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Modern Era Centaur: the Fusion of Art and Religion

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Modern Era Centaur: the Fusion of Art and Religion

by

Isabel Sobral Campos

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Modern Era Centaur: the Fusion of Art and Religion

by

Isabel Sobral Campos

Adviser: Professor John Brenkman

My dissertation, “Modern Era Centaur: the Fusion of Art and Religion,” focuses on art’s ability to assume other social functions outside its domain. It deals with a variety of artistic practices that take on overt religious roles or are otherwise implicitly grounded in a religiously inflected stance. I argue that the religious impulse of the modern era greatly motivates the poetic and visual aesthetic innovations in the European and American avant-garde. Framed through the thinking of Blaise Pascal, Emmanuel Levinas, and Niklas Luhmann, I show how proto-modernist poetics such as that of Charles Baudelaire and Emily Dickinson articulate similar religious commitments, as does the abstract art of such artists as Wassily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich. The modernity of Dickinson and Baudelaire, I contend, stems from their articulation of a religious position independent from a particular religious system while nonetheless plundering that same system in an expropriation and transformation of its symbols, narratives, and personalities. Kandinsky and Malevich accomplished a similar feat in their disavowal of mimetic art, and their construction of a pictorial language—in the case of Malevich inspired by Orthodox Christian iconography—aimed at fulfilling a religious function outside of a religious system. Abstract art prefigures the visual language of science fiction films of the late twentieth century. Representations of outer space in this genre have however transformed the positive openness to infinity implicit in Renaissance perspectival painting into an angst-filled view of infinity. In particular, apocalyptic science fiction films envisioning end of the world scenarios are pictorial inheritors of abstract art, although they refuse the ontological positivity of Malevich and Kandinsky. To paraphrase Hannah Arendt, in these films one sees how the conquest of space has altered humanity’s perception of itself in the universe. Scholarship on modern and
modernist literature and visual art often assumes the background of secularization. My dissertation, however, argues both for the importance of religion and for the unprecedented transformation of the meaning of a religiously informed outlook.

The theoretical framework of the study combines the pioneering thinking of Blaise Pascal with Emmanuel Levinas and Niklas Luhmann’s work to formulate the mutations of religion in the modern era and to show how these mutations have migrated to the sphere of art. Both Pascal and Levinas conceptualize atheism as a condition for the belief in God—a relationship to infinity must be conceptualized prior to a relationship to the deity. This allows them to articulate a religious viewpoint outside of religious systems invested in particular dogmas or narratives. Pascal and Levinas are then instrumental in the transformations occurring in the modern era in relationship to belief. Luhmann contributes to this study as he sees the process of secularization occurring in modernity to signify a restructuring of the religious system in relation to all other social systems, and not the disappearance of religion. This structuring permits the proliferation of different forms of belief since now it is up to the individual to choose and pick from various religious cultural options.
Acknowledgments:

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Introduction

“As a result of this bifurcation of the cultural religious option and personal religious decisions, there is currently widespread incoherence in individual opinions that qualify as religious” (Niklas Luhmann, *A Systems Theory of Religion* 212).

Niklas Luhmann’s lifelong project aimed at conceptualizing a general theory of society. His work on the religious system thus partakes of such an aim. Conceiving of two main moments in the formation of the modern world – premodern and modern – religion plays a fundamental role in the passage between them. In premodern times, religion regulates the ultimate meaning of all other social systems so that society’s organization is stratified. The modern era entails the undoing of this order. Now all social systems function autonomously of each other and the religious system is only one system among others, all of which function synchronously.

The loss of the position of religion also brings about another phenomenon. The system of art, since Romanticism, at times takes on the functions of religion, articulating the ambition that art can fulfill spiritual motivations. The above citation from Luhmann is concerned with the modern era for, since the loss of the position of religion and the full-fledged independence of all systems, it is up to the individual to decide whether or not he wants to be included in the religious system. The birth of the concept of culture in the eighteenth century also increases the burden placed on the individual who can now compare many different cultures, choosing what to endorse from various traditions, so that one’s beliefs are as custom-made as an individually tailored suit.
This dissertation examines the “widespread incoherence” of religion that Luhmann identifies as proper to the modern era and which is a sign of the creativity and adaptability of religion. It studies artistic practices that either aim at taking on religious functions such as Emily Dickinson’s poetry and Wassily Kandinsky and Vlademir Malevich’s painting, or whose subject matter is at root religious, thus determining the parameters and form of the artwork. Charles Baudelaire, Hollis Frampton, Stanley Kubrick, Andrei Tarkovsky and Lars von Trier fall under the latter category. Insofar as this study is concerned, all of the examined artistic practices across a long temporal arc and a variety of media – writing, painting and film – are invested in thinking “religiously.” Yet the religious nature of these practices is undoubtedly open to contestation. These are the stakes of this study, and what Luhmann’s quote also emphasizes is this: that the widespread incoherence of religious manifestations puts at risk the label of religion as we know it, tampering with it, and more than testing its limits, relentlessly revealing them to be elsewhere than thought.

There is a conflation between art and religion. Dickinson, Kandinsky and Malevich articulate religious aims at the core of their art-making, such as Dickinson’s view that poetry must have a spiritual function; Kandinsky’s attempts at painting the spiritual nature of the world; and Malevich’s understanding of Suprematism as a religion. Baudelaire, Frampton, Kubrick, Tarkovsky and Trier do not present their work as taking on a religious function, yet the relationship of finite life to the infinite universe informs their practice. Baudelaire’s infinite poem determines his approach to oeuvre and to the poem; Frampton’s concept of the infinite film undergirds each filmic embodiment; Kubrick’s meditation on the medium of film folds into an encounter with transcendence; Tarkovsky’s concern with humanity leads him to consider cosmological loneliness; and finally von Trier’s reassertion of this same loneliness embraces the apocalyptic termination of life as perhaps the only solution.
Whether wedding art and religion, or only presenting new solutions for religious questions, these practices attest to the great capacity for reinvention, mutation and adaptability of religion in the modern era. They also all share a common trait: in their pursuit of theological questions, these artists turn to an investigation of the medium of their art – language, painting or film. They attempt to get at the core of the medium, but end up inevitably finding the impossibility of this pursuit: Dickinson’s foregrounding of language qua language through her disruptive tactics – the dash and the difficulty of syntax and word choice; Baudelaire’s inscription of the notion of the infinite poem and of the open work in his meta-conception of the poetic oeuvre; Kandinsky’s and Malevich’s return, albeit in different ways, to the basic aspects of painting in an attempt to reach transcendence through art; Frampton’s infinite film, which ends all films but at the same time is the necessary condition for film; Kubrick’s linking of the infinity of outer space with the black rectangle of the cinema room; and finally Tarkovsky’s and von Trier’s meditation on painting, the art of the past, as a way of negating the possibility of a future. Through their considerations on medium, these artists aim at infusing the immanent world with transcendental depth: immanence becomes infinitely deep, its profundity being the expression of the infinity undergirding the world, that is, in Emmanuel Levinas’s terms, the in-finite that constitutes the finite.

The creativity of religion in the modern era largely derives from the weakening of what Luhmann calls ‘the observer God’, which the rise of monotheistic religions has consolidated. God is a personality, a person endowed with intentions and attributes. But with the paradigm shift that ushers in the modern era, the observer God weakens. For Luhmann it is this weakening that first allows for the art system to usurp at times some of the religious functions. Although Luhmann does not note this, alongside the weakening of the observer God, in some instances the observer God suffers a transformation whereby he loses his
personhood observing humanity now from the pure infinity of time and space. One of the first instances of the dissolution of the observer God occurs in the thinking of Blaise Pascal whose *Pensées* in its efforts to convince the non-believer of the necessity of searching for God, conceptualizes God as infinity. Although the conflation of God and infinity occurs only momentarily, as part of a rhetorical move, it nonetheless opens the way for the conceptualization of this transformation of God from person to infinite time and space. Implied in this transformation is the articulation of atheism as a condition for belief: the relationship of the finite with the infinite precedes the belief in God. The former does not require a particular religious dogma, that is, narratives, events and people, to exist. It is a basic articulation of the position of finite life in relation to an infinite universe. The personalization of God, however, occurs within a particular religious dogma.

The transformation of the religious system in the modern world, however, places the burden of religious choice solely on the individual who can now pick and choose from various traditions and even make his brand of religion by selectively accepting certain dogma and not others. Despite the unquestionable centrality of original sin for Pascal’s conception of the human condition, he conceives a question of size and duration as integral to belief: when considering the sheer immensity of the universe, human life, whose knowledge and lifespan are limited, disappears, is engulfed. The human condition is an enigma that vanishes into a greater, unthinkable enigma, that is, into the boundless universe. Levinas’s thought articulates in the sphere of philosophy the same Pascalian conflation of God and infinity. Similarly to Pascal but with different intention, Levinas maintains the distance between the finite and the infinite. For Pascal God’s incomprehensibility prevents the subsumption of the finite into the infinite, that is, it prevents the mystical experience from happening, whereby the infinite absorbs and annihilates the finite. For Levinas, the finite must maintain its boundaries and its separate “I” before an encounter with God can occur. This encounter must assure the integrity
of the finite vis-à-vis infinitude. Lastly, Pascal’s modernity does not lie solely in his reorientation of belief in relation to size and duration but also in his thinking about the void, which is both the flip side of infinity and at the same time another expression of the infinite. The void, for Pascal, signifies the infinite emptiness of human nature.

Although only Baudelaire and Frampton expressed any interest or knowledge of Pascal, and none of Levinas, Pascal and Levinas’s conceptions are implicitly articulated in the artistic practices examined here, this is perhaps so because both these thinkers, wittingly or unwittingly, opened up the possibility of thinking the relation of finitude to infinitude outside of the strict confines of religious dogma. Thus this study begins with an examination of their thinking.
Part I - Pascal’s Wager: Between Void and Infinity
Chapter One

Our Infinite World

Alexandre Koyré ends his study *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* on a dramatic note. After a skillful examination of the shift occurring at the end of Medieval times, whereby a cosmological conception of a closed, finite, hierarchical universe becomes an open, nonhierarchical and infinite, Koyré concludes that God’s intervention in the functioning of the world has become conceptually irrelevant. The world is sent reeling into its own development through infinite space and time, and God’s Will as an orchestrating force transforming contingency into necessity is taken out of the equation; all principles of operation between bodies become materialistic natural principles. Koyré concludes, “The infinite Universe of the New Cosmology, infinite in Duration as well as in Extension, in which eternal matter in accordance with eternal and necessary laws moves endlessly and aimlessly in eternal space, inherited all the ontological attributes of Divinity. Yet only those – all the others the departed God took away with him” (276).

As the concept of a universe of infinite duration and extension replaces the creator by taking on his attributes of sempiternity, immensity and omnipresence, God is exiled outside of this world picture, taking with him, it seems, his moral attributes: infinite goodness, compassion and perfection. This psychological evacuation leaves in its wake a material, contingent universe where events and beings are not distinguished by virtue of the place they occupy in an ordered structure – and not by what they are either - but by what happens to them, by their encounters with other beings and things. Koyré points to the decline of belief, as the idea of an infinite universe dislodges God, shaping the particular way of relating to the absolute that has become so deeply identified with our modern selves. Koyré’s words betray nostalgia for a lost God, for his psychological presence as orderer, caretaker and guide, as we embrace the laws of nature and abandon the immaterial, spiritual component of the cosmos.
Born nineteen years prior to Isaac Newton, Blaise Pascal does not develop, like Newton, a detailed theory of the physical and mathematical functioning of the universe, the triumph of which is largely responsible for the shift that Koyré examines; he does, however, lean on the notion of infinity when addressing the nonbeliever in his great apologist effort, the *Pensées*. Pascal seems to have embraced earlier than Newton’s precursors\(^1\) a conception of an absent God in relation to an infinite universe. He does not do this by speculating about theological matters that go beyond hermeneutical questions and the contentions between religious fractions of his day. He concludes the infinity of the universe largely by way of experimentation and mathematical reasoning. In fact, in the *Lettre de Pascal à M. Le Pailleur*\(^2\) concerning Père Noël, Pascal refuses to speculate about the mysteries of God, that is, to pronounce himself on the workings of nature, beyond the humble truths reason can assert via a limited scientific practice. Nonetheless, Pascal’s God does not manifest himself in the world, but hides himself; by this very concealment he also reveals himself to the worthy. He does not however intervene in the world; he is absent. For entirely different reasons than those of Newton’s followers, from where our modern cosmological conceptions derive, Pascal embraces the idea of an absent God. But, unlike Koyré, who sees in this shift whereby God no longer runs the world, the beginning of the triumph of atheism, Pascal uses the relationship of the human being to an infinite universe as a first step toward belief. Pascal is not alone in taking this step. Three centuries later Emmanuel Levinas makes a similar move when he turns to consider the human condition. Levinas’s work retroactively sheds light on

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\(^1\) Newton himself, as Koyré points out, argues for the continuous eternal intervention of God in the world, and resists Leibniz and Descartes’s position that God created the world once and for all, foreseeing all chance and change, so that he does not intervene in the world since the time of creation. The followers of Newton, while embracing many elements of the physicist’s conception, nonetheless absorb this element of Leibniz and Descartes’s thought.

\(^2\) In *Blaise Pascal: Oeuvre Complètes* Ed Lafuma (*OCL*). From now on *OCL* will be used to refer to Lafuma’s edition of Pascal’s *Oeuvres complètes*. The number of the fragment in Lafuma’s edition follows this abbreviation.
what Pascal’s thinking opens up: the possibility of relating to the absolute without necessarily positing the personhood of God and thus departing from the infinity of the world. At stake in Pascal is the beginning of a new religious thinking, able to exist outside of religious systems as a philo-theological stance that is not grounded in a particular creationist narrative but still maintains itself as religiously inflected.

**Atheism and Infinity**

Infinity is a multifaceted concept in Pascal. It is both mathematical and existential. Its mathematical embodiment comes to light by considering nature and the endless succession of matter throughout time:

La nature recommence toujours les mêmes choses, les ans, les jours, les heures, les espaces de même. Et les nombres sont bout à bout, à la suite l’un de l’autre; ainsi se fait une espèce d’infini et d’éternel. Ce n’est pas qu’il y ait rien de tout cela qui soit infini et éternel, mais ces êtres terminés se multiplient infiniment. Ainsi il n’y a ce me semble que le nombre, qui les multiplie, qui soit infini (OCL 663).

Pascal’s recognition of boredom as a dangerous affective condition of humankind relates to one’s awareness of the endless return of days, years, seasons and hours. It is to grasp how the past comes back in the guise of more time until at last new life replaces the dead, creating an infinite chain of succession. This multiplicity is at bottom numerical. Ephemeral beings die; infinity subsists in the impersonality of number, in the advent of ever-new life; it belongs to the indifferent, asubjective realm of nature.

The effect of the dissonance between an infinite cosmos and the finite being turns Pascal’s awareness of infinity into dread and anxiety. Infinity generates an acute grasp of humankind’s dislocation under the auspices of an indifferent universe:
Quand je considère la petite durée de ma vie absorbée dans l’éternité précédente et suivante - *memoria hospitis unius diei praetereuntis* - le petit espace que je remplis et même que je vois abîmé dans l’infinie immensité des espaces que j’ignore et qui m’ignorent, je m’effraye et m’étonne de me voir ici plutôt que là, car il n’y a point de raison pourquoi ici plutôt que là, pourquoi à présent plutôt que lors. Qui m’y a mis? Par l’ordre et la conduite de qui ce lieu et ce temps a(-t-)il été destiné à moi? *(OCL 68)*.

Finally the famous “pari” fragment brings together these two understandings of infinity. It introduces the wager by first addressing the double nature of human beings: the soul is thrown into the body. The dual nature of the body and soul constitutes the complexity of the human, dooming us to our incomplete knowledge of the world and self. The soul and the body, although of antithetical nature, exist entangled, generating our particular way of knowing, materially and affectively, sensually and intellectually. The body knows through the soul, the soul through the body, each human notion betraying the constitution of both body and spirit. This mixture generates the particular brand of human impurity that translates into an imperfect, limited knowledge of the world.

The double-nature of humans introduces the question of finitude and infinitude, for the body-soul unity is ephemeral, a provisional embodiment. We understand finitude since we are finite and limited; and finitude leads us to the knowledge of mortality. We can know that infinitude exists yet its nature remains unknowable to us. Whereas humanity can know of infinity, despite not sharing its limitless nature (for with infinity it shares the attribute of extension), humanity shares nothing with God, who is limitless and without extension. The
human ability to relate to infinity does not open a way for a relationship with God, proving the distinctiveness of infinity from God.

Pascal dwells on this relationship between infinity and finitude to represent the extent of human smallness vis-à-vis God’s immensity. The believers understand this distance already through faith. But faith is bestowed from above. It is individually felt and cannot be explained. Thus Pascal’s attempt at describing the proper positioning of humanity vis-à-vis God requires that he make the non-believer meditate in the infinity of the universe to understand the meaning of human smallness. Faith alone can transform this infinity into a divinely created world. If all human beings understand finitude, only the believers feel the relationship of this finitude to God in the proper light. The non-believers can only aspire to a rational understanding of this relationship. They can only relate to extension because a rational understanding cannot make one believe in God, since reason cannot prove his existence. Only the certainty of faith can accomplish this.

The atheistic relationship with the absolute is posed in terms of the perception of the ephemerality of life in relation to the temporal, spatial, and generative universe preceding and exceeding human magnitude. The implicit hope of Pascal’s text is that the weight of this confrontation with infinity presses upon the nonbeliever the need to search for God. This is why in the course of spelling out this structure, Pascal momentarily conflates infinitude with God only to separate them a few paragraphs later when the impossibility of knowing both the existence and the nature of God is vehemently asserted as the particular force of the human tragedy and the particular reason why Christianity is the only true religion. It is so since Christianity conceptualizes the human tragedy as it has been lived by humanity throughout the ages: the unfolding of history under the gaze of a hidden God. Infinity allows for the idea of a relationship with God to impress the nonbeliever.
In the momentary conflation of infinitude and God, Pascal intuits the transformation of the idea of God: if Koyré argues that in the dawn of the modern era, God loses his personhood as the infinite universe takes on the divine attributes of infinite extension and duration, Pascal momentarily conflates God and infinity as a way to impress upon the non-believer the infinity of the world, the insignificance of the human being and the necessity of searching for God if finitude is not to disappear in the overwhelming immensity of the universe. Koyré sees this transformation as signaling the beginning of the decline of belief. Yet as Niklas Luhmann shows in his study of the religious system, contrary to what is commonly assumed, the process of secularization does not necessarily point to the decline of belief but rather to a restructuring of the relationship between various social systems: if in premodern times, the religious system ultimately regulated the meaning of all other systems, in modern times, the religious system is one system functioning alongside other systems, all of which are autonomous. Moreover, the globalized modern world has led to a proliferation of new forms of belief: rather than the decline of religions there is a crosspollination between various religious options. The individual alone is responsible for accepting or rejecting dogmas. For this restructuring of the religion to occur, Luhmann notes that the observer God weakens. Although Luhmann does not say this, as the observer God weakens, in some modern expressions of belief, the personhood of the deity, its personality also disappears, becoming infinite extension and duration. In his momentary conflation, and ironically with the intent of defending Christianity against other religions, Pascal intuits the trajectory that will allow for ways of believing that exit the confines of a particular religious system without necessarily disavowing a religious position. Because God’s personhood inevitably is constructed around creationist narratives, the loss of this personhood fractures dogma, inviting all manner of syncretism, so that one can believe in reincarnation and in the

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3 A Systems Theory of Religion
redemptive power of the crucifixion at the same time. This aspect of Pascal’s thought is partially responsible for his relevancy for modern religious thinking and why for example Levinas, without explicitly referring to Pascal, will conceptualize a similar relationship between finitude and infinity.

The momentary conflation of infinitude and God in Pascal also betrays an important aspect of Pascal’s thought: the asymmetrical nature of his notion of double-infinity. As Lucien Goldmann notes, Pascal’s thought is fundamentally dialectical because it operates through successive paradoxes in its efforts to speak of a God of whom nothing can be said or proved, only felt; it is also dialectical because of his attempt to speak of the human condition and human knowledge, both essentially despoiled of immutable foundations, except for an epistemological impulse to know that betrays the mark of a lost prelapsarian nature.

Yet double-infinity does not operate symmetrically as a paradox of nothingness and infinity, whereby the before- and the after-life are posed as equally valued terms of the unknowable in the human experience. If the two abysses between which finite existence emerges are equally unknowable and frightening, the abyss of eternal life alone is the focus of Pascal’s apologist efforts and the source of anxiety undergirding the *Pensées*. Each human life should be turned to this question, focusing on the future abyss that all will eventually confront: “L’immortalité de l’âme est une chose qui nous importe si fort, qui nous touche si profondément, qu'il faut avoir perdu tout sentiment pour être dans l’indifférence de savoir ce qui en est…Ainsi notre premier intérêt et notre premier devoir est de nous éclaircir sur ce sujet, d’où dépend toute notre conduite” (*OCL* 427).

The conflation of God with infinity betrays this asymmetrical element because the finite being disappears in the infinite, as it becomes part of it. Its disappearance signals that the threshold of mortality has been crossed; before the death of the body, this threshold is crossed in the awareness of the unavoidability of death. Consequently we rejoin infinity when
confronting our future nothingness psychologically and affectively as much as literally in the eventual death of the body. Pascal delineates the disappearance of the human before God, using the relation between finitude and infinitude, writing, “le fini s’anéantit en présence de l’infini et devient un pur néant. Ainsi notre esprit devant Dieu, ainsi notre justice devant la justice divine” (OCL 418). For the nonbeliever God conflates with infinity so that the encounter of finitude and infinity ends in annihilation: the human becomes a pure nothing. The believer does not experience this encounter as annihilation but rather as fullness, since God’s immensity salvages human emptiness. God averts the disappearance of the human into the cosmological abyss.

In the “pari,” when the nonbeliever suggests the possibility of refraining from betting, Pascal replies, “Oui, mais il faut parier. Cela n’est pas volontaire, vous êtes embarqués” (OCL 418). One is already embarked since the relationship with the absolute that the nonbeliever as of yet understands in terms of infinity is part of the human condition as Pascal conceives it. The idea of infinity projects before the nonbeliever a relationship directed toward a height comparable to God. It is an understanding that is rational and affective but essentially human. Without this notion of infinity, Pascal would have no common ground between the believer and the nonbeliever. The necessity to think the absolute is what causes each of us to be already embarked upon a quest and forced to choose.

The tragic quality of Pascal’s thought calls for each of us to cease to resist. This loss is, nonetheless, grounded in resistance itself, in the sense that the realization of human emptiness generates a resistance to the world and a turn to a gargantuan engulfing notion that might lead to God.

This despoilment has of course a long history within Christian thought; but the innovation of Pascal’s approach resides in his recognition of a structure integral to belief that does not require belief. This structure is the distance between human internality and the
external everywhere, the all-around and the beyond that expands through space and time, outrunning the span of life and erasing it: in this immensity humanity becomes a point among an infinity of points, altering nothing, undistinguished and ontologically traceless. God alone can undo this eternal anonymity. But the existence of the human inconsequence in the cosmos, the posing of the self against a limitless immensity is a question that runs through the core of the human condition so that Pascal can conceptualize this necessity without divinizing it much as his contemporaries Benedict Spinoza and Giordano Bruno did.

The idea of infinity independent of a creator but crucial for conceptualizing the finite in relation to the infinite emerges in the work of Levinas, who, unconcerned with the notion of salvation but philosophically invested in thinking how the experience of infinity forms the human experience, thinks of the finite-infinite relation as an experience of plenitude which resembles the way Pascal conceptualizes the experience of the believer. While for Pascal this plenitude derives from God, for Levinas it derives from an immanent experiencing of a radical otherness, i.e. transcendence, as that which links me to another. Infinity for Levinas operates as if God is filling the human with his immensity. Infinity becomes a positive terrestrial transcendence, not a negative transcendent annihilation.

Pascal delineates a space for thinking transcendence outside of divinity. Levinas follows suit, marking a difference between philosophical transcendence, a transcendence that retains finitude against infinitude, and the transcendence of religions, which calls for the disappearance of finitude into infinity.

Like Pascal, who sketches a path toward belief by first conceiving the relationship of the finite to the infinite, Levinas also envisions atheism as prior to belief, “prior to the negation and the affirmation of the divine” (Totality and Infinity 58). Atheism does not function at the level of the truth or falseness of God’s existence, but essentially constitutes finitude as absolutely separated from the idea of God, so that an encounter with that idea may
become possible. So, “By atheism,” Levinas writes, “we thus understand a position prior to both the negation and the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I” (Totality and Infinity 58). One must turn away from God – “breaking with participation,” so as to exist absolutely separated as an “I,” before the experience of the radical otherness of God may happen, that is, so as to made that experience possible. To experience the radical otherness of God, one has to experience oneself as separate, as an “I,” as the same. Otherwise the radical other engulfs the “I.” Thus in Levinas atheism is not a state of belief but a condition of belief and a state of being. This condition and state grounds the finite being in its boundary. Only then can belief begin.

Atheism alone can withstand a relation to infinity that does not result in the absorption of the finite into the infinite, but in the violent anonymity of disappearance. Belief is a secondary movement, coming after a relation with the absolute has been posed in terms that assure the egotistic integrity of the “I.” In Levinas the experience of the self as a full limited being poses itself as an ethical demand occurring prior to all positioning of the human in the world. Belief is a movement toward infinity. It is the radical alterity of the other terrestrially witnessed. So although both Pascal and Levinas recognize a relationship to infinity as occurring prior to belief, in Pascal the nonbeliever will be annihilated by this relationship if he does not find God while God will save the believer from this fate. To find God is to maintain the finite’s integrity. As we shall see since for Pascal God remains wholly distant and incomprehensible, there is no merging with the deity. Levinas conversely sees this relationship not only as necessary but wholly positive. Atheism alone prevents the violence of transcendence as it establishes a relationship to the absolute.

**Invisibility, Desire, Infinity**

Pascal believes that the hiddenness of God proves the truth of Christianity. In keeping with Jansenist thought, his conception of the human condition and consequently of
humanity’s relationship to God resides principally in the heightened importance attributed to original sin, so as to remind us over and over, as Kolakowski puts it, that God owes us nothing.\(^4\) God’s invisibility is just and warranted, so that, “Dieu étant ainsi caché toute religion qui ne dit pas que Dieu est caché n’est pas véritable” (OCL 242).

Human desire to know the infinite world and the way human emptiness creates the need to know and to love God, for Pascal, are both proofs of humanity’s prelapsarian nature. Desire is the trace of a former human grandeur. After the fall, greatness depends fundamentally on a consistent desire to search for God and know the world as truthfully as human limitations permit. The desire to know is intimately connected with an awareness of mortality, for it is this latter awareness that asks the question of infinity, of the afterlife and of the existence of an immutable perfect being. Although in several passages of the Pensées Pascal envisions an encounter with God in terms of the annihilation of the self, he simultaneously stresses the incomprehensibility of God, writing, “S’il y a un Dieu il est infiniment incompréhensible, puisque n’ayant ni parties ni bornes, il n’a nul rapport à nous. Nous sommes donc incapables de connaître ni ce qu’il est, ni s’il est” (OCL 418).

This incomprehensibility maintains the separation between the human and the deity, for a rapport between the two is impossible insofar as the understanding is concerned. The experience of faith convinces the believer of God’s existence while it maintains the utter incomprehensibility of the deity, and thus the distance between God and the devotee. The impossibility of understanding God and of rationally proving his existence resonates with Levinas’s conception of desire and its relationship to the absolute. This affinity once again emerges from Pascal’s ability to conceptualize an absolute without God when attempting to conceive of the path for the nonbeliever.

\(^4\) An important study of the conflict between the Augustinian influenced Jansenist sensibility, and the less strict, more optimistic Jesuits.
Levinas distinguishes between need and desire. While the first entails the possibility of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, it functions as lack; desire however is beyond satisfaction. The desired cannot be integrated in the desiring, remaining absolutely separate. Water, food and body sate thirst, hunger and erotic desire. Desire for the absolute is desire for an invisible infinity that will never fill up the desiring self with its content. It is not absorbed into the sameness of the self. Desire for the absolute is incapable of filling up human lack or emptiness by erasing the distance between the “I” and the infinite. Rather it feeds from the distance itself, generating its particular form of nourishment, a hunger that operates independent of means and solely as an end in itself. The distance between the same, which is the finite “I,” and the absolute other feeds upon the immense distance it establishes, hunger maintaining itself as a positive force undoing lack, forging a self-generated deepening. So Levinas concedes, “It is a generosity nourished by the Desired, and thus a relationship that is not the disappearance of distance, not a bringing together, or – to circumscribe more closely the essence of generosity and of goodness – a relationship whose positivity comes from remoteness, from separation, for it nourishes itself, one might say, with its hunger” (Totality and Infinity 34).

Although Pascal writes about the finite disappearing into the infinite, God alone can prevent this disappearing. Despite this, however, God remains immensely distant and incomprehensible. Unlike the mystical experience, whereby the believer experiences the dissolution of the self among God’s greatness, for Pascal, it is the idea of infinity that causes the finite to disappear and impress upon the nonbeliever the necessity of searching for God, the only power capable of forestalling this disappearance. The nonbeliever’s relationship to infinity results in the self’s annihilation, but the believer’s relationship to infinity forestalls it for it comes up against the incomprehensibility of God. God’s invisibility and
incomprehensibility maintain the perpetual distance of the deity from the believer and prevents the believer’s dissolution in infinity through the love bestowed by faith.

Thus Pascal approaches Levinas in two ways: he conceives of a relationship to infinity prior to belief; and he conceives of the believer’s relationship to infinity and to God as rived by an enormous distance since God is incomprehensible. Moreover, unlike the mystic Pascal recognizes the dread inherent in the experience of disappearance of finitude into infinity and believes only God can prevent this disappearance from happening.

The impossible integration of the human and the divine attests to how Pascal conceives of the world as fundamentally ruptured. For Pascal a totalizing view of the cosmos, be it expressed in the Aristotelian plenum or in the Molinists’s optimism concerning salvation, contradicts the fundamental fallenness of the human condition. Humanity’s fallenness generates fractures, emptiness, and humanity’s isolation from nature, the cosmos and God. These ruptures that Pascal conceives negatively as contributing to the unavoidable unhappiness of men, Levinas sees as generating a bountiful joyful affective state. Nonetheless, Levinas shares with Pascal the refusal of a totality or unity in which the human cannot be subsumed or absorbed into the divine. Transcendence, as such, signifies a division, a rupture, a separation and not a mystical merging or subsumption.

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5 For the Molinists, whom Pascal discusses in his text Écrits sûr la grace, God has given conditional grace to all humanity. Jesus Christ's redemptive work applies to all, but it is up to the free will of each man to obtain or not his salvation. For the Jansenists, God justly should condemn all humanity after the fall of Adam. But his mercy has led him to send his son, whose redemptive work saves only a selected few to whom God bestows sufficient grace. Salvation occurs because of God’s will while condemnation because of men’s disobedience. As for the Calvinists, they claim God decides upon the elected regardless of their actions and wills, creating some men for salvation and some for damnation since the beginning of time. The fall of Adam was predeterminated and so is salvation and damnation (Écrits sur la grace can be found in OCL)
Chapter Two

Something between Matter and Nothing

If Pascal’s conception of infinity partly justifies his relevancy for modern religious thinking, and for such religious inflected poetic practices of a poet like Charles Baudelaire, his conception of the vide and of its importance for his thinking about the human condition also attests to his relevancy for modernity.

What is the meaning of the vide? For Pascal this crucial question discloses the unity of his interventions in various spheres of knowledge. It is also central to his conception of the human condition and his theological thought. Very early on Pascal sought passionately to assert the limits of what could be said about the world, mankind and God, and his greatest efforts went to note humanity’s misleading confidence in nature’s meaning. Humans do not belong to the natural world, having been expelled from an original unity with the universe at the time of Adam’s fall. Since then nature’s secrets have been denied to us. We know only the void, lodged in the human spirit. This void takes on a series of disguises in the world. One is the vacuum in nature, itself a reflection and confirmation of the human condition of emptiness Pascal sketches throughout the Pensées. Understanding the void paves the way to belief, as it demands the search for God. Original sin engendered the emptiness within humans, separating them from God and nature, and just as original sin is crucial for Pascal’s view of humankind’s relation to salvation and God, so is the understanding of the void, both in the self and in nature, crucial for his thought, since Adam’s fall at bottom generated the emptiness of Man.

The search for happiness leads us outside ourselves. Each of us, miserable alone, is driven to endless intellectual and affective pursuits that fail to end human emptiness. An ongoing struggle begins: on the one hand, instability makes us miserable; on the other,
greatness exists in that same misery, since our striving toward a greater good proves we once derived from a higher nature to which we yearn to return. Human nature results from original sin, so that of our prelapsarian nature, “…il ne lui reste maintenant que la marque et la trace toute vide” (OCL 148)⁶. Humans cannot fill this vide by their own means, “parce que ce gouffre infini ne peut être rempli que par un objet infini et immuable, c’est-à-dire que par Dieu même” (OCL 148). This emptiness, which only God can sate, is infinite.

Misery and grandeur form the double-nature of humans. When faced with ignorance and death, humanity experiences its impotency over the universe and its ultimate fate, but the impulse to search for meaning constitutes its grandeur too. The human alone among creatures is aware of its finite nature and the limits of its knowledge. Unable to confront these limitations, humankind turns to countless diversions, pursuits that prevent men from experiencing the inconstancy and ignorance of their nature. Above all, diversions must thwart off ennui that reveals the inherent emptiness of the human condition, disclosing the insubstantiality of human pursuits, emotions, and qualities, revealing human imperfection and the unavoidability of mortality. So in the Pensées, Pascal summarizes human nature with three words: “Inconstance, ennui, inquiétude” (OCL 24). Inconstancy, restlessness and ennui are consequences of the emptiness of man. The inconstancy of human emotion and knowledge generates restlessness and the escapism of diversions. If this escape does not take place, ennui arrives, and with it, human misery.

To argue for the universality of this condition, Pascal imagines a king, who endowed with the highest possible wealth, status and power, if left alone in a room, without company, amusement, concerns or stimuli would become “plein de misères,” despite his good fortune. This is why, Pascal continues, “…on évite cela soigneusement et il ne manque jamais d’y avoir auprès des personnes des rois un grand nombre de gens qui veillent à faire succéder le

⁶ OCL refers to Pascal’s Oeuvres complètes edited by Lafuma. The number of the fragment follows the abbreviation.
divertissement à leurs affaires et qui observant tout le temps de leur loisir pour leur fournir des plaisirs et des jeux en sorte qu’il n’y ait point de vide” (OCL 137). Diversions shield humans from the essential emptiness lodged deep in their nature.

Encountering this emptiness at bottom leads one to search out God. What follows is an attempt to link Pascal’s approach to the vacuum in the realm of physics and his conception of human nature as essentially empty. This link purposes an approach to the cosmos that is unique in its contemplation of spaces within the natural world from where God may be absent. Pascal does not concede to this possibility directly. He simply refrains from making pronouncements beyond a certain epistemological limit. He does not want to speculate, preferring to hover above a silence of possibility. Is God present in empty space? This cipher powerfully replicates the emptiness of humankind, the indifference of the cosmos, and the understanding that the deity may not hear our pleas.

The absence of an answer is the void itself. Looming vehemently over empty space is the inability to generate its epistemological certainty, that is, its content. In other words, if the nothing can be named what is the content of this nothing? The blank refusal to explain the nothing that nonetheless exists proves our severance from God; the present emptiness in the test tube; at the beginning of the world; within created nature itself; and most of all, at the core of the human spirit. Particularly in the first of his publications on the issue, the inaccessibility of this ultimate human reality leads Pascal to this question time and again. The anguish the vacuum produces is a silent seething impotence that replicates the present emptiness of the empirical world and the affective condition Pascal upholds as essentially human. Something is there in the form of emptiness. This material emptiness isolated in the test tube proliferates in multiple disguises throughout the Pascalian world; it is at once a symbolic accomplishment, an empirical reality, and a truth about humanity and its deity.
The Experiments

In 1647, at the young age of 24, spurred by the work of the Italian physicist and mathematician, Evangelista Torricelli, Pascal publishes his first treatise on the vacuum *Expériences nouvelles touchant le vide.* Four years earlier, in 1644, with the help of Michelangelo Ricci, Torricelli had performed an experiment with a 4-foot long test tube filled with mercury and sealed at one end. Previously suggested by Galileo, this experiment consisted in inverting the tube upside down, immersing it in a dish filled with water, and noting how the mercury in the test tube descended leaving an empty space at the top (OCL 194). Speculation about the possibility of empty space has a long intellectual history, beginning with the Greek atomists in the fifth century B.C. For the first time they had defined vacua as nonbeing, conceptualizing a nonexistent thing as a something, a present emptiness. The cosmos, the atomists claimed, was the product of infinite uncreated atoms moving randomly through an infinite empty space, a movement that sparked the creation of infinite worlds. Aristotle’s refutation of the atomists a century later prevailed throughout medieval times as the accepted attitude regarding the void. Medieval scholastic tradition adopted the Aristotelian plenum, adding to it an anthropomorphic view of nature. Whereas Aristotle never spoke of nature’s abhorrence of the vacuum, this notion became widespread later on: nature could not suffer a vacuum and would deploy an infinite force to prevent its formation.

In an anti-Aristotelian move, for the first time, Torricelli was subjecting to empirical observation this centuries-old speculation by suggesting that the space in the tube was empty of matter, sparking immense debate throughout the renaissance intellectual world. Marin Mersenne, having heard of Torricelli’s experiments, attempting even in his trip to Florence to repeat them himself, had disseminated the news upon his return to Paris in the group meetings he conducted in his chamber. Pascal’s father, Etienne Pascal, attended assiduously.

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7 This text can be found in OCL.
these meetings, where he brought his son. Thus Pascal became familiar with the innovations from Italy.⁸

When in 1647, he conducts his own experiments, Pascal is confidant he will end the disputes between the scholastic defenders of the Aristotelian plenum and the empirically inclined supporters of the vacuum (OCL 195). He does not. Expériences engage him in a controversial correspondence with the Jesuit Père Noël and lead him to yet another work concerned with the vacuum and with hydrostatics, the Récit de la grande expérience de l’équilibre des liqueurs of 1648. A preface for a projected treatise on the void, either never completed or lost, survives, and two additional treatises are published posthumously in 1664, the Traités de l’équilibre des liqueurs et de la pensateur de la masse de l’air.

These works encompass Pascal’s contributions to physics, suggesting that his interest in this science was perhaps more spurred by the question of the void than by the field itself. Furthermore, as I hope to show, Pascal’s investment in the void bears witness to the polar perplexities exposed in the Pensées as much as to his ongoing efforts at thinking the subtle connections between diverse spheres of human activity – mathematics, geometry, physics, philosophy and art. These spheres must be placed ultimately before God, whose unknowability renders human nature unknowable to itself.

In his brilliant study of the epistemological structures in Pascal’s oeuvre from the experiments in physics to the apologist writing, Guenancia has pointed out the tenuous presence of physics in the Pensées, a fact he attributes to the need in the latter work to humble human reason while extolling God’s infinity. Guenancia comments on the tension between Pascal’s experiments in physics and his later efforts as an apologist, writing, “Paradoxalement, c’est dans le vide que l’homme éprouve au plus haut point sa présence active; face à l’infini ou à Dieu, l’homme s’efface et se perd comme un point dans l’espace.

⁸ See Fanton d’Anton and Guenancia.
La physique se nie dans l’apologie comme le vide devant Dieu (Guenancia 334).” The mastery of nature that physics permits renews humanity’s confidence in reason rather than emphasizes human misery. The void recuperates human size, making it substantial, while infinity dissolves human finitude into infinity. In the practice of physics, man exchanges places with the Godhead, assured in his ability to manipulate materials and environments, to devise hypotheses and present explanations, and more importantly, to create a void.

The creation of the void in these experiments is comparable to a symbolic recreation in the empirical world of the ontological position of humanity as Pascal saw it, a position that stands at odds with the traditional Aristotelian ontology in which the human dwelled in a plentiful state in a world permanently full. Although Pascal refutes the plenum and its conjoining scholastic metaphysical worldview, he does not nonetheless affirm the existence of the vacuum, but rather denies, within the empty space created in the laboratory, the existence of any substance perceived by the senses and known to exist in nature. The transformation that takes place in *Expériences* between the apparent void posited at the beginning of the treatise and the real void asserted at the end is intended to disrupt the scholastic thesis, offering in its turn a limited assertion that speaks for the limitations of scientific knowledge, already a sign of Pascal’s restricted faith in the abilities of reason to achieve certain knowledge of nature, the pervasive epistemological position elaborated in the *Pensées*. Thus Pascal explains in his letter to Le Pailleur that the “le mot d’espace vide tient le milieu entre la matière et le néant, sans participer ni à l’un ni à l’autre” (*OCL* 210). The vacuum is space empty of matter perceived by the senses; it is not “nothingness” because it has dimensions; it is not “matter” since “son irrésistance et son immobilité le distinguent de la matière” (*OCL* 220). True nothingness implies the disappearance of space; matter offers resistance and is gifted with movement. So as Fanton d’Anton explains, “Si le vide apparent
est l’object d’un constant et s’il est donc affirmé assertoriquement, le vide réel est affirmé hypothétiquement” (L’Horreur du Vide 26).

Pascal’s prudence in his claims about the truth or falsity of natural phenomena, a practice he extends to all spheres of human knowledge, bears witness to a fundamental belief concerning the human condition. Since the latter is trapped in a finite sphere infinitely far from both extremes of nothingness and infinity, it is subsequently “incapable de savoir certainement et d’ignorer absolument” (OCL 199). In keeping with this middle range of certainty, Pascal can only discredit the plenum dogma by showing how experiments successively render it unlikely, but this discrediting can only be replaced by a qualified assertion: insofar as our senses and our present knowledge of the natural world is concerned, the apparent void is real. The disproved claim is inseparable from the hypothetical explanation, in a dialectical struggle that affirms through a negation tainted by doubt: a conditional statement replaces the dogmatic confidence in the Aristotelian plenum.

In view of this, the experiments with the vacuum stand for a new conception of the experiment, as Fanton d’Anton suggests, whereby Pascal is not seen either as a positivist empiricist, in line with many of his contemporaries such as Roberval and Mersenne; or as a rationalist in the Cartesian sense. While for Descartes a successful experiment is able to reveal to reason the unimpeachable laws that explain the natural world, for Pascal the experiment reveals an external state of affairs subjected to infinite permutations, combinations, shuffling, ordering, and reordering. The experiments can be recorded and reported, but conclusions concerning the ultimate meaning of empirical observations must remain suspended. Pascal keeps silent about the depth underlying natural phenomena, for that depth stays hidden, inscrutable and beyond human grasp. As Fanton d’Anton puts it, Pascal’s approach to the experiment “implique nécessairement une pensée suspendue à son propre avenir” (L’Horreur du Vide 38).
This suspension inherent in Pascal’s conception of experiential truth also emerges in his approach to the human condition, attesting to a view of humanity as ungrounded, uprooted and homeless. The fickleness of the human condition – its inability to know itself, the universe and nature – are rescued only by the knowledge of God through the faculty of the heart, a knowledge that cannot be captured in propositions, descriptions, or explanations, but is a certainty of a different nature, surpassing both the rational and the irrational, not belonging to either, and betraying the hand of God. It is not part of a human way of knowing but the divine imprint on the human frame trapped in its rational limitations on the one hand, and the irrational animality of human passions on the other. The void enacts this space of suspension, at once material and immaterial: material for it occupies space, immaterial for nothing exists within it. The void, like human beings, exists suspended between nothingness and fullness. One sees this connection particularly when Pascal describes the human condition vis-à-vis nature: “Car enfin qu’est ce que l’homme dans la nature? Un néant à l’égard de l’infini, un tout à l’égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout, infiniment éloigné de comprendre les extremes” (OCL 199).

Pascal’s definition of the human condition echoes and recalls his definition of the empty space created in the experiments. Similarly to the way “le mot d’espace vide tient le milieu entre la matière et le néant, sans participer ni à l’un ni à l’autre,” humankind is “un milieu entre rien et tout” (OCL 199). Only God knows the extremes in the universe. Human beings are as incapable of producing nothingness as they are of producing infinity. They are also unable to understand or recognize these two extremes, so that their position within the cosmos is one of suspension between the absolute truths dwelling in these polarities. Their knowledge must reflect this suspension, which affirms by negating, the negation in its turn being arrested in a provisional status. Between the “yes” and the “no” that truth demands
exists the qualified affirmation of possibility characteristic of humanity’s way of knowing. This is the void space, the place of humankind.

The experimental space of the vacuum is also the site of a symbolic re-enactment of humanity’s birth. As Genesis recounts, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void.” Similarly to the heaven and earth at the beginning of time, indifferent to the advent of humankind and indifferent to its disappearance, inside the test tube the space of pure indifferent possibility hints at how the cosmos outstrips human smallness. The experimenter controls and observes, the strange “small nothing” in the test tube by endlessly displaying his mastery via experimental variations – changing liquids, test tube sizes, devices and altitudes – and carefully arranged maxims and propositions, assertions and argumentations. The experimenter’s position allows for a therapeutic contemplation of the proper distance between the created world and the creator. This contemplation partakes of Pascal’s quest for understanding the nature of mankind, a quest that at every point discloses the human being as the most vulnerable of the natural world; at the same time, it shows its unique grandeur since mankind alone knows of the unavoidability of death and of its smallness when contrasted with infinity. The vacuum so easily achieved in the experiment speaks for the relative ease with which fullness is reduced to emptiness as it shows how easily emptiness returns to fullness. Cathartic, experimental observation allows for the experimenter to look from without at the inescapable tragedy of human life, doubly identifying himself with the master and the servant alike; on the one hand his sense of mastery is exercised and fully enjoyed; on the other, the indifference of matter, the entrapment of the void between fullness and nothingness turns the experimenter’s mastery into its inverse: an impotency disclosed in Pascal’s refusal to declare the space he sees as pure nothing. Misery and grandeur, the polar states that comprise the human being, are articulated and present in the ontological repercussions of Pascal’s experiments with the
void. He postponed as long as he could to pronounce himself on the ontological status of the space he created. It is the pressure of Père Noël that eventually leads Pascal to address this issue in the *Lettre à Le Pailleur*.

At bottom Noël demanded Pascal’s stance regarding old theological debates about the relationship between God and nothingness. Discussions over what exactly existed before the creation of the world had produced a wealth of writing and intense disagreement. Did God alone exist before the world was created? Did he exist within an infinite void space or was he surrounded by pure nothingness? If he existed in an infinite void was the latter coeternal with God? Did God create this void or did this void exist before God and was thus independent of him? In short, what was the relationship between God and the space predating the world, assuming that a void existed, and not a pure nothing? And if there were a void then, did it still exist, either outside God’s created nature or within it?⁹

These are some of the questions intricately debated among scholastic and theological authorities since the onset of medieval times, questions that continued to be relevant in the seventeenth century, and of whose existence Pascal would have been keenly aware, particularly, as he set out to disprove scholastic assertions concerning nature’s abhorrence of the vacuum. He most certainly knew the theological underpinnings of this matter and yet insisted on advertising his efforts as “purely” scientific. This fact should not mislead us to think, however, that the experiments with the vacuum were not for Pascal deeply theological at their core. Pascal’s mode of structuring his first treatise on the void when considered in light of crucial fragments of the *Pensées* reveals that these experiments enacted not only the drama of humankind’s beginning, but the latter’s very ontological dilemma; they expressed deeply, partly due to their empirical nature, partly due to their dramatic flair, the condition of mankind and the boundaries of human knowledge.

⁹ For a good survey of the evolution of concept of the void and its relationship with theology see Grant *Much Ado about Nothing*. 
This becomes evident if we consider Pascal’s views on the ontological status of the void. As Mazaric notes Pascal’s correspondence with Etienne Noël, Jesuit priest and rector of the Collège de Clermont in Paris, pressures Pascal to offer his views on the ontological status of the void.\textsuperscript{10} Noël writes Pascal immediately after the publication of the treatise, complementing the young physicist on the “fortes belles et ingénieuses” experiments (OCL 199), but disagreeing with his claim that the space in the tube is void. Pascal replies equally speedily. His letter opens with a methodological pronouncement followed by a meticulous refutation of Noël’s claims. The priest writes again, but Pascal does not reply to this letter; instead, he writes to Le Pailleur after the latter inquires over the reasons for Pascal’s failure to respond to the priest. It is in this letter that Pascal expounds his views on the ontological status of the void.

As both Koyré and Mazaric have noted, Pascal adopts the ontology of the seventeenth-century philosopher and priest, Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), arguing like Gassendi for the difference between space and bodies, and thus between pure nothingness and empty space.\textsuperscript{11} Noël’s second objection to the treatise demands that Pascal explain the status of the empty space in the tube that is “ni Dieu, ni créature, ni corps, ni esprit, ni...\textsuperscript{10} As Simone Mazaric notes, Noël’s objections to Expériences Nouvelles are threefold: the first concerns Noël’s refusal to accept that the apparent void is a real void. He suggests that very fine particles of air are able to penetrate the test tube’s glass; the second objection concerns the ontological status of the void space. Following Aristotle, Noël believes that all space is body. If all space is body, empty space, i.e., space without bodies, is a contradictory notion; the last objection concerns the relationship of light to the empty space. Since according to Aristotle, light cannot penetrate the void, the light manifesting itself in the test tube shows that there must exist a body in that void (Gassendi, Pascal et la querelle du vide 88-89). The second objection concerning the ontological status of the void is, according to Mazaunic, the main reason why Pascal is reluctant to debate his ideas with the Jesuit priest; and in his reply attempts to swerve the discussion to methodological matters, explaining his logical reasoning. Yet, since the priest largely insists on this question of ontology, Pascal finally addresses it in his Lettre à Le Pailleur. Mazaunic sees Pascal’s replacement of Noël with Le Pailleur as a symptom of his reluctance to address this issue.\textsuperscript{11} A. Koyré on Gassendi “L’ontologe de Gassendi n’est sans doute ni neuve, ni originale – c’est celle de l’atomisme antique, ainsi que je l’ais déjà dit” (288). “Gassendi et La Science de Son Temps.”
substance, ni accident” (*OCL* 208). For Noël, to say that the space is empty is to deny the omnipresence of God. If Pascal asserts that the space is empty of matter, he must at least admit that it is filled with God’s immensity, so not empty at all; thus Noël concedes that “À la vérité, si ce vide véritable n’est autre chose que l’immesité de Dieu, je ne peux nier son existence” (*OCL* 205). To admit the possibility of empty space, for Noël, is to admit the possibility of space emptied of God’s created nature, of God’s presence, and of a realm outside of God’s preview. Forced to tackle this problem, Pascal resorts to Gassendi’s ontology, the first in the history of Christian cosmological conceptions of space to posit an infinite void independent of God. This independent infinite void exists at the time of creation; it is filled only with God, although God did not create it. In order to sustain this position Gassendi argues that space and time should be added to Aristotle’s categories of substance and accident. He demonstrates this by postulating an imagined scenario: if God destroyed all the matter existing in the world, space and time would still survive this destruction. Purely negative elements that exist independent of bodies, neither substances nor accidents, the negative nature of space and time makes them unworthy of God’s bountifulness, for God creates only positive things. Space and time are not God’s creations, but coeternal and independent of God. The infinite void existing alongside God leads Gassendi to also argue, like the Greek atomists once did, for the existence of micro-vacua within God’s nature. For Gassendi both the micro-vacua and the infinite empty void are filled with God’s immensity.

Pascal had become acquainted with Gassendi’s work possibly by reading the summary of the latter’s ideas in Walter Charleton’s *Physiologia Epicuro-Gassendo-Charletoniana*¹² (Grant 388 n 162), or possibly through a circulation of Gassendi’s manuscripts among the Mersenne circle that Pascal and Gassendi both frequented. In the *Lettre à Le Pailleur*, Pascal refutes Noël ’s concern that the empty space is “ni Dieu, ni

¹² (London, 1654)
créature, ni corps, ni esprit, ni substance, ni accident,” by attributing to space and time the same status that Gassendi attributes, namely that they are not substance or accident but independent categories, explaining that, “Il est vrai que l’espace n’est ni corps, ni esprit; mais il est espace: ainsi le temps n’est ni corps, ni esprit: mais il est temps: et comme le temps ne laisse pas être, quoiqu’il ne soit aucune de ces choses, ainsi l’espace vide peut bien être, sans pour cela être ni corps, ni esprit” (OCL 210). For Pascal body, spirit and space are independent, so space may exist without bodies in it.

But if, for Gassendi, the void space was filled with God’s immensity, Pascal refrains from following Gassendi on this point, since “Les mystères qui concernent la Divinité sont trop saints pour les profaner par nos disputes; nous devons en faire l’objet de nos adorations, et non pas le sujet de nos entretiens” (OCL 210). Similarly to Pascal’s hypothetical affirmation of the void in the Expériences, he recognizes the impossibility of knowing whether the void is filled with or deprived of God. This impossibility once again stresses the impotence of human reason regarding the immense secrets of the cosmos, reminding us of the indifference of the universe vis-à-vis the human being.

As it is well known Alexandre Koyré in his 1973 Etudes de l’histoire de la pensée scientifique plausibly suggests that Pascal could not have made many of the experiments he claimed as he described, either tampering with the results to serve his argument, or not conducting them at all; thus Koyré proposes, “Je ne veux pas affirmer que Pascal n’a pas fait les expériences qu’il nous dit avoir faites: en revanche, je crois pouvoir affirmer qu’il ne nous en pas décrites telles qu’il les a faites, et ne nous a pas exposé leurs résultats tels qu’ils se sont déroules sous ses yeux. Il nous a très certainement caché quelque chose” (Etudes 345).

What Pascal might have hidden might be less important than why he hid it. Koyré’s assertion gains new meaning if one considers that Pascal’s interest in proving the existence of the vacuum was more than a matter of physics; instead it was intimately connected with
Pascal’s belief in the existence of emptiness in the cosmos. His belief in this emptiness stemmed from his view of the human condition as emptiness itself. In other words, humanity was his proof. Accepting the existence of an infinite void like Gassendi accepted allowed for the existence of a sphere severed from God, a spatial location that eventually embodied fallen mankind, so that this separate sphere spoke for humanity’s separation from nature that would only be repaired in the afterlife of the elect.

At the core of the mystery Koyré locates resided Pascal’s ontological agenda and his belief in the polarity of the universe: for him the positivity of Aristotle’s plenum had done away with an emptiness that was suggested by the myriad finitudes in the universe. In a universe filled with matter, there had to exist an empty space, from where God’s creation was absent and whose connection with God remained unknowable. The void marked the limit beyond which an incomprehensible question posed itself: the limits of human knowledge where the incapacity of humans to know themselves was revealed. To assert the existence of the void was to assert the unknowability inherent in the experience of being human, and more importantly, to reserve a place in the cosmos for finitude, for death.

As Grant points out, for Gassendi space “is an absolutely immobile, homogeneous, inactive (resistanceless), and even indifferent, three-dimensional infinite void that exists by itself whether or not bodies occupy all or part of it and whether or not minds perceive it” (Grant 210). Pascal accepts Gassendi’s conception of space, particularly the indifference of the universe to the presence or absence of bodies. This indifference of nature regarding emptiness becomes more apparent in Pascal’s latter physics treatises. As he points out in his address to the reader in the *Récit de la Grande Expérience de L’Équilibre des Liqueurs*, his experiments show “que la nature n’a aucune répugnance pour le vide, qu’elle ne fait aucun effort pour l’éviter, et qu’elle l’admet sans peine et sans résistance” (*OCL* 225). Pascal
reiterates this idea even more forcefully in the conclusion to the *Traités de L’Equilibre des Liqueurs et de la Pesanteur de la Masse de l’Air*, when he writes, “comme on dit d’un homme qu’une chose lui est indifférente, quand on ne remarque jamais en aucune de ses actions aucun mouvement de désir ou d’aversion pour cette chose, on doit aussi dire de la nature qu’elle a une extrême indifférence pour le vide, puisque on ne voit jamais qu’elle fasse aucune chose, ni pour le chercher, ni pour l’éviter” (*OCL* 256). Nature’s indifference to the existence of body shows that empty space exists alongside God’s created world, independently, indifferently, accentuating once more the smallness of human existence. The cosmos does not need bodies in order to be an infinite cosmos; it does not need its myriad finite forms as it can subsist without matter in the continuum of pure time and space. In short the universe would continue to exist even if there weren’t a single human alive in it. The void as such becomes another mark of the inability of humanity to know God’s world.

If the vacuum is conceived spatially, humankind’s dissolution in infinity is also conceived spatially: the reduction of the human to the void occurs when our distance from the deity is brought into perspective. Humanity disappears in the infinite spatial immensity of God’s world by being reduced to a void.

When Jouslin sets out to portray a more complex image of Noël, he describes him as a Cartesian-inclined scholar, locating the reluctance of the priest to accept Pascal’s void as a theological issue. He thus notes that “Noël refuse de séparer le physique de la théologie parce qu’il refuse de séparer Dieu et le monde” (*Science et Baroque* 365). For Noël the question of the void is theological since he is unwilling to separate God from the world. Jouslin implies that for Pascal physics and theology are separate spheres and that Pascal approaches the question of the void in purely experimental terms. Despite Pascal’s defense in the *Préface Sur Le Traité du Vide* that a rigorous application of the scientific method in physics will reveal some of the hidden secrets in nature, and despite the distinction he makes in that same
text between physics and theology, claiming for the former an infinite, endless expansion of knowledge through the application of the proper method, and for the latter the impossibility of innovation, the question of the vacuum remains at root a theological issue. For Pascal, the existence of the vacuum expresses the state of humanity in relation to nature and to God. While for Noël the vacuum in nature separates God from the world, for Pascal it expresses the separation of humankind from God, a separation that has been in place since Adam’s fall. What is at stake in their disagreement is not a difference over the independence between science and theology, but different conceptions of the human condition and of its relation to divinity. It is crucial that Noël was a Jesuit and Pascal a Jansenist, for the stress Pascal places on the importance of original sin is at bottom what leads him to conceptualize the human condition as fundamentally empty. The void, for Pascal, is a consequence of original sin, and a sign of mankind’s separation from God, not of God’s separation from the world.

Besides the influence of Gassendi in Pascal’s thought, Grant has also noted Pascal’s affinity with the development of spatial notions of divinity in such thinkers as Nicholas de Cusa (ca.1401-1464). With Cusa, Pascal shares the conception of an infinite universe. He presents his notion of double-infinity, citing a-by-then well-known aphorism to depict the relationship between humankind’s perception of nature and the universe, which is, “une sphère infinie dont le centre est partout, la circonférence nulle part” (OCL 199). Definition number two of the twenty-four definitions of God included in the twelfth-century treatise the Book of the XXIV Philosophers, this dictum was originally applied to God to convey both his immensity and indivisibility, the paradoxical nature of a unified entity absolutely omnipresent in the diverse multiplicity of the cosmos; for if God were a three-dimensional being with real extension, he would be divisible, so not present simultaneously and equally everywhere. The immensity of God must be incorporeal, a figure for an endless largeness that occupies concurrently the whole universe. As Grant points out, Cusa is the first to transfer
this metaphor from God to the cosmos, thus paving the way to the Newtonian conception of an infinite universe (Grant 139). Pascal follows Cusa in the transference of this metaphor. For Pascal, the universe is conceived as an infinite sphere, de-centered, where the end folds into the beginning and the beginning into the end. But if the universe is infinite for Pascal, the vacuum within this universe also partakes of this potential infinity. It is this infinite void from which God may be absent that locates spatial emptiness as a cosmological reality where the presence of God may not be felt, infinitely. Present emptiness is both the condition of humanity and a stark cosmological fact of infinite proportions.

**The Sentimental Experimenter’s Finger**

Pascal inscribes vividly the figure of the experimenter in his first treatise *Expériences nouvelles* by drawing attention to his body both affectively and physically. This short treatise is divided into two parts preceded by an address to the reader where Pascal explains his intentions. Recounting the famous Torricelli experiments, Pascal explains how he came to believe in them. Despite their rigor, Pascal informs us, Torricelli’s experiments were unable to dispel the detractors of the void, motivating him to design a series of experiments whose findings would put an end to all objections. To this effect, he writes, “Je me résolus donc de faire des expériences si convaincantes, qu’elles fussent à l’épreuve de toutes les objections qu’on y pourrait faire” (*OCL* 196).

As Pascal continues to explain, the first part of his treatise begins with a report of the experiments conducted, followed by seven maxims synthesizing their findings, and supporting the existence of an apparent void. The second part begins with a set of propositions reflecting on the consequences of these findings and concluding that this apparent void is real insofar as it is empty of any matter known to the senses. The second part ends with a conclusion that restates the maxims of the first part now applied to the real void,
and finally the treatise ends with a list of five objections to these findings, which are reiterations of common counterarguments of the defenders of the plenum.

The address to the reader displays a confidence that disappears by the end of the treatise. If Pascal boasts of having access to superior test tubes and of conceiving countless variations of the experiment, his conclusions are bound up with what he cannot know concerning the void. He refuses to claim the vacuum is a pure nothing since the experiments cannot reveal its nature. The shift away from the tone of certainty of the address begins at the beginning of the second part with the propositions. The maxims that end the first part are affirmations of what the experiments have proved. The propositions opening the second part, on the contrary, are a series of negations that culminate in the chief conclusion of the treatise: of the void one can only say it is empty of matter known to the senses.

Compare for example the first maxim with the first proposition. The former is posed as an affirmation: “Que tous les corps ont répugnance à se séparer l’un de l’autre et admettre ce vide apparent dans leur intervalle c’est-à-dire que la nature abhorre ce vide apparent” (OCL 197). As for the latter, it is presented as a negation: “Que l’espace vide en apparence n’est pas rempli de l’air extérieur qui environne le tuyau, et qu’il n’y est point entré par les pores du verre” (OCL 198). While all maxims are affirmations, all propositions are negations. These latter ones refute one-by-one the dogmatic explanations given by the defenders of the plenum to explain the void, but offer, in the last proposition, only a qualified, hypothetical statement to replace the previous believed dogma: “Que l’espace vide en apparence n’est rempli d’aucune des matières qui son connues dans la nature, et qui tombent sous aucun des sens” (OCL 198).

Pascal’s rhetorical approach in this treatise resonates with many fragments of the Pensées, where as an apologist he underscores the emptiness of the human condition. Whether in relation to the sustainability of human emotions, the abilities of reason, or
humankind’s struggle with boredom and death, only by confronting the negativity inherent in
the human condition – the ways human grandeur springs from a deep understanding of
human misery – may a “true” thought begin. The wise thought surfaces after the human
universe is shown to be a sandcastle. The comforts of the social, political, scientific, artistic,
material and affective spheres of life are incapable of filling up the gaps in human
knowledge. The undoing of the human world reveals the void from where our grandeur
emerges: the thought that confronts death, overwhelmed by the immensity of the universe,
places humanity face-to-face with cosmological infinity and with divine power.

The void is the necessary condition for human greatness; proper thinking surfaces
from it. So negativity allows for the advent of truth. The awareness of temporal relativity is
inscribed in the nature of this truth, marking it with a fragile, tenuous openness to the future.
The design of the treatise, from reportage and positive maxims to negative propositions and a
provisional negation of plenitude, creates a void space by moving from an objective tone of
certainty to a subjective tone of uncertainty that foregrounds the deep frailty of human
knowledge.

Perhaps nothing speaks more clearly for this modal shift than the two words Pascal
uses to introduce his conclusions. In the address to the reader, he says that “dans la
conclusion, je donne mon sentiment sur le sujet du vide” (my emphasis, OCL 196). These two
words “mon sentiment” also appear in the title of the conclusion: “Abrégé de la Conclusion
dans laquelle je donne mon sentiment” (OCL 198).

In the first edition of the Dicionnaire de L’Académie Française of 1694, the word
“sentiment” chiefly signifies “impression que font les objects sur les sens;” “l’opinion qu’on
a de quelque chose, ce qu’on pense, ce qu’on juge;” and finally, it is used to speak of “des
affections, des passion and de tous les mouvemens de l’âme.” 13 The main uses of this word

13 http://artflx.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/dicos/pubdico1look.pl?strippedhw=sentiment
pertain to sensory perception, the report of an opinion, and finally to one’s emotions. Pascal is clearly employing the word in the second sense, to refer to his opinion on the matter at hand; and yet he could have employed a less ambiguous formulation, such as “J’en conclus.” Instead he chooses a word featured prominently in the *Pensées* whenever Pascal discusses epistemological matters, particularly the power of reason and of the heart, which are the faculties responsible for knowledge. In the *Pensées* the word “sentiment” is crucial as a theological necessity: it is through the heart that the nonbeliever comes to believe; it is also through the heart that human beings come to know human nature, and thus, themselves. Reason reaches conclusions; “sentiment,” the faculty of the heart, feels first principles. Reason is powerless to demonstrate those principles that nonetheless constitute the foundation of knowledge upon which reason builds its propositional discourse. To this effect Pascal writes, “Nous connaissons la verité non seulement par la raison mais encore par le coeur. C’est de cette dernière sorte que nous connaissons les premiers principes et c’est en vain que le raisonnement, qui n’y a point de part, essaie de les combattre” (*OCL* 101). And in fragment 530, he picks up the relationship between reason and sentiment again, emphatically stating that, “Tout notre raisonnement se réduit à céder au sentiment.”

For Pascal the knowledge of the heart is intuitive and affective. At the same time it is also universal and particular: all human beings know first principles, such as time, number, movement and space, yet they know them differently, each perceiving the essential idea slightly differently. Pascal’s use of this word in the *Pensées* clarifies his desire in the treatise to show the limits of experimental practice as much as the limits of objectivity and certainty. He places the affective quality above the rational one. With just two words, Pascal implies that within science, reason may take us only so far; intuition and sentiment fill the gaps and limitations in human knowledge by pointing beyond what can be affirmed and forestalling human confidence before a future gaze. Only the heart can place human efforts in the context
of the infinity unfolding before humankind. The words “mon sentiment” disrupt the objective tone at the onset of the Expériences, siding with the conclusion, where a deflation of objectivity that begun with the cascade of negative assertions finally wins over.

As they rupture the veil of objectivity and confidence, these two words also recall the figure of the experimenter, enhancing the awareness of his presence, now swath in an impotent silent. And yet, the grandeur of the experimenter’s attitude rests precisely in the careful refusal to say more. The final quiet delivery of the five objections that Pascal foresees will be made, a delivery that does not bother with presenting counterarguments, accentuates this refusal. In a sense, by returning to frame the objections as affirmations, the treatise repeats the reporting mode of the first part; and yet, this tone of objectivity has become ruptured and emptied by the negative force of the propositions. The latter dispel the confidence of the scientist and promote a wary sensitivity to what may be said about the world. Pascal connects dogma with affirmation, and meaningful thinking with negation; ultimately, the treatise enacts the void at the level of thought by moving from the surge of confidence of the address and the first part to the negation and deflation of confidence of the second part, stressing the awareness of the unknown.

The relationship of negativity and proper thinking is also considered in a fragment of the Pensées where Pascal observes how self-awareness arises through the experience of human frailty:

L’homme n’est qu’un roseau, le plus faible de la nature, mais c’est un roseau pensant. Il ne faut pas que l’univers entier s’arme pour l’écraser; une vapeur, une goutte d’eau suffit pour le tuer. Mais quand l’univers l’écraserait, l’homme serait encore plus noble que ce qui le tue, puisqu’il sait qu’il meurt et l’avantage que l’univers a sur lui. L’univers n’en sait rien. Toute notre dignité consiste donc en la pensée. C’est de là
Genuine thought emerges from the consciousness of human proportion vis-à-vis an indifferent, immense universe. This first understanding is necessary for humans to learn to think wisely. The first thought emerging from this awareness is the future, inevitable doom of the body. As Pascal insists, “C’est de là qu’il nous faut relever.” Humanity raises itself from this space of annihilation precisely after understanding how the human world has become deserted when faced with the immensity that crushes it. Again, the void is the condition for thinking truly insofar as it is the condition for self-knowledge: it reveals the human position within the cosmos.

Ultimately, it is the sensibility of the experimenter that may assess the outcome of the experiments. The data reveals a set of facts and suggests a series of interpretations. But the experimenter sets a limit to the affirmations, using his intuitive sensibility to judge the operations of reason. It is undoubtedly the intimacy with the experimental process, with the micro-world of each experiment, that allows for his sensitivity to bloom. Perhaps the clearest image of this intimacy surfaces in the first experiment of the treatise that requires the scientist’s finger to intervene. The use of the finger evokes the scientist’s presence, at once underlining human mastery – the power of the observer is underscored since he is the architect, the actor and the data recorder – and humbling it – for the perception of pain is the only means for the experimenter to confirm the results, suggesting the frail quality of this assertion.

The first experiment is designed to show that the force necessary to produce a vacuum is a modest one; moreover, this force does not increase or decrease proportionally to the size of the void produced. Pascal’s intention is to disprove dogmatic opinions that nature abhors
a vacuum, and moreover applies an infinite and inexhaustible force to prevent its formation. By using his finger to block a syringe that has been placed inside a vessel of water, Pascal asserts that the finger “se sent fortement attiré et avec douleur” (196) when the piston is pulled in. An apparently void space cleared of the water in the vessel emerges in the syringe after the work of the piston, the latter only requiring the application of a moderate force. If the piston is drawn back further, the void space augments, but not the necessary force, since the finger does not feel additional pressure and pain. So Pascal uses the perception of pain in the finger to disproof the belief of his detractors.

The integration of the human body in the architecture of the experiment thus draws attention to the experimenter, highlighting his presence as the ultimate observer and master of the lab world at hand. And yet, the sensations of a finger are delicate evidence. One can say the tenuousness undercutting Pascal’s prudence at the end of the treatise is present, albeit in a concealed way, also at the beginning, in this first experiment, as a finger is called upon to prove the stability of the force acting on a piston and syringe.

At the edge of infinity, human beings must leap into the void that the experimenter has contemplated from without. The experiment allows for the momentary empowerment of the scientist who occupies “figuratively” the place of divinity. In this sense Pascal’s experiments in physics demonstrate empirically humanity’s relationship to God. The Pensées in its turn reveals the illusion inherent in the momentary mastery of the experimenter by disclosing the ontological position of humanity in the vacuum while pointing towards God in the separate sphere of the experimenter. Similarly to how the atmospheric pressure and the height of water produce a vacuum in nature, so must the arguments expounded in the Pensées create an empty space within thought that allows the experience of infinity. In order to encounter God, human beings must lose absolutely the sense of their size, becoming void and empty like the experimental space of God’s immensity. So Guenancia tells us it is through
the physicist’s activity that humans feel their presence more actively. The vanquishing of this presence signifies the ascendancy of God.

The vacuum resulting from the several experiments Pascal conducted is a testament to human creativity and ingenuity, and to an extent, in an infinitely smaller scale, it mimics the generative power behind the creation of life; however different in scope and essence, Pascal must have glimpsed the analogy between the experimenter and God clearly enough to largely remain silent about physics when he set out to depict humanity’s relationship to the deity in his apologia. The sphere of art also threatens to promote actively human presence, thus also receiving a modicum of attention in the *Pensées*. But while the power of art cannot impose itself on the materiality of nature, the labor of physics can, making the latter infinitely more able to stir human arrogance and breed illusion.

The contemplation the experiments allow confirms the indifference of the cosmos rather than dispels the workings of the universe. This insignificance underscores how the vacuum provides no answers beyond its factual reality, explaining nothing by its existence beyond its own process of coming into being. Like the being that exists as a fact of flesh and blood, the vacuum is formed by an interaction of air pressure and liquid height, its existence remaining silent about its ultimate meaning beyond an existential assertion. Furthermore the possibility of generating matter inherent in the vacuum remains a cipher, a knowledge belonging only to God. The theological nature of Pascal’s experimental work in physics helps shape Pascal’s notion of double-infinity in the *Pensées* because the conceptual tension inherent in this latter notion is enacted in the laboratory experiments he makes. For this reason Guenancia affirms that, “L’épistémologie pascalienne, élaborée au contact des pratiques scientifiques, ne pose donc plus de problèmes de constitution au niveau des *Pensées*. Lorsque ce texte s’ouvre, le choix idéologique décisif est déjà fait” (*Du vide* 333).
The decisive epistemological choice has already been made because the equation pertinent in Pascal’s interventions in physics equates humankind with the void; it releases, nonetheless, the latter from it by allowing the experiment to approach the position of the creator, so that human potency is maximally felt through scientific experimentation. Outside of this realm, creativity being abolished, the human condition shows itself for what is it: having sprung from the void, it disappears in it vis-à-vis God’s infinitude. While Pascal’s physics treatises metaphorically contemplate the place from which humanity originated and the ontological position of humanity, the *Pensées* consider how humans are eclipsed within the infinity of the universe. Only God can prevent this disappearance.

**The Emptiness of the Self and Emotion**

In fragment 688\(^\text{14}\), bearing the title “Qu’est-ce que le moi?”, Pascal considers the nature of the self, and of passionate love by implying that human love equates love of self for self. He concludes that love among humans is doomed to rest on a fickle, unsubstantial foundation because our intellectual and physical qualities do not belong to us: they are liable to perish before we do. The survival of the self beyond its attributes, be those physical or mental, shows that the self is not made up of them but exists as a pure recipient that can be filled with different substances. Without these qualities, the self is abstract emptiness, and so unable to generate affective connections. After the step-by-step refutation of the various ways humans explain love, Pascal bleakly concludes that one loves the qualities in a person, not the

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\(^{14}\) “Un homme qui se met à la fenêtre pour voir les passants; si je passe par là, puis-je dire qu’il s’est mis là pour me voir? Non; car il ne pense pas à moi en particulier; mais celui qui aime quelqu’un à cause de sa beauté, l’aime-t-il? Non : car la petite vérole, qui tuera la beauté sans tuer la personne, fera qu’il ne l’aimera plus. Et si on m’aime pour mon jugement, pour ma mémoire, m’aime-t-on? moi? Non, car je puis perdre ces qualités sans me perdre moi-même. Où est donc ce moi, s’il n’est ni dans le corps, ni dans l’âme? et comment aimer le corps ou l’âme, sinon pour ces qualités, qui ne sont point ce qui fait le moi, puisqu’elles sont périssables? car aimerait-on la substance de l’âme d’une personne, abstraitement, et quelques qualités qui y fussent? Cela ne se peut, et serait injuste. On n’aime donc jamais personne, mais seulement des qualités. Qu’on ne se moque donc plus de ceux qui se font honorer pour des charges et des offices, car on n’aime personne que pour des qualités empruntées.”
person itself: the self is too abstract, intangible and unknowable to be loved. It is an empty receptacle, a space without matter, existing as pure possibility, receiving only the perishable attributes responsible for the experience of human love. The self, Pascal writes, is something that is nothing: “Où est donc ce moi, s’il n’est ni dans le corps, ni dans l’âme? et comment aimer le corps ou l’âme, sinon pour ces qualités, qui ne sont point ce qui fait le moi, puisqu’elles sont périsssables.” This definition of selfhood leads him to conclude that, “On n’aime donc jamais personne, mais seulement des qualités” (OCL 561).

Beauty, intelligence or shared memories are ephemeral. Their disappearance does not entail the disappearance of the self. Its survival reveals that love is an illusion. Pascal reaches this conclusion following a similar rhetorical strategy that Gassendi used to prove that space and time are independent categories from substance and accident. Similarly to the scenario Gassendi imagined whereby if God were to destroy all matter in the world, space and time would survive this destruction, Pascal reaches the core of the self by destroying each of its physical, intellectual and experiential attributes: the self is at bottom like space without matter, empty but existing. The consciousness of mortality and finitude alone remain. The understanding of this emptiness necessarily leads to the search for God, the only immutable being and so the only true love available. Loving God for the sake of him alone produces the affective content capable of filling up human emptiness.

Pascal does not say where the qualities that generate love come from. Is he conceiving of them in a Platonic sense? And if so, do they derive from an ideal only fulfilled and immutable in God? The origin of these perishable qualities like the constitution of the self remains unknowable. The impossibility of loving the self and of knowing the origin of the qualities parallel the impossibility of the experimenter to assert the existence of the vacuum beyond the hypothetical, since as Pascal reminds us in the preface to his projected treatise on the void, “Les secrets de la nature sont cachés” (OCL 231). The nature of the self is part of
these secrets, so that human emotions spring from effects rather than the true foundation of things. As Pascal tells us the human tragedy is deeply linked to the instability of knowledge, to the way things are “causées et causantes, aidée et aidantes, médiate et immédiate” (OCL 527). The instability between causes and effects is evident in the confusion that occurs at an affective level: one conflates the quality with the uniqueness of the self; but others share that same quality, rendering evident it cannot be the essence of the person; ergo the quality is what is loved, and in this case, effects are read as causes.

**Analogies**

In his discussion of Pascal’s epistemological structures, Guenancia remarks that Pascal’s thought operates by analogies. A striking example is the two treatises on the equilibrium of liquids, and on the atmospheric pressure and weight of air. Pascal applies the findings of the first treatise on liquids to the second, by drawing an analogy between the behavior of water and of air. The maxims that Pascal elaborates for the water treatise have their respective parallels in the air treatise (Du Vide 305). As Guenancia observes, “le raisonnement par analogie” (Du Vide 304) that Pascal privileges extends itself to the Pensées, as proven by a thorough analysis of the rhetorical structure of the “pari” fragment (Du Vide 306-307). Pascal’s analogical approach stems from his belief that “[l]’homme par exemple a rapport à tout ce qu’il connaît” (OCL 199). Knowledge is possible insofar as humans relate to phenomena, arising from the human ability to draw comparisons between the thing and the experience of the self. Consequently, knowledge is bound to how humanity conceives of its existential position in relational terms: the human being is the finite something between nothingness and infinity. The ontological position of humanity is present at the root of all phenomena whether these are mathematical – there is the zero, the finite number and the infinite number – or physical – there is pure nothingness, the void and matter.
Analogies bridge gaps inherent in human knowledge between the whole and the parts, allowing the mind to move through them without ceasing to acknowledge them: the analogy retains the gaps, jumping from sphere to sphere without closing the unknowable link. The ability of analogy to bridge these gaps is evident in the *Pensées*. The awareness of infinity inherent in the human being, for instance, ensues from the comparison with a creature infinitely smaller than the human body. By comparing the human body to the smallness of the tick, humankind becomes “un colosse, un monde, un tout” (Poulet, *Métamorphoses* 62).

In his study of the theological symbolism of the circle, Poulet concludes that for Pascal, the circumference and its center are contradictory perspectives, only resolved and united in god, from which to contemplate the cosmos. While considering the center, the infinitely small point, the circumference with its infinity disappears, and man becomes the center of nature. But when considering the circumference, the center disappears as the infinity of the universe is restored. The center and circumference become one in God, as do eternity and simultaneity, nothingness and fullness. The human being shifts between these extremes and contradictions present themselves everywhere precisely by means of analogies: when contemplating the world from a certain viewpoint a particular set of relations is comprehensible, but when the point of view changes those relations are inverted into their opposites. This constant movement from one set of analogies to another generates the void of the human condition, for as Poulet writes: “Tour à tour la circonférence et le centre des choses sont nulle part. Finalement l’homme se trouve dans un monde vidé de tous rapports possibles, quelque part, au milieu d’une sphère dont la circonférence et le centre, ‘fuyant d’une fuite éternelle’, ne sont jamais en aucun temps ni en aucun lieu” (my emphasis *OCL Métamorphoses* 63).

In nature and for God, the circumference and the center do not contradict each other; only human beings live within this contradiction, doomed to flee from pole to pole, from
point to circumference, from circumference to point, each and every time, emptied, facing the abyssal void of human knowledge that God fills in the afterlife of the elected.

Pascal’s conception of the vacuum as space devoid of matter underlies his spatial conception of the human condition insofar as the positioning of the body in the cosmos and the consistency of the self is concerned. The vacuum speaks for the place humanity occupies in the universe, showing its smallness in relation to the immense cosmos, and revealing the emptiness of the self. Notwithstanding, the grandeur of humans also revolves paradoxically around the knowledge of this emptiness. Truth, the proper mode of thinking, and the necessity of searching God follow from the awareness of human emptiness. The vacuum retells the story of human creation, and as it does, so it speaks of human emptiness.
Part II – The Spectral Invention of the Modern
Chapter Three

“Sullied” Transformation: How to Believe in Modernity

In a frequently quoted poem written near the end of her life (ca1882), Dickinson describes the change she witnessed during her lifetime. The new historical moment has sent humanity into a vain search for the meaning of death:

#1581
Those – dying then,
Knew where they went –
They went to God’s Right Hand –
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found –

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small –
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illume at all –

6 abdication] marked for an alternative, none given

It is relevant to note Dickinson’s own abdication in the composition of this poem. As Franklin informs his reader in his manuscript edition of her poems, Dickinson marks the word “abdication” for a possible edit but never offers a word to replace it, the editing gesture revealing the very disoriented world the poem constructs. Furthermore, abdication is a religiously charged word in Christianity: the abdication of the religious devotee epitomized for example in the novice’s entrance into a convent or in the renunciation of worldly pleasures. Dickinson’s deployment of this word in an inverted context – the abdication of belief in God instead of abdication for God – indicates that the poem still enacts a religious attitude while at the same time indicates the topsy-turvy state of the world. It performs a religious context because it performs the same act of renunciation directed at the same entity, albeit with a different aim. It inscribes the devotee’s abdication in its atheistic abdication.
God’s presence in the time of the “Those,” Dickinson seems to imply, is already tenuous, as the poet uses a synecdoche to “materialize,” or rather to “find” God, already betraying the fragmentation, or the erosion of a unified idea of the deity (even if “God’s Right Hand” obviously echoes scriptures). The hand reveals the location of a God that one can fathom by an analogous comparison to the human hand (after all God created the human being after his own image). Along with the belief in the symbolic existence of such a place as God’s hand is the belief in the living truth of the Bible, in the apostolic promise of an afterlife. In this poem, this belief does not disappear as much as it is lost. Rather than a straightforward statement of disbelief, God’s amputation is a figure for losing one’s way, or for how the impenetrability of death has become frightful. God cannot be found because his hand has been amputated; yet this mutilated body persists as possibility. The difference between the loss depicted in this poem and the assertion of atheism arises precisely because uncertainty itself is never relinquished: it remains existing as uncertainty rather than as certainty of the non-existence of God. The poem enacts the suspension of a quest that cannot stop pursuing its way through darkness. The grandeur inherent in this suspension clashes with the “small” and the “no illume” of the last stanza; while the poem refuses to accept the futility of the search for God, the wayward humans of the poem, the implied “these who die now” contrasting with the “Those” of the first line, feel the meaningless of human action as an insidious dimming out, a spiritual dying.

The poet does not locate herself in either camp. She is not these now or those then. The silence regarding her state ultimately leaves the poem in a state of suspension whereby the possibility of God’s existence has been obscured yet does not vanish.

In his study of Dickinson in relation to the cultural context of the nineteenth century, St. Armand remarks on the “archaic mode” of Dickinson’s poetry as she refers back not to “the elaborate metrical intricacies of Longfellow, the Brownings and Tennyson in vogue
everywhere,” but to the “plain-style of hymns of Isaac Watts (1674-1748) as a consistent paradigm for her verse” (153). Despite her inventive treatment of the hymnal form, her decision to write in it, according to St. Armand, turns her into a folk artist. This is not the only archaism present in Dickinson’s poetics, as her complex religious attitude, despite her refusal to convert, remained firmly tied to the rigors and demands of early Calvinism, rather than to its diluted form of late nineteenth-century New England. Although she did not accept Calvinistic dogma, from Calvinism she retained the temperament; an acute sense of abandonment; and the conception of a hidden God. Often she altered the biblical message into the almost impious, frequently attaining a highly irreverent pitch. This probably stands as one of the reasons behind Dickinson’s relevance for her posthumous readers of the turn of the century and beyond. The poet reached into an unfashionable past to reckon with an impoverished present, voicing her dismay at the dearth of modern life.

“Those – dying then” is also a wonderful example of Dickinson’s manipulation of the hymnal form with its eight/six meter alternation. The poet turns the first eight beat line of the hymn into two four beat lines, a decision that conveys the irretrievability of past time as it establishes its rupture with present time. The split line of verse separates and distances one time from the next; and yet both times are cradled into the conventional form of the hymn that is traditionally liturgical (however “imperfectly” Dickinson chooses to replicate this form).

The hymnal form helps the poem to remain in its uncertainty rather than to fall in the certainty of unbelief since it tackles the question of belief using the traditional poetic form of Christian worship and in this way reaffirms its relevancy. The uncompleted penultimate line of the poem exhibiting its seven beats rather than eight reverberates with the “almost” that characterizes the faith that Dickinson sees now dangerously without direction yet persisting;
it reaffirms the initial implication that the belief of the past was already a feeble light, “an ignis fatuus.”

As Lundin notes, “[n]either Emily Dickinson’s particular form of seclusion nor her poetic vision of the self would have been conceivable without the Puritan past and the romantic present that shaped her understanding” (92). By her “romantic present” Lundin means her unleashing of the imagination’s freedom so that consequently the self’s capability of feeling expands immensely. Yet, this expansion would be better explained in terms of a shift in perception whereby the human interior becomes endowed with an infinite experiential capacity, internalizing the infinity witnessed in the natural world: the universe’s boundlessness is now lived as an interior life that knows no bounds of suffering, love, or ecstasy. Elsewhere in the same book Lundin also wonders how a certain disenchantment expressed in her poetry relates to her “becoming a great modern poet” (45). As for Blaise Pascal, Dickinson’s archaism combined with an assessment of her lived present generates her “modernity.”

Dickinson’s modernity thus describes the openness to a question that no longer has a definite answer. Because of this, the poet’s vulnerability increases exponentially but this vulnerability also proves poetically generative. This openness is felt at large in the world, a collective state of being that she detects in her cultural environment. Not only addressing the absence of faith, she speaks of its suspension and wonders whether it will return: the question of the departure of an answer renders the world still – immobile – steeped in stasis: the illusion of a forward moving exists because the movement forward is open and limitless. What is limitless is suspended in the sameness of what arrives.

Habermas describes this suspension too when he speaks of modernity’s new temporal consciousness, (beginning with Baudelaire and continuing onto the avant-garde movements of the turn of the century), which while privileging the ephemeral, passing moment, the new,
“discloses the longing for an undefiled, an immaculate and stable present” (“Modernity versus Postmodernity” 5). While Dickinson does not articulate the slogan of the new in the same way as Baudelaire (for him it stands as a rebellious gesture perhaps more reactive than consciously introspective), she embraces the infinity of the immanent world as a defiant gesture against transcendence. Time and again she asserts the infinite possibility of immanence. In a letter to her cousins Norcross, for instance, she writes, “The mysteries of human nature surpass the ‘mysteries of redemption,’ for the infinite we only suppose, while we see the finite” (L #389). And although she often speaks of the transcendent beyond, she also asserts its unmoving presence here in the world, “There is no first, or last, in Forever – it is Centre, there, all the time – ” (L #288). Infinity eternalizes the present.

Dickinson often formulates her commitment to the idea of the absolute, of the infinite, but places the thinking about this idea outside of the religious system per se, which depicts the finite’s relationship with the infinite in terms of redemption. The relationship of the finite and the absolute (or the infinite) has its own particular existence outside of the religious system, running its course in the theater of life, developing itself as a series of “experienced revelations” that each human being encounters (always differently) in his lifetime. Dickinson’s poetry struggles to distill the finite-infinite encounter from Christian symbolism while at the same time finding this same symbolism inspiring and aesthetically profitable, creating layers of metaphors that in the end point to an understanding of the finite’s relation to the absolute as primary to human experience and as such unavoidable.

Since Dickinson lived in a time of considerable upheavals and transformations in the religious fabric of society, and since she was raised within a deeply religious community, the understanding of the finite-infinite relationship central to her poetry attempted to detach this relationship from Christian narratives and symbols while unquestionably making use of them.

15 The letter “L” followed by a number indicates the numbered letter in the Johnson edition.
Dickinson’s inventiveness with biblical language, wisdom, characters and events heightened their fictional and symbolic nature, constructing an idea of God increasingly divested of Old and New Testament ideals. Her rejection of a vengeful indifferent God did not topple her belief in the godhead as much as it despoiled the idea of God: refusing to imagine his attributes, his body or his face, she gradually disinvested God of these things, so that an abstract everything stood in his place. Thus her poetry enacts a return to the drama of lived human life because it is concrete, as opposed to the abstract idea of God.

Returning to her letter of 1873 to her Norcross cousins, Dickinson speaks of the visibility of the finite for “we see” it, the verb “to see” here employed both empirically and to signify affective experience. The finite’s relation to transcendence is, on the other hand, one of pure absence, arising as such from supposition. Yet, it is this supposition that points back to what “we see,” not only in this letter by way of a sequencing of ideas – the mysteries of redemption, only supposed, lead us to the mysteries of the human nature – but in countless poems dealing with suffering, to mention just a few: “I measure every Grief I see”; “To Know just how he Suffered”; or “Apparently, with no surprise.” The sacrifice at the center of Christianity, which makes Dickinson speak of “the mysteries of redemption,” reveals the triadic structure implicit in the religious experience: the finite’s relationship with the infinite moves both vertically and horizontally as an interaction with the heights, that is, with God, and with God’s created world, that is, other beings.

This awareness perhaps explains the need of spectacle or ritual, in the course of religious worship since immemorial times, but also the theatrical terms in which Dickinson lays out the finite-infinite encounter: the supposition of transcendence redirects the observer to the finite, that is, transcendence makes the human observer reflect back on the human; transcendence initiates a specular encounter with reality similar to conventional dynamics of audience-performer. The latter always needs a third imagined absence, which allows for both
the audience and the actors to “pretend” not to see or to be seen (to pretend that one is seeing without being seen, one assumes that someone is seeing one pretending to see without being seen; otherwise for the sake of whom would this pretending be imagined? Not for the others pretending along with me since they are also pretending that someone else watches them pretending not being seen, someone who does not pretend, but simply watches the pretending. So the pretending is done for the sake of an imagined absent one. The same logic applies to the stage performers).

Dickinson’s approach to the idea of infinity and the structural logic of the relation finite-infinite as she writes in her letters and poetry shares many affinities with Emmanuel Levinas’s examination of this same relation, idea and structure. These shared affinities disclose the intellectual proximity between Pascal and Dickinson, since it is Pascal who first poses the relationship to infinity as a condition for belief in God, and by doing so maps the way to think the finite’s encounter with the absolute abstracted from the religious system. If Pascal is responsible for this first articulation, Levinas extensively develops it philosophically, but before he does this in the sphere of concepts, Dickinson’s poetry does it in the sphere of poetry.

In the seminal text, “God and Philosophy,” Levinas examines the relationship between religious and philosophical discourse, taking up the question that Pascal had tackled both in the Pensées, and more directly in the poem found sewn on his jacket pocket upon his death, “Le Mémorial.” In the latter, Pascal distinguishes the God of the philosophers from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For Pascal philosophical proofs of God’s existence fail and are even arrogantly useless. Faith alone can assert God’s existence. Levinas takes up this question, conceptualizing a third alternative to the relationship between faith and reason, religion and philosophy. Both agreeing with Pascal’s position that philosophical proofs of God’s existence are useless, and disagreeing with Pascal that philosophy has nothing to say
about religion, Levinas conceptualizes philosophy as the ethical discourse par excellence by transposing the relationship of the finite with the infinite from the religious system into the realm of pure ideas: philosophy, for Levinas, becomes a kind of ethical existing whereby the most fundamental experience of the human being is the encounter of finite immanence with infinite transcendence, which returns finite immanence to itself in the other facing the self. This encounter yields the realization that to exist is always to exist ethically, because the infinite constitutes the finite. All beings – potential and actual – are in a sense “in” one’s own being, part of the infinite chain of which each link is a part. The demand this realization places on subjectivity is the unimpeachable recognition of the integrity of finite life by finite life.

Levinas’s philosophy aims at rediscovering the ethical dimension of the word transcendence. For this to occur the idea of the infinite cannot imply the negation of the finite, that is, the subsumption (and thus disappearance) of the finite into the infinite. Levinas turns to Descartes for an approach to infinity that prevents the disappearance of the finite. In his third meditation Descartes looks to prove God’s existence by analyzing the idea of God that he finds in his consciousness. Could this idea originate only in him, or could it come from outside of him? Descartes concludes that, “[g]od necessarily exists.” “For although the idea of substance is in me,” Descartes continues, “by virtue of the fact that I am a substance, that fact is not sufficient to explain my having the idea of an infinite substance, since I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite” (76). The finite cannot conceive of what infinitely exceeds it.

Descartes arrives at the idea of infinity by way of the finite and as such is able to preserve the finite in face of the infinite. Levinas takes this lesson from Descartes. To examine the structure of the finite-infinite relationship, he introduces a series of concepts – insomnia, height, illeity being among them – but also co-opts the language of the theater to
convey the relationship’s tripartite structure. The latter does not only move upward but sideways too: the three entities compositing this structure are the self, the other, and the infinite, which is the other than the other.

For Levinas, then, the word “infinite” signifies both in the finite and not the finite. It is this double signification that directs the finite away from the infinite to the other, i.e., to the immanent world, for the idea of God, of the infinite, exists in the finite. It is the existence of this idea “in” (the more in the less as Levinas puts it) that directs the subject to the other, that is, to the idea of the infinite in the other, nonetheless recognizing that god is “the other than the other” (179). The finite-self recognizes in the finite-other the same absolute other that forms them both: the infinite (which is the other than the other). The ethical relationship is forged in the mutual recognition of the idea of infinity as constitutive of both the “I” and the one before the “I.”

Transcendence interrupts and overwhelms consciousness as it appears in thought and yet thought cannot comprehend it. The finite’s experience of consciousness leads retroactively to the idea of the infinite which predates consciousness, and has always already passed, existing only as the absent grounding of an idea that is prior to me and that absolutely exceeds me. This destructive negativity threatens to absolutely negate the finite; yet it nevertheless obtains positivity as it directs consciousness towards the other, forming the triangular – and theatrical – relationship that Levinas conceives as he thinks about the link between philosophy and religion.

The religious experience is not the experience of a narrative; it is not descriptive; its content cannot be conceptualized. Rather it is the experience of a performance because it is an encounter with the other, a simple presenting of oneself since, he claims: “The religious discourse that precedes all religious discourse is not dialogue”. He then continues: “It is the
‘here I am’ said to a neighbour to whom I am given over, by which I announce peace, that is my responsibility for the other” (184).

In a section of “God and Philosophy” entitled “Divine Comedy,” Levinas articulates the theatrical nature of the finite-infinite relationship:

For this formula ‘transcendence to the point of absence’ not to mean the simple explication of an ex-ceptional word, this word itself has to be put back into the significance of the whole plot of the ethical or back into the divine comedy without which it could not have arisen. That comedy is enacted equivocally between temple and theatre, but in it the laughter sticks to one’s throat when the neighbor approaches – that is, when his face, or his forsakenness, draws near (179).

The dynamics of the theatre convey the act of presentation rather than narration, and for this reason, the encounter of the finite with the infinite is a divine comedy, expressing the triadic relationship involved in the finitude-infinitude dynamics. Both the temple and the theater imply the unseen and assumed observer without which the rituals of temple and theater could not occur. These rituals initiate a back and forward of mutual recognition where the “I” and the “other” are both the “forsakenness” that “draws near.” Their encounter is possible because both are returned from themselves to the other as they realize what they share is the other than the other. Thus the binary dynamics of finitude-infinitude constitutes in reality a triad for there are always two sides to finitude – the self and the other. This triadic relationship also stresses the binding power of this encounter: the audience demands an act from the performers. Performing is to respond to this demand of allowing an audience to see; both audience and performers assume the third element who observes their mutual pretending: the observer God.
Similarly to Levinas, Dickinson’s poetry, as much as her thinking about her craft, is deeply aware of the tridimensional nature of the finite-infinite relationship, whereby the contemplation of the absolute remits one to human suffering, to the infinite present in the immanent world, which for Dickinson includes all beings whether humans, bees or daisies. If the supposed mysteries of redemption lead one back to the mysteries of human nature, the latter, in Dickinson’s vision, unravel under the aegis of an assumed absolute that is redirected from the narrative of the religious system to the relation between human beings. It is in this sense that Dickinson shares much with Levinas’s thought. Levinas conceptualizes the relationship of the finite with the absolute using theological language, and yet, attempting to think this relationship outside of religious systems. Transcendence exists as a ground, a preexisting past and an assumption that predates consciousness as disinterested directionless passivity, as pure acknowledgement that nonetheless fundamentally captures and demands of each subject that recognition of the infinite in the other.

Dickinson’s poem announces that “God cannot be found,” because the God of the Bible has lost validity. Yet her poems attempt to map the transition between the biblical God and the absolute or the infinite as an idea that fundamentally grounds human existence. Dickinson never abandons this latter idea of “God.” Her poems search for the language proper to this absolute, to the ways the immanent world is revealed to contain the infinite. This God that cannot be found is disclosed in the immanent world, in what one “sees” and witnesses. In a letter of 1863 to Higginson she voices this Levinasian position: “I was thinking today – as I noticed, that the ‘Supernatural,’ was only the Natural, disclosed,” followed by the lines “Not ‘Revelation’ –‘tis that waits, / But our unfurnished eyes – ” (L#280). Revelation again is not to be found in pure transcendence and the afterlife but in the unleashing of the world and all its beings. The contemplation of the divine returns one to

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16 The letter to T.W. Higginson of July 1862: “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person” (L#268).
nature, which has now become an enlarged site, because of the sheer impalpability of thinking the infinite, but also because of the sense of all that escapes human apprehension. This heightened perception of nature – “the more in the less” of Levinas (177) – begins with the contemplation of the absolute that remits one to the immanent world perceiving in it the presence of an indescribable excess in life. The perception of this excess entails a kind of awakening – the awareness of a dazzling distance in what is closer to us, the vertigo of proximity that leaves one with “unfurnished eyes,” bare, unprepared, unguarded.

Levinas also describes this raw awakening, conceptualizing insomnia as a primary ontological condition for experience. To encounter the infinite in the immanent world entails a violent, startling and relentless awakening that snaps one into attention. In Levinas’s words, “[t]he Infinite affects thought by devastating it and at the same time calls upon it; in a ‘putting back in its place’ it puts thought in place. It awakens it” (176). In Dickinson’s language this awakening takes place in the enactment of a particular mode of seeing, unshielded and vulnerable, whereby one recognizes the inherent destituteness in all things. One’s sight is the gateway to redemption, as it is expressed on earth in human terms, so that what is taken away and the unknown given render our eyes “unfurnished,” unprepared to look upon what cannot be imagined, that is, the expression of the infinite in the finite world.

This wakeful state is traumatic. Levinas calls it “the trauma of awakening” (176) and Dickinson speaks of the desire to escape it in her poem, “I had no Cause to be awake –” where she plays with “the others” in relation to whom the speaker of the poem is awake as both “other selves” and other people, a notion that emphasizes the specular structure that Levinas conceptualizes: the recognition of the idea of the infinite in me directs me to the same recognition in another; in other words, what is awakened within me leads me to be wake toward another as a foreign reflection of myself that I must recognize both because of its foreignness and familiarity; what is foreign in the other is foreign in me. Dickinson’s
The wakeful state creates a bond and the desire “[f]or Circumstance the same.” Desire in this poem, “wishfulness,” like in Levinas, is not a desire that aims at fulfillment, at an object, but a desire that aims at its own process, at a state of desiring as reciprocal recognition between beings without view to an end. The poem attempts to sustain a hiatus – pure wakefulness, a sunset that lasts all day. Since twilight borders on its own disappearance, its extension emphasizes the perilous ephemerality of this wakefulness; perilous since conditioned by earthly life but also acutely sensitive to the vulnerability of finitude. The Sabbath without bells is another figure for an “unnatural extension.” The poem attempts to arrest time by placing the Sabbath outside of it. Yet by doing so, rest turns into the labor of wakefulness of
which the poet is captive. Being awake entails a struggle, for one is caught in an inescapable demand, the traumatic element in the experience of awakening, demanding one to get to the “was There.”

In “Bereaved of all, I went abroad –” (#886), Dickinson once again speaks of the state of wakefulness as the consciousness of something prior and predating the self, which in this poem the speaker calls “The Grave,” that is, the infinite and eternally before us succession of the dead, a succession that remains “Spade” in “Memory” as the mark of what was and will return, so that the speaker “waked, to find it first awake – /I rose – It followed me –.”

For Levinas and Dickinson, this proximity of the infinite found in the fullness of the immanent world creates the paradoxical experience of proximity as unfathomable distance, the boundary, or the limited, opening up to the limitless. One thus must consider Dickinson’s, (and Pascal’s and Baudelaire’s) fancy for such words as “abyss” “vertigo” and “infinity,” among others, as ways to approach this experience. With this in mind, Dickinson’s late fragment as it appears in Werner’s *Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios* (A752) sums up the insight that Dickinson and Levinas share:

Emerging from
An Abyss and
entering it again
That is Life, is
It not?

To live is to disappear into and reappear from the engulfing abyss, the movement of paradox that articulates the polarity between finitude and infinity. Life as abyssal experience appears under many guises in Dickinson’s poetry. In “It was not Death, for I stood up,” the overwhelmed speaker tells us that “Space stares all around –”; in “The Sun kept setting – setting – still,” the world of time and space seems to open into unfathomable profundity, where “The Dusk kept dropping – dropping – still.” Or in “I saw no Way,” she announces that “The Earth reversed her Hemispheres –/ I touched the Universe.” Both the unleashed
immensity of the immanent world and the sense of panic and dread that the abyssal spurs has led Dickinson’s scholars to believe she suffered from psychological disturbances such as agoraphobia. Whether that was the case is not important, and I think, cannot be ascertained; moreover the usefulness of this diagnostic for an understanding of her poetry also remains irrelevant. Of importance nonetheless is how the vertiginous is connected to the experience of modernity insofar as it pertains to the self’s relationship to the absolute, to the finite-infinite interaction. Levinas calls this “an awakening to proximity” (178). This proximity is the nearness, the recognition, of the presence of the infinite in the finite; the latter creates the abyssal, vertiginous perception of existence that leads Dickinson to rhetorically ask:

Emerging from
An Abyss and
entering it again
That is Life, is
It not?

Pascal describes the plight of the human being in terms of a double relationship with infinity, whereby a vertiginous sense of the human size sends one reeling through the polarity between infinite small and infinite large – the human being is so small that it disappears into the infinite immensity of the universe; yet the infinitely small of creation suddenly renders the human immense. Baudelaire brings this Pascalian language into his poetry too, for instance in “Le Gouffre” or “Hymne à la Beauté” But what about this vertiginous experience makes it so crucial for the modern experience?

Modern Vertigo: Agoraphobia

When addressing Dickinson’s reclusion, Lundin writes: “It does appear that Emily Dickinson suffered from some form of agoraphobia, the fear of open spaces and public places. That fear involves something more than a reluctance to be seen by others; it includes an element of dread, a terror at the prospect of plunging into vast expanses. Any number of
Dickinson’s poems employ images of trackless immensities and uncharted paths” (134). He goes on to discuss her poetry in relation to frightful immensities, suggesting that certain poetic topoi might be indicators of a spatial phobia or of a dread of long expanses. These in her poetry are largely to be found in the immensity of the sea, the sky, or the ever elusiveness of God’s location, the inability to pin down spatially the place where the dead go, the location of heaven or the home of God.

Lundin is only following the lead of other scholars. While at first twentieth-century criticism explained Dickinson’s isolation as disillusionment with love, the second half of the century shifted to psychological explanations. In 1989 Garbowsky devoted an entire study of Dickinson’s letters and poetry in relation to this mental illness, so that years later in the first page to her introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Dickinson (2002), Wendy Martin could write of the poet, “She has been perceived as agoraphobic, deeply afraid of her surroundings, and as an eccentric spinster” (1). Werner too argues that agoraphobia explains Dickinson’s chosen way of life (Open Folios 27)\textsuperscript{17}, and Sewall while not naming the disease suggests that she might have been neurotic (689).

Similar conjectures were made about Pascal. In fact, it seems that his “case” led to the first articulation, and naming, of the phobia of open space. In his study of the modern subject’s relationship to the sprawling, often threatening space of modern cities, Anthony Vidler concludes that, “[f]ear, anxiety, estrangement, and their psychological counterparts, anxiety neuroses and phobias, have been intimately linked to the aesthetics of space throughout the modern period” (1). Agoraphobia and claustrophobia are obsessions that come to the fore during the modern period and are diagnosed for the first time at the end of the

\textsuperscript{17} Werner writes, “In her unauthorized discourse something – we may call it interiority, difference, or singularity without shelter – escapes apprehension and assimilation into the logic of the same. At last she wandered so far from the center that her refusal of destination (final intentions) itself became her aesthetic. Here language is ‘reformed to nothing but Delight which’ (A132), and writing is inscription without place. Agoraphobia was her alibi. ‘I’ her alias” (27).
nineteenth century. Pascal himself becomes then a chief example of a man with a fear of space, suffering from agoraphobia, due to a story that first circulated in the end of the seventeenth century and that aimed at explaining not only the scientist-philosopher’s second experience of conversion, but also implicitly at accounting for Pascal’s writings in the *Pensées* themselves. There he conceptualizes the human being vis-à-vis the universe in terms of vertigo and fright: being exposed to the unfathomable immensity of the cosmos generates anxiety and dread that threatens to dissolve the self. As the story goes, driving over a bridge toward Neuilly to see his sister at Port-Royal, Pascal’s carriage almost fell into the river, remaining hanging over the abyss suspended. Two things are said to have resulted from this incident: the fact that Pascal as a response to this traumatic accident from thereon saw, constantly or sometimes (it is unclear), an abyss on his left side, and the fact that the experience of being close to death led to his second conversion of 1654 (to which *Le Mémorial* attests).

Gouhier, as most twentieth-century scholars of Pascal, has largely contested that the accident ever happened, let alone that it was the cause of the phobia or the conversion. The story not only appeared posthumously but the first account seems to have been highly mediated and fed by the publication of the *Pensées*. Although Vidler does not say it, in the end the point is not whether Pascal experienced conversion after an accident or whether he saw an abyss on his left side, but that his connection with the abyssal and the infinite resonated with nineteenth-century revolutions in the urban space and their impact on the psyche of the modern city dweller. While Pascal spoke of the abyss, of the infinite and its relationship to the finite being as an ontological reckoning of the human vis-à-vis frightful immensity, psychologists conflated writing and biography, intuiting nonetheless that Pascal’s ontology had anticipated the modern psychological condition of dread and anxiety within the deformed city space, or rather, within the unleashed immanent world where the infinity of the
cosmos, before safely remaining in a distant faraway plane, now manifested itself everywhere, not only in the natural landscape, but in the artificial city terrain. Psychologists, including Freud\textsuperscript{18}, literalized Pascal’s conceptual interest in the abyss, framing it as a lived psychological and pathological condition, which the conditions of modernity rendered widely felt.

Dickinson and Pascal’s supposed agoraphobia must remain conjectural; yet it indicates a characteristic of the experience of modernity already present in Baudelaire’s writings on Constantin Guys and in Foucault’s brief analysis of this text in “What is Enlightenment?” As Foucault notes, “Modernity is often characterized in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition, a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment. And this is indeed what Baudelaire seems to be saying when he defines modernity as the ‘ephemeral, the fleeing, the contingent’” (my italics).

Vertigo, the disorientation that spatial immensity produces, emerges out of the realization of immanence’s infinitude. Both Dickinson and Pascal’s sense of fright is directed at this understanding. Transcendence, the infinity of the world beyond human perception, has always been unimaginable, even during medieval times when the universe was conceived of as closed and finite rather than open and infinite: the cosmos was securely contained, and yet, its totality was unimaginable. The openness of immanence accompanies the unleashing of the universe onto infinity. Ephemerality is perceived with new force. It is the condition of life, and perhaps the only stable law human beings can ascertain – that everything passes and changes but that it is also endless, for beings and events continue to succeed one another.

\textsuperscript{18} “I propose in the first place to exclude the group of intense obsessions which are nothing but memories, unaltered images of important events. As an example I may cite Pascal’s obsession: he always thought he saw an abyss in his left hand ‘after he had nearly been thrown into the Seine in his coach.’ Such obsessions and phobias, which might be called \textit{traumatic}, are allied to the symptoms of hysteria” (qtd. in Vidler 16).
Immanence acquires the characteristics of an unknowable beyond – thus the “vertigo in face of the passing moment” spells the way reality becomes abyssal and finitude unending. Infinity is not perceived outside of the interior life of the self, but it is harbored inside, inscribed as the contingency of life that does not end. The unleashing of immanence entails the understanding of the contingency of reality, for succession is only sequence, continuation, not progression or stratification: Enlightenment’s pyramidal progression has been transformed into horizontal, temporal unending sequencing. That this new perception of immanence is interpreted in terms of pathology points to another aspect of modernity: the refusal to accept this idea as pertaining to a collective shift in perception, containing it not only in the realm of pathology but in relation to the individual. The subduing of the frightful possibility of the immanent world is contained through the work of labels and according to Freud exists in the realm of hysteria (see note 5). Agoraphobia as pathology is an attempt to bring stability and closure to unleashed immanence, which has become a kind of transcendental boundlessness. Or perhaps, as Vidler seems to argue, spatial deformation – whether it is agoraphobia or claustrophobia – embodies the modern condition par excellence. And yet, when behavior deemed pathological becomes the norm, does it not destroy the initial dichotomy?

As a psychic phenomenon that arises out of the perception of infinity, vertigo results in attraction toward the abyss, rather than repulsion. Vertigo articulates the intimacy of distance, and in this sense, it is central to the experience of modernity: to experience the possibility of immanence is to be propelled always to the next state of being, that is, interiority becomes the lived transcendence of the self to itself; it becomes abyssal; here too arises the alienation and rupture connected to the experience of modernity.

The social fabric of the world Dickinson knew could not simply turn away from religious questions, or put aside its previous answers; rather it felt the invalidity of old
solutions as much as the pressing need of new ones. When accepted, atheism is a solution that indicates a path to be followed and a reckoning to be had. In the world of Dickinson, however, exists the impossibility of asserting faith as much as of denying it. The impasse itself is the crux of her poetic spirit as much as it indicates the importance of her poetic legacy. Vertigo articulates this wavering between the “yes” and “no,” “the awakening to proximity” of Levinas, and the spatial unleashing that Dickinson describes in “Those – dying then,” whereby God’s Right hand “is amputated now.” The inability to spatially locate God remains part and parcel of the way the infinite takes over everything, spelling out the strains of modernity that countless theoretical approaches have attempted to formulate.

**Pascal’s Modernity**

Between faith and reason, progress and stasis, belief and unbelief, God and his demise, from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Marx and Freud, and more recently, Blumenberg, Habermas, Luhmann and Vattimo, to name only a few, the various formulations of modernity seem to return to articulations of paradoxes that move simultaneously backward and forward in time, implying the idea of mobile impasse as the historical experience of the modern era.

In Blumenberg’s reading Pascal’s modernity is linked to his contribution to the migration of the attribute of infinity from God to the world. In the preface to his *Traité du Vide* (1647) Pascal contributes to this idea by combining the individual fate of each man with a universal idea of man, leading to the conclusion that man exists for infinity. This existence does not, however, mean that humanity will eventually yield the fruits of the accumulated progress of the ages, but that the finite being exists for a perpetually dislocated future:

In Pascal's language infinite progress is not the movement that would compensate for the difference between the finite and the transcendent infinite and would finally, after all, secure for the totality of mankind what it denies to the individual. Rather this
infinity in process is the painful actualization of the unalterable disparity between the status of a point which is all that anything finite possesses vis-à-vis the infinite, and the destiny of man, which finally, despite the fruitlessness of his exertions, allows him by a process of grace to participate in the transcendent infinite, the need for which he comes to know through is experience of the infinitude of progress (84).

Blumenberg’s reading of Pascal does not differ from Dickinson’s “Those –dying then” which shows modernity in the same light, nonetheless, without positing grace as the ultimate redeemer of the infinite process of deferral: the absolute openness of the path ahead that the suspension of belief accomplishes entails a movement forward that is always the same and in this way implies stillness expressed in the paradoxical formulation of a mobile stasis.

Kolakowski attributes the modernity of Pascal, not so much to a paradox, but to the working out of an exclusion/inclusion problem, to his upholding both faith and reason as mutually viable yet incommunicable realms that deal with different kinds of knowledge; reason cannot use argumentation to convince the unbeliever or prove God’s existence; faith cannot explain a mathematical operation. Kolakowski adds that Pascal’s support and separation of these spheres is not innovative in the context of Christian philosophy per say; rather he articulates in a new light how the importance of this separation goes beyond only a segregation of knowledge; for Pascal this separation signifies an ontological divide since the sphere of faith is also that of charity and God and thus infinitely superior to any human knowledge. Reason and faith cannot be compared for the latter pertains to an infinitely higher sphere, which God alone can choose to disclose. Pascal’s modernity resides in his offering “Christians a way to dismiss the challenge of the incredulous: ‘How do you know that God exists?’” (God Owes us Nothing 174) since “Perhaps nobody in the seventeenth century
expressed this incongruity between the life of faith and the secular life better than Pascal” (173).

If we are to follow Kolankowski, Pascal’s thought secures a path of strenuous instability, where the meaning of the world exists inaccessible and impervious to human efforts. Human knowledge is as imperfect as it persistently fails to distinguish the false from the true, part and parcel of every supposition, while faith is miraculous and therefore rare. But if Pascal’s modernity resides in his differentiation of the sphere of faith and of reason, it apparently runs contrary to the triumph of the Jesuits and their Pelagian approach to salvation over the Jansenist Augustinian strain of Christianity. Enlightenment – with its faith in progress and in human will, with its belief in the capacity of the human being to improve himself, eventually even eradicating evil – derives its strength not from an Augustinian sense of human wretchedness and guilt, but from “the Pelagian image of man,” that is, from the possibility of “man-made redemption” (God Owes us Nothing 183).

Pascal’s thought predicts later developments in the nineteenth century; it will have to wait at least one full century and half to resurface in the thought of, for instance, Nietzsche. Seen under this light, the Enlightenment functions as an interruption, between the pessimism of Pascal and the attempts of Nietzsche to fight it (even if the latter’s assessment of the human condition did not stray from Pascal’s own). The Enlightenment suspends the negativity that Nietzsche would reactivate and attempt to overcome. Two centuries earlier Pascal responded to the rareness of faith, to the widespread acceptance of an easy morality and a complacent regard for human nature. Nietzsche attacked the hypocrisy Pascal once attacked. For the philosopher, however, there was no recuperating God or faith. The only thing left was to demonstrate the end that society at large pretended had not arrived and to lay the seeds for a new beginning.
The discrepancy between Pascal and Voltaire confirms the antagonism of the Enlightenment to Pascal’s thought. In his *Philosophical Letters*, the philosopher criticizes Pascal for turning all of humanity into wretched criminals and depicting human nature as unknowable and enigmatic. In response to Pascal’s formulation, “Man is inconceivable without this [original sin] inconceivable mystery,” Voltaire replies that, “Man is not an enigma” (121). In direct opposition to Pascal, Voltaire defends the necessity of self-love: it is the latter that preserves life and motivates humanity’s accomplishments. Without it there would be no art, no scientific progress, no creation or discovery, no drive to fulfill the most trivial of needs. Furthermore, “it is the love of ourselves that helps the love of others” (127), implying that Christian feeling stems from the love of self so vehemently decried by Pascal and in general by Jansenism.

Although Voltaire considers himself a believer, and accuses Pascal of attempting to answer questions lying beyond human comprehension, Voltaire’s God seems almost to be eclipsed by a materialistic, naturalistic depiction of nature, where God’s manifestation, it seems, is ever evident. God’s created nature is not only purposeful and benevolent but ultimately unravels the providential plan. Voltaire flees from the enigmas sown everywhere in Pascal’s thought, attempting to dispel Pascalian paradoxes, replacing them with a materialistic depiction of the natural world and of God’s relationship to it, whereby the supernatural has been evacuated from immanence.

For Voltaire, God exists as receding origin and deferred justification: in a future time all events will come together, from the beginning to the end of time; everything will find its

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19 “That self-love is the same among all mankind, and that it is as necessary to them as the five senses; that this same self-love is given us by God for the preservation of our being, and that he has given us religion to regulate this self-love” (*Philosophical Letters* 121).

20 When disputing Pascal on the second coming of Christ, Voltaire writes, “Haven’t we here the second coming distinctly foretold? But if it has not yet happened, it is not for us to be so bold as to question Providence” (129).
place; and so all of nature, including the human being, is endowed with instincts that do exactly what they were designed to do; for the latter one should thank God and love humanity, not despise and condemn it. But if, as Luhmann conceives, the function of the religious system is to guarantee “the determinability of all meaning against the accompanying experience of constantly referring to the indeterminable,” and if theological reflection, as it sustains the meaning of everything in constant tension with the vast unknowable, must allow for this end paradoxes to partake of religious communication, then part of communicating religion entails the incorporation of enigmas. Luhmann explains that ciphers are inserted “into the process of transforming the indeterminable into the determinable” (A System Theory of Religion 90). Voltaire attempts to eradicate these ciphers or enigmas from Pascal’s text, betraying the deeply secular slant of his thinking, although formally he continues to ascertain God’s existence.

Assuring the place of the Deity, he nonetheless wants to trust creation, profoundly believing that the imprint of the creator in his works will eventually assure a good outcome. There are no ciphers as much as multiplicity and possibility in Voltaire’s vision. Yet ciphers are the inscription of transcendence in the religious system, which, in its signifying function of the immanent world, constantly refers back to the horizon of transcendence without which religion, in Luhmann’s terms, would not recognize itself as such.

As Luhmann also observes, religion in modern societies has lost its mediating function, no longer “producing a relationship of all societal activities to a total meaning” (88). Religion, then, is now a system among systems, operating not only independently of other systems that no longer need the help of religion to solve their paradoxes, each system being self-referential and autonomous; furthermore, religion stands in greater need of “societal integration” (thus the situation has been inverted between the past and the present function of the religious system), for religion’s contribution to society operates only as the
inflation of meaning, “which is unnecessary and technically not very helpful” (89). The differentiation of functions between the various systems, which in modern societies no longer need to function synchronized, is called secularization. Pascal articulates the tension between various systems, particularly of science and of philosophy, but ultimately he incorporates and subscribes them to religion or, in Pascal’s words, the realm of charity, God and the supernatural in an effort to sustain the old religious function of fundamental integration; he was, after all, a religious thinker, but he was also deeply attuned to the tensions tearing at the society of his time.

Voltaire wanted religion to allow nature and society to proceed without the fetters of guilt and remorse, without self-loathing, and most of all, without mystery, that is, freed of the mark of transcendence. The ciphers must disappear into the scriptures, recoil into the sphere of religion and retreat from human activity – an idea that is clarified in Voltaire’s glorification of the instincts, without which all wonderful human accomplishments would not have come to fruition. There is a disjunction here at play: Pascal perceives a new world slowly coming into being; as a religious man he attempts to offer a religious solution, already tainted by the very nascent menaces of the modern world to which he is keenly sensitive; those menaces require that he retreat into the distant past of Christianity: only the rigorousness of original Christian thought enlightens the fallenness of his contemporary world by both explaining it and attempting to secure the centrality of faith for human existence, paradoxically he attempts to use old Christian thought to stall the equalization process of the system of religion in relation to other systems, or rather, to prevent the end of the subservience of all social systems to religion.

Needless to say that Pascal’s religious solution failed. Yet, it failed in relation to society at large. However, in the small minority of those interested in the theoretical implications for religion in a world increasingly scientific in its values, Pascal offered a way
to remain a believer and a scientist without one or the other at any point having to interfere in each other’s spheres. In Luhmann’s terms, Pascal’s thought remains so prescient precisely because it exposes the tension between religion as the system that incorporates all systems into a totalizing meaning – so that it is hierarchically superior in import to all other systems – and religion as a system functioning among systems each operating with its particular code and relating to other systems only insofar as the other’s code gets translated into the system’s self-referential code. Pascal’s thought hinges on the tension between religion as the supreme giver of meaning and religion as a separated system functioning alongside other systems. Accepting that the system of science, for example, operates within the code of true and false, Pascal understands that religion cannot integrate scientific knowledge into a totalizing meaning since the distance between one system and the other is not only infinite, but of a wholly different nature: while the system of science is human-made, thus pertaining to the natural world and its laws, the system of religion is supernatural so that it resides beyond the capabilities of reason; only faith operates in this system and its findings cannot be translated into another system or another person, for they originate solely within the self, and moreover are God-given.

Is it because of this tension between two positions of the religious system that Pascal’s thought moves dialectically? He goes conservatively backward into the archaic conception of Saint Augustine and radically forward, previewing the late nineteenth-century propensities of the likes of Nietzsche and Baudelaire, the former’s critique of Christianity, and the latter’s poetic rendering of an impending world collapse.

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21 See Kolankowski

22 He operates dialectically both stylistically and at the level of argumentation. See Lucien Goldmann’s *Le Dieu caché* and Erich Auerbach’s *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*. 
Nietzsche’s respect for Pascal and his contempt for the likes of Voltaire already anticipate the similitude between this seventeenth-century scientist and modern philosophical thought. Nietzsche’s full-fledged scorn for the positivity of the Enlightenment and his deeply critical attitude toward the empty and hollow structure of the world in the wake of the “death of God” brings these thinkers together. It is the collapse of belief in transcendence that unleashes the deserted landscape Nietzsche’s thought attempts to fertilize. He conceptualizes the will’s relationship to time and to contingency as one of supreme responsibility – the eternal return being his response to the disappearing God.

Many studies have been written about the relationship between Nietzsche and Pascal since the former referenced the latter countless times throughout his works, and even when criticizing him severely, seemed to have admired him deeply. “The only logical Christian,”23 for Nietzsche, Pascal was a victim of Christianity because he had the courage to face the message of this religion, taking it to its logical conclusion. Ultimately, only Pascal could be forgiven for being a Christian since he undertook to live fully the demands of his beliefs without respite. Yet Christianity can only destroy since it says no to life. In Will to Power, for instance, Nietzsche writes, “One should never forgive Christianity for having destroyed such men as Pascal. One should never cease from combating just this in Christianity: its will to break precisely the strongest and noblest souls” (#252 145).

The affinities between Pascal, Nietzsche, (and later Heidegger) thus disrupt the historical continuum of a faith in human nature and capacity, in the ultimate obliteration of suffering and evil, and in sum, in the belief in a projected future where human faults have been subdued or at least greatly reduced (or perhaps it is more accurate to see Pascal himself

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23 From a letter to Georg Brandes from November 20th 1888 in Selected Letters p 327 quoted in Charles Natoli’s Nietzsche and Pascal On Christianity (p98): “I prize his [Dostoyevsky’s] work, on the other hand, as the most valuable psychological material known to me – I am grateful to him in a remarkable way, however much he goes against my deepest instincts. Roughly as in my relation to Pascal, whom I almost love because he has taught me such an infinite amount – the only logical Christian.”
as a pessimistic aberration in an otherwise current of lenient predisposition toward humanity). In light of Pascal’s modernity, Kolankowski describes the rapport between the former and Heidegger in terms of a break with Enlightenment ideas. The twentieth century, whose massive catastrophes severely maimed the belief in “the Pelagian man,” validated Pascal’s gloomy assessment of humanity. Without saying so directly, Kolankowski sees in Pascal a prescient modernity precisely because of Pascal’s depiction of human misery and his Anti-Enlightenment attitude is substantially recuperated by Heidegger (and Nietzsche): while Pascal was wary of the dangers of Cartesian rationalism and its reduction of the world to matter, Heidegger warned against the increasing encroachment of technology into every sphere of human existence with its ambition of domination over nature while the “the metaphysical status of man fell into oblivion” (Kolankowski 188).

In this particular reading, Pascal’s modernity, and his affinities with Nietzsche and Heidegger, resides in his refusal of the ideals that later would characterize the Enlightenment, but that were already firmly grounded in seventeenth-century France. For Pascal the Jesuits in particular embodied these ideals. This understanding of modernity however is by no means universal. Vattimo for instance sees Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s thought as postmodern, for their attack on Western metaphysics implies a negation of foundations, and a refusal of the enslavement of modernity to the infinite regression of the “new”: faith in the progressive improvement of Western society manifests itself in perpetual overcoming, whereby each “new” replaces the “old new.” These philosophers’ refusal of foundations prevents them from criticizing Western thought in the name of another, and truer, foundation” (The End of Modernity 2). In view of this, the consequences for belief are, as Vattimo notes in After Christianity, that the death of God opens up the possibility of believing in God again, precisely since the defense of God’s nonexistence would be another foundational assertion. He reads the death of God not as an assertion of the nonexistence of God, but as the death of
metaphysics whereby God’s existence (the one truth) stands as the ultimate and totalizing meaning. Modernity as such is equated with Enlightenment ideals, and the nineteenth century as the culmination of these ideals, emerging as an acute consciousness of being an historical epoch that differs from all previous epochs of Christian and Pagan tradition, or in other words, as a present time constituted in relation to a past time. Post-modernity as such appears as the consciousness of the end of history. The time of anti-foundational thought, post-modernity breaks with tradition, no longer defining itself in relation to the past or to the future overcoming of itself. Dissolving the conception of the new results from the refusal of foundations: “Things change, however, if we see the post-modern not only as something new in relation to the modern, but also as a dissolution of the category of the new” (The End of Modernity 4).

This dissolution becomes more evident with the technological revolutions of the past century; Vattimo mentions television, but one should add the internet, which by virtue of an acceleration of the velocity of, and access to, information renders the perception of difference as perceived simultaneity (The End of Modernity 10): there can only be a new if there is an old; when the old ceases to be perceived, the new too disappears. Despite the different reading of the Enlightenment’s place in the narrative of modernity’s emergence, Vattimo also repeats a movement backward: the end of metaphysics, of foundations, allows for the return of belief, but together with this return, in Vattimo’s thought there is also the rejection of the end of belief: in fact the potential for believing remerges at the moment when oppositional positions can be equally sustained in a free society. The pessimism of Nietzsche and Heidegger disappears.24

24 Perhaps it is unfair to characterize Nietzsche as pessimistic: one would have to lay aside his seething humor and his attempts at a “gay science.” And yet, Zarathustra’s journey is the most difficult (and solitary) journey any human being could undertake. Furthermore in his writing humanity often appears overwhelmingly weak and faulty.
Vattimo’s position, however, betrays its reliance on a general agnosticism, which must be assumed if the potential of multiplicity inherent in Nietzsche’s perspectivism is to be embraced. If one cannot prove the existence of God, one cannot disprove it either. If one cannot assert immutable truths, one cannot assert the existence of God and one cannot assert the non-existence of God. Philosophically speaking, this inability to assert universalisms returns us irrevocably to Pascal’s critique of Pyrrhonism, whose extreme doubt collapses the very act of doubting. Philosophy remains frozen in this agnosticism, which each individual alone can solve for himself, that is, Vattimo’s return of belief or rejection of the end of belief cannot be accomplished within the sphere of philosophy. Only individual choices can perform this rejection and this return. Only in this sense does Nietzsche’s thought open up the possibility of belief.

In Nietzsche and Pascal’s thought a certain archaism operates in response to an assessment of their historical time, yielding in both cases prescient contemporary critique. This archaism is present in Pascal’s violent resurrection of Augustine and in Nietzsche’s violent negation of centuries of Christian ethics (not as an assertion of atheism, but rather as reconfigured conception of the will), initially through an eulogy of the pre-Socratics. Modernity’s disenchantment stands as a rejection of the present, which appears futureless because a different reality cannot be imagined. A clipped imagination roams, seeped in apocalyptic imagery. It is perhaps this dizzying return to the past in order to convey modern experience that generates the dread of space, the intimacy with the abyss, the vertigo of the modern world and the unsettling question of infinity as formative of the human experience.
Chapter Four

The Haunted House of Nature - Immanence’s Infinity

Emily Dickinson scholarship has long established this poet’s idiosyncratic, though crucial, relationship to religion and has devoted much work to demonstrate how Dickinson both accepted and rejected particular religious dogma, thereby creating her own brand of religion. St. Armand, Beth Maclay Doriani, Linda Freedman, Jane Donahue Eberwein, James McIntosh, and Robert Ludin, among others, have examined how Dickinson’s poetry uses Christian symbols, characters, and events, as materials for poetic exploration.25 Her affinities with traditional Calvinism, but her rejection of organized religion, as Wendy Martin points out, make her both “modern and traditional” (Cambridge Introduction 26). Angela Conrad’s study goes further in placing Dickinson’s writing in the tradition of medieval women mystical writers, who spoke of the religious experience as one of ecstasy (The Wayward Nun of Amherst 19). Although Dickinson’s poetry is incontestably concerned with ecstatic states, her poems seek to experience ecstatic revelation in the immanent world.26 Her poetry does not perform the disappearance of the self in the immensity of God, as the mystical experience requires, but the expansion of the boundaries of the self with the discovery of the depth of


26 Eberwein hints at the poet’s concern with the manifestation of transcendence in nature: “…Dickinson revitalized the concept of sacrament to include those imaginative processes by which the poet—recognizing occasions of grace in the natural world, within her own consciousness, and in her relationships with other people—demonstrated the multifarious ways in which spirit surcharges matter, thereby giving symbolic expression to her hope for immortality” (my emphasis, “Emily Dickinson and the Sacramental Calvinist Tradition” 104).
nature and feeling. Her emphasis is then on spiritual processes, on the ongoing rediscovery of the infinity of the immanent world. For this reason, the devotional manual may have provided a model for her approach, as it emphasized practice over dogma. Unlike the mystical text, the religious handbook does not dwell on visions and prophecies, but on prescribing behavior and exercises, giving advice, and meditating on biblical wisdom.

Dickinson’s poetic approach can then be further illuminated by examining the religious attitudes and concerns found in her poems and letters in relation to Thomas à Kempis’s quintessential religious manual *The Imitation of Christ* (1427), with which she was abundantly familiar. It is central to my argument that à Kempis’s book helped Dickinson conceptualize a solution to the incompatibility of a poetic pursuit with a spiritual practice. Unlike the nun, who withdraws completely from worldly affairs to devote herself exclusively to God, Dickinson rejected both the world of society and the otherworldly. She was nonetheless unquestionably committed to spiritual pursuits, despite her criticism of Calvinist dogma, and embraced poetry, despite her rejection of the world of society.

In its long history of translation and circulation à Kempis’s text had fared well among Jansenism, Calvinism, and Lutheranism alike.27 Already in 1652, in the preface to a French translation of the *Imitation*, Antoine Girard said of the work that, "after the Bible, there has not been [a book] as fashionable, as often reprinted, nor translated into so many languages, nor that has contributed so much to salvation, to the perfection of souls, nor enjoyed so much the general approval of the whole world" (*Un succès* 11).28 The reasons for this success are

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27 For the importance of the *Imitation* for Dickinson see Cynthia Hallen’s “Nimble Believing Dickinson and the Unknown (review)” (78), Oberhaus’s *Emily Dickinson’s Fascicles: Method & Meaning* (3-4) and Jack L. Capps’s *Emily Dickinson’s Reading, 1836-1886* (61-62).

28 My translation from the French, “après la Bible, il ne s’en trouve point qui ait tant de vogue, qui ait tant de fois roulé sous la presse, ny esté traduit en tant de langues, ny tant contribué au salut, à la perfection des âmes, ny qui soit approuvé d’un si general consentement de tout le monde.”
certainly connected to the emphasis the work placed on personal devotion and its deflation of religious orthodoxy: à Kempis was not concerned with the academic debates of theologians but with promoting pious devotional practices.

The importance of this late medieval text for the reformation of early modern Europe can be glimpsed by the multiple Protestant translations of the book into the vernacular, despite the book’s Catholic origins. As Von Habsburg shows, the *Imitation*’s downplaying of outward demonstrations of faith in favor of a true inner spirituality, its promotion of contempt for the world, and its belief in a spiritual practice that could be undertaken by the lay believer as much as by the clergy, all contributed to its flexible adoption by Protestants. Furthermore, the book’s focus on the biblical message, attempting to translate it into a way of life, fit well with Protestant sensibilities (Von Habsburg 176). These Protestant translations often omitted the last book on the Eucharist and reformulated references to monastic life, purgatory, and the saints. They also emphasized more starkly the centrality of Christ in the pursuit of spirituality. So that while the *Imitation* was rendered Protestant through translation, it was the book’s emphasis on practice over doctrine that explains the widespread popularity of the various translations to English and German published for Protestant reading communities (Von Habsburg 127-144).

Richard B. Sewall was the first to point out the importance of the *Imitation* for Dickinson. He sees this book as offering a possible model for how the poet chose to live her life and develop her poetic talent, remarking that, “for whatever reasons, normal or neurotic, she was withdrawing more and more from the community. The *Imitation* was the

29 For an analysis of early Protestant English translations of the *Imitation*, see Elizabeth K. Hudson’s “English Protestants and the *imitation Christi*, 1580-1620” (544-545).

30 For Dickinson’s anxieties about conversion see for instance L35 and L13. For a poem about the relationship of poetry to truth see “I died for Beauty” (Fr448).
sternest kind of challenge to certain tendencies she felt in herself” (689). While Sewall describes the *Imitation* as a challenge for Dickinson, I see it as providing a solution to the dilemma of rejecting the world of society while embracing the world of poetry as much as of criticizing religious dogma while embracing spiritual pursuits. The *Imitation* allowed her to conceptualize a position that reconciled the antagonism between world and poetry, dogma and spirituality.

Susan Gilbert Dickinson gave Dickinson a new edition of the *Imitation* for the Christmas of 1876. Archived at the Beinecke Library of Yale University, this copy is heavily marked with penciled vertical lines along the sides of the page (Capps 61). Presumably, this edition was not Dickinson’s first encounter with the *Imitation*. Susan and Emily often exchanged books; Susan owned an edition of 1857 with Emily’s name on it, which contains several penciled markings, some of which resemble the marks Dickinson made on the books she owned (Capps 62). Although one cannot be absolutely certain Dickinson made them, nonetheless, the underlining often pinpoints themes and ideas she explored in her poems or addressed in her correspondence. It is however indisputable that she was abundantly familiar with the book and admired it enough for Susan to make of it a gift for her.

The *Imitation* proposed a cloistered life of tireless intellectual and spiritual activity. As this underlined passage suggests, the *Imitation* counseled, “Never be entirely idle; but either be reading, or writing, or praying, or mediating, or endeavouring something for the public good.”

À Kempis’s work embodies the clearest expression of the premises of the religious revival known as *devotio moderna*, a movement that rebelled against medieval scholasticism, the nominalism and abstract logic prevalent in medieval universities and seminars, advocating rather the practice of a purer religion based on pious sentiment garnered through ascetic practices and a direct reading of the Bible and patristic texts. *Devotio

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31 I use the translation of Dickinson’s copy of the *Imitation* housed in Beinecke Library of Yale University.
moderna posed a challenge to the ecclesiastic orders as it advocated a spiritual practice essentially similar for lay and clergy alike (Catholic and Protestant Translations, Von Habsburg).

Dickinson’s copy, amply used, was nonetheless selectively (albeit abundantly) underlined. The passages in question fall roughly under four categories: renunciation, nature and grace, suffering and consolation, and the martyrdom of Christ. Dickinson’s poems and letters also dwell extensively on these concerns. Most importantly, Dickinson takes from à Kempis’s text the notion of practice, interpreting it to articulate a poetics of spirituality, where the antagonism between the world of society and poetry and between religious dogma and spirituality are reconciled. À Kempis envisions the spiritual life as a praxis of living that aspires to imitate the perfection of Christ. In Dickinson, by contrast, this praxis seeks to activate the ability of poetry to reveal the infinity of the finite being, and of nature. In other words, Dickinson seeks to show the depth of the human being’s experience of finitude as well as the depth of the immanent natural world. Christ too becomes fundamental in her pursuit, but not as a figure of perfection; rather, Christ stands for the mystery of the human being, of the unfathomable infinity of the finite being. To imitate Christ is to be attuned to this profundity.

Notably, Dickinson deviates from à Kempis in her refusal to adhere to the Augustinian vein running through the Imitation, which subscribes to the irrevocable sinfulness of human nature. The search for a redemptive afterlife is also not a preoccupation Dickinson shares with à Kempis. The objective of this comparison is then not to suggest that the Imitation directly shaped or influenced the poems where a clear resonance between à Kempis’s book and Dickinson can be glimpsed, but to propose a set of concerns in her poems related to her construction of a poetic practice that mirrored ascetic principles à Kempis helped her conceive, despite their doctrinal divergences. À Kempis’s shift from dogma to
practice, prescribing a set of behaviors, modes of living, and principles, allows Dickinson to reconcile creative and spiritual aspirations. This shift suggested a compelling solution to the problem of balancing a writing ambition with faith, the assertion of an ego with the demands of the selflessness religion imposed. In 1876, as an addendum to a longer letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dickinson writes a definition of nature and art, “Nature is a Haunted House – but Art – a House that tries to be haunted” (L459A). What could this “hauntedness” be? And what does it mean that art seeks to haunt in imitation of nature? As Dickinson pursues unflinchingly the development of her poetic talent, poetry belongs to the world only insofar as it both reveals the human being’s infinite experience of finitude and the infinity of the immanent natural world. Poetry becomes inseparable from the practice of contemplation, and in this sense, it echoes aspects of the religious devotee’s behavior. Her belief that the world of society and its values corrupted the spiritualizing function of poetry might have informed her refusal to publish. Only asceticism could retrieve poetry from the world of human affairs, that is, the world of society, while maintaining it connected to the immanent world of nature and in tune with the human being’s infinite experiential potential. Poetry shows the spiritual meaning of nature—where flowers, setting suns, bees dwell—and of the human experience of finitude. The infinity of humanity’s experience of finitude witnesses the infinity of the natural world through poetry.

In an undated poem, Dickinson describes the space of solitude as where finitude expands vertically, inwardly into infinity:

There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of Death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself –
Finite Infinity
The poem deals with the paradox whereby the deeper the folding into the self the greater the experience of expansion. If solitude entails confinement—the creation and maintenance of strict boundaries—seclusion paradoxically generates an expansion, since in its absolute “polar”—cold, frosty, but also separated—isolation from the world, it discovers the infinity of the soul. The abandoned world reappears as an experience of the boundless depth of the internal life. Solitude comes from this complete separation from the world but also from the discovery of the unknowable, boundless dimension of the human interior: the finite becoming infinite. For Dickinson, this interiority—obtained through the practice of asceticism—is necessary for the experience of spirituality. Dickinson’s poems often speak of the difficulties and demands of the internal space that expands under the aegis of solitude: “One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted – / One need not be a House – / The Brain has corridors – surpassing / Material Place –”(Fr407). As Robert Weisbuch calls it (218), the “Gothic danger” of confronting an external ghost pales in comparison with the “interior confronting” that haunts the brain (“Prisming Dickinson” 218). Although scholars have read this interiority as signifying for instance “the internal self […] as battleground of the need for sanity and the urge toward the wild” (Weisbuch 218), another reading insinuates itself when she casts this interiority as “That cooler Host,” or, in its variant, “That Whiter Host.” With these words, Dickinson interposes an allusion to the suffering of Christ, and so suggests the spiritual

32 In Emily Dickinson’s Poetry, Weisbuch demonstrates how this poem “internalizes ‘haunting’ and devalues external horrors in comparison to self-inflicted ones” (139). In “Pursuing the Form of a Ghost,” Sally Bayley sees the “poem’s essential question (or mystery)” as the same as Hamlet’s question to Horatio in the second scene of the play, i.e., “did anyone really see or speak to an ‘external ghost,’ or this reported ghostly figure merely a figment of Hamlet’s internalized drama of grief?” (55). In Choosing Not Choosing, Sharon Cameron reads this poem in the context of fascicle 20, pairing it in particular with “Dare you see a soul at the ‘White Heat.’” She concludes that “the White Host” in the variation of “One need not be a Chamber” suggests this is the host of a passion (79). She also points to the oblique allusion to the Eucharist ritual (126).
dimension of the experience of interiority. In the deepest solitude one finds a layered self: “Ourself behind ourself, concealed.” The internal expansion is frightening, for it reveals the finite’s capability for infinite suffering. As we shall see, Christ will become a figure for this expansion, since he stands for the wondrous mystery of humanity and nature’s depth.

These poetic instances connect solitude and the ascetic life with the religious but also poetic life. After all, the poem records the ascetic discovery of the soul’s profundity. Dickinson then conceives a poetics of spirituality that will reveal the “Finite Infinity” of “A soul admitted to itself.” One is admitted to oneself through à Kempis’s notion of spiritual practice that Dickinson assimilates, so that poetry may speak of it. Among other things, this practice entails renunciation, a theme Dickinson addresses in countless poems. If indeed the underlining of the *Imitation* is hers, the third book’s chapter forty-nine on the rewards for those who struggle remains one the most scrutinized. It examines the renunciation of ego-centered desires the spiritual seeker must undergo. When considered in relation to Dickinson’s poetic corpus, virtually unknown at the time of her death, the following passage in particular suggests the way she might have envisioned the demands religion placed upon writing:

That which pleaseth others shall go well forward; that which pleaseth thee shall not speed. That which others say shall be heard; what thou sayest shall be accounted nothing; others shall ask and shall receive; thou shalt ask but shalt not obtain. To others shalt be great in the praise of men, but about thee there shall be no word. To others this or that shall be committed, but thou shalt be accounted a thing of no use. At this nature will sometimes be troubled, and it is a great thing if thou bear it with silence.
Suppressing the self is painful but also rewarding. The religious life entails a proscription against speech that carries its own recompense: salvation and God’s grace. The world must not hear the spiritual seeker’s word. Anonymity, which à Kempis recognizes goes against natural inclination, secures the life of the spirit. One can see how the command against seeking to be known might have conflicted with Dickinson’s poetic ambitions: if for the world she shall “be a thing of no use” about whom “there shall be no word,” her poetry must be kept secret, or at least never circulate outside of the private sphere. Luckily, if the *Imitation* prescribes self-effacement and silence, in other passages it also prescribes writing and reading among the desirable activities for the contemplative reclusive. There is one such passage underlined in her copy that equates writing and reading with praying and other contemplative practices: “Write, read, mourn, keep silence, pray, suffer crosses manfully; life everlasting is worthy of all these, yea, and of greater combats.”

In her poetry she often addresses the pain of renunciation, frequently even suggesting its impossibility. In “Me from Myself – to banish –”, Dickinson acknowledges that a true and complete renunciation requires the abdication of old affective ties and indifference to new ones. To love purely is to love without attachment, for the sake of love itself:

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Me from Myself – to banish –
Had I Art –
Invincible My Fortress
Unto All Heart –

But since Myself – assault Me –
How have I peace
Except by subjugating
Consciousness?

And since We’re Mutual Monarch
How this be
Except by Abdication –
Me – of Me –?

3 Invincible] impregnable  4] To foreign Heart –
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(Fr709)
As à Kempis’s text recognizes, the interior life is not secure. It must be perpetually won over. Constant struggle earns momentary peace. The endlessness of replication haunts the seeker, whose path is web-like, not linear. The seeker keeps reframing the problem of self-abnegation, which leads to the consideration of the impossibility of renunciation. Is it possible to thoroughly abolish the world, the self, natural inclination, and most of all, the meandering movement of the mind as much as the need for attachment? Dickinson’s poem poses this problem while connecting it to art making. Art that aims at spirituality comes from a heart freed from temporal attachments. The first stanza’s rhyming of “Art”/“Heart” suggests the need art has of the heart. The question mark with which the poem ends presents the difficulties of renunciation as unresolved, yet necessary, so that one must continue attempting it.

In this poem, the self in the grip of renunciation must be peeled. What remains, however, is inextricable from what has been peeled away. All parts are “Mutual Monarch.” The attachments of the heart are incorporated into the fabric of the self, after which, they can never be peacefully accepted, or utterly rejected, demanding the seeker sustain both as she attempts to resolve the conflict. Can one abdicate the self? The speaker asks. The answer cannot be given, accepted or refused. Renunciation is the resistance to this question’s answer, for it permanently requests the impossible, expelling the “wanting” out of the self, only for it to return in the form of “wanting not to want.” Renunciation is impossible because in its utter refusal of everything it affirms itself as desiring against desire.

The art of the spirit demands a heart divested of self-interest, of emotional demands, and open to the absolute other, the fourth line’s “All Heart,” or “the foreign Heart” of the variation. The latter is after all the site of pure love. Dickinson’s alternative “impregnable” for the “invincible” of line three is one of those instances where her refusal to choose, as Sharon Cameron puts it, functions not as an either/or relationship, but as commentary,
elaboration. To be invincible is to be impregnable—detached, embroiled in the impossible task of peeling the self—and closer to the spiritual peace of the *Imitation*, which as à Kempis promises makes one “invincible,” but only until the next battle.

Renunciation connects to the concern about invisibility often found in Dickinson’s poems about nature. The small, yet effervescent, richness of the natural world, leads her to examine endings, transformations, births and deaths, considering the fate of bees and sparrows, toads and gnats, in relation to the often-dormant eye of the deity. Is God attentive to nature’s infinite drama of perpetual change? Dickinson’s adoration of nature, and her sense of the fullness of life forms, so often overlooked and anonymous, but so plentiful because devoid of human apprehension, makes the natural world the locus of the manifestation of grace. The human being witnesses the operation of grace, but is rarely a conduit for it. Extensively underlined, the *Imitation*’s chapter on “the different stirrings of nature and grace,” as John O’Malley notes, betrays the “heavily Augustinian overtones” (*The First Jesuits* 265) of à Kempis’s text, with its view of human nature as corrupted by original sin, and grace as a supernatural manifestation that corrects fallen humanity. Although Dickinson rejects à Kempis’s position regarding human nature and grace, when seen in relation to countless poems and passages found in her correspondence, Dickinson’s interest in this chapter points to a dialectic engagement with à Kempis, whereby for her the natural world becomes a conduit for the human being’s experience of grace. The latter is an experience of immanence rather than transcendence. To conceptualize this, she introduces and relates the

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33 In *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson’s Fascicles*, Sharon Cameron reads Dickinson’s fascicle poems in sequence drawing relationships between proximate and distantly placed poems. In her readings she takes into account the variants Dickinson transcribed into the fair manuscript copies she bound together. Cameron argues that the decision to maintain the variants alongside the poems showed that Dickinson refused to choose among the possibilities and used the variants to comment and interact not only with the single poem but with others within the sequence (40).
natural world to the *Imitation*'s opposition between human nature and grace.\footnote{For positive views of nature widely accepted within Emily Dickinson’s New England community see Robert Lundin’s *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* (151).} The following underlined passage characterizes à Kempis’s position regarding this opposition:

> Nature seeketh to have things that are curious and beautiful, and abhorreth those which are cheap and coarse. Grace delighteth in what is plain and humble, despiseth not rough things, and refuseth not to be clothed in that which is old and worn. Nature respecteth temporal things, rejoiceth at earthly gain, sorroweth for loss, is irritated by every little injurious word. Grace looketh to things eternal, cleaveth not to things temporal, is not disturbed at losses, nor soured with hard words; because she hath placed her treasure and joy in heaven, where nothing of it perisheth. Nature is covetous, doth more willingly receive than give, and loveth to have things private and her own.

À Kempis condemns human nature for its love of superficial beauty, indulgence in sensual pleasures, and attachment to worldly things, which, since temporal, result only in loss. Attachment to emotions and pleasures, selfishness, and greed compose the picture of humanity the *Imitation* paints. Grace, on the other hand, opposes and reforms all such tendencies, giving where the fallen human being takes and loving the humble and the eternal. On the one hand, Dickinson rejects à Kempis’s characterization of human wretchedness. On the other, she eulogizes the experience of grace and locates its manifestation in the natural world, which does not figure in the scheme of à Kempis’s opposition. In Dickinson, the temporality of nature becomes marked with the eternal. The latter only exists insofar as the temporal exists. For à Kempis, humanity is doomed to loss because of the temporal nature that “stirs” human impulses. For Dickinson, the inevitable return of loss characteristic of
temporality constitutes eternity. By appealing to the natural world, Dickinson praises human nature, for which loss also always returns. Dickinson does not reject the otherworldly for the sake of the worldly, but folds the otherworldly into the worldly. Her underlining of à Kempis’s passage then suggests her interest in the opposition between temporal and eternal, finite and infinite, and as we shall see, her letters and poems point to how she refashioned this relation: while for à Kempis’s the eternal is the otherworldly, for Dickinson it arises from the perpetual return of the temporal.

As many have noted (Eberwein, “Graphicer” 176-177), Dickinson disavows the Calvinist (and Augustinian) belief in the unworthiness of the human being just as she does not stress the necessity of aspiring to salvation. Yet, she is deeply interested in the manifestation of grace, which she often locates as occurring in the natural world. “All [flowers] were indices of her own spiritual and emotional state,” writes Judith Farr of Dickinson, “while in her letters and poems, she continually associates flowers with herself and making gardens with making poems” (The Gardens 4). Farr’s book on Dickinson’s gardening convincingly contends that Dickinson thought of the two activities as analogous. Similarly to poetry, the realm of nature can signal spiritual realities: the poem speaks of the infinite constitution of nature that the infinite constitution of human nature witnesses. Two poems in particular—“Further in Summer than the Birds” (Fr895) and “As imperceptibly as grief”(Fr935)—present nature as a conduit for grace and reject Augustinian and Calvinist beliefs concerning human wretchedness:

Further in Summer than the Birds
Pathetic from the Grass
A minor Nation celebrates

Its unobtrusive Mass.

No Ordinance be seen
So gradual the Grace
A pensive Custom it becomes
Enlarging Loneliness.

Antiquest felt at Noon
When August burning low
Arise this spectral Canticle
Repose to typify

Remit as yet no Grace
No Furrow on the Glow
Yet a Druidic Difference
Enhances Nature now

(Fr895)

The experience of loss discloses grace. The crickets’ song, announcing the impending end of summer, pardons more poignantly since it does not request anything of the supernatural—no pardon, afterlife, or redemption. Instead, it accomplishes the enhancement of the moment, dilating it infinitely through its elegiac song. It is the “Antiquest” for it makes no demands. Being beyond desire, it only announces the occurrence of presence. The undemanding nature of this grace articulates the paradoxical revelation that an infinite depth, an “Enlarging Loneliness,” arises from the finite temporality of nature. The “Noon” of the third stanza initiates a string of rhyming assonance (“low,” “Repose,” “Furrow,” “Glow,” “now”) that decidedly qualifies this grace as a muted luminous apotheosis arising from the dying—the lowest transfixed into greatness through the song of its powerlessness. Since the “Canticle” is “spectral”—the only other word besides “Summer” in the first line that begins with an ‘s’—and since the poem evokes the Christian sacrament, the cricket’s liturgy becomes the sacramental elegy of temporality, immortalizing the “now” through a kind of spectral haunting.

The startling turn in the last two lines of the poem, introducing a “Druidic Difference” finally qualifies this manifestation of grace as pagan-like. It asserts nature as the locus of
grace’s manifestation, or rather, of immanence as transcendence revealed. Unsurprisingly then, Dickinson voices the belief in the sanctity of nature in countless letters. “Flowers are not quite earthly,” she writes, “They are like the Saints. We should doubtless feel more at Home with them than with the Saints of God” (L417). In a most striking parallel to this poem, she asserts that, “I was thinking, today—as I noticed that the supernatural, was only the Natural, disclosed—” (L280). The supernatural is the natural because the experience of the immanent natural world has essentially a transcendental depth. The supernatural is the mysterious expansion that constitutes the ephemeral, which changes and continues, returning always with ever striking difference, mutation, and newness. It is also the infinite human capacity for experiencing pain, love, ecstasy, and most of all, for creating poems. Ultimately, it speaks for the remarkable singularity of each being.

As Keane observes, “Further in Summer than the Birds” avoids posing a belief in immortality, instead casting nature as an earthly paradise haunted by death. He then reads it as revering “the pathos of mutability, the deeply moving contrast between seasonal return and human transience” (155). The poem is nonetheless concerned with revealing present grace lodged in nature as offering, for as Eberwein notes, “a natural manifestation of grace allows for the poet to accept the coming death of the year in expectancy of renewal” (Strategies of Limitation 191).

Haunted nature manifesting grace is of course a figure for art making, which in imitation of nature aims to manifest the supernatural—a notion that the poet condenses with aphoristic precision in the aforementioned note to Higginson (“Nature is a Haunted House— but Art—a House that tries to be haunted”). Ideally, through language, the poem must mark

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36 For a reading of this poem in relation to its multivalent religious meaning see Eberwein, “Emily Dickinson and the Sacramental Calvinist Tradition” (102-104) and Brantley’s Experience and Faith.
the temporal with infinity, disclosing the infinite nature of the finite being’s experience of finitude and of the perpetual return of the ephemeral in the natural world. In Eberwein’s words, Dickinson introduces, “words themselves as sacraments” (Strategies of Limitation 191).

Yet haunted nature as much as art attempting to be haunted demands the hidden subjectivity of the follower of Christ, whose quest stipulates anonymity: only this subjectivity will experience the infinity of nature’s immanence as well as the depth of the human being’s soul. Because of Christ’s dual nature, his figure marries the supernatural to the natural. Christ shows how the infinite folds into the finite—the otherworldly into the worldly. As such, he is a symbol of the supernatural nature of immanence, that is, of the human being’s infinite experience of finitude, which alone can witness the natural world’s transcendental depth. Thus, for the poet, to imitate Christ is to become an ascetic poet, renouncing the world of society and renown for poetic truth. The latter is the revelation of the infinite constitution of nature as the finite being experiences with full force the boundlessness of human interiority. For Dickinson, a poetics of spirituality reveals this infinity and makes this connection between nature and the human being.

Dickinson imagines the fall of seasons as an occurrence without witnesses, sketching out the greatest loneliness of this grief, precisely since it goes unattended. In a letter to Higginson of 1866, she sends two poems that stress the invisibility of this disappearance, which is nonetheless a prerequisite for a natural manifestation of grace. In “As imperceptible as Grief” (Fr935), the end of summer reveals a grace that is “harrowing” because it entails an unseen dying. The poem’s central word is “imperceptible” in the first line, reiterated and emphasized in the third line, “Too imperceptible at last.” This natural scene has been abandoned by nature itself, whose winds offer no “Wing / Or service of a keel” to heighten
the summer’s farewell. The latter slips away unnoticed, unrecognized, a “light escape / Into the Beautiful.”

Dickinson depicted the manifestation of grace as the reward of the anonymous, the invisible, representing the fate of nature in a similar way to how à Kempis’s text represents the fate of the imitator of Christ: “To others shalt be great in the praise of men, but about thee there shall be no word. To others this or that shall be committed, but thou shalt be accounted a thing of no use.” In an 1866 letter to Higginson, Dickinson tellingly depicts the isolation of nature, playfully commenting, “Nature, seems it to myself, plays without a friend” (L319), for nature is sequestered. And in, “Blazing in Gold, and quenching in Purple” (Fr321), another poem she too encloses with this letter, the poet follows a personified setting sun in its unobserved daily journey, “Laying her spotted face to die,” as sequestered as the nature in “As imperceptible as Grief.”

For Dickinson, the natural world then manifests grace: the beautiful, curious, sorrowful and temporal appear inscrutable and infinitely mysterious. As finitude shows itself infinitely profound, it expresses the unseen in a visible form. But human nature also partakes of this mystery. She reflects on this matter in a letter to her cousins Norcross, “The mysteries of human nature surpass the ‘mysteries of redemption’ for the infinite we only suppose, while we see the finite” (L289). The finite postulates the infinite, which arises from the succession of the ephemeral. Through an elegiac celebration of what is lost—in itself endless—the human being opens up to the boundless display of what is present. The experience of loss and temporality constitutes the endless deposition of nature’s possessions. Only the depth of the interior life may bear witness to the depth nature reveals—for the infinity of the finite is both inside the human soul and outside it, in the natural world.
The *Imitation*’s concern with suffering and the consolation of love certainly appealed to Dickinson’s sensibilities, for they form the bulk of the underlining and constitute important concerns of her poetry and letters. À Kempis often reminds us that, “There is none in this world, even though he be king or bishop, without some tribulation or perplexity,” or that, “All is not lost, although thou feel thyself very often conflicted or grievously tempted.” Likewise Dickinson examines the problem of suffering (and of how to console it) in countless poems, often probing the boundaries of pain. To bear one’s cross patiently means to reckon with the pain of others, scrutinizing their relationship to one’s deeply felt internal struggle. “I measure every grief I meet” (Fr550) dwells precisely on these problems, casting suffering as the most palpable, even if doubtful, link between people, and depicting empathy as an analytic attitude toward the inner life of others that becomes, by the end of the poem, consolatory:

I measure every Grief I meet  
With narrow, probing, eyes –  
I wonder if It weighs like Mine –  
Or has an Easier size –

I wonder if They bore it long –  
Or did it just begin –  
I could not tell the Date of Mine –  
It feels so old a pain –

I wonder if it hurts to live –  
And if They have to try –  
And whether – could They choose between –  
It would not be – to die

I note that Some – gone patient long –  
At length, renew their smile –  
An imitation of a Light  
That has so little Oil –

I wonder if when Years have piled –  
Some Thousands – on the Harm –  
That hurt them Early – such a lapse  
Could give them any Balm –
Or would They go on aching still
Through Centuries of Nerve –
Enlightened to a larger Pain –
In Contrast with the Love –

The Grieved – are many – I am told –
There is the various Cause –
Death – is but one – and comes but once –
And only nails the Eyes –

There is Grief of Want – and Grief of Cold –
A sort they call “Despair” –
There’s Banishment from native Eyes –
In Sight of Native Air –

And though I may not guess the kind –
Correctly – yet to me
A piercing Comfort it affords
In passing Calvary

To note the fashions – of the Cross –
And how they’re mostly worn –
Still fascinated to presume
That Some – are like my own –

2 narrow, probing eyes - ) Analytic eyes –

Dobson reads this poem as enacting a language turned radically inward toward the writer rather than the reader. It attempts to transmit an insight that pertains to the singularity of an experience rather than to find a connection to another’s pain, which the poem presents as impossible (96-97). Yet, although Dickinson constructs a carefully detached poetic persona, the inability to know for certain how others feel mirrors the inability to fully comprehend the grief of the self, and from the recognition of this mutual mystery, of the self to itself and of others to the self, consolation and empathy arise. Thus the possibility of connecting to the pain of others emerges. The poem enacts a search that, not yielding certainties, allows the poet to assert the variety and existence of grief, and in this, find comfort. Ultimately, this acknowledges the universality of the unique and impenetrable particularity of each individual experience, linking rather than separating the self and others.
The *Imitation* invites one to turn the gaze inwardly, posing the problem of suffering as common to all. In a similar fashion, it requests one to examine the self’s internal state, where the fallen condition of humankind is brought to sharp focus. This condition is universal, but internally, solitarily, and differentially lived. It then reminds one that all human beings share the exiled state of the self. Without endorsing the fallenness of humanity, Dickinson’s poem orchestrates the same understanding: a spiritual practice rests on an analysis of one’s interiority as much as on the recognition of its “mysterious” universality.

The verbs used in “I measure every Grief” express doubt or possibility. When conveying doubt, the verbs are tentative in their suggestions, since as the poem concludes, one cannot define, know, or clarify the grief of others. As such these verbs express a whimsical kind of searching, a fanciful flight of the imagination, “to wonder” being the most prevalent verb repeated four times, and further emphasized via the anaphora of the first, second, third, and fifth stanzas. The modals “could” (“I could not tell the Date of Mine,” “could They choose between,” and “Could give them any Balm”) and “would” (“It would not be”) enforce the aura of possibility in which the speaker indulges. However, contradicting the tentativeness of these verbs of doubt and possibility, “to measure,” and particularly “to note” (“I note that Some – gone patient long –” and “To note the fashions – of the Cross –”) introduce a level of finality, since the poem pits analysis against guessing. Instead of asserting the radical inaccessibility of others, it allows for the pronouncement of some aspects concerning the affectivity of another.

After all, the poem concludes, it is indisputable that all experience grief. Moreover, just as the poet muses on the exact nature of that grief, attempting to compare her experience to that of others, implicitly each human being indulges in the same “guessing work.” While one set of verbs stresses the indeterminacy of another’s suffering by suggesting possibility and doubt, the second set asserts that its existence cannot be denied. The dynamic between
what is shared and not is then articulated as the recognition of a certainty that cannot be
known or of an actuality that remains in the realm of possibility.

The variation of the second line of the first stanza substitutes, “probing, eyes” with
“Analytic eyes –”, a choice that emphasizes the attitude of the second set of verbs upholding
examination, rather than fantasy, and presenting the speaker’s investigation as less trapped in
self-consciousness and more turned outwardly. The variation once again reinforces the dual
attitude the two sets of verbs establish.

The third stanza distinguishes the different ways others cope with grief. Even if each
grief cannot be known, responses to it are knowable. Since they are performed, they can be
witnessed. The affective response Dickinson privileges here is the patient endurance of
hardship the Imitation preaches in several underlined passages, such as “At least bear it
patiently, if thou canst not bear it joyfully.” The attitude of the fourth stanza reproduces the
advice of the Imitation, and its frequent calls for forbearance; moreover, the line “An
imitation of a Light” echoes à Kempis’s language of imitation and of Christ as light. But
while in à Kempis those select people who choose to live a spiritual life use patience to
forestall despair and shun temptation, in Dickinson’s poem the smile of patience of “that
Some” who, following the Imitation properly respond to suffering, appears more like an
aping, a superficial and mechanical reflex, than the fruit of the spiritual rewards à Kempis
promises. The light of the spirit is not felt; it is reproduced, a fact that renders it frail, “so
little Oil” feeds the robotic smile, almost suggesting an internal numbness that suffering
generates in the end. The sixth stanza is also reminiscent of the Imitation. Just as the book
warns that the more one confronts one’s sinful nature, the more dejected one becomes, the
poem’s speaker considers the possibility of enlightenment “to a larger Pain.” Unlike the
Imitation, however, that promises the consolation of God’s love, when the seeker fully grasps
his wretchedness, in Dickinson’s poem love does not suffice to appease this enlarged
perception and human wretchedness does not arise from an essential sinfulness, but from the inevitable, and universal, experience of loss.

The last two stanzas clarify that comfort does not come from God so much as from the awareness of a shared condition for each lives “in passing Calvary.” The specific nature of this “Calvary” remains out of bounds, but the possibility alone that it may be the same as the poet’s consoles, as does the fact of grief itself.

If the poem presents human existence in similar terms as à Kempis’s text, it departs from it by presenting a distinct lack of faith in divine aid. Dickinson accepts the path but recasts the comforts the book promises: if attainable at all, these are to be found in the awareness of an analogous experience, (never completely shared), rather than in the comforts of faith. Consolation does not arise from the deity’s infinite love, but from the finite in its infinite suffering and from art’s attempts to haunt.

As Keane notes, for Dickinson, “her Jesus is less the divine Redeemer than a fellow sufferer” (93). Sewall remarks on this too, writing that, “Christ’s personal expanse meant for her this triumph over suffering, and in this she found identity with him, not so much in the Risen Christ, or in Christ the Consoler or Redeemer” (691). Eberwein also considers the complex, yet often heterodox, Dickinsonian cooptation of the crucifixion at times expressing awe in “the magnitude of willingly incurred divine suffering,” but showing “much less interest in the crucifixion as a specific historical event related to salvation history…than she did in it as an example of more generalized human suffering” (Strategies of Limitation 250).

Dickinson’s consideration of suffering, as such, is surprisingly freed from Calvinist conceptions of human sinfulness and wretchedness; notably, she is poetically less devoted to the incarnation and resurrection of Christ than she is to his death (Oberhaus ‘Tender Pioneer” 354). Zapedowska conceives of the question of suffering in Dickinson’s poetry as linked to
her ongoing wrestling with a hidden God, who cruelly does not show himself, while nevertheless being unable to abandon the desire to know this God. Her poems then pit skepticism, accusation, and anger against the assumed benevolence of the deity.

The underlining of the *Imitation* emphasizes an interest in a conception of human existence as fatally bound to suffering, stressing its inevitability rather than the sinfulness of humanity. Countless passages attest to this: “Prepare thyself to bear many adversities and divers kinds of troubles in this miserable life; for so it will be with thee, wheresoever thou art, and so surely thou shalt find it, wheresoever thou hide thyself;” or “Thinkest thou to escape that which no mortal man could ever avoid? Which of the saints in the world was without crosses, and tribulation.”

The crucifixion as a figure for universal suffering conveyed the potential boundlessness of suffering while at the same time sustaining God’s abandonment signified in Christ’s exclamation, “Why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27.46). In Dickinson’s poems the suffering of the cross symbolizes the limitless extent of human pain, but also a profound mystery. The crucifixion is often universalized, standing for the infinite, unfathomable nature of human suffering. The divine crucifixion does not disappear, however. For instance, in “One Crucifixion is recorded only” (Fr670), Oberhaus sees the Crucifixion as a figure for humanity’s universal experience of death, without simultaneously ceasing to stand for the infinitely mysterious event of Christ’s death (“Tender Pioneer,” 352). I further argue, however, that the mystery of Christ’s humanity becomes the mystery of human nature, as his death discloses the infinite experience of human finitude. The human being in the throes of the soul’s depth in its turn can witness the profundity of ephemeral nature. Both nature and the human being have the capacity to express eternity, since their immanent temporality infinitely recurs. Christ’s renunciation is for Dickinson the wellspring of poetry. Because she focuses on the search for the true spirit, she privileges Christ’s transition between life and
death: here nature reveals more poignantly its hauntedness, since his death will return infinitely in each death; here art shows itself attempting to haunt, since it must speak of the mystery of this return that Christ’s renunciation epitomizes.

McIntosh conveys the complexity of Dickinson’s relation to Christ accurately when he writes that, “Dickinson wanted him [Christ] to be a human Christ, a friend in need, not a merely transcendent divinity. At the same time, she wanted him to remain a divine and human mystery” (121). She labors over this duality in “To know just how He suffered” (Fr688), a poem with strong Christological overtones. Although Christ is not named, as Freedman observes concerning this poem, “the suffering and end of human nature evokes the death on Calvary” (142). Moreover, I additionally maintain that the quest to determine the nature of grief and the choice to focus on the moment of transition between life and death recalls George Herbert’s liturgical poem “The Sacrifice.” As Oberhaus argues, “Dickinson’s agon in her poems on the life of Christ is with the Bible and the poetic tradition of Christian devotion” (“Tender Pioneer” 358). The seventeenth-century metaphysical poets are of course included in this tradition. In particular, Dickinson’s affinities with George Herbert have been amply noted.37 Boldly writing in the first person, Herbert’s “The Sacrifice,” like Dickinson’s poem, imagines the moment of transition from life to death; yet, while Herbert names his protagonist Christ, Dickinson’s “He” remains referentially ambiguous. Her poem thus evokes the Christological motif of Herbert’s poem, while not referring exclusively to the Crucifixion. “The Sacrifice” starts by presenting Christ contemplating the indifferent crowd and ends with his expiration on the cross. When they are placed side-by-side, the first stanza of Dickinson’s poem clearly echoes Herbert’s first stanza. It is Dickinson’s evocation of “The Sacrifice” coupled with the aforementioned references in her poem to suffering and to the loss of human

37 For the influence of George Herbert on Dickinson see Oberhaus’s Emily Dickinson’s Fascicles (4); Capps’s Emily Dickinson’s Reading, (68-71); Diane Gabrielson Scholl’s “From Aaron ‘Drest’ to Dickinson’s ‘Queen’” (1-23); and Judith Banzar’s “‘Compound Manner’: Emily Dickinson and the Metaphysical Poets” (421).
nature that elicits the allusions to Christ in her poem. The ambiguity of the poem’s reference allows, nonetheless, for it to refer more broadly also to human suffering:

O, all ye, who pass by, whose eyes and mind
To worldly things are sharp, but to me blind;
To me, who took eyes that I might you find:
   Was ever grief like mine?

To know just how He suffered – would be dear –
To know if any Human eyes were near
To whom He could entrust His wavering gaze –
Until it settled broad – on Paradise –

Both stanzas stress the failed encounter of gazes: the crowd sees worldly, not spiritual, things. Herbert deploys metaphorically the dyad vision/blindness to present the spiritual waywardness of the multitude and to demonstrate Christ’s utter loneliness. While Herbert points to blindness, Dickinson wonders if witnesses were present at all. In her poem the “seeing” is also left unconsummated and the inaccessibility of the state of the dying “He” renders him as isolated as Christ. Her first stanza recalls the anaphoric structure of Herbert’s poem with the “To” heading her first three lines as well as the rhyming scheme of the “The Sacrifice.” Herbert rhymes the first three lines—“mind/blind/find/”—and ends the fourth on a slant rhyme—“mine.” Dickinson follows suit with a slight variation, offering “dear” and “near,” but slanting the last two lines with “gaze” and “Paradise.” The iambic pentameter in both stanzas—uncharacteristic of Dickinson, but characteristic of Herbert—seals the stylistic similarity between the poems. In “The Sacrifice,” each three-line stanza closes with the refrain, “Was ever grief like mine?”, except for the last stanza, where the question ceaselessly reiterated is finally answered: “Never was grief like mine.” While Herbert has no qualms in portraying Jesus’s suffering, claiming at least that it is unmatchable, Dickinson’s evocation of his death makes no claims whatsoever. It suggests that Christ’s crucifixion and human death are mysterious events, dramatizing them as unknowable and incomprehensible, part and parcel of the myriad torments of belief. Alluding to Christ’s death, the poem explores the
universal experience of dying, as the event that opens the transcendental dimension of
immanent life:

To know just how He suffered – would be dear –
To know if any Human eyes were near
To whom He could entrust His wavering gaze –
Until it settled broad – on Paradise –

To know if He was patient – part content –
Was Dying as He thought – or different –
Was it a pleasant Day to die –
And if the Sunshine face His way –

What was His furthest mind – of Home – or God –
Or What the Distant say –
At News that He ceased Human Nature
Such a Day –

And Wishes – Had He any –
Just His Sigh – accented –
Had been legible – to Me –
And was He confident until
Ill fluttered out – In Everlasting Well –

And if He spoke – What name was Best –
What last
What one broke off with
At the Drowsiest –

Was he afraid – or tranquil
Might He know
How Conscious Consciousness – could grow –
Till Love that was – and Love too best to be –
Meet – and the Junction be Eternity

4 broad - ] full – firm – 19 last] first 26 be] mean –

(Fr688)

Probing the suffering of dying, her poem replaces the intimacy of the first person of
Herbert’s “The Sacrifice” with the detachment of the third person, so allowing the poem to
refer both to an undetermined “He” and to allude to Christ. The speaker wonders about the
moment of transition from life to death, speculating about this suffering in remarkably similar
ways to how the earlier poem “I measure every Grief I meet” speculated about grief. In the
latter poem, written around the same time as “To know just how He suffered,” Dickinson
fantasizes about a series of possibilities in vain; contemplation yields consolation by the end of the poem. In “To know just how He suffered,” the speculation yields no such results for the speaker, although the poem concludes by asserting the existence of a loving eternity. The challenging final three lines confront the threshold between life and death, the culmination of the moment of transition, after which all experience becomes inaccessible to our human way of knowing. Before “the Junction of Eternity” descends upon the “He,” the greatest enlargement of immanence occurs, as consciousness becomes profoundly conscious of itself. The poet wonders how “Conscious Consciousness” can grow “Till” it disappears into a temporal paradox. The latter merges past and future in an ever eternal present, as “Love that was – and Love too best to be - / Meet –”.

Implicitly, the acknowledgement of an afterlife shaped by the meeting of divine and human love extends itself for the whole of humanity, and so to the subject of the poem. Yet, the carefully detached tone of the speaker should makes us wary of accepting the final certitude with which the poem ends as an assertion rather than as an expression of a wish fulfillment, the full-fledged enactment of a fantasy designed to comfort. For if “I measure every Grief I meet” avoids the question of the afterlife since it uses the Crucifixion to convey the inordinate nature of human suffering, in its allusion to Christ’s moment of death, “To know just how He suffered” becomes embroiled in a two-fold presentation of his death: it dwells on the experience of Christ’s suffering in a human way and it attempts to show the experience of human suffering through the lens of love, hence divinely, love being the particular divine way of Christ’s experience of death. Redemption is a question this poem cannot evade. Just as the speaker fantasizes throughout the poem about the affective, perceptual, and cognitive possibilities of the experience of the undisclosed “He” and an allusive Christ without being able to offer more than a fictional dramatization, the redemption of the last stanza functions as a continuation of this fantasy. Imagining the redemptive power
of divine love, it attempts to know, now from the divine side, the suffering of Christ and of the “He,” but cannot. Or perhaps, the last stanza expresses a fantasy that would end all fantasies, the closure of eternity brought about by the union of the human and the divine way, temporal and everlasting love: “the Junction be Eternity” (or in its alternate version “the Junction means Eternity”) is the closure of possibility, the desire of the end of fantasizing itself, imagined as an encounter with peace.

What further unites the speculation of the five stanzas to the resolution of the sixth stanza is the return in the last two lines of the poem to the iambic pentameter neatly performed in the first stanza and gradually interrupted from the second stanza onwards. The poem voices a wish to know by surmising a series of aspects of the dying “He,” tentatively formulating considerations that are never resolved. At the same time, by its reassuring reinstatement of the pentameter at the end, it also implies that to know the answer to the musings of the speaker is to assert a belief in eternity. Yet, if the speaker’s guessing work remains in the realm of possibility, so does the certainty of eternity: both can be equally entertained; neither can be definitely confirmed.

Sustaining the mystery of the divinity while at the same time allowing for an identification with the human being in the throes of death, this poem indulges in the fantasy of capturing the poignancy of transition. It attempts both to enact and save a liminal state through a kind of transfiguration, whereby eternity arises from the meeting of the love of past things and the love that cannot exist in the world because it is divine. This meeting point, incomprehensible and inaccessible from the human perspective, is the eternal. The poem moves from a privileging of sight in its linkage of knowing with seeing, since the first two lines dramatize the meeting of gazes between “Human eyes” and the “wavering gaze” of the “He” to an examination that moves progressively from the outward to the internal world: the “thought,” “mind,” “wishes,” “emotions” of the next stanzas at last culminate in the
“Conscious Consciousness” transfigured. The juxtaposition of “Human eyes” with “wavering gaze” moreover suggests the latter is something more or less than human: either already moving away from the human world or endowed with a second divine nature aside from the human.

While the poem offers two possibilities for each experiential response of the “He,” (which is both the human being and allusively Christ), it defines the nature of his gaze. The first concern of the poem is whether the death being described is a solitary one; regardless of the existence of witnesses or not, the speaker describes his gaze as “wavering.” This is the only aspect of his affectivity, sensation, or perception that is finalized. With this single word, Dickinson is able to conjure the transitional state the poem enacts: much as his gaze wavers dangling between life and death, so the speaker wavers between two possibilities: witnesses/no witnesses, patience/impatience, sunny weather/cloudy weather, desiring/listlessness, speech/silence, and fear/tranquility. The gaze of the “He” performs the mental activity of the speaker, which ultimately points toward the inadequacy of attempting to know or speak of the process of dying or of ends in general: the end is always contemplated from the perspective of those who, heading there, are still somewhere along the way. But the end can only be known from the standpoint of itself. This word, “wavering,” anchors the poem, allowing the speaker to develop the field of uncertainties and yearnings, which at the end are transfigured outside of the temporality of experience. Binding past and future, so as to retrieve them from temporality, resolves the inherent tension in the “wavering.” This space of speculation, the rocking motion that reveals the spaciousness of the finite, enlarges the infinite depth of what has boundaries. It also mimics the indeterminacy concerning the identity of the “He.”

The dual-referentiality of “To know just how He suffered”—the pronoun both alluding to Christ and to an undisclosed “He”—is able to sustain the double sense of the
crucifixion as an historical event and a figure for human suffering. This duality is also present in the *Imitation*, where the ejaculations of the follower of Christ and the exhortations to imitate Him, present the life and death of Christ both as a model for human conduct and a figure for human suffering. Although à Kempis and Dickinson both embrace the dual-referentiality inherent in Christ, Dickinson deviates from the imitation à Kempis proposes. While à Kempis puts forth the necessity of imitating the perfection of Christ, for Dickinson Christ’s suffering signifies the mystery of human depth: of the infinity that constitutes the human soul. Yet, this infinity also exists in nature, outside of the human being, and Dickinson often turns nature’s infinity into a figure for the infinite experiential potential of the finite being. The greatest isolation, Christ-like, leads to the internalization of cosmological infinity, transforming the interior life into a boundless experiential space. The devotee then reads the advice of his guiding manual, applying its suggestions concerning modes of living, activities, and affective responses, much as the poet works out “truth” in the meditation of the poem. Yet, while the devotee seeks to imitate the perfection and suffering of Christ’s life, having reinvented Christ as a figure for the infinity of immanence, the spiritual poet seeks to reveal this depth—the supernatural nature of the ephemeral being and of the natural world. This is the task of a poetics of spirituality. Just as “To know just how He suffer” fails in its search to “know” the suffering entailed in the process of dying, “To measure every Grief I meet” also fails in ascertaining the nature of the pain of others. These two poems ultimately assert a similar impossibility much as they avow the universality of the mortal condition of suffering and its mysteriousness. The infinity of the finite then remains tied to the infinite (and unknowable) nature of experience of oneself and of others. The “He” in “To know just how He suffered” too lies in the throes of this mystery. Undergoing a mortal human death, the human “He” and allusive “Christ” are both in the midst of a wondrous unknown.
Dickinson’s rejection of the worldly and criticism of Calvinist dogma coupled with her commitment to poetry and spirituality is the antagonism that propels, mitigates, and shapes her writing practice. À Kempis’s *Imitation* offered a model for how to conciliate a writing ambition with spiritual pursuits, suggesting Dickinson’s mode of living and conceptual poetic outlook. It helped her conceive a poetics of spirituality whereby the poem aimed at revealing the infinite nature of the immanent world as well as the infinite mystery of the finite being epitomized in the figure of Christ. The *Imitation* offered productive reflections on certain themes—renunciation, the opposition between human nature and grace, suffering and consolation, and the martyrdom of Christ—that touched upon her concern with the spiritualizing function of poetry and coalesced in Dickinson’s poems and letters. Doctrinal divergences, however, distanced Dickinson from à Kempis, in particular regarding the latter’s focus on human sinfulness and humanity’s urgent need for salvation. Dickinson did not subscribe to the Augustinian and Calvinist view of human fallenness. À Kempis’s focus on spiritual practice over dogma, nonetheless, allowed Dickinson to find his book productive despite these differences.

The poet aims at discovering the “true” spirit of things, which is the infinity of the finite, as it manifests itself in nature and in the “mysteries of human nature” (L289). The spirit of a question haunts the finite in nature and in the human being. As it unfolds and enters into fragment upon fragment of poetic utterance, not quite reaching the answer, but striving against the limitations of language, it faces the finite’s placement in the cosmos—its status and substance, depth and destiny. Forcing all onto language, the poem queries the instance when language finally lets out a haunted whiff of the divine utterance. Only then does it reveal the infinite nature of the finite—the transcendental dimension of immanent nature and of the interior life.
Chapter Five

Baudelaire – Spectral Balladeer

Perhaps slightly grudgingly, when Paul Valéry in “Situation de Baudelaire” described the poet’s modus operandi he depicted him as an ambitious conspirator whose perceptive critical sense led him to single-handedly topple the Romantic poets, found a new poetic era and internationalize French poetry. This was accomplished, to paraphrase Valéry, with less than three hundred pages. The hubris of Baudelaire extends itself beyond the poems he wrote and the artists, as Valéry suggests, that he plundered. How to extend one’s influence beyond the grave as something that travels inscribed in the work itself, in the way it stands as an intermittent presence, not foreclosed, not finished, so alterable?

Baudelaire embeds the idea of infinity in the conceptualization of his poetic works, so that the infinite poem becomes a useful a metaphor for his vision. His work performs a movement toward the blossoming of this promise, as he articulates ever more precisely the awareness of order as a possibility among possibilities, an order surviving for now, existing for the now, whose necessity dwells only in itself, in its collated integrity, i.e., the consciousness of book as an arrangement that springs from the abyssal possibility of endless arrangements.

Imagine then the poem that shows the infinite poem operating in each poem. Placed at the edge of an oeuvre, this poem affects the work by keeping it open even after the poet’s death, open as a principle functioning in the other poems that this one poem observes, and in the order in which the other poems that the poem observes are ordered. “Le Gouffre” is such a poem. At the time of the poet’s death, it remained outside of Fleurs du mal and of Spleen de Paris, as if outside of time, not yet activated by contact with other poems, but whose content describes an overarching vision. The infinite poem betrays the desire for immortality. Baudelaire wants to leave open the ability of a work to rewrite itself, to continue as the image
of a poetic vision that remains meaningful for posterity and also of a vision left open. To be left open is not to be left unfinished. The unfinished aim has been curtailed, perpetually arrested in its aiming toward a never-reached goal. The openness of the work is the desistance of purpose, the reliance on sequence because it entails only a progression not tied to necessity, and the awareness of contingency no longer as the downfall of the ephemeral being but as the triumphal moment of the particular. It also constitutes the rebellious gesture that Olivier Salazar-Ferrer a propos of Benjamin Fondane’s reading of Baudelaire calls “la révolte contre la finitude” (Une Poétique du Gouffre 57).

How can a poem observe other poems? What exactly is meant by observation? And who is the observer? The poet? The reader? Or something else altogether? Niklas Luhmann’s system theory provides an observational framework to tackle this problem. The ambition of his work is to conceptualize a general theory of society by approaching it as a set of events, a series of operations occurring within the purview of systems. Observers and observation are crucial notions for his general theory of society. Without observations there are no systems to begin with. The system emerges when there is an observing of the difference between marked and unmarked space, thus generating the distinction between system and environment. Without distinctions there are no systems and without observing difference there are no distinctions.

What produces the difference, or distinction between marked and unmarked space, is an operation, which results from an observing of the distinction between this side and the other. The system produces itself as an operation that is able to produce and connect itself to other similar operations. These systems are open, and their functioning is based on the relation between the system and the environment. They interact with the environment and are self-regulatory, incorporating environmental challenges, or irritations, by producing operations that operatively close the system since the condition for the system’s openness is
its ability to integrate the challenges of the environment into the binary code that rules it, that is, the ability of the system to maintain its boundaries by producing new solutions to environmental challenges. Following Maturana and Varela’s work in biology, Luhmann calls this capacity of self-regulatory reiteration autopoiesis.

Explaining the difference between observing and observer, Luhmann says that “Observing is viewed as an operation and the observed as a system that forms whenever such operations are not just individual events but become linked as part of a sequence that can be distinguished from the environment” (Introduction to Systems Theory 101). The observer, thus, is not a person, but a system producing operations and operations are observations. Since Luhmann distinguishes three types of systems: living systems (biological life), psychic systems (consciousness), and social systems (communication systems) (28), observations can be made from the standpoint of any of these systems and their environments or in between various systems.

“Le Gouffre” is a poetic utterance that observes Baudelaire’s work as it remains within it. Luhmann constantly reminds us that the observer does not observe from above, as if from an outside privileged position (101). The observer observes from within, from the blind spot that it occupies as it observes. “Le Gouffre” as such observes within Baudelaire’s work but from the outside of his two major poetic works, occupying an outside position in relation to the books while still being of course inside the oeuvre.

Crucially, Luhmann distinguishes between a first-level observation and second-level observation. The advent of modern society, according to Luhmann, is a product of the development of an increasingly more complex ability of the systems to observe themselves observing, that is, of the development of second-level observation. This is also true for the art system.
Modern art arises when the art system develops into a full-fledged operatively closed autopoietic reproductive system and thus one that observes itself observing first-order observations. For the latter, “the observer and his observing activity remain unobserved” (*Art as Social System* 61). The second-level observation renders the first-level observation visible at the same time that it renders its own observation unobservable. That is, observation makes the first-level observation visible as observation but the second-level observation remains unobserved as observation in itself. Only a third-level observation could render the second-level observation visible while assuming that its own observation in its turn is unobserved.

For the first-level observer the world “seems both probable and true,” since the observer only looks at the object focusing on the what, and does not think on the how the object appears. The second-level observer “notices the improbability,” but at the same time, since all operations are improbable (they could just the same be other operations) this improbability becomes “normal and unproblematic” (*Art as Social System* 62).

In Baudelaire’s oeuvre, “Le Gouffre” occupies this second-level of observation, observing the other poems observing and the observation inherent in their sequence too. It occupies a different textual level for it is not included in either *Fleurs* or *Spleen*. Other poems that appear in the 1868 edition of the *Fleurs* are also outside (while still inside), occupying a marginal position within the poet’s oeuvre. What makes “Le Gouffre” unique is the way the poem articulates the relationship of the poet to forms. The poem also explicitly thematises observing others observing, beginning with the first line where Baudelaire observes Pascal observing his abyss. What do the poems that “Le Gouffre” observes observe and what remains invisible as observation in “Le Gouffre” as poetic utterance? that is, what is its blind spot? Before examining how observation functions in the poem and how it presents a position for a self-reflexive observation of Baudelaire’s oeuvre, the question of how Baudelaire conceived of order arises, for the observing of “Le Gouffre” observes the poems in their
sequence – a sequence which the poems activate but that constitutes at the same time their blind spot.

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In eventful irony, perhaps, the very condemnation of *Fleurs du mal* draws out the concept of the infinite poem intently for Baudelaire. The notion of a masterpiece contains in itself the idea of finality and closure which is the expression of the triumph of contingency: the surprise and the awe of finding a form among all possible forms that presents itself as *the only form* while, as the viewer or reader is intensely aware, it is absolutely contingent. Having to withdraw six censured poems from the original projected manuscript of 1857 leads Baudelaire in the 1861 post-trial edition to introduce a whole new section “Tableaux Parisiens,” a total of thirty-five new poems, and to rearrange the order of poems such as *Sépulture; Tristesse de La Lune* and *Le Vin* group.

It is both the possibility of infinite re-arrangement and the understanding of a unique arrangement that presents itself implicitly in this decision. What was excised affected the overall form of the work Baudelaire conceived to the point that it needed to be reconceived, reformulated. Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly defended the integrity of *Fleurs du mal* precisely by referring to the book’s “architecture secrète.” He continues to defend the order of the poems:

Les Fleurs du mal ne sont pas à la suite les unes des autres comme tant de morceaux lyriques, dispersés par l’inspiration et ramassés dans un recueil sans d’autre raison que de les réunir. Elles sont moins des poésies qu’une œuvre poétique de la plus forte unité. Au point de vue de l’art et de la sensation esthétique, elles perdraient donc beaucoup à n’être pas lues dans l’ordre où le poète, qui sait ce qu’il fait, les a rangées.42

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42 Accessed online at http://www.poesies.net/leprocesdesfleurdsimal.txt
Since Barbey d’Aurevilly’s statement, the hunt for this secret architecture has taken many forms: some have focused on how the book begins with birth and ends with death. Others have privileged the cycle of poems devoted to Baudelaire’s three loves; and still others have studied the thematic underpinnings of the book and the arches the group headings develop. Marcel Françon, on the other hand, reads Barbey D’Aurevilly’s statement concerning the secret architecture as arising from the general effect of the book, which is a moral effect. Runyon takes a different approach. He aims at showing how both the 1857 and the 1861 version are ordered sequentially. Each poem converses with the one preceding and following it, forming what Runyon terms intratextual relations, for they are formed inside the text rather than in relation to external texts.

In a 1861 letter to Alfred de Vigny concerning the second edition, Baudelaire himself attributes the greatest importance of the order of the poems: “Le seul éloge que je sollicite pour ce livre est qu’on reconnaisse qu’il n’est pas un pur album et qu’il a un commencement et une fin. Tous les poèmes nouveaux ont été faits pour être adaptés au cadre singulier que j’avais choisi” (Correspondance II 196).

So the poems’ meaning is deeply connected to their order, their place within the poetic frame he has created. As Runyon notes, Mario Richter’s poem-by-poem reading of the 1961 edition already accounts for this, viewing the poems in relation to each other.

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43 Barbara Wright’s essay “Baudelaire’s Poetic Journey in Les Fleurs du mal” in The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire examines the complexities of the various ways the order or journey of the book might be read, offering several compelling simultaneous approaches: the life cycle, the love cycles, the aesthetic development, and the journey through the city are some of them.

44 In Poetry and Moral Dialectic: Baudelaire’s “Secret Architecture,” James R. Lawler groups the poems in Fleurs in sets of threes and fives according to their themes thus relating the order to the thematic underpinnings.

45 “C’est dans l’effet général qu’il faut donc chercher l’unite du recueil, dans l’effet moral” (“L’unite des Fleurs du mal” 1133).
examining their contrasts, thematic migrations or rendering of the same element in a different context. Or as F.W. Leakey also observed: “Of further interest also is the principle Baudelaire sought to adopt in the arrangement of these poems – that of sequence, with one poem leading smoothly into the next” (5).

But if Fleurs follows an order from beginning to end, his prose poems collection Le Spleen de Paris defies the excising gesture. Paradoxically by negating the existence of a beginning or an ending, Baudelaire construes the utmost form of unity, for each poem will always link to the next, regardless of what it is. In his well-known letter to his editor Arsène Houssaye, to which we will return later, Baudelaire describes a very different relation to his text: it is no longer a question of the unity of the work, but rather his prose poems are compared to a winding snake, which can be chopped and reattached at any point of her body.

In Spleen Baudelaire understands an order of poems as only a slice of a continuum of poetic manifestations, which arises from the same potential wealth and thus partakes of the same utterance: the different element the poem renders visible does not change the fact the poem exists in this infinite continuum. It is not surprising thus that Baudelaire intended to prepare yet another edition of Fleurs, had not death prevented him.46

Why keep rearranging and adding poems to the “finished work”? Is it not because the work itself is never finished? Writing in June 20th 1863 to Gervais Charpentier who, having published two prose poems in the Revue Nationale, had made slight punctuation changes without consulting the poet, Baudelaire evokes the integrity of his choices and his exhaustive labor over the poems. He writes that when sending a poem to the press, it “est parfaitement fini” (Correspondance II 307). But as Pascal Pia notes, “A la vérité, cette lettre fort pertinente contient pourtant une légère vantardise. Car s’il est vrai que Baudelaire ne livrait

46 His friends Théodore de Banville and Charles Asselineau published the third edition posthumously in 1868.
bien de bâclé aux imprimeurs, il est faux que son travail le trouvât finalement satisfait...Toute nouvelle publication est pour lui l’occasion de remaniements (Baudelaire par lui-même 97-98).

The refusal to accept or acknowledge the closure of the poem is another expression of the idea of infinitude as fundamentally underlining the poetic impulse. The book is an open book as much as the poem an open poem. The marriage of print culture with market economy allows for the reconstruction of the “masterpiece” as much as it brings about its necessity: new books offer new products to the reader and new profits for the writer. This is the material aspect of the manifestation of the infinite poem in Baudelaire’s work: the forces operating within capitalism generate the infinite poem. The reconstruction of the poem, however, betrays also the artistic compulsion, the search for, in the words of Jack Spicer, the perfect poem with its infinitely small vocabulary and which has never been written.47

The same idea of infinity as the catalyst for poetic instability exists in Dickinson’s editorial approach to her practice. As it is well known, a great number of her “finished” poems have multiple versions, which do not necessarily establish a particular hierarchy among themselves and that Sharon Cameron describes as Dickinson’s choosing not to choose between the various possibilities for her poetic embodiments (Choosing Not Choosing). Dickinson’s poem remains open in much more radical ways than Baudelaire’s. This is partly due to publishing, which inevitably seals and closes the book, the poem and the editorial gesture.

Yet, Baudelaire fundamentally sees the poem as always latently open to the infinite: not only as emerging from countless possibilities but continuing to exist in the possibility of its transformation, either because the context around it changes (the different editions of

47 “A really perfect poem (no one yet has written one) could be perfectly translated by a person who did not know one word of the language it was written in. A really perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary” (After Lorca 13).
Fleurs), or as is the case of the relationship Baudelaire articulates between Fleurs and Spleen, as new prose poems functioning as companions to earlier poems and thus inevitably affecting their meaning. As J.A. Hiddleston notes, “it emerges from the many references to them [the prose poems] in his [Baudelaire’s] correspondence that he thought of them as complementing Les Fleurs du Mal and providing a kind of companion volume” (1). Baudelaire’s “rewriting” of L’Horloge and Le Crépuscule de Soir, for instance, in both Fleurs and Spleen constitutes an example of how this complementation might function.

In a letter to Armand Fraisse on February 19th 1860, Baudelaire praises the sonnet, the short form, favoring it to the long poem form, which he criticizes. As he sees it, the sonnet has a “beauté pythagorique” capable of expressing all wealth of moods and states: “bouffonnerie” “galanterie” “passion” “rêverie” and “méditation philosophique.” Importantly, he asks his friend: “Avez-vous observé qu’un morceau de ciel, aperçu par un soupirail, ou entre deux cheminées, deux rochers, ou par une arcade, etc, donnait une idée plus profonde de l’infini que le grande panorama vu du haut d’une montagne?” (Correspondance I 676). The contrast between the immensity of the world and the selection of form renders the infinite visible. Precisely because infinity cannot be grasped, it needs the formal work to momentarily provide the frame through which to perceive the impossibility of perceiving it. Through the basement window, between two rocks one becomes aware of infinity because the frame emphasizes that something has been left out, excluded.

Baudelaire voices this same opinion in the Salon de 1859 when writing about Penguilly’s painting Petites Mouettes, where he praises the painter’s depiction of the sky and the water of the beach landscape. Baudelaire writes that, “l’azur intense du ciel et de l’eau, deux quartiers de roche qui font une porte ouverte sur l’infini (vous savez que l’infini paraît plus profond quand il est plus resserré), une nuée, une multitude, une avalanche, une plaie d’oiseaux blancs, et la solitude! Considérez cela, mon cher ami, et dites moi ensuite si vous
croyez que M. Penguilly soit dénué d’esprit poétique” (OC 1070). Once again it is a question of framing: Baudelaire privileges visual settings where the finite is juxtaposed to boundless space and thus accentuating the latter. In other words, what has been selected appears in its relationship to infinitude of which we are now suddenly aware. The looming craggy rocks at the left foreground of the painting not only frame the body of water in the distance but their shadows in the sand also mark the surface differently. Their tops trace a continuous line to the clouds, moving toward the far left increasingly swallowed by light. Tellingly, Baudelaire ends this commentary by rhetorically affirming the painter’s poetic sense, for this is what the poem shows, what in the same Salon Baudelaire calls a propos of Delacroix, “l’infini dans le fini” (OC 1053).

The folding of the infinite into the finite seems accurately to approach the heart of Baudelaire’s poetry. He himself articulated it overtly in his poems. For instance, in “Le Voyage” the poet tells us the traveler cradles within, “notre infini sur le fini des mers.” A playful inversion, it flips on its head the manner one usually thinks of finitude: the ocean, which usually in Baudelaire’s lexicon evokes infinity, here appears as the finite embodied, while the experiential capacity of the human being is cast as infinite. Part of this inversion is the ennui that will emerge later in the poem: the deadness threatening to cast each traveler into despair. The ending of “Femmes Damnées” also presents ennui as infinity. Here the poet calls upon the damned women and says “fuyez l'infini que vous portez en vous!” In this poem the infinite figures as the infinite heart, as what makes one infinitely love despite consequences, which in this poem is condemnation to eternal hell.

Baudelaire thus sees the entire mission and theme of poetry precisely as the articulation of an exclusion, that is, the finite that shows itself concealing another finite, but also the finite that by making infinity visible is only seen as that which triumphed within the realm of possibility, in relation to a background. Again as Baudelaire writes to Armand
Fraisse in 1860, the poem operates at two levels. On the one hand it voices its affect, for instance, “bouffonnerie.” Underlining this manifestation, however, lurks all that contradicts it, that which has been excluded, forgotten and repressed for one particular depiction to exist.

More importantly than what the poem actually conveys is that it always re-conceives the relationship of the finite to the infinite. The poem continues as yet another formulation of the same poetic concern, which is “une idée… de l’infini.” Thus poems require more poems, books supplement other books, and the poem itself remains lurking open, waiting for future metamorphoses that the poet might concoct. In a draft of 1855, Baudelaire articulates in a different way a definition of poetry: “La Poésie est ce qu’il y a de plus réel, c’est ce qui n’est complètement vrai que dans un autre monde” (qtd in Pia Pascal 93). This other world where poetry finds its truth lends to poetry the upmost reality among the things of the world. This reality, however, arises from poetry’s alienation. The latter points to an absence: a location that is ambiguously rendered as existing in a parallel or supplemental world, which cannot be reached. The alienation is surely linked to the idea of infinity that each poem renders visible. The materialization of form alienates what the form excludes, and in this way, shows us the infinity surrounding and encompassing everything; it points to what is not seen and what cannot be seen.

Baudelaire also poses this aim in the metaphor he construes about Spleen and its structure. An animal existing in ongoing metamorphoses, the image of the self-regenerative snake once again places a (Christian) figure of infinity at the core of his poetry. Thus he writes to Arsène Houssaye:

Nous pouvons couper où nous voulons, moi ma rêverie, vous le manuscrit, le lecteur sa lecture; car je ne suspends pas la volonté rétive de celui-ci au fil interminable d’une intrigue superflue. Enlevez une vertèbre, et les deux morceaux de cette tortueuse
fantaisie se rejoindront sans peine. Hachez-la en nombreux fragments, et vous verrez que chacun peut exister à part. Dans l’espérance que quelques uns de ces tronçons seront assez vivants pour vous plaire et vous amuser, j’ose vous dédier le serpent tout entier (Le Spleen de Paris 23).

There are no perfect orders. Each order takes the place of all the other orders that could exist instead of the one in place. Everything that has a place takes the place of something else. It is this realization, perhaps, that renders a “closed” order pointless, or in Baudelaire’s words “une intrigue superflue.” On the one hand this realization entails the exercise of a joyful freedom. Baudelaire makes no impositions on himself, his editor, or his readers. The work is indestructible as it embraces its contingency, which recognizes implicitly its ephemerality in the midst of countless other ephemeral embodiments. The indestructibility of the work depends on its making use of its contingent status rather than attempt the impossible universalization of a unique order: the unattainable unity that will coalesce all things into an ordered whole.

The temporary frame Baudelaire’s ordering of these poems entails and the poem itself, which if retrieved out of this grouping still holds together, brings to light the idea of infinity, the expression of which Baudelaire saw as fundamentally the aim of poetry. The poem is the two rocks that remind us of the excluded everywhere. It renders the outside of the frame visible as the imperceptible.

The metaphor of the snake points of course also to the problem of evil that so much attracted Baudelaire: the infinite offense of humanity in the notion of original sin is (as Blaise Pascal already knew) the most crucial and inescapable manifestation of infinity.

Baudelaire’s poems perform the infinity of evil that original sin creates, that is, the infinity of human suffering revealed in the inescapable pursuit of vain pleasure. An entire
species is continuously propelled temporally forward but so fundamentally without purpose or equilibrium that a vast soul-death threatens to end all. Furthermore considering Baudelaire’s statements about poetry and order, each poem reminds us of the infinite distance between the actual and the potential, the myriad possibilities in lieu of the fragile possibility one beholds. The poem brings to light the distance between inside and outside. The figure of the self-regenerative snake foregrounds the triumphal contingency of the poem that emerges from the abyssal death of fathomless possibility and that renders visible the experience of infinite movement and strife under the risk of an increasing purposelessness.

Infinity does not always fare well in Baudelaire’s poetry. It leads often to reflections on the incommensurable, provoking dread and vertigo, and awakening the fear of annihilation, because once again, the self-regenerative serpent is the infinity of original sin (and the infinity of possibility, which overwhelms.) Arguing for the way Baudelaire’s texts articulate a double (textual and visual) vision, Françoise Meltzer addresses the influence of Joseph de Maistre in the late Baudelaire. One of the ways the rightwing, staunchly Augustinian religious thinker influences the poet is in giving great importance to original sin, a crucial idea for Baudelaire’s oeuvre. As Meltzer observes, “…Maistre is the grim spokesman for original sin, the notion without which little of Baudelaire’s work can be understood” (17). “One of Baudelaire’s most consistent beliefs,” she continues, “[is that of] original sin as the root of all human experience” (23). Meltzer reads Baudelaire’s discussion of the nature of crime and virtue in his essay “The peintre de la vie moderne” in relation to original sin. Crime is natural for nature is evil (original sin has rendered it so). Virtue on the other hand is supernatural since it is artificially acquired, that is, it is learnt, not innate (Meltzer 28).

Baudelaire articulates a troubled relationship to nature elsewhere. For instance in a letter of 1855 to Fernand Desnoyers, responding to his request for a contribution to a
collection of poems about Fontainebleau and its forest, Baudelaire replies that, “Je ne croirai jamais que l’âme des Dieux habite dans les plantes, et quand même elle y habiterait, je m’en soucierais médiocrement, et considérerai la mienne comme d’un bien plus haut prix que celle des légumes sanctifiés” (qtd in Pascal Pia 98). Baudelaire’s tongue and cheek reply refuses both Pagan and Christian adoration of nature: nature is godless for it is fundamentally evil. By focusing only on nature as food, the “légumes,” Baudelaire reminds us that nature is only animal, a means for the sustenance of the body, which is, like nature, naturally corrupt and evil. Baudelaire shares these ideas with Pascal. They come from Augustine, for whom nature is degenerate, the body is evil and human beings are hateful in themselves while lovable only insofar as they are capable of loving God.

If Baudelaire believed the mission of the poem was to capture momentarily the idea of infinity – both as infinite evil and infinite possibility – what were his religious beliefs?

Baudelaire’s “religion” is paradoxical and complex. His work performs a set of irreverent religious attitudes, particularly the “Révolte” section of Fleurs which consists of three poems all of which enact a rebellion against God. In “Le Reniement de Saint Pierre,” the poet sides with Saint Peter against a tyrannical God, “gorgé de viande et de vins.” In “Abel et Cain,” the poet urges the race of Cain to rise up and “sur la terre jette Dieu!” And finally, in “Les Litanies de Satan,” using a liturgical form, the poet cries out to Satan for pity. This “révolte” constitutes Baudelaire’s Satanism, which as Walter Benjamin aptly noted, revealed the religious framework of his poetry: to give up God one must give up Satan.48

In his essay on Baudelaire, Aldous Huxley’s calls the poet “a looking-glass Christian;” “a Christian inside out, the photographic image in negative of a Father of the

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48 “Almost always the confession of piousness comes from Baudelaire like a battle cry. He will not give up his Satan. Satan is the real stake in the struggle which Baudelaire had to carry on with his unbelief. It is a matter not of sacraments and prayers, but of the Luciferian privilege of blaspheming the Satan to whom one has fallen prey” (“The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” 57)
Church” (qtd in Scales 85). Jean Prévost sees Baudelaire’s Satanism as aesthetic in its aim and thus not reflecting a disavowal of faith or an endorsement of Satanism. “Baudelaire ne blasphème qu’en chrétien,” writes Prévost (Baudelaire 61).

In his personal autobiographic writings, Baudelaire voices very different attitudes, leading Prévost, for instance, to say that “Sa foi n’a rien de neuf” (Baudelaire 58), and that, “sa foi alors est simple, naïve, mais sans mythes” (59). “Il prie alors Dieu seul,” he continues, “Le Dieu de catholiques” (59). In a series of entries in his autobiographical Mon Coeur Mis à Nu (1859-1866), Baudelaire confesses that, “Dès mon enfance, [he had a] tendance à la mysticité,” and speaks of his “conversations avec Dieu” (101). This wealth of communication takes on a wealth of expressions in his work. In Fusées (1855-1862) Baudelaire flaunts the necessity of prayer: “Je me jure à moi-même de prendre désormais les règles suivantes pour règles éternelles de ma vie: ‘Faire tous les matins ma prière à Dieu, réservoir de toute force et de toute justice, à mon père, à Mariette et à Poe, comme intercesseurs’” (JI 47). He goes on to spell out what he needs from God: strength to carry out his work as much as force permits.

As Crépet and Blin note, both autobiographical texts Fusées and Mon Coeur Mis à Nu enact a “mouvement vers Dieu,” which is often expressed in the reiteration of the necessity of prayer as much as in the articulation of the contents of prayers. So they conclude that, “Le fait est là que notre auteur, qu’il ait ou non utilisé des sacrements, a eu recours constamment à l’oraison non seulement la plus humble en esprit (celle qui, par conscience de l’indignité, se prévalait d’un certain nombre d’intercesseurs) mais surtout la plus misérable au point de vue littéraire, disons: le plus sincère parce que la plus puérile, la moins lyrique” (JI 202).

Baudelaire’s formulation of his plea attempts to abandon artifice. He writes in a disaffected style, and above all, without irony. The prayer stands in stark contrast with the fierce irony and irreverence of most of his writings. Here appears a humble Baudelaire. The editors’ description of his religious pleas in his autobiographical style as “child-like” and thus
sincere seems accurate and perhaps the only way an inveterate ironic moraliste could express “earnestness.” But Baudelaire’s acceptance of God does not manifest itself only in prayer. In Mon Coeur Mis à Nu, for instance, Baudelaire speaks of the two injunctions operating simultaneously in every human being: toward God and toward Satan. The first is an injunction toward spirituality and ascension; the second is the pleasure of descending into the animal nature of the human being (JI 62). It is clear that Baudelaire places the first injunction in a higher sphere, without being blind to the reality of human nature, which will also always heed the “Satanic” calling because of original sin, which makes vice pleasurable. Certainly this double bidding contributes to the conflicting religious positions in Baudelaire’s oeuvre.

Le Gouffre

In his important study on Baudelaire, Benjamin Fondane argues that Baudelaire and Pascal fundamentally share the same sensibility, “le goût de l’infini,” that for both represents the incapacity of reason to achieve assurances or certainties, in other words, the revelation of the instability of all knowledge and the fundamental ignorance of the human being in relation to its world and to itself (226). Both as such accept the existence of a mystery at the heart of this ignorance, which can only be original sin. Otherwise, the abyssal incertitude of the world would become even more dreadful, thus Fondane writes that “...ce gouffre, c’était la soudaine vision que leurs convictions les plus fermes, les plus assurées étaient sans fondement et qu’il fallait, sans le pouvoir cependant, renoncer à elles, qu’on était soumis à une espèce d’envoûtement” (Fondane 229).

For Baudelaire, in the poem occurs the sudden realization Fondane speaks of. Its precipitous appearance causes a disorientating vertigo, for the abyss arises and disappears only to arise again, shaking all beliefs and security. It is the rupture of the illusory continuity of the real. Yet because the experience of the abyss radicalizes the ground of the real, it becomes, as Salazar-Ferrer notes, the space of the singular: “Cet espace ouvert par
l’expérience du gouffre est aussi l’espace du singulier et de l’individuel, que le nominalisme de Fondane se plaît à concevoir comme le lieu d’une liberté infinie” (Une Poétique du Gouffre 59). The radical individuality and singularity found in the abyss is, in other words, the call of the new that contributed so avidly to the poet’s angst as it swayed and captivated him. The new conciliates the universality of infinity with the singularity of the instant. The new sustains the chain of infinity; it regulates the finite’s ephemerality but also ensures the openness of the world via its labor.

The connection between the new and infinity appears clearly for instance in the newly added poem, “Le Voyage,” with which Baudelaire concludes the 1861 edition of Fleurs. The last lines of the poem read: “Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,/ Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe? /Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau.” Beginning in childhood and ending in death, this poem casts living as traveling. Moving toward the unknown paradoxically makes the latter more and more familiar because the unknown constantly deflects its promise. The dullness and constancy of the changing world irrevocably offers the same failure of consolation. The freedom of childhood (which comes from the avidness and curiosity the world inspires) soon gives away to weariness and indifference. Yet by the end of the poem, the destructive effects of these sentiments open up the abyssal freedom of the new that blasts with all the small islands, that is, all the things, spheres, ways through and in which the human being attempts to find substance, ground, happiness and meaning. As all these fail, the possibility continues and its motor is the nouveau, remaining latently in what has been excluded. It can emerge at any moment, bursting up and generating a new movement. In abyssal disavowal of worldly attachment, the pure freedom of possibility emerges.

Salazar-Ferrer’s essay thus examines the ambivalence of Fondane’s interpretation of the abyss in Baudelaire’s poetic vision, in other words, the affective polarity the abyss entails,
wavering between wellspring of existential dread and unfettered freedom. Certainly, Baudelaire establishes this ambivalence throughout his oeuvre. “L’Invitation au voyage” for instance promises a movement toward an unknown infinity, which also represents an idyllic freedom. The poet calls upon a woman to travel with him to an unknown land, whose description revolves around a domino effect of unfolding figures for infinity: “Les soleils mouillés / De ces ciels brouillés”; “Les riches plafonds, / Les miroirs profonds”; and “Les soleils couchants / Revêtent les champs, / Les canaux, la ville entière, / D’hyacinthe et d’or;”

The poet indulges in a dreamy idealization from where all dread has miraculously vanished. The freedom of this departure can only maintain its deep calm harmony, which the poet reiterates in a two-line refrain, because it exists in the realm of projection, anticipation and imagination. If this register were to be broken, one assumes, freedom and order could no longer straddle the same terrain. In Baudelaire freedom does not usually appear as joyful as in this poem. Nonetheless, “L’Invitation au voyage” alongside “Le Voyage” present two ideas of freedom: the idyllic freedom of the projected motion toward an ideal, and the pure freedom of the frightful traveling toward the unknown.

Arguably the most dreadful, spleenful poem Baudelaire wrote, “Le Gouffre,” allows for the ambivalence of freedom to emerge: the abyss is both “l'espace affreux et captivant.” Perplexing, dejected, “Le Gouffre” appeared in L’Artiste in 1962 and was included in the posthumous 1868 edition under the heading “Spleen et Idéal.” We will never know whether Baudelaire would have included this poem in his projected third edition. It is nonetheless a poem that articulates his approach to “oeuvre” and to “poem,” because of its outside status in relation to the two books of the poet and because of its articulation of infinity folding into the finite:

Le Gouffre

Pascal avait son gouffre, avec lui se mouvant.
— Hélas! tout est abîme, — action, désir, rêve,
Parole! Et sur mon poil qui tout droit se relève
Maine fois de la Peur je sens passer le vent.

En haut, en bas, partout, la profondeur, la grève,
Le silence, l'espace affreux et captivant...
Sur le fond de mes nuits Dieu de son doigt savant
Dessine un cauchemar multiforme et sans trêve.

J'ai peur du sommeil comme on a peur d'un grand trou,
Tout plein de vague horreur, menant on ne sait où;
Je ne vois qu'infini par toutes les fenêtres,

Et mon esprit, toujours du vertige hanté,
Jalousé du néant l'insensibilité.
— Ah! ne jamais sortir des Nombres et des Êtres!

By the nineteenth-century the rumor that Pascal’s abyss was “real” had become entrenched. It was thought that he suffered from a kind of traumatic agoraphobia after an accident on a bridge toward Neuilly left his carriage hanging by a thread overlooking the precipice. This rumor has since been seriously disputed. We cannot ascertain whether the accident happened, let alone if Pascal suffered from a psychological disturbance. It is nonetheless apparent that Baudelaire knew of this story, so that Gochberg assumes Baudelaire’s line refers to the incident literally, as he mistakenly assumes that Fondane does too.

Baudelaire’s first line functions in a double sense. Using the well-known story, it signifies at a literal level that Pascal felt the abyss externally rather than internally, as a reaction to open spaces. That is, the abyss was outside of him, yet permanently perceived and in this sense close. Baudelaire, however, also means this line to point to an existential condition, as it is apparent by the internal affective state the poem develops. Baudelaire understands Pascal’s abyssal dread as theological in nature. So the agoraphobic disorder serves to externalize the abyss while the existential abyss internalizes it (and de-pathologizes it too). The latter creates the potential point of contact between Pascal and Baudelaire.
Baudelaire evokes both the biographical nineteenth-century vision of Pascal and returns to the Pascal of the *Pensées* who conceptualized the abyss as an expression of the forlornness of humanity and of the necessity to search for God. This duality is important because it creates a double movement of approach and distancing between the two figures.

“Le Gouffre” is central to Fondane’s argument linking Baudelaire and Pascal. In his reading of the poem, he suggests that Baudelaire identifies with Pascal’s abyss, collapsing the two, assuming that their abysses are the same. So Fondane writes, “Baudelaire n’hésite guère à confondre son gouffre avec celui de Pascal et nous invite à faire de même” (225). This conflation, with which Gochberg tacitly agrees, leads the latter to write that, “It is immediately apparent that Baudelaire is not really concerned with Pascal, but rather with himself” (10).

It is true Baudelaire disregards Pascal, but not, however, as Gochberg suggests because of self-absorption. Rather, understanding the theological nature of the Pascalian abyss, Baudelaire also understands that Pascal’s untenable position has become more untenable in his contemporary time. This realization provokes a rift between the two and the inability of Baudelaire to contemplate Pascal any further. He does not assume their abysses to be the same. He recognizes the abyssal feeling in Pascal in himself. Yet another abyss opens between the two men: an historical and theological abyss connected to Baudelaire’s interpretation of his position in relation to the abyss he perceives.

“Pascal avait son gouffre, avec lui se mouvant,” the poet tells us only to turn his back on Pascal. The period end-stopping the line encapsulates this declaration, separating it from the rest of the poem as if saying: “That was the past. That was what Pascal had. He had something. His abyss was his.” The despairing tone of the poem creates a distance between the two men. That is, the evocation does not comfort the poet. In fact, it seems to seal the
despair that tumbles down these lines and culminates in the dread of perceiving life as imprisonment.

With the opening of the poem, Baudelaire tells us that at least Pascal’s abyss moved along with him. The constant presence of the abyss gave Pascal solace and companionship: the meaning of life was the abyss. For Pascal it made perfect sense, since it was only a manifestation of the corruption of human nature. Pascal and his abyss were, in other words, intimate, as a believer remains intimate with his God. The poem voices the loss of this intimacy at the same time that the abyssal presence makes itself know relentlessly.

The abyss in Baudelaire migrates to the interior of the self, figuring as absolute estrangement, which is dreadful because it is unknown but also liberating in its concealed possibility. It is constitutive of the self. Baudelaire observes Pascal observing his abyss understanding that he, Baudelaire, could no longer observe it in the same way, that for him, the abyss has been internalized. Original sin no longer ironically stops the bleeding because Satan is no longer the expelled angel (although Baudelaire expressed his admiration for Milton’s Satan); instead, Satan is God’s shadow, God’s double, in other words, he is God’s other self. In Luhmann’s terms, Pascal’s abyss was probable and true, because God observed in his infinite charity Pascal’s first-level observation. God observed Pascal observing his abyss, which man’s disobedience created: the abyss is manmade, not divine. Baudelaire, on the other hand, observes Pascal observing with the conscience that the observer God is a punishing other, who creates the abyss, who “Dessine un cauchemar multiforme et sans trêve.” The abyss is divinely created.

Pascal’s God is silent and hidden because of the human offense. God is impeachable and just. Baudelaire considers only God’s other self, Satan, the one who punishes. The abyss emerges from the vengeful side of God, losing its kind guardian and gaping because of God’s “fallenness.” As Baudelaire puts it in Mon Coeur Mis à Nu (1859-1866): “Qu’est ce que la
chute? Si c’est l’unité devenue dualité, c’est Dieu qui a chuté. En d’autres termes, la création ne serait-elle pas la chute de Dieu?” (Journaux Intimes 73). Baudelaire does not (and cannot) answer the question he leaves suspended at the end of this fragment. Yet it is this kind of speculation that might get closer to his complex attitude in relation to Satan. Baudelaire returns the guilt of original sin to God. The fall renders nature dual and thus God too becomes dual: Satan comes out of God as the other side of the deity that emerges and creates the conditions for the fall of man. If human suffering exists because of a fallen God, the abyss simply gapes, being a consequence of this fall without redemption. The God in need of redemption can only be Satan, who alone tortures his creation.

Returning to “Le Gouffre,” action, desire, word and dream are abyssal because the poet perceives in the sea of contingency that makes up each of these spheres an intense alienation from choice itself, from possibility, since this contingent diversity results from a fallen God. In other words, it is not the infinite possibility that renders these things abyssal; the poet has become estranged from choosing itself, from the meaningfulness of possibility, as he writes elsewhere in “Le Voyage:” “Faut-il partir? rester? Si tu peux rester, reste;/Pars, s’il le faut.”

A “fragment” in Mon Coeur Mis A Nu further helps clarify how Baudelaire conceives of the “gouffre” applied to action, desire, word and dream. He writes that:

Dans l’amour comme dans presque toutes les affaires humaines, l’entente cordiale est le résultat d’un malentendu. Ce malentendu, c’est le plaisir. L’homme crie: ‘Oh mon ange!’ La femme roucoule: Maman! Maman! Et ces deux imbéciles sont persuades qu’ils pensent de concert. – Le gouffre infranchissable, qui fait l’incommunicabilité, reste infranchi (JI 85).
Misunderstanding rules all human interactions and actions. Baudelaire calls this misunderstanding “pleasure,” perhaps since the latter entails an experience fundamentally vested in the self that in its self-absorption is unable to see the other; or still, a captive of self-satisfaction, one has no self-awareness; one’s critical abilities disappear into the spiral of pleasure. This explains the blindness of both the woman and the man unaware they only see their own experience. The abyss emerges from this “infranchissable” and infinite web of self-images and self-interest. Pleasure transforms all encounters with the world into so many reflections of what we already see and feel. The “gouffre” here is not the unfettered ontological freedom of the unknown, of pure existence, but the inability to escape or to step outside of the self so as to know others. Since, as Baudelaire tells us, this mechanism of self-absorption rules “presque toutes les affaires humaines.”

Thus the meaninglessness of choice and of purpose is integral to Baudelaire’s spleen. Later in Mon Coeur, Baudelaire takes up again the issue of misunderstanding: “Le monde ne marche que par le malentendu. – C’est par le malentendu universel que tout le monde s’accorde” (JI 98). The world is cast as a series of failed instances of communication whereby each human being exists fundamentally isolated from all others, trapped within himself. This feeling of isolation leads Baudelaire to obsess over solitude and isolation in his autobiographical writings. The “gouffre” as such signifies the immensity of human loneliness. He speaks of “cette horreur de la solitude,” of how “L’homme de génie veut être un, donc solitaire” (JI 92). Or still of the “Sentiment de solitude, dès mon enfance. Malgré la famille, – et au milieu des camarades surtout, – sentiment de destinée éternellement solitaire” (JI 58). The man of genius is one because he can never experience the illusory merging between two people in which the lovers believe in the previously quoted excerpt. And the eternal solitude the poet speaks of appears as a premonition of ideas the poet will harbor
more violently toward the end of his life, increasingly secure of Satan as God’s other self and
of a world where redemption is impossible.

This emphasis on a psychological rather than a physical state once again shows how
Baudelaire reads Pascal’s abyss as an existential condition that concerns him too, albeit
differently. Pascal and Baudelaire share the feeling of extreme abandonment. Although
Pascal’s God observes hidden but infinitely charitable, Baudelaire’s God observes infinitely
cruel. Although the “gouffre” is an interior experience, the double function of the first line –
both literally and existentially – allows for Baudelaire to distance his abyss from Pascal’s. In
Baudelaire the abyssal experience has become wholly internalized: infinity has migrated
inside the finite being. The abyss found in the environment on the other hand directly
opposes the spleenful spiritual condition that Baudelaire addresses in this poem. A case in
point in his elegiac gloss on the sea in Mon Coeur, where the infinite space and movement of
the ocean does not evoke dread or fear but rather reveals the idea of infinity, which is
“éternellement agréable,” “la plus haute idée de beauté” (85).

Contingent multiplication, as the poem reminds us, simply continues in the world of
“Nombres” and of “Êtres.” The poet feels jealous of the inevitable peace death brings, the
“néant l'insensibilité” that erases all afflictions. Thus “Nombres” and “Êtres” exist in the
immanent world as manifestations of living beings and things, so that the poem rests on a
duality between nothingness and earthly life.

What did Baudelaire mean with the use of idiosyncratic capitalized words? They
appear to refer to abstractions or universals rather than to the tumultuous variety of the
immanent world. An entry in the Fusées offers a clue: “Le plaisir d’être dans les foules est
une expression mystérieuse de la jouissance de la multiplication du nombre. Tout est nombre.
Le nombre est dans tout. Le nombre est dans l’individu. L’ivresse est un nombre” (JI 7).
Although “Le Gouffre” ends by describing living as entrapment, in this undated entry the
world of numbers in not dreadful but mysterious and pleasurable. This vision does not necessarily need to be at odds with the poem. In “Le Gouffre” the infinite abyss is also “captivant.”

Dread and fascination go hand and hand since fascination transforms dread into the relentless persecution the poem speaks of, the “sans trêve” closing the second quatrain, for it prevents the poet from letting go. This journal entry shows how Baudelaire sees the crowd as the most fascinating expression of number, the sheer multiplicity of contingent human life. The infinity of the immanent world is what stimulates and pleases and what, in the spleenful poem of 1962, corrodes and destroys because the fallen God concocting nightmares relishes in the purposelessness of this multiplicity. The poem is part of this world of numbers and beings, but its existence momentarily arrests the alienation arising from infinity, winning over the silence of the sonnet’s second quatrain that Baudelaire fears.

By observing Pascal observing his abyss, “Le Gouffre” presents itself as the poem, whose concern is the existential condition of the poet and his relationship to possibility as it actualizes itself in multiple things, certainly poems among them. So what can we observe about Baudelaire’s oeuvre from the perspective of this poem? In other words, what does “Le Gouffre” observe the other poems in Fleurs and Spleen observing?

The other poems are blind to the understanding that infinity has folded into the finite form. They are unaware of the contingent and improbable nature of their triumph as they materialize into form and take on a place within a sequence. “Le Gouffre” renders visible Baudelaire’s consciousness of the contingency of order, of the infinity of what was excluded. This consciousness reflects back on the ways he found to prevent the closure of this order, (while nonetheless having to close it). The openness of Fleurs is thus conditioned on the operative closure that each edition effects and in the case of Spleen that each reader effects. To articulate the unfathomable depth each poem renders visible, Baudelaire had to destabilize
the illusion of the necessity that the work of art produces. *Fleurs* and *Spleen*, unlike “Le Gouffre,” are blind to their own order. They articulate a vision, inhabiting it as the only probable and true one, only to be replaced by the coming vision, which in its turn articulates itself as the only probable and true one, and so add infinitum. From the perspective of “Le Gouffre” one is stunned at the improbability of each formal poetic embodiment but at the same time of its unproblematic nature since all is equally improbable.

As Luhmann notes, “Contrary to what traditionalist might suspect, art demonstrates that modernity does not necessarily imply a renunciation of order” (Art as Social System 149). Baudelaire does not forego order, as much as destabilizes the stability of order by opening his work up to reconfiguration (1858 and 1861 editions) and by writing a supplement book, *Spleen*, to be read in any order and to modify *Fleurs* as it serves as its supplement. This subjects *Spleen* to myriad permutations in itself and in relation to *Fleurs*. In the latter case, it shows how *Spleen* is seen always in relation to a previously established order as that which affects that order and changes it.

After Baudelaire reconfigures the initial order of *Fleurs*, from then on, the book is no longer closed, but open. The finite becomes infinite, or rather, the infinite folds into the finite as potentiality and destabilization. “Le Gouffre” dramatizes this realization as the poem that observes this folding of the infinite into the finite. It occupies a second-level of observation since it functions as meta-commentary on Baudelaire’s arguably most vital conceptual stance. The literal function of the first line enforces this: Pascal’s abyss moved continuously “outside” of him; Baudelaire, however, experiences it wholly internally: thus he fears sleep, fears diving into the unconscious, fears the inside of things for they are abyssal. More importantly in the inside of beings one finds multiplication; one finds number. The poem exists within this internal unfolding.
The infinity of meaning Baudelaire attempts to inscribe in his work makes the latter not dependent on his life for continuing. The reader is free to create his own order of the poems in *Spleen* and the ways they function with *Fleurs*. Moreover, the idea of the infinite reconfiguration of *Fleurs* remains as unfulfilled potential because Baudelaire never finished the third edition, leaving it in a paradoxical condition of finished book whose author did not materialize his last vision of it. “Le Gouffre” is the perspective from which the infinity of the finite is perceived. Thus the poem articulates Baudelaire’s abyss as infinitude inside of finitude and his poetic work as enacting this idea.

Outside of any sequence, “Le Gouffre” observes the idea of order, multiplicity and unity. It articulates the complex relationship between the order that emerges – the form of the finite – and the overwhelming infinite of infinite possibility. Since the infinite folds into the finite, “Le Gouffre” ends with the frightful nature of finite embodiment, rather than the dreadful threat of the infinite.

Importantly, Luhmann alerts to the inevitable way each second-level observation leaves its own observing unobserved. In the case of “Le Gouffre,” the reader functions as a third-level observer who observes the observing of the second-level observation at work in the poem, looping it back to infinity or rather, to the realm of potentiality, for this reader is potentially infinite, potentially substituted by another. It is also no other than a figure for the immortality of Baudelaire’s poetry. What observes “Le Gouffre” observing *Fleurs* and *Spleen* observing is Baudelaire’s literary immortality that he inscribed into the conceptual basis of his poetry as the openness of oeuvre, the instability of order and the infinite potential meaning.

It is revealing that Baudelaire articulates his meta-poetic vision through Pascal. Fondane and others have noted the crucial importance of the Jansenist scientist and apologist
to the poet. By using Pascal to articulate his artistic aims, Baudelaire is at the same time folding a religious question into art. Similarly to Dickinson, at stake is how a religious outlook determines an artistic mode. It is Baudelaire’s understanding of a gaping infinity—the contingent multiplicity that God’s punishing self creates—that demands the infinite poem and assures that only the infinite poem can continue to develop after the life of the poet. Luhmann again helps clarify how art folds into religion, or rather, steams from a religion impetus that makes art absorb some of the labor and aspirations of religion. “With the retreat of the religious world order,” Luhmann remarks, “and the erosion of the observation of God as world observer, the questions arose: ‘Who else? and ‘What else?’…Here, ever since romanticism, art has found its niche” (Art as Social System 90).

The figure of the author replaces the observer God and in art the inscription of observation becomes increasingly important: the creative process happens already in a second-level observation as the artist observes himself creating and this observation shapes the form of the artwork, guiding choice. In the observing of himself creating, the artist is simultaneously observing the viewer or reader observing the work. What Luhmann hints at here is that art can take up the function of religion because when the observation of God weakens, the observer author rises. This cross between systems first happens in Romanticism and potentially reoccurs thereafter. “Le Gouffre” and its preoccupation with observation suggest the theological nature of the question. Again Luhmann comments on the theological implications of the creation of the difference between system and environment by way of distinctions: “Evidently, creation is nothing but the injunction ‘Draw a distinction!’ Heaven and earth are thereby distinguished, then man, and finally Eve” (Introduction to Systems Theory 49). Observation and distinction go hand and hand and hark back to the original (and

49 Jean Dubray’s Pascal et Baudelaire constitutes an exhaustive study of the proximity between these two figures. See also Jean Pommier’s Dans les chemins de Baudelaire.
untraceable) distinction that marks the world for the first time, splitting it into heaven and
earth, and marking the difference between beings: man and woman.

The observer God observes the poet observing too. He has not been weakened but
rather transformed into the negative image of Pascal’s God. Instead of the infinite mercy of
God saving some and damning justly most, the punishing God who, like his creation has
fallen, possesses the same dual nature of the fallen human being. The latter’s dual nature – an
inclination toward Satan and God – is a response to the dual nature of the fallen God.

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There is a “fragment” of Emily Dickinson that reads as follows:

Emerging from
An Abyss and
entering it again
That is Life, is
It not?  

Baudelaire would have appreciated the boldness of this poem: the way in its minimal
way it is disregards composure and order, standing in its own frailty as the statement that it
is. The poem performs what it says, reminding us of the irrupting word interrupting the
abyssal silence only to disappear again, one of the many subtle ways Dickinson’s poetry
foregrounds the medium of language. There are others: her well-known use of the dash,

In Werner’s Open Folios.

Both Jonathan Arac and Heinz Ickstadt have argued for a transatlantic connection between
Baudelaire and Dickinson. While their cultural milieus, religious background and personal
trajectories are starkly different, for Arac “the new emotion for poetry that Baudelaire’s
“spleen” offered is remarkably close to what Dickinson called elsewhere ‘the bandaged
moments’ of the soul (#512).” In Arac’s view the seventeen century crucially informs the
poetic investigations of these poets, pointing out the importance of Pascal for Baudelaire, and
of “Puritanism” for Dickinson (205). Ickstadt prefers to speak of these poets’ taste for
allegory, locating in Dickinson’s poetry a symbolist slant that shares many affinities with
Mallarme and Baudelaire, noting, among other things, their shared love for certain words:
“pain, death, tomb, abyss, paradise, eternity, infinity, immortality” (57).
which turns writing and reading into a ritual of interruption and of forceful redirection. The dashes say – here – remitting us to the erased context of writing, but perhaps more importantly to the word itself. Her poetics is a journey toward the word that cannot be chosen, but must be approached, as if unmediated. This desire of course cannot be fulfilled but it shows how an investigation of the medium lends itself to a cosmological, or theological (if you will), questioning, for it runs into the question of the impossibility of experiencing transcendence, or in other words, it reveals that the search for transcendence always remains in the immanent world, however, transfixed the latter may appear at times.

Her vast correspondence enacts a curious movement from the early ornamented voluble prose to an increasingly paired down, minimal, and cryptic style where the poem often interrupts what is left of the sentence, which in its turn has been reformulated to serve the poetic rather than the prosaic. Dickinson’s epistolary evolution draws a similar movement to Baudelaire’s who in his career begins in Fleurs and ends in Spleen, that is, the impulse to augment the poetic so that it overtakes the medium of language in its totality. There is no utterance where the poetic does not appear.

Dickinson’s correspondence in a sense also complements her poems, of course, not in the same way as Spleen complements Fleurs. The letters, nonetheless, provided an outlet of readers, which animated her poetic mission with a healing purpose. But also prompted a different version of a poem or a modified reading because of the context (or in same cases different contexts) in which the poem was sent.

More fundamental is the status of Dickinson’s work that enacts the idea of the open oeuvre in similar, but also in different ways, than Baudelaire. Part of what causes this resemblance is the unpublished nature of her poetry, which raises the question of order and

52 See Virginia Jackson’s Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading

53 See Sharon Cameron Choosing not Choosing: Dickinson’s Fascicles
sequence. Published in 1998 the Franklin edition is regarded as the most accomplished organization of her poems to date. Following a chronological principle of organization, it attempts as much as possible to date the poems rigorously. Aside from the fascicles she herself bound, the vast majority of her poems have the potential of being arranged in infinite ways, and it is the way in which, choosing not to think of publishing, Dickinson continues to write poem after poem that makes her poetic work a kind of continuous stream. There are of course differences and evolutions in her style but this is no replacement of a “finished work.” Even the fascicles are not stable texts for some poems have several variations. Her poetry enjoys an extravagant and unique freedom that virtually leaves her oeuvre open and able to “rewrite” itself after her death, a case amply demonstrated by the widely different editions of Dickinson beginning with Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s 1890 edition organized thematically by headings and betraying heavy editorial interference, and ending with Franklin’s chronology.

One could argue that Baudelaire conceptualizes intentionally the idea of the infinite poem, and that Dickinson’s infinite poem results from her unknown status as a poet at the time of her death. This, however, neglects to consider that Dickinson consciously decided not to publish, consciously allowed herself the freedom not to choose, and consciously decided not to organize the majority of her poems into handmade books.

Baudelaire and Dickinson come toward the open work in different ways and for different reasons, but for both it stems from a religious outlook. Dickinson did not perceive God as Satan. Her God shares with the Jansenist God its hiddenness and silence. Baudelaire’s deep belief in original sin becomes apparent in his admiration for Joseph de Maistre, which links Baudelaire to Augustine and to the Jansenism of Pascal.

Regularizing spelling and altering words are some of the ways the editorial interference manifests itself.
Dickinson was not invested in the notion of a fallen humanity. She did pine over the suffering she witnessed and rebelled in her in comprehens ion against a God who permitted it. Baudelaire turns to the world of the finite as that which infinity expands, that is, instead of infinity being the space of transcendence and of divinity, the immanent world has become infinite. Dickinson’s rebellion against the hidden God, and her embracing of Christ as a figure for the infinity of human suffering but also for the infinite potential of the human world, also turns toward the immanent, which becomes boundless. Considering once again Luhmann’s remark that, “With the retreat of the religious world order, and the erosion of the observation of God as world observer, the questions arose: ‘Who else? and ‘What else?’…Here, ever since romanticism, art has found its niche,” we can see the folding of the religious into art in the practice of these two poets.

It was crucial for Dickinson that (insofar as the world was concerned) her observing of poetry remained at a first-level of observation, where the observer and the observing remained unobserved, for this was connected with the belief that her poetic vocation needed to be justified: she could not write for the sake of herself. Poetry had to serve others and for this reason, it had to give without the gift binding the receiver into an obligation and without bringing recognition to the poet. Dickinson thus conceives of her poetry as a spiritual

55 In *Open Secret: The Literature of Uncounted Experience*, Anne-Lise François conceives the notion of the lyric of inconsequence, a lyrical mode in which the poetic “I” presents a state of affairs without attempting to take possession of it or take action in relation to it. The idea of the open secret is crucial for this lyric, of which Dickinson’s poetry is one of the exemplary embodiments. The lyric of inconsequence is an instance of the open secret, a conception she takes from Eve Sedgwick and D.A. Miller, but refashions to signify a state of affairs, which is acknowledged, yet cannot be appropriated. The difficulties in defining the open secret and its peculiar relationship to knowledge reside in precisely the little that happens, its smallness easily passing for nothing, and so, easily unacknowledged or unnoticed by others, for the open secret is “a way of imparting knowledge such that it cannot be claimed or acted on” (1). Denial, sublimation, refusal are terms which can just as easily be used to describe this gesture, but which conceptualize a negativity that does not do justice to what the writing of uncounted experience accomplishes, that is, a gift that requires nothing in return and that gives nothing except the giving. Its gift entails what could be perceived as waste, or a reception that might go unheeded. Furthermore, the notion of revelation is deeply
practice but to conciliate the two spheres she had to remain anonymous. Dickinson could not avoid thinking about justification; her gender contributed to this. If it hadn’t been for the trial, perhaps Baudelaire would not have had to think about justifying the purpose of his poetry. Ironically, however, it is his having to do so that leads him to conceive of the open work that the infinite poem accomplishes. Faith and art for him however did not conflict as intensely as they did for Dickinson. What Dickinson lost in recognition, she won in freedom, for her oeuvre remains open and able to “rewrite” itself (thus inscribing the poet’s immortality in this openness), in a way that Baudelaire’s oeuvre cannot. His freedom is more abstract, less extravagant and more temperate, although undoubtedly existing.

embedded in François’ lyric of inconsequence, because in the absence of God, only this revealing that requires no claims or acts from the receiver, the open secret, can acknowledge the relationship between beings who have turned to each other for mutual witnessing of their presences, having become unable to request this confirmation of an absent God. The mutual witnessing between beings, for François, forges a new ethical relationship. Each human being acknowledges and is acknowledged by another, a giving and receiving that leads to an infinite interest in the interaction that confirms existence.
Part III - Framing the Cosmos
Chapter Six

Luhmann’s Systems Theory of Religion and Abstract Art

Niklas Luhmann’s lifelong project was to conceptualize a general theory of social systems, that is, a universal framework that could be applied to the study of each social system. This framework can be conceptualized because modern society is made up of a series of autonomous self-regulatory systems, functioning independently of each other. Systems arise when a distinction marks the difference between the marked and the unmarked space. Thus difference constitutes the system by setting it apart from its environment. The distinction distinguishes the inside, the marked and indicates the unmarked elsewhere surrounding the distinguished. The systems are open; a binary code regulates them. In order to keep its boundaries while adapting to the challenges of the environment, the system produces operations that operatively close it so that it may retain its boundaries while integrating the demands of the environment. Following Varela and Maturana’s work in biology, Luhmann co-opts the concept of autopoiesis, a kind of circular self-production, to explain the self-reproductive capacity that keeps producing operations in an open system, closing the system with each self-generated operation, while keeping it open to the environment, which presents ever new challenges.

Yet this picture of the functioning of society is proper to the modern era. In premodern times, systems did not operate autonomously and thus synchronously. Rather, society was organized in a stratified manner, with the religious system ultimately regulating the operations of all other systems, providing as Luhmann puts it, the meaning of meaning. Thus it is the loss of religion’s privileged position in the premodern world that announces the arrival of the modern era, where the religious system is another autonomous open system functioning alongside other systems and displaying the same general framework that
Luhmann spells out: first-level and second-level observations; autopoietic operative closure; self-descriptions; coding and programming.

Luhmann thus sees the phenomenon of secularization as entailing a repositioning of the religious system rather than the loss of belief. This transformation modifies the relation of the individual to the periphery and the center of society. If in premodern times one’s place in society was fixed at birth, in the modern era each individual has to negotiate his inclusion into the various systems. In relation to religion, the inclusion into the system is an affair of the individual: it is up to him to choose to be included or not. His exclusion from or inclusion in religion does not affect the inclusion in or exclusion from other systems. Furthermore the individual’s acceptance of religion does not necessarily mean the acceptance of all doctrinal aspects of a particular religion, or even, of a single religious view. There are many cultural religious options.

The rise of the notion of culture in the eighteenth century leads to comparisons between the various religions, which are now studied as spheres of culture among other spheres of culture. Thus Luhmann observes that, “Most people accept a few components of religious belief and not others. Perhaps they affirm the existence of God but not the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. They might accept a number of esoteric ideas but not astrology, healing by faith but not redemption by mercy alone, individual survival after death….but without rule-flouting miracles” (*A Systems Theory of Religion* 212). The new forms of religious belief imagine religion “has an object that expands its own boundaries,” leading to the question of what is “an indispensable essential criteria for religion” (222). Luhmann sees this self-referential questioning as not unique to the religious system but appearing also in the system of art, which “Using the artwork itself, it poses the question of how art distinguishes itself in the first place” (222).
The art and the religious system, it turns out, share other aspects besides this self-questioning. Among all social systems, these are the only two that do not play into what Luhmann calls the interdependencies between inclusions into and exclusions from other systems. He notes that exclusion from any social system except religion and art leads to further exclusions from other social systems, in a domino effect of exclusions that is stable while inclusions are not, for the individual must fight for and can easily lose his inclusion status. So that, “Without schooling,” Luhmann writes, “one barely has a chance of practicing a reputable career, or obtaining a better job. Without income, one barely has access to healthy nourishment, and no energy for regular work. Illiterates, for instance, barely have the opportunity to exercise their right to vote” (A Systems Theory of Religion 219). If an exclusion leads to another, it does not lead to an exclusion from the religious or the art system: one can be poor, homeless, unemployed and even incarcerated and still be included in these systems.

Although art at its highest level fully partakes in the interests that generate the other exclusions, and although being successful in art invites the potential inclusion in all the other function systems, the art system functions in a similar way to the religious system. Inclusion into the system of art does not play a decisive survival role as money, health or education does. In principle, one can access art on the streets in murals or graffiti, although of course this latter type of art is considered marginal and often suppressed. In principle too one can make art with the most common and rudimental materials. One can engage in art without being included in the system of art but this is not true for other systems. One cannot profit from the health system or attend school if one is not eligible. Luhmann thus sums up this affinity between the two systems: “Art, however, bears a special trait which it shares only with religion: participation is optional,” so that like the religious system, “The art system thereby gains the advantage of making its mechanism of inclusion/exclusion largely
independent of the inclusions and exclusions of other functional systems” (Art as Social System 242). And like the religious system in the modern era, “there are only a few, rather loose structural couplings between the art system and other systems” (Art as Social System 243). This turning away from the world, in the context of the religious system constitutes the redemption from the world that religion promises and that Luhmann discusses in his study on religion. In the modern era, just like religion, “The art system decouples itself from its social environment” (Art as Social System 231).

More importantly however is how since Romanticism at times art takes on the functions of the religious system. “With the retreat of the religious world order,” Luhmann writes, “and the erosion of the observation of God as world observer, the questions arose: ‘Who else? and ‘What else?’…Here, ever since romanticism, art has found its niche” (Art as Social System 90). Elsewhere he points out the existence of modern artistic practices where “religiously influenced expectations” shift into “extrareligious – or worldly – realms” (A Systems Theory of Religion 203).

It is the weakening of the observer God that opens up the possibility for the artist to take on the role of observer of the world, since the function of art, as Luhmann puts it, “is to make the world appear within the world – with an eye toward the ambivalent situation that every time something is made available for observation something else withdraws” (Art as Social System 149). Because art renders visible a previously unobservable world that it constructs and operates within, it absorbs at times religious functions or usurps the weakened position of the observer God. The avant-garde does not end these kinds of totalizing artistic aims. In modernism and beyond, there are instances when the sphere of art and religion cross paths, and art oversteps the boundaries of its system, seizing the otherworldly sphere proper to religion.
A decline in religion and the instability of inclusion in social systems constitutes the modern era. These conditions open up the possibility for utopian art, laying bare the very primal impulse of art making, which in Luhmann’s words is “to break apart a simple, bivalent ontology and to reinvent the place of mankind within the cosmos” (Art as Social System 257). Art’s response to the modern era’s weakening of religion is to reinvent “the place of mankind within the cosmos,” now benefitting from a religious loosening where the individual can “make” his own religion. In its reinvention, art destabilizes the binary “being-non-being,” starting by expropriating the religious binary code, immanence and transcendence, and flipping it on its head, demanding that the art object manifests the infinity of immanence, or immanence as invisibility. Examining artistic practices whose ambitions overstep the art system and usurp religious aims reflects the state of the religious system in the modern era and speaks for the desire for unity in a fragmented world. The prolific cross-pollination between art and religion informs the modern reconfiguration of finite life in an infinite universe. Such a crossing between art and religion demands a self-reflexive art that turns to the medium qua medium in its attempt to overstep its boundaries, trying to deliver a total meaning. The question of transcendence gets investigated in the immanent plane in attempts at reaching the essence of the medium. Both Wassily Kandinsky and Vlademir Malevich are examples of such practices. But what is it about self-reflexive art that leads to the question of transcendence? Or rather why do transcendent concerns lend themselves to a self-reflective engagement with the medium?

**Abstract Painting – Art as Total Meaning**

The medium of painting first captured modernity’s peculiar manner of imagining infinity. If perspective assumed an infinite world,\(^56\) it assumed its infinity as infinitely

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\(^56\) See Kittler’s *Optical Media* 50. “Linear Perspective, on the other hand, was based on the implicit (and later entirely explicit) assumption of an infinite universe, which corresponded to an infinitely distant vanishing point in every single perspective painting.”
mimetic, an unfolding of the infinite mirror of representation. Abstract painting, however, imagined the space of the universe itself as abstract infinity, infinitely deserted of that which could be recognizable as human. Yet alongside this abstract infinity, avant-garde painting aimed at recapturing the loss of religion, or in some cases, more boldly, of creating the new religion of the future world. Kandinsky fell under the first aim, Malevich under the second. As such, their approaches to abstract painting differed as considerably as their aims. They shared, nonetheless, the desire and the belief in a new art that broke with the mimetic tradition of painting and was a spiritual practice. The avant-garde’s interest in religion sprung from an attempt at unifying the sphere of art and belief. Conceptualizing a totalizing vision of art, these painters envisioned art, in Luhmann’s terms, as regulating the other systems of society, a role that once belonged to the religious system of premodern times. Paradoxically, while proposing an aesthetic break with tradition, this romantic gesture attempts to reinstate the premodern unity of religion and art, an attempt that explains for example Malevich’s interest in Orthodox Christian iconography.

I- Kandinsky

In Kandinsky’s approach, art acquires a spiritual function. The “spirit” reveals itself in the new ways abstract painting chooses to represent the immanent world. Kandinsky attributes the development of the language of abstract painting to his spiritual aims. The revelation of transcendence, of the spirit, in the immanent world requires that the latter be defamiliarised: only then can the seen become unseen, allowing for the non-material to shine through the material. Thus Kandinsky spoke of developing a non-material abstract painting and believed the properties of color and geometrical shapes had the ability to evoke psychological and spiritual states. Art represents the immaterial spiritual content of the material world by a process of reduction: to point, line, plane and color. Kandinsky’s approach to painting thus goes hand and hand with a belief in and a search for essences
because the essence of the material world is spiritual: the artwork digs out the buried spiritual nature of things. Thus for Kandinsky, as Michel Henry explains, "Abstraction…is not opposed to nature; it discovers nature’s true essence" (Seeing the Invisible 155). The search for essences leads to an attempt at stripping the medium, that is, to a reflection on what is essentially “painterly” in painting. That core or essence yields the spiritual. The search for transcendence leads to an art that searches for the essence of the material, that is, for the pure material of a medium if you will. Art reveals the essence of matter; in this act of revelation, it unifies the human and the divine for the essence of matter (whether manifested in nature or in a manmade artifact) is spiritual; it uncovers the essential unity of all things: the shared spiritual essence of the human and the natural world.

Abstract painting opposes itself to mimetic art, even when it represents recognizable figures and objects. The birth of materialism has resulted in the concealed spirituality of the immanent world because under its aegis objects and bodies serve a purpose, concealing their end in themselves. The spiritual nature of the thing is this purposeless state where being shines forward aimlessly, disinterestedly. The task of art is to release the material world from the utilitarian shackles human society has created (Concerning the Spiritual in Art).

In Point and Line to Plane (1926), a text written while Kandinsky was at the Bauhaus, he develops a theory of painting that will accomplish this. Analyzing the pictorial elements essential to painting reveals the internal manifestation of forms. Every phenomenon has an internal and an external manifestation. Yet most of the time we only experience the empirical manifestation of the world and rarely its spiritual invisible manifestation. The external form obscures and conceals the internal for “The internal is hemmed in by the external” (Complete Writings Vol. II 538). Since only the internal phenomenon allows for the experience of spirituality, the task of the artist is to reveal the internal expression of form. Theorizing about art contributes to this disclosure, since “Only by a process of microscopic analysis will the
science of art lead to an all-embracing synthesis, which will ultimately extend far beyond the boundaries of art, into the realm of ‘union’ of the ‘human’ and the ‘divine’”(537). Importantly the work itself needs criticism to achieve its aim. Artistic practice must straddle both the conceptual and the material work, the idea and the object together can achieve the unity of transcendence and immanence, or rather, the manifestation of the transcendent in the immanent world. The totalizing aim of Kandinsky reaches its peak in its impossible dream whereby art becomes the new religion, reconstituting the bankrupted link between humanity and God. Art theory unifies the mythologies of art and religion, finally delivering the ultimate meaning of the human experience.

Thus Kandinsky articulates an important inversion:

Admittedly, the entire ‘world’ can, on the other hand, be regarded as a self-contained, cosmic composition, which itself consist of innumerable, independent, hermetic compositions, getting smaller and smaller, and which – large or small were ultimately created from points; while on the other hand, the point reverts to its original state as a geometrical entity. There are complexes of geometrical points, that in various orderly forms, hover in geometrical infinity (Complete Writings Vol. II 554).

If as Luhmann believes, the function of art “is to make the world appear within the world” (Art as Social System 149), then Kandinsky’s art inverts the relation between the doubling of worlds happening in art: the world art creates shapes and conditions the way we see the “real” world, which is now, like the painting, made of points, planes and colors, and not objects or figures whose names already betray their submission to utilitarian materialism. Art is the realm of the spirit; it is a cosmology of “geometrical infinity” where at last the relation between the human and the divine can become whole again. To reduce painting to its
basic elements returns us to the origin of the world and thus recuperates the spiritual nature of
the immanent. To move inwardly is to move toward an infinite unfolding. Kandinsky’s
response to the fragmentation of modernity and its challenges is to propose a return to a
premodern unity between religion and art but by way of a wholly new aesthetic path. Art
begins from reduction, economization, and defamiliarisation. It also entails the reduction of
all life to human subjectivity. The spirituality of art entails the destruction of human
organizations: abstraction shatters the relations of the social order, showing the buried spirit
beneath all things. A judge’s robe becomes a conglomerate of points and lines, empowering
only pictorial relations that sidestep the various power relations and social hierarchies. The
turn to the “basic” elements of the medium of painting is what

II - Malevich: From Abstract to Abstract

Malevich too attempted to form a total system that (through art) unified religion and
art. If Kandinsky articulates his spiritual aim from the onset, Malevich articulates it more
explicitly as he develops his practice. Suprematist iconography, nonetheless, owes much to
Christian Orthodox iconography. In this sense, one sees the spiritual concern in his art from
the start. Malevich however does not “psychologize” abstraction and its spiritual aims operate
beyond the subject-object relation. While Kandinsky turns away from mimetic art, intending
to represent instead the subjective space of the soul in protests of materialism and to unravel
the spiritual nature of the world, for Malevich painting should not investigate internal or
natural life, for “Painters should abandon subject and objects if they wish to be pure painters”
(Essays on Art Vol I 34).

There are no objects or subjects for nature is invariable since underneath all that
changes remains an essence, which is nothingness. The world as such exists in a zero
coordinate condition from which the artist departs, creating the world. Malevich calls non-
forms to the objectless world of forms that he seeks to create. It is an objective world that in no way attempts to mimic or represent nature or subjectivity. Freed of objects, forms and subjectivity, it creates its own forms (the non-forms): immanent expressions of the energy traversing all things and propelling them into movement through space. They point to the essential nothingness undergirding nature, art, science and God. This nothingness is infinite. In “The Suprematist Mirror,” Malevich shows how “The essence of distinctions,” i.e. nothingness, (which is infinite), corresponds to “The world as non-objectivity” (Essays on Art Vol I 225). Beginning this short text with the aphorism, “Amongst all the changing phenomena the essence of nature is invariable,” he then explains this statement by drawing on the following equation: “The World as human distinctions” is broken down into “God; The Soul; The Weltanschauung; Life; Religion; Technology; Art; Science; The Intellect; Ideology; Labour; Movement; Space; Time,” equals “0” (Essays on Art Vol I 224).

The set of eight propositions that follows this scheme further explains the equation. For instance, “Science and art have no boundaries because what is comprehended infinitely is innumerable and infinity and innumerability are equal to nothing.” This first proposition elucidates how Malevich casts nothingness as infinity: the infinity of the world returns to the nothingness of the world’s beginning. He continues, “If religion has comprehended God, it has comprehended nothing,” and “If science has comprehended nature, it has comprehended nothing.” To comprehend the absolute is to comprehend nothingness, so that “There is no existence either within or outside me; nothing can change anything, since nothing exists that could change itself or be changed” (Essays on Art Vol I 225).

Nothing can change itself or be changed because essences cannot be changed. Moreover, if essences are nothing, then nothing exists. Artistic creation begins with the expression of this essential nothingness, which is unchangeable and for this reason objective. Color and form are not on the canvas to make a composition: to establish a fixed set of
relations between forms would be to fall back into the world of distinctions, and so, of non-essences. So that like Kandinsky, Malevich searches for essences, even if the essence of all is the nothingness undergirding all things.

To depart from the infinite possibility of the zero is not to reinstate emptiness. Zero is only the beginning. This departure point marks the destruction of subject and object, inside and outside. From here one can begin creating; the blackness of zero culminates in the whiteness of the square. Furthermore, freed from the world of distinctions, “Each form is free and individual. Each form is a world” (Essays on Art Vol I 38). Each form constitutes its own independent paradigm, discarding all convention or shared standards. One can see how similarly to Kandinsky, Malevich inverts the doubling of worlds occurring in art: the world of the artwork transforms the immanent world into an infinite constellation of forms and colors.

Similarly to Kandinsky, Malevich criticizes utilitarianism. Art that is undertaken for a purpose, with an intention, for example, of faithfully reproducing a setting or an object, is undertaken to produce an aesthetic effect, the pleasure of delivering a beautiful landscape or faithfully capturing the face of a loved one. It simply reproduces the world, its structures and its codes, returning us to the known. This art cannot think beyond perception, cognition and pleasure. It shows us what is already there, or rather, the dead replica of the living thing. It operates at the level of effect, reinstating the places and order of beings and things in their known relations.

Suprematism, on the other hand, instead of using reason to consciously reproduce the real, uses reason to intuit subconscious non-forms that emerge from the void of the black to free themselves in the nothingness of the white. The Suprematist artist creates in the paradoxical tension of consciously striving against design and composition, in order to allow an unconscious, i.e., unintentional, apprehension of non-form. In this way, the artist is
released from the tyranny of the material world and the latter is released from the tyranny of aesthetics. Creation begins with this freedom.

Similarly to Kandinsky, Malevich’s approach also aims at unifying once again various social spheres and the human and the divine. Their projects share the utopianism of desiring that art will bestow ultimate meaning to the world as much as reconstruct and reinvent it, serving as an alternative to the oppressiveness of a utilitarian material society. So that in “Suprematism. 34 Drawings,” Malevich waxes about the creations of Suprematism in terms of a new technology and a new cosmology:

Working on Suprematism I made the discovery that its forms have nothing in common with the technology of the earth’s surface. All technical organisms, too, are nothing other than little satellites – a whole living world ready to fly off into space and occupy its own special place. For in fact each of these satellites is equipped with a mind and is ready to live its own individual life. On the enormous, elemental scale of the planetary systems there has also occurred the pulverization and separation of certain states which had formed an individual life, creating a whole system of world building and forming friendly alliances in order to safeguard their life and eliminate catastrophe. Suprematist forms, as an abstraction, have achieved utilitarian perfection. They are no longer in contact with the earth and may be examined and studied like any planet or entire system. I say they have no longer anything to do with the earth, but not in the sense of a rift, leaving it abandoned: I am merely indicating the construction of prototypes for the technical organisms of the future, Suprema, which

57 Nina Gurianova notes that, “The extant articles written for Supremus [a journal of Suprematist art that Malevich edited] unquestionably indicate that Malevich originally considered his style as synthetic and universal and not bound by the borders of one or another genre or form of art. Moreover, he promoted his nonobjectivity theory as a theory of unbound creativity…capable of penetrating beyond the boundaries of artistic activity to encompass the most diverse spheres of human life” (Gurianova “The Supremus ‘Laboratory-House’” 54)
are conditioned by purely utilitarian necessity – the necessity remains the link between them (*Essays on Art Vol I* 124).

Suprematist forms have nothing in common with the technology of the earth since both nature and human constructions arise from aesthetic action, so that “The aesthetic, the pictorial, takes part in the construction of the whole world.” He continues: “Nature forms the interaction between harmony and discord, which we have named aesthetics” (“On New Systems in Art” 83). If nature and human-made objects follow beauty, the new Suprematist art follows energy, the forces of movement, of sensation.

Utilitarian perfection relates to the “economic question,” which Malevich sees as “probably the primary source of all activity.” Activity results from bodily energy. Self-conservation leads every organism to instinctively want to preserve this energy. The “economic expression of the action of energy,” i.e., Suprematist art, leads to “economic necessity,” not aesthetic necessity, the latter being only concerned with beauty. Utilitarian perfection is thus the way Suprematist forms accomplish “the economic expression of the action of energy” (*Essays on Art Vol I* 124).

Earth forms – both natural and human-made – can potentially become Suprematist forms, thus Malevich emphasizes that Suprematism does not abandon the Earth. This potential is activated when approaching these forms in motion, as energy, rather than as forms striving to imitate nature’s beauty. Suprematism does not abandon the Earth because Malevich views nature as constructed and created; this is also why Suprematist forms are “prototypes for the technical organisms of the future.”

The Suprematist non-forms lead Malevich to contemplate the Earth in relation to outer space, revealing the deeply cosmological nature of Suprematism. The perspective of Suprematist forms entails a shift away from our planet, since they have shed all referential
relations with nature; but they are worlds, and as such, comparable to planets that, whether or not harboring life, are self-contained worlds existing among worlds and forming constellations. The planet Earth remains subjected to catastrophe because the relations between its forms are not based on essences but on the historical evolution of distinctions. Distinctions are the source of conflict between forms since they operate dialectically, compromising individual freedom and ensuring subjection to their contingency. The abstract system of Suprematism abolishes contingent relations, establishing in their stead a perfect necessity that ensures, in the utilitarian sense, the survival of each individual form. It can ensure this because of the equality at the root of abstract form.

The positioning of Suprematism from the standpoint of the universe entails the discarding of social, political and economical concerns in favor of a religiously oriented practice. Thus he writes, “energetic power knows neither peoples, nor states, nor nationalities, and is therefore constantly striving towards the highest degree of centralization. Man’s various pretences that spring from economic and political material affairs hinder forward movement. But all pretences give way before the intuitive universal movement of energetic forces” (Essays on Art Vol I 116). We are told that this universal movement is “a simple movement into infinity” (Essays on Art Vol I 117). That is, Malevich’s economic and centralization principles constitute an absolutely concentrated effort to enact, time and again, the movement toward infinity, which is a movement of dissolution, a kind of Heideggerian consciousness of being-toward-death or Kierkegaardian notion of sickness-onto-death. But the transformations that this concentration can bring about would affect all these areas of society – the catastrophes that social structures have been created to prevent (while at the same time producing) would cease to exist; social structures would cease being recognizable in its current shape. They would have reached the utilitarian perfection of Suprematist forms, wholly concentrated and directed toward the movement into infinity, into disappearance. The
breadth of the Suprematist system aims at creating a new art for the modern world, but also it presents itself as the solution for the strife and conflict undergirding this world: since the movement toward infinity is the only movement which is absolutely universal and thus able to unify “the pulverization and separation of certain states,” which form individual life. This pulverization will always occur but if one contextualizes it in relation to the universal movement into infinity, the unity between individual and universal is achieved while maintaining the contrast and difference between the two. Suprematist forms are harbingers of this possibility in the abstract realm.

Malevich envisions Suprematist art as potentially recreating the way humans approach the earthly realm. If natural and human-made forms are approached in the same way than abstract ones, and the mode of relation of abstraction is transposed into the natural world and society, perfect utilitarianism will be fulfilled at the core of human structural organizations. In this sense Suprematism does more than create the non-forms that result from sensations, but can change and recreate already existing forms in an act of reinvention that does not depart from zero. Rather it brings back to the current structure, the knowledge or creation that arises from Suprematist exploration: the movement toward infinity, which is a movement of energy, force, sensation.

Malevich’s ambitions are of course absolutely utopian, and if taken at face value unquestionably naïve. How can one transpose the utilitarian perfection of Suprematist forms from abstraction to the real fabric of society and nature without considering human interests and the resistance of all structural principles? Kandinsky’s goal, although also unquestionably idealistic, seems more realistic: art unveils the concealed and existing spiritual nature of everything. Malevich’s utopian aims, nonetheless, were oddly capable of intuiting or responding to the religious shifts that Luhmann observes are visible in the modern era.
The New Religion of Suprematism

For Malevich Suprematism is much more than an approach to the art of the modern world. It is a religious approach, which disavows allegiance to particular religious dogmas or traditions. It constitutes itself as an immanent religious event: a witnessed movement or action. Just as abstract painting breaks with the mimetic tradition of painting, Malevich’s conception of religion breaks with the religious past to form an abstractly conceived experience of belief. It is abstract but not subjective; in the same way that Malevich speaks of non-objective art as referring to the non-existence of objects, (the changeless natural and man-made objects), the religious experience is objective in the sense that it rests in the absolutely universal movement into infinity. Two years prior to the publication of his religious text *God is Not Cast Down* (1922) in a letter from April 11 1920, Malevich writes:

I no longer consider Suprematism like a painter or like a form that I took out from a dark skull. I stand before it like an outside contemplating a phenomenon. For many years I was concerned with my movement in colors, leaving the religion of the spirit aside, and twenty-five years have passed, and now I have returned or rather I have entered into the religious World; I do not know why it happened so. I visit churches, look at the saints, and the entire spiritual world in action, and now I see in myself, and perhaps in the world as a whole, that the time is coming for a change of religions. I have seen that just as painting has moved toward its pure form of the act, so too the World of religions is moving toward the religion of the Pure act; all the saints and prophets were impelled by this very act, but were not able to realise it, blocked as they were by reason which sees goal and meaning in everything, and every act of the
Malevich recognizes the changing religious landscape of the modern era. The innovations occurring within the sphere of art lead him to the possibility of new forms of belief – religious creativity becoming evident. In the early 1900s, however, Malevich’s engagement with religion was deeply rooted in Christianity and Russian folk religious art. As Yevgenia Petrova shows, the Suprematist language he developed was a reinterpretation of Russian icon painters; while this tradition used the circle, square and cross to decorate the clothes of saints and the white and black backgrounds to symbolize respectively purity and eternity, and hell and darkness, Malevich abstracted these symbols from their biblical narrative context, enlarged them, reinterpreting Orthodox iconography (“Malevich’s Suprematism and Religion” 91).

Moreover Malevich made a series of paintings representing Gospel subjects in the early 1900s entitled *Studies for a Fresco Painting*. Importantly, “in one of these works, Self-Portrait, Malevich depicted himself as God. This ‘Messianic’ approach to his role in society and art accompanied the artist all his life” (“Malevich’s Suprematism and Religion” 89). If this work clearly shows Malevich’s ties with Orthodox Christianity, the views he expresses in this letter put forth more universalist claims, attempting to sidestep particular religious allegiances in favor of an abstracted spirituality. What firmly remains, nonetheless, is the conception of the artist as prophet of a new spirituality: the artist’s vocation is foremost spiritual.

The messianic mission of the artist touches upon the question left unanswered at the end of Luhmann’s study on religion and that he poses with his particular neutral and

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disengaged tone: “How (if at all) can the religious system deploy its own possibilities of inclusion so that persons are included who have been excluded from other function systems?” (A Systems Theory of Religion 255). Because art and religion share this particular feature, that is, unlike other systems their inclusion or exclusion does not affect the inclusion or exclusion of individuals in any other system, the same question can be posed about art and certainly about an art that has taken on the function of religion. Both Kandinsky and Malevich want to change the world with art: the art of the future is at stake but more importantly the world of the future hangs in the grip of avant-garde abstract painting. This utopian ideal is deeply ingrained in their artistic vision. They believe art can undo the stability of exclusions that, as Luhmann describes, all other function systems except religion and art share. Alongside the migration of spiritual functions to the system of art is the belief that these spiritual functions will generate a new societal organization. Their projects, however, do not stir from the utopian realm.

Malevich takes this idea further than Kandinsky. Considering the global network of communication and the rapid dissemination of religions throughout the globe, Luhmann notes that, “it is striking that there is not a worldwide religion that is uniform in principle” (248). This reveals the uniqueness of the religious system, for unlike other systems, the modern era has transformed the religious system, which is one, into a system “with a preponderance of nonintegrated self-descriptions” (A Systems Theory of Religion 252). Instead of a reduction and unification of religion, an unprecedented diversification of religious beliefs proliferates in contemporary times. Malevich dreams the impossible unified religion of the globalized world and arrives at the same conclusion than Luhmann, who writes, “A semantics that performed the necessary generalizations would have to renounce all ties to the religious traditions, myths, texts, and it would presumably no longer be recognizable as religion” (A Systems Theory of Religion 249).
Malevich speaks of this renunciation by absolutely abstracting the religious act from its traditional context. He conceives of a religion stripped of narratives, dogmas and myths, bypassing even the central issue of the afterlife. Rather religion becomes pure motion toward infinity, the apprehension of meaningfulness without overarching explanations of history, tradition or origin, without creationist myths. Nothing could be more utopian than believing in the possibility of witnessing a pure act observed like a phenomenon. This pure act is absolutely disembodied, as if Malevich envisioned the witnessing of the world in spiritual motion and transcendence to become palpable. Despite his rejection of the possibility of returning to old forms, like Kandinsky, his vision wants to reinstate the link between art and religion of the premodern era when art was an expression of the religious experience since there was no other experience to be deciphered. The human being was a creation of God and lived in this expression wholly assuming that all first-level observers experienced the same faith.

Malevich believes that “To strive towards the old classical art would be the same as for a modern economic state to strive towards the economy of ancient states” (Essays on Art Vol I 89). Thus he speaks against reactionary impulses of all kinds. One assumes he would agree applying this statement to other spheres: one cannot return to old religions, old arts, old economic systems and so forth. If he exhibits a religious desire of premodern unity with religion, the new art is, nonetheless, radically different from old religious art: he reworked Orthodox Christian symbolism and established a wholly innovative pictorial system. Yet the idea of the unity between art and religion appeals to him, harkening back to an older time. Perhaps this is connected with his general optimism in relation to the changes the modern world brought about. “Not seeing the modern world and its achievements,” he writes, “means not participating in the triumph of modern transformations” (Essays on Art Vol I 89). Malevich attempts to recuperate the fragmentation of modernity (recovering unity) by a
rigorous and methodical work of reduction, economization and centralization. He intends to construct a new unity; yet the change Luhmann addresses from a stratified to a synchronic world entails precisely the loss of unity.

To return to the premodern era from the standpoint of the modern era, Malevich understands, requires a total rupture with tradition. In the particular instance of the religious system, it also requires a distinction between the old forms in themselves and the relation between social systems that these forms articulated. The religious art of the past is stripped of its legacy to inhabit the pure act that travels backward in time, reframing the tradition of the saints and prophets in relation to a movement into infinity; it also projects itself into the future, as the new religion of modernity. He calls it “the religion of the Pure act.” The act has been separated from an actor. It has become agent-less; this act is an expression of energy, of the movement of forces: nameless, bodiless and without personhood.

There are no attributes such as omnipotence, omnipresence or omniscience. The act is perceived as the-purely-there, for it is actualized in the witnessing being. It exists as movement without beginning or end. Reason previously obscured the view of this motion. If as Luhmann tells us “God is defined as a person because that establishes him as an observer,” (A Systems Theory of Religion 113) since “personality is nothing but a cipher for observing and being observed” (A Systems Theory of Religion 110), in Malevich’s dream God’s personality disappears; the observer vanishes. Perhaps the vanishing of the observer effectively makes this idea not recognizable as religion; or perhaps what Malevich envisions is a new form of religion: the religion of the witnessed act. The human being, as witness to that act, moves toward it in an inevitable movement of dissolution. The act does not look back: it continues; its recognition of the human comes only when the act finally arrests the being engendering the total dissolution of form. The world is transformed into movement without body, so that immanence becomes transcendence realized.
Yet Malevich’s description does not escape what Luhmann locates as the central problem for the religious system, and perhaps because of this, one can still speak of it as a religious vision. In the modern era, religion, as an autopoetically operative closed system, must offer its own self-descriptions. These arise from the self-perceived difference between the system and its environment. The self-description however cannot help but inscribe the difference from the environment into its own system, thus inscribing the negation of its definition at the same that it inscribes the affirmative difference, so “Self-descriptions thematize boundary experiences. Religion is looking for a form of its own whenever it is also looking at what it does not mean, what it excludes, the other side of the boundary” (A Systems Theory of Religion 234). In its attempt to continually distinguish itself from its social environment while having to inscribe the environment’s difference from itself into its own system, religion presents itself as redemption from society. Malevich’s turning away from the empirical world toward a world of abstract forms already enacts this kind of redemptive move, the distancing from physical reality in an attempt to construe a parallel world sidestepping the marked world humans construe. This idealist decision in art later discloses a similar idealistic spiritual movement where the world is dematerialized so that an immanent spirituality might paradoxically emerge. This is possible only if religion is seen as the action that sets beings into motion, propelling them through space.

Malevich shares with Luhmann’s description of the religious system this redemptive quality, but his thinking also betrays the problem of the religious system in the modern era. Each self-description that the code posits must by force inscribe within itself its negation. For the religious system this problem is amplified since unlike other systems, its code rests on a cipher of what cannot be said: the revelation that cannot be revealed. The religious system makes utterances of what cannot be communicated. It communicates the impossibility of communication, thus creating a chasm between the performative and the constative
dimensions of communication: “Each self-description calls for a self-presupposing of the
description itself, an undermining of the distinction between the description and the
described, between the performative and constative functions of the texts being prepared” (A

Malevich’s world of abstract forms attempts to think a way out of the double-
inscription of difference, to escape the inscription of the other side of the distinction into the
marked boundary that the distinction creates. It does this by foregoing any established order
linked to representation. For this reason, in his religious vision, religion has to be stripped of
everything, bursting up from its system into a totalizing idea of act, that is, of world in
motion. Yet to accomplish this, in a deeply religious gesture, Malevich has to renounce
reason: again the split between the performative and the constantive is reinstated since the
witness witnesses the event but cannot logically account for it; what has blocked the
realization of this pure act throughout history was precisely, “reason which sees goal and
meaning in everything.” Goal-oriented religious attempts to find truth and to stabilize
meaning render “every act of the religious World smashed against these two walls [goal and
meaning] of the rational fence.” Goal-oriented religion subdues religion to the future: the
afterlife; consolation from the evils of the world; the ultimate meaning of life; and so forth.
Malevich’s construction attempts to undo the distinctions between good and evil, sin and
virtue, for these reinstate the binary code, distinctions and ultimately return one to
representation, to mimetic religion subservient to ultimate narratives.

Malevich and Kandinsky’s approach to religion is inseparable from the media of
painting. For both, it is the nature of the medium that determines their own particular
religious visions: they search for an abstract spiritualism of forms. Discarding the religious
text, they aim at the manifestation of transcendence in the immanent form, in the material. In
their practices’ absorption of religious functions and their attempts at offering a totalizing
meaning for the fragmented modern world, these two painters chose, in different ways, to strip the medium to its bare essentials in a search for essences with which to construct the art, the religion and the world of the future. This objective remains, however, hopelessly utopian, so that paraphrasing Luhmann, it remains to be seen how art and religion can in any way deploy their indifference to the stability of exclusion linking all other systems to trouble this stability. Despite their intentions, Malevich and Kandinsky’s efforts resonated only within the system of art.
Chapter Seven

Futureless Invention: Hollis Frampton’s Infinite-Finite Film

Since P. Adams Sitney coined the term structural film, critical responses to Hollis Frampton’s work have been concerned with the formal aspects of his filmmaking, its ideological and political critique, and its preoccupation with seeing and perception. As other American avant-garde filmmakers of his generation, such as Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits, and Peter Kubelka, Frampton’s work engages with the filmic medium qua medium, foregrounding its materiality, and inviting the viewer to become aware of his apperceptual experience. Furthermore, because Frampton left us an extensive body of writings on film, photography, and even video, scholars have also worked hard to tease out the connections between Frampton’s practice and his theoretical output. In Annette Michelson’s words, “Frampton was of a generation which worked to suspend the consecrated disjunction of


theory from practice.” As she further notes, among this generation of artists such as “Judd, Morris, Smithson, Flavin, and Carl Andre […] Frampton alone sustained this dual production during the following decades.” Michelson then describes Frampton’s work as elaborating “an epistemological model for consciousness.” Drawing on both writings and films, Carroll and Zyrd look at Frampton’s conception of history. Windhausen, on the other hand, examines the importance of Hugh Kenner’s thinking for Frampton’s filmmaking, and Peter Lunenfeld sees Frampton’s theoretical prescience as making the latter “exemplar for digital media.”

The relationship between Frampton’s theory and practice has, however, not been examined from the standpoint of the religious impulse undergirding and shaping his filmmaking. Analyzing Frampton’s film Zorns Lemma (1970), Allen S. Weiss notes in passing the religious underpinnings of this film, where “God is the infinite film projector; world and humankind and language are the film that is projected by means of the pure, white, Divine light.” This religious meaning, which comes to the fore in Frampton’s conception of the infinite film and of the photographic medium, informs his theoretical and practical approach to filmmaking. In his essays “Eadweard Muybridge: Fragments of a Tesseract,” “Incisions in History / Segments of Eternity,” “A Pentagram for Conjuring the Narrative,” and “For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses,” Frampton poses the medium of film as the primary means through which the human being confronts transcendence and mortality. To the coming into being of the perception of an image corresponds the coming into being of finite consciousness, without which the vastness of all

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Windhausen, “Words into Film,” 175.
that surrounds us is a total image that subsumes everything. Frampton’s engagement with the materiality of film then signifies more than a formal decision or a materialist critique of social conditions. Rather, it expresses an onto-religious concern that seeks awareness of the unknown and imperceptible totality of everything through the finite ephemeral image. The latter emerges at the same time that consciousness emerges, for “To the undifferentiated consciousness all the sensible world must be continuously, and infinitely, replete. The act of distinguishing an image, that is, of portioning a ‘figure’ from its proper ‘ground’ is, if we are to believe with Jean Piaget, one of the first heroic feats of emergent consciousness."

For Frampton, Muybridge’s experiments sought to photograph time. In his fascination with waterfalls, Muybridge aimed to capture “not water itself, but the virtual volume it occupies during the whole time-interval of the exposure.” So that, “Having once consciously fastened upon time as his grand subject, Muybridge quickly emptied his images as nearly as he could of everything else.” As Matt Teichman notes, for Frampton, still photograph “represents not a three-dimensional configuration of objects in the world, but a four-dimensional solid (or ‘tesseract’) that is the imprint of changes in those objects.” This four-dimensionality and virtuality is the infinite world that surpasses each finite instance—whether an image or a being—and so speaks for mortality and for the infinity of all that remains when one passes. In “Incisions in History / Segments of Eternity,” Frampton continues to develop this line of thought. Henry Fox Talbot’s discovery of photography was not the discovery of a technology capable of imprinting an image on paper, but the realization


67 Ibid., 76.

68 Ibid., 77.

that the image he yearned to create was “already there.” This realization lies at the heart of the photographic medium and exists as the condition for cinema.

Frampton applies the same ideas he uses to discuss Muybridge and Talbot when he speaks of his own films, providing a link between his theory and practice and illuminating his concern with mortality and transcendence. In an interview with Peter Gidal, speaking about the last section of *Zorns Lemma*, where six women read a passage from the medieval treatise of Robert Grosseteste, *On Light, or the Ingression of Forms*, Frampton says that:

the text itself I think is apposite to film and to whatever my epistemological views of film are. The key line in the text is a sentence that says, ‘In the beginning of time, light drew out matter along with itself into a mass as great as the fabric of the world.’ Which I take it is a fairly apt description of film, as the total historical function of film, not as an art medium but as this great kind of time capsule, and so forth. It was thinking on that which led me later to posit the universe as a vast film archive which contains nothing in itself and presumably somewhere in the middle, the undiscoverable centre of the whole matrix of filmthoughts, and an unfindable viewing room in which the great presence sits through eternity screening the infinite footage.71

After an interjection from Gidal, Frampton continues, “One can make a whole religion out of this thing!”72 Is the question of religion and the medium of film, of the universe “as a vast film archive,” and of a God who “sits through eternity screening the infinite footage” more than fictions and metaphors for how Frampton conceptualized cinema? Or do they reveal the

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70 Frampton, *Circles of Confusion*, 93.

71 Peter Gidal, *Structural Film Anthology*, (London: British Film Institute, 1976), 67.

72 Ibid., 68.
religious root of his vision of the medium, as the means to articulate one’s relationship to transcendence and mortality? In other words, does the medium of film, for Frampton, express the cosmological positioning of human finitude in an infinite cosmos? To answer this question, we must first assert Frampton’s concept of infinity, and its relationship to filmmaking and to spectatorship. We should also examine his conception of metahistory regarding the history of the filmic medium, and determine how these theoretical concerns affect and shape his films, particularly as they culminate in Frampton’s unfinished project, the epic *Magellan* (1972-1980).

**Frampton’s Concept of the Infinite Film**

All experience may become a film, a book, a painting, or a music score. Before however it exists as pure manifestation of medium—the blank page, the empty canvas, the silence, or the flickering light of the film projector. This emptiness predating a particular artwork is in itself an artwork. It is the only complete and inimitable artwork that ever existed or ever will, the sum of all the artworks ever made, and of all the ones that will be made. It does not express infinity. It is infinity, or rather, the possibility of infinite finite works of art. Art-making depends on this complete, inimitable predecessor. In this sense every word, brushstroke, or photographic imprint reduces the plenitude of the infinite work since it zooms into the inevitable fragmentation inherent in every experience. The infinity of the finite arises from the relationship of each work to the only matchless and boundless creation. Art then does not happen ex nihilo since history offers each medium as already finished.

Such is Hollis Frampton’s theory of art, so that he writes, “If film strip and projector are parts of the same machine, then ‘a film’ may be defined operationally as ‘whatever will pass through a projector.’” The least thing that will do that is nothing at all. Such a film has
been made. It is the only unique film in existence.”\(^{73}\) In New York City, in a lecture delivered in 1968 six years after he had begun making films, he further illustrates this notion he calls “infinite film” by turning on the projector without loading it with film stock. The resulting “rectangle of white light,” he says, “is eternal. Only we come and go; we say: This is where I came in. The rectangle was here before we came, and it will be here after we have gone.”\(^{74}\) He goes on to demonstrate how every alteration of the rectangle, for instance, by inserting a red filter, does not allow one to see more, but less. In the case of the red, it subtracts “green and blue from the white light of our rectangle.”\(^{75}\)

Frampton’s inversion in thinking transforms a historically negative concept into a positive one. From Aristotle to the countless detractors of Blaise Pascal’s work in physics—his experiments with the vacuum—the concept of nothingness puzzled Western thought. How could nothing exist? For, if nothing existed, did it not mean it was something? This idea shook pagan and Christian beliefs in the plenitude of nature and of God respectively.\(^{76}\)

Among seventeenth-century scientists, Pascal was particularly invested in disproving once and for all that nature did in fact abhor a vacuum, seeking instead to confirm that void space could be created with relative ease. He then touched upon the old medieval question concerning creation ex nihilo.\(^ {77}\) Before there was world, there was God. What exactly existed


\(^{74}\) Ibid., 125.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 126.


around God was uncertain. Was there vast empty space alongside the deity? Or did He alone fill the entire cosmos? These questions gave rise to various speculations in early Christianity.\textsuperscript{78} Pascal did not pronounce himself on these questions directly, but his scientific work supported the vision of a world with gaps and gulfs. Furthermore, his experiments in physics contributed to his views on human nature, since he described the human being as an empty vessel filled with fleeting desires and impressions. Pascal greeted these insights with his usual pessimism: the emptiness in nature and in humanity pointed once more to the fallenness of original sin, suggesting more vehemently the necessity of searching God. As his experiments implied, the vacuum could be extended infinitely. Thus, it was also a figure for infinity, even if that infinity was a negative one. The two polarities of nothingness and infinity meeting in God, finding unity there, constituted the unfathomable mystery known only to Him.\textsuperscript{79}

In Pascal, the possibility for the relationship between the finite and the infinite remains tied to the idea of the human being as an empty vessel. This emptiness allows God to enter, faith to begin, and completion to happen, since humanity’s infinite emptiness creates the infinite demand and need for God. Now, for Frampton, the succession of fleeting desires and impressions adds nothing to the vessel. It rather removes, for the presence of these desires obscures the unified perception of everything that exists (of what Pascal would call the fullness of God).

\textsuperscript{78} For an historical study on the philosophical and religious responses to these problems in Western thought, see Edward Grant, \textit{Much Ado about Nothing: Theories of Space and Vacuum from the Middle Ages to the Scientific Revolution} (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

\textsuperscript{79} See Blaise Pascal and Louis Lafuma, \textit{Blaise Pascal: Oeuvres Complet\textemdash{}es} (Charlottesville, Va: InteLex Corporation, 2006), Fr 199.
Frampton’s transformation of the idea of emptiness or nothingness into a positive concept entails stripping Pascal’s language of its theological roots. Consciousness replaces fleeting desires and impressions. For Frampton, filmmaking, more than any other art form, deals with the rendering of consciousness since this medium establishes a relationship to sight, light, and time that the machine mediates fairly independent of human limitations. Consciousness ends with death, leading Frampton to declare that, “Film has finally attracted its own Muse. Her name is Insomnia.”80 In “A Pentagram for Conjuring the Narrative,” Frampton offers a metaphor to convey the meaning of the enigmatic claim that “Insomnia” is film’s “Muse.” The text begins by recounting a friend’s dream, whereby the dreamer is first a rich successful woman whose father has filmed her every waking moment since her birth, and whose inheritance stipulates that, upon his death, she must agree to continue to be filmed every waking moment of her life. Busy living a successful hectic life, the woman does not have time to watch any footage. She lives to be very old, “leaving her fortune to the first child to be born following her death, in the same city…under the single condition that such child shall spend its whole life watching the accumulated films of her own.”81 The dreamer experiences the heiress’ death, only to be reborn as her heir. Engulfed in her endless hours of footage, he becomes reclusive, sedentary, unhealthy, not speaking “except to shout ‘FOCUS!’”82. Living vicariously through her, he finally dies the same night he watches her last film. For Frampton, this dream tells the “story” of film, of what film does and how it does it.

Film exists for the consciousness of the viewer (not of the filmmaker or a presumed character), because as Frampton puts it by way of Beckett, we are all waiting to die. In this

80 Hollis Frampton, On the Camera Arts, 139.
81 Ibid., 140.
82 Ibid., 141.
process, our consciousness manifests itself in narrative, which is the finite materialization of a permutation or a combination of the same root formula. These combinations derive from what is already finished, what has already occurred—the white rectangle of light absolutely unique and replete. The finite then shatters the plenitude of the rectangle, an occurrence that has infinite chances of recurring. Moreover, the mechanical apparatus that makes film possible infinitely enlarges the possibility of rendering consciousness: the projector survives life, extending it and reproducing it even after the life it represents has ceased to be. The machine becomes equated with God, precisely because of its inhumanity. Only the inhuman can dwell in infinity, and deliver finite consciousness to the infinite possibility of a return.83

The dream illustrates the potential of film, which may record every single moment of one’s life. Yet, paradoxically, this recording is not done in the name of the film’s protagonist. The woman simply lives, unconsciously embodying the life she cannot witness. Her life does not return to her with the force of consciousness falling back on itself. The recognition of consciousness as consciousness only comes in the moment of viewing, whereby the fracturing between self and other is experienced as the other in the self, resulting in a simultaneous perception of distance and intimacy—of the distant within the self. If the woman does not experience the consciousness of her life, (thus her dying regret and the stipulations of her will), the film offers this experience to the viewer, who becomes the protagonist of the film, for he recognizes the wakening of consciousness to itself, the snapping into attention that Levinas, for one, theorizes.

For Levinas, the self wakens to its finite nature when it recognizes the idea of infinity in the other facing it. What joins finite life with finite life is the recognition of infinity as external to the finite and yet inside the finite, constituting it, but at the same time surpassing it. Because the idea of infinity implies an excess, the recognition of this idea as formative of  

the finite generates insomnia—the being awake to all that exceeds the self: awake to infinity. This excess that snaps one into attention is the experience of the other as what constitutes the self: the other in me that makes me. Hence, ontologically grounded, insomnia is a way of being in the world that the call of the infinite generates. Insomnia possesses no content. It is rather the manifestation of the awareness of a state, so that “Insomnia is wakefulness, but a wakefulness without intentionality, disinterested. Its indeterminatedness does not call for a form, is not a materiality. It is a form that does not terminate the drawing out of a form in it, and does not condense its own emptiness into a content. It is uncontained—infinity.”

Frampton’s dream dramatizes Levinas’s description of how the self comes to be aware of its being in the world in relation to others and to the infinite universe. The film is the call of infinity. Its form does not exhaust or terminate this calling; it activates it. Film then awakens the viewer.

The woman in the dream of Frampton’s friend exists only as surface, for the viewer alone can activate the image’s potential depth. The viewer’s encounter with the image functions as an encounter with the other where the understanding of the “uncontained” happens. The finite film remits us to the infinity lurking continuously unreachable. The woman’s inattentiveness to the other side, to the obscure view of the spectator, entails a complete immersion in life indifferent to and unconscious of herself as much as of others—she is unreal life, surface, impenetrable image. Only when one becomes attentive, does the awareness of being observed awaken. The observation is directed both inwardly and outwardly.

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What does it mean, however, that Frampton qualifies his friend’s dream as “a recurrent nightmare, in which he lives through two entire lifetimes?” In the dream, the awakening is traumatic because it reveals our inability to see, posed from two different perspectives that oppose and complete each other. In the first life, the woman “so crowds her days with experience of every kind that she never once pauses to view the films of her own expanding past.” Nonetheless, one gathers from the stipulation in her will that this inability to watch her life from the “outside” of herself prevents its completion. It is as if her experience is left unrealized, because the need to understand the “expanding past” continues beyond her finite life. The expanding past must be understood as a succession of (filmic) reductions of that replete existential continuum (the white rectangle) that links one life to the next, the heiress to her heir, the film’s protagonist to the film’s viewer. From the perspective of the heir, each film points to the next, from reduction to reduction, the lurking white rectangle of life insinuates itself as an all-there-is-to-see that by virtue of its plenitude is not recognized. Each film demands the next film for the only complete film is the white rectangle. Consciousness leads to more consciousness, reduction to further reduction, and the same demands more of the same. In the end, the heir too has lost sight of the expanding past since “he dies, quietly, in his sleep, unaware that he has completed his task.”

The dream articulates two poles, unconsciousness or indifference, and self-awareness. The task of film is to mediate between the unconscious indifference of the image as surface and the depth that the awakening of the viewer to the observation of this surface generates. The surface of the image plans images in the viewer’s consciousness, which are after all the consciousness of the other. For Frampton, fostering disjunctions in film augments

86 Hollis Frampton, On the Camera Arts, 140.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid., 141.
exponentially the possibility of the surface to create unseen images in the mind of the viewer and so to activate the viewer’s awareness of the relationship of his consciousness to others. Film’s ability to generate images that are not made up of silver halide crystals, but exist only in the viewer’s mind, is one of the ways it functions to awaken the consciousness of the other in the self, as that which is formative of the self. To accomplish this, for Frampton, film must offer perceptions, leaving the space of the one who perceives open so the viewer may occupy it. The viewer takes on the responsibility for the perception presented on screen, having been asked to complete it by creating images in response to the suggestion the screen offers. In this sense the film awakens the viewer.

The dream illustrates the dangers inherent in both poles of the cinematic experience. If the input-output dynamism between screen and viewer are to function only unilaterally, overwhelming stimuli will threaten to hypnotize the viewer, preventing him from contributing. It also illustrates the dangers of the white rectangle of light, here symbolically present in the dream of a totalizing cinema the attempt at recording every lived moment entails. If the unseen image the spectator provides disappears, cinema remains only surface, unreal because unrealized. Frampton theorized the “outside of film” by applying Eisenstein’s notion of vertical montage to incite a particular mode of spectatorship. However, before discussing how vertical montage addresses the infinite film and film’s task of mediation between unconsciousness and self-awareness, one must define how Frampton saw the notion of infinite film formally and in relationship to history.

Frampton’s notion of infinite film intervenes and shapes both his relationship to tradition and to the filmic medium. It helps him think through the difficult position of the filmmaker working in a relatively new medium, which moreover belongs to the industrial era,
to the Age of the Machine, as Frampton calls it, making of the film projector “the Last Machine”⁸⁹

The machine itself permits and enacts the notion of infinite film. As he writes in “For a Metahistory of Film,” a machine is made up of parts. The filmic machine, however, is not broken up into the various components of a projector—spools, lens, shutter, etc.—but is “the sum of all film, all projectors, and all cameras in the world...which is by far the largest and most ambitious single artifact yet conceived and made by man,” so that “the machine grows by many millions of feet of raw stock every day.”⁹⁰

The possibility of infinite photographic recording is the nature of the art of the machine. It requires the conception of filmmaker as metahistorian, who waddling through this immensity must shape it in order to forestall the danger of an ever-growing machine to “utterly engulf and digest the whole substance of the Age of the Machine.”⁹¹ In his friend’s dream, the heir illustrates this danger, as the image colonizes his life.

Importantly, Frampton starts “For a Metahistory” with an epigraph from Louis Lumière, “The cinematograph is an invention without a future.”⁹² As he explains in a later text,⁹³ this citation reveals Lumière’s awareness that the future depends on the existence of a past. The absence of the latter points to the lack of context with which to generate or imagine predictions and possibilities for the future of a medium. In Frampton’s view only now, a

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⁹⁰ Frampton, On the Camera Arts, 137.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 131.

century later, can one begin to “invent” the future by constructing a past. Nevertheless, since the past of film is only now beginning, one must create it, as it should have been. If the films are absent, the metahistorian should make them or remake them, as they should have existed:

[The metahistorian] is occupied with inventing a tradition, that is, a coherent wieldy set of discrete monuments, meant to inseminate resonant consistency into the growing body of his art.

Such works may not exist, and then it is his duty to make them. Or they may exist already, somewhere outside the intentional precincts of the art, (for instance, in the prehistory of cinematic art, before 1943). And then he must remake them.94

The criteria that lays bare the absence of the necessary films is directly connected to the filmmaker’s personal vision of what is formally proper to the medium of film: what Frampton calls “the inevitable conditions of film.” The conditions a filmmaker finds inevitable, however, depend on the filmmaker’s approach. They may vary, for many conditions of film have the potential to be considered inevitable. They are already the result of a vision, of an aesthetic transformation because, “There is no evidence in the structural logic of the filmstrip that distinguishes ‘footage’ from a ‘finished’ work…any piece of film may be regarded as ‘footage’ for use in any imaginable way to construct or reconstruct a new work. Therefore, it may be possible for a metahistorian to take old work as footage, and construct from it identical new work necessary to a tradition.”95

Frampton articulates the essential (for him inevitable) characteristics of film in relation to his practice by naming three axioms. Its “inevitable conditions” are then the frame, “the plausibility of photographic illusion,” and narrative.96 The frame is a condition of the

94 Frampton, On the Camera Arts, 136.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid., 143.
filmic apparatus that has become codified into a rectangle so it is absolutely contingent. Its contingent nature signifies that it “partitions what is present to contemplation from what is absolutely elsewhere.” If one links Frampton’s first axiom to his thoughts on the white rectangle of light, one understands he speaks here about the frame as a composition resulting from a selection made by the photographic image. For the white rectangle of light selects nothing. It exists only as possibility, or as pure elemental force, implicitly defining filmmaking as light, an idea that Frampton acknowledges in his commentary on Ernie Gehr’s films as an “operational commonplace.”

The second axiom means that the photographic image “invariably triangulates a precise distance between the image it [the mind] sees projected and a ‘norm’ held in the imagination.” This distance becomes increasingly important for Frampton, for it mediates between unconsciousness and self-awareness, whereby film becomes a site of seen and unseen images, photographic prints and products of one’s imagination. The seen images suggest unseen images, directing and influencing them. If film is to render consciousness, it must inscribe within its sequence and construction the image that only the viewer sees/imagines and which results from an encounter between the photographic imprint and an insinuation. The latter requests the juxtaposition of another superimposed image that generates a montage effect fully realized only in the mind of the spectator. This unseen image wakens the viewer to an awareness of the other in the self—of the image suggested from the outside but emerging only inside.

The third axiom is narrative, inevitable even in abstract films, since per force film entails a sequence of shots.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid., 190.

99 Ibid., 143.
Frampton’s notion of infinite film then operates at the level of tradition—through the metahistorian’s constructive and reconstructive relationship to footage—and at the level of the medium, which determines how this footage is to be re-appropriated. These two operational approaches are not separated in his work, but mutually determinative.

But, if the white rectangle of light is “the only unique film in existence,” it does away with Frampton’s three axioms of frame, photographic image, and narrative. For even if the “frame” as boundary remains, it does not partition “what is present to contemplation from what is absolutely elsewhere,” since there is no photographic image extracting color from the white rectangle of light. If all film is “about” light, light is the infinite film. The question remains: how does this idea manifest itself in his films. Does Frampton inscribe the white rectangle into the photographic image, not as light without an image, but as film filming the light? Or does he, within the finite film, point to the only unique film, which in the end is the absence of the image?

Two films, Zorns Lemma (1970) and (nostalgia) (1971), display the awareness of the white rectangle most overtly. Zorns Lemma juxtaposes the human way of ordering the world, through language and sequencing, to the engulfing opposites of total darkness and light by mapping a journey from the dark screen to the white screen. A narration of a New England elementary school lesson book titled the Bay State Primer (c. 1800) accompanies the initial two-minute dark screen shot with its singsong biblical rhymes designed to teach the alphabet. A twenty-four second sequence of alphabetized shots (one second per shot) follows the dark screen in rapid succession. Each shot displays one letter of the alphabet in relief, showing the criteria of ordering the sequence of image-words that constitutes the longest segment of the film (almost forty-six minutes). Ordered alphabetically, and found on the street, shots of words make up most of the film. Images of people, spaces, events or things—a man turning
the pages of a book, an egg frying, the sea, a grinder grinding meat, and a child on a swing, among others—interrupt the shots of words. The film ends with a field of snow, two figures and a dog, receding into an ever-greater distance, as the exposure becomes brighter until it overwhelms the entire screen, becoming the white rectangle of light. The film films the light, as it overexposes the white field of snow. The narration of Robert Grosseteste’s twelfth-century mystical Neoplatonic text, *On Light, or the Ingression of Forms* accompanies this last image. The narration speaks about light as the first form, considering the inseparableness of matter and form and the nature of each natural element: an homage to light that bespeaks a vision of filmmaking as the shaping of light into form. As Weiss argues, the film operates on two axes: it is concerned with mathematical sequencing, ordering, and structuring, and dwells on theological contemplation by way of Grosseteste’s narration, the biblical rhymes of the school book, and the evocation of nothing and eternity opening and closing the film.¹⁰⁰

Articulating the disjunction between both axes, nonetheless, Frampton inscribes the white frame, as the condition for the existence of each axis. The film moves toward it at its end, since it culminates in a completely white frame. Moreover, some of the shots that interrupt the word-images of the longest segment of the film recall the white rectangle, for example, a man painting a brown wall white. These images irrupt, functioning as moments of disclosure that point to the unchangeable surface each photographic image reduces, albeit in potentially infinite permutations, since the plentitude of the white contains the infinite-all. These irruptions, however, are not the only unique film in themselves, but the film filming the white, the white photographic image, not the white rectangle of light. Both can be reproduced endlessly. Yet, the film filming the light is already a materialization of a finite film, a reduction. The projector devoid of film stock alone contains the unique film. So the

filming of the light—light as photographic image—points to a complete absence. Frampton seems to have approached certain images as standing in for the film frame. In his notes on Zorns Lemma, for instance, he writes regarding the said image of a man painting a wall white: “K. Painting a wall. Another simile: starting something and finishing it through human work. The space ends up white; the wall is the film frame. In the course of the shot, I repeatedly breathed on the lens to fog the image, which then repeatedly clears.”

The film recycles and repeats this shot, which is always being interrupted, since the action starts over again, and the breath continuously fills and disappears from the frame. The impossibility of sustaining the white connects to the reductions that the finite effects: plentitude in Frampton’s films is the foremost property of the divine; but its changeless character, if it were sustained, would annihilate filmic history and the infinite sequence made up of each finite materialization. It appears and disappears since the filming of light is both the most basic condition of film and its obliteration. The presence of a man at work only reinforces this, for the frame functions as a positioning: the recurrent need to acknowledge the unequivocal origin as complete absence.

Furthermore, the fragility of the white rectangle of light, its refusal to coalesce entirely on the photographic image continuum it keeps interrupting, comments on the material conditions of film—on the medium’s survival as material and on the economic apparatus it depends on. When in “Invention Without a Future,” Frampton writes about early film, he comments on the paradox of film’s vulnerability as an artifact. By way of Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Frampton remarks that it is the reproducibility of film—the absence of its ritualistic value—that fosters an overconfident dismissive attitude toward its preservation:

101 See Carroll, Theorizing the Moving Image, 315.

102 Frampton, On the Camera Arts, 200.
The silver print [the still photograph but also film] will be washed out in thirty years…it is inaccurate for us to speak of copiousness, of ready availability of a common product…Ironically, the very fact that film and the photograph escape certain conditions of ritual, the fact of their reproducibility, has virtually assured their disappearance. The more copies we can make, the more we are assured we don’t have to make any, because we can always make them, and eventually, of course, none will have been made, and it will disappear. So it seems that, like the exercise of speech and sexuality, film and its allied arts of illusion are at once limitlessly plentiful and painfully fugitive.103

As projector projecting a rectangle of light, the infinite film alone resists this process of decay. The medium’s decay, nevertheless, revives the destructive potential of the only unique film, which alone contains and engulfs all others. Frampton inscribes the material risks of the medium, the unremitting threat of the engulfing white rectangle into Zorns Lemma with this double connotation of eternal inspirational wellspring and fundamental threat: the rectangle is complete; it alone does not decay; yet, its completeness defies every reduction as much as recalls the reduction’s decay.

Cinema’s muse as insomnia is a figure for this double potential of the white rectangle: not sleeping taxes one with demands, and in some sense, renders the subject powerlessness to end one’s state. As long as the sleeper does not sleep, he is propelled forward, continuing to engage and reduce the encompassing light to another permutation of color. The nightmarish quality Frampton hints at via his friend’s “nightmare” in “A Pentagram” is already intimately linked to this inability to turn away and detach oneself from the demand presented. Levinas considers insomnia as a fundamental ontological state that precedes being awake or unconscious, so that “Insomnia, wakefulness or vigilance, far from being definable as the

103 Ibid., 178.
simple negation of the natural phenomenon of sleep, belongs to the categorical, antecedent to all anthropological attention and stupor.”104 The state of sleep remains expectant, aware of the imminent interruption and return of insomnia, since “Ever on the verge of awakening, sleep communicates with vigilance; while trying to escape, sleep stays tuned in, in an obedience to the wakefulness, which threatens it and calls to it, which demands.”105

The state of vigilance of which Levinas speaks is absolutely necessary for humanity’s ethical habitation of the world. Insomnia, which recognizes the other in the self and so alerts the self to the other in it, demands: one cannot turn away from it even if one wants to. It requires obedience and attention. Being in the world entails responding to this demand of alertness as the human being’s primary way of being—the disinterested, unintentional, and without content category of experiencing the presence of another as constitutive of the self. In sum, insomnia is the call of the infinite placed upon the finite and so it cannot be escaped. In Frampton, the white rectangle is infinite demand placed on finite creation. Despite its contingent beginnings, insofar as the history of film, it is necessary, incontrovertible, and for Frampton, the fundamental metaphor for the artist’s relationship to tradition, mortality, and finitude.

In Zorns Lemma other images function in the same way as the wall: steam filling a frame, an image of a tree that in his filmic notes Frampton calls “the only static shot,”106 the sea, and of course the final snowfield. (nostalgia), however, perhaps points more poignantly to the necessity of the white rectangle and to its obliterative power. Frampton structures the film around a series of photographs he shot during his early career as a photographer. As a narration tells the story of their making, the camera films them being burned over a burner.

104 Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in The Levinas Reader, 169.

105 Ibid.

106 Frampton, On the Camera Arts, 200.
This narration, however, does not match the photograph on the screen. Out of sync, the words do not fit the image. Implicitly (nostalgia) is Frampton’s farewell to photography. The film stages the tension between the immobility of photography and the movement of film, the latter overriding and destroying the place of photography in Frampton’s artistic path. It also animates the photograph, resurrecting it in the moment of its destruction: for the burning of the photographs brings the paper to life. The stillness of the photograph appears only after the photograph disappears as the camera lingers on the empty burner. Photographs, Frampton reminds us, enable the existence of film and so in (nostalgia) they order the sequence of images and determine the content of the narration. But while the infinite film exists without film stock, the infinite photograph is simply absence: the absent photograph in the burner. Film does not need to materialize into an object while photography requires the existence of a print, because film, as light, exists already in the projector without stock.

The film does not show the last photograph the narration recounts. In its narration, however, Frampton tells us he has largely given up still photography. Nonetheless, three weeks later, having unexpectedly felt the urge to go outside with his camera, he wanders for hours until a compelling composition catches his eye. A car parks in front of it, partially obtruding his view, but he takes the photo regardless. After developing it, he notices in the negative that, “Something, standing in the cross street and invisible to me, was reflected in a factory window, and then reflected once more in the rear-view mirror attached to the truck door.” After blowing up this “tiny detail,” he continues:

Since then, I have enlarged this small section of my negative enormously. The grain of the film all but obliterates the features of the image. It is obscure, by any possible reckoning, it is hopelessly ambiguous.

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107 Ibid., 209.
Nevertheless, what I believe I see recorded, in that speck of film, fills me with such fear, such utter dread and loathing, that I think I shall never dare to make another photograph again.\textsuperscript{108}

The action of enlarging greatly the negative renders the image more and more ambiguous. What becomes visible is not the empirical world but the medium itself, the grainy film, which in its turn obscures the white rectangle of light from where it departed. Every filmic reduction is an obscuring of the all-there, but Frampton recognizes in this obscuring a fundamental defining human act that however capable of unleashing confusion constitutes nonetheless the endless purview of human action. The white rectangle, of which the grain reminds us, turns into abyssal infinitude à la manner of Pascal, who Frampton deliberately mentions in passing during the narration of the last picture of the film. The disjunction between word and image with which Frampton has been toying throughout, unleashes the thinker of the abyss from his abyss. Ironical and farcical, Frampton places Pascal’s abyss over the plainest of sights: “A stubby, middle-aged man wearing a baseball cap looks back in matter-of-fact dismay or disgruntlement at the camera. It has caught him in the midst of a display of spheres, each about the size of a grapefruit and of some nondescript light color.”\textsuperscript{109}

Frampton goes on to imagine a narrative explanation for the photograph: “The man is a Texas fruit-grower. His orchards lie near the Gulf of Mexico. The spheres are grapefruit. As they neared maturity, a hurricane flooded the orchard and knocked down the fruit. The man is stunned by his commercial loss, and a little resentful of the photographer who intruded upon his attempt to assess it.”\textsuperscript{110} Lastly, Frampton undercuts his imagining by way of Pascal: “On the other hand, were photography of greater antiquity, then this image might date from the

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 208.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
time of, let us say, Pascal, and I suppose he would have understood it quite differently.”

How Pascal would have understood the photograph differently is perhaps linked with the dread the enlarged detail provokes. Skirting away from the narrative representations the photographic image offers, Pascal redirects attention toward the white rectangle of light undergirding each image. Just as Pascal understood finitude as lodged between two abysses of nothingness and infinity, of annihilation and boundless possibility, so does Frampton wedges each film between non-existence and infinite potential. The white rectangle at once voices these two poles. The artwork arises from an absolute that does not need it, for plenitude does not demand the human reduction, although it commands it, as it establishes the ground of its possibility.

For Frampton, what the materiality of film signifies goes beyond an interest in making the medium an artwork in itself. The rectangle of light points to a totality that stands in diametrical opposition to Bazin’s concept of total cinema. Bazin envisions film’s task as the complete representation of life, depicting the world, as “realistically” as human perception perceives it. Bazin acknowledges, nonetheless, the impossibility of this task, for new technology reformulates continuously and infinitely the possibilities of realistic representation. For him, cinema has not yet been invented. For Frampton, the white rectangle is the “real.” It is the complete image that no technology can perfect. Because this image swerves from representation, it highlights the cosmological nature of Frampton’s vision: it is not only a question of life on Earth but also of its relation to the all-beyond, where forms

\[111\] Ibid.

\[112\] See Lafuma’s edition of Pascal’s Pensées Fr199 and Fr 418. “In the end what is man in nature? Nothing with regard to the infinite, everything with regard to nothing, the middle between all and nothing, infinitely far from understanding the extremes” (My translation). “Car enfin qu’est ce que l’homme dans la nature? Un néant à l’égard de l’infini, un tout à l’égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout, infiniment éloigné de comprendre les extremes” (199).
exist in the formless extension of the universe. For this reason, his films feature the medium, as that which expresses the infinite, and the relation of the temporal to it. Artificial Light (1969) is organized around this two-fold ambition. A series of reiterations of “a single filmic utterance,” the film displays shots of a social gathering “of young New Yorkers informally talking, drinking wine, laughing, smoking” interrupted by “a dolly shot into a picture of the moon.” The film starts with a shot of the moon and ends with a close-up of the moon’s crater. Meanwhile, “the single filmic utterance” is presented with variations:

1. A, upside-down and backwards
2. A, in negative
3. A, with superimposition of sprocket holes
4. A, with eyes painted blue and mouths red
5. A, scarred with a white drip mark
6. A, covered with transparent stripes of red and green
7. Still shots in sequence from A; a stroboscopic or flicker effect
8. A, almost obliterated by scratches
9. Shots from A, toned different colors by dye, in an asequential order
10. A, with faces and hair outlined by scratches, dissolves marked with a scratched slash (/)
11. A, spotted with multicolor drops
12. Superimposition of A, with a copy of A in which left and right are reversed
13. A, with all faces bleached out
14. A, with a flicker of colors (red, green, blue)
15. A, covered with art-type printers dots
16. A, toned sepia
17. A, superimposed over itself with a lag of one-and-a-half-seconds
18. A, interrupted by two-frame flashes of color negative
19. A, colored, as if through an electrical process, in a series of two primaries
20. A, with a close-up of a moon crater substituted for the expected moon shots

The variations on the sequence draw attention to the materiality of film. This materiality relates in its turn to the interruption of the moon shot in an otherwise mundane earthbound film. The materiality showing itself as gesture of artistic self-referentiality points to a cosmological positioning. The finite image is thereby related to what surpasses it, which here is imagined as the space beyond the Earth itself. Through coloring, superimposition, or

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114 Ibid.
bleaching, the filmstrip intervenes remitting the viewer to matter, but also to what temporally and spatially surpasses finitude. The white rectangle of light at times threatening to take hold of the image, whether in the light on the faces or the multiple white dots, is then tied to the spheres devoid of human life. It points to the unseen film underlining each film. In Frampton’s work a reflection on the nature of the filmic medium folds into a cosmological questioning of the universe and the place of finitude within its infinity.

In her long meditative poem about the paintings of Pierre Bonnard, Cole Swensen illuminates an idea that Frampton would have articulated in similar terms:

So many of Bonnard’s paintings that seem to focus on windows are actually more concerned with the frame. It stands in the way, not framing the scene, but cutting it in two, thus framing not our view, but our awareness of viewing, our standing in the middle and someone who draws back a curtain, who turns on a light, who across the street is more given (with someone in them)

glancing out, you catch your neighbor’s eye across the narrow

for an instant

who turns on a light. To draw a thin line around. To say outside is made of sun.115

Swensen’s insight into Bonnard points to the similarities between the painter’s and Frampton’s awareness of art-making as that which is untangled with awakening to one’s “sight,” to seeing the physical and the immaterial alike. Paradoxically, this awakening begins with a kind of blindness, for “outside is made of sun” obstructs the discernment of forms, blinds rather than reveals. This blindness however is necessary if things are to appear at last.

As Swensen’s poem acknowledges the overwhelming brightness of infinity by including a long space between lines nine and ten, and eleven and twelve, so do Frampton’s films remain conscious of this brightness. The painter applies paint and the filmmaker reduces light out of an awareness of seeing the infinity that engulfs all things. Art-making becomes this double attention to the totality of light that conceals everything and to what allows for light to begin to “show.” The frame reveals the world as light/sun, but the frame has already begun disturbing that overwhelming surface. It has begun marking the absolutely unmarked.

**The Infinite-Finite Film and Vertical Montage**

Fundamental to Frampton’s aesthetic, then, is his awareness of the white rectangle of light. The concern with the rectangle points to the undergirding question in his work—art must be positioned in relation to infinity, for infinity returns us to finitude as vigilance, as insomnia in the ontological sense that Levinas conceptualized. Hence, it is not surprising that Frampton’s last unfinished project aimed at creating the infinite-finite film, which would express precisely this wakefulness in its openness and ability, in principle, to continue infinitely. To accomplish this Frampton develops Eisenstein’s notion of vertical montage, for it maintains the finite work open so that infinity may articulate itself in this openness as a force that potentially modifies the finite.116

He called the project *Magellan* (1972-1980), after the first circumnavigator of the world Ferdinand Magellan, and envisioned it to consist of “a cycle of seven complementary but independent complete films,” each of which “composed of a number of detachable subsections and epicycles of separate semantic and formal integrity.”117 *Magellan* was supposed to consist of thirty-six hours of film; but, at the time of his death, Frampton “had

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117 Frampton, *On the Camera Arts*, 228.
completed approximately seven or eight hours.” Nonetheless, his projected part IV called *Straits of Magellan* (1974) entailed “360 subsections, each precisely one minute in length…The governing metaphor of this part of the work is the cycle of the solar year. A single segment of film is provided for each calendar day.” As Henderson explains, Frampton detailed his screening plan in a calendar he wrote on December 28th, 1978, clarifying that, “The *Magellan* cycle as a whole repeats itself every 365 calendar days, but takes 369 days to run its full course. This is so because the first two days of the cycle overlap the last two days of the preceding calendar year and the last two days of the cycle overlap the first two days of the following calendar year.” Accordingly, the film exceeds the temporal boundary of the year, advancing always into the next cycle, preventing or undermining an interruption. This infinite-finite film was to transform the unmarked infinity inaccessible to human beings into an infinitely extendable succession of finitude. To make the infinite-finite film is to oppose and converse with the white rectangle of light, both inspiration and dread, source and end.

Vertical montage was one of the guiding aesthetic principles of *Magellan*. A notion Frampton takes from Eisenstein’s 1928 text “A Statement on Sound,” where the Russian filmmaker sees the potential for montage residing not only horizontally from shot to shot, but also vertically, whereby the sound-image disjunction creates a montage-like effect. Instead of

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119 See Gidal’s interview, Frampton, *On the Camera Arts*, 228.

120 Henderson, “Propositions for the Exploration of Frampton’s ‘Magellan,’” 131.

121 Hollis Frampton et al., *A Hollis Frampton Odyssey*, 2012. See Zryd’s comments on the booklet: “Frampton understood *Magellan* as a work in progress whose very incompletion invites the spectator to participate and continue its infinite construction” (34).

122 V. I. Pudomn and G. V. Alexandrov also signed this statement. I mention only Eisenstein because Frampton speaks of vertical montage as Eisenstein’s concept.
sound serving an illustrative function, by playing itself against the image, it has the potential to evoke other images, unseen images that are brought to bear on the visible only through the connotations of the soundtrack. Hence, vertical montage also refers the viewer to other films, the film behind the film, in an endless spiral of deferral.

Ultimately, most of Frampton’s films make use of vertical montage: through the disjunction between the narration and the image, \textit{(nostalgia)} superimposes over the screen image a mental image that the narration invites the spectator to imagine.\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Poetic Justice} (1972) asks for the spectator to envision a film that is described but never seen. The latter is then only realized in the mind of the viewer, functioning in conjunction with the photographic print. With its image-words, \textit{Zorns Lemma} recalls the image of what is named as much as it creates inevitable meanings through sequence and juxtaposition. Frampton also uses vertical montage when evoking the spectator’s filmic knowledge: behind the clinical distance of \textit{The Red Gate} (part of \textit{Magellan}), one recalls the expressive painterly atmosphere of Brakhage;\textsuperscript{124} in the one minute pans of \textit{Magellan} that travel through cornfields or clouds, one remembers the phantom rides of early film, or how movement filled the impassive frame of the Lumière brothers’ films.\textsuperscript{125}

\textit{Magellan} is an infinite-finite film because of its imagined breath—it would run year after year continuously—and the ability of vertical montage to overstep the boundaries of the frame, forming a triangular relation between the single moment, the sequence, and the mind of the spectator, who provides the third image and completes the montage process. The infinite-finite film addresses this endless superimposition of image upon image: the shown

\textsuperscript{123} See Ragona, “Hidden Noise.”

\textsuperscript{124} Frampton et al., \textit{A Hollis Frampton Odyssey}, 36. Zryd’s commentary on \textit{Magellan} points out the importance of Brakhage’s \textit{The Art of Seeing with one’s own eyes} to \textit{The Red Gate} (36). See also Annette Michelson, “Frampton’s Sieve,” October 32 (1985): 151–66.

\textsuperscript{125} See Jenkins, “The Red and The Green,” 87.
image and the unseen, the imagined and the actualized. It is true of every film that each screening may always be experienced differently, but in the case of Frampton each screening is radically altered for it depends on the imagination of each viewer. The film exists as an infinite possibility of montage because it is imagined differently according to various spectators.

Once again, “One can make a whole religion out of this thing!” Frampton exclaimed in his interview with Gidal. His fictions and metaphors then allow him to articulate a cosmological view of the medium, whereby the film projector—“the Last Machine”—transcends human finitude, as it “magically” replicates what no longer exists, flaunting its independence of human life. If it was not present at the beginning of the universe, it nonetheless has the potential to record everything that has happened since its invention, giving us an ever-expanding vision of the world, and in this space age of ours, of the cosmos.

It has no future also because it exists in what is already there: the light surrounding us.
Chapter Nine

Cosmological Loneliness: When God Stopped Looking

Venturing into outer space raises the perennial question of who gazes at us from the space lying beyond planet Earth. If disturbances in belief have increased humanity’s sense of abandonment, traveling to outer space has resulted, in some cases, in a perspective shift: the loneliness of the human being achieves cosmological proportions.

Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* is arguably the first film to address philosophically the ontological consequences of humanity’s exploration of outer space. The promised odyssey is the journey toward the limit of the universe, searching for who observes from the infinite dark. Although *2001* considers humanity’s loneliness, it ultimately retreats into a faith in progress that will eventually dispel it. Yet the film’s outlook sparked a contemporaneous response that provided a radically different answer to Kubrick’s vision. In 1972, Andrei Tarkovsky made *Solaris*, a film that reacts to *2001* as it examines the search for extraterrestrial life, placing finite life in the context of the infinite universe. The film endorses the futility of this pursuit: regardless of how tirelessly humanity searches for “another,” extraterrestrials only replicate the human.

Following in the lead of Tarkovsky, Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* (2011) addresses the same question as *2001*, radicalizing Tarkovsky’s response to Kubrick. It sides with Tarkovsky’s vision, updating it to twenty-first-century sensibilities. Despite presenting this question differently, these three films form a constellation as they ask the question of who watches from outer space. The cosmological nature of *2001*’s inquiry folds into a reflection on the nature of the medium of film while Tarkovsky and von Trier turn to the medium of painting instead, emphasizing the impossibility of the future, as they focus on the art of the

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134 For Sanders *2001* asks the question of what it means to be human. The film imagines sentience as transcending the body.
past. Distancing themselves from Kubrick, who aims toward the future, Tarkovsky and von Trier perform veritable apocalypses, for in different ways, something reaches an irrevocable end in both films. The interest of these films in media and in the position of finite life in an infinite universe leads us to consider why a cosmo-theological investigation generates artworks that reflect on the nature of the medium, be that of film or painting.

**God as Personality**

Noting that since Romanticism the art system has occasionally taken on some of the functions of religion, Niklas Luhmann remarks that, “With the retreat of the religious world order, and the erosion of the observation of God as world observer, the questions arose: ‘Who else? and ‘What else?’…Here, ever since romanticism, art has found its niche” (*Art as Social System* 90). For Luhmann the weakening of the observer God lies at the center of this crossing of functions. Yet as he acknowledges in his study on religion, contrary to what is currently assumed in discussions about the secularization occurring in modernity, religion has thrived in the globalized world, yielding an impressive variety of new forms of belief. Luhmann fails to account for this intensification of religious manifestations when he considers the exchange of functions between the art and the religious system. The key difference here lies between the weakening versus the transformation of the observer God. The weakening falls in line with Luhmann’s historical mapping, where the advent of the modern era occurs when the religious system loses its regulatory power in relation to other systems. In the premodern era, society was organized in a stratified fashion, with religion regulating the ultimate meaning of the other function systems. The modern era emerges when the functional differentiation of each system solidifies. Systems become autonomous, operating independently of each another. The observer God weakens because it becomes restricted to the religious system, now a system among systems. New options of belief also open up. A shift occurs: the burden of belief is now placed on the individual who decides to
accept or not certain dogma. Luhmann does not speak of a transformation of the observer God, only of a weakening. Yet, the cosmological questions that these films examine think about God in relation to outer space immensity and thus the idea of God as personality disappears. Faced with the infinite universe, God no longer observes as a personality. The divine gaze vanishes in the infinity of time and space.

In his lifelong project of conceptualizing a total theory of society, Luhmann sees the shifts in the religion system as playing a fundamental role in the changes that mark the advent of the modern era. For Luhmann all function systems are founded in contingency formulas that mark the passage of indeterminability to determinability, thus establishing the difference between the system and the environment. In the case of the religious system, the contingency formula God is conceived as a personality, thus endowed with intention and the possibility of behaving in certain ways while excluding others. Once gods are no longer perceived as ancestors, who observe invisibly the living (and of whom one knows the origin since once they were among the living), one needs to conceive of the invisible observer differently. Attributing it a personality begins the process of dissolution of the familiar household observer and the creation of the impersonal invisible observer God. Personality, then, is “nothing but a cipher for observing and being observed” (A Systems Theory of Religion 110). This cipher gets disturbed in these films because they imagine humanity in relation to outer space immensity. In this new environment, the observer God cannot retain its personality.

Thus in Kubrick, Tarkovsky and von Trier it is not the weakening of the observer God that allows for the functional exchange between religion and art. God no longer observes as a personality. His gaze disappears in infinity. A depersonalized, boundless gaze observes. God metamorphoses from person, observer, judge, legislator, to placeless, subject-less, intention-less space. The infinity of an unmapped environment observes humanity. But while in
Kubrick the infinite follows humanity interestedly, in Trier the infinite exists indifferent and in Tarkovsky the infinite is lost to the human being who exists trapped in itself.

2001, the Odyssey

2001 moves from the origins of humankind to infinity, questioning the place of finite life in relation to the space “beyond the infinite.” To reflect on the cosmological place of humanity, the film turns to a reflexive questioning of the filmic medium qua medium. Similarly to the elusiveness of transcendence, reflecting on the medium leads to the limit beyond which one cannot proceed. Thus self-reflexivity lends itself to cosmological questions: they fold into each other, reminding us that the limits inherent in communication also limit our demand for absolutes.

The film’s religiosity is apparent in the arc it develops from the initial darkness to the last section “Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite.” In the first section titled “The Dawn of Man,” we observe the difficulties of a group of humanoids. The abrupt appearance of the monolith interrupts the tribe’s routine, leading to the discovery that the tapir’s bones can kill animals and humans. The film fast-forwards thousands of years to the space era. Dr. Floyd travels toward the moon station to investigate the discovery of an object (the monolith) “deliberately” buried in the moon’s surface four million years ago. In the third section, “Jupiter Mission: 18 Months Later,” the Discovery spaceship is traveling to Jupiter. The mission’s leader Dave Bowman and his assistant Frank Poole, three hibernated scientists and the artificial intelligence HAL 9000 computer constitute the ship’s crew. This section dramatizes the conflict with the computer that results in the murder of Frank and of the hibernating astronauts, in HAL’s disconnection and Bowman’s discovery of the true nature of the mission. In the last section “Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite,” Bowman departs in the space pod as he glimpses the monolith floating in space. He travels through various
landscapes, finally arriving at a Regency hotel room, quickly aging, dying and being reborn as the Star-Child.

**Monolith**

Kubrick posits the film in relation to what precedes the image: *2001* emerges from two minutes and a half of total darkness. Remitting us to the filmic experience, the darkness recalls the cinematic environment, that is, the black screen of the cinema room. So the film can be read as an allegory of the cinematic experience, which is also a journey toward the gaze that observes humanity. Just as one cannot strip the medium to its core, for experience exists within the loop of its mediation, so does the search for transcendence entail the experience of a limit beyond which absence plainly reveals itself. The beginning of *2001* enacts a comparison: as the world emerges from the dark, so the film emerges from the same nothingness. The monolith constantly remind us of the film’s beginning where the origin of life and of the artwork are equated. Furthermore the pursuit of the monolith triggers the journey beyond infinity and back. The monolith comes to mean finite life – the void, nothingness, death – and the infinite looking at humanity beyond the Earth. At no point, though, does it stop signifying also the medium of film: the black rectangle of the cinema room.

**The Gaze of Infinity**

As the gaze of infinity, the monolith functions as a portal, speechless gateway akin to God, posing the question of origin. It is inhuman, yielding or revealing nothing to humans directly. Its recurrence throughout the film points to a repetition, which resonates more poignantly since the film’s four parts are linked tenuously. Only the monolith remains constant while human history unfolds; humanoids become men; machines begin to feel; and a new era for humankind is announced in the birth of the Star-Child. The monolith is the

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135 Chion makes a similar claim.
surface that emits and receives, the loop of history absorbing the anonymity of finite life so as to sustain its infinite progression. If originally the monolith was to be a technological artifact of a more advanced life form, Kubrick eliminated all references to extraterrestrials. Moreover the scientists never answer the question of its origin, function or meaning. Much as religious mysteries cannot be clarified, the monolith resists clarification.

Because decentered and without subjectivity, the monolith sees everything. Paradoxically, it is the universality of the gaze, its inhumanity, that invites the spectator to inhabit it: since the gaze is not attributable to a subject, it is empty and can be occupied, i.e., its inhumanity is the condition for its humanization. In this sense the gaze of infinity returns us to the medium of film, as its cosmological dimension – the gaze that follows humanity throughout history and beyond the infinite – folds into the medium of cinema – the black original screen that allows for spectator identification. The double dimension of the gaze of infinity is its cosmological signification and in the reiterative potential inherent in the medium thus relies on it being nomadic. We see this particularly at the end of the film, when Bowman arrives at the hotel room. The gaze migrates from point of view to point of view. Bowman’s gaze is transferred to the older versions of himself that he encounters in the room. As Loren observes, “this segment is about viewing” (229). If it is about viewing, the monolith facilitates both viewing and the transferability of the gaze without constituting the locus of a divine unity from where all is seen as if by God. The gaze of infinity emerges because God’s personhood disappears: observation continues without coalescing in a center.

**Rectangular Screen/Cinema Room**

Bowman begins his travel “beyond the infinite” from complete darkness before lines of color slowly overwhelm each side of the screen. We are in the realm of abstraction.

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136 See for instance Peter Kramer *2001: A Space Odyssey* chapter three.

Mimetic connections have been abandoned. Succeeding each other at great speed, these lines converge on a point in the center, splitting the screen into two equal parts. Bowman moves toward the perspectival vanishing point of painting. Perspective conjures the theatrical performance space, for dividing the screen as fast moving lines converge into a vanishing point places Bowman and the audience in the “King’s seat,” creating the illusion the spectator is entering the film. Just as Bowman is reduced to an enormous close-up of an eye, the spectator too is sucked into the celluloid. Traveling beyond the infinite is thus equated to entering the medium of film. The latter has become infinity, and the filmic apparatus the portal delivering “men” into the infinite universe. Yet just as Bowman returns as the Star-Child, we return to the medium, to the next cinema room and the next rectangle of dark.

In the last appearance of the monolith in the hotel room, the camera zooms into its surface before cutting to the black screen again, where a slip second of darkness reinstates the object’s connection with the interplanetary dark but also with the dark rectangle of the cinema room. This darkness now has returned to the metaphor the film sets up at the beginning, equating the dawn of the world with the beginning of film. By delivering us back to the cinema room, the monolith’s rectangular shape returns us to the filmic medium. Yet the black image without photographic imprint figures in the film as enigma as if casting the nature of the filmic medium as absence of light that hides nothing but also cannot be known.

**Solaris and Melancholia, the Anti-Odysseys**

An apocalyptic story chronicling the last days of the planet Earth as experienced mainly through the perspective of two sisters, Justine (Kristen Dunst) and Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), von Trier’s _Melancholia_ directly opposes Kubrick’s _2001_. Melancholia, a newly discovered planet ten times the size of the Earth, is moving on a collision course towards the Earth. The film opens with an impressionistic sequence of images slowed down
immensely so that at first one mistakes them for stills. This sequence discloses the film’s
denouement, for *Melancholia* ends with the collision of the two planets and the complete
obliteration of the Earth. von Trier speaks of the film’s beginning as “a series of sequences
and stills which, to the overture of ‘Tristan and Isolde’, partly shows Justine’s own visions of
the wonderful end of the world, partly the most dramatic grand-scale images of the cosmic
collision.” Importantly, von Trier uses the word “visions” to describe the nature of these
scenes, for the film presents the melancholic as a prophetic figure: not only Justine desires
the *wonderful* end of the world but she also foresees it. As we shall see later, the melancholic
as visionary is connected to Trier’s interpretation of Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I* (1514).

After the overture, the film is divided into two parts titled respectively Justine and
Claire. The first shows the wedding party of Justine and Michael (Alexander Skarsgard) and
follows the collapse of Justine as she sinks deep into depression over the course of the night.
Her sister has meticulously prepared this event and her husband John (Kiefer Sutherland) has
dutifully paid for it and agreed to host it at his estate – a sumptuous imposing castle, where
all of the film’s action happens. The drama of the approaching planet consumes most of the
second part, culminating in the destruction of the Earth.

An amateur astronomer, John informs Claire that scientists have predicted
Melancholia will approach Earth but then pull away. Since the opening section of the film
informs the viewer of the end, this false expectation is introduced to trigger the different
responses to a possible impending end: the depressed Justine “comes to life” with this
prospect. In fact, she seems to “know” things, never expecting other outcome besides the
collision of the planets, which does not disturb her. Despite her husband’s confidence, Claire
frets anxiously when faced with this possibility.

From the beginning, Trier impedes the spectator from expecting nothing but
extinction just as Justine expects. So the audience’s affective landscape becomes that of the
melancholic. Besides establishing the subjective approach to the film, the opening gives visual cues that point to the film’s relationship with other films dealing with the question of humanity’s place in the universe and the possibility of extraterrestrial life.

Many reviewers\(^\text{138}\) have noted the cinematic and literary references that proliferate in *Melancholia*: Vinterberg’s *Festen* has inspired the wedding scenes of part one; the luxurious Castle and the estate is reminiscent of Resnais’s *Last Year at Marienbad*; the doomsday thematic retraceable to Tarkovsky’s *The Sacrifice*;\(^\text{139}\) and the fascination with German Romanticism a bow to Visconti’s *Ludwig*. von Trier explicitly refers to the latter as an important reference for the state of mind that generated *Melancholia*.\(^\text{140}\) Furthermore as Pahl notes, “The film has precedents. It’s not Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, and it’s not Tarkovsky’s *The Sacrifice*, but it has elements of both. It was filmed, like both predecessors, on location in Sweden—with its austere light. Trier, in *Melancholia*, is also as critical of conventional faith as Bergman in *The Seventh Seal*, and as languorous about life as Tarkovsky in *The Sacrifice*” (1). French reviewing the film for “The Guardian” mentions Sade’s *Justine* and *Hamlet*.\(^\text{138}\)

As important as these references are they remain cinematic and literary allusions that speak to von Trier’s relationship with both histories and less to the central question the film examines. *Melancholia* opposes 2001’s optimism in relation to the possibility of humanity’s redemption and to its belief in life beyond Earth. While Kubrick rejects the cosmological loneliness of humanity, Trier’s *Melancholia* embraces it; for this reason, von Trier sides with Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1972), which also opposes Kubrick’s optimism. Moreover, while


\(^{140}\) See director’s Statement at http://www.melancholiathemovie.com/#_directorsstatement
Solaris does not posit humanity’s cosmological loneliness because of denying the existence of extraterrestrials, it renders their existence irrelevant: even if humanity made contact with extraterrestrials, it would find itself again reflected in them as if looking at another mirror image of itself. In Solaris humanity is trapped in (and by) humanity.

**Von Trier’s Overture and Tarkovsky’s Solaris**

A close analysis of the opening sequence links Melancholia to both 2001 and Solaris. The film opens with a sequence of seventeen shots, the most important for our discussion being: 1) a bird’s eye view of John’s estate with an enormous stone sundial clock; 2) Pieter Bruegel’s painting *Hunters in the Snow* (1565) printed in a book that slowly begins to burn; 3) outer space images showing the approaching planets and their collision; 4) Justine floating on a lake holding a bouquet of flowers and dressed as a bride in a clear reconstruction of John Everett Millias’s *Ophelia*; and finally 5) a horse collapsing onto the ground.

Perhaps recording “the last time,” the sundial clock announces that time is running out. This image establishes the proportion between human life and the universe as an almost indiscernible figure dressed in white moving in the grass stresses the insignificance of life. After the sundial, von Trier shows us Bruegel’s reproduction of *Hunters in the Snow*, which has a two-fold significance. One of five surviving paintings of Bruegel’s cycle *The Seasons*, *Hunters* depicts a winter landscape. On the left foreground, hunters are returning home empty-handed, their backs slightly slumped and the body’s weight bending forward. Next to them, a pack of scraggly dogs moves with drooping tales. The hunters’ position in the pictorial plane faces directly the white rugged mountain peaks in the distance, suggesting the insurmountable inaccessibility of transcendence. Bound to their earthly need, the hunters do not look at the peaks: their faces are concealed; their gaze tilts downward. Bruegel’s compositional alignment presents the winter landscape as the setting of the human being’s
encounter with death because an invisible line aligns the hunters with the mountainous peaks, which seemingly mark the passage from the world of the living to the dead.

*Hunters* leads us to an important cinematic reference that stages *Melancholia*’s contention with *2001*. Tarkovsky too used this painting extensively in *Solaris*. In his film the painting signifies the inescapability of the past and the captivity of humanity. The psychologist Kris Kelvin (Donatas Banionis) has been sent to Solaris’s station to access the fate of this elusive sea: whether to destroy it or continue to study it. At stake in Solaris is the existence of life in the ocean. At the space station, Kris finds out that one of the crew, his friend Guibarian (Sos Sargsyan), has committed suicide. The remaining two, Dr. Snaut (Jüri Järvet) and Dr. Sartorius (Anatoliy Solonitsyn), are not forthcoming. Soon enough he discovers the origin of the mysterious people he sees moving about in the ship: his long deceased wife, Hari (Natalya Bondarchuk) materializes before him, except she is not a ghost. As Dr. Sartorius tells Kris, these “visitors” are not composed of atoms but of neutrinos, which allow their bodies to self-regenerate; their make up, Sartorius believes, holds the key to immortality. These visitors begin appearing after the ship sent x-rays to the ocean. Responding to this attack, the ocean taps into the unconscious of the crew, retrieving and creating the people that haunt their conscience. The visitors stop coming when an encephalogram of Kris’s brain is sent to the ocean. Islands begin forming on its surface, where Kris, or rather Kris’s double, lives in his transplanted brain.

Although acknowledging their differences, Chion sees *Solaris* and *2001* as affirming “the same agnosticism, and the same impossibility of communicating with a hypothetical other species” (157). Yet Chion forgets Kubrick’s redemptive end that results in a radical transformation of the human being into the Star-Child. Moreover, the central conclusion of *Solaris* pertains to human affective relations: the pursuit of alien life arises from the human being’s inability to confront its ignorance regarding love. Although in *2001* the attempt at
conquering space fails, the pursuit still yields progress: a new human consciousness emerges, less bodily, more powerful, for the Star-Child does not need a womb, only an allantoic sac.

In *2001* agnosticism thus does not prevail. Even if mediated by an inscrutable slate, the longed for transformation occurs, asserting the possibility of humanity’s progress. Thus the film does not foreclose the advent of the unknown becoming known in an unsaid future. Communication with other species might not occur but something results from this failure. Although, to paraphrase Kris, the crew does not know why they are being tortured, their visitors are a response to a human demand that the ocean make itself known.\(^{141}\) So in *Solaris* communication occurs. The crew begins to understand how the ocean operates. They succeed in ending the unwanted visitors by sending Kris’s encephalogram. Thus Dr. Snaut sums up the film’s philosophy: “We don’t want to conquer any cosmos. We want to expand the Earth as far as any cosmos. We don’t know what to do with other worlds. We don’t want other worlds, only a mirror.” For, he continues, “man needs man.” Humanity’s space exploration is thus ridiculous. Tarkovsky compares it to Don Quixote’s mad quest by reading a speech of Sancho praising sleep.

If *2001* relishes in a cold inhuman detachment, *Solaris* sheds the melancholy of human inaptitude, which stems from the paradox of simultaneously being unable to be only human while being only human. During Snaut’s birthday party, Sartorius criticizes Kris’s approach to Solaris mission. For him humanity is bound to the pursuit of knowledge, and science alone can bestow meaning to life. At this point, Hari interrupts the discussion to defend Kris (and herself): Kris is the only who acted human in inhuman conditions. He has realized she is his creation. Even if he loves her because of the “real” Hari, he nonetheless loves her, regardless of his reasons. They, on the other hand, make every attempt to dehumanize their “creations.” If they do not act human, then they do not know how to be

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\(^{141}\) Salvestroni notes how the ocean Solaris becomes an interlocutor. ("The Science-Fiction Films of Tarkovsky" 295)
human. The paradox of being what one does not know how to be is of course her plight too. She has materialized as the ideal image of Hari. But although she is that image, she does not know how to be it when she discovers she is the woman in the photograph Kris has brought with him and in the Earth footage he shows her. As she confronts the images of the real Hari both times, she looks at the mirror, for the first time seeing herself as a separated entity, independent of Kris. If up until then, Kris has functioned as “her mother,” and her perception of him has been inseparable from herself, her subjectivity is formed when she recognizes the image in the mirror as being both herself and Kris’s idealization. In this moment we see the enactment of the Lacanian mirror stage. The discovery of her subjectivity makes her human. Being human signifies not knowing how to be who one is. She does not know how to be idealized Hari or her own Hari. What Solaris reveals is the mystery of the human. As Kris concludes in his last conversation with Snaut, “We question life to seek some meaning. Yet all simple human truths have their own mystery. The mystery of happiness, death, love.”

In Solaris Tarkovsky uses Bruegel’s paintings to create a dream-like sequence in many ways similar to the overture of Melancholia. The orbiting station’s maneuvering of the spaceship will create 30 seconds of levitation. Kris rushes to look for Hari, finding her inside a library where several Bruegel’s paintings hang on the concave circular walls. Intently gazing at the paintings, she doesn’t turn to greet him when he comes in. After a close-up of her face, the camera cuts to several panning shots of Bruegel’s winter scenes, focusing particularly on Hunters: close-ups of details, such as animals, and longer views of entire landscapes. These shots signify what Hari “sees” in her mind, which is confirmed when she excuses herself to Kris for being “lost in thought.” For the first time in the film, she is absolutely in her own internal space. Like a newborn child, up until then, she could not endure being away from him: born out of his conscience, she is literally made of him, so that
his departure entails a loss of self. In this moment, however, she is lost in her own thoughts. She studies the paintings for a long time before an image of Kris as a child creeps in, showing the mental link between Bruegel’s snow and the footage of Kris’s childhood that he shows her in an earlier scene, and which triggers the formation of her subjectivity.

Soon the two begin to levitate. If the beginning of von Trier’s film slows down the image almost to a stop, the levitating of objects and people in this sense also arrests movement. Hari is the melancholic specter of Kris’s deceased wife, for whom he feels intense guilt at not being able to prevent her suicide. We see the paintings through her eyes, much as the opening of Melancholia is meant to signify Justine’s perception of the end of the world. Both Hari and Justine share the desire to die and are drawn to the arid desertedness of snow, the interruption and suppression of life it yields and the bleak stillness it exudes. Hari will attempt to kill herself in the next scene, failing because of her self-regenerative capacity. In Solaris an open book with a printed image of Don Quixote floats by as they levitate. In Melancholia Bruegel’s painting is a reproduction inside a book, which will also appear in part one when Justine rearranges a display of open art books in one of the rooms of John’s castle. In Solaris the book seems to acquire a life of its own as it levitates through space; in Melancholia the burning of the paper animates the reproduction as if the moment of destruction has breathed life onto the page. Open books with burning pages are also present in Solaris. When still on Earth, Kris burns his old papers: various notes, personal papers, photographs and scientific work.

Both von Trier and Tarkovsky assert the absolute cosmological loneliness of humanity, thus opposing the central premise of 2001 – for Melancholia this entails the denial of life beyond the Earth, and for Solaris, its significance. While in Kubrick infinity still gazes promisingly on humankind, in von Trier, infinity is not only indifferent but also empty, and
in Tarkovsky it is irrelevant. In Kubrick God as personality disappears into an extension that yields unquestionable promise; Trier and Tarkovsky do not believe in this promise.

Even if the “makers” of the monolith never reveal themselves, and despite their inscrutability, from the monolith’s presence one extrapolates a non-human intelligent presence. It exists even if as an insurmountable mystery. *Melancholia*, however, firmly refuses life beyond the Earth, so that its destruction effectively renders the universe deserted. The following dialogue between Justine and Claire from part two thus lays out the fundamental message of the film. Anxiously worrying over the possibility of Melancholia colliding with the Earth, Claire wrongly assumes her sister shares in her concern:

C: It’ll pass us by tonight. John is quite calm about it.
J: Does that calm you down?
C: Yes, of course. Well, John studies things. He always has.
J: The earth is evil. We don’t need to grieve for it.
C: What?
J: No one will miss it.
C: But where would Leo grow up?
J: All I know is: life on Earth is evil.
C: There might be life somewhere else.
J: But there isn’t.
C: How do you?
J: Because I know things.
C: Oh, yes. You always imagined you did.
C: I know we’re alone.
J: I don’t think you know that at all.
J: 678. The bean lottery. Nobody guessed the amount of beans in the bottle.
C: That’s right.
J: But I know. 678.
C: Well, perhaps. But what does that prove?
J: That I know things. And when I say we’re alone, we’re alone. Life is only on Earth. And not for long.

Without ambiguity the film aligns itself with Justine’s view: the Earth is evil; there is too much suffering, pain and death. Why mourn this evil? If life exists elsewhere, Claire implies, perhaps the evil of the world would be redeemed; perhaps other life forms can end evil. In his 1968 Playboy interview, Kubrick voices the same position, as he envisions the possibility of a higher life form teaching humanity to curb destructive impulses. He views the
possible encounter between humanity and a more sophisticated life form as having the potential for teaching the valuable lesson of anti-violence and self-preservation: “I would guess that any civilization that has existed for one thousand years after its discovery of atomic energy has devised a means of accommodating itself to the bomb, and this could prove tremendously reassuring to us – as well as give us specific guidelines for our own survival” (278).

Claire, as Kubrick, implies that the existence of other life opens the possibility of humanity’s redemption. Yet Justine is certain of humanity’s absolute loneliness; moreover this prevents the possibility of even mourning the planet since the mourner (Claire, for example, but never herself) cannot mourn after her own death. “No one will miss it” because all suffering will be eradicated and life is not worth the pain of living; but also “no one will miss it,” because no one will witness humanity’s disappearance. While Justine finds comfort in these thoughts, Claire despairs. Justine sees only suffering. Claire is on the side of life, after all she has given birth to a child.

Originally Clarke and Kubrick intended to end 2001 with the Star-Child detonating atomic bombs that would obliterate humanity. The new humanity of the more evolved Star-Child would blossom in its place. While Clarke remained faithful to this idea, Kubrick did not. Instead of following on the footsteps of Dr. Strangelove, a film that ends with the detonation of the bomb, Kubrick’s redemptive end averts the destruction of both his previous film and Clarke’s novel. Yet even if Kubrick had kept Clarke’s ending, the destruction of humanity in Kubrick is presented as a humanistic cautionary tale. Kubrick does not question the value of human life or sees the Earth as fundamentally evil.

Returning to the overture of Melancholia, after showing Bruegel’s print (shot three), Trier presents the first of the few outer space shots in the film (shots four, nine, twelve and
sixteen): the Earth moves toward the right obscuring a red glowing star in the distance.¹⁴² These images relish in the same geometrical emptiness that so fascinated Kubrick. To recall 2001, von Trier’s film needs only to show the still ordered shots of outer space, and perhaps cite Kubrick in the frame of the collapsing horse, which is reminiscent of the collapsing tapir in part one of 2001. These visual cues reconstitute the signification of their cinematic origin: while the outer space geometry of Kubrick’s film promises a journey “beyond the infinite,” Trier’s similar rendition features the destruction of all life in the universe. In one swoop the promise of infinite possibility that ignites Kubrick’s filmic impulse disappears. While the death of the horse is purposeless and cosmologically engineered, the tapir dies for the sake of humanity’s survival. The first inscribes the death of everything, the second the survival of a species.

**The Importance of Painting**

In a scene of part one Justine shifts the display of art books in a room of the castle. Claire has just stormed out of the room upset at the unhappy Justine, leaving her alone. Justine stares intently at the open art books on the bookshelves decorating the room all of which are reproductions of Malevich’s paintings – the Suprematist squares, triangles and circles. In a fit of rage, she pulls them down, replacing them with Bruegel’s *Hunters in the Snow* (1565), Millias’s *Ophelia* (1851-52); Bruegel’s *The Land of Cockaigne* (1566); and Caravaggio’s *David with the Head of Goliath* (1610). The new art Suprematism offered as much as its own brand of spirituality are pitted against Bruegel’s dangerous white nothingness of the Earth’s snow ridden surface; the floating suicidal lover of Millias; the consequences of sinful gluttony in *Land of Cockaigne*; and finally the triumph of monotheism over the pagan warrior Goliath. Importantly von Trier’s paintings share religious subjects, or if nothing else, a religious outlook.

¹⁴² Anselmi and Hogan note how these images allude to 2001 (44).
The paintings, and the film, embrace the idea of sacrifice while refusing the optimistic endeavors of the avant-garde as Malevich conceived it. For Malevich the art of the present was the beginning of future art. There is no future in Trier’s film as much as Ophelia and Goliath have no future and snow endangers survival. Since there is no future art, one can only gaze at the art and religion of the past: art as a vehicle for a new Suprematist spirituality as Malevich envisioned is a futureless dream. The destruction of *Melancholia* does not stop at organic life, but von Trier reminds us it engulfs the whole of human history. Emphasizing the demise of art, the film enacts a farewell to it amidst the horror of life’s destruction. Focusing on the medium of painting and its history allows Trier to emphasize the impossibility of the future (cinema is after all the youngest art-form), thus opposing Kubrick’s focus on the possibility of the future. Tarkovsky too will turn to the past because the future has become impossible, as Kris is left in a state of eternal “waiting.”

The paintings serve also to link Justine’s melancholia with the other melancholia the imminent apocalypse generates, for since she imitates the Ophelia painting in the overture of the film floating on the water in her wedding dress, she is the tragic bride of the planet Melancholia. This link becomes abundantly clear in part two when Justine lies naked near the lake gazing longingly at the planet as if beckoning for it to come.

Speaking to “The Examiner,” von Trier confirms that “‘Melancholia was inspired by paintings.’”143 If painting inspired the film aesthetically, Dürer’s *Melencolia I* (1514) inspired it conceptually. The engraving features a female angel dressed in long flowing robes, impassively gazing ahead. To her left a *putto* holds an engraving tool and is concentrating on drawing on it. Objects used in the angel’s craft lay about at her feet. Behind her there is an hourglass, a scale, a bell and a magic square. Besides these objects a ladder leans against the

partially depicted building; in the distance a comet irradiates light; a bat holds a parchment with the name of the engraving depicted; and finally a dog curls up on the ground.

Although the hourglass reminds us of the passage of time, for the angel it has stopped flowing. Her gaze and the right hand supporting her head spell a laden inertia. The objects for use in carpentry or architecture lay uselessly about her, unused and unseen. The angel does not see the beings next to her – the dog or the putto – a fact that strangely reduces them to the status of the objects on the ground; both are equally invisible for an insurmountable weight shrouds the world from her gaze. The inertia of the melancholic is a burdened suspension. Only the comet irradiating light at the left disrupts the overall inaction.

In Erwin Panofsky’s seminal interpretation of this engraving, Dürer recasts the most ill regarded of the four humors into the disposition of the creative genius. While earlier medieval representations of melancholia linked it to sloth, thus depicting the melancholic sleeping, in Dürer, the melancholic, “on the contrary, is what may be called super-awake; her fixed stare is one of intent though fruitless searching. She is inactive not because she is too lazy to work but because work has become meaningless to her; her energy is paralyzed not by sleep but by thought” (160). Contemplation, profound thought, results in this wakefulness; no longer springing from a reluctance to work, the melancholic’s inaction comes from a shift in her attention: her eyes are not fastened on the Earth but have turned to the universe, that is, to the overall placement and meaning of things, attempting to discover order and necessity, yet the evasiveness of cosmological questions overwhelms her. The melancholic’s external inaction arises from the ability to know the unanswered depth of things.

*Melencolia I* thus represents the artist’s melancholia, that is, the frustration arising from inspiration that fails to yield fruits. Wondering about the significance of the number “I” in the engraving’s title, Panofsky turns to what he considers the most important source for Dürer’s print: Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim's *De Occulta Philosophia* (1533). In this
book Agrippa develops a theory of melancholy, attributing to the *furor melancholicus* the ability to generate three kinds of geniuses: imagination, reason, and mind. The melancholy might turn a person with heightened imaginative faculties into a prophet of natural phenomena, such as “storms, earthquakes or floods, epidemics, famines, and other catastrophes of this kind” (169). This constitutes the first level of genius in the scale of values Agrippa constructs. For Panofsky, Dürer’s melancholy angel represents this expression of melancholy, thus explaining the number “I” in the title.

In her study of Renaissance occult philosophy, Frances Yates contests Panofsky’s interpretation of Dürer’s print as representing the melancholy arising from frustrated inspired genius. Believing that Panofsky has not fully accounted for Agrippa’s influence, she argues that, “Dürer’s Melancholy is not in a state of depressed inactivity. She is in an intense visionary trance” (56).144 Yates interprets the dog and the *putto* as allegorically representing the inner state of the melancholy angel. While the dog’s emaciated body represents the angel’s “bodily senses, starved and under severe control,” the *putto* records the vision of the angel with his engraving tool (56).

Both Panofsky and Yates agree that Dürer’s print functions as an allegory of art, but for the former it depicts the frustration arising from the failure to create, while for the latter the print depicts the artist at work: melancholy originates in the taking leave of the senses inherent in the visionary flight of the melancholic.

Von Trier’s *Melancholia* interprets the melancholic following extensively Panofsky’s reading of Dürer. But in part two the film dwells on the visionary power of the melancholic that both Yates and Panofsky agree Dürer derived from Agrippa. At the wedding party, despite his ulterior motives, (he wants a tagline from her), Justine’s employer compliments her talent, “Justine, you are way, way, way too good for advertisement,” proceeding to

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144 See recent criticism of Panofsky in Moxey’s “Panofsky’s Melancholia.”
announce her promotion to the position of art director. Von Trier depicts the melancholic as talented and artistic. More importantly Justine knows things. She knows, for example, the amount of beans in the bean lottery – a competition held during her wedding party: whoever guessed the amount of beans in the bottle received a prize. As the wedding planner (Udo Kier) tells Claire, none of the guests guessed the number of beans. Justine had refused to guess; yet she knows the answer. Claire knows she knows because the planner tells her the correct number earlier in the film. Justine also knows that Melancholia is going to collide with the Earth. Following Agrippa’s theory that Panofsky and Yates believe highly influenced Dürer, when endowed with the gift of prophecy, melancholy might reveal the foreknowledge of natural phenomena: “storms, earthquakes or floods, epidemics, famines, and other catastrophes of this kind.” This is precisely what Justine foretells: she predicts that Melancholia will collide with the Earth; she also knows that life exists only on Earth.

Melancholia’s prophecy is the infinite emptiness of the universe and the vindication and reconfiguration of the melancholic: melancholy no longer results from the perceived unanswered depth that cannot be fully grasped; it is no longer about epistemological limitations; the depth remains unanswered for it is (infinitely) empty; the answer has been given; the size felt so the world’s destruction is “wonderful.”

A Note on Sacrifice and Melancholia

At first glance the connection between these two films seems logical and indisputable. Moreover, von Trier often cites Tarkovsky as exerting a crucial influence on his work.145 Like Melancolia, Sacrifice revolves around a doomsday scenario: an imminent threat of nuclear annihilation leads Alexander (Erland Josephson) to plead to God to prevent this destruction, offering in exchange all he cherishes: he vows to abandon the family he loves, including his adored son, his house, his profession, in short, everything that ties him to life.

145 For Trier on Tarkovsky’s influence see for instance his interview with Sean O’Hagan for The Observer on July 11th 2009.
His prayer is answered: Alexander wakes up to find the world restored to normalcy. He knows he must fulfill his promise so he burns his house. His family declares him mad and sends him away to an asylum.

The film opens with Alexander planting a barren tree near the sea and telling his son the story of Monk Pamve: one day he planted a barren tree on an hill, instructing his apprentice to water it every day until the tree would come to life; after three years of assiduous care, blossoms cover its branches. The moral of the story, we are told, is the value of systems: if an action is consistently performed every day, then something cannot help but changing. Rituals are thus able to transform the shape of reality. The world of Sacrifice is like this barren condemned tree that Alexander’s sacrifice will bring back to life.

Although at the beginning of the film, Alexander does not believe in God, imminent destruction transforms his spiritual barrenness into belief. A famous journalist, theater critic and lecturer in aesthetics, Alexander is, nonetheless, gloomy. As his friend tells him, he is always waiting for something. Indeed when alone with his son, Alexander waxes about the sinfulness and disharmony of human society: scientific development has not kept up with spiritual development, making the world sinful. So he says, “Sin is that which is unnecessary. If that is so, then our society is built on sin from beginning to end.” He even quotes Hamlet’s exchange with Polonius “Words, words, words.” At last he understands Hamlet’s dissatisfaction with the world. He too is fed up with everything. Yet as soon as he utters these words, he refuses them: “Why do I talk this way!” Alexander cares about his family, his profession and his life. If he didn’t, his sacrifice could not take place. Despite the world’s sinfulness, he still hopes. Unlike Justine, the world still engages him, if nothing else, because he loves. Moreover, he too shares in the animal fear of dying (just as Claire), as he calls it. This becomes clear during his prayer and in his plea to Maria: he asks her to “save him,” to
“save all of us.” Because he includes himself among the saved, he does not lose his life at the end, surviving despite the heavy price he pays.

Justine yearns for the destruction of the Earth. This longing in fact resurrects her from the bottom of deep depression. At the end of *Solaris* Kris shares much more with Justine than Alexander. Now that his mission has ended, Kris muses out loud whether he should go back to Earth. If he does, he will make new friends, have new ideas, yet he will never make deep contact with anyone or anything again. Whether he returns to the earth or not changes nothing. He has been uprooted; nothing but a “new miracle” would change this. Staying in Solaris is equally futile. He does not hope Hari will return. Everything reminds him of what he experienced and lost. So he concludes: “The only thing left for me to do is wait. For what? I don’t know.” Kris has become the consummate melancholic that Justine is throughout von Trier’s film.

Kris’s transformation deflects the “quasi” redemptive moment with which *Solaris* ends: in the ocean of Solaris, the double of Kris’s father forgives Kris’s double. Even though the film ends in forgiveness, for Kris, life on Earth is no longer meaningful. His imaginary alone retains meaningfulness. In *Sacrifice* destruction is prevented and the possibility of redemption reinstated. Earth continues. Life is preserved. The film ends with Alexander’s son watering the barren tree with which *Sacrifice* began and uttering the words, “In the beginning there was the Word. Why is that, Papa?” The tree constitutes the rebirth of the father’s presence. The son recuperates the absent father, bringing him back to life through his ritual actions. Furthermore the child constitutes the future: Tarkovsky allows for the possibility that rituals will change the course of history, believing in the perseverance inherent in their power. In *Melancholia*, rituals are pointless: the wedding, the speeches, the rituals Claire proposes Justine and herself should do during their last day are all undermined, rejected, even ridiculed.
As von Trier said about *Melancholia* on the Cannes festival interview: “to me this is not a film about the end of the world, it is about a state of mind.” In *Solaris* the end of the Earth is also the kind of internal impossibility that Trier’s film addresses: Tarkovsky’s Kris experiences the Earth’s demise as a state of mind, as the inability of ever making contact with life, others, meaning. In Tarkovsky *Solaris* and Earth both end; in von Trier the Earth ends, and along with it, life in the universe; only Kubrick believes in evolution, transformation, and ultimately, in unquestioned life. Even though von Trier converted to Christianity, Tarkovsky was fascinated by it and Kubrick was not religious, in the world of *Melancholia* and of *Solaris* infinity simply exists without God’s personhood, without even bothering to look back at us from some inscrutable black slate. Kubrick’s God, however, although also not a personality, ripples through the disappearing extension of the universe, caring enough that it folds us in time and space, looking back and making us look back.
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