

Situating Sartre
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY
THOUGHT AND CULTURE

9

*Adrift in the Realm of the Senses:
Sartre and Fusional Being*

Robert Harvey

*Aux Le Gotic qui demeurent
sur l'estuaire du Gouet.*

EDITED BY
Jean-François Fourny
and Charles D. Minahen

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What figuration and (inevitable) disfiguration will a current immersion in Marguerite Duras's literary *imaginaire* bring to this return to Sartre: this ritual of repaying a visit? In order to visit, there must be a site other than the here and the now. The site that comes to mind when I think of Sartre is the one where he meditated upon relations among nature, our sexed beings, and, be it ontological (as "being-for-itself") or ethical (as "responsibility in freedom"), our essence. That place is not the Bouville Public Gardens (though they are never far away), but the sea. Whenever the theory of being was his self-imposed order of the day, Sartre's vision drifted to oceans, with their hidden perils, or else to those regions of the salty expanses that meet and mingle with fresh water delivered from far uphill, from within the land masses left behind by the sea's prehistoric retreat.

In affirming that the sea constitutes a privileged Sartrean site, it must be recognized that Sartre remains a resolutely land-bound thinker. While life-giving and life-taking waters may often have been the unspoken background for his deepest meditations, fear kept his imagination safely stationed on the shore. Of necessity, the sea is to be seen only from a vantage that is its contrary: the sea is a sight to be seen, not a site to be visited. Hence the currents I would like to follow (or invent) running from archaic myths about the oceans through Marcel Proust and Jules Verne to

Duras and Sartre. If I insist on the unlikely pairing of Sartre and Duras, it is because I believe that what everyone knows a priori about Duras can elucidate Sartre's predilection for the site of the sea.¹ Through every Duras text blows the sea air. The sea is always within her characters' sight or pounds away at them in the form of desire. For the sea is desire. Madeleine de Scudéry cautioned that, in love, a lady is safe only if she and her beloved dare not to venture beyond "Tender," via the mouth of its river, into "Dangerous Sea": a caution sign one also often reads in Sartre; it is a realm into which the desiring subject passes only at great risk. If Duras too can write that "heterosexuality is dangerous [because] it is *there* [là] that one is tempted to reach the perfect duality of desire" (DY, 40), then why do so many of her "adorable" characters—mostly women, but some men—choose to sail out to the limits of desire?

Let us start in another way, with a cue provided by Michel Butor in "The Cerebral Grotto," one of the "Little Liturgies" in *Illustrations III*,² and imagine some time- and space-altering process by which we could enter the confines of geological matter in the process of transformation of mountain into boulders, pebbles, sand, and mud. Split away from the mother mass, cracked and strewn by glaciers, before a majestic peak, our capsule would lie in a tumbled sea of granite awaiting further impetus toward the ocean. Dropped into a stream by some earthquake, we would be rolled downward, our vehicle split into smaller bits, rounded by millions of cycles of snow, thaw, rain, rushed by torrents toward a river's mouth. Encountering the tidal ebb and flow, let us suppose that our stony bathyscaphe escapes the fate of silt or mud and, as pebble or sand, is pulled away from the river's mouth by currents and washed up on the shore to form, along with millions of other similar units, a beach.

At the apparent term of our voyage, we would have arrived at the site where a listless Marcel suddenly saw and began to study the evolution of a scene that came to emblemize his amorous convalescence.³ Suffering from a worsening respiratory congestion, he had just recently left Paris for a healthier environment. Having recovered from his first exogamic erotic disappointment two years earlier at the hands of Gilberte, the bright vista of Balbec-Plage and the sea beyond enticed the sickly observer who had been "hanging about in front of the Grand Hotel" (PW, 503), to venture forth where the rebirth of desire would hypostasize around the band of rowdy and robust young girls espied frolicking against the horizon. From Balbec hence, Proust was to dissect the psychological effects wrought upon a physically weak and neurasthenic male of having committed his gaze and his underlying "desire for possession" (503) to hardy, sexually untamable females.

FROM BALBEC TO BERCK

An approximate measurement of a certain debt Sartre owed Proust can be obtained by recalling that as a young philosophy student, he lent the title, "A l'ombre des vieilles billes en fleur," to a sophomore theatrical production staged in 1925 at the *Ecole normale supérieure* that lambasted "old ninny compeeps" like Gustave Lanson and, less directly, Proust's novel. Although he would later often acknowledge in print Proust's influence on his literary development, Sartre, a member of "the anti-Proustian generation,"⁴ was also a relentless critic of artifices to which he claimed Proust had recourse in order to render human psychology through the novel. In a typical formulation, Sartre accuses Proust of "perpetually trying to find bonds of rational causality between psychic states," then having to resort to "magic" in order to make the bonds work within his system.⁵ But while the parodic distancing revealed in "A l'ombre des vieilles billes en fleur" may be one of the most characteristic moves of Sartre's discursive practices, denial, as psychoanalysis has shown, always hides strong affirmation.

Years later, with World War II behind him, Sartre chose Berck-Plage—a setting altogether analogous to Balbec—for a scenic sequence with strikingly similar elements and comparable purposes to those of Proust. For *The Reprive*,⁶ the second volume of his saga novel, set on the eve of the war, Sartre composed and arranged a rash of events, of both grand and lesser import, breaking out all over Europe during the week of September 23-30, 1938. The novels successive tableaux involve a cast of personalities crucial to the impending conflagration, identifiable by their real names, as well as everyday men and women, invented by Sartre, whose activities during this "reprive" history would ignore. Not surprisingly, Sartre's tone expresses more empathy with the insignificant lives of the latter. The elaborate construction of *The Reprive* delivers the events of that single important week in a kaleidoscoping and sometimes telescoping succession. Transitions from one tableau to another often occur in mid-sentence: from one character's direct or indirect discourse to another's; from one character's subject of conscious metaphor to the same metaphor occurring in the utterance of another. Because Sartre is concerned both with leveling the hierarchy that places fame above anonymity and with collapsing narrative time through a semblance of simultaneity, these transitions are founded on pure linguistic coincidence regardless of the locutor's social status. Sartre's attempt to emulate cinematic syntax is obvious: *The Reprive* takes shape within a framework of thematic match-cutting or montage by association.

One such shift wrenches the reader in mid-paragraph from the beach at Juan-les-Pins to Berck-Plage as two characters experience simultaneous

reflections inspired by the sea before them. So dazzling is Sartre's montage that reading several more sentences is necessary before one becomes aware that while Odette gazes out onto the Mediterranean, Charles is contemplating the Strait of Dover at its opening onto the Channel.

Among a small group of intimates including her husband, Jacques, and brother-in-law, Mathieu, Odette is vacationing in that early September of 1939. Instead of Albertine,⁷ Sartre places his Odette at the seaside. Instead of a carefree blossoming girl, he creates a fretful woman probably in her thirties. But the onomastic wink at Proust is patent and signals Sartre's rethinking of what a psychologically troubled individual might imagine when moved by a vision from the beach. Bored with Jacques, Odette has been playing a game of mutual flirtation with Mathieu, whom she has come to perceive as the incarnation of a self-assured free spirit. Neither of them make a move toward fulfilling their sexual fantasies involving each other. A resilient and robust woman (at least in Mathieu's eyes), Odette has just listened to the latter insist that war cannot be avoided. As he dashes off into the breakers, she remains staring at the sea, perceiving in it a disturbing example of the disjointed justice of existence.

If attentiveness and indiscriminate appeal to all objects of desire around an individual are valid measurement of libidinal fitness, then Charles is, in contrast to Mathieu or Odette, a perfectly healthy sexual being. Sartre's usual scatological treatment of sexuality only serves to underscore the scandalous paradox of this invalid with a voracious hunger for sex. Unlike the able-bodied characters in *The Reprieve*, Charles's problems are not meta-physical, but, rather, material, physiological. Part of a colony of invalids packed off to inhale the salubrious air of Berck, he suffers from tubercular osteitis and is strapped to a gurney on which he is shunted about "like a flower pot" (OR, 758) by his nurse. His pseudo-predilection for fascism and sarcasm which those around him mistake for sadism are harmless expressions of frustration at the physical impediment to the satisfactory realization of desire. Yet through this desire-ridden body, hindered by infirmity, Charles fathoms better than Mathieu, Odette, or any of the other "standing ones" (*les debouïs*) (759) certain ontological paradoxes that will forever remain enigmatic to them. In attributing this metaphysical knack to Charles, Sartre urges us to adjudicate upon his cast of characters and to decide that Charles alone deserves (in spite of his crudeness) to be rewarded by fulfillment of desire.

Sartre swings us from Odette to Charles, from southern to northern beach on a stylistic hinge composed of the noun "sea" modified by the stressed possessive adjective "their" (757). Fighting to shrug off Mathieu's words of insistent belief in the inevitability of war, Marcelle clings to the

notion that economic power somehow enables her and her friends to control nature and thereby history. The Mediterranean before them is "so light, it reminded one of the sky turned upside down. What could anyone have against it?" (757). A lease on the waters firmly in hand, she and her fellow vacationers stand for the nation: their ability to pay the 100 franc per person pension should guarantee that the war cannot take place. For Charles, the sea "was clammy and glaucous, café au lait in color, so flat and monotone . . . smelling of iodine and medication" (757), and the third-person possessive in "their sea" emblemizes his incontrovertible *dispossession* from anything except perhaps his own wits. He knows, because he lives it, that the body is irretrievably plugged into the world around us. The narrative shift from Odette to Charles drives home the discrepancy between an illusory sense of control founded on the unspoken given of health and economic ease to an accurate sense of little or no control over events coursing through us. For Charles, the individual causes neither collective nor libidinal history to happen: these histories occur as randomly to the individual as the rivers flowing where gravity takes them.

An obstinate and obscene counterexample to the healthy protagonists of *The Reprieve*, Charles is living proof that the "standing ones" are neither tragic nor joyous enough to combat effectively contingency in the historical time and place where Sartre places them. The footloose manner of Mathieu's dash into the Mediterranean is as fake as the freedom rooted in ontological lightness that he defended in *The Age of Reason* and that so impresses Odette. Odette's confidence in peace is as flimsy as her belief that there is some means by which one can possess the sea: the concept of "their sea" (*leur mer*) is a lure (*un leurre*). With this implicit pun as fulcrum for the narrative transition introducing us to Charles, Sartre teaches that control and possession at Juan-les-Pins are as impossible as Marcel's conception of them at Balbec.

FROM BERCK TO BOUVILLE⁸

The physical phenomena that overcome both Charles, in *The Reprieve*, and Roquentin, in *Nausea*, while they are in states of mental excitation, are related chiasmically to the placenames (*noms de lieu*) where their stories unfold. If, as Beauvoir reported, Sartre's series of vignettes featuring an infirm's sexual obsessions unsettled readers of *The Reprieve*,⁹ it was undoubtedly because Charles associates micriturion and defecation with his frustrated yearning for commerce with women. While he waits to be loaded with his cohorts into a freight train for evacuation, Charles's battle to retain

dignity over the bodily discomfiture of diarrhea alternates with and indeed magnifies his incessant thoughts of intercourse. When, after fantasizing that he was left behind at Berck with its "grey and naked sand as far as the eye can see" (OR, 921), the inevitable gets the best of him, Madame Louise's assistance in the clean-up touches off an explicitly announced erection imminent from the outset. Against his will to be disassociated from those who accept their illness as some preordained destiny, he is placed along with them, "a stone among stones" (946), in a bowel-like corridor to be shoved into the "gaping hole" of the train.¹⁰ Once outside the convalescent hospital, he realizes that he is lying on the ground, "half indistinguishable from mud" (945), his body—indeed, his very being—having become indistinguishable from the gooey substance gurgling inside his intestines (955) as he yet persists in rising above subhumanity by desiring "femelles" (944).¹¹

Charles's struggle to preserve his integrity (one could also write *consistency*) as human occurs in a place whose name evokes not diarrhea but nausea.¹² With a name like *Berck-Plage*, Charles is in a site where one might more appropriately imagine a queasy Roquentin. Roquentin, the hero in whom everything including his own sexual obsessions inspires nausea, on the other hand, is stuck in Bouville—a place that affords no pleasant vista, no belvedere, nothing beautiful to see for Sartre's surrogate, Roquentin. Unlike Balbec or Berck, with their bright pebbly or sandy beaches, Bouville is situated at the mouth of a river depositing a sediment so pulverized, heavy, and mixed with organic substances that it accumulates along the shore and lines the depths of the estuary. Acutely aware that mud both stifles and fosters life, Sartre renews and amplifies its universal symbolism. Both stone and water, both organic and inorganic, the hybrid quality of mud would be to the in-itself what Adam's androgyny is to the for-itself.¹³ The very name, Bouville, suggests what Roquentin discovers, to his horror, about the pebbles on its estuarial shore: they are hard and dry, as the superficial bourgeois mind might expect, but they hide a wet, muddy, slimy, and repulsive underside,¹⁴ a feminine underside that no male can elude. As viscous substance, mud reveals to man what total being is because—in accordance with Sartre's description of slimy substances in the final chapter of *Being and Nothingness*¹⁵—man can create total being by coming into contact with it. But whereas in the 1943 text Sartre classified slime or "the viscous" as feminine, the mud of Bouville elicits thoughts of ambiguity in existence through its androgynous nature. And it is to this hybridity of existence that Sartre returns via the unlikely hero of *The Reprieve*.

Bouville is the concatenation of two cities in which Sartre actually dwelled: La Rochelle, where between 1917 and 1920 he coexisted miserably

with his stepfather and discovered his own ugliness, and Le Havre, where during four academic years in the 1930s he fulfilled the unfulfilling function of lycée professor. A glance at the trusty *Guide Michelin* reveals that, at the muddy mouth of the Seine estuary, the masculine Havre conforms to our topographical vision of Bouville, while the feminine Rochelle is situated on a peninsula jutting forth between two channels (*pertuis*) and prolonged by the Ile de Ré. As composite of a *boue-ville* and a *bour-ville* projecting like a phallus into the sea, Bouville is emblematic of the frightening prospect of the two sexes united.

BOU À BOUE?—BEURR!

The vision of the open sea, its unpredictable viscosities, and the monsters that lurk within it keep the authorial vision alert to a truth deeper than that which can be made out from the shoreline. Just before reaching the Bouville Public Gardens for the climactic scene of *Nausea*, Roquentin surveys the situation at the seaside and thinks:

La vraie mer est froide et noire, pleine de bêtes; elle rampe sous la mince pellicule verte qui est faite pour tromper les gens. . . .
Moi je vois le dessous! Les vermis fondent, les brillantes petites peaux veloutées, les petites peaux de pêche du bon Dieu pètent de partout sous mon regard, elle se tendent et se contrebaillent.¹⁶

The explicit referent here hides an implicit one: puffed up pisciform bodies pop open like bivalves in a description that approaches the genital anatomy of the young girls for whom Roquentin lusts.¹⁷ "The obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which 'gapes open.' It is an *appel* to being as all holes are. In herself woman appeals to a strange flesh which is to transform her into a fullness of being by penetration and dissolution. . . . Beyond any doubt her sex is a mouth and a voracious mouth which devours the penis" (BN, 782). Like the muck into which Charles was dumped and the murky tunnel of the freight car waiting to whisk him away from the war zone, all passageways are, for Sartre, frighteningly feminine and yet invariable in the experience of the male.¹⁸

To focus on why the prospect of male-female union is typically horrifying in Sartre's writings, I would like to amplify some points raised by Adrian van den Hoven concerning *Nausea* in relation to Sartre's childhood encounters with books.¹⁹ Bolstering his conjecture that among the tomes found on the shelves of his grandfather's library Sartre pored through Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, van den Hoven stresses not only the

etymological connection between the title, *Nauséa*, and Nautilus, the name of Nemo's submarine, but also the metaphorical relationship between Roquentin's sense of superiority (*supra*), based on the putative ability to see below the surface of bourgeois life forms, and the underwater strolls taken by Nemo with Harvey and his crew. While I agree with van den Hoven that Verne's prophetic tale inspired the aqueous imagery in *Nauséa*, I believe that Sartre drew this inspiration not so much from scanning the Hetzel edition *illustrations*, but more from *reading* the book filled with Verne's characteristically encyclopedic details and accuracy. As Sartre would underscore from *The Imagination* all the way to *The Family Idiot*, the power of consciousness to create the image (*imago*) surpasses any plastic image thrust before passive senses. In this, Sartre concurs with Proust who wrote, in the very passage introducing the little band of blossoming girls, that "to strip our pleasures of imagination is to reduce them to their own dimensions, that is to say nothing" (PW, 513). Moreover, the half of *The Words* where he informs us of the presence of Verne's works in his youthful experience is entitled "Reading."

Of all its fantastic episodes, "The Poulps" chapter of Verne's 1870 novel is the most terrifyingly memorable.²⁰ Augmenting suspense through rhetorical play, Verne lures the reader toward the narrative unravelling of a monster anticipated since the first page of the novel. Ned Land's ejaculation, "What a horrible beast!" (VY, 322), at that moment of revelation is echoed in Mathieu's repulsed invective at the thought of having conceived a child and in Roquentin's cries of "filth! what rotten filth!" (N, 134; OR, 159), when he awakens from an erotic dream following the experience with the chestnut tree. The Nautilus crew's initial sighting of actual giant squids was skewed by the inflated hearsay about krakens ("[w]hose tentacles could entangle a ship of five hundred tons, and hurry it into the abyss of the ocean" [VY, 31] and about monstrous squids with "mouths like gulfs" and bodies "too large to pass through the Straits of Gibraltar" (VY, 321).

In pages Sartre claims he skipped over, Verne's sober scientificity combines with an unflinching sense for movement that brings a young reader's imagination within palpable reach of other-worldly, outlandish beasts. In discussing the possibility that such a creature as a poulp exists, Aronmax points out to Ned Land that *mollusk*, the phylum to which the cephalopod would belong, "indicates the relative softness of its flesh" (VY, 23). Yet the suction cups on the poulp's tentacles—analogueous to the chestnut-tree root seen as a "suction pump" (OR, 153)—prove strong enough to rip one of the submarine's sheet metal panels off. Realizing that "electric bullets are powerless against the soft flesh, where they do not find resistance enough to go off,"

Nemo calls upon his men to "attack them with the hatchet" (VY, 324). How close the quality of the poulp's flesh is to the feminine "viscous" in *Being and Nothingness* and to the "passive resistance" (N, 130; OR, 154) of the stone on Bouville's beach! No sooner is Nemo's hatchet strategy hatched than two tentacles, "lashing the air, came down on the seaman stationed in front of Captain Nemo, lifting him up with irresistible power" (VY, 324). Losing his self-control and ability to obey Nemo's injunction against the use of any language other than English, this "unhappy man" cries for help in French, revealing to Aronmax his kinship through linguistic identity in a "heartrending cry" that the latter would remember the rest of his life (325).

In the final moments of struggle, as the men "buried [their] weapons in the fleshy masses," the squids unleash their ultimate defence mechanisms: "a strong smell of musk penetrated the atmosphere" and "the animal ejected a stream of black liquid" (325). In Bouville's Gardens, Roquentin complains: "my nostrils overflowed with a green, putrid odor" (N, 128; OR, 151) and describes black (by far the most frequently occurring color in the novel) as "a bruise or a secretion . . . an oozing . . . [an] amorphous, weakly presence" (130-31; 155). The Nautilus crew's only chance lay in their ability to hack off every one of the "slimy tentacles [that] sprang up like the hydra's heads" and stabbing whatever vital organs they might reach—the "staring eyes" or the "triple heart of the poulp" into which Ned plunged his harpoon (VY, 325). Overwhelmed by the sight of the chestnut trees, Roquentin writes: "I drop onto the bench between great black tree-trunks, between the black, knotty hands reaching towards the sky" (N, 126; OR, 149). Even as the giant squid attack was being assuaged, the survivors were engulfed by the beasts' severed tentacles from which life had not yet fully ebbed: "We rolled pell-mell into the midst of this nest of serpents, that wriggled on the platform in the waves of blood and ink" like the transfiguration of absurdity ("the key to Existence, the key to my Nauseas, to my own life") from a concept into "this long serpent dead at my feet, this wooden serpent" (N, 129; OR, 152-53). For the inconsolable Aronmax, "It was horrible," (VY, 325), while for Roquentin, this "horrible ecstasy" became an oxymoronic "atrocious joy [*joissance*]" from which he could not free himself. Try as Roquentin might "to get rid of this filth," he became the root of the chestnut tree (N, 131; OR, 155) in which there were just "tons and tons of existence: endless" (134; 159). From the eyes of the ever-measured Nemo, this test wrenches ultimate proof of his susceptibility to compassion: "Captain Nemo, covered with blood, nearly 'exhausted' gazed upon the sea that had swallowed up one of his companions, and great tears gathered in his eyes" (VY, 325).

In *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Verne thematizes the ostensibly undifferentiated substance that harbors invisible variations. The sea is not what it appears to the novice: although uniformly transparent, its waters are in constant movement. Currents, like the Gulf Stream, sometimes deep below the surface, dwarfing the greatest rivers, carry waters of diverse temperatures at uncanny speeds. Tides, swells, waves, tsunamis, and maelstroms lend the oceans a myriad of movements. Neither the density nor the viscosity nor the salinity of the sea is stable. Verne describes the slimy inconsistency and potential for suction in the poulps' fleshy tentacles in such a way as to have us believe that the giants are aberrant constructs of the very medium in which they dwell. These monsters of the "liquid masses" are the spongy and all-too-real concretization of the worst fears expressed with haunting regularity since the first pages of the novel: "Maybe the oceans also conceal mollusks of unimaginable size, crustaceans too fearful to contemplate, like 300-foot lobsters, crabs weighing 200 tons. Why not?" (VV, 11-12). Such proportions may be unimaginable, but what can be imagined is that Poulou, years before his experience with mescaline, already hallucinated about poulps through involuntary recollections of reading *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*.

An outlandish contraption, the Nautilus itself conforms to the theme of difference within the same as well. To the eyes of sailors who search for it, it is virtually invisible within the transparent environment through which it moves. Swifter than the Gulf Stream, those who do sight it mistake it for Moby Dick or the mythical kraken.²¹ The submarine's motto, *mobiles in mobile*, applies equally to a sea current. It was there, adrift through reading in his grandfather's library, already imagining himself a man among the other men and made of all of them, inside the Nautilus, itself a man-made mobile object within a mobile environment, that Poulou fostered the imagery that would express his theory of total being in terms of the fusion of two sexed beings in the final chapter of *Being and Nothingness*.

The influence such imagery exerted upon young Poulou's crude notions about sexuality and existence had to have been tremendous. As powerful as Pardaillan's heroism²² and as ambiguous as the erotic undercurrents of *Moby Dick*,²³ Nemo's unexpected slippage from a measured tone to his nearly hysterical vow to "slaughter this vermin [by] fighting! them man to beast" (VV, 324) must have disconcerted and riveted the young reader. This imagery is present for all who read Verne's 1870 novel: men dwarfed by their vehicle, *hominicali*—so many spermatozoa (young Sartre's "La Semence et le scaphandre"²⁴)—sealed in a cigar-shaped vessel, racing through a seamless aqueous environment, capable of slipping through the Straits of Gibraltar

and penetrating the womb of the Mediterranean, men whose supreme battle before deliverance into freedom is with Medusa-like sea monsters. The poulps are phallic mothers whose viscous and interoceptive flesh, with enough strength to breach the bathyscaphe, can only be put to rest by means of a multiple castration. Their tentacles have the consistency of mud and writhe about like the roots of Roquentin's chestnut tree: "This vener [of the individuation of things] had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness" (N, 127; OR, 151).²⁵ True: in perusing Neuville's illustrations of the giant squid, Sartre could see the writhing configuration of tentacles, but only in reading Verne's text could he imagine fully the quality of the tentacular flesh. This is why it took Sartre's reading the text, a child's reading, one that is repeated over and over, to the points of saturation, memorization, and ventriloquy: "True: I did not know everything, I had not seen the seeds sprout, or the tree grow" (N, 129; OR, 153).

FROM BOUVILLE TO TROUVILLE

The permutations, truncations, transpositions, and retellings of *The Sea Wall* that constitute the *œuvre* of Marguerite Duras inform us that, without ever necessarily reading Jules Verne, her life provided ample reason to fear water and to dread all that thrives or dies there.²⁶ Her mother's progressive madness, after thousands of crabs undermined the sea wall and allowed the Pacific to inundate her crops, caused Suzanne (Duras) to loathe crustaceans. The theme of aqueous environments in contemporary literature cannot be evoked without invoking the name of Marguerite Duras, who returned unfailingly with her writing (which was her life) to rivers, deltas, estuaries, and oceans.

In 1963, just before the turning point commonly identified by *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, imbued with the intuition that "the feeling of love might come from a sudden crack in the logic of the universe, from an error, for example,"²⁷ Marguerite Duras leaves Neauphle and moves into an apartment purchased where Proust once kept a room: at Roches Noires in Trouville. Across the estuary from Le Havre, at the littoral, like Melville, Verne, Proust, Woolf, and Sartre before her, Duras brings into convergence physical, mental, or emotional illness with desire, its fulfillment, or fulfillment in order to think the unthinkable fusion of feminine and masculine.

Duras's *Man Seated in the Passage*,²⁸ a paradigm of her reflection on this problem, will serve as link back to Sartre. Returning from a walk under a torrid summer sun, the woman lays out on her back—legs together, then

spread—in the pathway leading to the house. The man, seated where the title demands that we envision him, fixes her with his blue desirous eyes, arises, moves out toward her, and, standing, ejaculates on her prostrate body. All the while, the narrator tells the woman, whose eyes remain closed, what she witnesses and, together, they orchestrate the subsequent acts. It is noted that, as the man returns to his cavernous domain, he casts his gaze upon the rolling hills before the river and the sea beyond without seeing them. Inside, “wasted by love and desire” (DM, 271; DH, 21), he lets “it” be taken by the woman’s mouth: “she has what is usually food for thought in her mouth” (272; 27). Only the feminine pronoun, without antecedent, is used to designate the penis with its “crude and brutal shape” (272; 23), while the woman’s genitals—described variously as slack [*étale*] or swampy [*marécageuse*]—are exposed “obscenely!” (269; 12). Her eyes still closed, the woman moves on from fellatio to a slow exploration of the cavernous regions of his body, “her face buried in the part of himself he knows nothing about, slowly breathing the fetid smell” (273; 29), “naming things, hurling insults, calling on words to come to her aid” (273; 31). Suddenly, amidst her tears, hetero-masculine penetration arrests these erotic peregrinations, and the text closes with a montage vacillating between the woman beaten by the man and the exterior with its fluvial panorama.

Never before or since has Marguerite Duras brought the association of Eros and Thanatos so close to rendering the death-dealing results that Sartre cautioned us about at the conclusion of *Being and Nothingness*. Exposing the limits of what is tolerable in art, *The Man Seated in the Passage* is undoubtedly founded on a lived experience of which *Moderato cantabile* and *Hiroshima, mon amour* bear some sublimated marks. To locate the events that Duras has transformed, one would have to travel back upstream, against the force of gravity and history that brings the stone from mountain to shore.²⁹ There is no time. In a certain manner that only literature can render, the two women of the story—narrator and actor—dodge the male brutality: the one, gabbing at the sidelines, holds to the threshold of action; the other is projected beyond it by her metamorphosis into the ideal paradigm of beauty. The two feminine instances form a conspiracy to neutralize male violence by means of two topological feminizations: one local—that of the man’s strangely invaginated domain, inside, outside, and on the threshold of which perversity is played out; and one distant—that of the river’s mouth opening onto the sea. Of the first, he is becoming painfully aware; of the second, he remains ignorant.

The domain of the passageway into which an irresistible force returns the man is a uterine territory—similar, in a way to those one finds through-

out Beckett’s work, but which Duras would never place directly above a grave in order to deliver her creations into death at the instant of birth. And this reprieve allows life the time to conquer death: if psychoanalysis posits the phallic woman harboring within her the signifier of desire, Duras, beginning with *The Man Seated in the Passage*, imagines a vaginal man—one whose entire being is associated with the womb. The man’s cavern—the passage—is also an invagination of his body: an alternate route for eroticism that, when explored and aroused, brings him close to the woman in a manner unacceptable to him. As with the obvious ambiguity in the meaning of “cavern,” it is fair to suppose that Duras plays on the homography between the French *verge*—the substantive behind the feminine pronoun—and the English noun “verge,” associated with the concept of threshold.³⁰

And thresholds there are: that between the house’s passage and the outdoors, her vulva exposed as lasciviously as his anus remains hidden, and the threshold that embodies them all: the distant line where the river water meets that of the sea. Duras’s subsequent texts will show that this man has already been led, through overdetermined vaginality, to an ontological threshold where she believes women dwell. The proof that he does not yet understand himself to have been neutralized by this displacement is underscored in the final movement of the text where the vista that imposes itself so patently to the reader is a vista that—within the diegesis—only the woman and the narrator/director can truly see for what it is.

The pen/camera embraces the panorama of the river, the estuary, and the sea under a hazy and violet sky an ensemble that Sartre would have found sublime. This river mouth, this threshold between the fresh water of the Seine and the salt water of the Atlantic, joins all the others—the Mekong, the Magra, the Ota, the Gironde, the Ganges. The final scanning of the horizon universalizes the singularity and eternalizes the brevity of the passage-way episode. The pornographic parable thus becomes the story of Anne-Marie Stretter, that of Lol V. Stein, that of Alissa, all the Annes, the Anna’s, and the she’s. Lest we forget, Sartre’s mother’s name, Anne-Marie, combining the names of the putative grandmother and mother of Christ, was precious to Sartre’s self-image. That parable projects into the future to become the story of all women and, I dare say, all men, of all being-on-the-threshold-of-the-other: the ethical *mitsein* that Sartre longed to institute in social reality, but could only point at in his prolific imagination.

ABBREVIATIONS

- BN: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.
 DH: Marguerite Duras, *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*.
 DM: Marguerite Duras, *The Man Seated in the Passage*.
 DV: Marguerite Duras, *La Vie matérielle*.
 N: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*.
 OR: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Œuvres romanesques*.
 PW: Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*.
 VV: Jules Verne, *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers*.

NOTES

1. Duras denies Sartre the sacred appellation of writer, granting him only the lesser status of "idea-launcher" [*lanceur d'idées*] (Interview by Bernard Pivot, *Apostrophes*, Antenne 2, 28 September 1984) (my translation, as are all translations of the original French, unless otherwise indicated). She says that, on those rare occasions when she thinks of Sartre, a sort of "Solzhenitsyn of a country without Gulag" comes to mind; he appears to her "all alone in a desert built by himself" (*La Vie matérielle: Marguerite Duras parle à Jérôme Beaujour* [Paris: POL, 1987], 119, henceforth abbreviated DV). There were virtually no professional contacts between the two writers: Duras wrote two short, hostile articles on Sartre; Sartre wrote nothing on her. Their signatures would occasionally appear together on the same petition. See also, Alain Vircondelet, *Duras* (Paris: François Bourin, 1991).
2. Michel Butor, *Illustrations III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 76. See my translation and Jean-François Lyotard's discussion of this text in "False Fights in Literature," *Toward the Postmodern*, ed. Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), 125-42.
3. Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove* [*À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*], trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright (New York: Random House, 1992), 502-16, henceforth abbreviated PW.
4. Denis Hollier, "L'Adieu aux plumes," in *Les Dépossédés* (Paris: Minuit, 1993), 179.
5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 234, 236, henceforth abbreviated BN.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Le Sursis* [*The Reprise*] (1945), in *Œuvres romanesques* (Paris: Gallimard "Pléiade," 1981), henceforth abbreviated OR.
7. One could speculate on the significance for Sartre of his grandfather's friend, Simonnet, in comparison to the significance for Marcel of Albertine, whose last name is Simonnet.
8. Pierre Bost, "Proust devant une sonate, Sartre devant un air de jazz . . .," *Le Figaro Littéraire* (8 January 1949): 1, 3, Robert Greer Cohn, "Sartre versus Proust," *Partisan Review* 28.5-6 (1961): 633-45; Rémy Satssehn, "Bouville ou

9. "Panti-Combray," *French Review* 33.3 (1960): 232-38; Eugenia Noik Zimmerman, "Some of These Days: Sartre's Petite Phrase," *Contemporary Literature* 11 (1970): 375-88; Eugenia Noik Zimmerman, "The Metamorphosis of Adam: Nausea and Things in Sartre and Proust" in George Stambolian, ed., *Twentieth Century French Fiction: Essays for Germaine Brée* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1975), 54-71.
10. The "violently realistic" anecdotes of a friend who had been sent to Berck to convalesce "and the whole atmosphere [here] lent Sartre inspiration for an episode in *The Reprise* that lofty souls reproached him for particularly" Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l'âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 322-23. Charles also considers this "gaping hole" through which he is pushed to be un *jeu de massacre* ["a bean toss game"] (OR, 775). This exact image arises in Mathieu's nightmarish premonition of war: "Draftable: Mathieu got small and tossed game and when Mathieu was all curled up like a ball, Jacques threw him and he fell into a black hole streaked by missiles, he fell into war" (898).
11. "Slang for females," according to the *Pléiade* notes (OR, 1996).
12. When repulsed by something, French children exclaim "Beurk!" or "Berck!" roughly equivalent to our "Yuck!" alluding onomatopoeically to vomiting.
13. Emmanuel Lévinas, whose *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (1930) introduced Sartre to phenomenology, continues to reflect upon this hypothesis as old as the rabbinic tradition. He writes, for example, in *Difficile liberté: essais sur le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963): "Cette côte n'était-elle pas plutôt un côté d'Adam, créé comme être unique à deux faces et que Dieu sépara pendant qu'Adam, encore androgyne, sommeillait?" (56) ["Was this rib not a side of Adam, created as a single being with two faces that God separated while Adam, still androgynous, was sleeping?": *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 35.
14. OR, 6. In "L'Homme et les choses," a 1943 study of Francis Ponge's *Le Parti pris des choses*, Sartre restated his position on the project of consciousness (intentionality) and illustrated it with pebbles, shells, and other objects dear to Ponge: Ponge is not interested in describing qualities that might differ and tiate objects from humans, while he is; Ponge willfully goes to the heart of and even becomes things while he guards against such inferiority. One can grasp the true essence of the stone—that it hides a fishy sliminess—only if one resists being sucked into it and perceives it from the outside, otherwise words retract into "word-things" (*Situations*, I [Paris: Gallimard, 1947], 308). See also Jean Pellegriin, "L'Objet à deux faces dans *La Nausée*," *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 113 (1964): 87-97.
15. Cf. Chapter 5 in Robert Harvey, *Search for a Father: Sartre, Paternity, and the Question of Ethics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 104-24.
16. The following English translation of this passage does not do justice to the alliteration I have emphasized: "The true sea is cold and black, full of animals,

- it crawls under this thin green film made to deceive human beings. . . . I see beneath it! The vaneer melts, the shining velvety scales, the scales of Gods catch explode everywhere at my look, they split and gape." Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausee* (1938), OR, 147; *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964), 124, henceforth abbreviated N.
17. Books, for Poulou (the nickname Sartre's mother gave him, an individual I consider discrete from Sartre), were hermaphroditic objects whose feminine attributes are described similarly. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots* [*The Words*] (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 37.
18. Among many examples, Garcin cries at Estelle: "I don't want to sink down into your eyes. You're moist! You're soft [*moelle*]! You're an octopus, you're a swamp." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Huis clos*, *Huis clos suivi de Les Mouches* (Paris: Gallimard "Folio," 1947), 84. See also, Josette Pacaly, *Sartre au miroir* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1980), 181-82.
19. Adriaan van den Hoven, "Nausea: Plunging Below the Surface," in Ronald Aronson and Adriaan van den Hoven, eds., *Sartre Alive* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 227-39.
20. Jules Verne, *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers* [*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*], illustrated with 111 drawings by de Neuville (Paris: J. Hetzel, [1870]), henceforth abbreviated VV. "The Poulps" (*la poupe* means "octopus" in French) is chapter 18 of 23 in the second and final part of the novel (Hetzel, 386-96).
21. "Leviathan is not the biggest fish—I have heard of Krakens." Letter dated 17 November 1851 to Nathaniel Hawthorne.
22. Pardallan was a paradigmatic hero of serial-story writer Michel Zévaco, whom the young Sartre read assiduously.
23. Verne drew explicitly from *Moby Dick*. Sartre wrote a short study of this "monument" by the "American Jules Verne" [*sic*], arguing that Melville's main concern was not the creation of a "universe of symbols," but one of things. "Moby Dick d'Herman Melville," in Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, *Les Ecrits de Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 634-36.
24. In the immature story, Sartre transposed some of the tensions and issues involved in a rift that occurred between himself and his friend, Paul Nizan. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Ecrits de jeunesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 140-87, and the "Notice" by Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, 137-39.
25. On what constitutes "obscenity" for Sartre, refer to note 2 in OR, 1785.
26. Hydrophobia in literature is in no way unique to Sartre and Duras. Jules Verne's childhood was spent living on Ile Feydeau, in the Loire, west of Nantes. In the shape of a boat, as most river islands are, and subject to frequent floods, the boyhood home kept Verne in fear of floating out to sea were it ever ripped from its anchorage. While reading "The Poulps" episode, Sartre might have reassured himself by recalling that he lived nestled in the bosom of a city whose motto is *Fluctuat nec mergitur*.
27. Marguerite Duras, *La Maladie de la mort* (Paris: Minuit, 1982), 52.
28. Marguerite Duras, *The Man Seated in the Passage*, trans. Mary Lydon, in "Translating Duras," *Contemporary Literature* 24.2 (1983): 259-75 (translation of Duras's text, 268-75), henceforth abbreviated DM; *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), henceforth abbreviated DH.
29. Shortly before writing *Moderato cantabile* and *Hiroshima, mon amour*, Duras was on a Mediterranean beach with a man when she received the news of the death of her mother—the woman who bore her and who resisted the forces of colonial bureaucracy and the sea. With her lover, Duras traveled north, toward a town on the Loire where the burial was to take place. At Aurillac, in a hotel, perhaps in a passageway, the fucking (as "immoral," under the circumstances, as Meursault's "indifference") suddenly turned violent. Had Duras awakened in the man his anal eroticism? Had she revealed to him a homosexuality more fundamental than his heterosexuality? Had her proximity shown him his being-at-the-threshold-of-the-other without his being able to formulate that being in the theoretical language of men? Something on this order, I surmise, triggered the man's sadism luridly described in *The Man Seated in the Passage*. The biographical event is recounted in "Le Dernier Client de la nuit." But it took the exercise of fiction, the work of the writerly imagination, to move whatever discovery actually did take place into the universally recognized Durassian site of the ambiguity of our being: the estuary.
30. Mary Lydon discusses Duras's use of the feminine pronoun for the penis as well as the possible bilingual pun. Furthermore, she uses the idiomatic "to be on the verge of" several times in her translation.