

FROM DOUBLE WORDS TO DOUBLE TRUTHS:
A RHETORIC OF SKEPTICISM IN THE MODERNIST NOVEL

by

DRAGAN ILIC

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David Ferris

Mark Leiderman

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A Rhetoric of Skepticism in the Modernist Novel

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The dissertation is guided by a group of questions concerning the discourse of skepticism as it has been explored in modernist fiction. I examine to what extent the rhetoric of skepticism is dependent on irony; what happens to the skeptic in a mass-mediated society; why is over-identification the proper rhetorical locution of an active skepticism; and finally I address the question is the skeptic necessarily doomed to fall into contradiction by arguing on both sides of the problem? The crux of my argument is that in modernist fiction, skepticism and its consequences are revealed rhetorically through the form of writing rather than by mere assertion and argument. Skepticism is thus transformed from a form of doubt to a form of narration. In contrast to traditional philosophical criticism that primarily focuses on the formative impact of philosophical ideas on modernist fiction, I emphasize those rhetorical efforts within modernist narratives that resist the influence of formal philosophical thinking of skepticism and are irreducible to the treatment of skepticism in classical epistemology. In this way, I challenge the reductive claims about modernism as a form of unrestrained epistemological skepticism and show that modernist novels perform a hard narrative labor against such a simplistic philosophical account.

In order to answer two fundamental questions, where did the problem of skepticism come from and why was it so concentrated in modernist fiction, I have selected novels not from any single national tradition, but from the literary culture that cuts across Great Britain, Ireland, the United States, and Russia. By doing so, I aim to provide a sampling of modernist work that is wide-ranging, culturally diverse, yet coherent. I closely read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, Ilya Ehrenburg's *Khulio Khurenito*, and Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*.

By following this trajectory, I address some of the most pressing questions that “haunt” skeptical discourse from its earliest beginnings and show that irony, *ekphrasis*, over-identification, *epanorthosis*, and the *dissoi logoi* best illustrate how modernist narratives deeply reflect on skepticism and fruitfully rework some of its basic tenets, and are, in return, decisively formed by them.

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Introduction

In his groundbreaking essay “The Critic as Artist” (1891), written at the dawn of literary modernism, Oscar Wilde writes: “It is enough that our fathers believed. They have exhausted the faith-faculty of the species. Their legacy to us is the skepticism of which they were afraid” (in Ellmann, 382). Following Oscar Wilde’s indictment, my dissertation explores how modernist writers challenged and reworked the legacy of skepticism by means of rhetoric and narration. Unlike their forefathers, modernist novelists were not afraid to face the specter of skepticism. My goal is to show to what formal breakthroughs and narrative results the modernist engagement with skepticism has ultimately led.

In philosophical discourse, skepticism has been most commonly understood as characterized by two distinctive features. First of all, it is based on a *thesis* that nothing can be known. The thesis is usually followed by a sort of *prescription*: since nothing can be known one should suspend judgment on all matters. Historically, the thesis that nothing can be known prevailed over the prescription within the tradition of Cartesian skepticism. The prescription, on the other hand, dominated the Pyrrhonist school of skeptical thought leading to practical questions such as is skepticism livable at all, and can the skeptic actually enact a total suspension of judgment?

In what follows I am taking a fundamentally different tack and I argue that in modernist fiction, skepticism is neither understood as a philosophical doctrine characterized by a thesis that nothing can be known, nor is it primarily understood as a skeptical prescription that advises us to suspend judgment on all matters ceasing to claim knowledge, but is revealed rhetorically and understood as a rather peculiar form of writing. In a word, my thesis is simply this: in the modernist novel, skepticism is transformed from a form of doubt to a form of narration.

What are the consequences of such a rhetorical understanding of skepticism? What is at stake when a group of major modernist novelists—and my representative sample consists of Joseph Conrad, Nathanael West, Ilya Ehrenburg, and Samuel Beckett—centers their fiction on skepticism?

I argue that modernist writers show a deep dissatisfaction with the way skepticism has been treated in philosophical discourse. They find *doctrinal* as well as *suspensive* understanding of skepticism insufficient and misleading. They are alert to the fact that in philosophical discourse the two aspects of skepticism—thesis and prescription—are kept strictly apart. As a result, skepticism is usually considered as a purely formal, intellectual matter, and accordingly, a *philosophical* skeptic ends up as nothing more than the straw man of epistemology textbooks.¹ It is important to note that modernist novels perform a hard narrative labor against such a simplistic philosophical account of skepticism. Unlike the straw figure of analytic epistemology textbooks, the modernist novel portrays the skeptic as someone who is deeply disturbed by gnawing doubts. He is, to put it as succinctly as possible, in the grip of *angst*. This grip does not come out of a disinterested philosophical reflection, as philosophers have traditionally assumed. On the contrary, the modernist novel's skeptic faces the challenge of uncertainty along the road while engaging in different actions, not just reflecting upon them. Thus, each one of my four protagonists—Marlow, Jurenito, Molloy, and Tod Hackett—feels how an abyss opens itself up between his own mind and the world; how an unbridgeable gap sets itself wide open between their own thoughts, feelings, and undertakings, and someone else's musings and expectations as if they were truly confronted by bodies hollowed out. This specifically Marlow's fantasy will subliminate itself in various forms as Jurenito's political conformists and puppets, as Molloy's seeing himself and people around him as doubles and "inseparable fools" (44), as Tod Hackett's real-life actors, and so on. In this way, the modernist narrative

¹ This state of affairs has been most aptly captured by Hume who had been, at one and the same time, overwhelmed by the power of skeptical arguments and the quotidian incredibility of the skeptic's conclusions. Indeed, even though Hume was led to the pessimistic conclusion that no satisfactory response to skepticism is possible, he also firmly believed that "nature is always too strong for principle" and that everyday belief is more easily sustained than philosophical doubt. Thus, skepticism has sense only when it surfaces in the "study" room, or simply, in the realm of a somewhat detached philosophical discourse. In the street, skepticism is out of the question.

renders an account of skepticism which is less epistemological, making the object of suspicion uncomfortably “embodied” and animate. Accordingly, in modernist fiction, skeptical doubt is neither a cognitive malady in need of logical refutation, nor an ill-formed uncertainty that can be disregarded and put aside, but an incarnation of the inescapable finitude that characterizes human existence. Hence, modernist narratives conceive of skepticism as an existential condition that is simply lived out, either destructively or productively, tracing out the myriad of its manifestations and corollaries.

However, it is not only the case that modernist narratives make doubt and suspicion less abstract, and more concrete and uncannily embodied. What distinguishes my approach is that I am less interested in skeptical thematic—or in telling the story of modernist skepticism—than in figuring out what rhetorical devices and narrative strategies the skeptical narrative employs to tell its own story. While I believe that the genre of skeptical narrative is both a hallmark of literary modernism and its primary narrative and philosophical invention, I am fully aware of the fact that it is a rather elusive critical coinage and a genre whose generic profile is anything but clear and consistent. However, in using phrases such as *skeptical narrative*, *rhetorical devices*, *narrative strategies* or *narrative techniques*, and so on, I not only emphasize how “much of the artistic passion of the period was stirred by questions of technique” (Levenson, *Introduction*, 3), but also draw attention to the rhetorical and narrative particularities of skepticism and to what Christian Thorne calls “the first error that conventional accounts of skepticism make,” that rather than reading skepticism as a form of writing, they read it as “little more than an extravagant form of epistemology” (24). Therefore, it is useful to note that in contrast to traditional philosophical and literary criticism that primarily focus on the formative impact of philosophical ideas on modernist fiction, I emphasize those rhetorical and narrative efforts within modernist narratives that resist the influence of formal philosophical thinking of skepticism and are irreducible to the treatment of skepticism in classical epistemology. In this way, I also challenge the reductive claims about modernism as a form of unrestrained epistemological skepticism and show that modernist novels perform a hard narrative labor against such a simplistic understanding of skepticism.

Before I provide a brief outline of the dissertation, let me address some of the questions that are highly pertinent to my project. Let me first turn to the question of the grounds on which literary modernism can be associated with skepticism in various, often quite divergent and irreconcilable, critical discussions of the period and its poetics. In the last three decades, modernist studies have not just widened and deepened, but have significantly diversified and have been made much more complex. Yet, in spite of the varieties of critical approaches *to* and understandings *of* literary modernism, there has been a common theme running through most of them: it is the theme of skepticism. Back in the 1980's, for instance, Douwe W. Fokkema has extensively argued that modernism "is characterized by the convention of *epistemological doubt*" (16, original emphasis), and has seen in *Sprachskepsis* (18, original emphasis), or simply in the modernist skepticism about language and its capacity to accurately convey meaning and represent the world, "the basis of the Modernist convention...which underline[s] the provisionality of all that can be said" (18). According to Fokkema, the compositional, thematic, and narrative facets of the modernist novel are organized around issues of skepticism, epistemological doubt, and metalinguistic narrative commentary. Similarly, already in the late 1980's, Brian McHale has formulated what he called "a general thesis about modernist fiction:" that "the dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*" and that it is governed by the principle of "intractable epistemological uncertainty" (9, 10). He has extensively argued how modernist narrative fiction is dominated by skeptical questions and concerns, and how its narrative techniques and strategies are generally molded as to express and respond to the problems of perception and cognition, the subjective experience of time and space, the unreliability of all knowledge claims, and so on. In the 1990's, Christopher Butler has paid attention to "a general atmosphere of scepticism" and "a sceptical loss of confidence" (1), as both characterizing modernist artistic innovation and functioning as a focusing component of the modernist work of art. In the 2000's, Philip Weinstein coined the phrase to explain the nature of the modernist narrative. To Weinstein, the modernist fiction is the fiction of "unknowing." Such fiction, he goes on to say, unshackles narrative from the failed project of knowing (5) and shows how a modernist subject instead of coming to know himself and the environment

he inhabits, ends up in an “uncanny space” in which none of the classical epistemological protocols of making sense and grasping the world truly work. Most recently, Michael Levenson has done an exceptional work on modernist fiction and has argued that the “logic that drives Modernism from realism toward subjectivism...raises a question of skepticism,” which he believes particularly “erupts” in the fiction of Joseph Conrad (*Modernism*, 93).

This brief summary of a relatively recent critical literature on the relationship between skepticism and modernism is representative, but certainly not exhaustive. Nonetheless, it leads me to another key question: How does my approach differ from all the previous explorations of modernist narrative skepticism? What, if anything, does make my approach novel and unique? How do I build on, critically engage with, and finally enrich an entire critical tradition of thinking of literary modernism in terms of skepticism and skeptical narrative procedures?

Let me first point out that in almost all critical discussions of modernist narrative skepticism so far, the following narrative features have been most commonly associated with the modernist skeptical *procédé*. First of all, it is the loss of narrative certainty stemming from an all-pervasive linguistic skepticism. It has been argued that unlike realist omniscient narrators, modernist narrators are mostly unreliable. Limited in what they know, they keep misreporting us and keep passing wrong-headed judgments about what had happened. Novels like *Anna Karenina* or *The Sentimental Education*, for instance, still belong to a stable and recognizable tradition in which the narrative follows the self-fashioning of various characters, their different life-histories and life-trajectories, and is presented to us by a narrator who is more or less well-informed, seemingly friendly and not deceiving, morally authoritative and not corrupt. Modernist narratives are, on the other hand, “shrouded in hermeneutic hesitation and doubt” (Cunningham, 463). Narrative confidence gets shattered under the pressure of language. “Words fail narratives and narrators,” Valentine Cunningham goes on to say, while “the power of words is [itself] felt as failing” (463). Additionally, skepticism has been related to the modernist character-fashioning.

Modernist heroes are typically *doppelgängers*, splitting egos of which one half remains, as if by default, beyond any cognitive reach. They hide themselves under the veil of adopted personae, various masks put on, different voices they emulate. In the words of T. S. Eliot, words borrowed from Dickens and intended as the original title of the first two parts of *The Waste Land*, modernist narratives and their heroes “do” themselves in different voices (Cunningham, 466). Last but not least, modernist narratives have been described as skeptical due to their fragmentary nature. While for the Jena Romantics the fragment had a paramount significance as a genre and a form of thinking, which sells the part as the whole, which is both expressive of the longing for the transcendent and the undoing of the same longing, and thus complete in its incompleteness, for modernist writers the fragment did not aspire to any totality. Apparently, skepticism is perfectly suited for fragmentary thought on the basis of its intrinsic refusal of epistemological closure. Modernist texts break up into fragments to emphasize such a refusal.

Thus, the most common narrative features of the modernist novel that are typically associated with skepticism have, so far, fallen into three categories: namely, the loss of narrative confidence, volatile egos, and fragmentariness, which have all become clichés in the critical discourse on modernism. While I do not neglect the significance of such a critical approach to literary modernism, I try to lay out what is distinctive and compelling about the modernist skeptical narrative in a rather different fashion. I focus on the rhetoric of skepticism and on rhetorical problems that the skeptic faces himself when he has been prompted to espouse his views, and I argue instead that modernist narratives both employ and radicalize rhetorical devices the skeptic typically resorts to. When the skeptic claims, for instance, that “we have no knowledge,” his claim presupposes and implies the very objectivity of knowledge that the claim itself denies. To know that knowledge is beyond our reach is to know something. Therefore, skeptical discourse is intrinsically self-refuting. Such a sort of critique of skepticism was not only widely voiced in antiquity; it remained vigorous and alive even in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, for instance, who had been intrigued by the vitality of skepticism, the vitality that paradoxically arises from the self-cancelling

character of skepticism and from the fact that the skeptic can express his views only by presenting them in a language that refutes the very same views.²

How does the skeptic cope with such a challenge? How does he respond to the accusation that skeptical discourse is incoherent? How does he meet numerous logical traps that so often haunt skepticism? The answer is fairly straightforward: he coins a language of his own; an entire language that is purged of assertion and affirmation and is based on irony, various disclaimers and rhetorical distantiations, *catachrēsis* and *epanorthosis*. In addition to this, the skeptic makes up an entire discourse that invokes outrageous hypotheses, little fictional vignettes or “thought-experiments” that turn on some defamiliarizing and incredible supposition: that one has no body, that one is a brain immersed in a vat full of liquid, that one is made of glass, that one is no more than a computer program, and so on. The skeptic invites us to visualize such uncanny stories, and, as if by means of *ekphrasis*, he petrifies them and turns them into something tangible and veritable.

That is precisely what makes my approach idiosyncratic. I will show how an entire bouquet of rhetorical figures and narrative devices typical of skeptical discourse infiltrate the modernist novel and decidedly weave its narrative fabric. It is crucial to note that in reworking rhetorical and narrative strategies characteristic of skeptical discourse, modernist writers managed to revitalize the form of the novel. If they have not fulfilled, they have at least approximated the ideal of a narrative that ceaselessly undermines its own discourse, counterbalances its own discursive practices, and unfixes its own truth- and knowledge-claims. By virtue of its form, the skeptical narrative stands in opposition to any genre and discourse—especially to philosophical discourse—that is built on the supposition that there *is* or *ought to be* only one privileged way of discoursing the truth and only one plausible way of fabulation. The genre of skeptical narrative is thus one of the last strongholds of narrative skepticism shored against philosophical dogmatism and narrative holism. Instead of being “an organic whole,” the modernist skeptical narrative is

² On Levinas’ reading of skepticism, see Critchley (1992), pp. 156-169.

a narrative that perpetually abolishes itself. It is a narrative in which the very resistance to the continuation of storytelling by ordinary, mimetic, well-tested means is built into the text. Finally, as a form of discourse, it testifies to the fact that what was in philosophy considered as a “scandal,” was in modernist literature considered as a creative challenge.³

In order to answer two fundamental questions, where did the problem of skepticism come from and why was it so concentrated in modernist fiction, I have selected novels not from any single national tradition, but from the literary culture that cuts across Great Britain, Ireland, the United States, and Russia. By doing so, I aim to provide a sampling of modernist work that is wide-ranging, culturally diverse, yet coherent. I closely read Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust*, Ilya Ehrenburg’s *Khulio Khurenito*, and Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy*. Although I deal with an entire spectrum of rhetorical figures and narrative devices, I primarily identify and account for four rhetorical strategies that epitomize the most vital aspects of skepticism in the modernist novel. Those are respectively: irony, *ekphrasis*, over-identification, and *epanorthosis*.

In Chapter 1, I read Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) as a founding statement of modernist narrative skepticism. I explore the link between skeptical discourse and irony and show how irony functions as a principle of the dissolution of all narrative markers of certitude (Critchley, *Very Little*, 114). I will look at how Conrad uses irony as a principle of narrative interruption, an interruption that takes place not just at one point, nor at various narrative intervals, but all the time and throughout the narrative. For that reason, I argue that the rhetoric of *Heart of Darkness* is that of “permanent *parabasis*,” a perpetual interruption of discourse—a critical structure that originates in Friedrich Schlegel and is minutely explored by Paul de Man. I aim to show how the novella represents a vivid example of the

³ The idea of skepticism as a scandal comes from Kant, who, in a footnote, in his preface to the second edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason* writes: “It always remains a scandal to philosophy and universal human reason that the existence of things outside us...should have to be assumed merely on faith, and that if it occurs to anyone to doubt it, we should be unable to answer him with a satisfactory truth” (121).

skeptical narrative which ceaselessly undermines its own discourse by means of irony. While my focus is the narrative work of irony as the perpetual dissolving of narrative certitude, I also explore an entire array of textual rhetorical strategies that includes Conrad's use of negative modifiers, his reliance on the genre of skeptical meditation, his skeptical treatment of epiphany and *anagnorisis*, which all together contribute to the formation of Marlow's skeptical "voice" and the creation of a distinct narrative model of skepticism. What makes my interpretation novel, is that I read *Heart of Darkness* both as a story of an unfulfilled epiphany and a story of unrequited love. In the final section of the chapter, I take up the problem of negative adjectives and try to defend Conrad against the charge of obscurity arguing that his negative adjectives have nothing to do with obscurity, but are rather part and parcel of Conrad's inverted skeptical vision. Ultimately, I discuss how all these innovative narrative strategies ushered in the genre of skeptical narrative that is both a hallmark of literary modernism and its primary philosophical and narrative invention.

In Chapter 2, I address the question what happens to the skeptic in a mass-mediated society? I argue that West's late modernist novel *The Day of the Locust* (1939) posits a real challenge to skepticism as it has traditionally been conceived and, ultimately, turns its meaning upside down. The novel simply creates a rhetorical outlet through which the traditional meaning of skepticism is being expelled. Skepticism typically assumes that there is a reality of some sort that is independent from us and that is confronting us, and the skeptic positions himself around the difficulty of determining how the world really or objectively is. Yet, *The Day of the Locust* is a novel that takes the preamble of objective reality off the table and portrays from the beginning the world we think we know as *representation*, film screen, theater stage, phantasmagoria, and dream. I shall argue that West creates a fictional world in which the very meaning of skepticism is based not on a lack of information but on its abundance. His narrative world of make-believe anticipates Guy Debord's "society of the spectacle" and Jean Baudrillard's "ecstasy of communication," and suggests that skepticism is pointless and even unthinkable under the social conditions of total simulation. I illustrate in detail how West reaches such a conclusion by means of

different narrative *metalepses* which first pluralize narrative worlds, then trick us into mistaking events at one level of reality for another level, and finally preempt the traditional meaning of skepticism. Rather than a *mise ne scène*, the bringing forward and advancing a story, characters, and events, *The Day of the Locust* is a skeptical narrative of a *mise en abyme*, of a vertiginous plunge into a yawning textual and epistemological abyss. But it is also a satire, a genre characterized by narrative certainty and moral authority. By sketching a concrete tension, that West is writing a satire and a skeptical narrative and that he wants to be a skeptic and a satirist at once, I also refer to a larger, general problem: the relationship of satire and skepticism as well as the relationship of satire and the novel. Ultimately, I argue that in *ekphrasis* West finds a narrative means of reconciling these two, often quite incongruous and conflicting discourses, and I propose a model for describing skepticism as the *ekphrastic* philosophical position.

In Chapter 3, I slightly deviate from the beaten path and deal with the skeptical self-fashioning and the creation of the skeptical identity within the text by focusing on a narrative “voice” or discursive persona that both represents and legitimizes the ever-shifting psycho-political profile of skepticism. I unearth one of the forgotten masterpieces of Russian literary modernism Ilya Ehrenburg’s *Khulio Khurenito* (1921) and explore the political and moral implications of skepticism. Skepticism has been traditionally associated with quietism, tranquility, conservatism, and even pessimism, and skeptical doubt with nausea, inactivity, and despair. I show how Ehrenburg’s novel, under the influence of Nietzsche and his re-evaluation of skepticism, transforms such a psycho-political account of skepticism and offers a characteristically modern view of the so-called active skeptic whose rhetoric is not that of suspension of judgment but that of over-identification, a term I borrow from both Slavoj Žižek and Alexei Yurchak. Over-identification is a parodic intensification of practices and customs one finds morally dubious and problematic. Strictly speaking, over-identification is neither purely a rhetorical nor exclusively a narrative device. It rather combines rhetorical, narrative, and performative elements and, as I will try to show, it represents both a way of discoursing and a way of living the skeptical life. It also testifies to the fact how much of the appeal of skepticism lies in its use of hyperbole, in its penchant for advancing outrageous

hypotheses and in its advocating positions that are quite shocking and uncanny. In Ilya Erenburg's *Khulio Khurenito*, such hypotheses are, as if by rule, used as a form of critique of the horrors of the First World War, the October Revolution, and the rise of Fascism. Moreover, a modern, committal skeptic finds in over-identification a proper means of both exposing and dismantling a totalitarian political order. As it has been widely acknowledged, a political power conceives of itself in terms of legitimacy and it couches its legitimacy claims in terms of knowledge. But it is hard to see how any such claim might pass by the skeptic unchallenged. In the face of skepticism, any political claim to power is unfounded and dubious. The uniqueness of *Khulio Khurenito* lies in the way it enacts, portrays, and radicalizes such a position. That is why its protagonist proceeds by over-identification and categorically mocks all claims to power and knowledge. In a brutal and uncompromising, yet discursively subtle, way, he throws back at all the dogmatists, fascists, religious fanatics, capitalist exploiters, and Bolsheviks the very same retort: you are not entitled to hold power for the reasons you claim you are.

In Chapter 4, I associate an entire logic of denial in Beckett with the ancient skeptical rhetorical strategy of the *dissoi logoi*—arguing on both sides of the question or forwarding two mutually exclusive and incompatible descriptions. Beckett's narratives, and *Molloy* (French 1951, English 1955) is a perfect example, unanimously create a skeptical voice or discursive persona that will first say something and then immediately unsay it, or say the opposite. I argue that Beckett's uniqueness lies in his radicalizing this technique and making it happen within a sentence, on the level of syntax, thus creating the so-called "syntax of weakness," as he himself once described his own narrative method. Yet, *Molloy* is not only a skeptical narrative based on antithesis and the logic of denial; it is also a novel founded upon a perpetual retracting of what has been said and an incessant self-correction. In rhetorical theory, such a figure of speech is called *epanorthosis*. Therefore, I will closely examine the interplay between antithesis and *epanorthosis* in Beckett's *Molloy* and I will argue how such a rhetorical merging of, on the one hand, the principle of narrative denial, and, on the other, the principle of narrative self-amendment, results not only in a parody of traditional narrative, but in a thorough dismantling of modernist narrative skepticism.

By following this trajectory, I address some of the most pressing questions that “haunt” skeptical discourse from its earliest beginnings and show that irony, *ekphrasis*, over-identification, *epanorthosis* and the *dissoi logoi* best illustrate how modernist narratives deeply reflect on skepticism and fruitfully rework some of its basic tenets, and are, in return, decisively formed by them. In the end, I conclude the dissertation with some ruminations about what I continue to see as the prospects of the skeptical narrative.

Before I begin, let me make a couple of provisos and have a short word on methodology. Some of the devices that I analyze in detail are, strictly speaking, not rhetorical. Therefore, the term rhetoric in the title of my dissertation should be understood in the broadest possible sense. Also, in spite of using the term skepticism (and modernism) in the singular form, I do not think that skepticism is a unified concept. It diversifies itself historically, philosophically, and rhetorically into various, often quite irreconcilable forms. Here are the forms of skepticism I find germane to the central line of my argument. First, I draw upon the Pyrrhonist tradition. Although the Pyrrhonist legacy may look like a remote terrain to literary modernism, I maintain its legacy is not at all foreign to modernist writers. On the contrary. In addition to the *dissoi logoi* that has a conspicuous formative function in modernist fiction, the Pyrrhonists left us with ruminations of what a life without commitments may look like, and is such a kind of life possible at all. Accordingly, I argue that what used to be the Pyrrhonist dilemma became a modernist obsession. It deeply perplexes each one of the four protagonists I will be examining, and each one of them oscillates between the Pyrrhonist ideal of *ataraxia*—a happiness reached through the freedom from disturbance—and a stubborn commitment to the on-going pursuit despite its patent absurdity and futility. Therefore, the modernist novel wavers between the two alternatives. On the one hand, it represents a skeptical suspension of belief; on the other, it displays a genuine skeptical activism. As it has been shrewdly noted, modernism represents “the mix of skepticism and ardor” (Levenson, *Introduction*, 7). As such, it makes phrases such as “skeptical commitment” or “life without beliefs” neither self-contradictory nor senseless; it rather presents them as genuine oxymorons.

The second form of skepticism I will keep referring to throughout the dissertation is the Cartesian skepticism with its eternally pressing question: Are things *really* as they seem to be? This question opens a schism between the world and the self resonating with clear overtones of both alienation and anxiety. It also puts an emphasis on the impressionistic/appearing quality of modernist fiction, wondering how the surfaces of things reveal, or hide, what is behind the surface. The modernist, non-assertive, narrative discourse of *seeming* and *appearing* thus testifies to skepticism's "paradoxical presence within our very possession of language," in which, as Stanley Cavell notes, we are commonly "misled by the ordinary word 'see' into supposing that we *really* as it were *see* the things of the world" (*Philosophy*, 133, original emphasis).

The third form of skepticism I will be tackling upon is that of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, "three masters of suspicion" (5), as Paul Ricoeur once called them. Nietzsche's, as well as Freud's, influence is all-pervasive in the period and it can hardly be neglected. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche pleaded for "an absolute skepticism toward all inherited concepts" (409); with his theory of the unconscious, Freud contributed to the same plead. But what interests me most in these three philosophers is precisely the interplay between strong commitments and even stronger doubts: Is it possible to be the most opinionated man and the most thoroughgoing skeptic at one and the same time, without falling into contradiction?

This taxonomy of different forms of skepticism is neither complete nor without its own faults and simplifications, and it is not exhaustive of my dissertation. However, what is important to note is that despite all the differences between various forms of skepticism I address, in all of them I find a peculiar sort of rhetoric at work. For that reason, my hermeneutic approach will be primarily based on a method of close reading and philosophical interpretation. My commitment to both literary studies and philosophy makes such a sort of methodology inevitable.

Last but not least, I read neither Conrad, nor West, nor Erenburg, nor Beckett, as skeptics in any unreflective sense, and I am fully aware that skepticism in the Russian context hugely differs from skepticism as it has been understood in Hollywood, or, for that matter, in the Victorian London. The underlying premise of my dissertation is that skepticism is neither a historical nor a cultural constant. As for the writers, to regard any one of them as a skeptic is to overlook the excess of language, the fascination with fabulation, and the filigree of narration, as dominating forces of their writing. Yet, it is also fair to note that each one of the four novelists I engage with adds a philosophical spin to the text, and the text occasionally veers away from narrative imaginings to discursive ruminations and philosophical speculations. The title of my dissertation seeks to express this doubleness. In Conrad, for instance, the discourse of skepticism is opposed to the discourse of efficiency and utility. In West, the discourse of skepticism is pre-empted by the discourse of simulation. In Erenburg, the discourse of skepticism is doubled by the discourse of commitment. In Beckett, the discourse of skepticism is complemented by the discourse of retraction.

Let me conclude by saying that this doubleness is also encrypted in the very etymology of the word skeptic. For the skeptic is not the one who doubts, but the one who inquires, questions, investigates, and keeps searching. A skeptic is a detective lost in translation. A detective whose clues are hidden in the passage from *double words* to *double truths*.

Chapter 1

A Merciless Logic for a Worthy Purpose: A Rhetoric of Skepticism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Introduction

Joseph Conrad once said of himself that he had been a “homo duplex” (Najder, 240), a self-characterization to which numerous Conrad scholars keep returning, not without reason. For someone who was both Polish and English—who was, on the one hand, attacked on the basis of frequently missing English idiom and writing obscure phrases down with a striking regularity and wantonness, while on the other, praised as the sole master and invigorator of British literary tradition—a “double man” was quite a proper tag.⁴ As a matter of fact, Conrad’s double disposition is multi-sided and does not amount to language issues only. Famously, Conrad cherished sharp-cut conservative predilections with a strong emphasis on the system of values including hard work, common sense, communal spirit, loyalty, and solidarity. Yet, none of these values survives unblemished in his fiction and each turns out to be no more than an illusion. And further, he was a harsh critic of the British imperialism but also its enthusiastic champion and defender. He despised democracy, socialism, and equality—in a word, all the fundamental liberal ideals—nonetheless, he could not help creating fictional worlds in which people strive to reach and die for such ideals. As a seafarer, he inclined to practical philosophies of life underpinned by a certain trial-and-error method; as a writer, he was anything but practical. His sentences are convoluted and complex, his mood somber and gloomy, his thoughts metaphysical, esoteric, and abstract. Analogously, Conrad’s narratives seem to function as openly didactic, moralistic, cautionary, counseling tales to whom

⁴ In Conrad scholarship it has been largely overlooked that by describing himself as a *homo duplex* Conrad may have alluded to Baudelaire who famously expressed his existential concern: “Who amongst us is not a *homo duplex*? I speak of those whose mind since childhood has been *touched with pensiveness*; always double, action and inaction, dream and reality; always one hindering the other, one usurping the place of the other” (quoted in Nicholls, original emphasis, 16). Although Baudelaire’s doubleness has a different rooting than Conrad’s, in both cases one faces the epistemological predicament in which the writer of modern life inevitably finds himself divided between opposite influences and inclinations.

one cannot resist appending the label *epimyth*; however, they are also sustained skeptical meditations in which every trace of certainty and dogma is utterly pre-empted and demolished.⁵

How are we to account for all these contradictions? “How does Conrad,” as Terry Eagleton once asked, “reconcile the sea captain in himself with the sceptic?” (*The English Novel*, 236). My aim in this chapter is to address the above question and try to provide a satisfactory answer. I argue that much of the incompatibility and tension between two different sides of Conrad’s personality and two different aspects of his narrative method is reconciled by means of irony. What makes Conrad the greatest innovator of narrative voice in Western literary tradition, and *Heart of Darkness* a catalyst that decisively accelerates the emergence and development of literary modernism, is Marlow’s ubiquitous, laborious yet quite unobtrusive and sometimes even imperceptible use of irony. In *Heart of Darkness*, irony appears in various forms: as verbal irony, as dramatic or situational irony, even as a general attitude to life. Yet, most systematically, it appears as a structural principle. In what follows, I will show that Conrad uses irony as a principle of narrative interruption that takes place not just at one point, nor at various narrative intervals, but all the time and throughout the narrative. It is for this reason that I focus on the notion of irony as “permanent *parabasis*,” a perpetual interruption of narrative discourse, and try to lay out what is distinctive about this particular way of narrative structuring. For, I shall not only argue that in using irony—of which one critic wittily said that in Marlow’s narration it seems to be “as unsparing as voracious as Kurtz’s open mouth” (Graham, 215)—Conrad has given voice to his own duality placing a special emphasis on its skeptical half. I shall also be discussing how Conrad’s ironic method led to dozens of quite significant formal breakthroughs, such as skeptical meditation, failed epiphany, unfulfilled *anagnorisis*, and negative modifiers, to mention only a few, which all together deeply inform the narrative method of *Heart of Darkness*. All these innovative narrative strategies ultimately ushered in the genre of skeptical narrative that is both a hallmark of literary modernism and its primary philosophical and narrative invention. In order to show what makes *Heart of Darkness* a founding statement of modernist

⁵ Some of these dualities and antinomies are crisply laid out in Eagleton (2005), see pp. 232-233.

narrative skepticism, I begin by sketching the contours of critical reception of Conrad as a skeptic and briefly analyze the skeptical underpinnings of turn of the century fiction. I then discuss what makes *Heart of Darkness* a skeptical meditation. The central part of my analysis is focused on the relationship between irony and skepticism. Finally, I extend the discussion of the relationship between irony and skepticism in *Heart of Darkness* by showing that Conrad's narrative is doubly configured: as a story of an unfulfilled epiphany and a story of unrequited love. In the end, I take up the problem of negative adjectives and try to defend Conrad against the charge of obscurity.

* * *

The skepticism of *Heart of Darkness* in particular—and that of Conrad in general—has not passed unnoticed in the critical reception of Conrad. Cedric Watts, one of the most notable Conrad scholars, extensively argued how any elementary list of the salient features of Conrad's work would have to include “an extreme pyrrhonism, a scepticism so thorough as to cast sceptical doubt even on the value of scepticism” (Watts, *Preface*, 42). Robert S. Baker held that the uniqueness of *Heart of Darkness* consists of its being “wedded to a Pyrrhonist epistemology” (118). Similarly, Albert Guerard in his groundbreaking book-length survey *Conrad the Novelist*, detected in Conrad's poetics “a declared fear of the corrosive and faith-destroying intellect—doubled by a profound and ironic skepticism” (57). Ian Watt, whose reading of Conrad is still unsurpassed in many respects, takes notice of a certain skeptical kinship between Conrad's Marlow and the protagonist of Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* and argues that “*Heart of Darkness* embodies more thoroughly than any previous fiction the posture of uncertainty and doubt” (174). He goes on to say that Marlow's principal narrative function is “to represent how much a man cannot know” (174). In the same vein, Tzvetan Todorov, in his well-known and widely influential reading of *Heart of Darkness* as an adventure story that gradually transfigures into a “gnoseological” tale, argues how “the entire text underscores how knowledge is impossible, how the heart of darkness is itself dark” leading forcefully to various skeptical conclusions (169). Even in Marxist criticism which has been,

as a rule, unyielding to Conrad's art, Conrad is treated as "a full blooded Continental sceptic" ridden by corrosive doubt, whose entire narrative endeavor can be seen as an attempt at responding to "the conflict between skeptical émigré and English conservative" (Eagleton, 235, 237). From Cedric Watts to Terry Eagleton there runs a single thread of describing Conrad's artistic eminence and singularity in terms of skepticism in its various philosophical valences and different narrative manifestations.⁶

Conrad himself did not hide his skeptical predilections either. In a well-known letter to Galsworthy, Conrad advised his friend to have "more skepticism at the very foundation of [his] work. Scepticism, the tonic of minds, the tonic of life, the agent of truth,—the way of art and salvation" (Jean-Aubry, 301). By describing skepticism as a tonic, Conrad showed a clear awareness that he had been born into an age of doubt in which skepticism seemed to pull into two largely opposite directions. On the one hand, skepticism functioned as the sole invigorating, refreshing agent in a largely conservative, sterile, and somewhat backwater Victorian cultural setting. On the other, skepticism was to blame for the continuous contraction of societal "muscles," the perpetual anomie of cultural mores, and the dethroning of all values. This tension, which refers to a peculiar ambiguity of skepticism, strikes a keynote in the entire Conrad's opus.⁷

⁶ The list, though representative, is far away from being complete. For instance, Peter Brooks qualifies *Heart of Darkness* as a "detective story gone modernist" (238)—one cannot help misreading "gone mad" mirroring one of its protagonists—whose structure has gone skeptical beyond the point of return due to the synergy of "inconclusive solutions" and "notable uncertainties" that strictly govern the narrative fabric (238, 39). Along the similar lines, Edward Said, whose long-lasting engagement with Conrad is as adversarial as it is affirming, states how all Conrad's heroes, most notably Kurtz, Jim, and Nostromo, seem to be "posited in a way as fundamentally unknowable" (70), a gesture in character-formation typically Conradian and unmistakably pointing to a sweeping narrative skepticism.

⁷ In a letter to Garnett, Conrad resonates more recognizably with a sort of Nietzschean skepticism:

I am like a man who has lost his gods. My efforts seem unrelated to anything in heaven and everything under heaven is impalpable to the touch like shapes of mist. Do you see how easy writing must be under such conditions? Do you see?

Even writing to a friend—to a person one has heard, touched, drank with, quarreled with—does not give me a sense of reality. All is illusion—the words written, the mind at which they are aimed, the truth they are intended to express, the hands that will hold the paper, the eyes that will glance at the lines. Every image floats vaguely in a sea of doubt—and the doubt itself is lost in an unexplored universe of incertitudes. (Garnett, 152-3)

Such skeptical musings would have led to some of the most pregnant skeptical pronouncements in the entire modernist literature. Marlow, for instance, in a gesture of shoulder-shrugging bitterly says: “We live in the flicker” (9).⁸ And the power of the first person pronoun by means of which Marlow generalizes his skeptical claim illustrates quite aptly that skepticism is never moderate, that it is always a hyperbolic gesture, jumping from a particular, singular doubt such as—“How do I know whether I am not dreaming at the moment?” or “How do I know whether I do not live in the flicker?”—onto a general, metaphysical claim—“How do I know that not all life is a dream”—or, as Marlow phrases the problem, do not we all live the very flickering of the light of reason through and thorough. It is precisely this flickering of the light of reason that made Conrad famous, not just for his skeptical doctrine, yet for his “nightscapes”—for his chiaroscuro portrayals of darkness, be it spatial or mental.⁹

If support for Conrad’s skeptical leanings can be documented both in Conrad’s criticism as well as in his explicit poetics, it can also, quite transparently, be found in the *Zeitgeist* of the Victorian age in which skepticism spread across the intelligentsia as rapidly and devastatingly as one could only imagine. Naturally, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to rehearse in detail all the factors that contributed decisively to the profound skeptical crisis that informed the Anglo-American and European literatures from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. It suffices to say that Conrad’s cultural environment had been thoroughly infused with the onset of unsparing skepticism announced by Nietzsche’s philosophical

Indeed, images drifting in a sea of doubt may be the most accurate and most vibrant description of Conrad’s narrative method ever articulated, quite unsurprisingly by the author himself. In several letters to Cunningham Graham, Conrad continued to show off his skeptical allegiances this time with regard to the capacity of language to convey meaning adequately:

Life knows us not and we do not know life—we don’t even know our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore; thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced die” (in Watt, 65).

⁸ All quotations are from the Norton Critical Edition series, Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough. New York: W. W. Norton, 1988.

⁹ On Conrad’s impressionism and his chiaroscuro coloring see Ian Watt (1979), whose survey is still both foundational and unsurpassed as far as Conrad’s impressionism is at stake. For a more up-to-date approach, see Peters (2001).

thought and exemplified by his doctrine of the reevaluation of all values; by the popularization of Lord Kelvin's second Law of Thermodynamics which tacitly prefigured all the images of "flickering" light in Conrad and elsewhere; by the theories of degeneration and atavism which formed the notion of a "highly-gifted degenerate" (Nordau) that may have influenced Conrad's invention of Kurtz; and, unavoidably, by Darwin's epochal "decentring" of man.¹⁰

All these contextual references lead us to the crucial question: If there is enough incontestable evidence of Conrad's skepticism first in literary criticism, then in the author's categorical pronouncements, and, ultimately, in the very *Stimmung* of the *fin de siècle* epoch, in which way, then, *Heart of Darkness* itself contributes to such a sort of synergy? How does the narrative structure act out the skeptical concerns? How does the very telling of a story become a performance of the problem we are told of? A conjecture is that rather than simply parading skeptical wisecracks, the narrative makes an attempt at reworking the theme of skepticism by means of rhetoric and narration. As Mark A. Wollaeger has argued in his thought-provoking study on Conrad's "fictions of skepticism," what distinguishes Conrad from other renowned early modernist writers is that he never forwards a philosophical thesis in an

¹⁰ On the cultural underpinnings of the *fin de siècle* period in relation to Conrad and *Heart of Darkness*, see particularly Watt (1979) and Watts (1993). Nowhere is such a process more conspicuous, though, than in aesthetic criticism of Walter Pater. Conrad's Marlow may be an extension, and a certain perfecting of Walter Pater's Marius, but it is the notorious "Conclusion" to his magnum opus *Renaissance* that truly unleashed skeptical discourse. For example, while it is widely known that Conrad had been familiar with Pater's work and was deeply influenced by his thought, it is less known that Pater's *Conclusion* cherishes the whole repertoire of typically Conradian adjectives, those which largely animate the skeptical rhetoric of *Heart of Darkness*. Namely, it is Pater who has first put to use the adjective "flickering" as a leitmotif of his skeptical reveries describing impressions as "unstable, flickering, inconsistent" (59). And further, it is Pater who first formulated for the Victorian epoch the so-called other-mind skepticism portraying experience as a "swarm of impressions...ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality," and, analogously, each human mind as a "solitary prisoner" keeping in itself "its own dream of the world" (60). Similarly, in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow muses how is one to comprehend the Manager of the Central Station since he ends each one of his utterances with "a seal applied on the words to make the meaning of the commonest phrase appear absolutely inscrutable" (24). The Manager, notoriously, "seals" the speeches with "that smile of his as though it had been a door opening into a darkness" (25). Curiously, it is the very same metaphor of sealing the speech that Virginia Woolf would have put into Lily Briscoe's mouth to express like skeptical concerns: "How then," Lily asks herself at one of the most dramatic moments in *To the Lighthouse*, "did one know one thing or another thing about people sealed as they were" (78), sitting as closely as she could get to Mrs. Ramsay and brooding over the question how to plunge into Mrs. Ramsay's stream of thoughts. Thus, a route from Walter Pater to Joseph Conrad to Virginia Woolf sketches out the full trajectory of a modernist skepticism and it catches, by means of one single metaphor, the spirit of the time both accurately and concretely. On the portrait of skepticism in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and its modernist parallels and predecessors, see Nussbaum (1995).

overt manner by means of either authorial or “characterial” voices. In Conrad, “explicit discourse *on* skepticism is subsumed by an encompassing discourse *of* skepticism” (xvii) and it is this subsuming that made *Heart of Darkness* an archetypal skeptical narrative and a forerunner of modernism.

Heart of Darkness as a Skeptical Meditation

Heart of Darkness is, beyond any doubt, one of the most “interpreted” texts in the entire history of Anglo-American literature. Much has been said of its skepticism as well. However, that it is a modern form of skeptical meditation is a thesis hardly ever brought forward.¹¹ And it is this thesis precisely that deserves attention. As it is widely acknowledged, the genre of meditation plays a vital role in the historical development of philosophical skepticism: From Augustine’s *Confessions* to Montaigne’s *Essays* to Descartes’ *Meditations* to Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, to mention only a few most notable examples deeply infused by argumentative style, idiom, imagery, and rhetoric of meditation.¹² Famously, Rene Descartes made the meditations of a solitary mind the ground for both knowledge and certainty. His procedure required that the meditator stays away from the external world, from all the things spatial and corporeal by way of doubting their existence, so that he could arrive at the certainty of the self. Furthermore, the origin of modern philosophical meditation is tightly related to the process of secularization and it is commonly seen as a form of “secularized confession,” while its main purpose, as it has been extensively argued, is to provide a method of self-knowledge (Cavell, *Must*, 70). By all these features, it squarely fits in the tradition of “spiritual exercises” (Hadot), or, in what Foucault has called “the care for the self,” since it represents a rumination on a way of life rather than a theory (de Vries,

¹¹ To the best of my knowledge, the thesis is forwarded only once by Cedric Watts who argues that Conrad’s novella is “a mixture of oblique autobiography, traveller’s yarn, adventure story, psychological odyssey, political satire, symbolic prose poem, black comedy, spiritual melodrama, and *sceptical meditation*” (Watts, *Heart*, 19, my emphasis). While Watts spends some time to unravel the significance of Conrad’s skepticism, the remarkable observation that *Heart of Darkness* is, generically speaking at least, a skeptical meditation has never been properly explored. The observation is simply thrown out and forgotten among the debris of generic characteristics.

¹² See, Cavell (1979) and de Vries (2006).

80).¹³ Here emerges a deep cleavage in the very understanding of the nature of skepticism. In philosophical discourse, which is largely bogged down in various epistemological concerns, skepticism is usually considered as a purely formal, intellectual matter, and accordingly, a philosophical skeptic ends up as nothing more than the straw man of epistemology textbooks. Modernist skeptical narrative, of which *Heart of Darkness* is a paradigmatic instance, performs a hard narrative labor against such a philosophical account of skepticism. By taking from meditation what is best in its treatment of skepticism, that it is a way of life rather than a doctrine, modernist narrative renders an account of skepticism which thus becomes less epistemological, making the object of doubt uncomfortably “embodied” and uncannily animate, which is precisely what *Heart of Darkness* masterfully achieves by means of a detailed portrayal of Marlow’s growing skepticism.

At first sight, the premise that *Heart of Darkness* can be generically related to skeptical meditation seems to be rather far-fetched. Yet, it can all be easily illustrated. First, with regard to Marlow as a skeptical “meditator.” As it has been widely recognized, the concoction of Marlow as a “characterized” narrator is “Conrad’s most salient contribution to the ambitious work of modernist subjectivity” (Levenson, *Conrad in Context*, 183). Naturally, Conrad’s Marlow owes much to and is a realization of Henry James’s device of the central intelligence—a consciousness registering its inner pulsations as well as the outer throbbing as punctually and rigorously as radar. Yet, unlike James’s “characterized” narrators, who typically order meanings by some logical, causal, chronological, or psychosomatic regularity and try to carefully distill whatever happens to them through the psychological filter, Marlow challenges the very privilege of the first person narration. It is perhaps in this context that James’ objection to Marlow’s overtly “mixing himself up with the narrative” can be best understood (in Watt, 209). As Michael Levenson rightly observes, Marlow “acknowledges the skeptical implications of the subjective turn [in modernist fiction] more than his Jamesian counterparts do” (Levenson, *Modernism*, 92) and thus breaks

¹³ The idea that skepticism is a way of life rather than a doctrine goes back to antiquity and has a long and fertile tradition. See, Williams (1988).

loose with the old, petrified system of narrative certainty. As a result, the narrative creates a space for a radical self-interrogation of the central “meditative” consciousness. Very much like the Cartesian narrative “I” in the *Meditations*, up to the point of the allegedly indubitable self-recognition, Marlow acts out as a hesitating, “distracted” meditator sucked into a whirlpool of gnawing doubts. Nowhere is such a process as visible as in those passages in which the “I” of Marlow hauntingly and almost compulsively keeps popping into view:

It looked at you with a vengeful aspect. *I* got used to it afterwards. *I* did not see it anymore. *I* had no time. *I* had to keep guessing at the channel; *I* had to discern, mostly by inspiration the side of hidden banks; *I* watched for sunken stones. *I* was learning to clap my teeth smartly before my heart flew out when *I* shaved by a fluke some infernal sly old snag that would have ripped the life out of the thin-pot steamboat and drowned all the pilgrims; *I* had to keep a look-out for the signs of dead wood we could cut up in the night for next day’s steaming. (36, my emphasis)

And it is here, in the very molding of Marlow as a relentless meditator, that the subtle work of Conrad’s irony becomes first visible. The irony is, of course, that the very preponderance of the “I,” quite reminiscent of and pertinent to the genre of Cartesian meditation¹⁴, is entertained against the “it” of darkness which is never properly explained by the narrator, never attributed a characteristic, except for a single feature: that “it” is precisely what swallows him in the course of his journey up the river. Indeed, as

¹⁴ Descartes is considered to be *the* first modern philosopher. The main stylistic reason that is usually brought forward to account for Descartes’s modernity is the fact that he philosophizes from the first-person point of view. As Gareth Matthews notes, the interaction between the cogito and modernity is pulling in both directions: as much as there is “the stamp of modernity on the cogito,” there is also “the stamp of the cogito on modernity” (11). Here is the beginning of the First Meditation in English translation:

Some years ago now *I* observed the multitude of errors that *I* had accepted as true in my earliest years, and the dubiousness of the whole superstructure *I* had since then reared on them; and the consequent need of making a clean sweep for once in my life, and beginning again from the very foundations, if *I* would establish some secure and lasting result in science. But the task appeared enormous, and *I* put it off till *I* should reach a mature age that no increased aptitude for learning anything was likely to follow. Thus *I* delayed so long that now it would be blameworthy to spend in deliberation what time *I* have left for action. Today is my chance; *I* have banished all care from my mind, *I* have secured myself peace, *I* have retired by myself; at length *I* shall be at leisure to make a clean sweep, in all seriousness and with full freedom, of all my opinions (61, my emphasis)

The preponderance of the “I” is more than obvious and the effect is a bit ironic as if Descartes is searching for something (the cogito) he has already found. Of course, in the Latin original the first-person pronoun is not explicitly stated as it is in the English translation, nonetheless it is strongly implied.

much as one “lost [one’s] way on that river” (35) and is gradually “cut off from the comprehension” of the surroundings (37), the meditative, narrating “I” is irretrievably lost into a skeptical frenzy.¹⁵

There is one more narrative contrivance that makes a skeptical meditation in *Heart of Darkness* while making a doubting meditator of the protagonist Marlow: the frame-narrative. The convention of a tale-within-a-tale had been used by many a writer Conrad personally admired, most notably by Turgenev, Kipling, and Wells. Yet, *Heart of Darkness* is not just the best-known example of Conrad’s employment of this technique, but the best-known example of “framed” narration in the entire textual corpus of Victorian literature. Truly, Marlow’s speech is framed by the anonymous narrator who then slowly merges into the audience to intervene only briefly and negligibly, yet whose presence is both strongly implied and deeply felt throughout the story. What is more important, Marlow addresses the audience of his *likes*, of those with whom he shares “the bond of the sea” even though he is the only one who “still followed the sea” (9). Due to all these peculiarities, the framing device in *Heart of Darkness* received much critical attention. It has been argued that it resuscitates “the old friendly commerce of oral storyteller and the listening group” (Watt, 213), the very commerce whose first symptom of disappearance Benjamin diagnosed, paradoxically, in the rise of the novel. Unlike the storyteller who turns the experience “known” to him into the experience of those listening to his tale, the paradigm of the novel is a solitary individual who is neither able to express himself poignantly nor is he entitled to give any counsels (Benjamin, 87). Such goes the story, according to Benjamin. If storytelling preserves, animates, and hands down the collective wisdom, it may be true that the function of “framed” narration in

¹⁵ There is indeed an illuminating analogy between Marlow’s succumbing to “a sickly atmosphere of tepid skepticism” and a sea of doubt, on the one hand, and Descartes, on the other, who, at the very beginning of the Second Meditation portrays skepticism as a profoundly uncanny experience and describes how he “had suddenly fallen into a deep sea, and could neither plant [his] foot on the bottom nor swim up to the top” (66). Strikingly, Descartes uses a maritime metaphor, just as Marlow frequently does, to give an account of his encounter with the skeptical Leviathan. And, unlike the ancient meditators of the Pyrrhonist bent of mind who believed that skepticism would ultimately lead to *ataraxia* and *freedom from disturbance*, both the Cartesian narrative “I” and the meditator Marlow render skepticism as a deeply unsettling and discomposing experience. As it has been extensively argued, the shift from the original Pyrrhonist approach had an enormous impact on the modern thinking and representation of skepticism. On this issue see, Paganini (2008). For a more critical approach to the modern experience of skepticism and a contrast between the cheerful acceptance of Montaigne vis-à-vis the anxiety of Descartes see, Toulmin (1992).

Heart of Darkness is to restore the storyteller to the culture based rather on a fleeting information than on an immutable, everlasting wisdom. Indeed, the motif of wisdom lurks slyly in the narrative but is always undercut by some sort of skeptical disclaimer. First, it appears when in “a sickly atmosphere of tepid skepticism,” undergoing a clinical death, Marlow finds out that unlike Kurtz he had nothing to say at that point, aligning thus Kurtz’s pronouncement “horror” with “the form of ultimate wisdom” quite abruptly and inexplicably (69). Second, when he finishes his tale “in the pose of a meditating Buddha” (76), yet, blatantly, without a lotus flower—a symbol of wisdom.¹⁶

While such a reading of the function of a tale-within-a-tale in *Heart of Darkness* seems to be highly plausible, one cannot help notice that “framed” narration, first and foremost, furnishes the speaker with an opportunity to brood over his thoughts under the guise of addressing others. It is not by accident that, as a narrator, Marlow is frequently described as “brooding;” indeed, he is reflective, meditative, and incredulous. And moreover, the adjective appears dozens of times as a means of personification, a well-suited narrative vehicle at the meditator’s disposal to project his own mood onto the landscape, including and up to some of the most notorious examples of Conrad’s alleged obscurity such as: “It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention” (36). In addition to this, in the very opening scene, Marlow is interpolated as sitting “cross-legged,” with an “ascetic aspect,” resembling a meditative posture (7). And the frame narrator comments how the entire company “felt meditative and fit for nothing” (7), emphasizing the meditative aspect of a *mise en scène* even further. In this way, the frame narrative opens a large corridor for Marlow’s meditative proceedings; it gives him real, yet virtual, listeners and an actual *chronotope*, reminiscent of Descartes’, who, seated by the fire, wearing a dressing gown and holding firmly a sheet of paper in his hands, unleashes his sweeping doubts on the very existence of the hands and the body attired in the robe. The only difference is that in the case of Marlow,

¹⁶ The frame device has been also interpreted as linked to “the social customs of an age of gentlemen’s clubs” (Watts, *Heart*, 20), and consequently, its use largely rationalized as a reflex of semi-formal gatherings with a sole purpose to provide an occasion for travelers to exchange their adventures and experiences.

the *chronotope* is less chamber-like: *Heart of Darkness* begins at sunset, outdoors, somewhere in the Thames estuary, with Marlow in the company of four acquaintances aboard the yawl Nellie awaiting the high tide. The same sense of brooding motionless, the same sense of entrapment, the same sense of an almost monastic devotion shines out of both meditations. Thus, “framed” narration makes its own principal structural contribution to the text: it puts Marlow in the position of a brooding subject, a relentless meditator, as much as it provides the factual setting for his thought. It successfully dramatizes all his uncertainties leading undeviatingly to the issues of subjectivism of perception and limitation of knowledge.

Skepticism and Irony

What makes *Heart of Darkness* unique as a skeptical meditation is the very rhetorical wrapping of its meditative discourse. If properly peeled off, it leaves the traces of irony everywhere. That may be the reason why not just Albert Guerard, but other Conrad scholars as well, labeled its skepticism as an “ironic skepticism.” But what makes skepticism *ironic*? Is irony intrinsically related to skepticism? Is it possible for a statement to be ironic without being skeptical and *vice versa*?¹⁷ And how does Conrad’s artistic genius merge skepticism with irony? Is there anything specifically novel about such a sort of merging, and what it bequests to the modernist literary tradition coming after Conrad? These are all the questions of central importance to the skepticism of *Heart of Darkness*.

¹⁷ Of course, it is possible for a statement to be ironic without being skeptical and contrariwise. However, irony shares with skepticism one fundamental feature or precondition: “a contrast between a reality and an appearance” (Muecke, 33). The modes of thinking customarily described as skeptical, in both ancient and modern philosophical traditions, exclusively rely upon the difficulty or impossibility of settling down how the world *really* is. This paradigm of thinking takes for granted the legitimacy of the view of the world *as it is*, that is, as it exists *really* or *objectively*. Indeed, it makes no sense to worry how the things *really* are if one discards such a kind of notion at the outset. Similarly, irony presupposes the distinction between *what is stated* and *what is really meant*; between *locution*, on the one hand, and *reality* or *implicature*, on the other. By *reality*, I mean what the ironist *takes as real*, not *what is really the case* in any objective sense of the word.

First of all, the novella is indeed replete with irony. Irony is its primary principle of structuring, its inviolable stylistic dominant. Even J. Hillis Miller could not help piling up expressions repeating the very same point that “the novella is ironic through and through;” that it is “a masterwork of irony;” that it is “steeped in irony” (Miller, *Should We Read*, 118), and so on. Truly, in *Heart of Darkness* one can find ironies on every scale, from micro- to macro-level, from words, even sounds, to the largest narrative structures. However, it is also true that, while acknowledging *Heart of Darkness* as an ironic text, critical focus has largely been placed on the overall narrative structure and character formation to the neglect of verbal ironies and subtle ironic nuances occupying the border between *opsis* and *melos*. In order to do justice to the text, I will start from the bottom to the top.

As soon as Marlow sets about recounting one of his notorious “inconclusive experiences” (11), the ironic undercutting of a “noble” virtue simultaneously takes place in relation to the first jungle victim the narrative informs us of in detail. The Danish captain Fresleven, “the gentlest, the quietest creature that ever walked on two legs,” is quite unexpectedly capable of “whack[ing] the old nigger mercilessly...asserting his self-respect” (12), where self-respect means nothing but the right of ownership of the greediest, usurping, colonial kind, not over ivory, but over “two black hens,” to make the whole case even more appalling. When “the gentlest creature,” while beating feverishly an African chief, finally got stopped and murdered by the chief’s son, no one really bothered to lay his remains to rest. “They were all there,” Marlow continues his story, with the grass germinating through the ribs, as if nothing had happened. “The supernatural being had not been touched after he fell,” Marlow comments sardonically. But the ironic vertigo does not stop there. Marlow pretends to be a punctual reporter who leaves no detail out of his reportage. “What became of hens,” as if it really matters, he is now asking? Nobody knows for sure. Yet, the reporter conjectures that “the cause of progress got them, anyhow” in the meantime (13). It is a typically Conradian ironic passage. Irony builds up slowly. Its domain is colonialism with its dubious “progressive” orientation. It bursts into the absurd and leaves none unstained. It is being interspersed by Marlow’s parenthetical “you know,” a gesture of addressing the audience whose function is only

“virtually” *phatic*. For, even though Marlow may have been truly interested in establishing a mood of sociability, intimacy, and understanding between himself and his interlocutors rather than communicating any tangible piece of information by retelling the Fresleven story, the genuine irony of the parenthesis “you know” is that his audience may indeed know as much as the Victorian public may prefer *not* to know what is the true nature of colonialism. Yet, irony works on one more semantic level. It is precisely Fresleven’s death that makes room for Marlow to jump into his place in the Company’s business in Africa. Thus the ironizer ends up ironizing himself.

That the ironizer is unwarily ironizing himself confirms the infinite and ubiquitous character of irony in *Heart of Darkness*. J. Hillis Miller is thus quite right when he double-links the work of irony in Conrad’s narrative with Friedrich Schlegel’s notion of irony as “permanent *parabasis*,” and with Kierkegaard’s definition of irony as “infinite absolute negativity” (*Should We Read*, 118). In rhetorical theory, *parabasis* is a well-known term that designates the interruption of a discourse by a shift in rhetorical register. Typical examples include the *buffo* in *commedia dell’arte* or the chorus in Greek tragedy stepping forward to address the audience, thus breaking up the illusion of fictionality. According to Schlegel, irony achieves a similar effect with the distinction that it can neither be located *within* nor subsumed *to* a particular narrative moment. It can, actually, stretch all over the narrative, because the narrative can be interrupted perpetually and at all points. That is why Schlegel defines irony as the permanent *parabasis*.

But the true question is how is this all-encompassing, overpowering, permanent irony related to skepticism? Paul de Man gives us a clue when he shows that behind *parabasis* as a somewhat superficial and merely technical “interruption of a discourse by a shift in the rhetorical register” (178) lies a profound issue: the essential unknowability of the “I” and the world as well as a certain double bind at the heart of language and thought. This line of thinking can certainly be traced back to Friedrich Schlegel and Søren Kierkegaard—first seeing in irony the principle of ultimate unintelligibility (*Unverständlichkeit*), second

famously stating that just as no genuine philosophy is imaginable without skepticism, no true human life is viable without irony.¹⁸ But it can be traced forward as well, to Simon Critchley's view of irony as a means of "the *sceptical* dissolution of the markers of certitude by which we attempt to understand the world and others" (34), to Bernhard Lypp's vision of irony as the "höchte, reinste *skepsis*" (in Critchley, 114) and Hayden White's re-conceptualization of irony as a "model of the linguistic protocol in which skepticism in thought and relativism in ethics are conventionally expressed" (37-8).¹⁹

In order for irony to be everywhere, to be permanent and incessantly interrupting, there must be a discourse and a counter-discourse at each moment, the illusion and the disruption of the illusion. This pattern, in which two discourses, one hyperbolic, dogmatic, and uncritical, the other unmasking and skeptical, compete between each other, one overstating the case, the other understating it, is a structural paradigm of *Heart of Darkness*.²⁰ It is the backbone of its skepticism as well. It gets particularly vivid in

¹⁸ In *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, Kierkegaard famously states: "As philosophers claim that no true philosophy is possible without doubt, so by the same token one may claim that no authentic human life is possible without irony" (338). In Kierkegaard's view, the coupling of irony and skepticism is both congenial and necessary and, as may be expected, it goes back to Socrates who in *The Apology* famously disavows knowledge and professes ignorance, while, at the same time, he does not refrain from accepting a number of ethical principles and claims to know that they are true. *Höchte, reinste* may be translated as the *highest* and *purest*.

¹⁹ To all these views that flesh out the marriage between irony and skepticism I would like to add two more. Both are vivid and typically "modernist." First, in *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot emphasizes the self-cancelling aspect of skepticism and links it directly to irony. He writes: "Skepticism, a noun that has crossed its etymology and all etymology, is not indubitable doubt; it is not simply nihilist negation: rather irony. Skepticism in relation with the refutation of skepticism. We refute it, if only by living, but death does not confirm it" (76). A similar view has been expressed by another outstanding modernist writer, Thomas Mann. In *The Magic Mountain*, Settembrini, Hans Castorp's tutor, claims that irony must be used "as an honest device... which no healthy mind can doubt [even] for a moment," to which Castorp skeptically responds, "'if not healthy mind can for a moment doubt its purpose' what kind of irony is that" (217, 218). Crudely put, Hans Castorp is right. To draw upon irony means to be insecure and uncertain; it means to find oneself in the grip of skepticism.

²⁰ This narrative pattern has been noticed by many a reader of Conrad. Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, for instance, argues that the narrative hinges on "the tension between a metaphysical discourse and a hostile, skeptical, anti-metaphysical discourse" (95); Michael Levenson sees the novella as a battlefield between the discourses of ethics and of a free, unrestrained will with the narrative effort mostly spent "to sustain an ethics in the face of skepticism" (*Conrad in Context*, 185); Peter Brooks notices that the narrative dynamics are governed by "Marlow's affirmations and their curious self-cancelations" (247); Edward Said recognizes that the narrative "enables the cohabitation of total opposites" (72), while Cedric Watts emphasizes that the novella brings up a series of paradoxes and that each nucleus in the narrative structure has a double meaning—for instance, London is associated both with the cradle of civilization and with the "brooding gloom" of a benighted city (*Heart*, 21); Patrick Brantlinger sees *Heart of Darkness* as a "schizophrenic" narrative in which an anti-imperialist message gets undercut, quite paradoxically, by a racist discourse (383); and, ultimately, Terry Eagleton criticizes Conrad for generating high-strung images "only to be deflated" in return (245).

numerous Conrad's characterizations that diligently and infallibly scan every overstatement in the discourse and quickly suffocate its potency by unmasking its vacancy. "So much of Conrad's art," Laurence Davis cleverly observes in his remarkable essay on Conrad's ironic skill, "turns on understatement, even silence. Every grandiloquence is quickly undercut" (226). Davis is quite right to discern that the game of understating what has previously been overstated is masterfully executed throughout the narrative. Here is how Marlow characterizes each one of the story's heroes as they are being introduced one by one into the narrative order. First, he says of his aunt that she is such "a dear and enthusiastic soul" (12); then describes Fresleven as "the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs;" proceeding with the head of the company's offices in the "sepulchral city," most likely Brussels, who is himself a "great man" (13); similarly, the Company's chief accountant is a "miracle" and his neaten "starched collars and got-up shirt fronts" Marlow highly "respected" (21); the General Manager of the Central Station who, even though he "inspired uneasiness," is also "great" (24, 25); a brickmaker is "a first-class agent" entrusted with a noble cause of making bricks (31); up to Kurtz who is individuated not just by Marlow, but by other characters as well, by a number of idolatrous, numinous hyperboles such as "a very remarkable person" (22), "an exceptional man" (25), "a prodigy...an emissary of pity, and science, and progress" (28), a "universal genius" (30); a man "equipped with moral ideas" (33); a man who "enlarge[s]" his disciples' minds (63); a remarkable man who "had something to say" and "said it" (69). Including even Marlow, whom his dear aunt compares to an "apostle" and "an emissary of light" (15). The characterization in *Heart of Darkness* is quite a monotonous and predictable game: whoever enters the arena gets the winning ticket. But all this foreseeable and schematic business, as soon as it is entertained, as soon as it is uttered, is immediately undermined by a skeptical discourse whose function is as old as rhetoric itself and recognized in its ancient form as "faint praise." Marlow's aunt may be indeed "dear and enthusiastic," yet without the blink of an eye she passes around racial comments about "weaning those ignorant millions out of their horrid ways" (16); Fresleven is, as we have seen, not "gentle" at all; the Company's chief accountant is one of those Kafkaesque nameless bureaucrats who

keeps his collar stiff and minds his business yet arrogantly and inhumanly complains how the groans of a sick, dying man “distract [his] attention” (22); the General Manager is the embodiment of a colonial spirit, corrupt, roughshod, and duplicitous, and certainly everything but “great;” the output and genuineness of a brickmaker is best seen in the fact that “there wasn’t a fragment of a brick anywhere in the station, and he had been there more than a year” (27); of Kurtz, in spite of being “loyal to the nightmare of [his] choice” (64), Marlow also says that he is an avatar of “a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of rapacious and pitiless folly” (20), that “he was hollow to the core” (38), and that he is an “atrocious phantom” and a “pitiful Jupiter” whose atrocities are left largely unspoken but strongly implied in the text (59).

Truly, all the significance of Conrad’s narrative, the strength of the novella and its enduring position as a modernist masterpiece, lies first in enacting and then perfecting of a skeptical linguistic protocol based on interruption. In addition to Marlow’s numerous ironic portrayals of other protagonists, a similar narrative procedure, though less obvious and much more sophisticated, brings about quite extraordinary ironic effects. At the very outset of the novel, for instance, the frame narrator spots the Director of Companies’ maritime predilections as those whose “work was not *out* there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, *within* a brooding gloom” (7, my emphasis). The conjunction of the two antonymous prepositions goes on in the description of London which dispatches “messengers of the might *within* the land, bearers of a spark *from* the sacred land.” As it is widely known, in this opening passage, the narrator glorifies the British maritime tradition and achievements which he pictures as a movement “*from* Deptford, *from* Greenwich, *from* Erith” and “*into* the mystery of an unknown earth” (8).

As Michael Levenson has already pointed out in his illuminative analysis of the frame narrative in *Heart of Darkness*, as soon as Marlow breaks into the story “he inverts this stable and heroic relation of ‘from’ and ‘to’” (*Fate of Individuality*, 11). Marlow begins his meditation on the fate of a Roman soldier in the midst of wilderness of Britain with a thought-experiment of a sort, inviting his listeners to:

“Imagine him [the soldier] *here*—the very end of the world” (9, my emphasis), and, as if by a trick of magic, by a trick of rhetorical interruption that unsets the whole previous *from-within* discourse, London turns out to be the very end of the world instead of its mighty center. “To speak of ‘here’ as the ‘end of the world’,” Levenson goes on to say aptly, “is to unsettle the categories of perceptual experience, a task at which Marlow excels” (9-10). Levenson is, by all means, justified in pointing to the skill at which Marlow as a narrator excels, and he is certainly right when he links the rhetoric of a frame narrative to the interplay of images of penetration and invasion vis-à-vis those of liminality and extension (7). In my reading, though, the clash between the images of invasion and extension is an instance of *parabasis* and it is possible only because the very meaning of prepositions involved is previously unsettled and ironized. When Marlow, for instance, intrudes into the narrative order with a somewhat daydreaming, indifferent assertion—“And *this* also,” he suddenly says, “has been one of the dark places of the Earth” (9, my emphasis)—he places in opposition a deictic “this” with the intangible, remote, beyond-the-reach “dark places.” It is a clear example of *parabasis* which both undermines and interrupts the very meaning of prepositional phrases involved. Indeed, it reminds me of the rhetorical dexterity of Proust’s famous heroine Albertine, that Paul de Man brilliantly invokes to explain the principle of irony’s functioning as permanent, persistent, unfading, happening-all-the-time *parabasis*, who, as Marcel bitterly observes in *The Captive*, begins every sentence from the first-person point of view as if she talks about herself, about what has happened to her, and then, by some undecipherable linguistic trick, that is, by *anacoluthon*, switches to the third-person point of view as if what she had been talking about did not refer to her but to someone else (de Man, 178). Like Albertine, Marlow pleads his listeners to form a mental picture of a Roman soldier who is “here,” and, as soon as they form the picture and get seduced by his tale, he, to their dismay, asserts abysmally that “here” is actually the end of the world—that *here* is *out there*.

What prepositions and prepositional phrases undergo throughout the narrative, pronouns undergo as well. In one of the most filmic and critical scenes in the novella, in his attempt to stay “loyal to the nightmare of [his] choice,” Marlow sets out to find the runaway Kurtz in order to bring him back onboard.

As soon as he notices a trail in the grass, Marlow, with some sort of “exultation,” says to himself: “*He* can’t walk—*he* is crawling on all four—I’ve got him” (64, my emphasis). From this moment on, a long series of “destabilized” pronouns, with no clearly identifiable referents, is being unleashed up to the point in which “I” turns out to mean “he” and vice versa. For instance, Marlow blends his throwbacks at Kurtz such as “*I* fancy *I* had some vague notion of falling upon *him* and giving *him* a drubbing” (64), or “*I* had to beat the Shadow [out of him]” (65), with Kurtz’s feverish programmatic pronouncements: “*I* had immense plans,” and, “*I* was on the threshold of great things” (65), but this “I” now has a double connotation signifying the encounter between the two characters rather than a single point of reference. Such ironic undercutting of the first-person pronoun can be found all over the narrative and it is one of the main formal reasons why Kurtz has been considered to be no more than Marlow’s doppelganger in some very influential readings of the novella.²¹

If the very meaning of such fixed items of language, as prepositions and pronouns supposedly are, is easily subverted, what are we to expect then from the rest of the narrative? What are we to look for from larger narrative structures and rhetorical strategies comprising the main body of the text? One of the discourses that permeates the narrative through and through is the discourse of “solidarity.” Indeed, Marlow embarks on a journey with a spiritual proviso of a sort that the whole business of colonialism “mostly means the taking it [the earth] away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves,” and that it “is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (10). This litotes “not a pretty thing” may be one of the most controversial spots in the whole story, leading the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe to adamantly discard Conrad’s irony as biased and to argue that “Joseph

²¹ For a *doppelganger* motif in *Heart of Darkness*, see Watts’ *Deceptive Text*, pp. 82-84, and Erdinast-Vulcan’s *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*, especially, pp. 101-104. Michael Levenson goes as far as to argue that one of the most significant narrative consequences of blending the images of penetration and invasion with those of extension and evasion in *Heart of Darkness* is that the narrative, by applying such an ironic procedure, compellingly shows how “the only way to represent the individual mind is to represent two individual minds” (*Fate of Individuality*, 13). As a result, it both requires and posits two protagonists: One who speaks from the position of liminality, “from beyond the threshold,” the other, from the position of centrality, as if “within the core” (13). Interestingly, that Kurtz may be nothing more than Marlow’s psychic projection was perfectly intuited by Orson Welles, who in a never-attempted film adaptation of *Heart of Darkness* intended to play both characters by himself (DeBona, 17).

Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist” (8). Achebe’s reading of the dispossession of language from the natives, forced to express themselves by means of drumbeats, grunts, and noises, has become a landmark in Conrad studies. “Not a pretty thing” is certainly a euphemism designed to conceal or disguise the fact that what was going on in the state of Congo was rather a bloody oppression and brutal looting. Yet, it is this critical place in which Marlow utters a sort of synecdoche (noses for people) and litotes (not a pretty thing instead of murderous business) that shows Marlow’s dispossession of language as well. Both rhetorical figures trade on not saying as a way of saying and both reveal the “minimal” side of language. Moreover, the irony is subtly insinuated into the passage by means of juxtaposing Marlow’s dispossession of language with his most dogmatic and least skeptical statements. Bakhtin famously argued that “the speaking person in the novel is always, to one degree or another, an *ideologue*, and his words are always *ideologemes*” (*Discourse*, 333), and this is precisely the point in the narrative at which Marlow, in spite of his synecdochic dispossession, let some of his long cherished ideals loose and conducts himself as an undisguised ideologue. Accordingly, he preaches that while colonialism is not a pretty thing, it can still be redeemed and that “What redeems it is the idea only” (10). However, what has been said is immediately undercut by Marlow’s likening the redeeming idea to something “you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to” (10). Ideas are not represented as symbols of critical thinking and products of the freedom of imagination, but as material entities, totems, that require absolute subordination, even self-sacrifice. In this superb skeptical inversion, ideas are equated to idols and described as idols, showing how “civilized” world is no better than “savage” Africa. Similarly, in the Company’s offices Marlow is looking at the map of the world, tinged with different colors, spotting “a vast amount of red—good to see at any time because one knows that some *real work* is done there” (13, my emphasis). Apparently, the idea that redeems colonialism is that of a certain Calvinist insistence on real work, which is in itself a colonial euphemism worthy of dismantling. Accordingly, Marlow sets out on a quest for Kurtz advocating “an unselfish belief in the idea,” efficiency, devotion, and moral strength: “What saves us is efficiency,” he says adamantly, “the devotion to efficiency” (10). Later in the story he opposes those who have a “solid pavement under [their] feet” and an “untrammelled feet,” “innate strength” and “capacity for

faithfulness” (49, 50), to those who are overwhelmed by doubt and indecision. Of course, Marlow may just be a vessel for some of Conrad’s personal anxieties, but, even if this is the case, the whole thing still does not beg the question. Marlow makes a plea for hard work, order, community, loyalty, fidelity, and finally restraint: “These little things,” he gives us a hint, “make the whole difference” (50). But do they really? Somehow, all this devotion, all this tumultuous verbosity that arises unexpectedly in the midst of expressive deficiency and dispossession, ends up just as Kurtz’s “power of eloquence” ends up: as “an exotic Immensity ruled by the August benevolence” (50), that is to say, as empty words. And what we have here is a clear example of the so-called dramatic or situational irony that casts a shadow over the entire narrative: Marlow’s evaluation of his situation, his wholehearted and unreserved dedication to fulfilling his task keeping the steamer on course, appears a tragicomic misjudgment. In fact, the greater is Marlow’s devotion to efficiency and hard work, the easier is the Company’s brutality and pillage. Moreover, Marlow ironically finds restraint and devotion he has been looking for all the time, in no one else but his cannibal-crew. Although they “had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple” (43), they were still doing their best to suppress the hunger and perform their naval job as properly as possible. Thus, starting from a position of Protestant belief in the redemptive power of labor and production, Marlow finds himself requiring restraint “from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield” (43). However, he promptly realizes that what he thought he had understood, shatters like mist:

But there was the fact facing me—the fact, dazzling, to be seen, like the foam on the depths of the sea, like a ripple on an unfathomable enigma, a mystery greater – when I thought of it – than the curious, inexplicable note of desperate grief in this savage clamor that had swept by us on the river bank behind the blind whiteness of the fog. (43)

The narrative once again subverts itself and the rhetoric of skepticism takes over. While Marlow’s belief in restraint may not literally be shaken, the question remains what is he to do with “the dazzling fact” that cannibals should be credited for restraint more than anyone else. Hence, the bottom line is that unlike Kurtz, who “could get himself to believe anything” (71), Marlow has trouble upholding even one single

set of beliefs, protecting even one tiny piece of certainty from turning into its ironical double, and consequently, he keeps plunging himself into the sea of doubt.

Friedrich Schlegel once pointed out that irony develops its own system of hierarchy. It begins with “coarse” irony, goes on with the so-called “delicate” or “extra-fine” irony, and culminates at the very end of the chain and after of a long series of transformations with “the irony of irony” which is then able to “swallow up all these big and little ironies and leaves no trace of them at all” (304). To Schlegel, irony is necessarily self-referential. It is a snake biting its own tail. Truly, once Marlow has ironized everything and done away with all hope, who can he return to, if not to his own self. The process of self-ironization is unavoidable. One cannot really disentangle oneself from the ironic mode: the only way to talk about irony is through being ironical. Moreover, the image of irony that keeps swallowing itself suggests that irony cannot really be mastered, that it escapes the intention of the ironist. The ironist rushes to say one thing while clearly meaning the other; yet, what boomerangs on him is precisely what he *literally* says, in spite of himself. As Friedrich Schlegel concludes, “the irony of irony” signifies the case of irony in which it simply “runs wild and can’t be controlled any longer” (304).²² Irony is thus an uncontrollable and unstoppable linguistic force.

This peculiar feature of irony, that the ironic meanings it disseminates might come out independently of our willing and our control, carries within itself a further connective tissue between irony and skepticism. One of the most enduring objections to skepticism is that it is necessarily self-cancelling, or, to rephrase the issue in Schlegel’s lexicon, that skepticism inevitably “swallows” itself. It stretches back at least to the Stoic Antipater (135 B. C. E.) who pointed out that whenever the skeptic asserts that nothing

²² In the essay “On Incomprehensibility” Schlegel argues that irony, in its most general form, borders on skepticism since human beings are perpetually titillating between the desires to know the world that surrounds them and to understand the language they use to communicate, on the one hand, and the realization that neither of these is possible, on the other. Even those who have a gift of creation, such as artists and poets, cannot really be in control of their fictional worlds, of their plots and characters, in spite of their desire for absolute control. Such are, for instance, the characters in the Old Attic Comedy, who, despite the authorial omnipresence step out of their fictional confines during the course of *parabasis* to address the audience directly and without mediation.

can be known, or that one should suspend judgment on all matters due to their ultimate unknowable nature, he simply contradicts himself. Namely, to know that knowledge is beyond our reach is to know at least one thing for sure. The skeptic of a Pyrrhonist bent of mind would try to offer a way out of such a sort of predicament. The skeptic, as the Pyrrhonist apology goes, actually never asserts anything and he doubts even his own doubt. Though many of his utterances will have a grammatical form of assertion, as Sextus Empiricus acknowledges in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, the skeptic never makes any firm claim. Even when the skeptic brings forward the thesis that nothing can be known it should not be taken literally but performatively. Such utterances are not denotative statements but ironic “avowals” or “confessions.” In one of the most picturesque passages in the entire history of ancient philosophy, Sextus effectively illustrates how skeptical judgments cancel themselves out:

Just as for example fire after consuming the fuel destroys also itself, and just as purgatives after driving the fluids out of the body expel themselves as well, so too the argument against proof after abolishing every proof, can cancel itself also. And again, just as it is not impossible for the man who has ascended to a high place by a ladder to overturn the ladder with his foot after the ascent, so also it is not unlikely that the skeptic, after he has arrived at the demonstration of his thesis...as it were by a step ladder, should then abolish this very argument. (*Mathematicians*, 8: 487.1)

It is not by accident that the ladder analogy, in the classical literature and especially in its postmodern Borgesian revival, has been supplanted by the figures of the polypus and Penelope who both symbolize the process of ironic undercutting: just as the polypus “swallows” its own tentacles only *after* they have ripened, Penelope spins her yarn over the day and then *unspins* it over night.

Is there any such thing as “the irony of irony” in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* then? And in case that the answer is affirmative, how does it reign supreme over all other ironies, how does it “swallow” them all? My answer is affirmative. The irony of irony in *Heart of Darkness* begins with the motif of spinning which has a long tradition in the history of skeptical narration and plays a crucial role in the novella as well. In one of Conrad’s most-quoted letters, he brings the motif up with an uncanny intuition:

There is a—let us say—a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold!—it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider—but it goes on knitting. You come and say: “This is all right; it’s only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this—for instance—celestial oil and the machine will embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold.” Will it? Alas, no! You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And most withering thought is that infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident—and it has happened...

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions—and nothing matters... (Jean-Aubry, 216)

The paragraph has been usually interpreted as an expression of Conrad’s ghastly vision of industrialism and his uncompromising skepticism regarding technological revolution.²³ However, the true question is how does one make embroidery with a knitting machine? Is such a thing possible at all? It is not, Conrad believes. The celestial oil, we are told, does not help. But what is Marlow to say? At the very opening of the novella, the frame narrator famously comments on Marlow’s “propensity to spin yarns:”

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted) and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (9)

This miniature vignette in narrative theory invites us to suppose that meaning may not lie inside, immersed as if in the shell of a nut as the heart is, but that it may reside in the outside, encircling the tale. In a form of perfect analogy, the frame narrator does his best to make us see that meaning is to a tale as haze is to a glow, and just as haze may shine as a splotch of light around the moon the meaning may show up as a nimbus surrounding the tale. Ultimately, it turns out that there is a celestial oil, a special lubricant, that can make an embroidery out of a knitting machine. By some narrative skill, Marlow drives the

²³ I cannot help notice how the passage cues itself into Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony*, with its masterfully detailed portrayal of the penal machine that literally knits people in and out while engraving into their flesh the commandment they have allegedly transgressed.

meaning out of a cracked nut into the open. But does he really? Is not such narrative promise in stark contrast with the very title of the novella which weaves the narrative back into the heart of darkness?

In one of the most unpredictable and disorienting moments in the story, the motif of knitting occupies a central place. On the way to receive his appointment from the Company whose offices are located in the “sepulchral” city, Marlow comes across “Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, *knitting* black wool” (13, my emphasis). The whole scene is not just “sepulchral” but, as T. S. Eliot would have put it later in *The Wasteland*, “unreal.” It represents a rupture of a narrative order, the outbreak of another level of reality, and the shift from what is supposed to be a quotidian job interview to the diabolic and the fantastic. For why has the Company chosen to enlist the knitters as doorkeepers “piloting” newcomers and job recruits into a waiting room? The vocabulary of initiation is particularly emphasized by Marlow who describes the offices as a “sanctuary;” senses that “there was something ominous in the atmosphere. . .as though [he] had been let into some conspiracy;” and expresses his captivation by the mighty river that even on the map looks “fascinating—deadly—like a snake” (14). One cannot help to notice the specific irony at work: Marlow keeps inspecting the map on the wall all the time, while being himself no longer in perceptual control of the space, as if he has lost his map. “Knowing,” as Philip Weinstein has observed in his superb study on the process of skeptical “unknowing” in modernist fiction, “assumes a viable purchase on the exterior world” by means of which the subject achieves not just outer but also inner orientation (5). Yet Marlow moves through the Company’s offices neither confidently nor acquisitively. He is everything but a knowing-subject.

And throughout all this, the stress on knitting persists. The two women are “knitting with downcast eyes” (13); “the slim one,” half asleep leads Marlow into the main office and when he finally walks out, after the interview with the secretarial head, he is welcomed by “the old one” with a protruding “wart on one cheek,” wearing on the tip of the nose “silver-rimmed spectacles” through which she throws at Marlow, as if by mere negligence, “the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom” (14) that she, as if by

rule, throws on other enlistees as well. The first time in the narrative wisdom is explicitly mentioned. But what kind of wisdom is that? “An eerie feeling came over me,” Marlow recollects his distress, and continues:

She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the Door of darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pal, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. *Ave!* Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant*. Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again...(14)

The passage in question prompted several critics to pursue a wholesale allegorical interpretation of the tale: Marlow journeys into the underworld, the knitters guard “the Door of darkness,” neophyte job applicants are “being piloted over” (14) to the Company’s offices as much as they are piloted over to their new job posts somewhere in the Congo, the heart of darkness is Limbo, and Kurtz something of a Lucifer.²⁴ While it is true that such a sort of allegorical reading does not seem to be unsupported by textual evidence, what rather interests me is that the passage represents the last word of the narrative with reference to the motif of knitting. Not just that the Company’s business knits Marlow in and out—as if he had finally succumbed to the knitting machine of Conrad’s letter—it is the knitting with solely one destination: the knitting into the unknown. Analogously, Marlow spins his yarn in the hope of driving the meaning out of a cracked nut into the open, but the narrative flies in the face of it. It demonstrates that every knitting is the knitting into the unknown and thus contradicts Marlow’s initial aspirations. Conrad’s text thus arrives at its ultimate irony, “the irony of irony,” and its narrative skepticism brings itself to completion.

²⁴ For the allegorical interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* see, Feder (1955), Evans (1956), and Steiner (1982).

Skepticism and Epiphany

If Marlow's irony of irony results in the ironic reversal of what Marlow's meditation is supposed to achieve, how is the narrative skeptical of its own skepticism? As I have already noted, Cedric Watts argues that the skepticism of *Heart of Darkness* is as "thorough as to cast sceptical doubt even on the value of skepticism." The question is, then, how the skeptic slides from the view that "nothing is certain" to the view that "nothing is certain, not even that," as the founder of the second Academy, the skeptical philosopher Arcesilaus, supposedly put it? With *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad brought to life a narrative form ideally suited to meet such a task. In it, skepticism and its consequences are revealed rhetorically through various narrative strategies and rhetorical devices, yet all these strategies and devices are entertained as if their purpose is to reach some sort of indubitable knowledge, some sort of certainty that cannot and must not be doubted. In literary modernism such a sort of certainty is known as epiphany, after Joyce.

The question is then why epiphany so often appears in conjunction with skepticism? Here lies one of the deepest paradoxes of modernist fiction. While the narrative invests all its energies to draw an irrefragable skeptical framework, the outcome seems to fall on the opposite side of the entrenched skeptical border. As a consequence, epiphany gets a controversial significance—from Kurtz' horror, via Marcel's *madeleine*, to Lily Briscoe's "painting," to mention only a few most notable examples—precisely because it is being entertained against a strong skeptical backdrop and in stark collision with the hard narrative labor that is previously being put to work to build a compelling skeptical *mise en scène*. The historical importance of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is that it inaugurates this paradox.

As it has been widely acknowledged, critical assessments of modernist epiphany are typically drawn back to James Joyce's never completed novel *Stephen Hero* (1944, published posthumously) in which the protagonist, not accidentally an artist, discloses his intention of collecting "a book of epiphanies." By

epiphany he means “a sudden spiritual manifestation” (216) occasioned by some trivial object—a clock in the brochure of Dublin’s furniture, in Stephen’s case. Following a Joycean precept, modernist epiphanies are, as a rule, triggered by marginal objects and sensations as flimsy and ephemeral as the taste of *madeleine*.²⁵ The second prominent feature of modernist epiphanies, especially in contradistinction to their realist equivalents, is that they develop slowly and take time. For instance, Lily Briscoe’s sudden insight that she should put a tree in the middle of the painting in order to make the whole composition harmonious and unobtrusive takes place only ten years *after*, when she returns to the Ramsay house with Mrs. Ramsay long passed away.

While none of these features appear evidently in *Heart of Darkness*, they seem to be evoked in a tacit way nonetheless. First, Kurtz’s “horror” is occasioned neither by a trifling object nor by a fleeting impression. Yet, the narrative is abundant with descriptive passages which all together suggest an elusive, atmospheric, dreamlike, hallucinogenic, or phantasmagoric aspect of experience. Accordingly, Kurtz’s double pronouncement is triggered by and aimed “at some image, at some vision” and the whole episode is colored in a typically impressionist, Conradian chiaroscuro vibrating between the flickering light of a candle and the “beastly, beastly” dark outside (69). Similarly, the narrative does not offer any indication that Kurtz’s vision had been developing over a long period of time; yet, one may say that it actually took the entire life of a human being, since Kurtz arrives at the illumination on his deathbed, facing the imminent death. The narrative timely, patiently, and unmistakably builds toward a climactic point, which is elaborately synthesized out of narrative minutiae, scattered reveries, and descriptive fragments. Early in the narrative, when Marlow begins recounting one of his “inconclusive experiences” (11), he hesitantly bestows upon it a burden of epiphanic decisiveness and transformation. “I don’t want to bother you too much with what had happened to me personally,” he sets out with a narrative *cliché* of contrition, and continues:

²⁵ On Joyce and epiphany see, Gillespie (2010).

...yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was somber enough too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No. Not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light. (11)

The rhetorical starkness of Marlow's prologue consists not just of its having a proleptic narrative function: it invokes the revelation to come. It begins with the narrator's announcing humbleness which is immediately undercut by his insistence upon the first-person pronoun: "*I* got out there," "*I* saw," "*I* went up the river," and so on. Kurtz is conjured up by means of euphemism "the poor chap," yet it will turn out he is anything but "poor." "The culminating point of experience" is spatially metaphorized as "the farthest point in navigation," which is not just a stock metaphor of a seaman, but a metaphor that gives the narrative its predominant orientation as a narrative of the quest. The epiphany is, further, announced as both social and mental: it "throws light" on everything about Marlow and "into [his] thoughts." Its nature is specified by the adjective "somber," and its power denigrated by the adjective "pitiful" as well as by means of cumulative negation: "not extraordinary," "not very clear," "No. Not very clear." Last but not least, the skeptical vocabulary of appearing and "seeming"—what *appears to* Marlow or *seems to be* does not have to be *really* the case—is particularly prominent. "It seemed to throw a kind of light" is repeated twice, first with the indefinite pronoun "somehow," which obscures the light of epiphany and makes the reader wonder *how?*; second, without it, which releases the burden from epiphany and makes it, supposedly, more translucent and clear.

A detailed rhetorical analysis of the first narrative prolepsis with regard to epiphany reveals that the revelation to come is, from the very outset, a murky, contradictory business. Later in the narrative, in a famous deathbed scene, the twice repeated Kurtz's "Horror!" is described by Marlow with more resoluteness, less ambiguity, and a mixture of adoration and envy. Marlow qualifies Kurtz's outcry as a "supreme moment of complete knowledge" (68); "the form of ultimate wisdom;" a summation and a

judgment; Marlow finds Kurtz “a remarkable man” who “had summed it up” and “had judged.” “After all,” he goes on to say, “this was an expression of some sort of belief; it had candor, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt...it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth” (69). Finally, Marlow sees in it “a moral victory” and confesses it to be the main reason for his having “remained loyal to Kurtz” (70).

Marlow’s rhetoric in the passage is the rhetoric of a certain deconstruction of skepticism rather than its affirmation. It is the rhetoric of a cataleptic impression *par excellence*. In her splendid essay “Love’s Knowledge,” Martha Nussbaum tracks the concept of modernist epiphany back to its ancient roots and the Stoical doctrine of the cataleptic impression. As she has shown, “cataleptic” is an adjectival form derived from the Greek verb *katalambanein* meaning to “apprehend,” to “grasp firmly,” and in its substantive form *katalepsis* may be rendered in English as “certainty.” What the Stoics meant by the concept of cataleptic impression was that some cognitions, by means of their own inherent structure, are certain and cannot be subject to doubt. “The cataleptic impression,” Nussbaum comments, “is said to have the power, just through its own felt quality, to drag us to assent, to convince us that things could not be otherwise” (26). It is an imprint, a stamp on the mind, entirely indubitable and unshakeable. She points out how the greatest Stoic philosopher Zeno compares a cataleptic impression to “a closed fist” emphasizing its absoluteness and firmness. The example that she brings up from a modernist corpus is Proust’s Marcel who, upon hearing the news that Albertine has gone, relinquishes all his previous, long-cherished skepticism and jealousy and knows with certainty that he loves her. Marcel teaches us that epiphanic impression is a form of “embodied,” passion-based form of knowledge that has nothing to do with intellect or formal reasoning. “For the Stoic the cataleptic impression is not a route to knowing; it *is* knowing. It doesn’t point beyond itself *to* knowledge; It goes to constitute knowledge,” Nussbaum concludes (267).²⁶

²⁶ It goes without saying that ancient skeptics did their best to dismantle the Stoical doctrine of cataleptic impression and were feverishly opposed to it. They employed an entire skeptical stock including optical illusions, madness, dreams, phantasmagoric or divinely induced states, and doubles, to argue that the allegedly indubitable character of

The question is, then, if Kurtz's "horror" is a verbal expression of a cataleptic expression reached "by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions" (70), an insight achieved through the sheer power of suffering and a summation of wisdom which Kurtz confers on Marlow, and Marlow, in return, confers on his listeners, does not that show that my analysis of the meta-skeptical aspect of *Heart of Darkness* disproves its initial premise? For it seems that the skeptic Marlow, who is overwhelmed by the echo that *nothing is known*, finds, at the very end of his pilgrimage, a dogmatic Marlow who is solaced by the discovery that *something is eventually certain*. Is this really the case? No, not at all. In fact, the genuine nature of Conrad's skepticism consists of its being skeptical first of all about itself. And that does not amount to showing that epiphany, as an important modernist narrative vehicle, is included at the end of the novella to undermine the discourses of skepticism and irony which the narrative formerly worked so hard to put up. What makes *Heart of Darkness* astounding and far-reaching both in terms of the originality of its narrative poetics as well as later influence on modernist fiction is precisely how the narrative ironizes the experience that is previously epiphanised. This is a crucial point. For what is "the horror" and what does it reveal? While Marlow keeps piling up expressions both affirmative and supportive of its significance, that it is a "glimpsed truth," a "supreme moment of complete knowledge," and a "form of ultimate wisdom," one cannot help noticing that it really glimpses at nothing; that it is rather incomplete than complete, and rather a parody of knowledge than knowledge; and ultimately, that it is a folly rather than wisdom. A remark by Peter Brooks is quite telling in this respect:

And yet, "The horror! The horror!" is more accurately characterized when Marlow calls it a "cry" [than a supreme moment of knowledge, for instance]. It comes about as close as articulated speech can come to the primal cry, to blurted emotional reaction of uncertain reference and context. To present "the horror!" as articulation of that wisdom lying in wait at the end of the tale, at journey's end and life's end, is to make a mockery of storytelling and ethics... (250)

certain impressions is untenable and shaky. Carneades (214-129 B. C. E.), for instance, famously argued that faced with two identical eggs or twins, one could not tell the difference and could not avoid making error.

The negative judgment that the end of *Heart of Darkness* is rather a mockery of narrative than a moment of its victory can be found in many, more or less vitriolic, critical variations. Some critics, though, take the very “emptiness” of epiphany quite seriously arguing that what makes the novella startling and worthy of being included into the Western literary canon as one of its precious milestones is exactly the way it discredits what it announces to accomplish. When, for instance, J. H. Miller argues that *Heart of Darkness* is a secular version of a parable, more precisely, of an apocalypse, he has in mind the underlying dialectic of promise that never gets fully accomplished: Marlow sets about to tell his tale so that he could pass onto his audience the wisdom he had allegedly received. He simply *promises* to bring his story to completion by revealing something very important. Thereupon, the narrative largely unfolds in an episodic manner in which each episode does not just replace temporally and thematically the previous one, but, as shown, undercuts what has been formerly affirmed. Thus, the consistent *parabasis* and the skeptical tone of Marlow’s narration work in unison towards a climactic point of the tale. When the *catalepsis* finally comes, it is expressed in the form of a “cry”—“The horror! The horror!”—and, logically, punctuated by exclamation marks. But what the twin horrors mean is never explained, either explicitly or implicitly. As J. Hillis Miller points out, the narrative ends up as “a revelation of the impossibility of revelation” (*Revisited*, 212), and an unveiling of the impossibility of unveiling (220).

I do not have much to add to J. Hillis Miller’s reading which subtly summarizes how the narrative ends up being skeptical of its own skepticism, except the two critical glosses. First, “The horror! The horror!” may be indeed a sign of “failed” revelation; rhetorically speaking though, it is simply a verbal reduplication. This important feature of the text has been largely unnoticed in the critical reception of Conrad’s novella. Marlow’s reduplications, as if by rule, come at the most dramatic points in the tale and are related, quite explicitly, to the problem of knowledge. Let me remind you how the two knitters—one obviously an allusion to Clotho, the other to Lachesis—are “*introducing, introducing* continuously to the unknown,” while at the same time scrutinizing and saluting those who are about to die. “The inner truth,” Marlow says at one point, “is hidden—*luckily, luckily*” (36), giving himself and his audience a voice of

consolation amidst the epistemological cul-de-sac. And further, in one of the most explicit moments of linguistic skepticism, Marlow desperately complains:

...No, *it is impossible; it is impossible* to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning, its subtle and penetrating essence. *It is impossible*. We live as we dream—alone. (30, my emphasis in all cases of reduplication above)

All these reduplications including and up to Kurtz's horror have a double purpose. Surely, they emphasize the point that has been made. However, it is not their only function. They seem to be clear pointers to Marlow's narrative uncertainty and hesitancy. He is the narrator who has to repeat twice so that he could start believing what he himself is saying. Reduplications thus have a rather ambiguous semiotic profile. On the one hand, they are redundant for they plainly repeat the already given piece of information. On the other, they are quite informative: in adding nothing new to the utterance, they say a lot about the speaker and his character, or intention. Finally, while J. Hillis Miller is certainly right that *Heart of Darkness* is a "failed apocalypse"—which is itself, as Miller observes, a pleonastic expression since every apocalypse ultimately fails to fulfill its own promise of unveiling—it is also an announced, self-reflexive apocalypse. The frame narrator, right before Marlow embarks on his narrative journey, ironically comments, assuming the role of a spokesman of a group doomed to listen to Marlow's tale, how "we knew, we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's *inconclusive experiences*" (11, my emphasis). In other words, from the very outset the narrative openly declares it will never come to fruition as if it counts on being inconclusive. There is a constitutive lack in its heart that cannot be filled in by any reduplication whatsoever.

Skepticism and *Anagnorisis*

The notion of a constitutive lack is particularly important as a skeptical narrative nexus whose function is to preempt the images of certainty, fullness, and satiety. What has been widely acknowledged in

numerous reading of the novella is that Marlow's journey is directed to the center, to the so-called Inner Station in which Kurtz lodges in and rules, yet he encounters only "Dead in the center" (13) and finds not a single trace of Kurtz upon arrival. A constitutive lack is evident in the very portraiture of fictional characters as well. First, with the notable exception of Marlow and Kurtz, all of them lack proper names and are evoked either by function or appearance—the brickmaker, the Manager, the aunt, the harlequin, the Intended, and so on. Second, in the moment of Marlow's disillusion with Kurtz, Kurtz is described as "hollow at the core" (58); the Manager of the Central Station suggests that people who enlist to work for the Company "should have no entrails" (25); and, last but not least, when confronted with the scheming, duplicitous brickmaker Marlow feels how he "could poke [his] finger through him and would find nothing inside" (29).

Nowhere is, however, this skeptical pre-emptying as cogent as in the final scene of the novella in which Marlow meets with Kurtz's Intended. The scene is supposed to be a calm, sad, friendly meeting. Yet it evolves into a sort of traumatic *agon*, which is insinuated in the scene but never fully realized due to Marlow's notorious lie. Namely, the Kurtz's Intended wants to know what were the last words uttered by her fiancé. Marlow, for his part, does not want to disillusion her who "had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering" (73), as he himself has been disillusioned, and decides to lie to her by saying: "The last word he pronounced was—your name" (75). The irony is multiple and proves to what extent Conrad, as an ironist, was "a master of avoidance" (Davies, 226). First, what is supposed to be a grand, concluding, melodramatic scene concludes with a lie, with a dissimulation, with a lack of assertion. Second, that the lack is constitutive is emphasized by the fact that the name of the Intended is never revealed, though a heavy dramatic emphasis is previously bestowed upon it. When Marlow says "your name," and the answer is hyphenated as if to mark his indecision and second thoughts, his listeners can justifiably inquire *what name?* One cannot help feeling how the effect of Marlow's words is both tragicomic and farcical. Third, Marlow's lie is the most portending instance of ironic narrative *analepsis*

drawing us back to the narrative beginnings and Marlow's explicit avowal that he would never have defended Kurtz by lying:

I would not have gone so far as to fight for Kurtz, but I went for him near enough to a lie [a lie to a brickmaker]. You know, I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavor of mortality in lies – which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick like biting something rotten would do. Temperament, I suppose. (29)

Last but not least, the whole episode is built as if its purpose is to end the story in a grandiose pathetic climax. Yet, it ends up with a bathos that is unmatched by anything ever written by Conrad. “It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head,” Marlow describes his feelings after lying to the Intended, just to find out that “nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle” (76).

The bathos seems to be in contrast to Conrad's own comments on the last sequence of *Heart of Darkness*. In a letter, he emphasizes the significance of “the interview of the man and the girl” in the concluding pages of the novella and argues how it “locks in...the whole 30000 words of narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa” (*Collected Letters II*, 417). Nothing shows better than the very end of the narrative that neither irony nor skepticism can be fully controlled. Despite the authorial intention that the narrative, in its final stage, emancipates itself from being viewed simply as a stereotypical story of white men “going native,” the scene with the Intended, contrary to *intentio auctoris*, escapes operating on “another plane.” Truly, the moment of frank confrontation between Marlow and Kurtz's fiancée insinuates that some sort of recognition will take place. And the narrative provides myriad possibilities for a fateful, life-transforming *anagnorisis*. First, of course, for the recognition of Marlow's lie. Marlow is quite upset by the Intended's tenacious asking and

equally tenacious mishearing, about what were the last words spoken by Kurtz. He is indeed on the brink of telling the truth. Marlow feverishly confesses:

I was on the point of crying at her, "Don't you hear them." The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. "The Horror! The Horror!" (75)

Yet, she does not hear what strikes a chord with Marlow's ears. She cannot see into his mind.

The second unrealized *anagnorisis* is even more significant. Marlow lowers the guard, while looking at the Intended's photograph handed out to him by Kurtz, and avows not just that he is "struck" by her beauty, but that the main reason for the meeting with the Intended may have nothing to do with the surrendering of the memory of Kurtz to the past. "I concluded," he says resolutely, "I would go and give her back her portrait and those letters [Kurtz's letters] myself. Curiosity. Yes. And also some other feelings perhaps" (71). Nowhere is Conrad's use of an indefinite pronoun as flimsy and revealing as in this sentence. It does not take too much effort to see through Marlow's defensive phrase "some other feelings perhaps." Some other feelings are the feelings of attraction and love. Yet, sadly, the recognition of love never occurs. Marlow does not utter the fatal "I love you," nor does the Intended, even though the entire meeting is colored in such narrative hues as if it is the only thing they wish to confess to one another. This is the second occasion for *anagnorisis* that stays unfulfilled. What Conrad had in mind was simply that *Heart of Darkness* is a tale of love, a romance. This is what he meant when he said that the concluding section of the narrative inverts the narrative order and sheds different light on the entire story. The story of a love, though, which is, in spite of the narrative direction, never acknowledged and never requited. Stunningly, in a gigantic critical discourse on Conrad such a sort of critical insight has hardly ever been acknowledged. While Marlow finishes his storytelling "in the pose of a meditating Buddha" (76), one cannot help noticing that Marlow actually ends up as a man, who, having lost all hope for love, masks his depression by means of meditative tranquility and feigned self-sufficiency. The novella is, thus,

truly meant to operate as an atypical, up-to-date romance in which an experienced sailor turns out to be not immune at all to the sorrows of a young Werther, gradually sinking into “a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism” (69), if not into suicide.²⁷ “The tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (76), are the last words spoken by the frame narrator with which he rounds the tale out. And they are doubly significant. First, the visual qualities of this gloomy, chiaroscuro ending are strongly reminiscent of the Dutch *vanitas* of the seventeenth century. Therein, as often is the case, a skull appears surrounded by a somewhat confused multitude of beautiful objects which, as the painting purports to tell us, are vain and mendacious since mortal. In the case of *Heart of Darkness*, though, there is a slight variation on the same theme. Instead of a typical Baroque repertoire of the symbols of mortality—a human skull, burning candles, or decaying flowers—it is the flickering luminosity of the sky that gradually turns into a completely extinguished light that signifies the impossibility of recognition, the narrative end, and the spiritual emptiness of the protagonist. Second, the narrative ends with the same ambiguity of prepositions with which it begins. A navigable body of water that supposedly leads out “to the uttermost ends of the earth” somehow makes a u-turn and flows back “into the heart of darkness,” which is, no doubt, Marlow’s heart. It thus both illustrates and confirms a splendid point made by Michael Levenson that *Heart of Darkness* represents a skeptical narrative of “the beyond within” (*Fate of Individuality*, 12), a phrase which is supposed to suggest how the travel to the end of the earth, a journey *without*, means to encounter oneself in the depth of one’s heart, a journey *within*.

The narrative, in this way, turns out to be not just a “failed apocalypse,” but also a *failed anagnorisis*. In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the concept is famously employed to refer to the narrative juncture which brings about a transition from *agnosis* to *gnosis*, from *unknowing* to *knowing*: “Recognition, as the word itself implies,” says Aristotle, “is a change from ignorance to knowledge” (in Cave, 27). Similarly, as Terence

²⁷ This strongly evokes the romantic novel of disillusion which is not without its own philosophical significance in the history of narrative skepticism.

Cave observes in his magisterial study on the concept of recognition, “it is the moment at which the characters understand their predicament fully for the first time, the moment that resolves a sequence of unexplained and often implausible occurrences; it makes the world (and the text) intelligible” (1). Yet, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is not a narrative of knowing but, in Philip Weinstein’s terminology, it is a narrative of *unknowing* in which recognition does not knit into the known, but into the unknown. Marlow comes to the Intended as Odysseus comes to Penelope, yet the scar of his sympathy is never acknowledged. In this way, the unfulfilled moment of *anagnorisis* brings up a much deeper, theoretical issue, pertinent to the problem of narrative skepticism. If there is any such thing as an epistemology of the novel, the question becomes, what would it mean to call a novel (novella, or simply narrative) skeptical? Can we talk at all about novelistic or narrative skepticism? I strongly believe that we can and that a satisfactory way to respond to such question would be to say that the narrative is skeptical if it substitutes the passage from ignorance to knowledge with a passage from knowingness to unknowingness which can be achieved, technically at least, with the device of failed recognition.²⁸

Skepticism and Conrad’s Negative Modifiers

Failed recognition is not the only device that the narrative uses to mark a transition from knowledge to ignorance. Having this in mind, I want to encircle my analysis of the rhetoric of skepticism in *Heart of Darkness* and address one of the most conspicuous, and most misinterpreted, aspects of its skepticism: Conrad’s persistent use of negative adjectives and nouns.

²⁸ One way to situate the argument developed in this section would be to state that Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is set into motion by two central absences: those of Kurtz’s cataleptic experience and Marlow’s lie to the Intended. They rob the narrative of its narrative confidence, its revelatory potential, and its melodramatic pathos respectfully. They flirt with irony and contribute to the overall skeptical tinting of the story. What is more important, and historically most relevant, is that by weaving the narrative around the central absence, Conrad set the prototype of a skeptical discourse that would have found its perfecting in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Kafka’s *The Trial*, both based on the devices of recognition never achieved and revelation never accomplished.

It has been extensively argued that the Victorians had “an odd fixation with–adjectives” (Moretti, 125), and, truly, it is not hard at all to start spotting clusters of adjectives in almost any Victorian text. Joseph Conrad is, of course, not an exception. However, what makes Conrad’s adjectives distinctive and unconventional is that they are primarily negative. Given how frequently they appear, they must have a special narrative function and importance. Here is the list of Marlow’s negative adjectives which is in no way exhaustive but rather includes those adjectives that are representative of Marlow’s coping with the challenge to represent in a familiar language experiences which are no longer familiar. The list consists of the adjectives *unearthly*, “The earth seemed unearthly” (37); *interminable*, “The Sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway” (7); *unstained*, “the sky without a speck was a benign immensity of unstained light” (8); *inscrutable*, “as inscrutable as Destiny” (9); *inconclusive*, “one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences” (11); *incomprehensible*, “He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible” (10); *uncanny* and *unknown*, “She seemed uncanny and fateful...introducing continuously into the unknown” (14); *unreal*, “I’ve never seen anything so unreal in my life” (26); *shameless*, “It was evident he took me for a perfectly shameless prevaricator” (27); *implacable* and *inscrutable*, both structuring the notoriously obscure sentence that sparked a great deal of critical attention, “It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable purpose;” *unfathomable* and *inexplicable*, “like a ripple on an unfathomable enigma...[like an] inexplicable note of desperate grief” (43); *impalpable* and *immense*, “the memory of the time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber” (48); *untrammelled*, “a man’s untrammelled feet” (49); *lightless* and *uncomplicated*, “some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery has a positive relief” (58); *unsound*, “The method [Kurtz’s method] is unsound” (61); *unconnected*, “a sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected with any distinct shape of physical danger” (63); *unavoidable*, an “unavoidable noise” (65); *invisible*, “the invisible wilderness” (67); *inappreciable*, “that inappreciable moment of time” (69); up to and including numerous examples of stringing the negative adjectives together as in the following sentence: “I also were buried in a vast grave

full of *unspeakable* secrets. I felt an *intolerable* weight of oppressing my breast...the *unseen* presence of victorious corruption the darkness of *impenetrable* light” (62, my emphasis).

The sheer number and frequency of Conrad’s negative modifiers in *Heart of Darkness*, brought against him two critical charges. The first is the charge of obscurity. The charge of obscurity is old and it goes back to F. R. Leavis who famously denounced Conrad’s rhetoric of negation as being too vague and quite annoying. In “Revaluations: Joseph Conrad” which first appeared in *Scrutiny* in 1941 to be reprinted seven years later in his magnum opus *The Great Tradition*, F. R. Leavis argued how Conrad seems to be “intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means” (180). Although Leavis’s resolute claim was to echo widely in later criticism on Conrad, and although it has remained one of the most negative verdicts ever passed on *Heart of Darkness*, it is also one of the most challenging and thought-provoking. What Leavis had found intolerable in *Heart of Darkness* was notoriously labeled as Conrad’s “adjectival insistence” (177)—his conspicuous overworking and persistent reliance on negative modifiers throughout the narrative. Indeed, what deeply informs Conrad’s rhetoric in *Heart of Darkness* is his frequent use of *accumulatio*, his unyielding stringing together a series of nouns and adjectives that say, more or less, one and the same thing. While Leavis himself is not lavish at all in providing examples of Conrad’s “adjectival” accumulations, one does not have to dive deep into the *Heart of Darkness* to find out that the mist on the marshes of Essex, for instance, was “gauzy,” “radiant,” and “diaphanous” (8), just as the air, in the famous “going up the river” episode, was “warm, thick, heavy, sluggish” (35), and the coast “smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage” (16). The sheer number of Conrad’s adjectives makes any attempt at pulling together a definitive, rigorous list doomed to failure. This may be the reason why Leavis, instead of enumerating some of the proper instances of accumulation, had been more attentive to the very imperativeness of Conrad’s negative adjectives such as “inscrutable,” “inconceivable,” “unspeakable” (177), to which one cannot help adding “impenetrable,” “implacable,” and “unknown.” Perhaps, the most vivid support for Leavis’s claim comes at the very beginning of the third part of the novel in which Marlow describes his astonishment at the sight of a red-haired Russian

“harlequin.” “His very existence was *improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering*. He was an *insoluble* problem. It was *inconceivable* how he had existed...” (54, my emphasis). Only a couple of lines after, Marlow would keep characterizing the enigmatic Russian in negative terms marking off his appearance as “indestructible,” his audacity as “unreflecting,” his adventurous spirit as “uncalculating, unpractical” (55). What are we to do with all these negative qualifiers, quite justifiably wondered F. R. Leavis? Is not it obvious that their effect on both narrative rhythm and narrative meaning must be decisive? But is not also the crucial question is F. R. Leavis really right in his estimation that the effect is, first and foremost, “cheapening” and “supererogatory” (180)? Had he been scrupulous enough when he contended that Conrad’s adjectival insistence “betrays the absence” just as his “willed intensity” gives away the “nullity” (180)? Finally, does he really do justice to Conrad’s style when he aligns himself with E. M. Forster—whom he quotes at the very beginning of the essay—stating that Conrad “is always promising to make some general philosophic statement about the universe, and then refraining with the gruff disclaimer,” that he is too “obscure” and as “misty” as many of his narratives, and ultimately, “that the secret casket of his genius contains a vapor rather than a jewel” (in Leavis, 173)? In a word, the question is how one makes a virtue out of not knowing what one means?²⁹

The second charge, or rather a qualification, is made by Mark A. Wollaeger who in his systematic study of Conrad’s “fictions of skepticism,” argues how Marlow’s negative adjectives “fill out the lexicon of negative theology” and form one of the thickest rhetorical layers of the novella’s skepticism (57). There is, of course, a valid reason for such a reading. Just as the name of the Intended is never spoken out, Marlow, overhearing the discussion between the Manager and his uncle and their avoidance to speak out Kurtz’ name, notices how: “His name, you understand, had not been pronounced once. He was: ‘that man’” (34). The ban to pronounce Kurtz’s name is pervasive throughout the narrative. Each one of the

²⁹ Beginning with Plato’s *Sophist*, there is an entire tradition of philosophical thinking of negation—be it in the form of predicate denial or negative affixing/suffixing—that holds that negative statements are in some sense less valuable than affirmative ones. Such a sort of reasoning backs up all critical attacks against Conrad’s insistence on negative modifiers.

Company's officials Marlow gets to know in the course of his odyssey is revealingly hesitant to utter Kurtz's name *into the open*. The ironic contrast is even stronger highlighted since Kurtz is presented within the narrative as *a voice*, rather than a body, whose name cannot and must not be *voiced*.³⁰ Marlow asserts, for instance, that throughout his quest for Kurtz he had a deep feeling like he "had been striving after something without a substance" (47-48). "I made the strange discovery," he continues his meditation, "that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing." And he concludes with a memorable line about Kurtz: "The man presented himself as a voice" (48). Later in the narrative, the observation that Kurtz presented himself as a voice is coupled with another memorable line that "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (50). Of Kurtz's notorious report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs Marlow says, "It was eloquent, vibrating with eloquence...The peroration was magnificent" (50), so that he could immediately deflate his own tribute to Kurtz's rhetorical excellence by pointing out that the pamphlet ends up with a terrifying command: "Exterminate all the brutes" (51). However, in spite of all these tensions, the same discourse of praising Kurtz's *imago* as that of a disembodied voice persists through the very end of the tale. "Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a

³⁰ In configuring Kurtz as a voice, Marlow plunges himself into one of those specifically Cartesian, skeptical meditations in which the external world, the body as such, drops out as the first victim of an impending hyperbolic doubt. As it is widely acknowledged, philosophical skepticism cannot do without fiction and it typically employs imaginary scenarios, most commonly known as thought-experiments, to bring its arguments forward. The skeptic open-heartedly invites us to *imagine* that we may not have hands or legs; that what we experience may nonetheless be just an illusion; that we could be dreaming or be misled by a *malin genie*; that we could be made of porcelain, or that we could be no more than computer programs, a part of a large, intricate matrix, without any corporeal or mental attributes. This specifically skeptical predicament in which the entire world is alienated from the skeptic by means of an omnivorous doubt is so characteristic of Marlow. As a consequence, the disappearance of Kurtz's body and his amounting to a voice can be read as a symptom of what Stanley Cavell calls "the body's fate under skepticism" (*Disowning*, 125) which is, surely, not a bright fate at all. It is not accidental, for instance, that Kurtz's body is not the only thing that withdraws from Marlow's consciousness. In the famous going-up-the-river episode, just before the attack on the steamer, a thick fog settles upon the water initiating one of those recognizable Marlow's interrogations of the accuracy of the senses:

What we could see was just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving, and the misty strip of water, perhaps two feet broad, around her – and that was all. The rest of the world was nowhere as far as our eyes and ears were concerned, just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind. (41)

Truly, the world dropping out is a recurrent motif in the story. "The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy," Marlow gives an account of drifting up the river so that he could immediately add up a skeptical observation, "We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms" (37). Nowhere is the experience of being cut off, gone, disappeared, absent, banned from enunciation, swept off, and so on, as subtly expressed as in Conrad's merciless use of negative adjectives.

voice!” (67), Marlow remembers the dying Kurtz as if struck by some Pentecostal apparition. Finally, in the meeting with the inquisitive yet dubious journalist who inquires into the causes of Kurtz’s death, Marlow shockingly finds out that a man who supposedly “couldn’t write a bit” (71) was gifted in another way:

‘But Heavens! how that man could talk! He electrified large meetings. He had the faith— don’t you see—he had the faith. He could get himself to believe anything—anything. He would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party.’ ‘What party?’ I asked. ‘Any party,’ answered the other. ‘He was an—an extremist.’ (71)³¹

The passage marks a distinction between a dogmatic Kurtz “who could get himself to believe anything” and a skeptical Marlow who is sucked into the vertigo of doubts. The reduplications are, once again striking: that Kurtz was the man who “had the faith” is repeated twice as much as that he was able to let himself be attached to “anything—anything.” I guess that the ban to pronounce Kurtz name as well as the fact that he is represented as a voice and configured by means of negative adjectives, have led Mark Wollaeger to detect the rhetoric of negative theology in *Heart of Darkness*. The question is of course, is his inference justifiable?

Let me now address both charges, or rather, both critical assessments respectively. While it might be true that Marlow’s “words sometimes accumulate without effect” (Wollaeger, 61) and that the narrative relishes “in a kind of verbal overkill” (Eagleton, 244) by means of amassing negative modifiers, it is in no way true that *Heart of Darkness* is an obscure narrative. It is rather true that the rhetoric of negation in

³¹ Perhaps, it is this passage that captivated Orson Welles’s imagination and prompted him to adapt *Heart of Darkness* as his inaugural Hollywood film. More accurately, it may have led him to conceive of Kurtz as a modern dictator and of the whole film as an allegory exposing Nazism. Sadly, when the project ran over the budget the film was terminated. It is less known, though, that the project may have been terminated due to a couple of less obvious, politically motivated reasons. First, Wells intended to show interracial sexual intercourse still tabooed at the time. Second, his attack on fascism may have been unfavorable at the time and thus tacitly censored. Though Welles himself never fulfilled his initial desire, it is likely that he modeled his role of the villain Harry Lime in Carol Reed’s classic *The Third Man* on Kurtz. Tellingly, one of Harry Lime’s henchmen in the film is called “Baron Kurtz.” On Welles and *Heart of Darkness* see, DeBona (1994) and Watts (2008).

Heart of Darkness is a deliberate narrative strategy. It is *co-operative* with narrative skepticism, not *co-incident* to it. The point is simply that the very multiplication of adjectives—be it affirmative or negative—has the function of shaking the narrative confidence, not of obscuring the narrative content. That is how one makes a virtue out of not knowing what one means; that is how one *unknows* the narrative. The critics who accuse Conrad of obscurity neither understand the nature of his skepticism nor do they fully grasp the genre of skeptical narrative.

I have made a large claim. What is there in *Heart of Darkness* to give my claim credence? First, Conrad's negative modifiers are not scattered randomly. They are used neither chaotically nor accidentally, but with a method and clear narrative purpose. Namely, they are regularly contained either within a simile or parenthesis. For instance, Marlow is shocked by the restraint of the cannibals and says it is “*like* the foam on the depths of the sea, *like* a ripple on an *unfathomable* enigma...[like an] *inexplicable* note of desperate grief.” Or, he says that the memory of Kurtz is “*like* a *dying* vibration of one *immense* jabber” (48, my emphases). And so on. It has been widely acknowledged that in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad systematically foregrounds the difficulty of seeing, and he uses both similes and negative modifiers to fulfill such a task.³² The three adjectives, “inexplicable,” “unfathomable,” and “immense,” certainly foreground the difficulty of seeing and understanding. Yet, nothing shows Marlow's cognitive failure as dynamically and expressively as the similes Conrad eventually resorts to. For, the system of Conrad's similes is such that every *like*, instead of unlocking *primum comparationis* by means of *secundum comparationis*, locks it even further into the unknown.

Second, adjectives are rather curious items of language. On the one hand, they are subordinate to nouns both syntactically and semantically, in terms of congruence and meaning. On the other, they are

³² Franco Moretti writes: “The modal ‘could see’—which clearly implies the possibility of *not* seeing, especially in place of ‘darkness’—occurs over thirty times in *Heart of Darkness*; more often than in the entire text of *Middlemarch*, which is ten times as long.” He then goes on to propose that “Conrad's laborious and ubiquitous similes...further strengthen the opacity of the novella” (111).

superior to nouns for the feature they attach to the noun they may attach in such a way as if a given feature is objectively characterizing the noun itself, as if it is an intrinsic and inseparable part of the noun. When Marlow describes Kurtz's infamous rites as "unspeakable," we can only conjecture what does make the rites unspeakable. The adjective is, at one and the same time, informative and reticent. Revealing and concealing. Yet, its power of ascription is so remarkable that we never conceive of Kurtz's rites, though we know hardly anything about them, in any innocent or neutral terms. The rites are such they should rather be left unspoken, and the negative adjective is enough to confer on them connotations as incriminating as *orgies*, or *atrocities*, or *mass exterminations*, or *satanic rituals*, and the like. Kurtz's rites are similarly compared to "the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation" (49). And again, the adjective "inconceivable" subtly joins his forces with another adjective, the diminutive "devilish," to bestow upon the noun "ceremonies" a quality which we then take for granted, though what sort of ceremonies Kurtz truly performs is never flashed out. To sum up, instead of being arbitrary and contingent, the adjectives "unspeakable" and "inconceivable" become essential *to* and constitutive *of* the nouns' meaning. Conrad's negative modifiers "unspeakable" and "inconceivable" are, thus, not predicated on obscurity, but on lucidity and transparency of their inverted skeptical vision. The vision of life damaged by colonialism is not recorded in positive historical accounts; it can only be seen when one adopts the perspective of the negative.³³

What about the Wollaeger thesis? The prohibition to utter Kurtz's name aloud may indeed recall the biblical "image ban," but to say that the rhetoric of *Heart of Darkness* approximates the discourse of negative theology is a rather problematic claim. While Conrad's rhetoric is indeed replete with negative modifiers, it can hardly be associated with negative theology. In Derrida's précis, negative theology presupposes "the becoming theological of all discourse" (6), and *Heart of Darkness* does not, even

³³ To paraphrase Adorno from *Minima Moralia*, Marlow's negative adjectives and nouns provide the "optimal light source" that refuses ocularity but still *makes us see* "the crevices" of the world (247). In Adorno's famous reading of Kafka, the standpoint of unyielding negativity is indistinguishable from the perspective of illumination. Kafka's negative vision is, thus, the inverted reflection of the light of knowledge and redemption. Conrad's is as well.

tangentially, approximate the theological narrative. On the contrary, it is a secular story *par excellence*. Accordingly, Marlow's ubiquitous negative modifiers do not ponder the question of divinity, nor are they predicated on the rhetorical strategy of *apophasis* or denial—a particular kind of irony whereby we deny that we say what we eventually say.³⁴ What is at stake in *Heart of Darkness* is rather something else and it is nicely captured by Derrida:

Once the apophatic discourse is analyzed in its logical-grammatical form,..., it perhaps leads us to consider the becoming theological of all discourse. From the moment a proposition takes a negative form, the negativity...resembles an apophatic theology...God's name would then be the hyperbolic effect of that negativity or all negativity...If there is a work of negativity in the discourse it will produce divinity (6).

To rephrase: whenever there is a work of negativity in the discourse, the implicit danger is that that discourse may create a divinity of its own. And that is precisely the point of Marlow's crowding negative adjectives around Kurtz and his experience in the African Congo. For it is not only the case that Marlow's negative adjectives testify to the fact that it is difficult to express in a language of the metropolis experiences and feelings which are metropolitan no longer. It is also true that by referring to his experience as a mystery, enigma, and heart of darkness; by ascribing to it various pseudo-religious overtones; by representing it as something that cannot be explained, visualized, understood, nor

³⁴ Negative theology as “knowledge of God obtained by negation” (OED) is most commonly associated with an attempt to express the divine transcendence by forbidding its portrayal. It draws upon the Old Testament's commandment: “You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them” (Exod 20: 4–5), and it relates to all those philosophic and religious traditions (Neoplatonist, Christian, Sufist, Jewish Kabbalah) which advocate the use of negative modifiers to convey the idea that the numinous being is beyond cognition and representation; that it is ultimately transcendent, unknowable, and ineffable. As a consequence, such apophatic discourses develop their own, largely idiosyncratic, epistemology as well as rhetoric. The epistemology is usually based on a certain fissure between an allegedly knowable world and its originating unknowable source, or first principle, which leads to a skeptical grinding mill leaving “knowledge without foundation, gaping open and suspended upon an abyss” (Franke, 63), as one commentator has stated. The rhetoric is, on the other hand, distinguished by its reliance upon negative modifiers (usually adjectives); by the avoidance of assertion, which strongly reminds of the skeptical refraining from assertion; by the discourse's intrinsic negativity and self-cancelling nature reminiscent of Kierkegaard's definition of irony as “infinite absolute negativity;” and by the ultimate inability to differentiate between what is affirmed and what is denied, what is stated and what is not, what is pictured and what is only sketched. As Dennis Turner once has put it, “The apophatic is the linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language” (34); it thus testifies to a sort of liminal experience to which only proper rhetoric is that of liminality.

transmitted, and thus can only be represented through negation, Marlow tacitly refers to the danger of Kurtz with his elevating himself into a guru and a self-proclaimed God-like figure. Therefore, Marlow's negative modifiers are not in the service of negative theology, of saying the unsayable, of speaking the unspeakable, or of postulating a divinity that is both cognitively and ethically beyond anyone's comprehension. On the contrary, their function is skeptical in the crudest sense of the word. They are there to warn us, point *to*, make us alert *to*, and finally overthrow the divinity in rising.

* * *

The discourses of skeptical meditation, permanent *parabasis*, empty epiphany, unfulfilled *anagnorisis*, and adjectival negativity form the structural linchpin in *Heart of Darkness*. By masterfully molding all these discourses Conrad set the standard for the modernist skeptical narrative fairly high; he also made *Heart of Darkness* a founding statement of modernist narrative skepticism. In one of his most desperate moments, Marlow says that life amounts to a "merciless logic for a futile purpose" (69). The two negative adjectives, "merciless" and "futile," resonate deeply with the larger skeptical structure of the novel: While life may be a merciless logic executed for a futile purpose, the rhetoric of skepticism executed by Conrad does not seem to be futile at all. Its consequences, echoes, and vibrations were felt throughout literary modernism and they have left a decisive mark on the skeptical narrative to come. In the following chapter, I will explore some of those consequences in a rather different context. In the context of Hollywood's culture of make-believe and the work of Nathanael West.

Chapter 2

Skepticism in the Desert of the Real: Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* as a Skeptical Narrative

Introduction

Nathan von Wallenstein Weinstein is something of a “stunner” in American literature. A stunner may not be the most convenient critical term yet I am using it on purpose: no other word better describes Weinstein’s immersion in popular culture, a feature which would leave a lasting and decisive mark on his writing. Since his premature death in 1940, Weinstein’s work has gone through a couple of stages of critical reception. From a period of absolute or relative obscurity, to an initially modest and thereafter ever increasing recognition, ending up with a number of lavishing praises characterizing Nathan Weinstein as “the prototype of the post-modernist” (Klug, 17) and the first American novelist cultivating a somewhat neoteric style of writing in many respects much ahead of his time. If once on the way to becoming canonized, Nathan Weinstein has by now received “the ultimate seal of approval,” as one of his critics modestly observed back in the mid 1970’s (Light, 130). Yet, if there is anything “stunning” regarding the process of Weinstein’s canonization it consists first and foremost of its inextricability from the process of his “Westernization.” In Nathan’s case, Westernization meant at least three things. First, it meant moving to California. One may even say that without this pilgrimage Nathan Weinstein would have only been a mediocre writer. If he had not been contracted to move to Hollywood and work as a writer of dozens of unexceptional screenplays, he would have never become a writer of at least two exceptional novels—*Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*. Second, it meant changing the name. Going West for Nathan von Wallenstein Weinstein meant going Nathanael West. West confessed once to William Carlos Williams that he got the new name in a somewhat easygoing and uncalculated fashion: “Horace Greeley said ‘Go West, young man.’ So I did” (in Hyman, 13). Of course, critical discourse on West has often emphasized the significance of West’s anti-Semitism and commented on the writer as a

self-hating Jew whose fascination with the grotesque side by side with his relentless skepticism must have had something to do with his hatred of the Jews and self-professed “negativism.”³⁵ In this spirit, no critic of West misses the opportunity to mention that by the stage in West’s life at which Horace Greeley generously offered his advice, West’s Jewish self-loathing had exponentially grown up to the point “where he referred to Jewish girls as ‘bagels’” (Siegel, 5). How decisively and in what particular ways West’s alleged anti-Semitism shaped his fiction is a complex question indeed, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter. Let me point out, however, that West seemed to be keen on re-baptizing his characters just as he nonchalantly renamed himself. One particular example is quite revealing. In an early draft of *Miss Lonelyhearts* the protagonist of the novel who is never named in the final text, carries the name Thomas Matlock which we may—as Stanly Edgar Hyman has shrewdly observed—translate as “Doubter Wrestler” (19). The transition from a “Doubter Wrestler” to “Miss Lonelyhearts” is very similar to a transition from Nathan Weinstein to Nathanael West. West could indeed hide his origin and westernize his character’s name into a sentimental and provocative “Lonelyhearts,” yet he could never conceal that he was feverishly wrestling with doubt, just as one of his major characters does. This leads straightly to the third point I want to make and to what is most important about “West’s going West.” Namely, going West for Nathanael West meant more than anything else going skeptical. In an important letter to Malcolm Cowley written in 1939, West put a special emphasis on his being a “comic writer” with a thorough “skeptical schooling” (in Martin, 335). It turned out that West’s skeptical upbringing and the questioning attitude simply craved for Hollywood to mature. Hollywood had been a soil on which West perfected the skeptical outlook and produced some of the most challenging skeptical narratives ever written. “Going West,” in American culture at least, always presupposes some sort of reevaluation of skepticism and the nature of doubt. As Richard Gehman rightly observed: “West used Hollywood as a microcosm...because everything that is wrong with the United States is to be found there with rare purity and because the unreality of the business of making pictures seemed a most proper setting for his ‘half-world’” (in Kernan, 54). The *unreality* is indeed a key word in West’s entire oeuvre. One of his Dostoyevskian

³⁵ On West as a self-hating, nihilist Jew, see Bloom (1986), pp. 6-8.

characters, John Raskolnikov Gilson, calls for “Reality! Reality! If I could only discover the real. A real that I could know with my senses...A Real that would wait for me to inspect it as a dog inspects a dead rabbit” but he never does (*Novels*, 14). The very same urge is explicitly expressed by many a West’s hero, but instead of ever getting hold of something tangible and indubitable, they keep paying witness to a world in which, as one critic shrewdly pointed out, “the fake itself encrusts on the fake” (Kernan, 55) and “the incongruity of make-believe and reality” reigns supreme (Aaron, 78).

The key question is, therefore, what makes Nathanael West’s contribution to the history of skeptical narrative unprecedented and idiosyncratic? Namely, Nathanael West creates a narrative that preempts not just the meaning of skepticism but the very conditions of the possibility of skepticism. Each one of the four novels he wrote before he died in a car accident, is a skeptical narrative of a certain ecstasy of information, and *The Day of the Locust*, the novel on which I will be primarily focused, is indubitably the most consistent skeptical narrative of the so-called late modernist period. Nathanael West’s novels respond to two fundamental questions: what makes skepticism possible and under what philosophical conditions does skeptical narrative flourish? As it is commonly acknowledged, those modes of thinking that are customarily described as skeptical, in both ancient and modern philosophical and narrative traditions, rely upon the distinction between what can be known with certainty—Plato’s appearances, Cartesian “clear and distinct” ideas, Kant’s *phenomena*, and Wittgenstein’s “hinge” propositions, for instance—and what cannot be ultimately known—such as Plato’s ideas, Cartesian corporeal entities, Kant’s *noumena*, Wittgenstein’s metaphysical propositions, and so on. As a paradigm of thinking, skepticism takes for granted the legitimacy of the view of the world *as it is*, that is, as it exists *really* or *objectively*. Indeed, it makes no sense to worry how things really are, if one discards such a sort of notion from the outset. All the traditional skeptical thinkers, however radical and uncompromising their methodology of *skepsis* may be, leave unblemished the preconception that we are still deceived or incognizant *about*

something. In other words, they all cherish the view that there is a reality of some sort that is standing over against us and that cannot be denied.³⁶

³⁶ In a brilliant essay “Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkley Missed”—which made me believe in spite of its author’s intentions that idealism *a lá* Berkley might have been the first genuine postmodern philosophical outlook—the philosopher Myles Burnyeat convincingly shows how skepticism has been traditionally conceived as a reality-check of some sort. From Greek philosophy on, various *skepticisms* were ready to think that reality may be entirely different for what it is taken to be and that we may know nothing about it. But none of these skepticisms have ever questioned that “There is a reality of some sort confronting us; [that] we are in touch with something, even if this something...is not at all what we think it to be” (19). To Burnyeat, this explains why, for instance, Greek philosophy did not and could not know for the external-world skepticism and why Berkleyan idealism is “one of the very few major philosophical positions which did not receive its formulation in antiquity” (3-4). The problem which typifies traditional skeptical enquiry, as Burnyeat argues, is rather focused on how thinking can be of nothing rather than of something, and how can it be exercised at all upon illusions, non-existents, simulacra, and falsehoods. Following this logic, one may quite rightly argue that postmodernism can be construed as a deconstruction of skepticism thus conceived and a certain dismantling of boundaries grounding some of the most influential Western philosophical doctrines: first Platonism, with its reliance on the distinction between knowns and unknowns in the form of appearances and ideas; then Cartesianism, with its insisting on the barrier between distinctness and clarity, on the one hand, and “seeming” on the other (a typically Cartesian dilemma is how do I know that what *seems* is what really *is*?); and finally Kantianism, with its insisting upon the distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*.

It is not by accident that in one of the early modern masterpieces of skeptical narration, *The Apology of Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne coined an influential metaphor—that of *portée*—characterizing skepticism in terms of a *reach* of an arm, or a *range* of an arrow. To Montaigne, skepticism is simply a sort of awareness of one’s reach. It defines both our capacity to know and our limit to knowledge. “A man can only imagine according to his *reach*,” Montaigne timidly warns us (in Shattuck, 29). Pascal, who had closely read Montaigne makes a similar plea: “Let us then know our *reach*,” and do our best not to make a fistful bigger than the fist and an armful bigger than the arm (in Shattuck, 29). But, both Montaigne’s and Pascal’s metaphor is not only a metaphor of humility, typical of the so-called Counter-Reformation period. It rather outlines the conditions of the possibility of skepticism as such. What is more important, it persists in various guises in skeptical narratives to come. What for Montaigne and Pascal had been *portée*, for Conrad and Wittgenstein was a “solid pavement under [one’s] feet” and an “untrammelled feet.” Thus, a solid pavement and the shifting sands are the two fundamental metaphors of skeptical thinking. There is no skepticism if one of the two necessary ingredients is missing.

In my analysis of the conditions of the possibility of skepticism, I draw upon an excellent discussion of Montaigne’s and Pascal’s *portée* done by Roger Shattuck in his groundbreaking book-length study *Forbidden Knowledge*. However, it is quite startling that similar metaphoric has been used by Descartes as well. Curiously, of his own methodology, Descartes writes:

Throughout my writings I have made it clear that my method imitates that of the architect. When an architect wants to build the house . . . he begins by digging out a set of trenches from which he removes the sand . . . so that he can lay his foundations on firm soil. In the same way, I began by taking everything that was doubtful and throwing it out, like sand...(105)

This Cartesian architectural metaphor is not just the best description of foundationalism known to me: it indeed builds up an edifice of knowledge firmly anchored to the ground. It is more important that it nicely illustrates how skepticism begins with a sort of preamble, which is, quite naturally, typically Cartesian: I have always claimed to know all sorts of things, but...! The “but” is the inaugurating gesture of skepticism. The question is then what happens if the preamble is taken off the table? What if Descartes’ bulldozers instead of the firm soil reach a pure simulacrum? What if they dig up the very sandy surface they worked hard to clear off? This is the state of affairs exemplified by West’s narratives and the condition reached by his characters.

The crucial question is then what happens to the skeptical discourse when the very concept of reality is challenged? How are skeptical stories narrated in a world in which, as Norman Mailer once has humorously put it, “reality is no longer realistic” (in Barnard, 143)? Nobody responded better to Norman Mailer’s anxiety than Jean Baudrillard in his illuminating early essay “The Ecstasy of Communication.” In the society of the spectacle—what Baudrillard at this occasion still called the society characterized by a certain over-abundance of communication—the very meaning of skepticism as it has traditionally been conceived is being turned upside-down. According to Baudrillard, in a postmodern world “I” cannot know not because there is some piece of knowledge beyond my cognitive reach, that is, not because there is some piece of knowledge unattainable, inaccessible, hidden, forbidden, unwelcome or “alienated” from me, but because everything is “all-too-visible,” “the more visible than visible,” everything is at my disposal and precisely because of this I am skeptically lost. “We are no longer a part of the drama of alienation,” says Baudrillard, “but are in the ecstasy of communication” (*The Ecstasy*, 130).

Here lies the true significance of Nathanael West and the uniqueness of his contribution to the poetics of skeptical narrative. What Norman Mailer casually intuited and Baudrillard systematically theorized, West minutely and singularly narrated. In *The Day of the Locust*, Nathanael West created an entire gallery of characters who are not suffering from the drama of alienation but from a “pornography of information” (130), to use another Baudrillard’s coinage. It is “the total instantaneity of things...[and] the overexposure and transparency of the world” (Baudrillard, 133) that makes West’s characters doubt and suffer. They are all trying to find “the purloined letter” of Poe, but just as Auguste Dupin, they keep failing, for what they are looking is neither inaccessible nor beyond their reach. It is unknowable just because it is *too* knowable, *too* visible, *too* tangible to be missed. In subsequent philosophical discourse, this state of affairs came to be known as *simulation* and Nathanael West should be credited for being the first novelist who clearly recognized and boldly tackled a perplexing philosophical and existential problem. Accordingly, in Nathanael West, human desires and undertakings are not made real but hallucinatory and

elusive. Here is how Rita Barnard finely captures one of the most important aspects of West's skeptical rhetoric:

Wishes are not made "real" at the Hollywood "dream dump" (which functions as an apocalyptic figure for mass-mediated culture in general), but they are made "photographic:" two-dimensional rather than three-dimensional. It is thus no accident that all the Hollywood dreams have the aspect of the façade, the masquerade, and the movie set. They are perfect examples of Daniel Boorstin's "pseudo-events:" simulations that can no longer be defined in contradistinction to the norm of "what is the case," since they cumulatively undermine the very category of the real. Or, perhaps more exactly, West's conception of wishes seems to prefigure Guy Debord's conception of the society of the spectacle. For West, as for Debord, the disintegration of the real into the image, the mock-up, and the seedy façade is correlated with the domination of the commodity form. It is at the moment when even dreams become a business that all the common-sense categories of which I spoke earlier are absorbed and erased in the totality of the spectacle: illusion as reality, reality as illusion. (173)

Truly, many rhetorical facets of the novel—such as its strong flavor of hyper-reality quite innovative and unparalleled for its own time; its detecting of the collapse between the "real" space and the "fabricated" one with a peculiar treatment of the entire city, Hollywood, as a shooting *set*; its numerous characters who keep mistaking reality for fiction acting out their roles in everyday life as if in front of the camera's lens; its mixing of historical events and film adaptations, and so on—serve solely one purpose: to create a rhetorical outlet through which the traditional meaning of skepticism is being expelled.

In what follows, I will be exploring in detail how the interplay between the three constitutive discourses of the novel—those of simulation, satire, and *ekphrasis*—compete with each other in order to both undermine and reassess the value of skepticism. My argument has a tripartite structure. In the first part, I closely analyze *The Day of the Locust* as a narrative that preempts the meaning of skepticism. I will be primarily focused on the narrative practices of remediation—such as *mise en abyme*, *trompe l'oeil*, metalepsis, and the like—that are generally geared toward showing the unreliability of all knowledge claims and the instability of experience and perception. However, the key tension in the novel arises due to the fact that its protagonist is characterized as a skeptic and a satirist at once. Nathanael West thus finds himself in a stalemate position: How does the writer who erases the border between the image and its

source, between the “real” world and the fabricated one, and for whom flesh-and-blood people amount to no more than analytic “cases,” can possibly be a satirist? Or, to put it in a slightly different way, how can one possibly be a skeptic and a satirist at one and the same time? Does not West by pre-empting skepticism of any meaning, by making it both unnecessary and pointless in a world teeming with simulacra, also preempts the very possibility of satire, the very possibility of criticism as a practice of distinguishing between truth and falsehood. In the last part, I argue how Nathanael West finds in *ekphrasis* a means of encapsulating and reconciling two incompatible discourses: satire and skepticism. It has been argued that *ekphrasis* is not only a “verbal representation of visual representation” (Mitchell, 152), but that it is essentially a double-coded narrative device and that “what *ekphrasis* represents in words, therefore, must itself be *representational*” (Heffernan, 133, original emphasis). Taking this as my point of departure, I shall argue that what makes *ekphrasis* capable of representing such irreconcilable and divergent modes of discourse, that is, of representing both skeptical and satirical narration, is precisely its ambiguous rhetorical profile. I thus read that *The Day of the Locust* as an elaborate and extensive narrative *ekphrasis* and try to show why is skepticism the only philosophical outlook that may be described as *ekphrastic*.

Simulation and Narrative Remediation

Let me start unraveling the thick layers of skeptical rhetoric in *The Day of the Locust* by addressing its curious and elusive beginning. *The Day of the Locust* opens with an impressive yet confounding image:

Around quitting time, Tod Hackett heard a great din on the road outside his office. The groan of leather mingled with the jangle of iron and over all beat the tattoo of a thousand hooves. He hurried to the window.

An army of cavalry and foot was passing. It moved like a mob; its lines broken, as though fleeing from some terrible defeat. The dolmans of the hussars, the heavy shakos of the guards, Hanoverian light horse, with their flat leather caps and flowing red plumes, were all jumbled together in bobbing disorder. Behind the cavalry came the infantry, a wild sea of waving sabretaches, sloped muskets, crossed shoulder belts and swinging cartridge boxes. Tod recognized the scarlet infantry of England with their white shoulder pads, the black infantry of the Duke of

Brunswick, the French grenadiers, with their enormous white gaiters, the Scotch with bare knees under plaid skirts.

While he watched, a little fat man, wearing a cork sun-helmet, polo shirt and knickers, darted around the corner of the building in pursuit of the army.

“Stage Nine – you bastards – Stage Nine!” he screamed through a small megaphone.³⁷ (*Miss Lonelyhearts*, 59)

The image is confounding because it makes us believe that we are reading a historical novel, whose plot is set in the midst of nineteenth-century tumultuous revolutionary times, bringing to mind *L'Education sentimentale*, for instance, or a similar piece of fiction. It details every single sense impression that Tod Hackett, the protagonist of the novel, gradually acquires, and it deliberately suspends revealing what is actually the true nature of the entire procession. Nathanael West skillfully and provocatively confronts us with an effect while delaying or withholding the knowledge of its cause. Strikingly, the novel opens up with a “noisy” image: someone is making a din, there is the “jangle of iron” and the “groan of leather” (59). Tod is having an impression that the entire world is falling to pieces like a movie set, which will be a key structural metaphor throughout the narrative. In the middle of the day, he is looking at the army, “jumbled together in bobbing disorder,” passing unruly by his apartment’s window. He is utterly shocked and disoriented, having even revolutionary premonitions. Moreover, the phrase with which the entire story begins—“around quitting time”—belongs obviously to an administrative jargon; nonetheless, it is followed by an image whose historical, immortalized “heroics,” as Rita Barnard has remarked, has indeed nothing to do with “the bureaucratized time and space of the present” (178). The question is, thus, where are we?; What are we actually reading?; What do we pay witness to? Not until a strange little figure, in a polo shirt and knickerbockers—as if interrupting the marching army—shouts out “Stage Nine!,” we actually come to know that Tod Hackett “had been in Hollywood less than three months” (59) and that what seemed to be the troops on the march were actually a bunch of extras on a leisurely promenade to a shooting location.

³⁷ All quotations are from Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts & The Day of the Locust*. New York: New Directions Book, 1962.

The opening scene in *The Day of the Locust* is an atypical instance of narrative metalepsis. It represents a narrative hook by which we are propelled to mistake events at one level of reality for events at another level. Even though both actions, Tod's standing by the window and the "army" passing by the same window take place at the same level of narrated events, Tod's later comments of the entire procession as well as the interrupting "Stage Nine!" screamed through the megaphone produce an effect of narrative metalepsis. Metalepsis is traditionally defined as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into to diegetic universe...or the inverse" (Genette, 234-5). It thus stands for a violation or contamination of narrative levels and is usually manifested by such examples as when a spectator leaps on stage, or an extradiegetic narrator merges himself with the action proper, or when the author enters the scene and starts conversing with fictional characters, and so on. In that narrow sense, the opening scene in *The Day of the Locust* is *not* a metalepsis. Yet, in another sense, in which metalepsis may occur not only at the discourse level but also at the story level and may contaminate and comingle two levels of the same story, it functions as a perfect metalepsis (Cohn, 105). The narrative principle that underlies West's inaugural metaleptic vision is quite transparent: the true cause of a series of sense impressions as well as a number of physical and psychic reactions is deliberately "delayed" or suspended in order to maintain the narrative suspense, achieve the increased vividness of impact, and stir up in the reader a feeling of shock by defamiliarizing his experience of handling the story.

Metalepses are usually inaugurated and distinguished by that peculiar narrative moment where fictional characters become readers or spectators of their own stories and it is not accidental at all that we find the protagonist of *The Day of the Locust* first in the position of the spectator. Tod is looking through the window as if watching a film on the big screen. Very much like Hamlet who first stages and then watches "The Murder of Gonzago," a play within a play which dramatizes some of the key motifs of the Shakespeare play, Tod Hackett watches a procession he has not really staged but is rather *staged by* or *staged through*. From the very outset, the narrative emphasizes the simulated character of experience in the city of Los Angeles. As much as Tod seeks to establish a distance between himself and the city of

make-believe, to occupy the extradiegetic position of *a spectator of* rather than the intradiegetic position of *a participant in* the spectacle, he is deeper involved in the precession of simulacra. Genette writes: “The most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative” (236). Accordingly, the significance of narrative metalepsis in West is triple-charged. First, all general principles of metalepsis, of the contamination and short-circuiting of narrative levels, are strictly followed: what is at one level described as marching troops turns out to be a group of extras; narrative suspense is finely preserved and gradually intensified; description gets a picturesque quality and the event described gains a vividness of impact *by means of* and even *in spite of* its seminal strangeness. Moreover, the example exploits the detriments of a limited narrative perspective. *The Day of the Locust* is a third-person, or heterodiegetic, narrative and Tod Hackett is not a narrator but rather the main focalizer of the story. His perspective is, from the very outset, limited both physically, by the window that frames his vision, and mentally, by his bitter and satiric attitude to Los Angelenos and their way of life. As it has been widely acknowledged, the limitedness of narrative perspective is likely to raise two questions: are we to believe the narrator whose point of view is only relative and somewhat restricted, if not biased and distorted? But also, how does it happen that sense impressions fail to match the world and keep misinforming us about its whereabouts? How does it come that there is an unbridgeable gap between sensations and understanding and that “the forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world” may be totally out of joint “with the much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning,” as Ian Watt used to stress on his part and in relation to Conrad (175). Moreover, the opening of *The Day of the Locust* and the closing events of the novel, which we assume to be occurring on the level of narrated events, turn out to be pitched at another narrative level as well: the entire world of *The Day of the Locust* is retrospectively revealed as a painting whose process of creation we have progressively witnessed and retroactively recognized. Therefore, seen retrospectively, the opening episode of *The Day of the Locust* functions not only as a narrative metalepsis, but also as a specific *trompe l’oeil*. It induces us into mistaking actions at one narrative level for actions at another

narrative level and is a means of expressing a waning reality, a reality that is being replaced by different models of reality, up to the point when the concept of reality *as such* becomes irretrievable. Right after the introductory passage, for instance, Tod Hackett, a young painter who has come to Hollywood “to learn set and costume designing” inspects the evening crowd with a heedful eye of a painter. “A great many of the people,” he observes, “wore sports clothes,” even though none of them were really sportsmen. “The fat lady in a yachting capping was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning not from a mountain, but an insurance office,” and so on (60). Should he believe his unbelieving eye? Where does the line between truth and falsehood traverse in a world in which the authority of a reality principle, which traditionally used to sanction the possibility of skepticism, has dissolved once and for all? How one doubts in a city made for credulity and make-believe, in a city which preempts every suspicion? These are all questions tormenting Tod’s mind and permeating the narrative through and through.

Narrative beginnings are, of course, rather elusive in a sense that they can be easily marked off, isolated, and abstracted from the rest of the story. Yet, they are simultaneously tied up in a whole complex of relations with the rest of the narrative (Said, 256). Accordingly, the opening episode of *The Day of the Locust* signals the beginning of a narrative that is structured as an infinite series of metaleptic violations and narrative remediations nested one inside the other or chained one after another. Remediation is a concept broader than the concept of *ekphrasis* and describes the way in which different media recycle and refashion other media forms: Video and computer games emulate and refashion films, digital photography remediates analogue photography, while the Internet swallows and digests every imaginable visual and textual medium that historically precedes the Internet. Like the Internet, *The Day of the Locust* is an omnivore: it absorbs and refashions almost every visual form, including television, film, radio, photography, and painting.

For instance, in an episode where the Hollywood madam Mrs. Jennings, widely known and esteemed for her refinement and propensity to discuss “Gertrude Stein and Juan Gris,” throws a party, all her guests, including Tod, easily succumb to the temptation of watching a porn film. Mrs. Jennings is, after all, not just cultured and sophisticated but a successful businesswoman: she “had opened a callhouse” and “ran her business just as other women run lending libraries.” Todd’s sarcastic comparing call girls to library books cannot pass unnoticed. It especially gets prominent when he notes that Mrs. Jennings is so caring that she permits “her girls to service only men of wealth and wisdom” (73). Be that as it may, the company gathers and watches a film *Le Predicament de Marie*. It is a bizarre, light burlesque that everyone mindlessly enjoys and all goes well until the cameraman fails to focus the projector and the entire projection collapses:

The scene changed to Marie’s room. She undressed and got into a chiffon negligee, leaving on only her black silk stockings and high-heeled shoes. She was making an elaborate night toilet when the child entered. Marie took her on her lap and started to kiss her. There was a knock on the door. Consternation. She hid the child in the closet and let in the bearded feather. He was suspicious and she had to accept his advances. He was embracing her when there was another knock. Again consternation and tableau. This time it was the mustachioed son. Marry hid the father under the bed. No sooner had the son begun to grow warm than there was another knock. Marry made him climb into a large blanket chest. The new caller was the lady of the house. She, too, was just settling down to work when there was another knock.

Who could it be? A telegram? A policeman? Frantically Marie counted the different hiding places. The whole family was present. She tiptoed to the door and listened. “Who can it be that wishes to enter now?” read the title card. And there the machine stuck. The young man in evening dress became as frantic as Marie. When he got it running again, there was a flash of light and the film wheezed through the apparatus until it had all run out. (75)

Of course, this would have been only a marginal episode if the entire narrative was not predicated on the narrative remediation of experience. The film is described as a “dirty film” and “low comedy,” and truly, its plot is based on a series of repetitions and clichés invoking the slapstick or situational comedy. But in the narrative, the Marie film is remediated in a series of short, concise, and abrupt sentences that emulate stage directions and fast editing. When the projector ultimately gets stuck, it interrupts the narrative progression and induces a violent reaction in the audience that increasingly conforms its behavior to film characters. From the screen, the slapstick comedy moves to the “real” place, Mrs. Jennings’s house.

Throughout *The Day of the Locust*, reality is fatally and irretrievably compromised by characters who conform their conduct to television models, celebrities, and superstars while allowing the genre conventions of cowboy shows, soap operas, and sitcoms to shape decisively their actual lives. But not before the narrator comments in passing how “Under cover of mock riot, Tod sneaked out” of Mrs. Jennings’s party (76), do we actually realize that the scene functions as a perfect *mise en abyme*, that it not only remediates a film but rather resembles the larger work in which it occurs. For first we realize that Marie’s fate mirrors and anticipates the fate of Faye Greener, Tod’s untried, unrequited, and unconsummated love. But also, we come to know that Hollywood-movie simulacra not just literally preempt the reality of *The Day of the Locust*, in scenes modeled on cock-fights, grotesque pantomimes, and cheap romances. They preempt the reality of *The Day of the Locust* in a manner which is rather systematic and consistent for the entire narrative world is retroactively revealed to have been the world of a painting, of a mock-riot painted by Tod Hackett. Therefore, *The Predicament of Marie* is not only an instance of narrative remediation, of a film *ekphrasis* of a sort, but rather functions as an inset text that mirrors, doubles, and multiplies the primary narrative in which it occurs.

Moreover, whenever the narrative forwards a description, it makes recourse to a ready-made object. Similarly, whenever Tod makes a claim, he draws upon a painting, film, novel, or photograph, be it imaginary or real. When he, for instance, describes Hollywood as a place that instead of fulfilling wishes converts them to dregs and in the process throws them away on “a dream dump,” he resorts to Thomas Allibone Janvier’s famous novel *In the Sargasso Sea*:

Just as the imaginary body of water was a history of civilization in the form of a marine junkyard, the studio lot was one in the form of a dream dump. A Sargasso of the imagination! And the dump grew continually, for there wasn’t a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn’t sooner or later turn up on it, having first been made photographic by plaster, canvass, lath, and paint. Many boats and never reach the Sargasso, but no dream ever entirely disappears. Somewhere it troubles some unfortunate person and some day, when that person has been sufficiently troubled, it will be reproduced on the lot. (132)

And further, when he portrays Homer's desperate condition he recalls "a book of abnormal psychology" in which "he had once seen a picture of a woman...whose posture was much like Homer's. 'Uterine Flight,' or something like that, had been the caption under the photograph," Tod tries to summon back the photograph's title (171).

What are we to do then with all these instances of *trompe l'oeil*, *mise en abyme*, narrative metalepsis, and narrative remediation—of which I provided only a tiny sample—that systematically punctuate *The Day of the Locust*? Why are they so ubiquitous in West? What is their purpose and what do they ultimately achieve? It has been extensively argued that such narrative techniques disorient, defamiliarize, and disrupt the narrative in which they appear, but it has also been noted that they can serve to unify and consolidate the narrative. Whatever the case, all such transgressions of narrative levels, all such intrusions into the story world by something (or someone) that is extradiegetic and does not necessarily belong to the fictional world, are already representations of representations. Every narrative remediation, no matter does it count on erasing the signs of mediation or, to the contrary, on emphasizing and making explicit the process of mediation, comes to precede and preempt the very object it remediates. We experience the image—the product of remediation—before and even instead of its originary object. As Brian McHale has shown, such techniques, as old as literature itself, are designed to explore not solely epistemological questions that address the issues of perception and cognition, the subjective experience of time, the unreliability of all knowledge claims, and so on, but first of all to explore ontological questions that address the relationship between fictionality and reality, the nature and plurality of worlds, alternative and hypothetical worlds, and finally the processes of simulation and representation (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 10). There is, indeed, a lot of narrative padding around *The Day of the Locust*, all the way down to the very final scene that retroactively sheds light on the preceding narrative and presents it as a painting in the process of becoming, yet all that linguistic padding, all the narrative juxtaposing, layering, nesting, and stacking of levels, has solely one purpose: to replace reality as such with different models of reality and to make it difficult to determine where fantasy, performance, a work of art, or dream leaves off and

reality begins. Accordingly, Tod is in search of “one thick word and not a sentence” (168) but he is by no means able to find it. In looking for a “thick word” that would authentically express his experience of living in Hollywood, Tod only manages to find a series of insufficient supplements and substitutions all given in the form of narrative remediation. *The Day of the Locust* thus proliferates the techniques of remediation because they establish best the narrative’s *chronotope* as well as the protagonist’s mood: the action takes place in a world of make-believe and the dominant mood is that of feeling fake. “For West,” David Seed summarizes briefly, “Hollywood was primarily a place of simulation” (272). Indeed, it is almost impossible to find a single West interpreter who does not pass a comment which is more than a variation on the Seed assessment. Similarly, critical commentary on Nathanael West has often characterized the writer as a forerunner of the Frankfurt school’s engagement with the dire prospects of the culture industry, Guy Debord’s “society of the spectacle,” and perhaps, more than anything else, as an uncompromising precursor to Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation. Jonathan Veitch, one of the most notable West scholars, extensively argued how “West offered his home-grown critique of American society—a critique that seemed to anticipate the insights of all three [referred above]” (133), corroborating his statement with the already mentioned Tod’s description of the evening crowd on Vine Street, a flashy parade of yachting caps, Tyrolean hats, bandannas, and so on, that bear no relation to what they stand for—yachts, mountains, and tennis courts in respect—but function as “pure” images in a world which, as Veitch claims, “begins to dissolve” and, as a result of this dissolution, is “impossible to know” (134). Similarly, Rita Barnard, whose work on West is invaluable and still unsurpassed in many respects, compared *The Day of the Locust* to “the *horror vacui* of that America of simulacra described in Umberto Eco’s *Travels in Hyperreality*, where a frenzied passion for fakery, replication, and collection comes to seem the key national characteristic” (145).³⁸ What *is* the case, in West, has become indistinguishable from the

³⁸ Of course, all these judgments are not unwarranted. An unpublished story of West, most likely from the early 1930’s, is a readymade critical tool to be pulled out, whenever needed, as an apt illustration of West’s interest in the process of disintegration of the real into the image and the erasure of the critical border between reality and illusion. Namely, in *Mr. Potts of Pottstown*—whose very title confuses a character and a place on purpose—the eponymous protagonist, the owner of a local hunt club, lives a happy, peaceful, American life running the suburban club successfully, bothering about a very few things, or rather, about none. Just as in a fairy tale, everything goes well

sensational, spectacular, and *simulacral*, and simulation cannot possibly be subject to doubt since the latter presupposes the existence of some external content that may be either discarded as falsified, or verified as correct and then accepted. This is, indeed, the main critical juncture of West's philosophy of literature and his storytelling practice.

How does then *The Day of the Locust* work out the problem of belief in the society of the spectacle? What narrative devices and rhetorical strategies does it exploit to account of the shifting sands of "modern" belief? The novel tells a simple, drained-out story about a young painter named Tod Hackett working at a Hollywood movie studio as a set designer. He is fascinated by Hollywood as much as he is eager to grasp the professional opportunity he has been offered. As a Hollywood freshman, Tod surrounds himself with a group of people—a beautiful want-to-be actress Faye Greener he has been strongly attracted to; her father Harry, a dying vaudeville comedian and an unfulfilled actor; Earle Snoop, Faye's bragging cowboy beau; Abe Kusich, a dwarf racetrack tout, characterized by a strong, vulgar Southern accent; Miguel, Earle's handsome Mexican friend who is occupied by breeding fighting cocks; and, most

until the Pottstown folk decide to switch from one fantasy to another, from a hunt club to an alpine league. While his business is collapsing and the rival's one is on the rise, "poor" Mr. Potts sets out to Switzerland to acquaint himself with the actual Alps and beat his competition in their own game. Newly arrived, exhausted, yet eager to learn and thirsty for new experiences, he equips himself with the fancy climbing gear and goes for the Jungfrau peak. At one point, on the slopes, he is shell-shocked upon seeing a climber yodeling a recognizable tune with an artificial moustache constantly falling off his lips. Contrary to all the expectations, he recognizes in the mountaineer a young boy, Jimmy Larkin, a fellow from the Pottstown community. Jimmy's confession is quite startling:

I'm local here; I'm atmosphere. I work for the company...Switzerland is nothing but a fake, an amusement park owned by a very wealthy company. The whole show is put on for the tourist trade—lakes, forests, glaciers, yodelers, peasants, goats, milkmaids, mountains, and the rest of it. It's all scenery...It's like the opera. All fake...If you tumble into crevasse you fall on soft snow, and there is a Porter at the bottom of every one of them to brush your clothes and ask for your baggage...It's like the theater. You run no risk. (*Novels*, 441-42)

"This story," Rita Barnard comments, "could easily serve as a parable illustrating Debord's nightmare of the total invasion of the social space by the spectacle turning the world into a museum or an amusement park and rendering us all tourists and spectators: permanent fantasists" (173-74). The story in which a yodeling guy is an American from Tennessee hiding under fake moustaches, in which an entire country comes pretty close to a reality TV show, ends in a somewhat sketchy, deficient way: Is Mr. Potts transformed by the experience? What has he learned? What is going to happen to his business? Is he switching to running an alpine club instead of a hunt club, or not? All these questions stay largely unresolved, quite expectedly, since West's fiction works always by understatement and suggestion and never by narrative transparency and closure. Yet, despite all the narrative gaps, there is a hint that the main psychological, philosophical, and narrative problem induced by the Jungfrau experience is the problem of belief: What is Mr. Potts to do now? To doubt everything and become a though, consistent, unfaltering skeptic since everything may be a lie; or, rather, to believe everything since there is nothing to doubt.

importantly, Homer Simpson, a middle-aged man from the Midwest who has also fallen in love with Faye and who becomes the sole friend of Tod in the Californian desert of the real. The novel's loose, episodic structure may be described as a set of vignettes, a series of pocket-size portraits in which each character—from a quite rich and colorful gallery—is presented in a sketchy, cursory fashion. Indeed, as much as Tod keeps encountering a bunch of weird Hollywood entrepreneurs and middlemen, the novel keeps dissipating into a fragmentary narrative lacking any narrative center. It had been argued back in 1939, right upon the novel's release, that “the worst fault of the book is that it follows the choppy, episodic technique of a movie scenario,” which is all true (Milburn, 68). But the effect of a somewhat precipitously disjointed composition, reminiscent of some Hollywood screenplay writing, was deliberate on the part of the author. It resonates well with the fragmentation of experience in a city which brings mass culture to life and deprives its citizens of any social prospects. What is going on in the novel is thus less important. What matters is how the story unfolds and how it *mediates* its “insignificant” content. After a wild party at Homer's house, in which Faye and Miguel end up in bed, Homer goes astray and murders a pesky little boy on the street, which in turn precipitates a riot, a revolution, a plague of the locusts from which the Biblical title of the novel itself descends.

The “flat” character-formation seems to be in full accord with, and anticipative of, Guy Debord's view of the society of the spectacle not as “collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (5). Truly, the first thing that is peculiar to West's characterization is that his characters, as if by rule, “come across as embodied roles” (Seed, 274) and are unable to distinguish between fiction and reality, acting out their roles in everyday life as in front of the camera lens or on stage. Laurence Goldstein has rightly pointed out that *The Day of the Locust* brings up characters whose personality and appearance is entirely based on the rules of spectatorship and performance (115). Indeed, the story is simply swarming with episodes consisting of putting up a performance of some kind. Tod Hackett is, at the very outset and “despite his appearance”, characterized as “a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a Chinese box” who is, additionally, “soon

to paint” his *magnum opus* “The Burning of Los Angeles” (60). The characterization is telling in many respects, and, quite significantly, each one of these is skeptically charged. First, personality is contrasted with appearance: what you see is not what you get. Second, personality is multiple, like roles: you can put up one performance today, second tomorrow, and so on, as if pulling out different “selves” from the very same identity storage. It is impossible to comprehend most of West’s characters as stable “selves;” they are rather “conglomerates of speeches” (Barnard, 171) whose theatricality and “collage-like subjectivity reflects the fragmenting effects of capitalism” (Nell, 13). Tod is thus just one fragmentary, volatile “ego,” among the entire Westian gallery of malleable selves, whose psychological and existential instability seems to be directly dependent on a fluctuant and shaky economic system that is going through a terrible crisis. Third, Tod is characterized as a painter even though he has actually painted nothing. He was brought to Hollywood by “a talent scout” who had seen some of his “drawings in an exhibit of undergraduate work at the Yale School of Fine Arts” (60). The time has obviously passed from the undergrad period and Tod is “soon to paint”—which means, *yet* to paint—something worthy of attention. All through the book he is planning a breathtaking, grand-scale, revolutionary canvass, yet, by the end of the story, he comes up with nothing and is still to make it. In a curious way and in spite of Tod’s inactivity, “The Burning of Los Angeles” manages to paint itself up as if by means of “magic,” as I shall argue.

The discord between the image and the substance is even more pronounced in the Faye Greener’s case. The first American Lolita who likes “‘good-hearted men,’ but only as friends” and dresses like a child of twelve even though she is seventeen, whose fairy “platinum hair” and “swordlike legs” are an “invitation [not] to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than love” (67, 68), is not just a stereotypical *femme fatale*—modeled on Fay Wray, the star of *King Kong* (Seed, 274). She does not only manipulate with Tod and with all other men in the novel, particularly Homer. She is, to repeat Rita Barnard’s phrase, a permanent fantasist. She is dreaming of becoming “a star some day” (98) and just because she makes herself believe that the Greeners are born for stage—“My father isn’t really a peddler,”

she boasts, “He’s an actor. I am an actress. My mother was also an actress, a dancer. The theater is in our blood,” none of which is entirely true (98)—she spends days and days “making up stories,” petty stories, in which a young girl gets married to a Russian count and lives happily ever after, and so on. The stories that will never come true. As much as Faye’s appeal becomes gradually sexualized as the narrative progresses—“She was as shiny as a new spoon,” Tod reflects at one point (94)—the meaning of what she says comes out of joint with the bodily movements she makes: “The strange thing about her gestures and expressions was that they didn’t really illustrate what she was saying...It was as though her body recognized how foolish her words were” (159). The theatricality and inability to distinguish between life and stage comes to the foreground in one of the most direct narrative passages addressing “the falseness of an attitude:”

Being with her was like being backstage during an amateurish, ridiculous play. From in front, the stupid lines and grotesque situations would have made him squirm with annoyance, but because he saw the perspiring stagehands and the wires that held up the tawdry summerhouse with its tangle of paper flowers, he accepted everything and was anxious for it to succeed. (104)

This psychological reverie is fully resonant with the basic dilemma played out on a broader narrative level: How does it come that “the falseness of an attitude” seen from the front, is “accepted” as true, when seen from the back? Is Hollywood a relativistic paradise in which all beauty and all truth is exclusively in the eye of the beholder? Why is it that Tod Hackett, who unsparingly scrutinizes everything (and everyone) with his skeptical, rigorous, painterly eye, seems to be ready to accept the fake as something as metaphysically real as the genuine itself?

The Day of the Locust is a narrative that suggests the very distinction on which all the preceding questions heavily rely—between appearance and substance, between the imaginary and the real, between the fake and the authentic—does not really hold anymore. In Hollywood, the city built on the desert, the city which the Real deserted never to return, everything is to be “accepted” and nothing to be judged. That

is the lesson Tod Hackett arrives at after undergoing numerous incidences and adventures in his dogged persistence to separate falsehoods and liars, on the one hand, from truths and truth-tellers, on the other. Yet, in *West*, there are no simple solutions and no easy ways-out. The narrative is as complex and ambiguous as it is, for one reason only: it does not embrace what it suggests. On the contrary, all the narrative labor is actually invested to counter the narrative conclusion reached by the protagonist, not to support it.

As a matter of fact, in *The Day of the Locust*, we witness two contradictory narrative tendencies. The first consists of a discourse which purports to preempt the meaning of skepticism.³⁹ In *West*, this discourse works on many different, yet overlapping, formal and thematic levels. Not just that all the novel's characters are permanent fantasists incapable of distinguishing between fiction and reality and coming across as embodied roles, the city itself is portrayed as one huge, never-ending shooting set. It has been noted that West's patient, persistent, exhausting description—leaving none of the details out of the frame—is not just a literary parallel to what is known as cinematographic ultra-realism, but a surrogate for a hyper-real technique that was used by the managers of supermarkets already in the 1930's California where, as West portrays in *The Day of the Locust*, “colored spotlights played on the showcases and counters, heightening the natural hues of the different foods. The oranges were bathed in red, the lemons in yellow, the fish in pale green, the steaks in rose and the eggs in ivory” (87-88).⁴⁰ West's Sun Gold Market conveys not just a somewhat heightened sense of reality, passing onto us the touch of the hyper-real, it rather marks the radical reduction of the wealth of our sensory experience to the series of most rudimentary colors, just as virtual reality generates the “simulated” experience of reality, reducing everything to the most basic digital pattern of 0 and 1. The city's architecture is, similarly, described as a list of unreasonable wishes and escapist fantasies whose materialization leads not just to an uncritical

³⁹ This discourse aligns itself very well with Gertrude Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), another late modernist skeptical meditation, in which Stein poses a question how one skepticizes at all in a place such as Oakland, California? How does one fulfill a noble mission to doubt where no one else will, is a basic concern of Stein. How does one suspect in a world where, “There is no there there,” as she puzzlingly writes (289).

⁴⁰ On West's super-realism, see Barnard (1995), p. 143.

pastiche–hodgepodge of styles, traditions, and tastes—and ultimately to the tyranny of kitsch, but also to a de-substantialized landscape, a clean, empty plate made for satisfying a voracious, yet uncultivated, “cultural” appetite. Hollywood buildings are, as Tod Hackett notices, made mostly of “plaster, lath, and paper” (61), the most elastic, malleable, and least durable materials; they are made to look like buildings, while they are essentially not. Like film scenery, they could easily be dismantled and moved to another location. Hollywood is, ironically, a city on the move. Here is again the introductory passage, in which the very same technique of delayed decoding makes us realize that what has been described is truly a city, though we come to believe it is rather a shooting location:

But not even the soft wash of dusk could help the houses. Only dynamite would be of any use against the Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles that lined the slopes of the canyon.

When he [Tod] noticed that they were all of plaster, lath and paper, he was charitable and blamed their shape on the materials used. Steel, stone, and brick curb a builder’s fancy a little, forcing him to distribute his stresses and weights and to keep his corners plumb, but plaster and paper know no law, not even that of gravity.

On the corner of La Huerta Road, was a miniature Rhine castle, with tarpaper turrets pierced for archers. Next to it was a high-colored shack with domes, and minarets out of the Arabian nights. Again he was charitable. Both houses were comic, but he did not laugh. (61)

Here we see, as if in a stroke of a brush, how “dwellings in Hollywood are the residential equivalent of costume, offering roles that their occupiers can adopt” (273), as David Seed observes, rather than providing a familial, homely, resting place endowed with clear meaning and purpose.

Such discourse reaches its climax as soon as the reader comes to realize that the main character of the novel is not Tod, but Hollywood as a *set*. Jonathan Veitch has remarked that the “clichéd ready-mades of desire are so ubiquitous that even the architecture of the city come to resemble the sets on the back lot” (116). Of course, the set is a constructed space where film action is being shot, but in *The Day of Locust* the distinction between the “real” space and the “fabricated” one collapses from the very first page. Later in the novel, though, Tod stumbles upon an actual film set indeed. At first, he is thinking that the set in

question is just an attempt at a genuine historical representation of the Waterloo battlefield. Gradually, he realizes how the set—let me use Baudrillard’s words—“rather unmasks and perverts a basic reality” (*The Precession*, 346) than makes a genuine one. For, right next to the Waterloo mise-en-scène dominated by a pretty convincing Dutch mill, Tod notices the “bones of a dinosaur, the upper half of the Merrimac, a corner of Mayan temple” (131), among other scene intruders. And the progression of the image does not stop at this point. Stunningly, some forty years before Baudrillard, it proceeds in a strictly Baudrillardian logic and pace. Tod, for instance, comes to the conclusion that the whole setting rather marks the absence of reality than its presence: “Neither Napoleon nor Wellington was to be seen,” Todd notices, “In Wellington’s absence, one of the assistant directors, a Mr. Crane, was in command of the allies” (134). The transition ends up, quite comically, in an utter disaster of a pure simulacrum. Due to a “fatal error” of some extra in the “checked cap” who ordered the crew to mount a yet unfinished Mont Jean set, the set collapses in a terrible noise:

It was the classic mistake, Todd realized, the same one Napoleon had made. Then it had been wrong for a different reason. The Emperor had ordered the cuirassiers to charge Mont St. Jean not knowing that a deep ditch was hidden at its foot to trap his heavy cavalry. The result had been disaster for the French; the beginning of the end.

This time the same mistake had a different outcome. Waterloo instead of being the end of the Grand Army resulted in a draw. Neither side won, and it would have to be fought over again the next day. Big losses, however, were sustained by the insurance company in workmen’s compensation. The man in the checked cap was sent to the doghouse by Mr. Grotenstein just as Napoleon was sent to St. Helena. (135)

In a bitter sarcasm, the “fatal error” of an unknown, insignificant, and unnamed extra is paralleled to Napoleon’s misjudgment, the one that famously changed the course of the history. In a sentence which fully consummates the blurring of the lines between historical events and what is supposed to be their fictive representation, the ironic analogy is posited: just as Napoleon was sentenced to spend the rest of his days on the Saint Helena island, the poor, little, unnamed Los Angelenos is sentenced to continue to pursue his American dream in a doghouse.

Images like these multiply throughout the narrative up to the point of total *derealization*—as Fredric Jameson once has put it—of the city of Los Angeles and Hollywood society as a whole (34). Tod’s friend Claude Estee, for instance, who is a successful, rich, yet quite spoiled screenwriter, keeps “a life-size, realistic” dead horse reproduction made of rubber in his swimming pool just for the sake of fun. “But why?” asks Tod stunned; “To amuse,” is the response he receives (71). “Realistic” is, of course, a key word. For nothing is realistic in Claude’s surroundings. The character, who was supposed to be a protagonist in West’s original conception of the novel, lives “in a big house that was an exact reproduction of the old Dupuy mansion near Biloxi, Mississippi” so that he could create a faulty impression of “the Southern colonial architecture” (68). His simulated “colonialism,” his being a sole potentate of the house, is a notion undermined at the very moment when it is introduced and promoted. After the rubber horse episode, we find Claude Estee addressing his servant with a racial, Southern cliché, “you black rascal,” and again, after a certain narrative postponement, we come to know that what is supposed to be a “black rascal” is actually a “Chinese servant” (69). Claude also utters one of the most memorable speeches in the novel in which he equates love with a vending machine:

Love is like a vending machine, eh? Not bad. You insert a coin and press home the lever. There’s some mechanical activity inside the bowels of the device. You receive a small sweet, frown at yourself in the dirty mirror, adjust your hat, take a firm grip on your umbrella and walk away, trying to look as though nothing had happened, It’s good, but it’s not for pictures. (72)

In Hollywood, you do not doubt love nor do you ask yourself “does she love me?” That is Claude’s friendly advice for Tod. Claude’s rhetoric in this passage is quite reminiscent of another fully-fledged skeptical character West previously modeled—that of Shrike in *Miss LonelyHearts*. Just as Shrike teases out Miss Lonelyhearts to recognize that “Life is a club where they won’t stand for squawks, where they deal you only one hand and you must sit on it,” where one must “grab what’s on the buffet, use the girls upstairs” (*Novels*, 83) instead of waiting for a true love to come—Claude de-romanticizes love into a

simulated game of give-and-take, stripping it of any genuine temptations and hardships, and, what is more important, of any strong attachments and fatal, uncontrollable emotions.

Here lies the difference between the Conradian skeptic vis-à-vis the Westian one. While Marlow was bewildered by the ease with which Kurtz “could make himself to believe anything” (71)—keep in mind that Marlow, on the other hand, was stuck in the whirlpool of uncertainty and doubt and could basically assent to nothing—Claude, a typically Westian skeptic, is neither suspicious of love nor of those who cherish it. He might even be said to be supportive of and well adjusted to the society in which everyone “easily” makes oneself believe she has fallen in love. Truly, Claude sees love everywhere. In Claude’s eyes, love appears to be a perfect example of what Baudrillard calls “the ecstasy of communication.” It is a form of transaction, a formal protocol of give-and-go, in which nobody can actually lose, while the stakes are constantly getting higher. All this works under two conditions: do not be ostentatious and keep it for yourself, and do not expect too much. This in return explains why *The Day of the Locust* cannot generically be equated to those narratives that thematize alienation. West depicted a cruel world in which, as W. H. Auden astutely observed in what is by far the best essay written on West, “no married couples have children, no child has more than one parent, a high percentage of the inhabitants are cripples, and the only kind of personal relation is the sadomasochistic” (42). But all this has nothing to do with the alienated, capitalist, profit-driven way of life. From a writer with strong sympathies for communism one may truly expect alienation and the loss of authentic experience to be the meals from the very top of the poetic menu. However, back in 1936 when West delivered a talk on Hollywood to The Western Writers Congress, he neither addressed exploitation in Hollywood film industry nor did he engage with the problem of authenticity and alienation. He simply titled his speech “Makers of Mass Neurosis,” an essay which is now unfortunately lost (Seed, 264). It is Hollywood as a vending machine, an experience-machine, an instrument that is likely to produce whatever sort of experience one may wish to undergo,

working also on a grand scale, on a scale of “mass neurosis,” that eventually occupied West’s attention.⁴¹ Thus, *The Day of the Locust* simply brings to light a set of suppositions, a set of circumstances and ordeals, of a world in which skepticism seems to be pointless. Are the portraits of the people married without children, in need of good shape yet actually crippled, loved yet sadistic and unresponsive, are these portraits—to make use of Stanley Cavell’s meditation on the “scandalous” erasure of skepticism—the portraits “of a mad world to which reason has no response, or are they ones in which skepticism is itself, as such, accommodated to in feats of mania or indifference?” or, as Nathanael West would have put it, in feats of mass neurosis (141)?

Such is the question that leads me directly to the second discourse punctuating the main narrative current, the one whose purpose is not to preempt skepticism of any function, but to bring it back to life and to restore its meaning and purpose.

Skepticism and Satire

It is astonishing indeed how an entire school of criticism has succeeded in emptying *The Day of the Locust* of its social and historical content. According to Rita Barnard and Jonathan Veitch, a somewhat

⁴¹ The question of whether only conscious or first-hand experience can ultimately matter has been explored in depth by Robert Nozick in his groundbreaking 1974 book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Therein, he modeled a famous “experience machine” thought-experiment:

Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life’s experiences?...Of course, while in the tank you won’t know that you’re there. You’ll think it’s all actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experience they want, so there’s no need to stay unplugged to serve them (Ignore problems such as who will service the machines if everyone plugs in.) Would you plug in? What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside? (310)

As it is widely known, Nozick goes on to argue that other things do really matter to us; that we want to perform certain things instead of simply having an experience of performing them. In *The Day of the Locust*, the very same problem of agency is both historically and culturally situated: it is Hollywood as a vending machine—as both Claude and Tod tacitly assume—that hooks people up to a certain experience-generator, depriving them of any agency and free will while creating an illusion that they are still the artisans of their own fortune.

depoliticized and formalist readings of West first emerged and then spread due to a certain supremacy of liberalist post-war ideology taking over literary criticism in the early 1960's. As an illustration, here is how Norman Podhoretz commented on West's fiction in his influential essay "Nathaniel West: Particular Kind of Joking:"

Nothing could be further from the spirit of his work than a faith in the power of new social arrangements or economic systems to alleviate the misery of the human condition. West was one of the few novelists of the 30's who succeeded in generalizing the horrors of the Depression into a universal image of human suffering. His "particular kind of joking" has profoundly unpolitical implications; it is a way of saying that the universe is always rigged against us and that our efforts to contend with it inevitable lead to absurdity (in Veitch, xv)

The emphasis that Podhoretz places on the "universal," instead of local or regional, or simply American, cannot really go unnoticed. Such criticism, as Jonathan Greenberg has recently summarized, "took the suffering of [West's] angst-ridden, sexually frustrated, Dostoevskian heroes, and their withdrawal into dream, delusion, and art as symptomatic of a vaguely existentialist human condition" (116), instead of taking them as both historically determined and culturally specific. In contrast, the critics among whom one may single out Veitch, Barnard, Nel, and Strychacz, have addressed West's work in a new fashion, drawing our attention to the issues of consumerism, industrialization, popular culture, and mass media "resituating his novels within the historical and ideological context of 1930's America and finding in them a critique of the world permeated by simulacrum and commodity-fetishism" (Greenberg, 117). This second wave of West criticism has its own clear advantages, but also some pitfalls. While it certainly brought West back to his historical context and rooted his narratives in the political and aesthetic issues pertinent to late modernism and depression crisis, it has equally been reductive in its own way. The novel is here either reduced to a somewhat one-dimensional exploration of the spectacle and its discontents or to a narrative that is unsparingly coming to grips with the phenomenon of mass culture alongside its various offshoots. In contrast to all these readings, I want to emphasize the third way to approach *The Day of the Locust*. It is the way of an explicit, straightforward satire whose satirical target is not just clearly recognizable, but also explicitly stated: the masses and their potential for liberation.

In a famous passage from *The Day of the Locust*, Tod bitterly meditates on the Los Angelenos, on all those desperate mid-Westerners pouring into a big city in disorder and with no clear purpose:

All their lives they had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor, behind desks and counters, in the fields and at tedious machines of all sorts, saving their pennies and dreaming of the leisure that would be theirs when they had enough. Finally that day came. They could draw a weekly income of ten or fifteen dollars. Where else should they go but California, the land of sunshine and oranges?

Once there, they discover that sunshine isn't enough. They get tired of oranges, even of avocado pears and passion fruit. Nothing happens. They don't know what to do with their time. They haven't the mental equipment for leisure, the money, nor the physical equipment for pleasure. Did they slave so long just to go to an occasional Iowa picnic? What else is there? They watch the waves come in at Venice. There wasn't any ocean where most of them came from, but after you've seen one wave, you've seen them all. The same is true of the airplanes at Glendale. If only a plane would crash once in a while so that they could watch the passengers being consumed in a "holocaust of flame," as the newspapers put in. But the planes never crash.

Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they've been tricked and burn with resentment. Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, wars. These daily diet made sophisticates of them. The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing. (177-78)

A mastery of satire, to paraphrase Simon Critchley, involves a careful control of retractions, of stuttering and faltering in discourse, on the one hand, and, on the other, of knowing exactly when to unleash the satirical invective. The passage above provides a superb illustration of such a sort of satirical dialectic. It is significant in many respects. First, as it is widely known, West's Dostoyevskian working title for the novel was *The Cheated*, and the critical passage indeed carries the recognizable features of those who have "come to California to die" (184).⁴² The cheated are introduced at the very beginning of the novel as people "scattered among these [Hollywood's] masquerades," who loiter on the street corners and keep staring at everyone passing by with the "eyes filled with hatred" (60). Although Tod knows from the very outset "they were the people...he must paint" (60), this narrative anticipation waits up to the very end of the novel to be fully consummated. Some of the cheated previously show themselves on Harry's funeral

⁴² In an early 1933 review, West's fiction has been called the "mixture of Dostoyevsky and gin" (Troy, 55). On West's admiration for the Russian master see, Light (1958).

and Tod, as a controlling consciousness of the narrative, notices their potential for destruction. As he returns their glance, it seems to him “that they stared back at him with an expression of vicious acrid boredom that trembled on the edge of violence.” But not until the critical passage quoted above—the one that introduces the concluding scene of the street riot—the cheated actually receive their personality contours and a proper satirical treatment, as if the entire novel has only been a prolegomena for a powerful and detailed description of the betrayed and exploited Californian masses. What first strikes the eye is that West’s portrayal of the crowd has nothing in common with the benign mockery of Horatian satire, nothing in common with the tradition of the so-called “light” satire, but is rather close to the misanthropic, meditative, and brooding satire of Juvenal. It is not surprising at all that West’s satire is primarily permeated with the apocalyptic humor and with what Harold Bloom has called the rhetoric of the abyss (2), especially if one keeps in mind that West’s skeptical spirit does not cherish any hope for redemption nor does it offer any program for a fruitful, productive reform. It has been shrewdly pointed out that the purpose of satire is to stand “resolutely against the self-images of the age... and to warn us against a danger implicit in our self conception” (Critchley, *On Humor*, 36) and it is truly amazing how West manages to challenge the well-established images of California as well as the deep-rooted convictions of its citizens. By means of a clever and almost imperceptible punning play on words, which uses similar or identical phonemes for the intended paronomastic effect, the people who have come to California to *earn* and *save* turn out to be those who have come to *loose* and *slave*: “They have slaved and saved for nothing,” West coldly makes his satirical invective. In a similar verbal *calembour* typical of West, they are equipped neither for “leisure” nor for “pleasure.” But it is not only that the self-images of saving and leisure turn into their opposite, satirical twins: into the images of slaving and pleasure. West’s rhetoric of the abyss makes every single foundational belief tumble suddenly yet decisively. As David Fine has remarked the lotus land turns into the locust land (192), while “the land of sunshine and oranges” converts into an infidel conviction that the sun itself is a “joke” and that oranges are simply insufficient for the “jaded palates.”

It has been extensively argued that West's treatment of the crowds in *The Day of the Locust*, of all those mid-Westerners and inland Americans who have retired to California in expectation of enjoyment and health to find there only boredom and sickness, anticipates Walter Benjamin's view of the film's latent power over the masses.⁴³ The Hollywood population is fed by cinematography based "on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, and wars" which can produce everything but *élan vital*.⁴⁴ In the final scene of the novel, the very same crowd characterized once again as "savage and bitter...made so by boredom and disappointment" (177) first responds docilely and obediently to the radio announcer only to turn into a group of unstoppable rioters upon finding out that the film celebrities who were supposed to attend the film premiere were actually not coming.

This brief summary of West's portrayal of the urban population leads us directly to one of the crucial questions: What is the point of such an abrupt metamorphosis? How did it come that the writer with the self-proclaimed and unhidden sympathies for Communism nurtured a "deep skepticism about the revolutionary potential of the masses" (Veitch, xiv)? The answer to this question lies in the ambiguous nature of West's satirical discourse and in the way it relates to another discourse that decidedly structures the narrative as a whole: the one that preempts skepticism of any meaning. Namely, the ambiguous nature of West's satire is nicely illustrated by the critical *dissensus* that arose over its character. "West is not a satirist," W. H. Auden self-confidently writes, "Satire presupposes conscience and reason as the judges between the true and the false, the moral and the immoral, to which it appeals, but for West these faculties are themselves the creators of unreality" (43). W. H. Auden's still unsurpassed psychoanalytical reading of West provocatively titled "West's Disease," begins by stating that "West is not, strictly speaking, a novelist" (41). What does Auden have in mind when he argues that West cannot possibly be considered as a novelist? He seems to be arguing that the amount of "unreality" and the grotesque in West render him

⁴³ See, Nel (2002), especially pp. 33-36.

⁴⁴ Jonathan Veitch similarly writes: "This reductive translation of Baudelairian 'ennui' into 'boredom' is to the point; boredom contains none of the connotations of 'spirit' implicit in 'ennui,' with its suggestion that the 'heroism of modern life' consists in the resistance of an exquisite consciousness" (119).

more a pathologist of sort, similar to Richard von Krafft Ebing for example, and all his narratives more the variations of *Psychopathia Sexualis* than genuine novels that attempt at “an accurate description either of the social scene or the subjective life of the mind” (41). Of course, it should be emphasized that Auden himself does mention neither Krafft Ebing nor his *Psychopathia Sexualis*, nor do I mean by invoking the two that West keeps up the tone of psychiatric expertise in his narratives.⁴⁵ I just want to point out what West himself emphasized in one of his most revealing programmatic statements “Notes to *Miss Lonelyhearts*,” that “the great body of case histories can be used the way ancient writers use their myths” (*Notes*, 53). As it is widely known, the narrative appeal of *Psychopathia Sexualis* consists precisely of its conception of character as case, exemplified by a sequence of micro-narrative vignettes grounded upon a few charismatic, “mythic,” or unusual circumstances and personalities. Understandably, it is beyond the scope of this essay to investigate West’s predilection for the perverse and the grotesque and his wholehearted reliance on the fragmentary nature of case histories.⁴⁶ What I want to bring up in relation to Auden’s reading of West as a non-satirist, is that Auden both recognized and flashed out one of the central paradoxes of West’s fiction: How does the writer who wipes out the border between the image and its origin, between the “real” world and the fabricated one, between reality as such and different models of reality, and for whom flesh-and-blood people amount to no more than analytic “cases,” can possibly be a satirist? Auden notes that West wants to write as a satirist, yet that his fiction makes a preemptive bid in the game of skepticism. Does not West by pre-empting skepticism of any meaning, by making it both unnecessary and pointless in a world teeming with simulacra, also preempts the very possibility of satire, the very possibility of criticism as a practice of distinguishing between “the true and the false,” as Auden himself states. For, however fine-tuned and delicate, satiric narration is always aggressive, derisive, and

⁴⁵ On the importance of *Psychopathia Sexualis* for the development of the modernist aesthetics of the grotesque and for a certain modeling of character as case, see Levenson (2011), pp. 77-79.

⁴⁶ It has been extensively argued that West’s characters “resemble ventriloquist’s dummies, party dresses, mechanical toys, poorly made automatons” (Barnard, 141); that his fiction is centered on “psychosexual disorder and degeneracy...physical and behavioral anomalies as well as scatology and sexual eccentricities” (Bombaci, 25); that *The Day of the Locust* is no more than a “Hollywood Freak Show” (Nel, 269) and a certain “museum of curiosities” (Jay, 213); that he surrounds his protagonist Tod Hackett with a “galaxy of spongers, misfits, and eccentrics” deformed up to the point of non-recognition (Siegel, 10); not to mention William Carlos Williams, who is widely acknowledged as one of the most fervent apologists of West, who first drew our attention to “West’s insistence on extreme types in his narrative” and an inexplicable penchant for the bizarre and the grotesque (61).

slanderous. It requires a writer who is not skeptical and unbelieving, but determined and unyielding in his stance. As a rule, satire marches forward more with force and resolution, and less with refinement and understatement. In his “Notes on the Comic,” Auden even went as far as to challenge the very pertinence of satire to modernism. “Satire flourishes in a homogenous society where satirist and audience share the same views as to how normal people can be expected to behave...In an age like our own, it cannot flourish,” apparently due to the impossibility of distinguishing between the real and the unreal, the moral and the immoral, the sensible and the insensible, and so on, and it can only be replaced by what Auden terms “prophetic denunciation” (*Notes*, 385) which rather alludes to a somewhat divine distance of the author from the world than to an unmediated engagement of the satirist with it.⁴⁷

If it is true that instead of aiming at hypocrisy and duplicity, exposing folly and excoriating vice, the satirical flash flood unleashed in *The Day of Locust* stalls on the freeway called ethics and morality, it is so because the narrative first dismantles the very notion of objectivity. The point is that *objectivity*, in a traditional sense of a grasp of things, is a necessary condition for the satire to flourish. In West, however, hardly anything is left of objectivity.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Auden was not left alone in his view that West’s “simulated” narratives preempt their own satiric potential. Daniel Aaron, one of the most illuminative readers of West, similarly argued that “there is nothing of Juvenal, or of Johnson or Swift or Smollet” in *The Day of the Locust*. He argued that in the novel based on a certain *circulus vitiosus* in which illusion breeds disillusion and vice versa, there is actually no place for any satirical treatment. “Because of his close identification with what he described,” Aaron writes, “his cast of whores, paranoiacs, con-men, and sadists are never presented with the detachment which we expect from the true social castigators that lash out against moral aberration” (79). Like Auden before, Aaron also emphasizes that the amalgamation of the real and the unreal, the satirist and the fictional world he creates, forestalls the very possibility of satirical discourse. He sees in West’s predilection for exaggerations of all sorts not a satirical, but rather an impulse that aims at simulation, as if West’s narrative, as another critic has pointed out, actually “unleashes the moral entropy it purports to decry” (Greenberg, 119).

⁴⁸ All this has already been observed by Adorno, who related the alleged disappearance of satire in modernism and its immersion with the narratives of simulation, to the very loss of objectivity that characterizes modern experience:

The impossibility of satire today should not be blamed, as sentimentality is apt to do, on the relativism of values, the absence of binding norms. Rather, agreement itself, the formal *a priori* of irony, has given way to universal agreement of contempt. As such it presents the only fitting target for irony and at the same time pulls the ground from under its feet. Irony’s medium, the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared. The former resigns itself to confirmation of reality by its mere duplication. *Irony used to say: such it claims to be, but such it is*; today, however, the world, even in its most radical lie, falls back on the argument that things are like this, a simple finding which coincides, for it, with the good. (211-12, my emphasis)

It should be also noted that the entire group of critics held an opposite opinion and argued *against* Auden. Unlike Auden, who negated that West may be labeled as a satirist, Martin Jay, the eminent West's biographer, centered his groundbreaking biographical study precisely on West's satirical spirit, putting a special emphasis on West's trying to figure out "how to satirize illusions" (4) at a time when they have become a key component of modern experience and indistinguishable from the facts.⁴⁹

What are we to do then with such a critical disagreement? Is West a satirist or not? How could one be a satirist and a skeptic at one and the same time? Is not the satirist, as George Meredith once has put it, "an *ipso facto* moralist" (in Greenberg, 5)? Kundera writes: "Satire is a thesis art; sure of its own truth, it ridicules what it determines to combat" (202). Is not then the satirist the one *in the know*, the one who is acquainted with the fallacies and wrongs so that he could subsequently expose them? Is not the satirist the one who has overcome all skepticism and who writes from the position of authority, credence, and certainty, surely not from the position of doubt? In *The Day of the Locust*, this ambivalence is nicely captured by Tod who is wondering what to do—to make a revolutionary, prophetic painting or compose a piece which is less explicit, more allusive, and philosophically nuanced:

Adorno's reflection "from the damaged life" is quite simple: satire is possible only when one may justifiably say that something is *not* the case. *Such* it claims to be, Adorno says didactically, but *such* is actually not. If one's entire life is made up of illusions, up to the point that it becomes impossible to stand outside of them, how could one then possibly extricate himself from the ideological net that always binds tightly, structuring even the unconscious itself. Note: In his thought-provoking study on the relationship between modernism and satire, Jonathan Greenberg draws heavily upon both Adorno and Auden. While I am fully indebted to Greenberg, I would like to emphasize that my goal is completely different, and that Greenberg never aligns the discourse of satire to that of skepticism.

⁴⁹ Similarly, Alvin B. Kernan, whose contribution to the theory of satire is still highly valuable, saw in *The Day of Locust* a satirical novel *par excellence* and argued how West "like many satirists...deliberately leaves any positive, reforming element out of his work" (54). Finally, James F. Light, the author of the first book-length study of West noted that West was "a satirist who felt in his bones the necessity of laughing at everything – love, death, ambition, etc.," and made of West a complete and thoroughgoing satirist whose narrative technique inventively blends the elements of folk humor, surrealist humor, black humor, and ultimately apocalyptic humor (130).

He told himself that it didn't make any difference because he was an artist not a prophet. His work would not be judged by the accuracy with which it foretold a future event but by its merit as painting. Nevertheless, he refused to give up the role of Jeremiah. (118)

Tod's refusing to give up the role of Jeremiah mirrors West's refusing to give up the role of a satirist. However, one may also argue that the satire is a first-class skeptical genre since it undermines and parodies the inherited system of genre-conventions, the one that is handed over to every new generation of writers as a literary legacy and poetic guidance? Are not some of the very first skeptical narratives, such as Lucian's dialogues, for instance, written in a form of satire?

West was genuinely aware of this sort of ambiguity. What is evident throughout *The Day of the Locust* is that West works hard to stabilize and strengthen his irony and to make the satiric scene of a disorderly society riddled with social, political, and cultural anomalies as explicit and repulsive as possible. He does not even refrain from using quotation marks to make us sure that what characters say should not be taken literally. In a critical passage that addresses the elusive relationship between Tod and Faye Greener, the narrator lets us know, for instance, that "Tod was a 'good-hearted man' and she liked 'good-hearted men,' but only as friends." The narrator goes on to suggest that Faye "wasn't hard-boiled. It was just that she put love on a special plane, where a man without money or looks couldn't move" (67). The theme of love and genuine affections is the novel's leitmotif. That Claude conceives of love as a gambling game and a certain protocol of give-and-go is a well known matter. Yet, striking in the above passage are West's quotation marks. They are as redundant and superfluous as they are conspicuous. If someone gives love a "special" status by means of putting it on a plane accessible only to rich men, is not that enough for the Westian satire to work? Are the quotation marks truly necessary to label such an obvious ironic phrase as "good-hearted men?" Why does West double-mark an expression which is apparently satiric in intent and indubitably ironic in meaning?

That West wants to make his satire explicit and dig it out from underneath the numerous layers of simulation is also evident in the satirical tone of indignation he adopts. Tod's irony is of a militant kind and is marked by his ability to mimic convincingly all the personae and incidences he gets to mock. It is an irony marked respectively by directness, minimal transfer of meaning, lack of tolerance, and rigorous denunciation. Of "the people who come to California to die" and who are to become the true subject of his painting, Tod directly and derisively says that "they were only the pick of America's madmen." Yet, the narrator soon informs us that Tod "'changed the pick of America's madmen' to 'cream'" (118). As an instance of satirical narration, this sentence testifies very well to the fact that West was afraid that his satire might have been robbed of its satirical potency and direction. For that reason, he does not just strengthen the discourse of satire by marking off two unequivocally ironic expressions with quotation marks, but even makes Tod mimic the author himself by writing that Tod has "changed" one expression for another. For Tod is, at that narrative point, neither writing nor painting. He sits in a room, tries to put Faye out of his mind, and meditates on "the series of cartoons" he is still to make "for his canvas of Los Angeles on fire" (118). The question is then: "changed," but how and where? In his mind? Certainly neither on paper nor on canvass. Needless to say that such an intrusion of the extradiegetic remark proves my initial thesis that *The Day of the Locust* teems with narrative metalepses and narrative remediation. For, who is speaking here? A satirist, or a skeptic? A writer, or a painter? Someone who writes with images and is capable of *changing* "the pick of America's madmen" to "cream" mentally and visually, or someone who paints with words and is capable of double-marking satirical expressions and images?

Such narrative tensions have led some notable critics to argue that "West's fiction at once manifests and resists a satiric impulse, and [that] the push and pull of this ambivalence constitute the central dynamic of his work" (Greenberg, 115). It seems to me that West shared the same feeling. He knew very well that the urban Californian population "have been gathered together so that they me exploited" (50)—as William Carlos Williams once summarized what West's novelistic material actually consisted of—yet he also sensed very well that the world permeated by make-believe, simulacra, and commodity fetishism

preempts the possibility of critique as such. He knew very well, as Doug Haynes has wittily put it, that “a culture industry [is also] a consciousness industry” (345). Famously, West wrote of himself as being “a comic writer” for whom seemed utterly impossible not to laugh at things, no matter how they actually been sad, noble, or serious (*Novels*, 794). In a famous letter to Malcolm Cowley, he confessed how what was supposed to be a detailed description of the meeting of the anti-Nazi League in *The Day of the Locust*, turned into an unexpected opposite: a group of people watching porn film. Here is a key statement, a sort of West’s poetic *credo*, in which West addresses all the conundrums he had been through while he was writing *The Day of the Locust*:

I am a comic writer and it seems impossible for me to handle any of the big things without seeming to laugh or at least smile. Is it possible to contrive a right-about face with one’s writing because of a conviction based on a theory? I doubt it. What I mean is that out here we have a strong progressive movement and I devote a great deal of time to it. Yet...I find it impossible to include any of those activities in [*The Day of the Locust*] I made a desperate attempt before giving up. I tried to describe a meeting of the Anti-Nazi League, but it didn’t fit and I had to substitute a whorehouse and a dirty film. The terrible sincere struggle of the league came out comic when I touched it and even libelous. (in Veitch, xii)

The confession is quite illuminating. First, it testifies to West’s inability to relate to everyday politics and to his deliberate distance from the orthodox communist left. Second, it shows that if West was a satirist at all, he had been the one with no correction program and no moral message. Third, it tells a story of West as an arch-debunker, a travesty-master, whose very touch turns everything into a mockery and burlesque. Fourth, it carries a self-reflective, skeptical statement that dominates the entire opus of West: “I doubt it,” West imperceptibly states. But more than anything else, it reveals that West was hesitating between the two discourses, between the two poles, the one that disables the function of skepticism and empties the meaning of satire, on the one hand, and, on the other, the discourse that seeks to restore both their balance and relevance. In the last part of the essay, I will briefly investigate how West managed to overcome this tension. He came up with a powerful narrative technique, which is as old as literature itself, and which mirrors a paradigmatic shift in epistemological perspective of late modernism. It is the technique of *ekphrasis*.

Skepticism and *Ekphrasis*

It has been extensively argued that *The Day of the Locust* is actually a story of the painting “The Burning of Los Angeles,” and that the entire novel “desultorily builds towards the final chapter” (Rhodes, 37) in which Tod Hackett’s painting manages to paint itself off as if by means of magic. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, no critic of West has ever acknowledged that *The Day of the Locust* is not just the story of the painting but, first and foremost, a sustained and systematic narrative *ekphrasis*.

Indeed, *ekphrasis* is slowly built from the outset. We are first introduced to Tod who, while examining the evening crowd—all those desperate dreamers “who have come to California to die”—decides that “they are the people he must paint” (60). Thereupon, we are timidly acquainted with the fact that Los Angelenos made quite an impression on Tod: “From the moment he had seen them, he had known that, despite his race, training, and heritage, neither Winslow Homer nor Thomas Ryder could be his masters and he turned to Goya and Daumier” (60). But in the course of time, with Tod’s disillusion and disappointment on the rise, even such a virtuoso of the grotesque as Honoré Daumier, gives way to another master of the grotesque, Alessandro Magnasco:

As he watched these people writhe on the hard seats of their churches, he thought of how well Alessandro Magnasco would dramatize the contrast between their drained-out, feeble bodies and their wild, disordered minds. He would not satirize them as Hogarth or Daumier might, nor would he pity them. He would paint their fury with respect, appreciating its awful, anarchic power and aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization. (142)

The first genuine *ekphrasis*, the first narrative description of an imagined work of art, comes at the point when Tod seems to be sure what he wants to do with the painting, and how is it supposed to look like. His composition is based on a stark contrast between the beauty of the naked female body and the sublimity of the violent, mass protests:

In "The Burning of Los Angeles" Faye is the naked girl in the left foreground being chased by the group of men and women who have separated from the main body of the mob. One of the women is about to hurl a rock to bring her down. She is running with her eyes closed and a strange half-smile on her lips. Despite the dreamy repose of her face, her body is straining to hurl along at the top speed. The only explanation for this contrast is that she is enjoying the release that wild flight gives in much the same way that a game bird must when, after hiding for several tense minutes, it bursts from cover in complete, unthinking panic (108)

But his confidence soon gets shaken by an entire storm of skeptical questions. First, as much as he tries "to put Faye out of his mind," she appears to be slipping out of the canvass as well, and the entire composition gets drastically changed. Second, even though "he was going to show the city burning at high noon," he is a little bit insecure as to how the flames are to "compete with the desert sun," how are they to appear fearful alongside a "terrible, holocaust" sun. While he wishes the burning city "to have quite a gala air...to appear almost gay," and those who have set it on fire to be just a regular "holiday crowd," he also wonders "weren't he exaggerating the importance of the people who have come to California to die." He then begins questioning his own estimation of the Californian mob as a demonic, maniacal, destructive, and wrathful collective entity. While he initially believed that "it was a mistake to think them harmless," he now endeavors to appease himself by hypothesizing that "maybe they weren't really desperate," or even, that "they were only the pick of American's madmen and not at all typical of the rest of the land." But all these doubts followed by quick consolations come at a very high price. While Tod feverishly seeks to calm himself by repeating that "he was an artist, not a prophet," his revelation that "there would be civil war" unleashed by the Angelenos (118) gets entirely fulfilled in the novel's final episode, in which the angry crowd storms the city just because the awaited film stars have not showed up at a movie premiere. The "locusts" run over Tod, Adore gets killed by Homer, Homer is then crucified by the crowd and the novel ends up in a sort of general hysteria reminiscent of the apocalypse. As Tod tries to run the gauntlet with one of the legs injured, the final touches to his "Burning of Los Angeles" are being made:

Despite the agony in his leg, he was able to think clearly about his picture, “The Burning of Los Angeles.” After his quarrel with Faye, he had worked on it continually to escape tormenting himself, and the way to it in his mind had become almost automatic.

As he stood on his good leg, clinging desperately to the iron rail, he could see all the rough charcoal strokes with which he had blocked it out on the big canvass. Across the top, parallel with the frame, he had drawn the burning city, a great bonfire of architectural styles, ranging from Egyptian to Cape Cod colonial. Through the center, winding from left to right, was a long hill street and down it, spilling into the middle foreground, came a mob carrying baseball bats and torches. For the faces of its members, he was using the innumerable sketches he had made of the people who have come to California to die; the cultists of all sorts, economic as well as religious, the wave, airplane, funeral and preview watchers—all those poor devils who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence. A super “Dr. Know-All Pierce-All” had made the necessary promise and they were marching behind his banner in a great united front of screwballs and screwboxes to purify the land. No longer bored they sang and danced joyously in the red light of the flames.

In the lower foreground, men and women fled wildly before the vanguard of the crusading mob. Among them were Faye, Harry, Homer, Claude, and himself. Faye ran proudly, throwing her knees high. Harry stumbled along behind her, holding on to his beloved derby hat with both hands. Homer seemed to be falling out of the canvass, his face half asleep, his big hands clawing the air in anguished pantomime. . . . Tod himself picked up a small stone to throw before continuing his flight (184-85)

This extensive summary of a somewhat steady and pedantic building of *ekphrasis* towards the climactic point in the story, is intended to show that *The Day of the Locust* is structured around an imagined work of art and that it can be read as a sort of long-drawn *ekphrasis* imbued with a specific meaning and purpose.

The question is, though, what meaning and what purpose? How does the *ekphrastic* discourse of the novel relate to those of simulation and satire? Does it have any impact on the discourse that preempts the meaning of skepticism, on the one hand, and additionally, does it have any influence on the discourse that is supposed to “satirize” the American dream and the people who are dreaming it?

Ekphrasis is, of course, both an ancient literary device and an autonomous literary genre. “The verbal representation of a visual representation,” in W. J. T. Mitchell’s words (152), or in a simple yet lovely John Bender’s phrase “literary descriptions of real or imagined works of art” (in Scott, 51), is as double-edged and enigmatic literary phenomenon as satire itself. The study of the relation between literature and the visual arts spurred an entire industry of definitions and theories in which *ekphrasis* has been viewed as

a device that “frustrates narrative movement” (Baldwin, 19) and sides with *description* at the expense of *narration*; as a narrative technique that teaches us “how to read a work of literature spatially...or decode a painting...as if it were a text” (Heffernan, 1); as a literary principle whose function is to create a plasticity of the image, a plastic presence, a “spatial word” able to turn the fictional world upside down and “still” the moment (Krieger, 256); even as an entire philosophy of art and a mode of thinking whose central goal “might be called ‘the overcoming of otherness’” (Mitchell, 156).

In all these theories, the double movement of *ekphrasis* involves both the *ekphrastic* fear—advocated famously by Lessing—that the marriage between the linear flow of narrative and the extension of spatial form would produce only the centaur-like children⁵⁰; and the *ekphrastic* longing that “speaking out,” “giving voice to a mute object,” granting presence to something which is absent, may ultimately lead to a successful and productive fusion. But *ekphrasis* does not just offer “an alternative poetics of space” (Scott, 303), nor does it only represent a symptom of “the self-consciousness of the author’s form” (Leach, 104). Its function is much more radical and its workings much more complex. Essentially, *ekphrasis* challenges all the foundational epistemological postulates involved in every fictional representation, but at the same time, offers a way out of the skeptical predicament. Valentine Cunningham has brilliantly elaborated how the *ekphrastic* forensics works:

Writing is always tormented by the question of real presence, by challenges to knowability, by the problematic of truth and validity, the difficulty of being sure about what it might be pointing to outside of itself, by its deictic claims and desires, by what its grammar of pointing, its *this* and *that* and *there* might be indicating, by what if anything is actually made present to the reader when the text says, with Jesus at the Last Supper and the priest at the eucharistic table, Hoc est..., this is...The ekphrastic encounter seeks, I think, this ancient and continuing doubting by pointing at an allegedly touchable, fingerable, *thisness*...In the given, or claimed, actuality of the shield, or urn, tapestry, sculpture, or painting brought thus into the text, re-represented as text, there is none of the gap between sign and referent that so commonly troubles writing and writers (61, original emphasis)

⁵⁰ In a memorable wording by Lessing such a sort of marriage would make as much sense “as if a man, with the power and privilege of speech, were to employ the signs which the mutes in Turkish seraglio had invented to supply the voice” (68-69)

Does Valentine Cunningham's theory of *ekphrasis* really hold? Whatever is made present as fingerable and touchable does truly create the so-called "l'effet du réel," as Roland Barthes would say. The *ekphrastic* encounter may indeed wish to halt skepticism by relying on the obvious presence, as if *ekphrasis* is saying in an imperative mode *touch this!*, *look that!*, *feel with your finger* and *behold with your own eye*. But, the *ekphrasis* of West, does the opposite: it "unreals" and dissolves the object to which it previously gives both voice and shape. And the logic on which West's entire novel rests, the logic of his over-stretched *ekphrasis*, is analogous to the logic of skeptical "defamiliarization." What I mean by skeptical defamiliarization—and here, I modestly follow Stanley Cavell's views of skepticism—is that the skeptic does not commonly challenge the metaphysical and abstract notions or feelings. She actually challenges my ordinary beliefs, beliefs that go without saying, and ultimately asks me (and tells me) what I have already known: for example, how do I know that I have two hands instead of one?, and so on. Philosophical skepticism typically draws upon "thought experiments," miniature tales of fiction, that turn on some unusual, uncanny supposition such as—how do you know you own name (you could have been a changeling)?; how do you know you are not a brain in a vat?; how do you know that you do not live in the Matrix?, and so on—inviting us, just as *ekphrasis* does, *to doublethink* of our own name, *to touch* our own skin, *to look* at *this* and *that*, *to imagine* an unusual turn of events that might have taken place in the world which we inhabit. In a word, skepticism inaugurates an *ekphrastic* encounter with the world and it is the only philosophical mode of thinking that may be, quite justifiably, called *ekphrastic*. In a famous Cavell's coinage, the skeptic "replaces my ordinary" causing a creepy, eerie feeling (134). He estranges the world from me by asking me first to touch it. And this is precisely what the *ekphrasis* of West does, and what it does to his satire in the first place. While Tod seeks to paint of "the messianic rage" (142) of the manipulated and exploited people and of "their eyes filled with hatred" (60), he never brings his project to completion. The proper target of his satirical invective cunningly eludes his much avowed intention. He does satirize how explosive the eruption and the wrathful force of the mob is. He satirizes its destructiveness, its triviality, and its illusory character as well. But, quite strikingly, while the entire

narrative minutely prepares the concluding scene—what is supposed to be a revolution on the streets of Los Angeles—the long-awaited revolution takes place *as if* only on Tod’s canvass. The ending’s instability, its uncertainty, is really impressive, and it is also dazzling how the discourse of *ekphrasis* takes over the discourse of satire. While “Tod was carried along in a slow, steady push” by the brainwashed, crazed crowd—which is all supposed to function as the climactic moment of the satirical treatment—when “he closed his eyes” the riot dissipated into the frame of the painting: “*In the lower foreground*, men and women fled wildly before the vanguard crusading mob;” “Homer seemed to [be] *falling out of the canvass*” and so on (184, my emphasis). As Philip Nell has keenly put it, “*The Day of the Locust* forces its readers to conduct a reality check on their own” (36) by making the reader ask is the street rebellion “real” or fictive?; does “the lower foreground” refer to what Tod is sketching, or imagining in his mind, or does it refer to the actual world of the riot? It has been extensively argued that Nathanael West heavily relied on film language and film technique in his writings. His “abrupt” narrative technique is compared to the jump cut (Steiner, 158); his descriptive method to “the scenic sense which is the hallmark of his more mature fiction” (Seed, 266); while some of his characters, such as Harry and Homer, have been aligned with the silent cinema actors in their performing silent mimes and overstressed gestures (Allmendinger, 108). But in this particular case, one may even speak of a certain “double-exposure,” of a certain fade-out in which the actual world disappears as Tod closes his eyes and his mind darkens, followed by an unexpected fade-in in which the riot gradually brightens and appears as a recognizable content of Tod’s painting. Furthermore, the uncertainty of the ending and the narrative as a whole is even more salient and complex because we cannot know for sure has Tod ever finished “The Burning of Los Angeles,” or has the *ekphrastic* encounter remained only on the level of Tod’s wishing. W. H. Auden made a powerful case reading West’s novels as suffering from a peculiar “West’s disease:” “a disease of consciousness which renders it incapable of converting wishes into desires” (43). The narrative offers some evidence that Tod’s painting never really progresses any further from its elementary stage; or, to use Auden’s terminology, that Tod never converts his initial wish into an *ekphrastic*, “fingerable,” indubitable, fulfilled desire. The wave of fury that is carried out on the street of Hollywood

and the religious militancy of the people led by a scandalous, fascist-like priest “Dr. Know-All Pierce-All,” serve both as a cautionary remark that claims to knowledge may ultimately lead to extreme violence, and that the conflict between a cheerful promise offered by both religion and cinema is quite incompatible with the furious eschatology of the first and the simulated, make-believe character of the second. From the perspective of Tod, Hollywood provides an outlook lamentable in every respect: not just that it is unfortunate that the things are as they are, but it is also deplorable that most people lack the rage to revolt against this state of affairs, and instead turn their dissatisfaction into an irrational killing spree.

But, who guarantees that Tod’s mind is also not programmed, and simulated? Who issues a warrant that we are not just looking at the picture, at an imaginary, wished object which does not exist, whose life story does not take place, at an object which is both “mute” and absent and to which only Tod’s imagination sympathetically responds by giving it a certain voice and by making it happen.

Let me conclude my analysis of the *ekphrastic* discourse in *The Day of the Locust* by pointing out that the apocalyptic vision on which the novel rests is, just as *ekphrasis* itself, equally double-edged. The apocalypse is, of course, the most vivid happening one could ever imagine. It is the emanation of all those “plastic” and strong passions that are in true possession of human beings: rage, fury, “death drive,” primary aggression, pride, and so on. Yet, just as the flames of the city burning look like a *piece of cake* in comparison to the desert sun—one of the technical, painterly problems that Tod never really manages to overcome—West’s apocalypse is not fearful at all. It is rather of a spectacular, even humorous, nature. The participants of West’s Day of Judgment are quite comic and relaxed, prone to make dirty little jokes and sexist comments such as that “Ripping up the girl with scissors” is wrong, since the scissors are “the wrong tool” (183). And Tod himself, after being hauled up in the police car, begins “to imitate the [police] siren as loud as he could” (185). This travesty of the apocalypse, this merging of the spectacle and doomsday, is a perfect match. In a recent book on the rhetoric of rage, Peter Sloterdijk has argued that apocalypticism may be considered as the ultimate form of spectatorship, and everything in West—people,

buildings, emotions—is indeed a product of spectatorship. “To witness such a process,” Sloterdijk writes on the very expectation of the end of the world, “means to become a special kind of theatergoer. Among all kinds of possible spectacles (*Schauspielen*) the end of the world is the only one for which one does not need to invest any resources to get a special seat. It suffices to be born” (95). This condition is fulfilled by all West’s characters. Because they are born into the city of make-believe, some of them die physically, some of them die mentally, some of them get stoned. But all this may have only taken place on the surface of the painting.

* * *

There is a moment in *The Day of the Locust* in which Tod observes how Faye Greener’s father, Harry, groans in pain. Harry is a typical Westian hero characterized by the inability to draw a clear line between performing and living. As an ex-vaudevillian, he often emulates that he is being sick in order to manipulate other people, trigger their compassion, and finally make them pay for his “service.” One day he is even “wondering himself whether he was sick or not” (90). Realizing that he should be sick, he abruptly “jumped to his feet and began doing Harry Greener “as a sick man” (91), and his pantomimic repertoire is suddenly being unleashed to such an extent, as if to make of Harry a grotesque theatrical toy, an acting-out automaton. But there is more to Harry’s chronic pantomimes. His incapacity to distinguish himself from the different masks he regularly puts on, his inaptitude to draw a boundary between himself and the roles he plays, comes at a high price. When he finally gets deadly ill, no one believes him and Harry passes away. Tod is looking at him “modulating from pain to exhaustion,” but in spite of his compassion and sympathy for Harry, he can only see how Harry “got the maximum effect out of his agonized profile” (119). Even on Harry’s deathbed, he has been perceived as lying about his pain. “Tod began to wonder if it might not be true that actors suffer less than other people,” but quickly and somewhat arbitrarily decides that he is wrong (119). Even dead, Harry still carries the sheer theatricality

of all his grimaces. On the day of his funeral, placed in the coffin and finally at rest, he still looks like “the interlocutor in a minstrel show” (125).⁵¹

Thus, Tod finds himself in a typically Cartesian predicament: Is Harry a groaning automaton, or is he really in pain, that is the question? Indeed, this critical episode captures the spirit of the entire novel. It does not just illustrate to what extent the skeptical problematic permeates West’s fiction, it is also directly responsible for *The Day of the Locust*’s impact on the skeptical narrative to come. First, this particular scene exerted a discernible influence on the French post-war fiction. Tod’s doubting Harry’s pain has been replicated many times: for instance, in Meursault’s doubting Raymond and in his indifference to killing Raymond’s Arab friend.⁵² Second, it might be considered as a distant precursor to an entire series of contemporary Hollywood films—to a specific burgeoning genre of films—that address simulated environments, societies of total control, or entire lives made up of illusions, such as *The Matrix*, *The*

⁵¹ How do we know that someone is in pain is an ancient skeptical problem. It challenged the Presocratics as much as it challenged Wittgenstein, Russell, and Cavell, to mention only a few twentieth-century philosophers that tackled a perplexing problem. However, the idea that each one of us is a self-enclosed monad and that each one of us has an inner life made up of thoughts, feelings, and internal vibrations, took hold not before the seventeenth century. There is a moment, though, in Homer’s *Odyssey* for instance, in which Odysseus gets the highest possible acclamation just because he could cry “inwardly,” that is, with his eyes dry when looked from the outside. As it is widely known, Odysseus is such an unequalled trickster for he can keep his private life for himself and protect his feelings from being publicly known and shared. But it is only in the seventeenth century and with Descartes that the problem received a typically modern formulation: How can we ever get outside of our own private, inner experience? How could we possibly know that there are minds associated with other human bodies, when all that is immediately observable are only bodies and bodily reactions? In the last part of the Second Meditation, Descartes stated the problem memorably:

We say that we see the wax itself, if it is there before us, not that we judge it to be there from its color or shape; and this might lead me to conclude without more ado that knowledge of the wax comes from what the eye sees, and not from the scrutiny of the mind alone. But then if I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happened to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves just as I say that I see the wax. Yet, do I see anymore than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind. (21)

The number of responses to Descartes’ “wax-automaton meditation” is enormous. Perhaps, the most important is the one made by the existentialist philosophers—Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, first of all— who argued, back in the 1920’s, that we deal directly with the world, that we are “plunged” into it, that we do not process the information entirely detached from the object of observance, but are making the object, and are made by it in return, through our inspection. Inspection is, thus, always-already a sort of interaction.

⁵² Another skeptical narrative of West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, in which he created an eponymus, unmatched skeptical character, “the skeptical and unbeliever-in Christ of a faithless age” (Fiedler, 128), had been translated into French by Marcelle Siobon, as *Mademoiselle Coeur-Brise* in 1946, with an introduction written by Philippe Soupault.

Truman Show, *eXistenZ*, *Fight Club*, *Total Recall*, or not so long ago *Inception*, to mention only a few examples.⁵³ Third, with its *ekphrastic* plotting, West's *Locust* is a perfect example of a proto-postmodern *ekphrasis*, the one that is usually credited for raising the stakes of representation high, making of itself a perfect skeptical tool.⁵⁴

Finally, and most importantly, it truly perfects a long narrative tradition that comes into the question of a certain pointlessness of skepticism.⁵⁵ In Hollywood, *The Day of the Locust* shows us, skepticism is not just useless but unthinkable. Such a conclusion runs counter to West's intention to write a satire as well as to Tod's wish to come up with a revolutionary, satirical painting. The riot scene turns out to be a mock-riot as if it is taking place only virtually, while the entire novel is retrospectively revealed to be a painting we have been looking at from the beginning. *Ekphrasis* thus mediates between skepticism and satire. It controls the Westian satire by taming the anarchic power of the riot that his satire seeks to unleash. But it also keeps a tight rein on the discourse of skepticism by not allowing it to make the entire world unreal and chimerical.

In the next chapter, I will cross the Pacific and settle in Russia. In this novel context, I will explore a narrative that tames neither skepticism nor satire but rather releases the powers of both. My topic will be Ilya Ehrenburg's skeptical masterpiece, the novel *Khulio Khurenito*.

⁵³ Skepticism is, these days, quite marketable, which may be an ironic proof that even such a resistant philosophy of life cannot really escape the clutches of the market.

⁵⁴ On postmodern *ekphrasis* and its aporetic, skeptical character, see Heffernan (1993), pp. 135-189.

⁵⁵ In his illuminative essay, "What is the Scandal of Skepticism," Stanley Cavell quotes from Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* and argues that Schopenhauer envisions a world in which skepticism may not just be pointless but even "unthinkable." The critical passage, so typical of Schopenhauer, which declares "the ancient wisdom of the Indians" as that which sees the world as nothing but a dream, "the veil of deception," "a world of which one cannot say either that it is or that it is not," a world which is "like the sunshine of the sand," and so on, is being first brought up and then analyzed word by word by Cavell. "The world as representation," Cavell goes on to argue, "accepts from the beginning the worst... that the world we mostly say we know has no more intellectual worth than a dream" and that such a "phantasmagoria"—"the world as will, or the will as thing-in-itself"—cannot really be doubted (141). If Cavell is right in crediting Schopenhauer to be the first modern philosopher to envisage the society of the spectacle and to preempt skepticism of its purpose, then Nathaniel West may be credited for being the first modern novelist to give the same problem a narrative expression.

Chapter 3

Skepticizing with a Hammer: Ilya Erenburg's *Khulio Khurenito* and the Rhetoric of Over-identification

Introduction

In the Russian context, skepticism has hardly ever been understood as a circumspect and moderate philosophical position, careful to question all circumstances, consider all consequences, and possibly lead either to better judgment or the suspension of judgment. Much of late realist and early modernist Russian fiction is centered around the problem of belief and the notion of doubt, but it gives both a rather peculiar flavor. In Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862), for instance, Bazarov offhandedly suggests with his characteristic contemptuousness that the logic of doubt is grounded neither on inquisitiveness nor on the suspension of judgment but on rejection. Nowadays, he says, everything should be subject to rigorous doubt, yet, he also adds that "nowadays the most useful thing of all is rejection—and we reject" (166). To Bazarov, rejection is the foundation of skepticism.⁵⁶ Similarly, Dostoyevsky's characters—Raskolnikov is the best example—take their doubts and uncertainties to their ultimate limits and end up being either morally bankrupt or immobilized between crime and conscience, resolution and hesitation, action and the lack of belief that is supposed to justify the action. Dostoyevsky's poetics, Bakhtin writes, requires "the creation of extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea" (114), and in many cases the philosophical idea or question that is being tested is precisely can any kind of action avoid belief entirely? What are the moral and political implications of skepticism, on the one hand, and, on the other, what are the consequences of giving oneself lightly to the sheer power of beliefs? And further, in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*—which is published in series from 1873 to 1877 in the periodical *The Russian Messenger*—and which is now unanimously considered as a classic of ripe realist narration, there is a famous passage in which Levin is accused of having no firm convictions and of being incapable of having

⁵⁶ In Turgenev's famous essay *Hamlet and Don Quixote* (1860), Turgenev similarly writes that in spite of "the strain of indifference," Hamlet's skepticism contains "a destructive force" (102).

any beliefs whatsoever.⁵⁷ Even communism is better, his brother lets us know, than the thoroughgoing skepticism of Levin. Levin thus finds himself stuck in a dire whirlpool of doubt but ultimately manages to overcome his *skepsis* and becomes the only proactive character in the novel. The Russian critic, Boris Eichenbaum, whose reading of Tolstoy is still unsurpassed in many respects, drew a straight, biographical line between Levin and Tolstoy and argued extensively that what bothered Tolstoy most had been precisely his perpetual lack of positive beliefs. He even went further to suggest that Tolstoy's legacy to modernism, if there is any, may be captured by one single question: Is life without beliefs livable at all? Or, with a slight revision of Eichenbaum, the question may be put as follows: Can the skeptic live his skepticism through and through?⁵⁸

⁵⁷ I am using the terms *belief* and *conviction* interchangeably though I am not denying that they differ in meaning. A belief is something that is subject to change and is thus more provisional and contingent; a conviction is not. Whenever we speak of *absolute* truth, *necessary* action, *certain* knowledge, and so on, we speak of those categories in terms of conviction, not belief. Having a conviction thus implies not only that one is having a strong belief, but that the belief is such that it can neither be challenged nor revised, let alone be substituted.

⁵⁸ The problem of belief seems to be a specifically modernist preoccupation. While Kurtz could let himself to believe "anything, anything," Marlow is stuck in a whirlpool of doubt. That is the condition of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the critical juncture in the narrative. Whereas Marlow finds himself "amazed," incapable of pursuing any significant action, Kurtz is the hero of our times, the very embodiment of the capitalist, entrepreneurial spirit, a fearless man who is likely to go as far as needed. Even before Conrad, in Baudelaire, the same dilemma appears with a striking regularity and unprecedented power. Baudelaire kept repeating, somewhat compulsively, "I have no convictions, as the men of my century understand it," as if he felt that his time was out of joint, and that he himself was belonging to another historical period, perhaps the one yet to come (in Klein, 91). Just as Tolstoy may have created Levin after his own image, Baudelaire pulled together an entire gallery of men-without-convictions in *Le Spleen de Paris*—published posthumously in 1869—of all those do-nothings and mischief-makers, dangles, bohèmes, ragpickers, dandies, gamblers, farceurs and flâneurs, whose life Benjamin masterfully interpreted as defined solely by a somewhat dazzling uncertainty and whose heroism has not just been that of everyday life, as Baudelaire would have insisted, but that of commodification to which even Baudelaire himself, as a poet, was not immune and ultimately succumbed to. Understandably, from someone who at least two times explicitly supported political uprisings and at least twice edited reactionary newspapers condemning them, one could hardly expect better. But the true question is what sort of life Baudelaire "advertised" and what kind of self-fashioning model he bequeathed to the generations to come? Was Sartre right when he argued that Baudelaire's shifting political views had nothing to do with the honest intellectual *skepsis* but were only a clear indication of *bad faith*, which presupposes that whatever is held in check or put in doubt is even more revered and simply taken for granted, taken *as such*: "The more he attacks it [the system of values of the bourgeoisie, or any belief whatsoever], the more he secretly respects it; the rights that he openly contests, he preserves intact" (225), Sartre bitterly characterizes Baudelaire's guiding maxim of "having no convictions."

This legacy will heavily bear down on an entire gallery of protagonists at the turn of the century, marked by a specific skeptical sensibility and the lack of any piloting beliefs—as in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Letter of Lord Chandos* (1902), Gide's *Immoraliste* (1902), Musil's *Young Torless* (1906), or Mann's *Tonio Kröger* (1903), to mention only a few most illustrative examples. All Kafka's no-name and no-beliefs characters will directly evolve from mid- or late nineteenth-century "men without convictions;" we will also get Musil's people "without qualities" as well as Beckett's notorious characters distinguished not just by a proverbial lack of beliefs, but even by the very lack of bodies.

Is life without holding beliefs worth living and to what consequences it may possibly lead then? Following this question, in this chapter I want to resuscitate one of the forgotten modernist masterpieces, Ilya Erenburg's outstanding novel *The Incredible Adventures of Khulio Khurenito and His Disciples* (1921), simply known as *Khulio Khurenito*, whose eponymous hero is, from the very outset, introduced by a typical modernist, skeptical mantra as "a man without convictions," a "saint without a religion," and a "sage without a degree from the philosophical schools" (10).⁵⁹ In the course of the novel, though, one finds out not just that Julio is a thoroughgoing skeptic and truly a man without convictions, but that he is also the most "opinionated" literary character ever made.⁶⁰ One can hardly find a topic on which Jurenito does not have a firm, unshakable opinion which he lavishly bestows upon his disciples and interlocutors. What are we to do with such a paradox? What kind of skeptic is that? Is he a skeptic at all? What makes him a *modern* skeptic, and what aligns him to Nietzsche's view of skepticism as a proactive, and not passive, philosophy of life? Or, may not he only be a pretender, an "*agent provocateur*," a tempter who simply flounders in the Sartrean bad faith (Erenburg 10, original emphasis)? Those are some of the questions I shall address in detail. Significantly, each one of them springs from the same root—from the intricate relationship between the rhetoric and politics of skepticism.

What is then the politics of skepticism? Beginning with Aristotle, a political subject (*politès*) is defined as someone who *partakes* (*metexis*) in the life of a political community. Every political subject is caught in a double bind: between ruling (*archein*) and being ruled (*archestai*). If there is any such thing as the essence of politics, it lies precisely in this very relationship. Even in the smallest imaginable community, there must be someone who determines what is good and just, what are the rules of

⁵⁹ "он был человеком без убеждений," "праведника без религии," "мудреца, не прошедшего философского факультета" (Erenburg, 4).

⁶⁰ A brief note on transcription: Hereafter *Khulio Khurenito* refers to the title of the novel, Julio Jurenito to his protagonist, Erenburg (Ilya) to the author of the novel, and Ehrenburg (Ilya) to the fictional character named after the author.

communal living, and what are the goals that a community may seek to achieve? In order to be established and pursued, such categories as the common good, rules, goals, and so on, must not be contingent and subject to doubt. As Jacques Rancière writes: “Right from the start something else is needed—justice, the power of what is better over what is less good. There are greater and less noble tasks, jobs that are more or less degrading...and all these must be distinguished” so that a political community could function at all (Rancière, *The Order*, 267). Yet, how does the skeptic *partake* in the life of a *polis*? For skeptics, everything is subject to doubt and nothing can serve as the ultimate, indubitable foundation of a society? For that reason, skeptics are commonly accused of either negativism or passivism. The argument runs something like this: whoever doubts everything and ultimately assents to nothing have no basis for involvement in public affairs at all. Any participation in the life of a political community requires knowledge and positive beliefs. Claims *to know* are not just ubiquitous but necessary in both public government and personal conduct. But in the skeptic’s view, politics is not a matter of clearly defined agendas and established truths, nor is it a matter of firmly held beliefs and necessary decisions. If this is true, what are then the political implications of skepticism? How does the skeptic go around in the world? How does he participate in the social life? How does he justify the system in which he lives? On what basis does he criticize political and social institutions? And, ultimately, whether the skeptic can maintain at all the notions such as common goals, laws, rules, morals, obligations, and so on? Most scholars who have investigated the political implications of skepticism agree that skepticism based on excessive doubt and perpetual suspension of judgment would make any kind of life impossible. Is not the final result of skepticism such, asks Julia Annas, that it “precludes any half-way serious practical commitment to any moral project” (Annas, 22)? Skepticism is thus both morally and politically problematic because it corrodes various sets of beliefs and knowledge claims necessary to sustain governance and make agency, understood both as a capacity of exerting power and subjecting oneself to those who rule, possible. If one’s beliefs and knowledge claims are only contingent and doubtful, why would anyone advocate and propagate them?

Whether or not skepticism leads to quietism and indifference represents a topic proper to this chapter. In what follows, I shall argue that this is by no means the case. As John Christian Laursen has noted, if skeptics could not challenge the political and ideological system on the basis of knowledge, “they had [also] no reason to accept its legitimacy on that basis either” (5). The significance of Erenburg’s novel lies precisely in the way it represents this double bind, the one that is highly pertinent to the development of skeptical narrative in its most general contours. For, in the figure of Julio Jurenito, Erenburg creates one of the most challenging fictional representations of skepticism. He creates a skeptic who is neither suspensive, nor doubtful, nor apolitical, nor is his rhetoric noncommittal and defensive. On the contrary. He portrays a skeptic who is both committal and decisive. As I interpret the novel, my focus will be on the creation of the skeptical identity within the text, on the narrative “voice” or discursive persona that both represents and legitimizes the ever-shifting psycho-political profile of skepticism. What rhetorical outlets those who have no convictions employ to talk their interlocutors out of knowing something will ultimately be my primary concern. It should be noted at the outset that *Khulio Khurenito* is a novel largely based on dialogue which fulfils the important narrative functions of characterization and driving the plot forward. But the prevalence of dialogue in the novel also foregrounds speech and argumentation and keeps narrative input to a minimum. The novel’s very structure thus explains why I slightly deviate from the beaten path and read the novel both as a form of writing and a form of arguing. Narrating and arguing are not the same thing, but in Erenburg one is often being slipped on the back of the other. For that reason, Erenburg’s writing is sustained by contradiction, arguing on both sides of the question, hyperbole, and oxymoron, keeping its reader continually off balance. His narrative is animated by incompatible discursive modes such as rational argumentation, journalistic reports, philosophical dialogue, anecdotes, and so on. However, Erenburg uses all these discursive antinomies for a specific purpose: to enable his characters to express and embody the changing function of skepticism in the twentieth century. I shall argue, and this is the key point, that the political function of skepticism in the twentieth century is neither moderation, nor *epochē*, nor is it doubting and questioning as such, but is rather a call to action and a relentless, often even violent, critique of ideological systems, historical processes, philosophical

doctrines, and political institutions. To all this, Erenburg's narrative gives nothing less than a unique expression. My chapter has a tripartite structure. First I focus on the skeptical thematic in the novel. Thereafter, I deal with Nietzsche's reevaluation of skepticism and with how it has been re-appropriated and fictionalized in *Khulio Khurenito*. Most importantly, I will minutely elaborate on the concept of over-identification by means of which twentieth-century skeptics express themselves and challenge some of the deepest and oldest misconceptions of skepticism. In the concluding section, I will wrap up the entire argument with a discussion of the political merits and pitfalls of skepticism.

Khulio Khurenito's Skeptical Underpinnings

The life and times of Ilya Erenburg were so rich and tumultuous that even a modest attempt at providing a brief biographical sketch seems to be quite complicated and doomed to failure. Accordingly, I do not read Erenburg as a skeptic in any simplified or unreflective sense. To the contrary, I treat him as a writer who creates a complex narrative, a skeptical satire that works on a grand yet subtle scale, and uses it as vehicle for self-reflection and a means of thinking through the perils and downsides of modernity. From a writer who has been frequently accused of being Stalin's "literary" watchdog and an agitprop mercenary, one could hardly expect any explicit skepticism.⁶¹ Nobody expressed better what kind of fate fell upon Erenburg than Nadezhda Mandelshtam, the spouse of a famous Russian acmeist poet Osip Mandelshtam, in a letter addressed to Erenburg in 1963, four years before his death and immediately after he had been attacked by Khrushchev for the views espoused in his fresh-published memoirs:

You know there is a tendency to accuse you of not reversing the direction of rivers, of not changing the course of the stars, of not breaking up the moon into honeycake and feeding us the pieces. In other words, people always wanted the impossible from you and were angry when you did the possible (in Rubenstein, 6)

⁶¹ In the 1920's, when *Khurenito* was both written and published, Erenburg had truly been a harsh critic of Bolshevism. The accusation refers to the later period of Erenburg's life.

But this position of a usual suspect that has been regularly allotted to Erenburg, luckily enough, has not lasted forever. As Joshua Rubenstein, Ilya Erenburg's rigorous biographer, has compellingly shown, Erenburg's political loyalties were rather "tangled" than straight and unequivocal. And, one may say, that even Nadezhda Mandelshtam had been wrong in her defense of Erenburg and her judgment that he only did what was possible to do at the time. For nothing like his *Incredible Adventures of Khulio Khurenito* had appeared before either in Russian or any other European national literature. Ultimately, it turns out that Erenburg managed to the impossible, if not by means of his real-life activism than at least by the help of one of his books.

While Erenburg himself may have been a person who could hardly be described as a skeptic, nonetheless he managed to show some strong affinities with skepticism in virtue of his viciously incredulous character. As Joshua Rubenstein argues, Erenburg indisputably became the most influential and widely read journalist in the Soviet Union. While most correspondents and war-journalists "protected the high command [of each party involved] from criticism," and presented the war in a beautified and polished fashion, allowing themselves to be put into the services of propaganda machinery, Erenburg did not succumb to this practice and showed both a professional and intellectual honesty and courage, making a lasting exemplar of journalistic independence and impartiality. "He did not glorify the war," Rubenstein goes on to say, "A *skeptic by temperament* he found it easy to resist the war's grandiose appeal. His years in the Bolshevik underground and the Rotonde Café immunized him from the allure of political authority" (36, my emphasis), and I would add, from the allure of any sort of dogmatism.⁶² While it is still a matter of contention had Erenburg really been "a skeptic by temperament" or not, it could hardly be denied that the novel's skeptical mood contributed greatly to Erenburg's reputation of a man, who, like his protagonist, had no convictions.

⁶² Joshua Rubenstein's reference to Erenburg as a journalist also addresses the later period of Erenburg's life and is primarily associated with Erenbrug's writings in the 1940's.

It is crucial to note that in Russian culture recourse to the journalist form of writing has always been linked to skeptical mentality and interpreted as a reaction against philosophical idealism and political dogmatism. For instance, Aleksandr Herzen's decision to devote himself to political journalism "came through a clear confrontation with philosophical idealism" (Clowes, 53), just as Vasilii Rozanov's feuilletons have been read not only as a gutter work of journalism but also as an unrelenting skeptical critique. In a similar fashion, narrative journalism permeates *Khulio Khurenito*. Though a piece of fiction, the novel abounds with reports, "articles," news, journalistic jargon and catchphrases, and a certain prioritizing of information and conversation over narration. Erenburg's journalism thus reads like fiction just as his fiction is structured around the system of values such as timeliness, conflict, novelty, accuracy, and the like. There is, of course, a rationale to such a narrative method. Guided by his experiences of the First World War, October Revolution, and the Bolshevik rule, Erenburg explores not just the state of unconditional certainty—for those were the times in which there were far too many who considered their views uncontested and absolute—but also the state of an uncompromising doubt—needless to say that those were also the times in which there were far too many who doubted everything, even their own views. This particular paradox that consists of an inexplicable and, perhaps, up to that point in history, unseen merging of skepticism and dogmatism in their harshest and least conciliatory forms, is what makes Erenburg's take on skepticism both unique and unprecedented, and also explains Erenburg's merging of conventional journalism with fiction writing. But, it also opens up a much larger problem. How did we come from Nietzsche's famous proclamation from *The Will to Power*—"What is needed above all is an absolute scepticism toward all inherited concepts" (409)—to an absolute confidence in all those brand new, yet untested political projects and agendas characteristic of the first half of the twentieth-century? There lies the deepest significance of Erenburg's novelistic practice: it explores and thinks through the early twentieth-century skepticism, through the death of all those ideals, principles, and values that were once unconditionally set upon humankind, yet, in thinking through "the twilight of the idols," it contests the issue how does it come that idols are still being reborn. Similarly, his narrative method of showcasing facts from the First World War and the October Revolution while narrating a story

of an imagined skeptic, allows Erenburg access to subjects and people not usually considered newsworthy, thereby offering an increased potential for social critique.

While much of literary modernism carries the stigmata of difficulty and incomprehensibility, Erenburg's novel is anything but difficult. Namely, it tells a very simple story and heavily relies on traditional, well-tested narrative devices. Written in the course of just one month in 1921 in the seaside resort La Panne in Belgium—in a state of Erenburg's double-exile both from Russia and France—the novel centers its story on a strange figure of the Mexican origin, named Julio Jurenito, whom novelistic double of the author, Ilya Ehrenburg, keeps dubbing as “the Teacher” throughout the novel.⁶³ As a charismatic leader, the Teacher then gathers a group of blind followers, a group of disciples, who, despite all the differences, have at least one thing in common: each one of them represents a national stereotype. This is how we get a crew consisting of a proverbially practical, missionary-inspired, and merciless American, Mr. Cool, who is contrasted to the French quasi-bourgeois *bon vivant*, Monsieur Delet; then the anarchic and careless Italian, a sloth of a sort, Ercole, who is counterbalanced by the punctual, systematic, yet fanatic and racist German, Karl Schmidt; finally, a superstitious, naïve, animistic, yet good-natured Senegalese immigrant Aisha negatively compares with another exile, the pathetic, literary-centered, God-searching Russian bookworm, Alexei Spiridonovich. Last but not least, the agile and “assertive” Teacher stands in a stark contrast to the novelistic double of the author and the primary narrator of the novel, Ilya Ehrenburg, who is, very much like Conrad's Marlow, overwhelmed by an onslaught of doubt and hesitation. Thus, the very “casting” of characters seems to be grounded upon a system of binaries, and the novel's grasp is in this way both anthropologically and culturally “panoramic” and all-inclusive: it simply purports to render a comprehensive, yet satiric, sample of Western civilization and the entire humanity. After gathering his little circle of disciples, Julio sets them all on a journey, mostly through Europe and Russia, and the rest of the novel is set up as a road trip. As it has been widely argued, the road provides a

⁶³ Julio Jurenito's name, in addition to being quite idiosyncratic and untypical of Russian literature, represents also the author's tribute to the canonical Mexican painter, Diego Rivera, also known widely as the husband of Frida Kahlo.

typical *chronotope* of the so-called picaresque novel, and what follows is deeply embedded in this particular generic setting.⁶⁴ As much as classical *picaro* does, Julio Jurenito uses his wit and experience to extricate himself and his disciples from a number of sticky situations they all get into, but also to ask the most provocative, offensive, and outrageous questions pushing his clueless interviewees as well as his disciples, while quizzing them, to the highest conceivable limits of discourse, until they simply crack under pressure and burst into either violence or desperation.

In some of the first reviews of the novel, both traditions have been clearly recognized and given credence to. Marietta Shaginian, for instance, compared the novel with “great satires of the ancient decadence and European satirical novels-panoramas” (in Lipovetsky, 63). She had been thinking, most likely, of the Menippean satires written by Lucian or Petronius, along with its early-modern counterparts, especially Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and having this in mind, she had been indeed quite right. Yet, while this is the tradition Erenburg, no doubt, draws heavily upon and borrows from, the panoramic scope of his enterprise is more reminiscent of the works of art yet to come, such as Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* (1924), or Fellini’s *Casanova* (1976). Interestingly, the novel is severely criticized on the very same basis and for the very same reasons it has been unsparingly praised. Yurii Tynianov, one of the leaders of Russian Formalist movement, picked up precisely from the novel’s being solely satirical *tour de force*, from its episodic and hackly structure, and from its picaresque and adventurous nature and thought of it as no more than a piece of crafty yet literary unworthy journalism:

Despite the fact that Erenburg’s philosophical system included Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche, Claudel and Spengler, and in general whoever wasn’t lazy enough—or perhaps, precisely because of this—his protagonist had become lighter than a feather, he transformed into pure irony. . . . Erenburg’s novel is a reflected novel, a shadow of the novel (in Lipovetsky, 64)

⁶⁴ “The chronotope of the road,” as Bakhtin extensively argues, “is associated with encounter” (243). In addition to this, Bakhtin emphasizes that it “is especially appropriate for portraying events governed by chance” (244). Both observations are fully applicable to *Khulio Khurenito*. First, the novel is structured as a series of road-encounters. Second, they all take place by mere chance. Now, if there is any such thing as a skeptical novel, one may describe it as a novel in which precisely chance and contingency propel the events. On chance as characteristic of skeptical narrative, see Thorne (2009), pp. 283-284.

It is both curious and quite telling how Tynianov's 1924 review splits in two directions. On the one hand, he criticizes Erenburg for making a too light-weighted novel. On the other, he attacks it on the basis of being exclusively, or predominantly, the novel of ideas, the so-called novel with the thesis, which consummates itself supposedly in one single purpose—in advancing, illustrating, and defending the thesis in question, in reflecting upon it obsessively. It may be said that while much of the novel amounts to an outright, straightforward satire, and while much of its language is plain, unrefined, and editorial, its lack of subtlety and metaphoricality is only partial. For Tynianov, and many other Erenburg “incidental” readers, missed some important layers of meaning that make of *Khulio Khurenito* a sophisticated and ambiguous skeptical narrative. Truly, it is a satire, and a thesis novel whose characters are, as Bakhtin would have put it, “ideologues,” and it is a “collection of extravagant lampoons” (Rubenstein, 76), and an editorial, as if written by a spin doctor or a ballyhoo artist, but it is also a finely-nuanced seduction novel, a layer of meaning which is never previously acknowledged nor commended. Erenburg works as hard as he can to make Jurenito's anarchism and skepticism as attractive as possible. The Teacher's verbal seduction of the still inexperienced Ilya, and other disciples as well, is reminiscent of Lord Henry's seduction of young Dorian derived from a model, turn-of-the-century seduction novel, Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, for instance. The analogy cuts deep down to the point that some of Jurenito's disciples—Aisha and Alexei, for instance—end up committing murder, just as Dorian does. The novel is also abundant with speeches and speech-act situations—needles to remind you of Lord Henry's maniacal talking and philosophizing—neither because of its very *syuzhet*—a teacher preaching to his students—nor due to Erenburg's alleged penchant for a columnist-like, socially engaging style. It is lavish with speeches for they seem to be a perfect means of showing Jurenito's openly instrumental attitude towards other people as well as of illustrating that his skepticism is not a deviation from his society's values, but a parodic intensification that renders such values even more visible and lays them completely bare.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ A similar argument in relation to Oscar Wilde's Lord Henry has been forwarded by David Mazella in his great book on modern cynicism. See Mazella (2007), especially, pp. 198-208.

Indeed, many parallels, essential and incidental, may be drawn between the two skeptical seducers, Henry and Julio. Both are characterized by the two fundamental Pyrrhonist maxims: Julio, as “a man without convictions”—which is a prerequisite for any type of skepticism—and Henry, as a man who keeps saying of himself “I never approve or disapprove of anything” (111), which represents a typical skeptical disclaimer, required all over Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. The skepticism of both entails an obsessive inversion of commonplace values—such as love, marriage, freedom, art, religion, church, war—always opting for the opposite side of the spectrum, and even being able to argue on both sides of the issue at one and the same time. Rhetorically speaking, from Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines* on, skepticism represents neither a doctrine nor a philosophical school, but a method of arguing that, as Christiane Thorne has shrewdly pointed out, “teach[es] a set of techniques along the lines of: *If a philosopher says x, you say y*” (24), picking up school by school, teaching by teaching, philosophy by philosophy, in order to shut each down. “Skepticism is always striving to position itself beyond philosophy,” he goes on to observe, “cheerfully taking hold of any philosophical arguments that it can turn against philosophy itself” (25). And this state of mind, rather than a school of thought, can indeed be tracked down in both Lord Henry and the Teacher. If it was said *marriage is good*, Henry would have sarcastically added “the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties” (203); similarly, when, at the beginning of 1914, a book was published in London entitled *The Encyclopedia of Mechanical Love*, “something like a version of modern Kama-Sutra,” written by the eleven most experienced Parisian prostitutes, Jurenito would have willingly given his assent to write an introduction to this “unrivaled” piece of art: “You have turned life into art,” he addresses the prostitutes, “a difficult science, a complex machine, a splendid organization, anything you like except life” (73).⁶⁶ If it was said *war is bad*, here is how Jurenito would have addressed his disciples over-identifying with the very vistas of the ongoing war:

⁶⁶ “нечто в роде современной ‘Кама-Сутры’,” “Вы сделали жизнь искусством, трудной наукой, сложной машиной, великолепной организацией” (69, 70).

My simple-hearted boys, do you really think it's easy to end war . . . Now everybody's got used to it. Never mind if we are all doomed to death; in the meantime it's a good sport . . . It isn't that people have adjusted themselves to war, but the war had adjusted itself to people. From a hurricane it has become merely disagreeable draught . . . This war has come to stay for decades, perhaps for centuries. Don't laugh, there will be peace treaties and all sorts of idyllic pleasures in between. The war will change its forms, like a stream that sometimes runs underground. It will resemble an almost repulsively delightful peace. (163)⁶⁷

Similarly, if it was said *freedom is necessary*, here is how Jurenito would have commented on the matter:

Away with freedom, it is heavier than the yoke, it is too much for us. Is freedom conceivable without perfect harmony? It quickly transforms itself into disguised enslavement. I become free by oppressing another . . . Don't be taken in by the beautiful fables and the nostalgic sighs for Hellas. All these are merely poetic formulations of a single truth. Freedom does not exist and has never existed . . . What humanity is heading for today is by no means paradise but the harshest blackest, sweatiest purgatory of all. The twilight of freedom is at hand. Assyria and Egypt will be exceeded by this new, unheard-of slavery. But the slave-galleys are a preparatory stage, a token of liberty—not the liberty of the statue in the square, not of the penny-a-liner's hackneyed idea, but of created liberty, faultless in its equilibrium, the *ne plus ultra* of harmony. (217-18)⁶⁸

And so on. However, while Henry and Julio, the two skeptical archetypes, may indeed have many things in common as verbal seducers, naysayers always on the lookout to disagree, both sharing the aura of a genuine social appeal, there are still some significant differences that one may spot between them. As it is widely acknowledged, half through the novel Henry simply comes off the dramatic stage and plays no role in Dorian's final doom, a structural fact that makes of him a somewhat pitiable and secondary character. Yet, this never happens to Jurenito. He is the center of Erenburg's narrative universe and no one else is entitled to take over his position. Similarly, while Lord Henry perverts moral issues "because

⁶⁷ "Наивные ребята, вы думаете, что так легко прикончить войну?...Теперь обжились. Ничего, что 'смертники'—пока сдобная булочка! Быт!...Не люди приспособились к войне—война к людям. И урагана она превратилась в неприятный сквозняк...Война ет на десятки, а может быть, и на сотни лет. Не смейтесь: в промежутках будут мирные договоры и вообще всяческая буколика. Война будет менять свои формы, как ручей, порой скрывается под землей и напоминать до отвратительности трогательный мыр" (167).

⁶⁸ "Уберите свободу, она тяжелее всякого ярма! Разве мыслима свобода вне полной гармонии? Она быстро превращается в скрытое рабство. Я становлюсь свободным, угнетая другого...Не верьте прекрсным басням и вздохам об Эладе...Все это лишь поэтические оформления единой сущности. Свободы нет и никогда было. ...Теперь человечество идет отнюдь не парадизу, а к самому суровому, черному потогонному чистилищу. Наступают сумерки свободы. Ассирия и Египет будут превзойдены новым, несслыханным рабством. Но каторжные галеры явятся приговорительным классом, залогом свободы—не статуи на площади, не захватанной выдумки писаки, а свободы творимой, непогрешимого равновесия, предельной гармонии" (223-4).

he wishes to enjoy people's sins as they were work of art" (Mazzella, 202), Jurenito has a much broader agenda in mind: to expose the heart of darkness of the entire Western civilization which is founded upon a grounding, yet self-contradictory, myth of modernity. In both cases though, the very feature of belief—Dorian's or Ilya's, the Victorian laymen's or the disciples'—is tested against Henry's or Julio's disbelief respectively. As if both novels have set the very same goal of untangling which one is less favorable: the quality of unreserved belief or that of excessive doubt.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ I paraphrase here David Mazella. Here is what he says on the problem of belief as it has been elaborated in Wilde's *Dorian Gray*: "Yet Wilde, for all his supposed cynicism, seems by the respective fates of Dorian and Lord Henry to suggest that it is Dorian's fate, not Henry's, to become the grotesque monster. As the true believer, in Henry's 'poisonous theories,' Dorian experiences sins and consequences that Henry never imagines. *Which is worse, Wilde tacitly asks, Dorian's quality of belief or Henry's cynical disbelief?*" (205, my emphasis). While these power relations between Lord Henry and Dorian do not fully match onto the relations between the Teacher and his disciples, the same question of belief transpires through both novels. Moreover, the complexity of Ilya Erenburg's *Khulio Khurenito*—and the proof that it is not only a dry, one-dimensional satire—may also be shown by means of linking it to another classical skeptical narrative, Denis Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*. Some structural parallels between these two skeptical tales are simply striking. First, just as *Khulio Khurenito* opens in the Montparnasse café Rotonde, in which a desperate and impoverished poet named after the very author of the novel Ilya Erenburg, is aimlessly hanging on and "waiting in vain for someone to liberate [him]" from hunger and boredom by paying him a lunch, Diderot's fictional double, "Moi," is taking his time in the garden of the Palais-Royal, then the fashionable meeting place of both the French aristocracy and the *demimonde*. In both cases, a strange intruder breaks the everyday routine adding disorder into what seems to look like a perfect daily order. In Diderot, an eccentric figure, a nephew of the great composer Jean-Phillipe Rameau, "Lui," first unexpectedly shows up and thereafter totally unsettles Moi's composure, as if getting him count to ten in order to pull himself together. In Erenburg's case, an even stranger figure, a Mephistophelian tempter who makes an impression of being dispatched by the Devil himself, equally unexpectedly, comes along and changes the entire Ilya's life. "A pair of small horns rose steeply from the locks above his temples," Ilya observes, and, after a mysterious newcomer orders himself a beer, Ilya goes on to give further voice to his own disgust and fear "The devil drinking beer! I could not bear it" (17). The similarities between "Lui" and Ilya go to such enormous details that, inevitably, bring up a hypothesis that Erenburg must have read Diderot's famous dialogue and used it as a sort of proto-text for his novel. Just as Ilya, for instance, long awaits to be saved by someone paying "the patient garcon six sous" on his behalf, "Moi" informs us that whenever the notorious nephew "has less than six sous" (34) he quickly relies on a cabby he knows for help.

And even further, in both stories homely places such as the garden of the Palais-Royal and the café Rotonde, quickly turn into their unhomely counterparts. "The whole harmonious structure I had built was collapsing," says Ilya upon seeing the ghostly, demonic apparition. And "Moi" feels much the same, with a difference of not having a diabolical component. But this is not all. One cannot help but notice one further uncanny moment in common to both narratives. Strangely, the character who recounts the story in *Khulio Khurenito* and represents its narrative focal point is of the same name as the author of the novel—Ilya Erenburg. Analogously, one of the characters directly involved in *Rameau's Nephew* two-person dialogue, which is also the same one that introduces us to the meeting and makes all narrative comments and digressions is emblematically and restrictively called "Moi," a deictic device referring, most logically, to Diderot. The question is, then, what are we to do with such naming? Are we supposed to read both stories as literary biographies? Or memoirs? Or diaries? Or confessions? Does the biographical, documentary element grant both stories some level of authority and "probability," which would otherwise, due to a certain unlikelihood and "unreality" of the characters they render, lack? As if the authors were aware of the fact that the very portraying of such belligerent skeptics—as "Lui" and Jurenito indubitably are—would come out completely unlikely, and that the entire undertaking should better be supported by a quasi-documentary material and given a pseudo-actual appeal. All this, I contend, provides clear narrative evidence for a long-time philosophical stance holding that skepticism is rather hard to get going and to be believed in.

I have just described how the Teacher came to existence and what sort of skeptical backup has been exploited by the author so that the narrative's complexity could be both diversified and amplified. But the true question is: What does the Teacher teach? What is his mission and goal? How the skeptic teaches his skepticism? Is skepticism teachable at all?

The Teacher sets his mind on either bending the high powers, if possible, if not, on stirring the underworld of civilization.⁷⁰ And that is precisely what he is doing throughout the novel. In its introductory part, which functions like a narrative preamble and a certain homage to the memory of the great Teacher, the narrator Ilya lets us know how Julio Jurenito taught his disciples “to hate the present” and how, in order to intensify the hatred even more, “he opened before our [the disciples'] thrice astonished eyes a chink of the door leading to the great and inescapable tomorrow” (10).⁷¹ That Jurenito is a prophet and that his mission is messianic is also confirmed by a number of *topoi* related to the life of Christ. As Zsuzsa Hetenyi has already noted:

Events of the Teacher's life are peppered with commonly known emblematic elements of the life story of Christ. Jurenito dies in Spring, during Easter, at the age of 33. He is born 12 years before the end of the century, dies in the year 21, 12th of March... The Italian Ercole becomes his disciple in the scene that profanes and paraphrases the biblical miracle of Christ's resurrection of Lazarus: 'stand up and go.' Before his death Jurenito eats a pear and wipes his face with a kerchief – this is the last supper of kinds in the company of disciples who will soon betray him... (in Lipovetsky, 69)

⁷⁰ In order to flesh out what is that that the Teacher teaches, I am recycling a motto from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* that he took instead from Virgil's *Aeneid*. “Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo” – “If I cannot bend the high powers, I shall move the Hell.”

⁷¹ “Хулио Хуренито учил ненавидеть настоящее, и, ..., он приоткрыл перед нами дверь, ведущую в великое и неминуемое завтра” (4).

Not just his mission, but his motto is also prophetic: “Defile the sanctum, break the commandments, laugh, laugh, laugh loudly when laughing is forbidden, and with your laughter...clear place for him who is to come that there should be emptiness to receive that which is empty” (49).⁷²

In order to create this space of emptiness, Julio confronts his disciples with some shocking ideas: that “freedom is heavier than the yoke” and that one becomes “free by oppressing another” (217); that prostitution is much more respectable and morally higher institution than the institution of marriage, and that it represents a vivid example of turning “life into art” (11); that war should be welcomed and praised not rejected and condemned—“when you curse war I bless it,” says Julio (194)—and that mankind lives in a state of permanent war—“This war has come to stay for decades, perhaps, for centuries,” he estimates (163); that art is detrimental to the iron will and that it should be done away with—“Why haven’t all theaters been closed down? Why haven’t poetry, philosophy and other forms of idle nonsense been abolished?” are all the questions by means of which the Teacher begins his cross-examination of the anonymous Bolshevik leader, most likely, Lenin (250); further, that all those who deviate from or disagree with the Bolshevik recivilizing of Russia should be “remove[d]” and that “there is no other way” (251, 53); that nothing is sillier than religion and that “the only subjects on which you can talk seriously,” as Ilya reports in abeyance, are “methods of breaking a new pipe, various kinds of spitting...and the

⁷² “Оскоробляй святыни, преступай заповеди, смейся, громче смейся, когда смеяться нельзя, смехом, мукой, огнем расчищай место для него, грядущего, чтобы было для пустого—пустое” (44). In many respects, Jurenito is modeled as a parody of Christ. His disciples are ironically likened to Christ’s apostles. When in a climactic episode of the novel he kisses Lenin, the kiss is supposed to evoke both Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor legend—and, first and foremost, Lenin as a Grand Inquisitor of our times—as well as to refer to Christ’s relationship with Judas. Yet, as Mark Lipovetsky has noted, “connections established between Khurenito and Christ are tinted by the trickster’s ambivalent irony” (71). While this is all true, it seems to me that the very philosophical underpinnings of such ironization have something to do with skepticism. As it is widely acknowledged, Christianity is driven by a will to truthfulness. It propagates the ideal of finding the truth in one’s heart, and Christ is its model truth-finder. It is for this reason that the Teacher deliberately inverts the Christian epistemology, as if saying that the truth is beyond our reach. Unlike Christ, he characteristically dies for a pair of boots, that is, he does not sacrifice himself for a big Truth but for a mock-Truth. The essential point to be grasped here is that the Teacher’s skeptical behavior is not a mere negation of Christianity, but is the result of Christian ethics with its interpretation of the world. On the Christian-Moral interpretation of the world and the skepticism it gives rise to see Critchley (1997), pp. 7-8.

structure of the inimitable Charlie Chaplin's legs" (37, 38), and so on.⁷³ While one cannot help notice clear anarchic and doctrinal commitments that shine through Jurenito's teachings, commitments that are certainly incompatible with skeptical *epochē* or skeptical sensibility, the method by which he presents his views is skeptical through-and-through. Indeed, it is reminiscent of the skeptical *elenchus*, a form of arguing widely practiced by both Socrates and Plato, and later perfected by the Academic skeptics. In general, the structure of the *elenchus* consists of Socrates' driving his interlocutors into contradictions by showing them that their views are self-refuting and that they cannot be consistently maintained. When Socrates rejects his interlocutor's view or definition-proposal, he is also driving him not just towards the state of skeptical *epochē*, but also towards *aporia* (Woodruff, 27). Something similar takes place in the *elenchus* performed by Jurenito. Just as Socrates did, he asks or "assumes" a short question, such as *What is freedom?* Emulating Socrates, he also wants to know what his disciples think and that is why he makes his questions as provocative as possible. That is the part of Jurenito's art of *anacrisis*, broadly "understood as a means of eliciting and provoking the words of one's interlocutor, forcing him to express his opinion and express it thoroughly" (Bakhtin *Problems*, 110). After they propose a definition that freedom means the end of "oppression of peoples or other races" (137)—and this definition holds even for the fictitious state Labardan, which is scandalously inaugurated by Jurenito himself—he subjects it to a fierce examination.⁷⁴ The logic behind Julio's questions and inquiries is always hidden and does not reveal itself until he rounds up his disciples' concessions as premises for some unusual and unexpected conclusion: such as that one can also become free by oppressing another. This is the part of Jurenito's *syncrisis*, understood as the introduction of some unexpected and shocking point of view. In any case,

⁷³ "Уберите свободу, она тяжелее всякого ярма...Я становлюсь свободным, угнетая другого," "Вы сделали жизнь искусством," "когда вы клянете войну, я благословляю ее," "Война эта на десятки, а может быть, и на сотни лет," "Почему не закрыты все театры, не упразднены поэзия, философия и прочее лодырничество?," "Так надо, слышите, иначе нельзя!," "Учитель утверждал, что серьезно...можно говорить лишь о способе обкуривания трубок, о различных манерах плевать...о построении ног неповторимого Чаплина" (223, 70, 201, 167, 258, 261, 33).

⁷⁴ "Кончится угнетение иных рас" (138).

what begins as a casual chat and a leisurely verbal contest, evolves into a heated debate, with Jurenito occupying a guiding role in the conversation.⁷⁵

But this is not all. There is a moment of perversion, a moment of self-deconstruction, in every skeptical *elenchus*. After the first two usual steps—in which Socrates first takes on his interlocutor and then starts refuting him all up to the point when the interlocutor willingly gives up—Socrates strangely begins challenging the views he himself holds. Jurenito, similarly, excels at such self-questioning dialectic. In skeptical discourse, this is precisely what the skeptic must or is expected to do so that he could make clear to his audience that his claims are only relative to the nature of things, and by no means absolute. The skeptic is thus caught in a typical double bind and that is why he usually goes further: after he has undermined the thesis propounded by his opponent he must go on to undermine his own claims. And Jurenito is not at all an exception in this respect, but rather confirms the rule. From the thesis that freedom means freedom from oppression, Jurenito leads his disciples to an understanding that freedom is rather a “yoke” one should get rid of. But he does not stop there. He goes on to unearth his own argument by calling exactly for freedom, a new kind of freedom, “faultless in its equilibrium,” as he says. Many times, it is not quite clear to which side of the question Julio actually inclines. Is he really arguing *against* or *for* freedom?⁷⁶

⁷⁵ In his *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin identifies both *syncretism* and *anacrisis* as narrative procedures typical of the Menippean satire, both part and parcel of “the Socratic method of dialogically revealing the truth” (109). With its *syncretism* and *anacrisis*, with its having numerous heroes as “ideologists,” and with its “creation of extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea” (Bakhtin, 114)—the philosophical idea of modernity is indeed being tested throughout the novel in quite “exceptional” circumstances such as the First World War, October Revolution, German and Bolshevik concentration camps, the Cheka prison, and so on—*Khulio Khurenito* might truly pass as a modern Menippean satire.

⁷⁶ In this respect, he is quite reminiscent of one of the famous Hellenistic philosophers and orators, Carneades, the head of the so-called Third Academy, who, on one occasion, while fulfilling his official duties in Rome, shocked the city by delivering two public lectures on two succeeding days once arguing in favor of justice and, thereafter, scandalously arguing against it. Carneades was praised in the Hellenistic period first and foremost for the great technical skill he showed in the practice of arguing *in utramque partem*. In Russian culture, a similar example is presented by Vasilii Rozanov, notorious for his publications in both liberal and conservative newspapers (under different pseudonyms), in which he often expressed opposite views on the same subject. On Carneades, see Bett (1989). On Rozanov, see Stammler (1973).

Some of this logic—of arguing on both sides of the question—persists in one of the key episodes in the novel in which the Teacher, accompanied by one of his dearest disciples, Ilya Ehrenburg, interviews the leader of Bolsheviks, Lenin in person. After leading his disciples through the perils of the First World War, the concentration camps, the Bolshevik Revolution and the ensuing Red Terror, the Teacher decides to end the entire journey in Kremlin, which simultaneously functions as a narrative consummation, the furthest point in their Eastward journey, and the most concrete symbol of destruction. The Bolshevik Rule is based, as the narrator timidly tells us, on inconsistency and the normalization of violence: “According to them, God did not exist, having been invented by the priests,” for their own benefit, Ilya observes. In spite of thinking of God as a fable and opium for the masses, Bolsheviks still held all the churches intact believing that there is no such thing as village if it that had no church. Similarly, whereas the act of killing Jews was considered almost an instance of sportsmanship and was both supported and awarded by the state, “it wouldn’t do any harm to knock a few communists either” (258). Further, the narrator goes to great lengths to describe how one revolutionary slogan, such as *freedom for people*, is being immediately replaced by another opposite in meaning: for instance, the kingdom of freedom turns out to be the Cheka prison, and so on.⁷⁷

Despite being acquainted with all these revolutionary deviations, anomalies, and horrors, the Teacher’s interview with Lenin does not really *unbends* any of them. To go back to my borrowing from Virgil, instead of bending the high powers in Kremlin, Julio further stirs up the fire of its infernal regions. Assuming a position of sage and a counsel, and imposing on Lenin a well-tested rhetorical tactic of switching the conversation from one argument to its opposite twin, the Teacher advises Lenin to be even more contradictory in his ruthlessness. For example, while he supposedly burns with enthusiasm to render Bolsheviks as people who are ready to sacrifice themselves to salvage both art and science, he reproachfully asks Lenin “Why haven’t all theatres been closed down” and all art banished as no less than

⁷⁷ “Господа бога, по их словам не имелось, и выдуман он попами для треб,” “Но коммунистов тоже вырезать не мешает” (266).

“idle nonsense” (250)? Similarly, while pretending that the Revolution opens up the window of liberty and plurality, Julio nevertheless mercilessly address the problem of the Other. He again asks resentfully: “How can you tolerate those left-wing Socialist Revolutionaries” (251)? Lenin’s response is both unambiguous and straightforward: Some of those who deviate from the course set up by the Bolsheviks “are fools, the other are traitors. The former we’ll enlighten and re-educate, the latter we’ll remove” (251).⁷⁸ Upon hearing that *Izvestia* freely publishes lists of people who have been shot, Lenin replies in a similar cold-blooded way: “That’s terrible but it has to be done . . . We’re leading humanity towards a better future” (252). The whole episode ends up with the Teacher running up to Lenin and kissing his convex forehead, which represents both a direct allusion to Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor Legend as well as the final cynical praise of Lenin and his ideology of driving the masses to “paradise with iron whips” (252).⁷⁹

The Nietzschean Novel and the Reevaluation of Skepticism

Jurenito is, apparently, a philosophical chameleon: the variety of opinions and attitudes in his discursive “seizures” makes it difficult to figure out where he stands on any issue and what he deems to be the case. The question is then: is Jurenito a skeptic, “evolved,” transformed, and well-adapted to modern times or is he just a vivid example of an “abject hero,” a sort of representation of what Michael Bernstein once called “encountering the genuinely monstrous in a literary text” (24)? By calling him a skeptic is his true nature being misread? Am I seeing him exclusively in a positive light as an agent of social unmasking while downplaying the dark side of his personality, its bitter, nihilist, anarchic, and pathological destructiveness? Have I accepted with too much ease and even been seduced by the Teacher’s skeptical “stunts,” to embrace uncritically a certain mixture of “seductive charm,” “improvisatory wit,” “sense of planetary significance,” “utopian anarchism” and violent manners (6)—to use a couple of original

⁷⁸ “Как можете вы терпеть левых эсеров?” “Первых мы просветим, научим, вторых—устраним” (259).

⁷⁹ “Это ужасно! Но что делать—приходится!...Мы ведем человечество к лучшему будущему,” “гоним в рай железными бичами” (260).

Bernstein's denominations of abject heroism—instead of posing a critical distance to what seems like an embodiment and total internalization of the most problematic and truly obnoxious social values? Is the Teacher's faith, *good* or *bad*, to evoke Sartre?

The amount of abjection in Jurenito's provocations, performances, speeches, and violations of decorum, is enormous. Even the very criterion of selecting the disciples is governed by the principle of identification with what is worst in each one of them. He picks up the American, Mr. Cool, for instance, just because of the latter's relentless greed: "Of course he is utterly vile," admits the Teacher, "but in my choice of the disciples I am not guided by my stomach's reaction to them but by the degree of their usefulness to the cause" (31).⁸⁰ And the cause, as he reminds a muddle-headed Ilya, is to "destroy everything," with having Mr. Cool by one's side and at one's disposal as some sort of "first-class heavy artillery" for accomplishing such a task (34).⁸¹ What to say about a character who, when the First World War erupts, eagerly pursues chemical investigations in order to make weapons for mass-destruction, "seeking with exceptional patience and persistence new and hitherto untried methods of killing human beings" (148). And so on.⁸²

Are we to justify such actions? Or just take them for what they are, in their "plain" light and value? The paradox that lies beneath this interpretative dilemma is actually of a much broader significance and it directly relates to the question what is the political function of skepticism in the twentieth-century? The paradox actually mirrors the ever-changing psycho-political profile of skepticism, in which the skeptic gradually becomes more and more opinionated and belligerent, and less suspensive and reserved.

⁸⁰ "Конечно, он отменно гнусен, но я руководствуюсь при выборе учеников не реакцией на них моего раздражительного пищевода, а степенью их полезности для дела" (25).

⁸¹ "Вспомните, мы хотим все разрушить. А Куль—это великолепное тяжелое орудие" (29).

⁸² "С исключительным терпением и настойчивостью стремился он найти различные, доселе не использованные способы умерщвления людей" (141).

When I say that Jurenito is a skeptic, my assertion is very much like Nietzsche's when, in the 54 paragraph of *The Antichrist*, he says: "Zarathustra is a skeptic." How does it come that the two figures with such remarkable doctrinal commitments could count as skeptics? What sort of skepticism Nietzsche had in mind when he enlisted Zarathustra in the skeptical sect? First of all, let me point out that my recourse to Nietzsche is neither arbitrary nor digressive; it is both justifiable and called for by the novel itself. For Erenburg's narrative is deeply, and explicitly, influenced by Nietzsche. In literary criticism, it has already been argued that Jurenito's model draws upon and "is borrowed from Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ*" (in Lipovetsky, 70). What Boris Paramonov offhandedly suggested may indeed be generalized on the entire narrative, which, in consequence, may also be considered as a typically post-Nietzschean novel. If the task of philosophical modernity is "a thinking through of the death of God" (Critchley, *Very Little*, 2), where God only postulates whatever absolute system of values is cherished by and set above humanity, then *Khulio Khurenito* thoroughly fulfils such an exclusive Nietzschean task. "I know who you think I am," the Teacher reads Ilya's mind during their first encounter in the café Rotonde, "But he doesn't exist." Yet his café-preaching does not stop here. "The one with the capital G, also doesn't exist," he quickly enlightens the terrified Ilya (18, 19).⁸³ What matters here is not what the Teacher, a little bit tipsy, babbles. What matters is the very narrative gesture, which lets us, readers, know, from the very outset, that the narrative world which is yet to unfold is that of the death of God. I do not want to go any further in explaining to what extent the narrative encapsulates and is permeated by Nietzsche's vision, suffice to say at this point that every single episode, every single event, and every single utterance in the novel rings with nihilist undertones and that the entire story might be plausibly read as a "yearning for something to believe in," as Joshua Rubenstein has rightly noted (3).

Now, when Nietzsche held Zarathustra to be a skeptic, his understanding of skepticism must have been quite different than usual. Indeed, Nietzsche's take on skepticism is quite idiosyncratic, both

⁸³ "Я знаю, за кого вы меня принимаете. Но его нет," "Но и добра тоже нет. И того, другого, с большой буквы" (10, 12).

complex and controversial, and irreducible to short explanations. While it is certainly not my intention to dig deep into this elaborate problematic, I would anyway like to flesh out a couple of things in order to illustrate how the very understanding of skepticism dramatically changes at the turn of the century. Nietzsche, for his part, praised the skeptics and called them “the only honorable type among the equivocal, quinquivocal tribe of philosophers” (*Ecce*, 243). Just as Jurenito, he believed that “Men of conviction are not worthy of the least consideration,” that “convictions are prisons,” and that “a spirit who wants great things...is necessarily a skeptic” (*Antichrist*, 54). Following this line of reasoning, he glossed skepticism as a “freedom from all kinds of convictions” (*Antichrist*, 54) celebrating its anti-dogmatic spirit. He was thinking of Pyrrho’s life as “a protest against the great doctrine of identity” (*Will*, 437) His own philosophy, on the other hand, he called “schooling in suspicion” (*Human*, preface) and considered himself to be the arch-skeptic. For a thinker who held that there is only a perspectival knowledge; that the concept of truth is haunted by the army of metaphors; that there is no such thing as essence, only *appearing*; that language falsifies the world since it is based on abstraction which irretrievably annihilates particularities; that philosophy is nothing more than a personal confession; that the will to truth is just a cleverly disguised form of the will to power—one might rightly say he *is* the arch-skeptic.

But Nietzsche also recognized that the consequences of skepticism, as it has traditionally been conceived, might be dire. How does one philosophize with a suspension of judgment? How does one live, will, speak, or believe with a lack of convictions? In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, the so-called “ephetic bent,” the tendency to suspend judgment and annul one’s convictions, is first strongly required from philosopher, but later harshly criticized as paralyzing, effete, and deeply immoral. Here lies, what one may call, a typically Nietzschean recoil: he first praises, but ultimately despises the skeptical suspension of judgment and life lived without beliefs, associating it with inactivity and intellectual cowardice. Nietzsche was, as Petr Lom remarks, “careful to distinguish a skepticism of strength, one tied to an unyielding intellectual severity, from a decadent skepticism reflecting a weakness of will” (20). Around the latter, he clustered epithets such as “decadent,” “ephetic,” “passive,” “exhausted,” “enfeebled,”

“emasculated,” “weak,” “ascetic,” “nihilist,” “Buddhist,” “Christian,” and “nervous”—a typical Nietzschean repertoire that consists of all possible variations on the *Müdigkeit* motif, which best translates as fatigue or weariness—and argued for a “stronger type of skepticism” which “does not believe but does not lose itself in the process” either (*Beyond*, 209), the one which would ideally be both life-transforming and proactive. In this way, Nietzsche thoroughly uprooted a firmly-established and long-received picture of what the skeptic was actually supposed to be—an un-opinionated and phlegmatic philosopher—introducing a modern view according to which doubt is not incompatible with strong commitments. Ultimately, Nietzsche was a skeptic, yet the committed and over-opinionated one.⁸⁴

And this is precisely what Jurenito is as well: he is a committed skeptic. Pervasive throughout Jurenito’s provocations is his lack of convictions. He believes nothing and questions everything. He is eager to embrace any belief, just as he is ready to accept any disciple. As Benjamin would say of Baudelaire, he is eager to assume ever new forms for himself.⁸⁵ But, equally pervasive are his opinions, all sorts of opinions, and an enormous capacity to committing himself to a wide range of *dogmas*, someone else’s or his own. At the “International Congress for Measures Against Prostitution” the Teacher

⁸⁴ Simon Blackburn calls Nietzsche “the most opinionated men of all time” (77), and emphasizes how he kept holding some uncompromisingly firm beliefs: that Christianity is the morality for slaves based on the resentment of the weak in the face of the strong; that the French revolution was a failure and a farce; that Wagner’s music is the embodiment of the sublime, first, and then, after he has been disillusioned with Wagner, that his music is the embodiment of the insipid, and so on. But he also calls him “the arch-debunker,” which makes the entire story much more difficult. On Nietzsche’s rethinking of the role of skepticism see, Bett (2000) and Mosser (1998).

⁸⁵ On Baudelaire’s changing political views, still unsurpassed is Richard Klein’s 1967 essay “Baudelaire and Revolution.” “The critical problem is,” Klein states, “not to discover Baudelaire’s ‘real’ political convictions as they fluctuated with each grave event, but rather to explain his reluctance to describe them” (86). I see both Baudelaire’s ideological shifting back-and-forth as well as his reluctance to motivate this shifting in any comprehensive way, as a symptom of Baudelaire’s skepticism, of his skeptical *dissoi logoi*—arguing on each side of the issue in order to show the relativity and flimsiness of both sides. In this respect, Baudelaire is a true heir of another Francophone celebrated skeptic, a great seventeenth-century philosopher Pierre Bayle. Just as Baudelaire was switching from supporting to condemning revolution, Pierre Bayle had been converting more than once from Protestantism to Catholicism and contrariwise, in order to show that convictions are contingent and superfluous. His entire *Dictionnaire*, is structured as a series of *ad utramque partem* arguments that are intended to illustrate the very instability of belief. Interestingly, in both cases, we have a clear example of “embodying” the doctrine one has been advocating, of “preaching” by one’s own example. Thus we come to a paradoxical predicament of the modern skeptical poet, so brilliantly described by Klein: “The poet is the man who renounces his illusions and bears ironic witness to the illusions of others,” just to find out that his own position is “unmistakably undercut” by the very “doctrine” he has relied on (91). On Pierre Bayle, see Popkin (2003), pp. 283-302.

speaks in defense of prostitution and submits a proposal to rename the congress into “International Society for the Propagation of Prostitution” (75). After receiving an invitation to a wedding, Jurenito, who openly “loathed the institution of marriage” (66), instead of attending the wedding only sends the present: “a large and handsome Mexican scarf and an excerpt from *Farmer’s Calendar* dealing with methods of cross-breeding a stallion with a she-ass...for mutual marital happiness” (67).⁸⁶ He condemns art for its “arrogant break...with life” and deems that its function should rather be “the organization of men” (86). One of his disciples, the notorious Karl Schmidt, is using the very same metaphor with reference to flesh-and-blood people: “Dear friends,” he says, “The thing’s very simple. We must organize you” (127). And what he means by “organization” is that “Between killing one weak-minded old man and ten million people for the good of mankind there’s only an arithmetical difference” (199).⁸⁷ There is an arithmetic here, Bentham’s pragmatic calculus of a sort, leading to murder and genocide. Only in Russia, and not before his conversion to Bolshevism, is Schmidt capable of making his monstrous calculus work. As it has been commonly acknowledged, in Russia, a thoroughly skeptical and radically oriented intelligentsia takes Western ideas “*too* seriously” and pushes them to their ultimate conclusions (Moretti, 167). “You must find out where and under what conditions,” says Jurenito excitedly “it is easiest to catch the soul,” and continues:

In former times man’s so-called ‘religious sense’ arose from the tranquil contemplation of nature. It was expressed in a desire for simple harmony, tranquility, inaction. That is why churches, chapels, shrines were built in solitary, quiet places and were centers of peace...The “religious sense,” however, or rather, that sense of exultation, which religion can exploit, is aroused in modern man by the sensation of rapid motion: the train, the motorcar, the aeroplane, the races, music, the circus, etc. (46)⁸⁸

⁸⁶ “Международное общество насаждения проституции,” “ненавидел институт нашего брака,” “но послал в виде подарка большой платок максиканской выделки и извлечение из ‘Календаря сельского хозяина’ о приемах спаривания жеребца с ослицею,...,для взаимного супружеского счастья,” (72, 62, 63).

⁸⁷ “гордый разрыв искусства с жизнью,” “способствует организации людей,” “Дорогие друзья...Нам необходимо вас организовать,” “Убить для блага человечества одного умалишенного старика и десять миллионов—различие лишь арифметическое” (84, 129, 205).

⁸⁸ “Надо выяснить, где и при каких условиях легче всего поймать душу...У человека были времен чувство, именуемое ‘религиозным,’ исходило от спокойного созерцания природы. Выражалось оно в стремлении к примитивной гармонии, миру, лепоте. Поэтому церкви, часовни, распятия строились в местах уединенных, тихих и были очагами покоя... Но ‘религиозное чувство,’или, точнее, чувство восторга, которое религия

But Jurenito is not only contemplating modernity in virtue of the cult of speed and the uncertainty of experience.⁸⁹ He immediately makes a radical proposal: to install mobile chapels in express trains and to reorganize various church services “by making them frenzy instead of slow and decorous” (47).⁹⁰

What are we to do with such a radical reformer and a “discursive chameleon” (Clowes, 156)?⁹¹ He wants his disciples to be opinionated as much as he urges them to take distance and judge for themselves. The chaos that he carries within himself and provokes in others is the same chaos that the committed, life-affirming skeptic Zarathustra unconditionally demands from his followers: “one must still have chaos in oneself,” he exclaims, “to be able to give birth to a dancing star” (*Zarathustra*, 129). But the question is what kind of star Jurenito gives birth to? There is a simple answer to this question: The only reason why Jurenito gives an impression of being a fully destructive force, a sort of *stormtrooper* for Bolshevism and proto-Fascism—an apocalyptic prophet of the godless world—is because he deems that the project of modernity has taken the wrong and dangerous turnings. Thinking that gets expressed, quite deliberately, through its opposite: through the very promotion of the worst. How are we to understand such a practice? Nietzsche indeed pleaded for a bold, committal skeptic, for someone who would be a living incarnation of

может использовать, подымается у современного человека при ощущении движения: поезд, автомобиль, аэропланы, скачки, музыка, цирк и прочее” (42).

⁸⁹ Interestingly, in the first section of his “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” Benjamin traces a cluster of connections between the figure of the poet and that of the bohème and finds that what they have in common is the uncertainty of life and a certain weakening of experience. To Benjamin, the uncertainty of experience and the ensuing skepticism about the very possibility of long experience (*Erfahrung*)—the one that develops across history and takes time to be formed—represent the most problematic aspects of Baudelaire’s poetry. As it has been poignantly noted, in his later essay on Baudelaire, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin interprets Baudelaire’s poetical mission as “the rescue of long experience,” and a recuperation of memory, out of its scattered, fragmented, isolated moments (Ferris, 129). The crucial yet paradoxical question, as Benjamin nicely formulates it, is how does it come that Baudelaire, who deliberately “did not have any convictions” and had “assumed ever new forms of himself” (*Paris*, 60)—those of flâneur, apache, dandy, and ragpicker, for instance—manages to transcend all this fragmentary and temporary roles into a vision of time and knowledge that are supposed to be sustained easily and indubitably within modernity as such, modernity that has always been characterized as a process of melting the solid and unknowing the known.

⁹⁰ “а все службы реорганизовать из медлительных и благолепных в испугленные” (42).

⁹¹ Clowes coins this expression in reference to Rozanov, not Erenburg. I would say that it works equally good for Erenburg.

an oxymoron. But the question is how do we make sense of such a creature and what are we to do with the oxymoron he embodies? With the proviso that skepticism is by default anti-doctrinal and that it represents a way of life, how do we make out such a way of life?

The answer is that there is one way at least. The twentieth-century skeptical narrative molded and handed down to us a new way of living as a skeptic. It is called over-identification and it has received one of the first literary expressions in *Khulio Khurenito*, which all together makes Erenburg's novel more historically important and exclusive.

Skepticism and Over-identification

The key strategy of over-identification is to take whatever dogma—in this particular case the ruling ideology, be it Communist, proto-Fascist, or capitalist—more seriously/literally than it takes itself, thus, to *over-identify* with it. Slavoj Žižek describes the whole mechanism in terms of an element which *out-embodies*, or *over-fulfills* itself. According to Žižek, the formula at work is something like: an element which does not belong to the genus x is more x than x itself. Žižek invites us to consider, for instance, a popular catchphrase that somebody is “more Catholic than the Pope,” which most aptly captures the mechanism at stake. Over-identification may be metaphorically described in terms of burdening additional weight onto a structure that is already ideologically fragile, or incoherent, enough. As a consequence, the ideological structure simply collapses under the augmented pressure. Thus, over-identification actually *makes visible* a series of hidden points of contact that the particular dogma has to keep concealed in order to preserve its power and sense. There is always an excessive component that can both frustrate and paralyze the system if uncovered or over-stressed, Žižek goes on to argue (92-93).⁹²

⁹² The same mechanism has been elaborated in detail by Alexei Yurchak in his book-length study of the last Soviet generation and its cultural practices. When Yurchak discusses the way in which some members of the Late Soviet avant-garde used ironical discourse, he asserts that it “was based on a grotesque ‘overidentification’ with the *form* of an authoritative symbol, to the point that it was impossible to tell whether the person supported that symbol or

Reading this way, Jurenito is neither the abject hero nor a character who relishes in bad faith; he is actually a genuine skeptic, the one who finds in hyperbole, in parodic intensification, in ironic reversal, a proper way of expressing his doubts about modernity's ways and its ideological dictums. When he identifies with the Parisian prostitutes, the First World War slaughter, or Lenin's "pogroms," he just sarcastically reveals what is about to come, what are actually the prospects of the future modernity so eagerly pushes for. When he kisses Lenin's forehead, for instance, he does not really give support to Lenin's dictum that everyone standing in the way of Revolution must be eliminated. To the contrary, he uses mimicry, a parodic gesture, a provocation that works by means of someone being too easily ready to assent to the dictator's monstrous claim. In a word, he over-identifies with Lenin to unmask where such a political project may ultimately lead to: extermination camps, routinization of violence, and the ceaseless state of exception. Thus, what at first sight seems to be like an ideal, harmonious union of the two major Mephistophelian characters, quickly turns into a dexterous skeptical debunking, exercised by Jurenito, of the ruling, cynical, Bolshevik ideology, exemplified by Lenin. Yet, it is needless to emphasize that the debunking is two-fold: on the one hand, its purpose is to show the Bolshevik ideology as despotic; on the other, its purpose is to display modernity's goals and agendas as self-defeating and fatally flawed. It is for this reason that by the end of dialogue between Jurenito and Lenin motifs of enlightening, re-educating, "re-civilizing," "driving towards a better future," taking responsibility for the inevitable course of history, to mention only a few, begin to heap up. By driving the discourses of power out to their limit, by remolding their potentialities and disclosing what is not explicitly said, the Teacher converts the Bolshevik "utopia" into the impending Stalinist dystopia. What is to come is truly a sort of "paradise with the iron whip"—in other words, the Stalinist rule. Accordingly, *Khulio Khurenito* demonstrates how cynical discourses and positions generate what can retrospectively be defined as Ur-Fascism. As I have already pointed out, Ehrenburg deals with its various manifestations: Karl Schmitt, Vatican, Lenin and Bolsheviks, colonialism, anti-Semitism, Western capitalism, and so on. The manifestations are,

subverted it with a subtle ridicule" (252, original emphasis). This ambiguity seems to transpire through all Jurenito's acts. A brief note: I am deliberately using the term with a hyphen to emphasize its hyperbolic, parodic, "skeptical," or transgressive aspect.

nevertheless, less important. What is important is their common denominator: the destruction of otherness.⁹³

During the war Julio pursues chemical experiments that were supposed to create more advanced weapons of mass destruction. Why does he do such a thing, one may ask puzzled? He over-identifies with the ongoing mass-killings in order to expose the long-term prospects of humankind and express his doubts about its survival rates and opportunities. What Jurenito hints at is precisely the very possibility of total annihilation. “Never mind,” he teaches, “if we’re all doomed to death, it’s good sport” (163). Yet, his pose of a fatalist quickly gives way to the discourse that praises and elevates the war. The war will change its forms, Jurenito believes, but will always resemble “an almost repulsively delightful piece” (163). Such a sort of *peritrope*, a turning-of-the-tables, in which the ideas or arguments of one speech are reversed in the following, opposite speech are ubiquitous in *Khulio Khurenito*. That *war is peace, freedom slavery, and so on*, are all political slogans that will also play a key role in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). In a well-known passage in the novel, Orwell describes such slogans as instances of *doublethink* and *newspeak*, of the language invented by the totalitarian government of Oceania to replace standard, everyday English. In the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *doublethink* and *newspeak* have a double political purpose: to divert attention away from the truth and make critical thinking impossible as well as to impede any hypothetical political opposition. But Jurenito’s *doublethink* is neither invented nor mandated by the government. It is rather directed against “hypocritical culture and the leviathan of the State” (163).⁹⁴ And, most importantly, it always reverts to itself. As soon as the Teacher starts to elevate the war, he is skeptically challenging the philosophers who hold that “War will elevate spirit.” He says:

⁹³ I am using the term Ur-Fascism drawing directly upon Umberto Eco’s definition of Ur-Fascism as “Eternal Fascism.” It is a sort of fascism that, by means of its most general features, escapes historical coordinates and transpires through time.

⁹⁴ “лицемерную культуру и левиафана–государство!” (168).

The past has become an impossibility...You curse the war, yet it's not merely a step but a leap into the future...the war is conducted with the help of the material, the *thing*. It opened everyone's eyes to the *thing's* meaning and power. In destroying a thousand *things*, annihilating matter with matter, men have learn to respect the *thing* as such, they have come to love as they never could in the happy days of peace. (192-193, original emphasis)⁹⁵

This is a typical instance of Jurenito's over-identification. It is a discourse permeated by paradox, hyperbole, mimicry, synecdoche, and irony. It begins with an illogical statement: it is not the future but the past that is impossible. It proceeds with a hyperbole: the war is a leap into the future, and not merely a step. The entire speech is shrouded in the philosophical jargon and emulates the abstract discourse of transcendental idealism. Such a sort of mimicry is further accentuated by the synecdoche that switches between singular and plural forms—the thing and things—with a clear indication that different grammatical numbers refer to different entities. Finally, the speech consumes itself in a self-cancelling irony: while the past is only an impossibility, the only happy days are those already past. However, unlike Orwell's *doublespeak*, this language neither diminishes thought nor does it hinder action. As the narrator of the novel confesses, it is a language that has “opened before our [the disciples'] thrice astonished eyes a chink of the door leading to the great and inescapable tomorrow” (10).⁹⁶ It is a language skeptical in its form, prophetic in its meaning, and therapeutic in its intent.

Some of this language transpires through Jurenito's over-identifying with the very idea of modernity. If we take the myth of modernity as signifying that whatever is new is by default “better,” progressive and desirable in itself, or “more” justifiable, then Jurenito over-identifies with the very project of modernity because he does not just embrace the future; rather, he goes as far as to detest the present, doing his best to destroy it literally: “Julio Jurenito taught us to hate the present” (10), says Ilya, resonantly, when he

⁹⁵ “Война возвысит дух,” “Прошлое стало невозможным...Вы клянете войну, а она даже не шаг, но прыжок в грядущее. Она убила все, во имя чего началась...Но война велась с помощью вещи, она открыла всем ее мощь. Разрушая тысячи вещей, материей уничтожая материю, люди научились уважать вещь, они полюбили ее так, как не умели любить в счастливейшие дни мира” (199, 200).

⁹⁶ “он приоткрыл перед нами дверь, ведущую в великое и неминуемое завтра” (10).

begins to recount his life-story.⁹⁷ In other words, modernity's tomorrow, as justified by the idea of progress, brings death to everything that is dear and vital today. The image of the future derivative from this vision is apocalyptic indeed, and the apocalypse appears as the inevitable result of the modern concept of history. Thus, Jurenito—by means of his perpetual performances of over-identification—arrives at the same understanding of modern history, which was epitomized quite dramatically by Walter Benjamin's famous reading of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, as the embodiment of modern history:⁹⁸

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin, 257-8)

Mark Leiderman has argued that "Jurenito is himself such 'Angelus of Novus'—albeit in the trickster's rather than messianic attire" (Leiderman, 79), and, I would add, in the attire that is rather that of a skeptic than that of a prophet. Why is this so? Because Jurenito does not just over-identify with leading dogmas and grand narratives of modernity but also systematically dis-identifies with them. As an impeccable skeptic, he always argues on both side of the issue. As Alexei Monroe writes, the process of over-identification is always entwined with the very opposite process, that of dis-identification (47). It carries within itself its antithesis. It works by means of "creating distance by approaching too closely," Monroe shrewdly observes (48). By bringing to light the obscene super-ego of the system—or any dogmatic view whatsoever—over-identification undermines its most solid, and, at the same time, most perverse foundations (Monroe, 79). Truly, Jurenito over-identifies with the war and he even "bless[es]" it, but he also dis-identifies with its very momentum claiming that it "has come to stay for decades, for centuries" so that it could resemble "a delightful peace" (163). It is the thin, strenuous line between war and peace—

⁹⁷ "Хулио Хуренито учил ненавидеть настоящее" (10).

⁹⁸ I am thankful to Mark Leiderman for this insight.

the obscene super-ego of any peaceful state is the state of “latent” war as much as the obscene super-ego of war is the state of peace that may hebetate war in turn as if it was not taking place—that Jurenito seeks to delineate by switching from one to another rhetorical “attire,” or argument.⁹⁹

Over-identification enables a “committed” skeptic to reinvent himself and expose the ruling order. It should be noted, though, that while over-identification is certainly a rhetorical strategy, it is also not “purely” rhetorical. When Jurenito delivers a speech against freedom, holding that “I become free by oppressing another,” he is first ironic—it is surely highly unlikely that one becomes free by oppressing another. Second, he openly resorts to hyperbole. In the classical handbooks of rhetoric, hyperbole is defined as a figure of speech that contains an exaggeration for the purposes of emphasis. It has been noticed that in discourse it usually comes in the form of gradation which assumes at least three “ascending” steps. Even this requirement is minutely fulfilled by Jurenito: he first says that freedom is “heavier than the yoke;” then that “I become free by oppressing another;” and finally that “Freedom does not exist and has never existed” (217).¹⁰⁰ Last but not least, he posits in front of his listeners a classical paradox: How does it come that *imprisoning* or *enslaving* might also count as *freeing* or *liberating*?

⁹⁹ Quite fitting in this respect—serving as a final illustration of the most inner workings of over-identification—is an anecdote recounted by Sloterdijk in his *Critique of Cynical Reason* regarding the famous English neo-punk group, *The Stranglers*:

A short time ago, the leader of the English punk group, The Stranglers, celebrated the neutron bomb in a frivolous interview because it is what can set a nuclear war into action. ‘Miss Neutron, I love you.’ Here he had found the point where the cynicism of protesters coincides with the braze-faced master cynicism of the strategists. What did he want to say? Look how wicked I can be? His smile was coquettish, nauseated, and ironically egoistic; he could not look the reporter in the face. As in a dream, he spoke past the camera for those who will understand him, the little, beautifully wicked punk devil who causes the world to rattle with unthinkable words. That is the language of a consciousness that earlier perhaps did not mean to be so wicked. But now, since the show demands it, not only is it unhappy, it also wants to be unhappy. In this way misery can be outdone. *The last act of freedom is used to will what is terrifying* (Sloterdijk, 127; my emphasis).

Even though Sloterdijk never explicitly mentions the concept of over-identification, he does provide a brilliant example of its most intricate workings. If the last act of resistance is to will what is terrifying, then Jurenito turns out to be the first fully-fledged “believer” in the cause, since his *modus operandi* seems to be quite along *The Strangler*’s line: “Miss Neutron, I love you.” Jurenito’s variation on the same theme might be something like: “the war [is] not merely a step, [but] a leap into the future” (193). But, the last act of liberty is not just to identify with what is most terrifying, but to dismantle the same by doing so.

¹⁰⁰ “она тяжелее всякого ярма,” “Я становлюсь свободным, угнетая другого,” “Свободы нет и никогда не было” (223).

In almost every over-identification performed by Jurenito one can easily identify three rhetorical moments: the ironic, the hyperbolic, and the paradoxical. Typically, skeptical arguments usually employ the very same moments. When Sextus Empiricus, for instance, exclaims at one point *Why not patricide!?*, he is putting forward a typical *dissoi logoi* argument—arguing on the opposite side of a view which seems to be widely accepted and uncontested—by drawing upon the mechanisms of irony, hyperbole, and antilogy in respect. For he certainly does not mean what he says; for he presses the point only for the purposes of counter-arguing; for he forces a paradoxical statement upon *all* fathers and sons. Or, to give you another well-known yet more recent example, when Descartes meditates on his hands and his entire body as if having been foreign to him, he also relies on the interplay between irony, hyperbole, and paradox.

In wondering what kind of rhetorical resources are available to skeptics to talk their interlocutors *out of knowing* something, one surely comes across these three rhetorical paradigms. But in the case of Jurenito's over-identifications, there is one more component involved. When he picks up Mr. Cool just because he is utterly despicable, when he praises his Circle of Prostitutes in Aid of Society Ladies, when he creates a fictitious state Labardan to mock the on-going peace initiatives, when he stages the pogroms “of the tribe of Judas” (110), or arranges mock-patriotic “matinées” in the midst of war, and so on, he is rather *performing* his skepticism than *discoursing* it. The question is, of course, where does this leave Erenburg, does the author perform the same thing in novelistic discourse thus adding another layer to the novel's structure and complexity? Namely, Erenburg mimics his protagonist's penchant for performing, and structures his narrative as a series of performances, anecdotes, and reports. As a consequence, throughout the novel language is used primarily in a performative way. It is utilized to execute a specific social act, and less for the purposes of describing a certain state of affairs. Virtually every utterance in the

novel *does* something, or, to put it in Austin's terms, exerts a specific illocutionary force. For instance, Jurenito does not describe freedom in a literal way; he rather aims at *assuring* (illocution) his disciples that freedom does not seem to be a positive value by default, as they may have thought.

It is important to note that the novel is structured as a series of anecdotes and reports on purpose. Anecdotes usually focus on a single encounter between a protagonist and an interlocutor, they are dialogic and culminate in a punch line, such as: "A bad peace is better than a good war, but a good war is better than a bad war" (176). The novel is further punctuated by phrases such as "let me quote the Teacher," or, "let me report the Teacher's proceedings," or "the Teacher often spoke about," and so on (75).¹⁰¹ A prioritizing of particularized stories and reporting them after they have happened are the two primary narrative devices the novel heavily relies on. And they are both characteristic of narrative journalism. Yet, Erenburg's narrative is structured as a series of reports not only because Erenburg was an eminent journalist. To remind you, the skeptic's language is always contingent, provisional, and arbitrary. From Sextus Empiricus on, it has been argued that the skeptic never claims how his senses have struck him, but only "reports" what he has paid witness to. In a word, the skeptical language is the language of reporting. It leaves to the audience to judge is what has been reported true or false, certain or doubtful? Similarly, while *Khulio Khurenito* seemingly amounts to no more than a collection of acts and sayings of characters in the narrative, it is neither a thesis novel nor the *apophthegmata*. Acts and sayings tend to attach themselves to characters known for their charisma, quick wit, and verbal dexterity, yet, all these acts and sayings are "reported" and thus given an appeal of second-handedness, arbitrariness, and conditionality.

How does it come then that Jurenito finds frequent recourse to performativity in order to espouse his political views? Does it have anything to do with skepticism as such? Or, to frame the question in more

¹⁰¹ "Плохой мир лучше хорошей войны, а хорошая война лучше плохой войны," "Хулио Хуренито рассказывал нам," "Приведу также здесь речь Учителя" (181, 71).

general terms: Is it possible for a philosophical doctrine to be laid down by non-discursive means? This is, in a way, a trick question. Most commentators on skepticism agree that skepticism rather represents a way of life than a consistent epistemological doctrine. When Sextus defines skepticism as “an ability to set up an opposition of appearances and thoughts” (*PH* 1.9) by means of which the skeptic consecutively reaches first *isostheneia*, then *epochē*, and *ataraxia* in the end, he is using the expression *dunamis*, that best translates as *ability*, on purpose. He wants to emphasize that skepticism, unlike other philosophical schools of the time, is not a *technē*, an art that can be mastered or a systematic body of knowledge that can be learned. How can skepticism *be* a body of knowledge, one might ask, if the skeptic goes to great lengths to deny the very possibility of both teaching and learning? As Martha Nussbaum suggests, Sextus finds a deft answer to this question: skepticism is “a know-how: one learns how to do something,” that is, the technique itself, rather than substance or some abstract content (Nussbaum, 528).

If this is correct, how does one then teach a way of life? How does one instruct another into an art of living intended to transform entirely someone’s life? This is, of course, a suggestive question with a ready-made answer, the answer that simply imposes itself on us: by performing. Skepticism is, indeed, taught by performing. The paradox is briskly captured in the very opening pages of Erenburg’s novel where the one “who never taught anybody anything” is also called the “Teacher,” where the one who happens to be “a man without convictions” turns out to be the most opinionated literary character ever (9-10).¹⁰²

A broader theoretical issue arises here, namely, it seems to me that scholars engaged in the problem of skepticism—whether they are coming from philosophy or literary studies—have not really paid attention to what degree is skeptical discourse permeated by the language that is used in a performative way. All

¹⁰² “Я называю Хулио Хуренито просто, почти фамильярно ‘Учителем,’ хотя он никогда ничему не учил,” “он был человеком без убеждений” (4).

throughout the history of skeptical narrative, examples simply abound and the point of all seem to be that the skeptic neither means what he says nor that he could ever mean what he wants to say, but rather uses language in a purely performative way.¹⁰³ When Sextus argues that there is nothing wrong with killing the father, he does not and cannot possibly mean what he says. Or, when Kysarcus, one of the numerous episodic characters in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, forwards the claim that the mother is not kin to her child—which is a typical counterintuitive skeptical retort—he also does not truly mean what he says.¹⁰⁴ And further, when Descartes says that he might have been, all the time, manipulated by *le malin génie* to believe falsely that two plus three equals five, he cannot truly mean what he purports to convey. In all these instances, language is rather used in a performative way; its uncanny arguments are meant to pull us into the game played by the skeptics, to make us alert to most uncommon views, to make strange what we thought we knew, to defamiliarize our field of vision and our axis of understanding.

And this is how Jurenito uses language and how his over-identifications transpire through all his performances. Jurenito never truly means what he says. The unsettling upshot of this discovery—that the skeptic might have been all the time using language in a performative way—is that, in the final instance, the skeptic can even do without language, just as Jurenito does in the end.

¹⁰³ When I say that the skeptic cannot possibly mean what he says, I am, of course, alluding to Stanley Cavell's influential reading of skepticism presented in *Must We Mean What We Say* (1976) and elsewhere. Let me try to reconstruct briefly this complex yet beautiful argument. When the skeptic, for instance, argues that there is not a table in front of your eyes, he is using language in a rather odd way. Notice, that he does not say that the table may be missing from another room, or so. The skeptic is, deliberately, referring to what is already present, to what simply lends itself to the senses, not to what is hidden from them. In Cavell's reading, such a use of language is rather untypical, "outside of its language game." Of course, as Stanley Cavell admits, it is essential to the language that it can be used in this way, but it still does not beg the question. Similarly, when the skeptic argues that prostitution is nobler than love, or that war is bliss, or that freedom is a yoke—as Jurenito does—he "alienates" us from our ordinary grasp of reality and of what it means to prostitute oneself, engage in war, or get rid of one's freedom. Cavell's point is, to conclude, that in all these cases the function of language is not and cannot be "constative." It is, above all, performative and its goals are to dislocate our perception and upset us in what we ordinarily think. Of course, needless to say that these are all perlocutionary effects.

¹⁰⁴ The example is ingeniously brought up by Christian Thorne and taken from a novel which represents another true masterpiece of skeptical narration. See Thorne (2009), p. 23.

While *Khulio Khurenito* certainly works as an incisive, unrelenting, and unscrupulous critique of modernity—of its goals and grand-narratives, of its dogmas and *mythemes*, of its beliefs and convictions—I do not want to leave the impression that the novel amounts to a dry critique of modernity nor that its skeptical voice is just a “literary” precursor to Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, or any similar piece of philosophical writing. Its skepticism is much more complex and much more double-edged. For it seems that the novel reaches its most controversial fulcrum precisely at the point where Nietzsche has given up: From where comes the urge to over-identify with beliefs, convictions, and dogmas? Is that the only way, at the modern skeptic’s disposal, of critical engagement with various ideologies? All these questions lead me to the ever-changing psycho-political profile of skepticism and to the very question of its political efficacy.

The Moral and Political Implications of Skepticism

In an article on the upshot of skepticism and the relativity of the skeptic’s attitude, Julia Annas quotes a *locus classicus* of skeptical discourse, Aristotle’s famous challenge to skeptics: “What kind of citizen...or judge or counselor or friend can the skeptic be—in fact, what kind of person? What evil thing would he not dare do, seeing that he thinks nothing to be really bad and shameful, just or unjust” (20)? What kind of teacher is Jurenito indeed? Is not he ready to do all sorts of monstrous things due to the contingency of his skeptical stance? Does not his ethos of doubt liquefy any moral codex? Or, might not, on the other hand, his doubt be aligned to a radical critique of reason, of vicious ideological systems, and of worn-out political institutions?

The politics of skepticism is a tricky phrase. To make sense of it, let me first briefly spell out the idea of politics I have in mind. Politics is commonly understood as the practice of exerting power and of formulating and enacting collective goals and interests. The practices of exerting power, formulating goals, enacting ideas, and pursuing interests imply some sort of commonality. Political subjects, by

default, share a *common* world. “What really deserves the name of politics,” writes Jacques Rancière, “is the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world” (*The Politics*, 10). The question is then: How does the skeptic participate in shaping the common world? How does he partake in the life of a community to which he belongs? It is important to note, though, that the politics of skepticism does not mean the same as the politics of skeptics. It rather means is skeptical discourse capable of *partaking in* founding, shaping, framing, ruling, criticizing, and even overthrowing a political system?

In order to answer this question, I will briefly outline why many believed that skepticism is incapable of such a sort of participation. As it has traditionally been conceived, skepticism works roughly in a following way: the skeptic comes upon an opposing argument whenever needed, that is, “on as wide a range of topics as possible” (Bett *Pyrrho*, 3). Even though the skeptic typically holds that there are no limitations to this method and that anything can be opposed to anything, Sextus insists that the skeptical maxim “To every argument an equal argument is opposed” (*PH*, 1.202), is neither absolute nor dogmatic. The skeptic, as Michael Williams astutely comments, “is simply reporting that so far his [the skeptic’s] ability to set up appropriate antitheses has not let him down. He is not putting forward a general epistemological thesis” (554), rather, he simply finds himself mastering the technique of arguing equally forcibly on any side of an issue, and that is what makes his approach unique, helping him to stand out among his “dogmatic” competitors. Namely, whenever the skeptic finds himself to be opinionated on some particular topic, he tries to think of the opposite views on the same topic. As pros and cons cancel out in confrontation with one another, due to their equal persuasive strength—what the ancient skeptics called *isostheneia*, which best translates as equipollence, equipoise, or simply equilibrium—the skeptic, facing this irreconcilable disagreement, finds himself in a position to suspend judgment about the true nature of things he has been taking into consideration. This suspension of judgment, the so-called *epoche*, has a momentous practical effect on the way the skeptic leads his life: it results in *ataraxia*, freedom from disturbance, which is not just the final goal but also the ultimate wisdom of any skeptical undertaking.

Now, Sextus Empiricus already provides dozens of examples how skepticism practically works. The Persians, for instance, he says, do not find male homosexual intercourse obnoxious, even favor it, but the Romans have a rigorous law against it. Something *appears*—which represents a typical, skeptical locution of *disclaiming* that the language itself may be used in an assertive mode, as if it is describing the true nature of things—to be true and morally justifiable in one way, but in the other it *appears* to be false and morally unacceptable. Since we have no rational grounds for deciding which one is really true and thus preferable, we find ourselves in a strange predicament of equipollence on the topic. One of the most important things to be noted in regard to this process is that Sextus, as Julia Annas succinctly puts it, “is of course not putting us through a form of argument. Suspension of judgment is not a conclusion from any premises; it is just what happens” to the skeptic, by itself and in itself, necessarily and accidentally and one and the same time (206). From *isostheneia*, the skeptic is only one step away from leading a more meaningful and happier way of life than the rest of the unhappy, dogmatic crowd. To the skeptic’s surprise then comes the discovery that *epochē* brings with itself the peace of mind the skeptic has always longed for. For the skeptic philosophy is rather an anesthetic than a stimulant: “We philosophize, he claims, so as to be at ease and safe in the world,” as Martha Nussbaum suggests, and neither to be disturbed nor get excited (529). This experience that comes by mere chance, in spite of the fact that it is persistently and systematically sought for, is best illustrated by what had happened to one of the greatest painters of Hellenism, the Greek Apelles:

The skeptic’s experience is, in fact, the same as what is reported about the painter Apelles. For they say that as he was painting a horse, and trying to represent the foam on its coat, he was unsuccessful that he gave up and flung at the picture the sponge on which he had been wiping the paints of his brush. And the sponge made the effect of the horse’s foam so, too, skeptics used to hope to get freedom from disturbance through sorting out the discrepancies in impressions and thoughts but proving unable to do this, they suspend it: and as they were suspending, freedom from disturbance, as if by chance [*hoion tuchikōs*], followed them as a shadow follows a body. (PH 1.8)

As has been noted by many commentators of Sextus’ *Outlines*, Sextus does not quite explain how *epochē* induces *ataraxia*. The skeptic starts as anyone else, as the lover of truths. As Friedrich Hölderlin has put it

in his *Hyperion*, the skeptic “knows the harmony of perfect beauty...and is secretly feasting at the table of Gods” (93), just because he never loses sight of one particular thing—the truth itself. Indeed, just as Apelles is searching for a true, perfect, painterly foam-effect, the skeptic wants to know the truth and is an inquirer into its mysterious paths. This is supported both by Sextus’ insistence on labeling the fellow skeptics as *zetetikoi*, or “the seekers” because they seek after the truth, as well as by the very etymology of the word skeptic, which best translates as the one who searches out or investigates. But, as a result of a failure of such an enterprise, the skeptic, one may say quite unexpectedly, achieves tranquility and feels he has been all the time on the wrong track. For pursuing truths and having beliefs, bring only anxiety, rashness, and stubbornness, and are respectively a task that is impossible to fulfill and a condition that should be overcome.

The most incredible point about skepticism thus conceived is that it is supposed to be fully *liveable*, that is, practically put to work. If you accept that there are disagreements you can neither rationally resolve nor triumph over—the Persians are *into* one thing, the Romans prefer another—then you necessarily end up in a state of equilibrium or balance and hence of suspension of judgment. And then, as if by a trick of magic, you simply *lack* those beliefs that used to bother you, you are “purged” of and relieved from them. In a word, you will not longer believe that homosexuality is either *good* or *bad* in itself, which will ultimately have a lasting and decisive impact on your life.

Here we come to one of the most ancient and most serious charges against skepticism. Traditionally, it is called the *apraxia*, or “inactivity,” argument, and consists of a simple claim that the skeptic cannot live his skepticism at all, that is, that it can be put to practice neither successfully nor consistently. For how can you act in the world without beliefs that would guide you and ground your preference of one course of action over another? If one’s beliefs are constantly subject to doubt and only relatively valid, why would anyone defend and propagate them? If there is anything proper to politics, it is that it requires beliefs. Once the knot between beliefs and a subject is undone, politics disappears, and the subject is not

any more *politēs*, a political subject. If the requirement of all politics is commonality, how does the skeptic meet such requirement? Does not the skeptic challenge all beliefs allowing none to slip off untested? And if the essence of politics consists not in commonality but in challenging what is held as common, in disagreement and different framing of common goals, how does the skeptic might even disagree? For *dissensus* also requires beliefs, indispensable beliefs. Are not some beliefs, as Michael Williams has put it, both “logically indispensable” and “psychologically ineliminable” (552)? What are then the practical consequences of skeptical *epochē*? Is the skeptic, as Hume believed, doomed to a kind of paralysis—a vegetative-like existence—speechlessness, and even suicide?¹⁰⁵ Does not then the skeptic end up in a complete detachment from ordinary life, desensitized to any partaking in the action of ruling or of being ruled? Is not he ultimately incapable of any political activity, of any framing of common experience?

It is useful to note that many skeptics disagreed with the charge and tried both to account for and defend skepticism as a viable and reasonable way of doing things in the world and partaking in a social life. The skeptic, Sextus says, lives “according to appearances.” This living “by appearances” has a four-grounded foothold:

Clinging to appearances, then, we [the skeptics] live without belief, according to the practices of life, since we cannot be altogether inactive. And it looks as if these practices of life are four sorts. The first lies in *the guidance of nature*, second in *the necessity of the feelings*, the third in *the transmission of laws and customs*, the fourth in *the instructions of the arts*. (PH 1.8)

¹⁰⁵ Let me draw upon another philosopher who extensively reflected on the political consequences of skepticism, Gilbert Chesterton. Chesterton writes, “Man can only be defined as an animal that makes dogmas,” and continues:

When he drops one doctrine after another in a refined skepticism, when he declines to tie himself to a system, when he says that he has outgrown definitions...holding no form of creed but contemplating all, then he is by that very process sinking slowly backwards into the vagueness of the vagrant animals and the unconsciousness of the grass. Trees have no dogmas. (126)

Is the skeptic’s consciousness, as Chesterton suggests, the consciousness of the grass? Are skeptics, because they have no beliefs, no more than trees?

Now, the system seems to work perfectly well when it is up to the skeptic to confront epistemological problems. He will use his senses as any other man and simply run his business as usual in judging, for instance, that honey is both sweet and nourishable. But though he will admit these “facts” and allow them to guide him in his life, he will never take them “as in any way indicative of honey’s true nature” (Bett *Pyrrho*, 3). The skeptic will again, typically, reach out for a disclaimer and say that it is only how honey *appears* to him and not how it truly is.

While it is still functional on an epistemological level, the system is entirely inoperative when it comes to serious political dilemmas. For listen how clumsily and inconclusively Sextus responds to a charge that the skeptic would never be able to make a choice if ordered by a tyrant to do something “unspeakable:”

When they say this they do not understand that the skeptic, though he does not live according to a philosophical account is perfectly able to choose some things and avoid others...So, if he is compelled by a tyrant to do one of the unspeakable things, in virtue of his thinking according to the ancestral laws and customs he will perchance choose the one and avoid the other. (M 11.165-66)

Are we really told which course of action will perchance (*tuchon*) be finally chosen? Not at all. We are only, somewhat timidly and inaptly, told that the skeptic will follow the customs. It is crucial to note that politics, understood as a way of framing and relating to critical problems and dilemmas shared among citizens, has nothing to do with *chance*. A political subject never acts accidentally, but purposively. He grounds his decisions and choices in firm beliefs and clear explanations. If a subject is political, he must provide a rationale for his decisions. Diogenes Laertius, another major source on the tenets of ancient skepticism, brings up a similar puzzle. What would the skeptic do, he asks, if ordered to eat his own father? And again, he offers an unsatisfactorily dry answer: the skeptic will “observe rules and customs” of the society in which he lives. That is all we get.

We get the very same response from Erenburg's Jurenito. When asked why did he kiss Lenin and "Was it reverence or pity?," he skeptically responds: "No. I always respect the traditions of the country I'm in" and that is all we get (253).¹⁰⁶ Now, it clearly follows from Jurenito's answer why is skepticism traditionally regarded as a form of political conservatism and psychological quietism, always intent on preserving the status quo. As Christian Thorne astutely observes, classical skepticism works as "a kind of authoritarian pragmatism, a means of defending established...practices without claiming these practices to be true" (11). For how one lives according to appearances and customs, if what is to be judged and questioned are precisely *those* appearances and *those* customs on which one heavily and decidedly relies? The political menace of skepticism consists precisely in its forwarding a systematic critique of episteme to fight off all the potential enemies of the state and all the heretics and then, as if by a trick of magic, in offering "a utilitarian rationale for continuing on" with all the customary forms of state and church life (Thorne, 11). The question is, thus, what does the skeptic do when ordered by a dictator to participate in the Holocaust, for instance? Is he doomed to the maintenance of political order and existing social relations? Does he cling to the Nazi customs or, rather, challenge them?¹⁰⁷

This is the question that brings me back to Erenburg's novel with its Nietzschean rethinking of skepticism. It is precisely this predicament, in which what is supposed to ground our deep-cherished beliefs turns out to be most questionable, that the Teacher both lives through and seeks to expose. In this respect, Jurenito's provocations may be compared to Pyrrho's numerous colorful "misdemeanors"—though most of them apocryphal—famously recorded in Diogenes Laertius' life of Pyrrho. Just as Pyrrho

¹⁰⁶ "Нет. Я всегда уважаю традиции страны." (261)

¹⁰⁷ There has been a vigorous debate in philosophical discourse in recent years on the scope of skeptical *epochē* and the question does the skeptic suspend judgment on all matters, or just on the "theoretical" ones, and how does this suspension consequently affect his whereabouts in the world and, ultimately, his political views. While it is systematic indeed, the debate is, also, typically philosophically "dry." For, the true question is not how does one live without beliefs—which is how it has been regularly formulated in analytic philosophy—but how could one be a revolutionary, for instance, without convictions. Or, to put it slightly differently, the big question is not is life without belief possible at all—but rather, how can one be "a fanatic without convictions," as, for instance, Emil Cioran, a great French-Romanian skeptic, used to say of himself (in Said, 29). Is to be the fanatic without convictions same as to be the skeptic with commitments? And what is, preferably, Jurenito? First, second, or both? Such lively questions, sadly, usually stay out of analytic philosophy's domain. On the debate, see Burnyeat and Frede (1998).

takes no precautions in the face of steep precipices, falling wagons, or barking dogs—which is all supposed to show how Pyrrho did not put trust in his senses, promoting not just empirical skepticism but also the ideal of living one’s life “unaffected”—Jurenito takes no precautions in the face of the First World War mass killings, the Revolution dangers, nor does he fear the Bolshevik pogroms. “It has been suggested that, rather than actually living this way,” which is a way of being dependent upon others all the time in order to be rescued and saved, “Pyrrho was performing a kind of pantomime, intended as a dramatic illustration of his philosophy,” Richard Bett makes us alert (68). Now, if this is correct, Pyrrho’s pantomime may also be likened to Jurenito’s provocative performances. Just as Pyrrho, somewhat parodically, intensifies some “tenets” of his “teaching,” by living them through-and-through, even up to the point of suicide, Jurenito over-identifies with the very tenets of modernity—with its beliefs, convictions, dogmas, and mythemes—up to the point when he simply dies for a pair of boots.

That this comparison is not at all far-fetched, and that Jurenito may be modeled as a Pyrrho of our times, is best shown in an episode in which all the novel’s characters find themselves in a tiny, rescuing boat, drifting in the open sea, right after their small ship *Hannibal* has been sunk by a German submarine:

During these solemn hours each of us was convinced of his impending death, and each expressed this in his own way. The Teacher alone maintained a perfect, I might almost say, an everyday calm. He occupied himself with us, joked with Aisha and told the story of how, as a child, he had taken it into his head to cross the Atlantic in a beer barrel, but the waves—alas!—had washed him back on shore after a few minutes. I asked him whether the thought of inevitable death meant nothing to him. The Teacher shrugged his shoulders: “It’s a matter of habit. I don’t feel secure on dry land either. My *Hannibal* was sunk long ago.” (177)¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ “В эти торжественные часы все были убеждены в близкой смерти, и каждый это по-своему выражал. Только Учитель был до крайности спокоен, скажу—даже будничен. Он заботился о нас, шутил с Айшей и рассказывал о том, как ребенком он вздумал переплыть в пивной бочке Атлантический океан, но был, увы, выкинут, через несколько минут волнами на берег. Я спросил его—неужели он совсем не воспринимает неизбежной, по видимому, смерти? Учитель пожал печами: ‘Привычка! Я и на земле не чувствую себя уверенным. Мой Аннибал ведь давно потоплен’” (182).

While *Khulio Khurenito* is indeed an “agitated” novel, rich in its anarchic destructiveness and lively action, which all together get reflected on its narrative structure by means of its exquisite discursiveness and a number of speeches, speech-act situations, and “rash” anecdotes, it also subtly cherishes an underlying discourse of equanimity, indifference, and inaction. In the previous episode, Jurenito’s cheerful tranquility is being both promoted, but also contrasted with his thirst for danger, with his enjoying and seeking for the “liminal zones” (Lipovetsky, 66)—such as Mexican burglaries and latter chases, the war itself, German and Soviet concentration camps, the Cheka prison, and so on. The analogy is indeed striking since Pyrrho himself is said to have remained “undisturbed” and calm in a small ship at sea during a storm, being occupied solely by the pig’s lighthearted and unmindful munching of the food, thinking of the pig’s behavior as a model to be followed and emulated by every sage.¹⁰⁹

In both cases we find a paradox. On the one hand, there is a philosophy of indifference and the state of unperturbedness that is being advocated; on the other, both Pyrrho and Jurenito seem to appreciate the state of liminality. Confronted with the dire prospects of modernity, Jurenito discovers that his skepticism finds its proper expression—and politically the most efficacious one—in hyper-action not in inaction, in over-identification not in suspense of judgment. In the words of Jacques Rancière, it is only in hyper-action that the twentieth-century skeptic finds a way to *re-partition the sensible*, to reconfigure the field of what is allowed and what is not, to make himself visible, to make his voice heard, to break free and come out of the prison-house of *epochē*. In over-identification, the twentieth-century skeptic finds a way to “rupture in the logic of *arche*,” to burst into the system of ruling, and to dismantle the hierarchy of power relations (Rancière, *Ten Theses*, 4). The skeptic is not anymore understood as the one who is unaccounted for, or unentitled to speak, but as someone who has the right to give a configuration to a

¹⁰⁹ In Diogenes Laertius, the story goes like this: “When his [Pyrrho’s] fellow-passengers on board a ship were all unnerved by a storm, he kept calm and confident, pointing to a little pig in the ship that went on eating, and telling them that such was the unperturbed state in which the wise man should keep himself” (481).

political community.¹¹⁰ Insofar as it is a rupture in the logic of *arche*, twentieth-century skepticism reveals the structural void at the foundation of all politics and refers to “*an-archy*, to the absence of an entitlement to rule that constitutes the very nature of the political space” (Rancière, *Ten Theses*, 8). It is not by accident that the Teacher is, throughout the novel, described as “an anarchist” (21).¹¹¹ And it is not hard to notice how Jurenito’s gesture of kissing Lenin’s forehead “unfixes” Lenin’s sovereignty, unmasks the illegitimacy of the Bolshevik rule, and refers to the absence of an entitlement to rule and the usurpation of power.

When I said that the meaning of skepticism radically changes at the turn of the century, and that Erenburg’s protagonist embodies this change, I meant precisely that a radical reaction against skepticism’s political discontents—quietism, conservatism, solipsism, its uncritical acceptance and a wholesale acquiescence in the status quo—was both invited and welcomed. Moreover, it is simply incredible how the reaction itself gets both “rhetorically” and “narratively,” and not just politically, couched in the novel. Indeed, *Khulio Khurenito* is, in spite of Tynianov’s judgment, not exclusively the novel of ideas. For it is not surprising at all that Erenburg’s novel, generically at least, is a typical action or adventure novel. This generic feature is only a reflex of a view that suspension of judgment is too slow and sluggish for early-twentieth century accelerated times. Second, the novel challenges the view that the main source of human happiness is *ataraxia*: it rather finds in disturbance and anxiety, in what the ancient skeptics called *tarachē* and Heidegger *Angst*, a worthy goal of human life. Finally and most importantly, in the rhetoric of over-identification Erenburg discovers a form of writing—an idiosyncratic narrative form even—ideally suited to Nietzsche’s, and Jurenito’s, skeptical outlook. In the novel, “active” skepticism and

¹¹⁰ To do justice to Jacques Rancière, I must say that he never directly addresses skepticism. I am only drawing upon his understanding of politics as a “specific rupture in the logic of *arche*” and a reconfiguration of critical questions such as: who can rule?, who can speak?, who can criticize?, who can judge?, who can vote?, who can disagree?, and so on. Rancière sees politics as the interruption in the logic of *arche*, or simply of the right to rule, exercised by those who are marginalized and repressed. He makes a strong case for the understanding of politics as “the manifestation of *dissensus*,” or simply of disagreement (*Ten Theses*, 11), and a perpetual questioning or *skepsis* of what he calls the order of *police*: of the political discourse that prescribes who can rule? who can speak?, and so on. I am thankful to David Ferris for this insight.

¹¹¹ “анархист” (13).

the figure of a committal skeptic are revealed rhetorically through over-identification, rather than by assertion and thesis-illustration.¹¹²

In the end it is useful to note that neither the purging of belief nor the suspension of judgment are “bad” as such; on the contrary, with each one of them comes also the purging of violence, cruelty, and aggressiveness, as well as the suspension of single-mindedness and selfishness. Rather than this, I would like to stress that the debate on the ethico-political merits of skepticism and its ever-changing psychopolitical profile had been pretty lively especially in the 1920’s and 1930’s. If Erenburg is right in his

¹¹² The final rationale for Jurenito’s rhetoric of over-identification may have already been provided in 1938 by Max Horkheimer. In his less known yet brilliant essay, “Montaigne and the Function of Skepticism,” Horkheimer envisaged a possibility of skeptical over-identification. Published at the twilight of the 1930’s, the essay revisited the political disquietudes of skepticism with a clear vista on an impending catastrophe. In the essay, Horkheimer argues how Montaigne’s view of skepticism seemed to be both futile and inoperative in the 1930’s. While he acknowledges Montaigne as “the founder of modern skepticism” (266), he criticizes a somewhat blind acceptance of both Pyrrho’s and Montaigne’s ideas in skeptical Weimer Republic intellectuals. Horkheimer’s point is simple: Montaigne’s skepticism is a philosophical product of his own tumultuous times—of public rebellions caused by poverty and hunger, of class struggles between aristocracy and the newly-emerged bourgeoisie, and of the numerous religious clashes between Catholics and Protestants—and it cannot simply be copy-pasted on the beginning of the twentieth-century. In the face of all these horrors, in the face of fanatical times in which far too many considered their views uncontested and absolute, Montaigne takes the role of a diplomat, “a negotiator rather than an antagonist” (269)—we would say today of a peacemaker—and pleads for the skeptical *epochē*, for keeping oneself from the historical upheaval and for “the retreat into private interiority” (271), for toleration and humbleness, which all together, at the time, fleshed out a progressive attitude. However, to Horkheimer, all this had sense and was possible just because early modern skepticism left at least one thing uncontested: the *ego* as such. The isolated ego was the point of power (Kraftpunkt), a foothold, “the only principle we can rely on,” Horkheimer asserts (279). Montaigne could have promoted the values of tolerance, moderation, privacy, and freedom of conscience just because they were closely linked to a rising individualism, subjectivism, and the philosophy of the ego. Similarly, early modern skeptics could claim independence from the violent manners and rash attitudes of the religious sects and confessions—that is, they could both suspend judgment and retreat into privacy—just because the very independence of the ego from external events was licensed and granted by the early-modern bourgeois ideology. “But personality,” Horkheimer continues ironically, “doesn’t fall from the sky; it is socially produced and dissolves with the conditions that created it” (290). Unlike the early-modern, the totalitarian society whose emblem is the Führer state, abolishes the ego and menaces its very ontology, “it completely disappears as a possibility,” says Horkheimer (290). Now, the greatest illusion of all early-twentieth century skeptics, Horkheimer contends, is that in spite of all this they still believe “the ego to be a safe harbor” (290) and an unthreatened entity. Consequently, they keep practicing *epochē* for they still believe that by keeping themselves apart from the Führer state they would manage both to express their criticism and ultimately make some change. But, they are just wrong. There is no place for reservation of judgment under Fascism, but only for action. The skeptical “neutrality in the struggle against the Führer,” Horkheimer utters, “is tantamount to participation in total mobilization” (292). To put it crudely, Horkheimer seems to be saying that you can hardly beat the Nazis by suspending judgment: “Out of the skeptical tolerance concerning freedom of conscience comes conformism with the regime of the secret police” (292). So, like Nietzsche before, Horkheimer urges for active skepticism in a strong plea which is, quite paradoxically, both deeply dismissive of twentieth-century skepticism and at the same supportive of it, and, in addition to this, it also perfectly describes the general philosophical underpinnings of Erenburg’s novel.

account of skepticism and his contention that the very linchpin of skepticism is threatened, that the very possibility of criticism is “under siege,” and that the only viable alternative is simply a call to arms and resistance, what is then left for skeptics in a totalitarian state? A modest suspension of judgment or, rather, an uncompromising rhetoric of over-identification? Perhaps, that is what Erenburg had in mind when he said of his protagonist: “Jurenito is dear to me because nobody (even myself) knows where his smile ends, and his pathos begins...In him I am more truthful than anywhere else without obligations toward any kind of totality” (in Rubenstein, 80). Indeed, does Jurenito’s smile begin when he runs up to Lenin and kisses his “high vaulted forehead,” or is that the point at which it finally ceases to be (253)? This is the place of indeterminacy, so typical of literary modernism and the skeptical narrative. But it is also a place in which the skeptical ideal of *ataraxia*, of a happy life achieved through seclusion and tranquility gets dissolved under the banner of Nietzsche: “A happy life is impossible: the highest that man can attain to is a heroic one” (*Will*, 696). Therefore, it is also a place in which heroic skepticism is born.

Khulio Khurenito as a Skeptical Prophecy

Skeptical prophecy? Is not that a contradiction in terms? The skeptic, by default, is not able to foretell, for foretelling requires beliefs, rock-solid beliefs. And not just rock-solid beliefs about the present, those that can be immediately verified and dismissed if necessary, but those about the future, the beliefs that exist only virtually, *in absentia*.

Yet, Erenburg’s novel did not have to wait too long for his ghastly, prophetic visions to get fully realized. First, with his stunning portrait of Karl Schmidt. The naming is, of course, wholly accidental yet still quite disconcerting. Karl Schmidt is the only disciple of the Teacher, who lives an orderly, regular life. Moreover, he is the embodiment of German punctuality, order, and commitment to work. But the dark side of his personality soon gets revealed: he is a racist and a proto-fascist. During the First World War, Schmidt pleads in favor of the occupation of Russia and the absorption of both France and England

under the great Germany and a single Europe. The reasons, he says, are purely “economic” and should result in “the happiness of mankind.” As shown later, Schmidt is even eager to “condone the annihilation of a thousand babies for the good of society” and to kill either “one weak-minded old man [or] ten million people for the good of mankind” because, as he coldly says, “there’s only an arithmetical difference” (105, 199) in doing so. Towards the end of the novel, we find Schmidt in the role of the honored Red commissar carrying out the Bolshevik utopia of a perfectly calculated society, fitted to a “single plan.” One of the charts in his commissar’s office shows “the exact distribution of the working population by professions” with no deviation allowed (267). The Bolshevik utopia is thus transformed into a self-evident, “programmed” dystopia in which a child would be instructed from its earliest infancy “to love the calling assigned to it” (267).¹¹³ Moreover, Schmidt advocates that the total number of births should be strictly controlled by the State, with children taken away from their parents and then programmed in labor camps. As Joshua Rubenstein observes, “Ehrenburg created a Nazi in his imagination long before the world got its first glimpse of Adolf Hitler” (77).

The next prophetic vision is even more sinister. Right into the middle of the novel, the Teacher, as if out of the blue, invites his disciples and the public to attend “Solemn Performances of the Tribe of Judas which will take place shortly in Budapest, Kiev, Jaffa, Algiers and many other places” (111). It quickly turns out that the performances in question include:

...apart from the traditional pogroms—a public favorite—a series of historical reconstructions in the spirit of the age, e. g., burning of Jews, burying same alive, sprinkling of fields with Jewish blood, as well as modern methods of “evacuation,” “removal of suspicious elements,” etc., etc...Time and place will be announced later. Entrance free. (111)¹¹⁴

¹¹³ “распределение трудящихся по ремеслам,” “любить предназначенное ему ремесло” (274).

¹¹⁴ “кроме излюбленных уважаемой публикой традиционных ПОГРОМОВ, также реставрирование в духе эпохи: сожжение иудеев, закапывание их живьем в землю, опрыскивание полей иудейской кровью и новые приемы, как-то: ‘эвакуация,’ очистка от подозрительных элементов, и пр., и пр....О месте и времени будет объявлено особо. В х о д б е с п л а т н ы й” (110).

One cannot help but notice the grisly apparition of the Holocaust lurking from behind these sentences. Although it has been noted that Erenburg has not been as prophetic as it may seem, and that these “ghastly visions were suggested to [him] by actual pogroms he lived through in 1918-19 while in Kiev” (Lipovetsky, 83), the language of bureaucracy, the very administrative idiom that he used both to announce the pogroms and to describe them, is indeed stunning. The paragraph is teeming with abbreviations—such as “e. g.,” then “etc. etc.”—which all suggest how human life can easily be “abbreviated.” Its abstract, euphemistic language of *evacuations* and *removals of suspicious elements*—what George Orwell famously called *newspeak*—is even more frightening. Last but not least, the entire invitation is arranged as a poster advertisement thus strongly emphasizing the bizarre parallel between the practice of mass-killing, on the one hand, and the society of the spectacle and mass propaganda, on the other.

The prophetic qualities of the novel do not stop here. Erenburg envisions in a crystal-clear way where the Bolshevik rule ultimately leads to—pogroms, mass-exterminations and the society of total control—and he even manages, as a clairvoyant looking at a shew stone, to pass an offhand remark that a weapon of mass destruction would befall the Japanese.

At some point, his “panoramic” yet ill-omened satire turns, to the astonishment of all, Kafkaesque. Right before the Teacher sacrifices himself for a pair of boots—skeptically mocking *apophthegmata* and also *the lives of the saints*, in which protagonists typically sacrifice themselves for noble values and lofty ideals—he addresses his disciples for the last time. This time his skeptical over-identification takes on the form of confession:

In my last hours, I should like to see something else, the next stage, the thing still shrouded in mist. Here comes a man with the pile of papers. On his hip, in a special pocket, he carries a Browning. Don't be afraid, he isn't a bandit, he is an honest official. This morning having typed

something under a serial number, he has shot a man who has disagreed with him on some issue or another. Now he has dined and is briskly walking to a meeting. (300)¹¹⁵

What is the confession then about? A clerk official, buried under the pile of papers, buries another unnamed man. In a typically Kafkaesque atmosphere, no-name characters and indefinite pronouns proliferate. All we are told is that the man shot disagreed with “an honest official” on some obscure issue. He has been shot only because he doubted and did not hesitate to express his doubts. He has been shot only because he was a skeptic. And the skeptic is known as the naysayer, the contrarian, the pesky disagreeer, “the twelfth angry man” (Thorne, 35). In Sidney Lumet’s film, the twelfth angry man brings the rest of the jury over to his cause in the end: one committed skeptic wins over eleven faltering dogmatists. Unlike this happy resolution, a closely-administered society—in which every disagreement is abolished and the entire culture is run by the principles of homogeneity and the destruction of otherness—molds another final solution for the skeptic: a cold-blooded murder.

If *Khulio Khurenito* is a skeptical narrative, this is how it pictures its ultimate prophecy: An “honest,” brainwashed, “serialized,” dogmatic, clerk-murderer—a little insignificant cog in a huge “paper-machine”—is energetically walking to a meeting, after killing his fellow skeptic, as if nothing has happened. If this is its ultimate prophecy, then it is not surprising that the entire narrative calls for and builds toward the image of a resolute skeptic. The skeptic of our times. The skeptic with a hammer.

¹¹⁵ “...Мне хочется в последние мои часы прозреть иное, следующее, туманное. Вот идет человек с папкой бумаг. У него сзади в специальном карманчике браунинг. Не бойтесь: это не бандит, это честный чиновник. Утром он, отстукав нечто на машинке за номером, расстрелял человека, с ним не согласного. Сейчас он пообедал и бодро идет на заседание” (307).

Chapter 4

The Syntax of Skepticism: Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* as a Skeptical Narrative

Introduction

Samuel Beckett is a writer who has bequeathed to us an unprecedented work of individual sentences. In the course of his life, he struggled to accomplish the task of structuring a consistent narrative in the sense of continuous, uninterrupted speech. Due to a kind of Lord Chandos neurosis, all his attempts at asserting coherences of the world by means of words and all his endeavors to bring about an apprehensible and sustained piece of fabulation turned out to be inadequate. Yet, despite his explicit and self-proclaimed allegiance to the aesthetics of failure, Samuel Beckett's work betrays the high tension and strained smile of a man who demanded a permanent and absolute dedication to extremely rigorous structuring principles.¹¹⁶ Namely, no problem preoccupied him more deeply and more profoundly than that of a narrative syntax. The question how does one move from the instability of conjunctions and clausal linkages to a cohesive text, resonates across his narratives and dramas alike. In their experimental spirit and radical modernity, his writings attest to the reconfiguration of classical storytelling and are foreordained to function as a hodgepodge of fragments and unfinished thoughts, a patchwork of arbitrary language games, sketchy events, and grammatically dubious constructions. If there is any such thing as the paradox of Beckett it consists precisely in the question how did someone's rigor for precision ultimately lead to his being also a bellwether of ambiguity?

My claim that Beckett is a writer who left behind a work of individual sentences rather than a complex work of novels, dramas, stories, and radio and television plays is, of course, a counterintuitive claim. By making it, I neither want to underestimate Beckett nor do I intend to deny that Beckett's patient and inexorable work resulted in numerous fully-fledged novels and plays. I only claim that the essence of

¹¹⁶ In *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, Beckett famously declares that "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail" (*Proust*, 125). The doctrine of creative failure has been haunting Beckett scholarship ever since.

Beckett's narrative art resides and is to be found on the level of syntax, *within* the Beckettian sentence, rather than on the levels of longer narrative stretches, intertextuality, philosophical allusions, and the like. These hermeneutic approaches have dominated critical reception of Beckett and are certainly not without their own merits and accomplishments. However, science fiction teaches us that one may reach distant worlds either by spending hundreds and thousands of years travelling in a state of hibernation in a high-speed spacecraft, or, alternatively, by opening a spacegate that twists the key dimensions of space and time and provides a direct access to any desired destination. Beckett's syntax is a shortcut to the intricacies and marvels of his narrative universe.

At the beginning of the 1960's, in his interviews with Lawrence Harvey, Beckett himself hinted at the true purpose of his narrative explorations: "Someday someone will find an adequate form, a 'syntax of weakness'" (in Harvey, 249), he said. This futurological statement that addresses the nature of modern art is, of course, a clear example of false modesty. Beckett has already found the form and has used it lavishly and consistently throughout his works. Beckett's syntax of weakness is thus a proper topic of the following chapter and I shall argue that it is a skeptical syntax *par excellence*. My aim is to show that Beckett completes the trajectory of modernist skeptical narration by molding a syntax that is, as Christopher Ricks has put it with characteristic intelligence, "sceptical even of scepticism" (145). In order to decipher a somewhat murky expression and reveal what lies behind its "weakness," I will closely analyze a sample of Beckett's sentences from his novel *Molloy* (French, 1951; English 1955). *Molloy* serves as an optimal narrative for exploring the skeptical underpinnings of Beckett's "syntax of weakness" and also represents the eclipse of modernist aesthetics. What makes the novel truly outstanding is that both its syntax and narrative method mark a triple break: from Beckett's previous works, from Beckett's "paternal figure," Joyce, and from the earliest realist and modernist tendencies Beckett somewhat unwillingly succumbed to.¹¹⁷ Though my topic is *Molloy*, I will also refer to both

¹¹⁷ A significant amount of scholarship has been done on the relationship between Joyce and Beckett. In the *German Letter of 1937*, Beckett claimed that Joyce's way with literature is "an apotheosis of the word," while his is the

Malone Dies and *The Unnamable*, with a particular focus on how this syntax develops and evolves in the course of what came to be known as Beckett's narrative trilogy and, with no doubt, his *magnum opus*. I will thus track down what rhetorical figures and narrative threads are closely, if not fatefully, entangled with characteristic patterns of Beckett's syntax of weakness. For that matter, I will pay special attention to three rhetorical figures as they interact between one another and form a very peculiar narrative syntax: antithesis, *epanorthosis*, and *catachrēsis*. I will try to find a way through the complex syntactic labyrinth that is set up by Beckett for each reader who is intent on trespassing the slippery territory of the so-called first trilogy. In this respect, Beckett's self-proclaimed "fidelity to failure" and his aesthetic ideal of finding a style of writing that would accommodate the chaos and "the mess" (*The Madeleine*, 23) will turn out to be neither chaotic nor messy. On the contrary, I will show that they are the products of a meticulous, combinatorial, and methodical literary mind.¹¹⁸

The Syntax of Weakness: Preliminaries

In an excellent recent essay, Bruno Clément has noticed that there is something quite inexplicable, almost magic, about Beckett's syntax. While Clément is first of all concerned with how certain French philosophers such as Bataille, Blanchot, Badiou, Deleuze, and Anzieu make use of Beckett and forward somewhat biased and reductive readings of his art, readings that draw upon and focus on those aspects of Beckett's work that can be with little effort and in an easy way squeezed into their own philosophical systems and agendas, he is also prompt to show how each one of these eminent readers of Beckett seems to be "ventriloquized" by the text" about which they claim to be saying something (*What the*

"literature of the unword" (Disjecta, 172, 173). In the 1956 *New York Times* interview with Israel Shenker, he described Joyce's narrative method as working with "omniscience and omnipotence," while his is working with "impotence [and], ignorance" (1). Beckett's position is quite clear in this respect: unlike Joyce, Beckett strips away details and nuances seeking to approximate a minimalist, degree-zero style of writing.

¹¹⁸ Samuel Beckett was a chess fanatic. With Nabokov, Marcel Duchamp, and before them, Stefan Zweig, he may be enlisted into a "circle" of modernist artists who enjoyed chess so much that the game inevitably infiltrated their work and shaped their understanding of art. Some of its combinatorial spirit and mathematical precision gives itself off through the pores of Beckett's narrative method and appears as a subject in some of his works, first of all, in *Murphy* and *Endgame*.

Philosophers, 118). Clément's "ventriloqué" refers primarily to those characteristic thoughts and ideas of Beckett's fictional characters that are being unconsciously repeated in various philosophical treatments of Beckett's novels. He indeed provides dozens of quite compelling examples of a certain mimicking of Beckett's style in the critical idiom of French philosophy contemporaneous with Beckett. However, what I find crucial in Clément's assessment of the nature of philosophical discourse on Beckett is not just that Bataille or Blanchot, for instance, in their famous essays published along with *Molloy* and *The Unnamable* and respectively titled "Molloy's Silence" and "Where Now? Who Know?," recapitulate and almost word-by-word restate certain key phrases from these two novels, without being aware of what they are actually doing. The crucial point is that even the philosophers' syntax begins to emulate and multiply those syntactic patters that are typical of Beckett and fiction writing, but certainly not of philosophical metadiscourse. One cannot help notice, even in translation, how Bataille's syntax stutters, breaks, and fractures in the same way as Beckett's syntax regularly does. "This would only make sense if death," Bataille writes on the aggravated state of Molloy's legs, "–or existence *in* death (or, for that matter, death *in* existence)–could have a meaning, whereas the only meaning death can have reposes in the fact that, in its way, its lack of meaning is itself meaning, a parody of meaning perhaps, but, ultimately, a quite finite meaning..." (135). While the example from the Bataille essay is mine, the conclusion I arrive at is the same as Clément's: Bataille keeps strenuously correcting himself in a similar way as many a Beckett protagonist, as I will later show, systematically does. He goes *from* death *over* existence in death *to* death in existence as much as he goes *from* meaning *over* a lack of meaning and a certain parody of meaning *to* a meaning that is quite stable and finite. Even those secondary, formal features, such as the obvious paratactic patterning, the excessive use of comas, and the second-ordering of information by means of brackets and parentheses, are all characteristic of Beckett's syntax in the *Trilogy*. Clément's essay is provocatively titled "What the Philosophers Do with Samuel Beckett," yet he arrives at an ironic conclusion: it turns out that it is rather the case that the enchanting quality of Beckett's syntax does something to the philosophers rather than contrariwise.

If the first feature of Beckett's syntax of weakness is that it does not seem to be weak at all but rather is quite adaptable and adept at perpetuating itself in every discursive form it gets in touch with, the second prominent feature is that it accounts for the fragmentary and cult appeal of most Beckett's novels. "In order to transform a work [of art] into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only the parts of it, irrespective of their relationship with the whole" (395), writes Umberto Eco on a slack composition of *Casablanca* (1942) and the status of a cult film it subsequently achieved not *in spite of* but precisely *because of* such a wobbly composition. Samuel Beckett's narratives are already ramshackle and rickety enough, so loosely structured as if they are ready to collapse. This very *unquality* is precisely what confers on them the aura of cult objects. Indeed, no reader of Beckett has ever appreciated *the whole of* Beckett but only *the part of* "him." Yet, readers are, certainly, not to blame. Beckett's texts are preprogrammed to be cut to pieces and memorized and assessed only in parts. "The sheer contingency of his prose," writes Terry Eagleton on Beckett, "cuts the ground from beneath the sense of destiny and absolute certitudes" (*Introduction*, 2), but it also cuts the ground from beneath itself and offers itself to us in the form of fragments, sayings, nonsense lines, unfinished sentences, and broken narrative chains. This explains why Beckett's critics frequently behave like *Casablanca* fans: first quoting, and then spending pages and hours on some memorable phrase that is torn out of the context and given an archetypal appeal.

One such line, "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (170), concludes some one hundred and seventy densely written pages of *Molloy* and I am using it here as a guidance to the third prominent feature of Beckett's syntax of weakness.¹¹⁹ Truly, the sentence

¹¹⁹ Samuel Beckett. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press: New York, 2009. All references to the *Trilogy* are to this edition. I would like to point out, at the outset, that I am taking Beckett's self-translations of the novels (written and published first in French) as autonomous works of art. While I am not in the position to judge if Beckett's English syntax "weaker" than its French counterpart, it is very likely that if my argument holds for Beckett's English, it works for his French as well. For, at the beginning of the 1960's in his interview with Lawrence Harvey, Beckett admitted that, compared to his native tongue, French represented "a form

has been cited over and over again in the various critical interpretations of *Molloy* and it has invited a lot of critical attention. The main reason for its having such an appeal is not just that it directly confronts us with a key question and, simultaneously, exposes us to the main hermeneutic puzzle: What are we to do with such a statement? What are we to make of it? It rather serves to signal to an implanted and frequently reappearing syntactic pattern and a specific rhetorical situation that provokes in the reader of Beckett's novels not just the vague feeling of a *déjà vu*, but also serves as an omen of what is to come in the *Trilogy* on the level of content as well as on the level of form. If Moran's narrative ends where it once began, in the garden of his household, with him penning down a line that recoils on itself just as his search of Molloy in the end recoils upon his entire life, in what sense then what Moran writes down might represent a species of the syntax of weakness? That is, indeed, the key question. Is his sentence, then, a testimony to the strength of consolation, if not of redemption and salvation; or, is it, on the other hand, an evidence of spiritual exhaustion and weakness that ultimately finds its expression in a contradictory, self-undoing statement?

The answer to all these questions reposes in a certain interplay between formal and topical features as they have been incorporated into and radiated from Beckett's distinctive narrative syntax. It is not accidental at all that Beckett's syntax of weakness has been usually associated with various images and motifs capable of appearing, disappearing, and reappearing throughout the *Trilogy* and even beyond it; with a certain critical voice that has been self-consciously inserted into the narrative;¹²⁰ with his numerous antitheses, chiasmic reversals, and periphrastic evasions; with "an endlessly proliferating series of *non*

of weakness" (196). If we are to believe Beckett, what appears to be weak in his English must be even weaker in his French.

¹²⁰ With characteristic critical insight, Bruno Clément argues that: "The essential reason for the difficulty of establishing some distance in relation to the Beckettian text is undoubtedly due to the duality of narrative authorities that it proposes." He goes on to say that, in most cases, the reader "only belatedly becomes aware...that there is in the work, in the text that he or she reads a voice...resembling the critical voice" (*What the Philosophers*, 119). While it is certainly true that the Beckettian text envisions hypothetical critical objections and glosses, and incorporates them into its fabric—spelling them out already on a fictional level and before they are made *in reality*—these glosses are not the only reason for his multiple self-corrections and a self-acknowledged weakening of the narrative syntax, as I shall argue.

sequiturs, of planned inconsistencies and contradictory sayings and unsayings” (*Very Little*, 23), as Simon Critchley has put it. Every novel in the *Trilogy* ends with an antithetical narrative *paralipomena*, with a certain postscript to the story that has just been told. While Moran unsays what he has previously said, that it is midnight and raining, Malone closes his narrative ruminations thinking of Lemuel and his hatchet on “which blood will never dry” but who will, anyway, “not hit anyone any more” (280-81); finally, the elusive voice of *The Unnamable* keeps whispering to itself memorable yet enigmatic words: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (407). Now, one can indeed easily identify an entire logic of reversal (and denial) in Beckett, in which a positive statement about something—be it an object, thought, emotion, or process—is immediately followed by a negative statement with the very same referent. Beckett’s narrators will say something and then promptly and coldly withdraw it, and all this, at least on the level of syntax, would take the form of a perpetual coupling of adversative clauses or opposite descriptions (the *dissoi logoi*). In the opening pages of *The Unnamable* that deliver, in the most self-conscious and explicit fashion, Beckett’s poetic credo, the narrator says:

What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how to proceed? By aporia, pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidate as uttered, or sooner or later? Generally speaking. There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless. I should mention without going any further that I say aporia without knowing what it means. (285)

This passage is the syntax of weakness at its best, or, to put it more accurately, at its weakest. The one who proceeds by aporia, by “affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered,” does not truly get anywhere. “Aporia, in Beckett’s writing,” as Leslie Hill makes clear, “is a figure of indifference, of differences articulated and then suspended. To the extent that it creates not significance but further aporia, it is circular...” (65). To proceed by aporia means to go in a circle or proceed nowhere. No wonder that Beckett’s characters, Molloy in particular, frequently confuse between going in a circle and walking straight ahead:

And having heard, or more probably read somewhere...that when a man in a forest thinks he is going forward in a straight line, in reality he is going in a circle, I did my best to go in a circle hoping this way to go in a straight line...And if I did not go in a rigorously straight line, with my system of going in a circle, at least I did not go in a circle and that was something. And by going on doing this, day after day, and night after night, I looked forward to getting out of the forest, some day. (79)

Truly, much can be said of Molloy's antithetical reasoning here. When he timidly and somewhat insecurely intuits that he "more probably read somewhere" about going in a circle as a means of getting out, a well-informed reader might promptly guess where, in the third part of Descartes' *Discourse of Method*.¹²¹ But the passage does not only contain one in a number of more or less hidden allusions to Descartes. It clearly embodies a dizzying series of antitheses that produce a sense of total immobility, of which Moran's mind characteristically "swoons:" "To be literally incapable of motion at last, that must be something" (134). And indeed, Beckett's protagonists are stuck, and they keep getting stuck in the very same sentence—and an existential condition—they would rather get rid off and move on. Beckett's sentences are like wheels in the snow, spinning and slipping on the spot, occasionally veering off the road but surely getting at no final destination. Yet, this particular technique that frustrates narrative movement is not solely characterized by its downsides, in terms of plot development, characterization, and action. It also has a few peculiar, yet tangible "advantages." Adorno rightly saw in Beckett's syntactic movements to and fro, in the very dynamics of taking first two steps forward and then one step back, in his endless and laborious chaining of antitheses, paradoxes, oxymorons, antinomies, and absurdities, a certain "legacy of action" (381), a trace of Stoicism that is buried deep under the layers of narrative *skepsis*. The syntax of weakness is not weak in any literal sense of the word. As Simon Critchley shrewdly observes, it rather "presses on" (169) being unable to fully relinquish its locomotion. It is a perfect instrument of a

¹²¹ Where Descartes writes: "In this respect, I would be imitating a traveler who, upon finding himself lost in a forest, should not wander about turning this way and that...but should keep walking as straight as he can...for in this way...he will at least end in the place where he is likely to be better off than in the middle of a forest." Simon Critchley is right to bring about the above passage from *Molloy* and to point out how it represents one of numerous "semi-hidden references to Descartes," so typical of Beckett (142). But there is more to a story. For being lost in a forest is Beckett's pet metaphor and his way of paying homage to Baudelaire. In a famous letter to Axel Kaun, Beckett writes: "For in the forests of symbols, which aren't any, the little birds of interpretation, which isn't any, are never silent" (*Disjecta*, 172).

syntactical dredging machine: it scoops slowly but surely. By what rhetorical means this antinomical discourse made up of numerous endlessly proliferating, self-cancelling sentences “presses on,” will be the subject of my subsequent analysis.

Antithesis and the *Dissoi Logoi*

Even before *The Unnamable* that explicitly pleads for and plastically embodies the method of “affirmations and negations invalidate as uttered,” one may find that affirmations and negations weave together in a series of antitheses that systematically punctuate *Molloy*, the first novel in the *Trilogy*. Truly, I must resist the temptation to single out each and every antithesis, and each and every coupling of opposite descriptions, that appears there, but I shall anyhow briefly address those that seem to be rather transparent and structurally simplest. Here is an important, yet highly selective set of Beckett’s antitheses from the novel:

Yes I work, a little like I used to, except that I don’t know how to work (3)
Yes, there is more than one, apparently. But it’s always the same one that comes (3)
A little dog followed him, a pomeranian I think, but I don’t think so. (7)
There I am then, he leaves me, he’s in hurry. He didn’t seem to be in hurry...(9)
A and C I never saw again. But perhaps, I shall see them again. (11)
That then is how the second day began, unless it was the third, or the fourth (25)
And if I do not go there gladly, I go perhaps gladly there than anywhere else... (35)
These things, what things, come from where, made of what? (35)
It was as though the brakes were jammed, and heaven knows they were not, for my bicycle had no brakes.
(42)
For my waking was a kind of sleeping... (48)
I did my best to go in a circle hoping in this way to go in a straight line. (79)

In all these cases, including and up to the famous “It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining,” one can notice a certain desire for symmetry. “I always had a mania for symmetry” (79), Molloy lets us know at some point in the story. This is not at all surprising. It is characteristic of antithesis that as a distinct mode of expression, from the earliest times and its oldest examples, it has been expressed by means of *isocola*, in segments of equal, or approximately equal length,

and often of an equal number of syllabi, words, or phrases. Accordingly, throughout the *Trilogy*, contraries appear in pairs of balanced length, existing in harmony and proportion, yet approaching neither unity nor synthesis. Beckett is here, as he is in regard to many other structural and stylistic features, quite rigorous and unyielding.

This manner of setting the oppositions up, of “careful rhetorical balancing of contradictory periods” (Hill, 63), derives straightly from Beckett’s philosophy of syntax and his most immediate aesthetic and philosophical leanings. While his conception of language might have indeed been closer to emphasizing the fluidity and instability of all linguistic expression, his creative genius has been tightly bound to the idea of normative poetics, sternly prescriptive and unrelentingly regulative at once. A fact that has largely gone unnoticed in the critical reception of Beckett and the one I would like to bring to the fore.

Beckett once said: “I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of ideas. There is a wonderful sentence in St. Augustine: ‘Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.’ That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters” (in Schneider, 173). In what features did the skeptical Beckett, who self-admittedly took no sides, find the beauty of the Augustine sentence? In its harmonious clausal structure; in its apparent antithetical parallelism; in its perfect *isocola* (identical number of words, even syllabi); in its internal pseudo-rhyme (saved, damned); in its repetition of negative commands (Do not despair!, Do not presume!); in its subtle and imperceptible use of *metanoia*, of a rhetorical device that weakens the prior statement by using a corrective, or simply, a more suitable expression (the switch from “despair” to “presume”), among many others. If Beckett’s antitheses then conduct his fictional characters and most attentive readers on a path of aporia that ultimately leads nowhere and zig-zags into a wall, they do so in a highly calculated, methodical manner. “I had a methodical mind,” Moran says of himself, “and never set out on a mission without prolonged reflection as to the best way of setting out” (93). He also keeps insisting that “a vast organization” to which he allegedly belongs and on whose behalf he performs the detective job, trying to track down and

catch Molloy, is characterized by “the falsetto of reason” (102). Much of this cryptic phrase falls in place, indeed, when it comes to Beckett’s use of antithesis.

On a supra-syntactic level, Beckett keeps pairing the opposing, antithetical speeches with striking regularity symptomatic of a certain “falsetto or reason,” of reason turning dialectical. “Yes the confusion of my ideas on the subject of death was such,” says Molloy, “that I sometimes wondered, believe me or not, if it wasn’t a state of being even worse than life” (63). In order “not to rush” (63) into the state of existence that presumably may be even worse than life, Molloy does precisely what he is overtly precautionary not to do. He places himself in a grave of sort: “So I crawled into some hole somewhere I suppose and waited” (63). And similarly, after delivering an entire encomium in favor of the sea, in favor of its invigorating and rejuvenating spirit, Molloy describes his life as being washed away by the sea waves: “Much of my life has ebbed away before this shivering expanse, to the sound of the waves in storm and calm, and the claws of the surf” (63). These two, and many other antithetical narrative sequences in *Molloy* and the *Trilogy*, are reminiscent of the skeptical *dissoi logoi* (double words), of arguing on both sides of the question. It is how the very movement of antithesis—of finding opposing arguments and points of view whenever required—occurs in skeptical discourse. And of course, it goes without saying that the structure of a largely antithetical narrative such as *Molloy*, is typically and most facilely woven of different sets of paired antithetical speeches. Yet in Beckett, the *dissoi logoi* has nothing to do with presenting both sides of a case, nor with looking at all possible sides of a question, as it does in Thucydides’ *History*, Euripides’ tragedies, or Montaigne’s essays, for instance. Nor does it, somewhat moralistically, imply that a debate and a conflict of opinion is possible on any topic. In *Molloy*, it is impossible to know is the series of the *dissoi logoi* created solely by the arguer, by the narrator, that is to say by Molloy, for the purposes of rhetorical stunning and killing time—“in order to blacken a few more

pages may I say I spent some time at the seaside,” Molloy justifies himself in passing (63)—or do they genuinely reveal the contradictory and irreconcilable aspects of reality.¹²²

Of course, I am not introducing the *dissoi logoi* as a novel critical structure to Beckett criticism without reason. As Kerferd states in his outstanding book on the sophistic movement: “The essential feature [of the *dissoi logoi*] was not simply the occurrence of opposing arguments but the fact that both opposing argument can be expressed by a single speaker, as it were within a single argument” (84). And this is precisely a condition that is tested throughout *Molloy* and exemplified by his eponymous narrator. While the *dissoi logoi* technique finds its stimulus in endemic disagreement between people, cultures, schools of thought, and philosophies of life, in Beckett its impetus is disagreement that takes place within a single mind, that of Molloy, and within a single language expressive of a slightly schizophrenic consciousness.¹²³ Following a skeptical recipe, to every argument, statement, or description, Molloy pits a counter-argument, statement, or description. In a famous sequence in which his girlfriend Lousse buries the dog—which I will later analyze in detail—Molloy, after portraying the burial in all its nuances and minutiae, conjectures that it is actually his burial, not the dog’s (32). While he occasionally looks for compassion and understanding, when offered a humane gesture, he disdains it: “Against a charitable gesture,” he bitterly says, “there is no defence” (19). Even such statements of facts are turned upside down in Beckett and presented in rhetorically contrastive ways.¹²⁴

¹²² The *dissoi logoi* doctrine is usually associated with the statement that is attributed to Protagoras which roughly says that there are two *logoi* regarding each thing (*pantos pragmatos*). Now, everything truly depends on how one translates the Greek *pragmata*. In English, it has been usually translated as “issue,” “thing,” “question,” “matter,” “subject,” and the like, though, it is more likely that by *pragmata* Protagoras means *reality* in its totality, diversity, and complexity. On the influence of Protagoras on Beckett, see Feldman (2006), pp. 37-8. On Protagoras and the two *logoi* fragment, see Schiappa (2003), pp. 89-95.

¹²³ To the best of my knowledge, it is not until Plato’s *Phaedrus* that it is dealt with the question that *one* person may both hold and advocate contradictory positions. Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy* rehashes the same question and explores it on the level of narrative syntax.

¹²⁴ Let me also add, that Beckett does not just construct a series of paired antithetical “speeches,” but also a series of antithetically paired *characters*, a certain *dissoi hominēs*, from Neary and Wylie in *Murphy*, to Watt and Knott in *Watt*, Molloy and Moran, Hamm and Cloy, Vladimir and Estragon, and Mercier and Camier, to mention only a few. They *embody* the doctrine of the *dissoi logoi*.

In *The Unnamable*, the falsetto of antithetical reason gets radicalized, that is, intensified even further. But it also ramifies. This later strategy assumes that Beckett's *peritrope*, in which the ideas or statements of one logos are reversed in the anti-logos, gives way to a plenitude of antinomical relations. The pairs of contraries are still coinstantiated, but what makes the ground of their opposition is not quite clear. Accordingly, while well-balanced antitheses based on *isocola* can still be found—"I can't go on, I'll go on," is a ready-made example, or the recurrent "Here all is clear. No, all is not clear" (288)—what rather dominates the narrative is a certain dispersion and diversification of syntactical structures, a melting of clausal frontiers and linkages, and an unsettling of adversative conjunctions up to the point of near-total indistinction.¹²⁵ This metamorphosis is, unsurprisingly, narratively motivated through and through. For the very voice of *The Unnamable* is characterized by indistinction. Of itself, the voice says:

No, they have nothing to fear...none will ever know what I am, none will ever hear me say it, I won't say it, I can't say it, I have no language but theirs, no, perhaps I'll say it, even with their language, for me alone, so as not to have not lived in vain, and so as to go silent, if that is what confers the right to silence, and it's unlikely, it's they who have silence in their gift, they who decide, the same old gang, among themselves, no matter, to hell with silence, I'll say what I am so as not to have not being born for nothing...(319)

The figurative charge of these self-inquisitive reveries is an antithesis that is built around *not saying* and *saying*, that is, *keeping for oneself* versus *revealing to others* the core of one's true identity. But the shift from "I can't say it" to "I'll say what I am" is neither so clearly marked nor definitely discursively shaped. First, the passage invokes "the same old gang," but we can hardly know who *they* really are. They are described as the sole possessors of language: "I have no language but theirs," the Unnamable admits. But it is anyway the language that the Unnamable have mastery over: "perhaps I'll say it, even with their language," he confesses as if he has been ready to make a painful and difficult concession. Further, the

¹²⁵ Things already get complicated in the example: "Here all is clear. No, all is not clear" "Here" is locative and restrictive and refers to a place where all is clear. The second clause neither restricts nor localizes, and so the negative goes with universal negation. The question is, thus, whether the first "all" is the same as the second "all?" This would surely argue for an intrinsic asymmetry in Beckett's antitheses. I am thankful to David Ferris for this comment.

language itself occupies an antithetic, double space: it is *an object*, something that can be possessed, but also *an ability* that can be mastered, an ability to speak and express what is on one's mind. Its function is perverted in such a way that *saying*, in this particular instance and in the course of both *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, is truly *saying for oneself*, "for me alone" as the Unnamable puts it. Talking, in Beckett, is talking to the mirror. And further, what "confers the right to silence" also triggers a swearword "to hell with silence" and the entire passage gets dissolved in the recognition of difference: "I am neither, I needn't say, Murphy, nor Watt, nor Mercier, nor--no, I can't even bring myself to name them, nor any of the others whose very names I forget, who told me I was they..." concludes the Unnamable (313).

Why does the Unnamable refer to itself as *it*, "none will ever know *what* I am" he asserts, and not *who* he or she might be, is a problem thoroughly discussed in Beckett scholarship. That Beckett's fiction raises serious questions about some deeply entrenched conceptions of subjectivity is a well known issue. "And even my sense of identity," says Molloy, "was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate" (27). Yet, what interests me here is not that in the course of the *Trilogy*, M-named protagonists gradually become indistinguishable, Moran resembling Molloy, Malone approximating Macmann, or Mahood of *The Unnamable* merging with and losing himself in all the M-named characters he has previously molded in his own image. To remind you, the voice of *The Unnamable* at intervals goes by the names of Mahood, or Basil, and is allegedly responsible for creating all previous characters in the *Trilogy* and not just there. At last, the elusive voice of *The Unnamable*, that is wrapped in the namelessness of total indistinction, finds itself in the shape of a Worm, grotesque and inconceivable, with a giant head grown out of his ear, completely indistinguishable from the surroundings and, paradoxically, clearly standing out of the background, at one and the same time. It is for this reason that Beckett's narratives are appropriately called the "stories of progressive disintegration" (Nussbaum, 238). His characters dream of "the tranquility of decomposition," and believe that "to decompose is to live too" (21). Yet, they may have been equally adeptly called the stories of *progressive indistinction*, since they are all enwrapped in the namelessness of non-recognition. From the formalist point of view, though, the true question is not what

happens to different personalities, bodies, and voices in the *Trilogy*—they are, like Tolstoy’s happy families, all alike—but rather, what sort of metamorphosis a formal device, a rhetorical figure such as antithesis, does undergo in the process? In the antithetical passage quoted above nothing is left of *isocola*, for instance, nor of any other formal feature characteristic of classical antithesis and the *dissoi logoi*. Even the very ground for antithesis, that two entities, thoughts, or processes are opposed in some respect, does not hold any more. It has been rightly argued that in Beckett the structure of antithesis gives way to a much more complex and ambiguous structure, that of *epanorthosis*, and I will now turn to this rhetorical device.

Epanorthosis

In his brilliant, and truly indispensable, study on the rhetoric of Samuel Beckett which, unfortunately, still awaits its translation to English, Bruno Clément locates *epanorthosis* at the heart of Beckett’s prose.¹²⁶ *Epanorthosis* is recognized, and thoroughly theorized, in classical rhetoric as a figure of self-correction (Lat. *correctio*). The name of this, a bit arcane, device of figuration is derived from the Greek roots *epi*, having a prepositional meaning “on;” *ana*, turning the tables, or signifying a “return” back to the point of departure; and *orthos*, variedly translated by an entire range of adjectives such as “correct,” “right,” “appropriate,” “accurate,” or simply “true.” As the etymology of the word suggests, *epanorthosis* is a figure of speech in which the speaker goes over what he or she has just said, *returns* to his statement, holding that what he has said is slightly inaccurate and believing that he may offer a better way of saying it. It is a complex rhetorical figure which covers an entire spectrum of semantic meanings and pragmatic functions that include specifying a detail, adding a nuance, weakening or strengthening an expression, but also rehashing and reasserting as well as completely abolishing or taking it back. In a recent commentary on the work of Bruno Clément, Audrey Wasser states that *epanorthosis* “functions as a particular type of

¹²⁶ Some of the key statements are made on pages 171, 179-181, and 423. While they perfectly capture the problem and systematically define the figure, the number of closely read examples of *epanorthosis* in Beckett is rather scarce and insufficient. Hopefully, my chapter will compensate for that lack.

hinge between two or more assertions, marking the later assertion as a repetition of the former while simultaneously differentiating their conceptual content” (262). It would be a bad taste and even worse manners, and slightly misleading after all, to name this technique “repetition with a difference,” though some of its dynamics certainly transpires through *epanorthosis*. In the book, Bruno Clément argues that *The Unnamable* is in fact a huge *epanorthosis*, extended over some one hundred and thirty densely written pages. Like allegory, that may stretch and multiply individual metaphors *ad infinitum*, *epanorthosis* lengthens and expands *substitutions* in place of what is ineptly or infelicitously said. But, in Beckett, one does not have to wait until *The Unnamable* to see the figure shining in its full light. It is already present in large quantities in *Molloy*. Let me provide and closely read some of the key examples:

I watched him recede, overtaken (myself) by his anxiety, at least by an anxiety which was not necessarily his, but of which as it were he partook. Who knows if it wasn't my own anxiety overtaking him. (6)

This is Molloy in one of the first paraphrasable episodes of the novel. He is spying on a mysterious man, “perched...against a rock,” trying to spot as much as he can against the darkness of night which is mercilessly gathering all around him. And it is the story of an anxiety of influence. But whose anxiety is influencing and overtaking whom, is not quite clear. Nevertheless, Molloy does his best to clarify this tumultuous process, and strives to flash it out for us quite passionately. First, he says that he is overtaken by the anxiety of the stranger, but he nonetheless brackets himself out of the unfolding discourse. Then, he promptly corrects himself: anxiety is not a matter of possession, rather it has something to do with the state of being possessed. That is, it has nothing to do with *having* a material object, but rather with *partaking in* a psychological process. Finally, he makes an additional concession: in a *peritrope* typical of Beckett, Molloy adds a nuance of hesitancy and absurdity. Nobody knows whose anxiety is at work here and who might be the target of its inner, intricate workings: Molloy or the object of his peeping.

Here is another example taken from the very same episode:

I must have been on the top, or on the slopes, of some considerable eminence, for otherwise how could I have seen, so far away, so near at hand, so far beneath, so many things, fixed and moving.
(10)

The question is, of course, from what Olympian heights Molloy passes onto us his judgments. From the top, or from the slopes? And what is that that he sees most clearly? What is nearest to him or furthest from him; what is beneath him or above him, what is moving around him or staying fixed next to him? While most Beckett's *epanorthoses* are characterized by a rigorous parataxis, this one stands out by means of its *anaphora*, the repetition of a word or group of words, in this case the repetition of a conjunction "so," at the beginning of each successive clause. The passage is seductively rhythmical, and it fashions a distinctive prosody of its own. It is dense with heavy and abrupt stresses, alliterative effects (near/far); and a calculated placing of long and short vowels. Of course, we neither easily notice, nor we do ordinarily speak of the prosody of Beckett's prose. But, without any doubt, the rhythm of Beckett's narration is a well-wrought urn. By means of syntax that is based on *epanorthosis* he manages to structure the sounds of language into rhythmical patterns that are not just symbolic of his characters' affects—in this particular case, Molloy is both perturbed and excited—but are also capable of presenting an idea in a plastic form.

The entire *Trilogy* is, indeed, a rhetorical primer on *epanorthosis*. Its form ranges from those that are structurally and syntactically quite simple: "The room smelt of ammonia, oh not merely ammonia, but of ammonia, ammonia" (13), which is a typical instance of correction whose function is the strengthening of a statement by means of doubling. Or, "He gave me shove. I had been touched, oh not my skin, but none the less my skin had felt it..." (17), which is a qualifying correction, supposedly specifying *what* is touched instead of *who* is touched. To these syntactically simple, one may add those that are so complex

that their relentless parataxis betrays not just the alleged desire for precision, but also, to use my qualification from the introductory part of the chapter, produces a certain martyrdom of confusion:

There I am then, he leaves me, he is in a hurry. He didn't seem to be in a hurry, he was loitering, I've already said so, but after three minutes of me he is in a hurry, he has to hurry. I believe him. And once again I am I will not say alone, no, that's not like me, but, how shall I say, I don't know, restored to myself, no, I never left myself, free, yes, I don't know what that means but it's the word I mean to use, free to do what, to do nothing, to know, but what, the laws of the mind, perhaps, of my mind,... (9)

This particular passage is a perfect example of *epanorthosis*, quite elaborate though, in which Molloy seeks to find a way to express his loneliness. The passage opens with an uncanny antithesis of pronouns: *I* versus *he*. The opening sentence introduces a certain ambiguity. It can be read in two ways at least: "There I am/then, he leaves me" or "There I am then,/ he leaves me." This formal ambiguity is then transferred on the figure of the mysterious stranger: Is he truly "in a hurry," or is he just "loitering?" The dilemma is never resolved. And this has been further nuanced by means of grammatical mood: is he in a hurry (present indicative), or does he *have* to hurry (imperative)? *Epanorthosis* continues to expand also by means of *paralipsis*: Molloy brings up a subject of loneliness by feigning that he would rather not describe his emotional state as that of being lonely. And finally, in the course of this marvelous episode that represents a sort of "stretched" *epanorthosis*, it is not quite clear who is watching whom: who is the hunter, who the prey? The subject-object relation is thoroughly shaken. It is typical of Beckett's protagonists, that, while they are doing something, they present themselves not as doers, agents, or executors, but as objects or recipients. In search of a proper expression, they typically resort to the passive. Molloy is, thus, not lonely, but feels "restored" to himself. The passive form punctuates the narrative with striking regularity, and it is characteristically employed at those places where the verb used does not quite tolerate it. "I believe all I am told," says Molloy (9); "I am virtually onelegged" (31); but also, "I am *reduced* to looking for a meaning to my life..." (15); "I am *reduced* to confabulation..." (16, my emphases), and so on. Now, while Molloy may really, and not just virtually, be onelegged and believe whatever he has been told to believe, he cannot even virtually be "reduced" to looking for a meaning to

life nor to confabulation. I will come to this point later and argue that Beckett's passives are used *cataphorically*.

As a discursive tool, *epanorthosis* occupies a curious place between exactitude and preciseness, on the one hand, and double meaning and incomprehensibility on the other. And it might very well explain what in the introduction I called the paradox of Beckett, of a writer whose striving for precision and explicitness has actually led him to equivocality and obscurity. But it also occupies a subtle position between loquaciousness and conciseness. There is an entire discourse on speaking and not speaking in Beckett which is, not incidentally, shrouded in *epanorthosis*, and it is a perfect example of a certain homology of content and form, of congruence between what is said and how it is said. Molloy, Moran, Malone, and the shapeless Unnamable are all proud of their laconic spirit, though we know very well they have nothing to be proud of. They are everything but succinct. "I avoid speaking as much as possible for I always say too much or too little" (29), boasts Molloy. Because words are so unstable and flickering, they often sound to Molloy as the buzzing of the insects: "And this is perhaps," he adds, "one of the reasons I was so untalkative" (43). But how could a man, with such "a passion for truth" (30), ever avoid speaking? Here is a concrete example how one of Beckett's protagonists allegedly avoids speaking:

And I shall not abandon this subject [a passion for truth comingled with the necessity to avoid speaking], to which I shall probably never have occasion to return, with such a storm blowing up, without making this curious observation, that it often happened to me, before I gave up speaking for good, to think I had said too little when in fact I had said too much and in fact to have said too little when I thought I had said too much. I mean that on reflection, in the long run rather, my verbal profusion turned out to be penury and inversely. So time sometimes turns the tables. In other words, or perhaps another thing, whatever I said it was never enough and always too much. Yes, I was never silent. Whatever I said I was never silent. Divine analysis that conduces thus to knowledge of yourself and of your fellow-men, if you happen to have any. For to say I needed no one was not to say too much, but an infinitesimal part of what I should have said could not have said, should never have said. Need of my mother! No, there were no words for the want of need in which I was perishing. (30)

As it is widely acknowledged, much of Molloy's life story may be read as an oedipal journey back the mother, a retreat from risks and dangers of the outer world to the security and warmth of her room. "I am

in my mother's room. It's I who live there now" (4), are the first words uttered by Molloy and the very first sentence in the novel. But the sentence does not just acknowledge the standard narrative requirements of a story beginning: who speaks? (the *I* of Molloy); where does the speaking take place? (in his mother's room); when does it happen ("now," that is, after an entire life story has already passed, of which we will be informed retrospectively). It also marks an uncanny beginning and it does so by means of introducing a room whose dimensions, furnishings, and all other significant qualities suddenly turn unrecognizable, and which is, equally abruptly, occupied by no one less than an intruder. "Preset state. This room seems to be mine. I can find no other explanation to my being left in it" (176) later will, in a similar fashion, acknowledge Malone. Needless to say that there are numerous other explanations that Malone dismisses from the outset. Similarly, the voice of *The Unnamable* will ask: "Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving" (285), underlining a certain paratactical frenzy that betrays the desire for securing the foundations—space, subject, time—of its own storytelling experience that is just beginning to unfold.

In an allegorical reading of the novel, Martha Nussbaum writes of Molloy's oedipal return to the mother: "The journey back to the mother's room or womb, which might in one way be a project of atonement...is, in the light of the sexual desire that motivates it, a guilty desire for filthy penetration and a compounding of original guilt" (238). If this is correct, and there is plenty of evidence *pro* and *contra* such a reading, the true question is how does one *rhetorically* return back? Is not the above *epanorthosis* a way of verbal zigzagging and crisscrossing, of going in a circle to get out of the forest of symbols, that is, to get to the bottoms of someone's fixation? Samuel Beckett is, very much like Freud, particularly alert to how cunning and tricky the mind can be in fending off traumas and frustrations, or in disguising its own primordial yet illicit desires.¹²⁷ The entire talk of "verbal profusion" that turns into verbal "penury" is in

¹²⁷ Interestingly, many of Beckett's *epanorthoses* take a specific form of a *denial*, followed by a *conditional*, followed by an *affirmation*: "What I assert, deny, question, in the present" (100), says at some point Moran slightly inverting the order. He is the master of inversions. Like James Bond, he introduces himself to us by stating first his last name: "My name is Moran, Jacques" (87). Now, let me draw your attention to the fact that Freud himself has

fact a cover for what really bothers Molloy: the relationship with his mother. Before he utters the key word and comes to the recognition of a desire in which he has been long “perishing,” Molloy unleashes a frantic sequence of corrective statements that is in its richness and persistence reminiscent of differential calculus in mathematics. He starts with an infinitive, “to say,” then negates it, “was not to say,” proceeds with the past conditional “should have said,” denies the same past conditional, “could not have said,” and ultimately turns the tables and admits his own failure, “should never have said.”

This technique of finding a proper language with which to express certain thoughts, feelings, or events, by means of incessant, relentless self-correction, evasion, and circumlocution, is pushed to its furthest limits in *The Unnamable*:¹²⁸

These things I say, and shall say, if I can, are no longer, or are not yet, or never were, or never will be, or if they were, if they are, if they will be, were not here, are not here, will not be here, but elsewhere. But I am here. So I am obliged to add this. I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak, and therefore perhaps think a little, cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am, but can a little, sufficiently, I don't know how, unimportant, in relation to me who was elsewhere, who shall be elsewhere, and to those places when I was, where I shall be. (276)

Or:

...I am words among words, or silence in the midst of silence, to recall only two of the hypotheses launched in this connection, though silence to tell the truth does not appear to have been very conspicuous up to now, but appearances my sometimes be deceptive, I resume, not yet our good fortune to establish, among other things, what I am, no, sorry, already mentioned, what I am doing, how I manage to hear, if I hear, if it's I who hear, and who can doubt it, I don't know, doubt is present, in this connection, somewhere or other, I resume, how I managed to hear, if it's I who hear, and how to understand, ellipse when possible, it saves time, how to understand, same observation, and how it happens, if it's I who speak, and it may be assumed it is, as it may be suspected it is not, how it happens if it's I who speak, that I speak without ceasing, that I long to cease, that I can't cease, I indicate the principle divisions...(382)

spent much time psychoanalyzing this particular “syntactic” order as it manifests itself in the succession of analysand's answers in the course of a treatment. The typical question such as—“Have you ever been attracted to your mother?”—would be, characteristically, met first by an abrupt negation, “No way!” then, as the treatment unfolds, by a conditional, “Perhaps. I am not sure,” and finally, if everything goes well, by an acknowledgment “Yes, I have actually been,” which is all, in itself, a perfect example of *epanorthosis*: of a gradual self-recognition followed by a self-correction.

¹²⁸ In saying “with which to express,” I am also unintentionally emulating Beckett's syntax. In *Three Dialogues*, Beckett voices his awareness of the impossibility of expression by means of *epanorthosis*: “there is nothing to express, *nothing with which to express*, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (139, my emphasis).

We are witnessing here a “discourse that fades out” as Pascale Casanova notes, “in a kind of paratactic inarticulation” (16). We are talking about *epanorthoses* with neither beginning nor end. There are not too many periods in *The Unnamable*, placed in such a way so as to clearly indicate ends of sentences. Just an incessant weaving and unweaving of assertions, spinning and unspinning of narrative threads, raveling and unraveling of emotions, that all together intersect so much that eventually they cannot be distinguished from one another. Moreover, they all come to fuse into one big and unstoppable flash flood of language. Such an *epanorthosis* is truly a compendium of grammatical tenses, moods, and aspects, where present, past, and future forms dizzily and ceaselessly combine with indicative, interrogatory, imperative, emphatic, and subjunctive features of verbs. Now, I want to particularly emphasize that while all this may leave the reader with an impression of reaching a cul-de-sac and also give the appearance of total arbitrariness and chaos, it is not entirely so. As Terry Eagleton warns us, Beckett’s writing may indeed appear to maintain “a compact with failure...as a form of anti-Literature allergic to all rhetorical flatulence” (70), but it is a species of writing that maintains yet another compact: the one with “pedantic precision” (69) and with the “extraordinary exactness” and “obsessive scrupulousness” (72). Although the latter may occasionally seem rather inhuman, it is still part and parcel “of the *combinatoire* in which the same few drab odds and ends are rigorously permuted with all the clinical impersonality of what would later be called structuralism” (*Political*, 72).¹²⁹ Does Beckett’s syntax of weakness anticipate structuralism is surely a debatable question. However, it is undeniable that there must be some method in Beckett’s *epanorthotic* madness.

¹²⁹ In his introduction to Pascale Casanova’s superb book on Beckett titled *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Evolution*, Terry Eagleton makes a similar yet much stronger point: “Beckett’s austerely Protestant texts set out to punish themselves by seeking to eke as many permutations as possible out of the scantiest number of component parts” (4). What in the same introduction Eagleton calls “crazedly meticulous hair-splitting” of Beckett (6), alluding to his relentless combinatorial spirit, Pascale Casanova names simply “Beckett’s *ars combinatoria*” (16).

The Skeptical Method

The problem of Beckett's method is the central problem of Beckett scholarship. It actually divides Beckett's critics in two camps. In the first, we find scholars who place emphasis on the play of negativity in Beckett's texts. The following words of Leslie Hill best capture the fundamentals of this school of critical thought:

The questions of Beckett's writing are questions of negativity,...of how the power of the negative in his work is understood. Indeed, the history of reception of Beckett's texts could be written in terms of the different interpretations put forward as to the force and significance of the negative. It lead one to believe that the single most important reason for Beckett's success,...is in the questions his work raises as to the shape and character of the negative, the different, the other, the something without name that haunts not only the words and rhythms of Beckett's writing but also the words with which audiences too strive to pattern their lives. (163)

Such an approach usually grounds its legitimacy in one of Beckett's most consistent programmatic statements, in his letter of 1937 written in German and addressed to the friend Axel Kaun, in which Beckett describes his method as that of "*Literatur des Unworts*," or the "literature of the unword" (*Disjecta*, 173). In the letter, Beckett emphasizes that he has been focused on "finding a method by which we can represent this mocking attitude towards the word, through words" (172). Following this statement, the approach emphasizes the antithetical aspects of Beckett's texts and focuses on rhetorical devices of negation and *apophasis*, such as antithesis, litotes, oxymoron, antinomy, and paradox, to mention only a few.¹³⁰ As Wolfgang Iser captures the problematic of the general trend of negativity in Beckett's prose: there is the "relentless process of negation, which in the novels applies even on the level of the individual sentences themselves, which follow one another as a ceaseless rejection and denial of what has been just said" (707).

¹³⁰ I admit that my division of Beckett scholarship is neither clear-cut nor absolute. It is rather provisional and contingent. Yet, one cannot help notice some methodological "markers" by mere looking at the titles such as *The Intent of Undoing*, or *Unwording the Word*. For the first approach, see, for instance, Gontarski (1985), Locatelli (1990), and Buning (1999).

In the second camp, however, we find those scholars who maintain that Beckett's rhetoric operates with various figures of dispersion and dissemination of meaning rather than with those of polarization and opposition. As Audrey Wasser states in a recent essay:

In Beckett's work, it is important to note that almost no such restatements [of what has been previously stated] are exact contradictions. They involve rather a kind of nervous adjusting, adding, displacing, or diminishing. This adjusting, I would argue, belongs to a wider gesture of repetition, of which both epanorthosis and self-reflection are but limited types. (262)¹³¹

The question is thus: antithesis or *epanorthosis*? Polarization or repetition? Reversal or dispersal? The identity of stark contrasts or the differentiation of *sememes*? Now, I do not intend to take sides nor do I intend to argue who is in the right and who in the wrong, who comes closer to the truth of Beckett's method and who largely deviates from it. Both methodologies have their own stronger and weaker sides and both left behind a substantial and indispensable amount of Beckett criticism. However, I do want to show how the Beckettian text disperses and disseminates what it *unwords* and undercuts, how it plays with contradictories and double meanings, not in order to oppose but, as I shall argue, diffuse them.

Let me get straight to the point. When Moran pens down, "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining," we are indeed confronted by a paradox. The deepest, most fundamental principle of rationality and writing, the law of non-contradiction, is rejected and transgressed at once. We are exposed to numerous antitheses and contradictions throughout the *Trilogy*. Just like Molloy, who "was distraught, who am so seldom distraught" (15), we are distraught with Beckett's repetitive denials. We reason then, there must be some logic to this, a rationale behind all these outrageous negations and violations of common sense. Perhaps, affirmation and consistency misrepresent the world and existence in their most fundamental aspects, while negation and contradiction open up a new perspective of looking at the same aspects. As Molloy, somewhat jeeringly, says: "What I liked in anthropology was its inexhaustible faculty of negation, its relentless definition of man, as though he were

¹³¹ The work of Bruno Clément, with no doubt, symbolizes the second camp.

no better than God, in terms of what he is not” (35). Let me call this rhetorical level of Beckett’s writing, after Arkady Plotnitsky, “alterity-difference.”¹³² “Alterity-difference,” Plotnitsky explains, “would refer to that which is the other to a given entity” (58). While the concept looks truly awkward and entirely technical, in the philosophy of heterogeneity it signifies nothing more than discontinuity and opposition. In classical rhetoric, alterity-difference is marked by a specific kind of antithesis formed by means of *contraries* or *privatives* such as joy/sorrow or death/life. And in Beckett, alterity-difference is the simplest and most common way of producing sentences. It is the main engine of his narrative art. The polarizing character of alterity-difference is smoothly captured by Molloy’s “allegorical” confession: “For in me there have always been two fools, among others, one asking nothing better than to stay where he is and the other imagining that life might be slightly less horrible *further on*...And these inseparable fools I indulged *turn about*” (44, my emphasis). The negative based on alterity-difference is a rhetorical “further on” and “turn about.”

The crucial point is, nonetheless, that Beckett’s writings get much more complex than this. And, it is at this, second level that Beckett’s antitheses metamorphose into *epanorthoses*. We will name this level “differentiation-difference.” Plotnitsky defines this type of difference as that which “refers primarily to a transformation of a given entity, or to ‘the same differing from itself’” (57). A typical example of such a species of heterogeneity in Beckett is his grammatical bravado of incessant morphological transformations. Let me provide two examples, first from *Molloy*, second from *Malone Dies*:

Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition. (23)

Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. I have tried...I say living without knowing what it is. I tried to live without knowing what I was trying. Perhaps, I have lived after all, without knowing. I wonder why I speak of all this. Ah yes, to relive the tedium. (189)

¹³² Plotnitsky’s essay has nothing to do with Beckett. I am using Plotnitsky’s reflection on the concept of difference to illustrate the variety of Beckett’s denials and their dissolving, relative, and contingent nature.

While it is undeniable that all these segments betray a general pattern of negativity, it is also discernible how negativity gives way to a larger process of textual dissemination. In the first passage, the differing entity is the verb *to say*. It passes through a number of metamorphoses: from multiple denials each one of which is marked by a different qualifying verb (want/know/be able/think), through the gerund (saying) which triggers its own differential calculus that oscillates between “stop saying” and “hardly ever” saying. The entire *differend* takes place between composure that is required so that one could keep something in mind, on the one hand, and “the heat of composition” that characterizes creative process, on the other.

In the second passage, entities that are seeking to mark differences from themselves are the actions of *living* and *inventing*. They merge with one another and collapse into each other; similarly, present perfect “I have tried” smashes into the self-avouching, yet contingent, “I must have tried.” Both ideals are then denied and discarded, “Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live,” and the entire passage ultimately gets dissolved in a self-consuming chiasmus, that is, in *antimetabole*: “I tried to live without knowing what I was trying.”

Finally, Beckett’s syntax of weakness instantiates the most sophisticated form of linguistic differentiation and narrative branching that is called “multiplicity-difference.” This is the third and most intricate narrative level in Beckett. To Plotnitsky, multiplicity-difference involves those cases that “are extended to that which would be the Other of both ‘I’ and the Other” (58), that is, from both the self and what is diametrically opposed to the same self. Here are the two critical examples from *Molloy*:

All roads were right for me, a wrong road was an event for me. But when I was on my way to my mother only one road was right, the one that led to her, or one of those that led to her, for all did not lead to her. I did not know if I was on one of those right roads and that disturbed me, like all recall to life. (26)

That moon then, all things considered, filled me suddenly with amaze, with surprise, perhaps better. Yes, I was considering it, after my fashion, with indifference seeing it again, in a way, in

my head, when a great fright came suddenly upon me. And deeming this deserved to be looked into I looked into it and quickly made the following discovery, among others, but I confine myself to the following, that this moon which had just sailed gallant and full passed my window had appeared to me the night before, or the night before that, yes, more likely, all young and slender, on her back, a shaving...It was at all events with the aid of these considerations that I grew calm again and was restored in the face of nature's pranks to my old ataraxy for what it was worth. And it came back also to my mind, as sleep stole over it again, that my nights were moonless and the moon foreign, to my nights, so that I had never seen, drifting past the window, caring me back to other nights, other moons, this moon I had just seen...(36-7)

Beckett's anti-heroes, and Molloy is not an exception, take paradoxically *all* things to be true. "All roads were right" for Molloy on his way back to the mother, and it is not the right road but the misleading one that counts as an event. Now, as it is widely acknowledged, what counts as an event is the question of all questions in Beckett. What presents the epistemological and narrative problem is not only the very indeterminacy of what is going on in the story: is Molloy on the right path or on the wrong one and what is the difference after all? Does waiting for something to happen, for someone to arrive, for Godot or, in Molloy's case, for Moran perhaps, count as *doing* something or the suspension of *doing* it? Moreover, the problem consists in a typically Beckettian skeptical retort: even if something great, life-transforming happens, who is to judge? As Eagleton posits the question of "refusing finality" in Beckett: "No doubt Godot's eventual arrival would constitute a big moment; but who is to say...that it would be recognizable when it happened" (*Political*, 73)? Eagleton is, doubtlessly, quite right: it is, after all, not only the problem of the possibility of redemption, but also the problem of recognition. The key point is that epistemology as such becomes a problem in Beckett. Almost all the philosophical tradition in epistemology concentrates on the knowledge of facts, or propositional knowledge. However, Beckett emphasizes the question *Who is to know or not to know?*, and not *What is to be known?* In an interview of 1956, Beckett says: "I think anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er" (Shenker, 148). And notice how the road of a non-can-er Molloy sets out in the plural: "all roads." It represents a perfect form of multiplicity-difference. In spite of assuring us that all roads are just as good for him, Molloy straightens this out by admitting that on the way to his mother only one road seems to be right, logically, "the one that led to her." But as soon as

he solidifies and cements the variety of roads to one particular road that leads to his mother, he makes a subtle adjustment, an *epanorthosis* of sort, and further diversifies what he has just subsumed and brought down to the One: “one that led to her, *or one of those that led to her*” (my emphasis). This is a nice illustration of how one and the same entity may, at one and the same time, differentiate itself from the Other, the right road from the wrong one, but also from itself, the right road from all other *right roads*.

In the second excerpt, we witness a similar work of multiplicity-difference. Molloy finds himself in one of those uncanny spaces, endowed by neither properties nor contours. A prison cell, perhaps. There is a window, and everything Molloy can see comes through that window, a narrative situation that will be rehashed and hyperbolized in the second novel of the *Trilogy*, *Malone Dies*, with Malone taking place of Molloy. Such recurrences in the *Trilogy* are not random, and they stem from everyday trivia and catchphrases such as bicycles, crutches, pebbles or Molloy’s (and then Moran’s, and then Malone’s) repetitive “perhaps,” to larger narrative units among which I shall single out the states of being chained to a bed or set against a window. Now, Molloy pulls himself together to speak of the moon, but he faces two problems. First, the moon is constantly moving. Or is it truly the moon that is moving?

For the moon was moving from left to right, or the room was moving from right to left, or both together perhaps, or both were moving from left to right, but the room not so fast as the moon, or from right to left, but the moon not so fast as the room. (34)

Second, the moon cannot be easily handled for the moon is *she*: “How difficult it is to speak of the moon and not lose one’s head, the witless moon. It must be her arse she shows us always,” complains Molloy (35). From someone who couldn’t be stopped by any woman as he “swept towards mother” (51); for whom the definition of a woman is “a hole between...legs” (51); and “who would have made love with a goat, to know what love is” (52), one could not expect better indeed. Now, in the critical passage, Molloy is, in spite of all his insecurities and hesitations, quite positive that the moon which was gallantly sliding past his window was the same moon that “had appeared to [him] the night before.” But suddenly, what

comes across Molloy's mind is that his nights are actually "moonless," and that the only moon that he could actually see, that is *not see*, is "the moon foreign to [his] nights." And even though he finally contemplates the possibility that he might have never seen the moon he has just seen—"so that I had never seen...this moon I had just seen," since his nights are supposedly moonless—he multiplies this nonexistent moon into multiple "other moons," drifting past his window and evoking all moonless nights he has, perhaps, slept through. The multiplicity-difference is here so complex, and so layered, that one and the selfsame object, the moon of Molloy, appears to be different from itself and its immediate alter-ego in four respects at least. First, in respect to the gender: the moon is gendered as *she* and opposed to the *he* of Molloy. Second, in respect to the number: the singular moon is opposed to "other moons." Third, in terms of motion: what is moving the room or the moon, Molloy is puzzled, and in what direction from left to right or the other way around? Finally, and most importantly, on the basis of existence: the visible, actual moon is eclipsed by the "foreign," invisible, never-existing moon.

In what sense is then this largely *differential* narrative calculus—or, as Pascale Casanova has put it, Beckett's "*ars combinatoria*" (16, original emphasis)—that resists simple oppositions and transforms them into a complex web of narrative clewing and *unclewing*, of syntactic meandering and plot-line curving, a skeptical calculus? No wonder that Beckett's radical modernist fictions of epistemological doubt and of hermeneutic refusal to mean, cast their skeptical play in terms of the misleading nature of self-corrections, disclaimers, and equivocations. Some truly marvelous critical work has been done on the philosophical influence of skepticism on Beckett's narrative method, on his rhetorical stuttering and narrative spasm. Michael E. Mooney, for instance, drew our attention to how "Beckett's fiction, beginning with *Murphy*, can be better understood by reference to the Presocratic philosopher, Democritus of Abdera and to Sextus Empiricus' scepticism" (215). He then goes to great lengths to demonstrate how Beckett's protagonists from Murphy through Watt, Molloy, Moran, Malone, and the Unnamable "each wish to achieve the state that skeptics called ataraxy" (216-21), peace of mind or freedom from disturbance. Not to mention all the Cartesian readings of Beckett from the works of Ruby Cohn and Hugh Kenner back in the 1960's, to the

later work of Roger Shattuck, ceaselessly and laboriously unearthing in Beckett's writings more or less hidden references to Descartes, Arnold Geulincx, and Nicholas Malebranche.¹³³ Yet, in spite of such an outstanding critical effort, the question still remains how is skepticism in Beckett rhetorically revealed and narratively manifested? In what sense is his syntax of weakness, his technique of reversal and correction, part and parcel of what Bruno Clément terms "procédés rhétoriques sceptiques" (*L'Œuvre*, 171).

The answer is, and I want to put a special emphasis on this, provided by Beckett himself, and expressed through the mouth of Molloy. It has been usually held that the opening pages of *The Unnamable* represent "the methodologically most self-conscious part of the *Trilogy*" (Critchley, 166), yet nowhere is Beckett's narrative method so briskly expressed and so succinctly captured as in the following passage from *Molloy*, that so far eluded the attention of Beckett scholars and that I want to bring to the fore. Therein, Molloy explains the nature of all those "little adjustments" that he keeps making throughout the novel and that he unwillingly relegates to his M-named successors in *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, and beyond:

And every time I say, I said this, or, I said that, or speak of a voice saying, far way inside me, Molloy, and then a fine phrase more or less clear and simple, or find myself compelled to attribute to others intelligible words, or here my own voice uttering to others more or less articulate sounds, I am merely complying with the convention that demands you either lie or hold your peace...And then sometimes there arouse within me, confusedly, a kind of consciousness, which I express by saying, I said, etc., or, Don't do it Molloy, or, Is that your mother's name? said the sergeant, I quote from memory. Or which I express without sinking to the level of oratio recta, but by means of other figures quite as deceitful, as for example, it seemed to me that, etc., or, I had the impression that, etc., for it seemed to me nothing at all, and I had no impression of any kind, but simply somewhere something had changed, so that I too had to change, or the world too had to change, in order for nothing to be changed. And it was these little adjustments, as between Galileo's vessels, that I can only express by saying, I feared that, I hoped that, or, Is that your mother's name, said the sergeant, for example, and that I might doubtless have expressed otherwise and better, if I had gone to the trouble. (82)

¹³³ For a nice overview of the Cartesian readings of Beckett see Pattie (2000), pp. 105-125.

In these Molloy's ruminations lies an entire philosophy of language, and, indeed, an entire philosophy of composition. Both provide a key to the skeptical nature of Beckett's discourse. For every time Molloy says something he "merely [complies] with the convention." But this is not only to confirm the arbitrary character of all language. Molloy is not Saussure. His complying with linguistic rules and social customs is born out of "a kind of consciousness," a rather peculiar kind of consciousness though, which does not have to be necessarily couched in terms of direct speech, that is to say, as it has been phrased in its original form, but also "by means of other figures quite as deceitful." Now, other deceitful figures include an entire repertoire of skeptical disclaimers, *epanorthoses*, and relativizations, such as, to paraphrase Molloy, it *seems* to me, or, it *appears* to me, or I have *the impression of*, and so on. There is a principle common to all "these little adjustments" that Molloy, in the heat of inspiration, compares superbly yet wrongly to "Galileo's vessels."¹³⁴ It is the principle of rhetorical distantiation, of a certain retraction of language. As any skeptic, Molloy is both allergic to and afraid even of a slightest whiff of dogmatism. He obviously takes extraordinary precautions to prevent any fixing of a statement from sneaking into his skeptical discourse. He is on the lookout that his avowals and impressions might be taken as assertions and definite statements. Whoever *asserts* something implies that he *knows* the truth. And both Beckett, and his fictional analogue Molloy, find themselves on the opposite side of the spectrum. As Terry Eagleton notes, against all "totalities [Beckett] pits the fragmentary and unfinished" (70). In like manner, against the totality of expression, Molloy peppers the discourse with nervous disclaimers, dizzying corrections, and feverish denials. No philosophical position in the entire history of philosophy, and no writer, in the entire history of literature, have been so alert to the tricky question of how is one *not* to dogmatize as soon as one opens one's mouth, as skepticism and Beckett have been. And the entire skeptical discourse, from Sextus Empiricus on, may be rhetorically seen as an attempt at forging a new language, a language utterly devoid of assertion, which also seems to be an ideal of Molloy. The skeptical expressions, so-called formulae (*phônai* in ancient Greek), include not only the language which prefers

¹³⁴ The principle is, to the best of my knowledge, accounted for by Blaise Pascal in the seventeenth century. In a nutshell, it states that the pressure applied to a liquid pushes the liquid in all directions with the same intensity.

“indefinite” verbs such as *to seem* or *to appear* over the definite *to be*, but also rhetorical gestures such as “no more this than that,” “it may be,” “I suspend judgment,” “I determine nothing,” “I have only an impression of,” “perhaps,” and the like, all indicated and listed already in Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Now, each one of these expressions plays a large and significant role in Beckett’s *Trilogy* and, unfortunately, it is truly impossible to go through all of them, but just by having a look at the very opening sentences of *Molloy*, everything becomes clear:

I am in my mother’s room. It’s I who live there now. I don’t know how I got there. *Perhaps* in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind. I was helped. I’d never had got there alone. There’s this man who comes every week. *Perhaps* I got here thanks to him. (3, my emphasis)

From the very outset, we witness the unyielding dissemination of the skeptical *perhaps*. “*Perhaps* I’m inventing a little, *perhaps* embellishing” (4), says a bit later Molloy; or “But *perhaps* I am remembering things” (5); or “But they knew each other *perhaps*” (5); or “Yes, he saw himself threatened, his body threatened, his reason threatened, and *perhaps* he was, *perhaps* they were, in spite of his innocence” (6, all my emphases). And pay attention to the page numbers, we still have not progressed a lot from the beginning of the novel.¹³⁵

Christopher Ricks has done some truly exquisite work on the antithetical sense of Beckett’s lexemes. After Freud, who was attracted to the capacity of some words to imply two mutually exclusive meanings—by means of which they supposedly resembled the contradictory language of dreams in which everything may mean its opposite—Ricks argues that “Beckett’s way with antithetical sense is such as to suggest their propensity to short-circuit” meaning (131). But interestingly, Ricks neither mentions nor does he analyze Beckett’s *perhaps*. And is there any other word which is more imbued with double meaning and more antithetically charged than the English particle *perhaps*? Whenever you say *perhaps*, you necessarily imply *perhaps not*. Whenever Molloy says *perhaps*, he is most likely saying *perhaps not*. To remind you, Molloy confesses: “And this is *perhaps* one of the reasons I was so untalkative” (45), and we know,

¹³⁵ Eagleton points out, that according to Beckett’s own avowal, the author’s favorite word was the word “perhaps” (70). Eagleton does not provide the source, nor could I find it myself. If true, the avowal reveals a lot.

without knowing the reason, that it is not; or, “*Perhaps* things have changed since” (46), and we know, without knowing it, they have not; or, “*Perhaps*, she too was a man” (52), and we know she was anything but a man; or, “Dan was my father’s name *perhaps*, yes, *perhaps* she [Molloy’s mother] took me for my father” (13, my emphases), yet it is quite likely this is wholly untrue.

Let me add another expression that escape Ricks’ magnifying glass, Molloy’s repetitive “doubtless” and “no doubt.” In virtue of their antithetical nature, even those expressions seemingly anti-skeptical and reassuring such as *doubtless* and *no doubt*, become unsettling and indecisive under Beckett’s pen. “The treacherous hills where he fearfully venture,” a certain parody of the Romantic sublime, “were *no doubt* only known to him from afar” (5, my emphasis); or, “And at the same time I satisfied a deep and *doubtless* unacknowledged need, the need to have a Ma” (13); or, “...I listened, absent-mindedly, I had nothing else to do, I could do nothing else, and *doubtless* she had poisoned my beer with something...” (42, my emphases). And again, we know that Molloy’s treacherous hills were not only known to him from the distance, for that is his *habitat*; neither is his desire for a mom unacknowledged; nor is his beer poisoned by Lousse, or Ruth, or Edith—he cannot even recall the girl’s name.

And finally, the adjective that is a hallmark of skepticism: “certain.” Christopher Ricks does vivisection this one in detail and notices how, “At a deeper level of certainty and uncertainty, there is Beckett’s attention to that old favourite, *certain*” (133, original emphasis). While he offers examples from Beckett’s *How It Is*, I will provide some from *Molloy*. Right after speculating on a little dog, is he pomenarian or not, Molloy admits: “Yes, it was an orange pomenarian, the less I think of it the more *certain* I am” (8); or, “There I am then, informed as to *certain* things, knowing *certain* things about him, things I didn’t know” (9); or, “What is *certain* is this, that I never rested in this way again, my feet obscenely resting on the earth, my arms on the handlebars and on my arms my head, rocking and abandoned” (20, all my emphases). As you may guess, all these “certain” avowals are, later in the narrative, betrayed and shown as false and disingenuous.

To sum up, “these little adjustments” of Molloy—these little- or large-scale *epanorthoses*—are the skeptical adjustments. And his narrative method is, accordingly, skeptical through and through. If we are to treat them as a matter of technique, we will rightly call the technique—the technique of non-assertion. Beckett’s writing is on an eternal lookout for dogmatism and definitiveness. For this reason, it is always undetermined and non-committal. Just as his characters are.

Catachrēsis

How does it come that skeptical language does nothing more than to mirror how the skeptic feels affected by the outer world at a particular moment, at an instant? What does the skeptic do to our ordinary language to make it “sound” less committal? How does he create a new language, the language of non-assertion, out of the only language that is at his disposal: the constantive language of our lives? How do we get, as one commentator has stated, “the sceptic’s Newspeak” (Sluiter, 95)? Or, to put it in a more philosophical way: How does one escape from the clutches of logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence? Sextus Empiricus gives an answer: the skeptic *abuses* language. In the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus points out that whenever the skeptic makes a statement that is assertoric-looking, he is in fact using language *catachrēstically* (*PH*, 1. 129). As Ineke Sluiter comments: “Unless katachrestically, you cannot say ‘I am cold’ and not mean ‘I assert I am cold’” (96). The point is, thus, that the skeptic cannot help using all sorts of general, largely constantive, statements, while what he means is only how he has been struck, or affected, by certain phenomena, and by no means how they truly are.

In Molloy’s case, this methodology is further radicalized, even parodied and perverted. For, when Molloy states “I had the impression that, etc.,” he is not only *misusing* the language of *being* as the language of *seeming*, but is also reporting on an impression where there is actually none: “I had the impression that...and I had no impression of any kind,” he is prompt to acknowledge. He feels “compelled to attribute” to others and to himself all sorts of expressions, and to abuse language and

squeeze it to such an extent that, according to his own avowal, “I might doubtless have expressed otherwise and better.” Now, if I am right that in most cases Molloy’s doubtless means its opposite, it then follows that Molloy cannot actually do better than proceed by way of abusing language, that is, by way of *catachrēsis*. He unintentionally and unconsciously confirms that *catachrēsis* is necessary, that it is a “necessary metaphor”—as Quintilian used to say—and that expressions, such as “head of department” or a “bottleneck” exist in a language due to a certain lack of “better” expressions. Here is another rhetorical figure whose role has been largely misrecognized and underappreciated in Beckett criticism so far, and which also significantly contributes to the petrification of the *Trilogy*’s skeptical backbone, making it even more solid and conspicuous.

What makes *catachrēsis* so elusive a figure is a triple-bind at its heart. First, as a necessary metaphor, it compensates for the absence of a *nomen proprium*, of a proper term, in a given language. Its function is thus both creative and productive. It ascribes to the ready-made items of language new functions and new meanings. It dislocates them from their usual contexts and makes them mean something anew, in a novel context. It is then everything but abusive. Second, as a dead metaphor, which has become a part of the everyday speech and no longer recognized as “figural,” it is a sign that the production of meaning is both a historical and ruthless process: what once counted as the original contribution to the expressive idiom, no longer counts as such. Finally, as a novel metaphor, it always rings twice: first with the jingle of shock and novelty, both defamiliarizing and enriching our experience; and then, with the jingle of violence, inducing in us a mixed feeling of joy and unpleasantness.

All three faces of *catachrēsis* are clearly at play in Beckett’s *Trilogy*. “Yes, night was gathering,” notes Molloy, “but the man was innocent, *greatly innocent*, he had nothing to fear” (6, my emphasis), is a perfect instance of *catachrēsis*. How could anyone be “greatly innocent?” Aren’t you either innocent or guilty, *tertium non datur*? And if there are at all any intermediate meaning valences of *innocence*, is not the expression “greatly innocent” a clear example of a failure to express someone’s innocence, to

successfully add to its intensity, color, and substance. And similarly, in the opening of *Malone Dies*, Malone lets us know: “I shall soon be *quite dead* at last in spite of all” (173, my emphasis). Christopher Ricks reads this as an instance of antithetical meaning in Beckett. He rhetorically asks and then answers: “Is there a comparative form of *dead*? Scarcely” (130, original emphasis). Scarcely indeed. It is a non-gradable adjective: you are either dead or alive, there is no the third way.

And, have I not already pointed out that Beckett’s passives are, as a rule, *catachrēses*: “I am reduced to looking for a meaning to my life,” says Molloy (15). How could anyone be “reduced” to doing something? We certainly get the point: Molloy wants to say that it is the only thing he regularly or still does, perhaps, with passion and enthusiasm. He is just trying to figure out is there a meaning to life, or, does his life have any meaning at all. But he is, anyway, not using an active form, saying something like: “The only thing I still do is looking for a meaning to life.” He describes himself in terms of commodity, in terms of a production process with its output, that can, as we know very well, be quite reduced. And further, he even says, “I have never been particularly resolute, I mean given to resolutions” (28). What does it mean *not* to be “given to resolutions?” What kind of construction is that? Why does not he say simply that he is irresolute or indecisive? And what is the point of forging this specific *catachrēsis*, instead of using a more “appropriate” expression?

The point is simple: If you are *not* given to resolutions, you are *doubly* irresolute. Molloy obviously lacks confidence. Not just that he sees himself as an irresolute, hesitant, uncertain man, but he thinks of himself as an object: in addition to being *hesitant* he is even “given” to hesitancy. Given and forgotten. Given, once and for all. As Molloy, quizzing himself, unwillingly admits: “Yes, my resolutions were remarkable in this, that they were no sooner formed than something always happened to prevent them from execution” (27). “The Beckett man,” comments Anthony Cronin, “is utterly devoid of ambition” (90). And, I would add, action. And all this is rhetorically emphasized through Beckett’s use of largely *catachrēstic* passives.

But none of these *catachrēses* is either wholly abusive, or entirely dead (*catachrēsis* again!), or truly metaphorically novel. They draw their power and complexity from each of these three sources, with equal intensity. In his outstanding musings on Aristotle, metaphor, and *catachrēsis* in the essay “White Mythology,” especially in an enigmatically titled section “The Ellipsis of the Sun,” Derrida awakens us to the difficulty, and impossibility, of clearly demarcating *good* from *bad* metaphors, that is *metaphors* from *catachrēses*. Such a sort of distinction, in his reading, simply misfires and is untenable. Look at this chain of statements, with the proviso that the examples are mine, not Derrida’s:

I will speak to her
I will speak to her loudly
I will speak to her softly
I will speak flowers to her
I will speak daggers to her (as Hamlet says of Gertrude)¹³⁶

The first statement is, obviously, non-metaphoric, with no transfer of meaning. The second is equally so, it is just endowed with an adverb. The third contains a “dead metaphor,” a synesthesia of sort to which we grew entirely dumb and cannot quite sense: the adjective “soft” is of a tactile not audible nature. It is not a matter of speaking but touching. The fourth is a metaphor characterized by an identifiable though slightly evasive transfer of meaning. To speak flowers to someone might mean to let someone know that you love him or her, and the like. But the last instance is the trickiest one: we are prone to qualify this as an abuse of language for its transfer of meaning is imponderable and borders on nonsense. Yet, it is the last, Shakespeare’s *metaphor*, which is actually *catachrēsis*, that we find most superb and most enticing. It is a miniature work of art in itself.

And that is precisely Derrida’s point. You cannot really cut into the chain of metaphors—what Aristotle, at least in Derrida’s reading, seeks to do—or establish objective criteria for distinguishing good from bad metaphors. Have a look now at the Beckettian chain of statements, all taken from *Molloy*:

¹³⁶ The last is, of course, a well-known example from rhetorical handbooks.

What business has innocence here? (6)
I am reduced to confabulation (16)
Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. (27)
In the end it was magic that had the honor of my ruins (35)

As it may be expected, all above expressions are metaphors. But who is to say which one is *catachrēsis*? Who is to say which one is successful and thus acceptable, and which one is not up to the standards of comprehension and thus discarded? What business does *innocence* have with *business*? They belong to the two incompatible semantic fields: emotions versus bureaucracy. Then, how could you be reduced to confabulation? If you are filling in fabrications in your memory and believe they are true, how could you be aware at all of the state of your own alleged “reduction?” Or, might what is wrong be described as being *rightly* so, a typical oxymoron of Beckett? Ultimately, how do you picture yourself a magic that is taking advantage of someone’s ruins?¹³⁷

I must resist the temptation to summon all such instances of *catachrēses*. The *Trilogy* is an inexhaustible compendium of all sorts of linguistic “abuses”. We can see now, nonetheless, how the skeptic’s Newspeak gets formed in Beckett in the end. Antithesis, *epanorthosis*, and *catachrēsis*, each in its own distinct way, contribute to an overall skeptical tinting of the *Trilogy*’s discourse. They create a new language that occasionally may struck us as awkward, inadequate, or infelicitous, but which is, in its very essence, tailored to suspend our judgment and stun our imagination. When the skeptic unleashes some of his outrageous hypotheses—that what is in front you may not be the essay on Beckett; that you do not surely know what is your real name for you could be a changeling switched in the hospital upon birth; that your body might not necessarily be corporeal or truly *yours*; that you, most likely, live in the Matrix, and the like—he wants to do precisely what Beckett’s syntax manages to do: to suspend your judgment and inflame your imagination. To switch the light of your confidence off, and turn the light of your doubt on.

¹³⁷ It has been argued that Beckett’s writings are characterized by “apotropism—the turning away from figures” (Wolosky, 163). The evasion of all forms of figuration, especially the evasion of metaphor, and a certain tendency toward literalism and pure denotation is, indeed, a common theme in Beckett criticism. With the examples I have given above, I want to show that such readings of Beckett are both unfounded and unsound.

The syntax of weakness is, thus, not only tailored to tell the failure of telling. It rather represents a perfect means of telling something in the skeptical register and under the skeptical linguistic horizon.

Beckett's Humor, or Beckett the Turk

In the concluding section of this chapter I would like to take up the claim that Beckett's syntax of weakness is largely "a comic syntax" (Critchley, *On Humor*, 49).¹³⁸ I would like to engage with the provocative Critchley's claim in light of Beckett's skepticism. There is a reason to this. It has been extensively argued that "the mood of...skepticism is...one of disappointment" (Conant, 109). Such a view is famously advocated by Kant, who writes in the *Prolegomena* that skepticism arises exclusively in *völliger Verzweiflung*, that is, in a state of complete desperation (11). Yet, nothing is left of such an understanding of skepticism in Beckett. The mood of Beckett's heroes is *not* the one of bewilderment at the dissolution of the world's conditions of intelligibility, but the one of amusement. Skepticism induces laughter in Beckett, not despair. And it provokes a specific kind of laughter—"the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh...in a word, the laugh that laughs...at that which is unhappy" (Watt, 48, original emphasis). Of course, Beckett's humor forms an entire galaxy of its own and it can hardly be subsumed under the concept of syntax. But there is something mind-boggling indeed in the claim that a series of self-undoing and weakening sentences, a series of antitheses, *epanorthoses*, and *catachresēs*, may eventually induce laughter. How does then Beckett bring about the *risus purus* by means of syntax?

The first thing that should be noted in relation to Beckett's "human comedy" is that there has been a certain leitmotif in various critical interpretations of Beckett's humor. It says that Beckett's sense of humor cannot be dissociated from his Irishness. Eagleton argues, for instance, that "there is...a

¹³⁸ Critchley is not alone in arguing that Beckett's syntax is a comic syntax. Anthony Cronin, similarly, says of *The Unnamable*: "Its very syntax is a comic device, an exposure of stylistic obsession, of fine writing, of supposed narrative exactitude" (91).

distinctively Irish quality to Beckett's deflation" and that "nothing is more Irish than debunkery" à la Beckett (71). When someone asked Beckett if he had been English he famously retorted "Au, contraire!," but if he had not self-admittedly had sympathy for the English, he might have had it even less for the Irish. It is truly amazing how some outstanding passages of Beckett's low, sardonic humor—the one that Critchley characterizes as "the lowly fart" for it "returns" the materiality of the body to us (*On Humor*, 47)—ultimately turns on, or "shits upon," Ireland. In a well-known and much-quoted episode from *Molloy*, which is in itself a perfect example of Beckett's sardonic "deflation," the hero of the same name meditates on the topic of farting and the impermeability of *The Times Literary Supplement*. He is impressed by how well *The Literary Supplement* is "adapted" to the purposes of wiping oneself, and how its "neverfailing toughness and impermeability" are such that even farts could make "no impression on it." Then Molloy goes on to count how many farts he makes daily and comes to, approximately, "Three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours," which makes up to "Four farts every fifteen minutes." In a reversal typical of Molloy, he steps back and amends what he has just shamelessly acknowledged: "Damn it, I hardly fart at all, I should never have mentioned it." But, since he has already mentioned it, the entire episode ends with a wonderful deduction, which is an apparent travesty of philosophical discourse: "Extraordinary how mathematics help you to know yourself" (26).

Many a commentator of Beckett has found in this episode from *Molloy* a typical example of Beckett's scatological humor, which, as Simon Critchley nicely puts it, combines "our *souls* and *arsholes*" (*On Humor*, 46) and represents the return of the repressed, animal physicality. While it is certainly true that such a sort of humor—based on incongruity between *farting* and *computing*—can be traced back to Sterne and Swift, and certainly to Rabelais, no critic of Beckett has ever pointed out that the farting episode of *Molloy* comes right before and introduces us to one of the first, tangible narrative references to Ireland in the novel. For, after figuring out how many farts he actually issues a day, Molloy goes on to think of the nature of climate:

In any case this whole question of climate left me cold, I could stomach any mess. So, I will only add that the mornings were often sunny, in that part of the world, until ten o'clock or coming up to eleven, and that then the sky darkened and the rain fell till evening. Then the sun came out and went down, the drenched earth sparkled an instant, then went out, bereft of light. (26)

Such a placing of stomach problems and farting next to the description of climate as it appears to be “in that part of the world” cannot be accidental. For that part of the world is obviously Ireland, and it is its climate that might have been causing Molloy’s bowel movements. And moreover, in this stunning passage we do not just have what Eagleton calls “Beckett’s rejection of his nation,” and what he interprets as a “time-honored Irish custom” of insulting oneself (71), but we also have a certain meteorological motivation to Molloy’s rhetorical hair-splitting, to his obsessive adjustments and retractions, which all together, like the Irish sun, keep unpredictably and unruly popping up and hiding again.¹³⁹

Nevertheless, Beckett’s humor does not exhaust itself in its distinctively Irish temperament, nor does it only retain an exclusively anti-metaphysical, scatological vein. The second significant feature of Beckett’s humor is that it is most superb and successful where it is most sexist, a feature which is by a kind of unspoken agreement usually passed over in Beckett criticism, I suspect for the reasons of political correctness. The misogyny of Beckett’s M-named protagonists truly makes us laugh, in both positive and negative senses of the word. Moran tells, for instance, an “old joke about the female soul” and the joke goes something like this: “Question, Have women a soul? Answer, Yes. Question. Why? Answer, In order that they be damned. Very witty” (131). Is this funny? Not really, though, some might find it, like Moran, “very witty.” But, let us go further. Something of conjoining humor and misogyny in a comically suggestive way may be found in Molloy’s attitude to the mother. The question: How does he

¹³⁹ Eagleton makes a number of quite extraordinary claims about the “Oirishness” of Beckett’s humor both in his introduction to the Casanova book and in his essay “Political Beckett.” In the introduction, he argues that anyone familiar with Irish culture, cannot “fail to find a distinctively Irish sensibility in these [Beckett’s] apparently disinherited texts” (7) with their “debunkery, self-mockery, savagely ironic humor, carnivalesque strain, satire of pomposity, quick sense of farce and recurrent trope of bathos,” and, above all, in their “mock-pedantry” (7). In the essay, he lets us know that Beckett’s characters are, like all Irishmen, “vulgar materialists” and “more body than so all” (68). Interestingly, he then unweaves this narrative thread all the way back to Swift, Sterne, and “Flann O’ Brien’s *The Third Policeman*, in which human bodies betray a distressing tendency to merge into bicycles” (68).

communicate with the mother suffering from dementia? The answer: “by knocking on her skull” (14). Now, they truly develop an entire gestural language where “One knock means yes, two no, three I don’t know, four money, five goodbye” (14). But the language that is supposed to bring them together and make them understand each other—in spite of its obvious cynicism and a calculatedly reduced character—is predicated on Molloy’s “mom” having lost faculty of counting beyond two. As a result, Molloy comments, “She must have thought I was saying no to her all the time” (14). And then, in a true bravado of black humor, Molloy shares his original, yet quite nasty, plan with us:

Enlightened by these considerations [that his mother cannot count beyond two] I looked for and finally found a more effective means of putting the idea of money into her head. This consisted in replacing the four knocks of my index-knuckle by one or more (according to my needs) thumps of the fist, on her skull. That she understood. (14)

We see the point now. It is the language of five symbols but it is only the fourth symbol that truly matters. And everything is written in such a way that it indubitably makes one laugh. The source of laughter lies in the incongruity between Molloy’s repeated false excuses that he does not care for money and the only true purpose for which he created such a language: to pull out all the remaining financial resources from the demented and helpless old woman. He cynically says: “In any case I didn’t come for money. I took her money, but I didn’t come for that” (14). As if against Wittgenstein, Beckett offers us a proof that “private language” eventually exists. For it is a private language of sort, created solely on behalf of one particular man—Molloy.

Nowhere is Beckett’s humor as sexist and intoxicating as it is in the episode of Molloy’s first love experience with Ruth, or Edith, or whoever. “She had a hole in her legs,” Molloy begins to recount a touching story with a phrase which is recurrent throughout the narrative and which best represents Molloy’s definition of a woman, “oh not the bungle I had always imagine, but a slit, and in this I put, or she put, my so-called virile member” (51). Now, what makes us laugh in this episode, and to be

remembered first of all *laugh at* Molloy,¹⁴⁰ is his constant switching between the passive and the active, between “I put” and “it” *was put*, and his truly brilliant use of euphemism such as the “virile member” and *periphrasis*, a truly awkward, roundabout way of saying what is he up to: “*I lent myself to it*,” he says, “knowing it was love” (52, my emphasis). But, the way Molloy has gone through it and the way it remembers and narrates the unique experience, has nothing to do with love:

She bent over the couch, because of her rheumatism, and in I went from behind. It was the only position she could bear, because of her lumbago. It seemed all right for me, for I had seen dogs, and I was astonished when she confined that you could go about it differently. I wonder what she meant exactly. Perhaps after all she put me in her rectum. A matter of complete indifference to me, I needn't tell you. But is it true love, in the rectum? That's what bothers me sometimes. Have I ever known true love, after love? (52)

This is, indeed, an excellent example of Beckett's scatological yet sexist humor, where humans, quite unambiguously, interfere with animals and are reduced to them. The sheer amount of Molloy's inexperience, he is astonished there are other ways of having sex; the distortion of his perspective, he sees the rectum everywhere and is even unsure did he have sex with a woman or man—“She too was an eminently flat woman...Perhaps she too was a man” (52); his clear awareness that the “idyll was of short duration” (52); and, ultimately, his rapacity and cynicism—“She gave me money after each session, to me who would have consented to know love, and probe into its bottom, without charge. But she was an idealist” (52-3), all together color this stunning episode in tones that are evenly comic, farcical, and absurd. Needless to say that the episode characteristically ends with an open deflationary reference to “that part of the world,” Ireland:

She must have been a woman after all, if she hadn't been it would have got around in the neighborhood. It is true they were extraordinarily reserved, in my part of the world, about everything connected with sexual matters. But things have perhaps changed since my time. And it is quite possible that the fact of having found a man when they should have found a woman was immediately repressed and forgotten, by the few unfortunate enough to know about it. As it is

¹⁴⁰ The question of *laughing at* versus *laughing with* is an ethical question. In such delicate matters, it is convenient to emphasize the distinction. As Ruby Cohn has noted: “So ambiguous are Beckett's comic heroes that we scarcely know...whether we laugh *at* or *with* them” (8, original emphasis). While some may believe that it is a question of personal taste and disposition, I do believe that Beckett wants us to do both.

quite possible that everybody knew about it, and spoke about it, with the sole exception of myself.
(53)

The sexual xenophobia of the Irish is both emphasized and mocked by the catachrestic use of the third-person plural pronoun in conjunction with a singular noun: “when *they* should have found *a woman*.” And we also laugh at the double resonance of Beckett’s favorite words: “perhaps” things have changed implies they have not; what is “quite possible” suggests it is not possible at all, and so on. Finally, one cannot help but notice how Molloy’s perspective might neither be “distorted” nor be truly misogynic, but simply be homosexual. After all, and this may serve as a hidden title of the novel, he calls his life: “Molloy, or life without a chambermaid” (54).¹⁴¹

Side by side to Irishness and sexism, stands the third facet of Beckett’s humor, so far utterly unacknowledged in Beckett scholarship. I will call this aspect of Beckett’s humor *trivialism*. While Beckett’s characters may be vulgar materialists, emotionless automata, or open sexists, they make us laugh, first of all, because they take *all* things, even contradictions, to be true. For a start, it is significant to note that when I say *all*, I truly mean it. In calling them trivialists, I am actually borrowing a critical structure from the Australian philosopher Graham Priest, who has both envisioned and theorized a philosophical position which falls on the opposite side of the spectrum to skepticism. To Priest, the trivialist is someone who believes that all things, and especially contradictions, are true. He is a dual nemesis of the skeptic: while the skeptic believes nothing, the trivialist believes everything. Priest writes:

There is, in fact, a strong similarity between trivialism and scepticism. The trivialist will subscribe to everything; the skeptic will subscribe to nothing. In this respect, they are dual figures. And both take such extreme positions that it is difficult for those who wish to hold the middle ground to know where to start the debate. It might be thought that, at least historically, scepticism and trivialism are not on a par. For there have certainly been skeptics, such as Sextus Empiricus; but there have been no trivialists. (189)

¹⁴¹ Beckett’s grotesque deflations of female bodies and sexual acts might have had a literary origination in Swift. Pascale Casanova brings E. M. Cioran’s memory of Beckett’s literary tastes. Cioran recalls a moment: “Beckett told me that he was reading *Gulliver’s Travels* and that his favourite part was the ‘country of the Houyhnhnms,’ especially the scene where Gulliver is wild with fright and disgust at the approach of the female Yahoo” (in Casanova, 28). Much of Gulliver’s fright and disgust survives in and revitalizes with Molloy.

While Priest might be right that trivialists have never existed in reality, I am positive that they have existed in fiction at least. All Beckett's characters are trivialists *par excellence*. While they are repeatedly left with persisting suspicions and may, like Molloy, have their own genuine "little doubts" (25), they truly care for none of them. To remind you, "All roads were right for Molloy," even those that are not right. In the paragraph from *The Unnamable*, the eponymous "character" muses on "how it happens, if it's I who speak, and it may be assumed it is, as it may be suspected it is not, how it happens if it's I who speak, that I speak without ceasing" (382). This is a recognizable and repetitive feature of Beckett's characterization: his heroes cordially embrace and honestly believe in either side of the antinomy. And they sincerely do not care where the truth might reside, but take each alternative as both plausible and truthful. Who speaks in *The Unnamable*, Maurice Blanchot worked hard to figure out, but the novel tells us that it does not really matter: whoever speaks *I* or, "as it might be expected" *not-I*, speaks for sure.

Now, nothing is so funny as Beckett's little trivia, scattered all over the *Trilogy*, and this is exactly how his writings ultimately recoil upon themselves being "sceptical even of [their own] scepticism" (145), as Christopher Ricks has put it and I quoted in the introduction to this chapter. The question is still though: What makes trivialism such a powerful generator of laughter? What makes it comically effective? I would argue that its comic potential is tightly bound to the capacity of the trivialist to accept everything: "In fact," Priest remarks, "there is no point in engaging in debate with the trivialist about anything. We know that they are going to agree in advance" (190).

Let me show, then, a telling example of Beckett's trivialism and point out briefly what makes us laugh therein. It is a superbly written episode of burying the dog of Lousse that Molloy recounts with much enthusiasm and in detail:

Let's first bury the dog. It was she dug the hole, under a tree. You always bury your dog under a tree, I don't know why. But I have my suspicions. It was she dug the hole because I couldn't, though I was the gentleman, because of my leg. That is I could have dug with a trowel, but not with a spade...It was Lousse dug the hole while I held the dog in my arms. He was heavy already

and cold, but he had not yet begun to stink. He smelt bad, if you like, but bad like an old dog, not like a dead dog. He too had dug holes, perhaps at this very spot. We buried him as he was, no box or wrapping of any kind, like a Carthusian monk, but with his collar and lead. It was she put him in the hole, though I was the gentleman. For I cannot stoop, neither can I kneel, because of my infirmity, and if ever I stoop, forgetting who I am, or kneel, make no mistake, it will not be me, but another. To throw him in the hole was all I could have done, and would have done it gladly. And yet I did not do it. All the things you would do gladly, oh without enthusiasm, but gladly, all the things there seems no reason for your not doing, and that you do not do! Can it be we are not free? It might worth looking into. But what was my contribution to this burial? It was she dug the hole, put in the dog, filled up the hole. On the whole I was a mere spectator, I contributed my presence. As if it had been my own burial. And it was. It was a larch. It is the only tree I can identify, with certainty. Funny, she should have chosen, to bury her dog beneath, the only tree I can identify, with certainty. (31-32)

With certainty, an indispensable teach-yourself manual on how to bury a dog. And, with certainty, a trivialist one—where you can do, as Molloy say, as “you like.” Where nothing is truly impossible and everything is unconditionally true. If you read the passage in a trivialist way, you may then, quite plausibly, infer dozens of weird conclusions: that one is a gentleman because of one’s leg; or, that *she* dug the hole because *he* was a gentleman; or, that *he* was a gentleman because *she* dug the hole; or, that the dog was not dead but old for that was the way the dog smelt; or, that the dog dug the hole himself for he “too had dog holes” at that “very spot;” or, that the dog was a Carthusian monk with a slight difference of having a collar and lead; or, that by stooping or kneeling one may lose one’s identity and forget who one is; or, that *he* would have *gladly* thrown the dog in the hole but that *he* did not do it by the same token; or, that to do something “gladly” means to do it “without enthusiasm;” or, that “the things there seems no reason” for someone not to do, should not be done nonetheless; or, that the dog’s burial was actually his, Molloy’s, burial—“As if it had been my own burial. And it was;” or, that *she* has chosen to bury the dog under the tree *he* knew with certainty, and so on to infinity. Even the very problem of laughter is foregrounded in this episode in a trivialist fashion, where it truly seems insignificant does one cry or laugh. When Lousse finally buries the dog—for Molloy is a gentleman—the same gentleman says:

I thought she was going to cry, it was the thing to do, but on the contrary she laughed. It was perhaps her way of crying. Or perhaps I was mistaken and she was really crying, with the noise of laughter. Tears and laughter, they are so much Gaelic to me...(37)

And, undeniably, this series of ambiguities and paradoxes, of truisms and trivialisms, of “tears and laughter,” that can be read as you like, is extremely funny. Up to and including the crowning *catachrēsis* which allows Molloy to contribute his presence to the toilsome act of digging a grave: “But what was my contribution to this burial?...I contributed my presence” (32). Molloy’s “contribution” implies that presence is not a possession that can be transferred in such occasions. Even, if someone happens to be a gentleman. And, last but not least, whose is this burial, after all? Of the Lousse’s dog? Or, Molloy’s? Molloy takes both things to be true just as he takes all roads to be right.

The Turks have an entire corpus of short stories and anecdotes about the thirteen-century character Nasreddin Hodja. A trickster and good-for-nothing. And a skeptic. In some of them though, he appears in a role of a local judge. And he adjudicates all sorts of quarrels between peasants. He is thus obliged to listen to a man who comes over to file a complaint against a neighbor. And he listens, a little bit unwillingly yet carefully, and after having listened to the man’s argument he says: “You are right.” The man departs in hope he has won the case and the trial is over, but it turns out that it is not. Upon hearing the news of Nasreddin Hodja’s judgment, the accused neighbor runs down to Hodja’s dwelling to recount his own side of the story. And Hodja listens again, tiresomely yet patiently, and after having listened to the second man, he passes his judgment: “You are right,” he says again. And the man leaves with full heart. Now, Hodja’s wife, minding her own business, had been anyway paying witness to all this from the start and suddenly she feels she must interfere: “But Hodja, they cannot be both right,” she says. Hodja, calmly and self-satisfyingly, answers: “You are right.”

I am paraphrasing this story since it is a stunning example of trivialist reasoning. I believe that much of its logic transpires through Beckett’s writings. The story has a universal quality of humor and makes us laugh by virtue of its protagonist’s capacity to hold incompatible positions as true. And it shows that Beckett’s humor is, after all, first cosmopolitan and only then Irish. It oscillates between the two extremes: those of skepticism and trivialism. There is a distant and elusive relationship between Molloy

and Nasreddin Hodja. But, it is, nonetheless, there to be perceived and flashed out. It confronts us with a typical Beckettian disjunction: Beckett the skeptic or Beckett the trivialist? Beckett the Irish, or Beckett the Turk? And it teaches us that everything in Beckett ultimately recoils upon itself. The disjunction is not an exception. Beckett is both.

Conclusion

In his famous response to Lukács titled “Reconciliation Under Duress,” Adorno astutely summarizes what bothers Lukács and what is of central importance to his attack on modernism. Adorno says it is precisely the modernist skepticism in coalition with its various alter-egos such as solipsism, nihilism, and cynicism, to mention only a few. To Lukács, modernism is an extreme form of skepticism bordering on madness, the pathological, and the perverse, with no way out of one’s mind. Adorno picks up on this point and then turns the tables by arguing that even though Lukács’ thesis that modernism is skepticism is quite right—which is indeed what Lukács so tirelessly castigates in writers such as Joyce, Eliot, and Kafka—he nonetheless misses the point, for he seems to be unable to recognize that the skeptical suggestion that “the world is unknowable...can become a moment of knowledge” itself (162). This is a modernist skeptical paradox that best captures the dominant tendencies of the aesthetics of modernism and summarizes very well my entire project.

Modernist studies have been way too long dominated by the issues such as the representation of consciousness in the modernist novel or by narrative experiments with the representation of time. While formal breakthroughs in the representation of time and consciousness are, certainly, key to the development of modernist fiction, the story of modernist fiction is much more complex and nuanced. Similarly, modernist fiction has been way too long read as a fiction of epistemological doubt and uncertainty, as well as a fiction of “unknowing.” My conclusion is different and is rooted in Adorno’s claim that the skepticism of modernist fiction represents a moment of knowing rather than unknowing the world.

It is crucial to note that this moment is achieved both rhetorically and narratively. While rhetorical strategies I have analyzed may indeed serve the purpose of disowning knowledge, they also seem to support the view that the point of forgoing knowledge is nothing but knowledge itself, to paraphrase

Stanley Cavell. Skepticism is thus neither “intractable” nor “unknowing.” Nor is the modernist narrative. Lukács, and some contemporary literary critics as well, simply fall prey to the very same fallacy: they are insensitive to the fact that epistemological failure in fiction is *de facto* a sort of narrative knowledge.

Insofar as skepticism is not exclusively the discourse of unknowing, the skeptic is not a detached thinker who entertains his doubts in a disinterested fashion. Those are the two payoffs of the modernist novel’s engagement with skepticism, and the payoffs of my dissertation as well. For the modernist narrative plucks the problem of skepticism from philosophical discourse to show primarily two things. First, that skepticism is not a doctrine, but a way of life; second, that it is neither self-refuting nor unlivable; on the contrary, it is a viable option in spite of all its misfortunes and pitfalls. Rather than being defined as a set of different epistemological principles, skepticism can be read as a set of different rhetorical practices. Irony, unfulfilled apocalypse, unrealized *anagnorisis*, epiphany, negative modifiers, the discourses of satire and simulation, various narrative metalepses and thought-experiments, *ekphrasis*, over-identification, the *dissoi logoi*, antithesis, *epanorthosis*, *catachresis*, and so on, are all more descriptive of skepticism than any imaginable epistemological axiom. I am not saying, of course, that these rhetorical and narrative devices are *exclusively* skeptical. Just as it is *not* the case that all irony is skeptical, it *is* also the case that there is no skepticism without irony. Just as it is certainly *not* true that each *epanorthosis*, each self-amendment, is skeptical in itself, it *is* certainly true that skeptical discourse is unimaginable without rhetorical self-correction.

I have showed how by exploring the intricate and complex net of rhetorical figures and narrative practices, the modernist novel may be reassessed in new light. For *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, is not only a typical story of disillusion—and that is how it has been most commonly interpreted—in which Marlow’s beliefs, to remind you, gradually sink into “a sickly atmosphere of tepid skepticism.” Truly, Marlow’s language is prolific with the vocabulary of unshakable convictions and firm commitments, and he keeps pouring the injunctions to “stand fast” by one’s duty, to have a “solid pavement under [ones]

feet,” to have an “untrammelled feet,” and numerous others. Nonetheless, this metaphoricality is being permanently interrupted by another set of metaphors whose primary function is to *ironize* the *standing-fast* discourse of the novel. Adjectives, such as “inconceivable,” “impenetrable,” “inscrutable,” and “flickering” abound. The novel is full of fogs, walls, veils, curtains, and shadows. One stumbles upon “mist,” “maze,” and “darkness” at every step. In the apogee of his doubt, Marlow physically emerges out of the jungle’s “haze.” Epistemologically speaking, his state is that of being “amazed;” emotionally speaking, he shows that he is incapable of revealing his true feelings to the Intended. The novel is thus not simply a story of disillusionment, but rather a complex and layered skeptical narrative of disillusion, unrequited love, untold story, failed mission, and so on.

Of *Heart of Darkness*, one critic has said that: “Without Marlow, the sceptical and contemplative narrator, the novel would probably be the most elaborate black-and-white picture in the history of literature” (Kuna, 446). And it is truly so. Similarly, without Tod Hackett, *The Day of the Locust* would have been only a mediocre narrative venture into the simulated character of experience in California; without the Teacher, *Khulio Khurenito* would have been a thesis novel and an unsuccessful, tendentious, journalistic satire; without Molloy and Moran, Beckett’s narrative would dissipate into a condition that T. S. Eliot once called *shoring fragments against ones’ ruins*. For, alongside innovations in the representation of time and consciousness, one of the most distinctive breakthroughs of the modernist novel is the triple-invention of a skeptical narrative voice, of a skeptical character, and of skeptical discursive practices. Of course, all three, and especially skeptical narrative practices, are as old as literature and philosophy. They are known to us since antiquity. But, it is only with modernist narratives that such practices become a stylistic dominant, a focusing component, and an organizing principle of a literary text.

What are the consequences of the infiltration of skeptical rhetoric into the modernist novel? After the narratives such as *Heart of Darkness*, *The Day of the Locust*, *Khulio Khurenito*, or *Molloy*, the novel has

never again entertained straightforward assertoric modes of utterance. This is the key point. The opening gambit of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, stating the likeness of all happy families while distinguishing the idiosyncrasies of all the unhappy ones, could have never been repeated again. For even though Tolstoy's motto is deeply ironically charged, the narrative that follows, in spite of all its complexity and ambiguity, serves as a mere illustration of the narrative thesis rather than a challenge to the thesis. That is how the poetics of literary realism generally works. In contradistinction to this, the poetics of the modernist skeptical narrative strictly opposes the propensity to *fixing, illustrating, or proving* narrative statements. As Brian McHale has noted, "modernist poetics begins to *hemorrhage*, to leak away" (12, original emphasis). By positing a narrative statement and then skeptically *unnarrating* or revoking it, placing it as if under erasure, the modernist skeptical narrative leads directly to the postmodern narrative of "forking paths," so typical of Borges and Pynchon, for instance.

And this is not the only consequence of the infiltration of skeptical rhetoric into the modernist novel.

As Valentine Cunningham writes:

The classic realist novel is really a kind of detective story—and of course the apogee of Realism in the Victorian period coincides with the invention of the detective story—in which narration and narrators are essentially detectives, sorters out of truth from error, final arbiters of moral guilt and innocence, clearers up of uncertainty: all parodic of the Christian God, who is to sort out all things on The Last Day of Judgment. And the modernist novel finds that old detective confidence difficult, not least because faith in the old detective deity of End Times judgment, the old model theology that sustained its confident epistemology and hermeneutic, was lapsing. Modernism's detective work gets increasingly clue-less. The clues build up, but lead nowhere much. (464)

After the emergence and consolidation of the modernist skeptical narrative, the narrative work of fiction got increasingly clueless. But this is the cluelessness of a special kind. I have began my journey through the modernist skeptical narrative by pointing out that a skeptic is a detective lost in translation and that the word skeptic originally means the one who inquiries, seeks, questions, searches, and investigates, and not only the one who doubts. But where do the story clues ultimately lead Marlow, Tod, the Teacher, Molloy, or Moran? Marlow is amazed and mentally, if not physically, stuck in the heart of darkness; Tod is

equally amazed and mentally stuck in the society of the spectacle; the Teacher and his disciples are amazed and stuck between extermination camps, routinization of violence, mass executions and pogroms, and the ceaseless state of exception; and Molloy finds himself literally stuck on the way to his mother. But he also does not worry. He knows that all the roads are good just as he knows that they will all lead him to the desired destination, though none ever does. As Anthony Cascardi notes: “The novelistic impulse toward self-fashioning may [indeed] be quite powerful, but there is hardly any guarantee that the self will be successful in any of the projects it undertakes” (170-171). This is the condition unearthed in the skeptical modernist narrative and bequeathed to the narratives to come.¹⁴²

Finally, the modernist skeptical narrative displays a genuine duality by showing that skepticism is not only enwrapped in epistemological cloak, but is rather of both rhetorical and socio-political nature. In a word, it is facing in two directions and it is, in the famous words of Franz Kafka, a genuinely “Janus-faced” phenomenon. On the one hand, skeptical rhetoric descends to the level of syntax, as it does in Beckett, on the other, it rises above the levels of epistemology and narrative grammar onto the levels of socio- and psycho-political critique, as it does in Erenburg. This is understandable. For, the prominence of skeptical rhetoric in the modernist novel is not only due to the all-pervasive atmosphere of skepticism that characterizes the period *from Joseph Conrad to Samuel Beckett*. That is to say, it is not only an expression of ever-growing disenchantments, but is also an expression of ever-growing re-enchantments and rising

¹⁴² In his collection of philosophical fragments *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein portrayed the skeptic as someone whose worries are obsessive, endless, and pathological. Wittgenstein’s skeptic, overwhelmed by radical, all-consuming doubts, does not engage in any recognizable community practice. To Wittgenstein, what determines something as a case of genuine doubt is its conformity to community rules. Thus, the skeptic’s doubts are not “of this world” and they do not raise genuine questions. The philosophical skeptic is feigning, playing outside the pre-established language game. In one of his best known fragments from *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein argues that the skeptic’s behavior reminds us of someone who keeps opening and closing the drawer infinitely, looking for the lost keys, even though he sees that the keys are not in the drawer—what Freud previously described as obsessive-compulsive behavior. And further, Wittgenstein is famous for having developed dozens of philosophical vignettes to illustrate a specifically skeptical predicament: as, for instance, that of a man who caught in skeptical musings tries to get out of a room by trying first the window which is too high, then by trying the chimney which is too narrow, etc., instead of simply turning around and walking through a wide-open door. Interestingly enough, much of Beckett’s skepticism can be read against such a Wittgensteinian philosophical backdrop. For instance, when in the first part of the *Trilogy* Molloy finds himself lost in the woods he is not going forward in a straight line to find a way out, as Wittgenstein would have suggested; he is rather going in a circle “hoping in this way to go in a straight line” (78).

dogmas typical of the first half of the twentieth century. As Michael Levenson has aptly put it, the modernist novel is replete with the figures of skepticism, nihilism, and doubt; but it also opens an entire “field of action, a theatre of conviction, within a wider social failure” (*Introduction*, 5). The modernist skeptical narrative thus transforms a theater of dogma into a theater of verbal and rhetorical free play.

Let me conclude my work with one of the most curious details I have stumbled upon while I was studying the relationship between skepticism and literature. In Diogenes Laertius *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*—which is one of the very few surviving sources on ancient philosophy—Diogenes surprisingly writes that some believe Homer is the founder of skepticism. The detail is quite shocking: it is not a philosopher but a poet who sets skepticism up. But why? “For,” Diogenes writes, “to the same questions he [Homer] more than anyone else is always giving different answers at different times and is never dogmatic about the answer” he gives (2: 483-4).

Even if apocryphal, the detail is revealing at least in two respects. First, *contra* philosophers, it suggests that the true home of skeptical discourse is not philosophy but fiction. Second, it suggests that skepticism already resides in language: in figuration, in fabulation, in narrative imaginings and orderings, in language’s very syntax and semantics. When Levinas, some 1700 years after Diogenes, writes that “language is already scepticism” (170), he means that skepticism returns in the excess of language, after all philosophical refutations and renunciations. Skepticism, he says, is both “le réfutable” and “le revenant,” what is refuted and left behind as well as what returns and haunts the philosopher. Nowhere is this as visible as in the novels I have read. Nowhere is this as crucial as in the modernist skeptical narrative.

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