

AN EXPERIMENT IN IDENTITY: KATE AND EDNA IN *THE AWAKENING*

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In "An Experiment in Misery" (1894), Stephen Crane relates that he disguised himself as a tramp in order to spend a night in a Bowery flophouse. He wanted to experiment what the experience would be like. Is all good literature an experience, or better an experiment? Isn't it especially true of some aspects of late 19th Century American literature which seemed to have had scientific pretensions following the publication of Claude Bernard's *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* (An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine) in 1865?¹ "Experiment" is etymologically trying to acquire

¹ Bernard's book was not translated into English before 1927, but the ideas put forward in it had become widespread in the United States almost the moment it was first published in France.

knowledge by means of a thorough trial. The word "peril" interestingly shares the same Latin origin *ex-periri*, which comes from a Greek term meaning "passing through." It should also be noted that Crane's text is not a first-person narration. The experiment is conducted by a character called "the youth" who decides to follow a rather shady tramp referred to as "the assassin." Originally, the story ended with this exchange which Crane—perhaps unfortunately — deleted: "'Well,' said the friend, 'did you discover his point of view?' 'I don't know that I did,' replied the young man; 'but at any rate I think mine own has undergone a considerable alteration.'" It can thus be argued that literature enables us to probe possibilities, perceive what our limits actually are, and maybe even catch a glimpse of what lies beyond these limits. Crane's protagonist is a hobo and at the same time he isn't a hobo. He risks his life and he doesn't. Put differently: any man can become a homeless person, and Crane's story helps us perceive a number of possibilities about ourselves of which we are not generally conscious.

Isn't that also the problem raised by Herman Melville in "Bartleby," another famous short story (1853)? A wealthy lawyer tells us right from the beginning that he dislikes literature. When the story ends, the lawyer has, however, become the narrator of a narrative, organizing what can be ascertained as well as imagined about his unfortunate copyist. The lawyer no longer limits himself to writing "bonds and deeds," he has embraced literature! The neither negative nor positive logic behind Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" has become contagious. ("It turns the

tongues,” admits one of the other clerks). In spite of the hundreds of academic articles devoted to Melville’s story, we will never pin down what the copyist “represents.” The true protagonist of the story is unquestionably the lawyer with his hesitations, his attempts at getting rid of his employee (according to the iron logic of capitalism), but also at helping him (in the spirit of Christian charity — capitalism and Protestantism being of course the two key values governing the mind of the true 19th century WASP). “What is charity?” the lawyer asks at one point. Isn’t that the new Law Christ taught us, love one another the way I have loved you. Melville’s narrator comes very close to one of our limits. Christ gave His life for us. The lawyer doesn’t go that far. Does Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin’s “The Awakening” give up her own life in an attempt at being herself (whatever that means)? We will never know for sure, as the narration stops abruptly. What seems worth noticing is that Kate Chopin certainly did not commit suicide even if her character possibly did. *The Awakening*² is a third person narrative in which the implied author conducts an experiment, assesses limits, and probes the consequences of going behind these limits. What does Edna’s nine month (!) experiment tell us about identity and femininity³, their possibilities and their impossibilities? Is

² Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*. Pages refer to the Norton Critical edition, ed. Margaret Culley, New York: W.W. Norton, 1976. (Originally published 1899).

³ Contrary to Sandra M. Gilbert famous and penetrating study of *The Awakening*, I believe that what Edna Pontellier (or shall we say Kate Chopin?) is looking for is not love, which would be far too restrictive a

there a point of view that would give us a glimpse of what lies beyond what is socially possible?

The invention of reading.

Edna Pontellier shares at least one thing with Bartleby: it is difficult (impossible?) for us to grasp what she wants. Does she represent something? The problem is a problem for readers. Edna experiments with possibilities. What she tries to achieve is not given in advance, neither to her nor to us. In other words, *The Awakening* is an eminently unreadable text, not so remote from "Sarrasine," Honoré de Balzac's 1830 short story which Roland Barthes used as a pretext for the theoretical constructs of *S/Z*⁴. Kate Chopin's book was (morally) unacceptable when it came out. It was also unreadable. It still largely is today. How does Edna's experience and experiment make sense for us, men or women? In this respect, Barthes's study could to a certain extent at least help us determine why and where *The*

quest. It can only be something more general and encompassing such as identity. It would rather seem that the correct question should be: what does it mean to be/have a self? See Sandra M. Gilbert, "The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire," *Kenyon Review*, V/3, Summer 1975. I offer that the right question — that is the one with the most far-reaching implications for us — is that raised by Carol A. Wade in "Conformity, Resistance, and the Search for Selfhood in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *Southern Quarterly*, XXXVII/2, Winter 1999. Identity is not a given, but a quest, or more precisely, as I will try to show, an experiment when one tries to stop playing the alienating roles imposed upon us by our community.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970. Eng. transl. *S/Z: An Essay*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.

Awakening resists closure and interpretation.

Barthes explains that we can make sense of a text because we apply our mental codes to it. The list of codes could be endless, and they depend very much on our culture. *S/Z* somewhat simplifies the problem in retaining only five codes. None of them exhausts *The Awakening* any more than they do "Sarrasine." They will, however, help us point to some of what resists in the Kate Chopin's novel.

There are basically two kinds of codes, reversible or irreversible. The so-called 'hermeneutic' code concerns the plot of the novel. It consists in being able to ask questions about what puzzles us as we start reading a book, and hopefully answer them satisfactorily before its dénouement. Kate Chopin's novel raises indeed quite a few problems in this respect. What is the book about? What is the main question it raises? Its title is obviously important. Will Edna wake up, something which we assume will be metaphorical? The problem is that she keeps falling asleep throughout the novel, and then of course waking up (physically). Is the final scene Edna's first real (that is metaphorical) awakening? In that case, to what does she awake? We will never know. True femininity? True identity? In addition, we find a sub-plot which is connected to her relationship with men, Robert Lebrun and Alcée Arobin mainly. Here again, nothing tangible happens, apart from physical sex with Arobin, and that clearly doesn't point to a new beginning for the young woman. As far as Edna's feelings for Lebrun are concerned, their ultimate meaninglessness indicate that it would be completely wrong to read the novel as a kind of romantic love story.

The problem is elsewhere. But where?

The second code ('prorairectic') is that which permits us to identify actions. Readers are able to name what the characters do: Edna removes her ring, or breaks a vase, for instance. All the actions put together in chronological order constitute the story as such (as opposed to the questions which by definition make up the plot). One of the problems faced by readers in this respect has obviously to do with the ending of the novel. What happens? The events are reported by the narrator as they are filtered by the character's consciousness, and then the narration stops. Does Edna die? If so, is it of exhaustion? suicide? Should we speak of a success for her? Or a failure? The novel never answers these questions. It doesn't even ask them.

The other codes are reversible, that is to say that what comes next as we read the book doesn't affect the way they work. Here again, they don't prove very helpful to us, even though they are present in a text which simply would not be readable without them. That doesn't mean that is is readable with them! Code n° 3 is called 'gnomic' by Barthes. All books are sprinkled by clichés, stereotypes, things that we take for granted in our own culture. Men smoke cigars. It is in fact when they start smoking cigars that they become men.... It is true that we cannot question our environment all the time and so we unconsciously identify to these clichés. Such details are certainly present in Chopin's novel. The problem here is that at some point Edna tries to live without (or outside?) them. These codes are the expression of our society and of culture. Can one exist outside society? Increasingly, Edna finds herself

unable to express what she feels or wants. There simply is no 'vocabulary' or 'code' at her disposal in the world in which she lives. As a consequence, readers are unable to understand explicitly what Edna is trying to achieve.

The fourth code is the 'semic' code. An important function performed by this code is constituting characters. Basically a character is a proper name and a certain number of semes, or singularities which make up his or her identity. In this respect, Edna is characterized by a most unstable mixture of semes with the consequences that up to the end she remains a split self. She is a Northerner in the South. (Seen from Louisiana, Kentucky is a Northern State...) Her native language is English, but she now speaks French. She is of course a Protestant in Roman Catholic country. In fact, she seems constantly torn between two poles, between two sisters, a 'vixen' and a more conventional one, between Adèle Ratignolle et Mademoiselle Reisz, between Alcée Arobin and Robert Lebrun, not to mention her clothes, half white half black. Is it surprising to discover that she refuses to be a woman in the traditional sense of the word, and that she fails to be like the men, even though she starts speaking loud, goes to horse races, and walks on her own in the street? In her case, the semes are never unified behind her (husband's) name.

All codes are born equal, Barthes says, but all the same he attaches a lot of importance to the last on his list. The 'symbolic' code is bound up with the way our culture structures the functioning of our minds, that is to say — in true structuralist fashion — that it is made up of binary oppositions, such as one is black or white, dead or alive,

rich or poor, and food is raw or cooked, etc.⁵ Curiously enough, just as in Balzac's "Sarrasine," oppositions collapse in *The Awakening*. The main one is of course the gender difference. As we said, Edna cannot correspond to the idea her society has of a (rich, middle-class) woman. Can she be like a man? What sort of man? The correct question to ask is perhaps, if we look at things in a slightly anachronistic manner way, what exactly is Kate Chopin's feminism? Are women superior to men? Are they equal? Should Edna be man plus woman, or neither man nor woman, but something unheard-of and entirely different? The question here again is neither explicitly asked nor answered, yet reading the book inevitably leads us to raise it. The last scene of the novel exacerbates this impossibility of looking at Edna through binary oppositions: as she enters the ocean, she is cold and hot at the same time, as she feels the sun and the icy water on her skin. The reader, as we said, wonders whether she is still alive or if she has died. In fact, when the scene begins, she sheds all her clothes and looks like a baby: is it death and (re)birth at the same time? If we accept that she at last discovers her true identity, we certainly have to ask ourselves what that identity consists in. Has she abolished the opposition between subject and object? between society and nature?

⁵ Cristina Giorcelli offers an extremely rich (if somewhat confused at times) reading of Chopin's novel. In what is probably the best passage of her essay, she rightly insists on the importance of these binary oppositions for Edna Pontellier. See "Edna's Wisdom: A Transitional and Numinous Merging," in *New Essays on "The Awakening,"* ed. Wendy Martin, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

She apparently goes over the limit beyond which her society's oppositions no longer exist. The novel keeps telling us directly or indirectly that these oppositions prevent a woman like Edna from achieving a sense of identity. Yet, at the same time, she cannot produce a new set of oppositions to think her newly achieved freedom, which will thus remain wordless and possibly is an illusion which is followed by extinction.

The invention of transference.

One of the first crucial passages in which Edna begins to discover who she is — or, rather, who/what she would like to be — , is the afternoon she spends with Adèle Ratignolle in front of the ocean (Chapter VII). Curiously enough, that discovery looks like a rediscovery. At the same time, she understands that what her society has given her is not the totality of the possibilities open to her. There is something else, and that something seems to belong to nature and it is also something extremely difficult to express.

The scene shares a certain similarity with what Sigmund Freud called 'transference.'⁶ Edna doesn't see Adèle as she really is, that is to say first and foremost a devoted wife and mother. She projects her desire upon her friend's beauty, her supposed freedom, her happiness. In other words, Adèle for her is a possibility, the image of what she would

⁶ Sigmund Freud introduced his first attempt at a theory of transference in the Dora case, *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, 1905. Interestingly enough, the moment Freud discovered transference, he also found out that it is limited. At bottom, it is only a projection made by the patient upon the analyst, that is to say an illusion...

like to be. In the scene, the two women are away from society, especially from men. Edna starts undressing, a process initiated in the first chapter of the novel and ending in the last scene when Edna is completely naked under the sun and then inside the water. Here, the heat, the sea, the beauty of Adèle's body prove contagious and she feels compelled to start (re)discovering her own body.

At the same time, Adèle (intuiting what Freud's technique to discover a patient's submerged truth would be) invites Edna to associate ideas ("Of whom—of what are you thinking?"), which Edna does. The process leads her to remember a past she had repressed when she got married: "Nothing," then "a little girl," then "I see the connection now," then "I was just walking..." Edna's anamnesis finally leads her to use the first person pronoun, and to discover at last what seems to constitute her true identity. Apparently, her identity consisted in running away from prayers, and especially from her father—a grim Presbyterian clergyman—from family, from society, into... a field that looked like the sea. Of course, the last scene of the book is here entirely foreshadowed: the sea will look exactly like that Kentucky meadow. Edna never goes anywhere. She only runs away from society and its oppositions: "I felt I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it" (17-18). Is then her identity being part of nature, its rhythm, its infinity?

Maybe all is said at the very beginning of the novel. *The Awakening* does not start with a presentation of its main characters, but with a parrot speaking four languages, English, French, a little Spanish, just like everybody at

Grand Isle, and "a language which nobody understood" (3). Is Edna like that parrot, the prisoner of a golden cage? What will happen to the animal if someone opens the door of the cage? Will it survive in real nature with that language which nobody understands?⁷

The invention of ethics: Either . . . or . . .

When dealing with Edna, it is thus necessary to take into consideration two levels: society (present through binary mental oppositions) and nature (that is the unknown which cannot be described). It is possible to consider that Kate Chopin wrote her novel in order to examine what our options in a given society are and to fathom how far we can go outside these cultural systems of oppositions. Had she read Søren Kierkegaard? Her biographers do not mention his name, and yet we know that his books were very popular in the 19th century. He asked himself a series of questions which sound extremely similar to Kate Chopin's. *Enten-Eller* (1843, translated into English as *Either/Or*)⁸ is made up of two parts: readers are explicitly given the choice between an "either" and an "or" which are undeniably contradictory. Kierkegaard however believed that the two postures expounded in *Either/Or* are basically superficial and have nothing to do with what he believed to

⁷ No-one will deny that the Grand Isle Parrot plays a crucially symbolic role in the novel. In his fascinating analysis, Stephen Heath also rightly starts from it. See "Chopin's Parrot," *Textual Practice*, VIII/1, Spring 1994. The problem I raise is, however, different.

⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Enten-Eller*, 1843. Engl. trans. *Either/Or*, in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 3 and 4, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

be the true meaning of life. He then developed a third posture, particularly in *Stages on Life's Way* (1845). He is now considered to be the ancestor of 20th century existentialism. Could the same be said of Kate Chopin who went very far in her interrogation of what our identity and our body consist in, what their true possibilities are, and what essential choices are ultimately open to us?

Roughly speaking, the first two stages describe life in society, and more specifically the relations between men and women. The third stage is a hypothetical stage (it was a real stage for Kierkegaard though) beyond society. More specifically, it is a religious 'leap' into faith. Edna provides a good illustration of what Kierkegaard meant by his "either / or" logic: you choose (consciously or not, that is irrelevant as far as we are concerned here) either the "aesthetic" posture or the "ethical" posture. (These words are defined with great accuracy by the philosopher and have very little to do with their use in everyday language).

The aesthetic posture (exemplified by Mozart's Don Giovanni in the section of *Either/Or* called "The Diary of a Seducer") is first and foremost characterized by a conception of time based on moments. Moments are synonymous with sexual pleasure, orgasm (and possibly the seduction process leading to orgasm). The point of view is here individual: my sense of identity is based on the intensity of these moments. It follows that once the moment is over, my identity vanishes and boredom takes over, and I then start looking for another sexual partner. (Don Giovanni pushes that logic to its extreme: he seduces all women, young or old, ugly or beautiful, and he must never

seduce the same women twice.) In other words, the aesthetic posture implies a repetitive process: partners follow one another and the process can only end in death, something Don Giovanni, who doesn't try to run away, honestly accepts at the end of the opera. Edna is of course not a seducer, but she does have her aesthetic temptation. She has left her husband and she chooses Alcée Arobin to provide her with physical pleasure. In the last scene, before she walks into the ocean, she knows that aestheticism has been a possibility open to her. "She had said over and over to herself, "To-day, it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be some one else" (113). That was one of the reasons why she rejected Robert Lebrun when he returned from Mexico. All through her experiment in her new life, Robert represented a sort of romantic ideal. She doesn't want him to become (briefly) her lover. She knows that he would then go away sooner or later. In other words, he would in reality only be a sexual partner. Besides, in their final confrontation, he behaves like... her husband. Married life—a life apparently devoid of intimate relationships in the case of the Pontellier marriage—was full of "ennui," as Kierkegaard would have put it. Sex outside marriage is just as boring the moment of orgasm is over....

A stable life with Robert (divorce and remarriage?) would be exactly like life with Mr. Pontellier, and that would represent what Kierkegaard called the ethical posture. The conception of time which is implied here is basically different: what is important is marriage and continuity, not moments of intensity. The point of view is also different: what matters is what the community

demands, that is to say giving birth to children and thus enabling the reproduction of society. Dr. Mandelet knew it: "The trouble is that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost" (Chapter XXXVIII, 110). Edna cannot accept this posture either, as it would annihilate her identity. She would only be a married woman, a cog in the great wheel of society. Death in life? She prefers to choose (like Don Giovanni?) life in death, the union with the perfect lover, the ocean.

Like Kierkegaard, she posits a third level. Unlike the first two stages, which are immanent, stage n° 3 implies transcendence. The solution to all our conflicts is "beyond." Edna (like Kate Chopin in this respect) is not tempted by faith and religion and by the promise of another world in which moments and eternity, just like the finite and the infinite, would no longer be contradictory. Yet, she too, like the Kierkegaardian believer, "jumps" into the unknown. In her case, she seems to believe that union with the ocean will permit her to find her true self. Thus, nature / society is the last binary opposition alluded to in the novel. Edna's union with the sea annihilates this opposition and the novel ends.

The invention of languages.

Is there life after *The Awakening*? Can we live outside language, that is to say outside culture and society? Would we then reach what Edna at last imagines real life is? Can I

escape alienation? Such seems to be Edna's desire. In this respect, the novel can be summarized as a long, repetitive series of experiments. Interestingly, Edna becomes Kate.... In her own particular way, she becomes a writer, and more generally an artist. Of course, Edna doesn't exist. Edna did not write novels. Kate Chopin invents her and uses her in order to experiment with languages. She does so inside her novel through a fictitious character in a way that can be more radical than she actually could with her body in real life. Edna's desire is to produce something "that nobody understood," as the narrator explains in connection with the parrot that opens the novel. Can language permit some form of radical experimentation in order to escape representation? Kate Chopin guesses that the attempt would be synonymous with death. One cannot live outside society. That is why, in order to try and see what it would be like, she needed her character to bear the real risks and their consequences.

The novel systematically represents Edna's attempts at inventing languages, taking that word in its broadest, metaphorical meaning⁹. We can classify her endeavors into four main categories. First, she uses traditional language,

⁹ Patricia S. Yaeger is unquestionably right. The importance of language for one's identity is one of the key questions raised by the novel. See her "'A language which nobody understood,': Emancipatory Strategies in *The Awakening*," *Denver Quarterly*, XVII/4, Winter 1983. In a most readable and sensitive, Joseph R. Urgo develops the same insights in greater detail. See his "A Prologue to Rebellion: *The Awakening* and the Habit of Self-Expression," *Southern Literary Journal*, XX/1, Fall 1987.

going through three separate stages. When the novel begins, she is most of time speechless. Then, Robert enters the scene and tells her stories of which she is the heroine: "On the twenty-eighth of August, at the hour of midnight, and if the moon is shining—the moon must be shining—a spirit that has haunted these shores for ages rises from the Gulf..." (30). The spirit of course encounters Edna, the forlorn princess, who acquires an identity in the process. What Edna needed, in her empty married life, was narrativity, a representation of time that would structure her representation¹⁰. Edna knows, however, that these representations are but stories, that she can only be a poor imitation of the heroines invented by Robert. Obviously, she doesn't want to repeat old models which, like the rest, belong to the culture of her society. To some extent, she would then still be like her friend Adèle Ratignolle whose only conversation consisted only in repeating *verbatim* what Monsieur Ratignolle had just said. As a consequence, a third stage is necessary: how can I go beyond narrative, not to say beyond language? A key scene in this respect is the dinner party in New Orleans to which her father has been invited. The male guests all tell stories which are in fact very traditional anecdotes in which they evidently had played an important role. When her turn comes, Edna

¹⁰ Paul Ricœur's seminal study shows that our identity is bound up with being able to construct articulated mental representations of a narrative in which we play a part. In other words, the self is always bound up with our personal structuring of time. Cf., *Temps et récit*, 2 vol., Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983-1984. Engl. transl. *Time and Narrative*, 3 volumes, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

invents the story of "a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back" (70). Edna's story has no ending, happy or not. It is completely open. It posits that something possibly may have happened outside society. Language and conventional narration can no longer be of any help to us.

Edna secondly attempts to go beyond the clichés of her culture thanks to music. She discovers that there are two kinds of music. When Adèle Ratignolle plays the piano, Edna sees all sorts of images in her mind's eye. On the other hand, when it is Mademoiselle Reisz who is playing, everything is different. "She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her" (27). (Her favorite musical pieces are a number of passages from Frédéric Chopin and, not surprisingly, Isolde's mystical dying aria in a piano transcription of Wagner's opera). Edna's view of music is thus no longer representative, it is not a collection of images in her mind. It is now haptic, it implies direct contact with her body.

Edna also essays herself at painting, which clearly also represents a sort of language for her. Needless to say, her painting is literally (to use a 20th-century phrase) non-representative. She first paints "realistic," true to life pictures, which Adèle admires a great deal, precisely because they are conventional: "this basket of apples! never have I seen anything so lifelike. One might almost be tempted to reach out a hand and take one" (56). Quickly,

however, Edna becomes dissatisfied with her work, and she then no longer finishes her paintings. Could we hypothesize that art could perhaps be something more than reproduction, something beyond representation?

The last field in which Edna tries to find herself is swimming. She could not swim when she married her husband and settled in Louisiana. It is thus a new experience for her and it constitutes a sort of language in which she can express herself. It is of course a non-intellectual sort of language. You are alone when you swim. Edna seems to believe that it is pure expression, and that it has nothing to do with communication and its necessary clichés.¹¹ Your identity comes from your body which in itself is part of the world. One afternoon, she swims into the sea and reaches an unbelievable distance from the shore. "You were not so very far, my dear. I was watching you," interjects her husband when she returns. She had clearly been suffering from an illusion. Will the last scene of the novel also be an illusion for her, the illusion that one can break completely from the shore, and find oneself radically alone, without being limited by an outside point of view?

The old romantic dream.

Isn't that an old romantic dream, the sort of dream a critical

¹¹ The point was very well documented by Mylène Dressler who very closely analyzed the importance of gazing and being gazed at the novel. See her "Edna Under the Sun: Throwing Light on the Subject of *The Awakening*," *Arizona Quarterly*, 48/3, Fall 1992.

mind like Edgar Poe was always keen on deconstructing? One may think — to limit ourselves to a single example — of the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" who would like to rid himself of the "veil" before the eye (the I?) of the old man. Can we acquire perfect consciousness without a veil hiding our whole identity? That would mean abolishing in the process time and space, which incidentally also means destroying others and their gaze upon us. We may suppose that Kate Chopin's purpose in writing her novel was twofold: experimenting how far one can go in trying to experience pure identity, and at the same time deconstructing the attempt as in fact it implies negating the self, as shows the end of the book, and also negating others. Can one live outside society, without language and without representation?

Did Kate intuit what Edna could not? There appears to be something which is missing in Edna's experiment. In modern terms, we might offer that the novelist's analysis foreshadows in its own way what philosophers like Emmanuel Lévinas or Paul Ricœur theorized in the second half of the second century. Lévinas in *Totalité et infini*¹² showed that the other (that is to say, the stranger, the person I meet by chance on my road) is more important than myself, and that I am *ipso facto* responsible for his or her well-being or happiness. Edna Pontellier ignores others. In this respect, she is the complete opposite of Lévinas's

¹² Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité*, The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1961. Engl. transl. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969

selfless ideal. Ricœur in *Soi-même comme un autre*¹³ refuses to go as far as Lévinas. He, however, retains the idea that there is no self possible without interaction with others. He posits that the self is eminently fragile. The only possibility for us to construct a (temporary) self is to make a promise. Promises, however, are fragile, 90 % of them are never kept, and yet what little identity we possess comes for pledging our word to another person. Edna's search goes exactly the opposite way. As she realizes, "I would give up the inessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (48). What is thus that essential, that is her (impossible to represent) "(my)self," for her? Another dimension Kate ignores is that you always write for a people. Gilles Deleuze in his writings was repeatedly fond of quoting Paul Klee's famous 1924 pronouncement, "Uns trägt kein Volk" (A people is missing).¹⁴ With Edna, even though she is at times very close to Whitman's mysticism, the people goes on missing, and yet, in all societies, there is always a people which can't express itself, which is not conscious of itself, but which possibly one day will be able to invent — for how long? A better organization of the community than the one in which we have to live at present. Let us say that

¹³ Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996. Engl. transl. *Oneself as Another*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

¹⁴ Klee, Paul. "Übersicht und Orientierung auf dem Gebiet der bildnerischen Mittel und ihre räumliche Ordnung", *Vortrag aus Anlaß einer Bilderausstellung im Kunstverein zu Jena*, 1924. (Reprinted in *Über die moderne Kunst*, Bern-Bümplitz 1949, 53)

Edna is not Melville's lawyer, and she does not know what charity means. She doesn't even seem aware that Louisiana is characterized by a specific racial and social structure. In the first scene of the book, she doesn't understand why her husband resents her hands being slightly suntanned. Mr. Pontellier feels that his wife is like a "piece of furniture" that has been damaged, and he certainly surmises that the distance between his wife and the local servants (and former slaves) has singularly diminished. At bottom, Edna tries to reach pure solipsism. That is probably the main difference between her and her creator. The novelist would probably have concurred with the lines of Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," apostrophizing future readers: "Closer yet I approach you, / What thought of me now? I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in advance" (l. 86-87).¹⁵

The sense of an ending.

The final scene of the novel presents the last stage of the experiment in all its purity: how far can Edna go in order to be "herself," whatever that word means. In fact, it doesn't "mean" anything if we consider that meaning is a problem of representation, which is probably why the novel suddenly ends abruptly. Pure identity has nothing to do with words. Words are basically social and they immediately limit what we feel is the infinite richness of our identity.

Readers have of course two ways of reading that scene,

¹⁵ Walt Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*, 1855-1892.

depending on whether they identify to Edna, or whether they adopt the novelist's exterior point of view. The main difference between Kate and Edna is that the latter possibly did not survive her experiment/experience. The narrator remains inconclusive in that respect and nothing in the text says that the young woman just did not swim back. Edna's experience can thus be considered either as a breakthrough (to what? to know the answer, we would need to have experienced the same breakthrough ourselves) or a breakdown leading to death¹⁶.

Edna's experience is first and foremost physical¹⁷. When she reaches the beach, she removes all her clothes, as if she was disposing of her last links with society, its symbols and its conventions. She is now in direct contact with the sun

¹⁶ Does Edna Pontellier commit suicide? Carol Christ, in what is probably the best article on the subject, seems to think that she does. I believe that such a conclusion is unwarranted and that on close reading Kate Chopin's text is utterly undecidable. Apart from that reservation, Christ's paper is still one of the most perceptive about the last scene. See also Carol P. Christ, "Spiritual Liberation, Social Defeat : Kate Chopin," in *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1980. A lot of ink will certainly continue to be shed on that ending. The most challenging among the recent contributions devoted to it is probably that of Robert Treu, "Surviving Edna: A Reading of the Ending of *The Awakening*," *College Literature*, XXVII/2, 2000.

¹⁷ Trying to connect mind and body seems to be a new, promising trend in the criticism devoted to Kate Chopin's novel. Nicholas M. Gaskill offers a number of extremely illuminating insights in this respect. See "'The light which, showing the way, forbids it': Reconstructing Aesthetics in *The Awakening*," *Studies in American Fiction*, XXXIV/2, Autumn 2004.

and the water, as if her self was inseparable from her body. "I too had receiv'd identity by my body, / That I was I knew was my body, and what I should be I should be of my body," wrote Whitman in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," splendidly ignoring centuries of philosophical systems that steadfastly opposed body and mind. There is no doubt that Kate Chopin instinctively knew that the first and most important (and dangerous...) question that one can ask is that raised by Spinoza, "*Quid Corpus Possit?*" ("What can a body do?").¹⁸ Edna then proceeds to invent a new body that one is tempted to call "a body without organs," to borrow Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept¹⁹. The

¹⁸ Had Kate Chopin read Spinoza? Her biographers do not raise the question. The similarity of some of the questions he asked (in his own way of course) to hers is extremely striking, especially that famous pronouncement about the connection between the body, the world and one's identity "*Quid Corpus Possit?*" (first expressed in his *Ethics*, part III, proposition 2, scolia). Spinoza adds, "No-one has thus far determined what a body can or cannot do." What Spinoza is doing is setting out a programme for philosophers and — we'd like to add — writers too. And his programme concerns the single most important question that needs to be asked. That is something Kate Chopin (and Edna Pontellier?) intuitively knew.

¹⁹ The concept is developed at great length in their two seminal works, *L'Anti-Œdipe: Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, en collaboration avec Félix Guattari, Paris: Éditions de Minuit (collection "Critique"), 1972 (Engl. transl., *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, New York: Viking Press, 1977) and *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie* 2, en collaboration avec Félix Guattari, Paris: Éditions de Minuit (collection "Critique"), 1980 (Engl. transl., *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.)

French thinkers oppose our organism (that is our body as it is coded by society and years of functional training) to a non-teleological experiment testing the ultimate possibilities of the body-mind continuum. Edna's body stops trying to play socially recognized roles, such as eating, copulating, etc., with its traditional organizations, its territorialisations, its taboos, etc. Speaking of a "*BwO*" implies thinking of the body as some sort of uncharted space in which life, affects, rhythms flow freely. Such a state would be useless in daily life, but it represents a definite possibility²⁰. For Edna, the experience is unquestionably about life. As a matter of fact, the word 'death' is not present in the text. In other words, what is described by the narrator is seen through Edna's consciousness. It is also cosmic as the forces of a universe seen as infinite are all now part of her, the sun, the waves, etc. Last, Edna, or, rather the consciousness in the text (for she is no longer the socially identified Edna Pontellier) is made up of impersonal singularities, which means that we should no longer speak of a "self" (which implies a mirror, or at least someone looking at him/herself), or of "identity," something that retains some sort of "identical" core. The consciousness in the text is now pure duration.²¹ It keeps

²⁰ In this respect, Spinoza would speak of different manners of being. An intense white light is the same light as when it is dim because the current has been reduced. Intensity is a possibility — or mode of being — for that light. Temperature is another. In the same way, Kate Chopin asks the question of what are Edna's possibilities.

²¹ We have reached a domain in which Kate Chopin reveals herself innovative. In this respect, her conception of psychology is extremely

changing all the time, and it no longer believes that it possesses a unity of its own.

"She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" (114). The novel's last words embark that consciousness upon a process of becoming, of becoming non-human, as it reverses the history of evolution, from human to domesticated animal to wild animals to plants. Should we add from recognized entities like her father to a mythical soldier she used to fantasize about when she was a teenager, then to sounds, then to something more difficult

close to that of Henri Bergson, whose *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (*Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, translated 1910, New York: Macmillan) appeared in French in 1889. Bergson is certainly the philosopher whose empiricist conceptions best echo Marcel Proust's experiment in his *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Could we also say that they echo Kate Chopin's experiment too, even though these two writers most certainly never heard of one another? Bergson starts from an intuition barely developed in John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (XIV/2): the opposition between duration and (clock) time. In this respect, the last scene of the novel is quite revealing and provides a remarkable example of what duration is. For Bergson, it is synonymous with consciousness, which for him also means personal identity. In his empiricist approach, identity is of course not an essence, but a process consisting an assemblage of heterogeneous present perceptions and past memories which define themselves in the mutual relationships which they constitute.

to represent — smells? Are the pinks to be construed as symbolic flowers in those last words? Do they suggest the presence of some kind of fertility principle, as if what the character had finally discovered was the inexpressible presence of life? In other words, is it a victory? In any case, Edna has become, not an abstract category, but that concrete arrangement made up of discrete, intensive sounds and smells, leading to some sort of epiphany, or 'haecceity'²² as it were. This haecceity lasts one second. Then, one may suppose that it will be replaced by other arrangements of singularities. Or by nothing, silence, death.

So far, the scene has been read from Edna's very special point of view. We may suppose that Kate Chopin never went as far as her character. Is Edna the victim of a common romantic illusion, just like the protagonist of Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart"? It is clear that, if we choose not to identify with the character, we have to recognize that she has embarked upon a process of regression. She not only relives backwards the evolution of the human species, but she also regresses psychologically to primary narcissism²³, that is to say to the state of an infant before it has reached

²² One remembers that in Chapter X of *Mille Plateaux*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattary borrow from the philosopher Duns Scotus the concept of 'haecceity' which for them denotes, among other things, the sudden realization of the identity of an individual (or thing). It consists, not in an abstract eternal or innate essence, but in the perception of a unique arrangement of discrete singularities.

²³ Sigmund Freud, "Zur Einführung des Narzissmus," 1914. Engl. transl. *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, New Haven, Yale University Press, repr. 1991.

identity. The baby is not a subject as opposed to objects. Indeed, for it, binary oppositions such as the dichotomy subject / object do not exist yet. It probably (probably — as obviously it is no longer possible for us to get back to that stage and know exactly what its perceptions consisted in) experiences reality as a infinite and indefinite continuum encompassing fragments of its body, its mother's breast, as well as the universe. Romain Rolland believed that reinventing that state could help us understand the essence of mysticism. In 1923, in a letter to Sigmund Freud, he coined the phrase "oceanic feeling" to describe that experience in adults. The phrase acquired some notoriety, much to the dismay of Freud who, in *Civilization and its discontent*²⁴, insisted that that so-called "oceanic feeling," in doing away with the importance of a father figure in our minds, and also preventing us from projecting ourselves into any sort of future dimension, was an experience extremely dangerous for us, not to say lethal. We of course know that Freud was in this respect a very pessimistic man who believed that the 20th century was going to be the victim of that kind of unhealthy mysticism Romain Rolland seemed to be so keen on. Was Freud right? What did Kate Chopin think exactly of Edna Pontellier "oceanic" experience in 1899?²⁵

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1930. Engl. transl. *Civilization and its Discontent*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, repr. 1989. Cf. Chapter 1 which is devoted to a critique of Romain Rolland's concept of "the oceanic feeling."

²⁵ Regression is clearly an important component of Edna's desire. A pioneer study of that aspect of the novel — still worth turning to today

Her novel is an experiment about the experiment conducted by a young woman who chooses to experience a world without binary oppositions: subject/object, mind/body, loneliness/love (the sea is described as the perfect lover who will never go away), time/eternity, the cold of the water/the heat of the sun, and, shall we add, a final, total awakening which is perhaps also synonymous with eternal sleep? Is she a naked baby being born or an adult woman dying by drowning?

The problem literally is not what happens after the novel ends so abruptly. No one will ever know. The problem is that, before the novel ends, the narrator has obviously to use language (with its signifiers and signifieds forming "systems of differences," as Ferdinand de Saussure explained to his students in Paris roughly at the same time).²⁶ Worse, Edna's consciousness has constantly to resort to metaphors in order to function. Metaphor as the quintessential romantic device which hides reality and projects us into worlds of illusion? Edna's metaphors are identifications. She identifies to a baby, and then to a woman in love. (Metaphors often tend to be mixed.... Purity itself is but another illusion....) The personified waves inviting her with their voice and their arms are another identification. Maybe we should recall Paul de

— comes from Suzanne Wolkenfeld, "Edna's Suicide: The Problem of the One and the Many," in the Norton Critical edition of *The Awakening*, ed. Margaret Culley, New York: W.W. Norton, 1976

²⁶ "Dans la langue, il n'y a que des différences sans termes positifs." (166) ("In a language, there are only differences, and no positive terms," English translation 1998: 118).

Man²⁷ who kept warning us that metaphors confer a false unity on what is in fact only a series of fragments. There are no wholes in nature. We only imagine that they exist. Metaphors artificially resolve contradictions, positing for instance the possibility of an essential union between man and nature.

The invention of the temptation.

At bottom, *The Awakening* is the book of a temptation. Like Melville and many others, Kate Chopin wanted to create her Captain Ahab or her Bartleby. The question her is, "How far can I go?" The temptation runs through the whole 19th century, perhaps because Romantic writers found it perfectly congenial to their opposition to society. Arthur Rimbaud, the culmination of the Romantic poet, also tried to alter perception and see the world differently from tradesmen and all those hateful petits bourgeois so full of their common sense. Poetry should be "*un long dérèglement raisonné de tous les sens*" (a long and reasoned disordering of all the senses)²⁸. Such was the programme of a fiery young man, who then gave up literature and became... a tradesman. Did he know that that

²⁷ See Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. See especially chapter 3 ("Reading") in which De Man analyzes the reasons why the young Marcel in a famous passage of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*) insists of remaining in his room with his books instead of playing with other children.

²⁸ Arthur Rimbaud, "Lettres du Voyant," to George Izambard, 15 May 1871.

"disordering" is a game at which one cannot succeed, and that the real choice is between death or madness, and, on the other hand, what Sigmund Freud called the reality principle? Gérard de Nerval, that wonderful poet, wrote, as for him, "Et j'ai deux fois vainqueur traversé l'Achéron." ("El Desdichado.")²⁹ If you are really strong, maybe you can twice swim across the Acheron River and return to tell it. (The fact that the poet eventually succumbed to madness and suicide is irrelevant here).

Was it a breakthrough for Nerval? And a breakdown for Edna Pontellier? Maybe, we should pay attention to what the narrator says at the end of the book. As the young woman enters the ocean, unawares to her, a bird with a broken wing falls into the water, thus providing the last bird metaphor of the novel. Birds have to be strong in order to survive in nature. If, however, you spend your life like a parrot accustomed to a golden cage, it is most unlikely that you will make it in the end.

Kate described the experiment. Edna lived it, and possibly died of it. Kate worked with words, representations, the mind. Edna felt that her identity (whatever that was) should be experienced through her body. Maybe, after all, the opposition mind / body is not ready to disappear. And real experimentation, which takes place between body and mind, will always be synonymous with peril.

²⁹ "El Desdichado" is the first of the twelve sonnets of Gérard de Nerval's *Les Chimères* (1854).

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