoided toeing the Kantian line. Where Kant rigorously theorises the sublime and above all the beautiful as lying beyond empirical reality and hence also representation (the image), French aesthetics has retained the conviction that the plane of transcendence must remain accessible to the imagination fuelled by the creative spark of ugliness.

From a purist's point of view, such an aesthetic enterprise would appear to be fundamentally misguided. By focusing on the ugly, it might seem to be repeating from the opposite end the errors of the past which led to the monotonous classical beauty Hugo rejected. Over time, we might just as easily end up with a monotonous ugliness, as Souriau has suggested. French aesthetic theory, however, has followed Hugo in recognising the volatility of ugliness, which hovers unnervingly between immanence and transcendence. Moments when ugliness is at its most ugly are, paradoxically, also moments when it becomes sublime. This is a sublime 'from the bottom up', as it were, rather than 'from the top down' which forms, I would suggest, the underlying structure of much late 20<sup>th</sup>- and early 21<sup>st</sup>-century art.

The Belgian artist, Luc Tuymans, whose work is included in the exhibition 'Apocalypse: Beauty and Horror in Contemporary Arts' (Royal Academy of Arts, 23 September-15 December 2000), would seem to support this view. The stark lines of his paintings and the ascetic conditions under which they are produced betray a hidden preoccupation with a possible 'beyond'. In an article by Gordon Burn for the *Observer* magazine (10 September 2000: 30-37), Tuymans is quoted as saying: 'I'm not so much interested in the spiritual aspect of culture – "beauty" or poetic descriptions of beauty don't seem real enough for me. Reality is actually far more important than any form of spirituality. Realism. It's much more interesting to crawl from underneath to the so-called top' (34). If Tuymans is rejecting so-called spirituality, he is certainly not rejecting transcendence, or the possibility of crawling up towards it. Brown suggests that Tuymans's work, like many of the other works included in the 'Apocalypse' show, 'represents a kind of anti-sublime' (34). If the sublime is a horizon for transcendence, and if Tuymans's view is in any way representative, this cannot be the case. What is missing from criticism of this kind is an adequate discourse of ugliness *as* the sublime. And clearly what is missing from this dissertation is any discussion of contemporary art from such a perspective. For reasons of internal coherence, my investigation of art in relation to the sublime is limited to Lyotard's theory of the avant-garde and Pascal de Duve's practice of writing.

One aspect of the sublime, as theorised by Lyotard, which merits further consideration in relation to the ugly is its ability to disrupt the habitual relation between the mind and time. In *L'Inhumain*, Lyotard does not specify *how* this is achieved, other than through the effect of shock. It would be possible to explore the nature of the ugly's shock value, but in the end, I suspect, this would lead back to Burke and locate ugliness in the perspective of death. It would be more interesting to pursue the idea of ugliness in terms of time, or more specifically, in terms of anachronism. I envisage here a way of theorising the ugly not only as matter out of place, but also as matter out of time. Again, such a theory falls outside the scope of this dissertation, but it remains an important potential area for further research.

*iii) The metaphysics of ugliness*

In chapter 4, I argued, on the basis of Sartrean philosophy, that ugliness is an existential issue. The sense of ugliness – nausea – mediates between consciousness and the fact of contingency (being without reason, without cause and without necessity). In doing so it draws attention to the meaning, and meaninglessness, of human existence. Ugliness provides evidence of the human condition. It is the phenomenological link between the experience of nausea and the abstract metaphysical state of contingency.

Unlike the tradition of the sublime, which begins with ideas about the divine, the starting point for existentialist thought is that there is no God. The immanent-transcendent division is retained, but theorised in terms of the ‘en-soi’ (brute existence) and the ‘pour-soi’ (consciousness). Ugliness resides in the capacity to trouble that distinction between the conscious self and the material other, as well as the distinction between one conscious self and another. Ugliness is experienced as an ‘existential oxymoron’, or an unbearable contradiction between two states. The archetype of ugliness for Sartre, as noted above, is slime, which participates both in ‘le grand secteur ontologique de la viscosité’ and in the phenomenological realm of human reality. All empirical interpretations of the slimy, according to Sartre, refer back to an originary sliminess which constitutes an anti-value and an objective structure of the world. Sartre signals this movement from the particular to the universal by saying that the slimy reveals itself as ‘beaucoup plus que le visqueux’. In this dissertation, I have tried to explore the ways in which, in the context of modern French culture, the ugly can also be seen as ‘much more than the ugly’.

It seems appropriate to conclude this study by drawing attention to the actuality of the issue of ugliness. As I have noted in the introduction, ugliness has always flourished at a popular level, in the sense that there have always been negative, empirical discourses of the ugly. Now, however, it appears that there is a renewed fascination with ugliness in the domain of art and aesthetics. I should stress that such a

preoccupation is renewed, not new. The history of positive ugliness in France can be traced back at least as far as Hugo, for whom the ugly was a fundamental aspect of the good 'bad taste' he saw as the key to modernity. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Baudelaire's aesthetic of modernity continued to revalue the ugly as part of a 'new beauty'. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lyotard insisted on the presence of ugliness as part of the sublime in his theory of the avant-garde. Art is still claiming the ugly as an expression of the essence of the modern mind. There is a continued sense, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that ugliness has an enduring, inexhaustible capacity to tell us what it means to be human here and now.

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