

## MATERIAL MEANS: FORMS OF PRECARIOUS LIFE IN JEAN RHYS'S *GOOD MORNING, MIDNIGHT*

CHANTAL DELOURME

*Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense*

1. In this paper I intend to explore the different implications of what revolves around the issue of “material means” in Jean Rhys’s novel *Good Morning, Midnight*, which implies a twofold problematic: how “material” means in the novel and how meaning is made material, implying therefore that there can be no clear-cut division between “material” and “meaning” but that they are bound by liminal effects, “meaning effects” and “material effects”. I also assume that the best echo chamber for the deciphering of these effects is “bodies”, their being written, deciphered, but also encrypted by power structures and subjective positions. The backdrop of my problematic is the history of thought in the second half of the xx<sup>th</sup> century when numerous concepts were forged that circumscribe the body as that heterogeneous site where the material and the immaterial meet, intercross, overlap across an ever-shifty threshold, from Karl Marx’s and Sigmund Freud’s epistemological breakthroughs to Jacques Lacan’s own conceptual reworking of Marxian and Freudian concepts, Michel Foucault’s concept of “bio-power”, Giorgio Agamben’s of “bare life”, Jean-François Lyotard’s of “wrong”.
  
2. As a second set of preliminary remarks, let me say that I intend to restrict my focus to the issue of “forms of precarious life” such as they are embodied (material as meaning) by the fauna that haunts the interwar novel, *Good Morning, Midnight*, and particularly its main protagonist, the self-baptized Sasha. As a woman of extremely limited means, hardly sustained and yet sustained, in the interwar cosmopolitan cities of London, Paris and Brussels, she stands for social, political and subjective conditions of life the survival of which is made precarious and through whose “deformed” lens (for which one of the characters in the novel reproaches her<sup>1</sup>) a political and economic network is both enacted and read; for however “deformed” the lens is, it provides a consistent pattern of intelligibility revealing forms of exposure and self-exposure to banal and ferocious violence. I also contend that this exposure to precarious conditions of life, given voice through a mobile first-person narrator particularly apt at dramatizing the different effects of doxic

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1 J. Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight*, 41. Page numbers henceforth between parentheses.

voices, is not the passive, melancholy voice that the critical reception has often entrapped her in<sup>2</sup>, but a liminal voice in various ways bringing under a political and epistemological limelight the issue of precarious forms of life, and thus rewriting Benjamin's "dignity of an experience that was ephemeral"<sup>3</sup> into "a poetics of precarious life". Bringing together the "ephemeral" and the "precarious" immediately enhances their difference. Whereas the ephemeral is a reading of time set against a lost metaphysical background of the infinite, or clashing with metaphysical assumptions about knowledge and truth (as Walter Benjamin contends in his critical reappraisal of Kant's theory of knowledge in this essay), the precarious is a concept of historical time as irredeemably tragic, apprehended within the interwar context as fashioning a specific mode of experience. Because it derives from a notion of prayer in the face of a revocable decision<sup>4</sup>, it implies an intersubjective scene marked by a sense of jeopardy, of extreme uncertainty and loss of guarantee to be countered only by struggling forces, and an ongoing resilient survival. The precarious is the dogged insistence of being itself when it is beset by or exposed to various forms of negation and as such, paradoxically, is a most critical cornerstone. This definition would partly chime with the ethico-political approach of Judith Butler, whereby the acknowledgment of vulnerability — "we are from the start given over to the other"<sup>5</sup> — comes into dialogue with "the question of a non-violent ethics"<sup>6</sup> and overrides politics in terms of claims and rights. "This means that each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies — as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed"<sup>7</sup>. The ethico-political shifts gears leading in a new direction, turns away from the political issue of ensuring life beyond the limitations of the individual's finiteness by acknowledging a debt to vulnerability, as an historical and ethical condition countering either its appropriation or its foreclosure by the political.

3. My contention is that the very structure of the novel is not so much determined, as often said by the critical reception, by the tension between on the one hand its narrative precariousness in the form of contingent encounters and discontinuous snatches (regressing into overlapping layers of time), and on the other hand, the implacable law of repetition and sameness in the form of narrative

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2 A noteworthy exception is to be found in Juliana Lopoukhine's paper, "L'Encombrement de la 'vie nue' : le tort à l'épreuve du malaise dans *After Leaving Mr MacKenzie* (1930) de Jean Rhys", *L'Atelier*, vol.4, n° 1, 2012.

3 W. Benjamin, "La Philosophie qui vient": "[...] la seconde celle de la dignité d'une expérience qui fut éphémère", 180 (translation mine).

4 *Webster's Dictionary*: from the latin *precarious*, obtained by entreaty or prayer; 1 (*archaic*): depending on the will or pleasure of the other.

5 J. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 31.

6 J. Butler, *Precarious Life*, XVII.

7 J. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

and temporal impasses, the latter in the end prevailing over the former<sup>8</sup>. Its narrative logic to my mind is other: each narrative unit in fact circles round a figure of precarious life, or patterns of destitution and their very exposure to the limits of inhumanity: that is these discontinuous snatches explore relentlessly “that hole in the carpet” (that’s how Sasha defines herself “a hole in the carpet, that’s me” 40) through which the philosophical and political threshold of in/humanity is questioned. This figure could stand as a figure of political foreclosure and in that sense as an aporia, yet Sasha’s voice, within its very contradictions, inscribes it as an ever-insistent figure, restores its presence on the threshold of the symbolic, requires that the city be accountable for it.

### **Precarious life : exhibiting the implacable dynamics of power structures**

4. To start with, we cannot but draw attention to the “meaning effects” of the double dating of the novel: first as an interwar novel which intensifies both the sense of collective vulnerability and the pressure of national codes; second its being set at the time of the Parisian exhibition in 1937, “front-sponsored then and promoting a message of internationalism”<sup>9</sup>, but in a highly ambivalent architectural and formal rhetoric<sup>10</sup>. The narrative presents us with a counter-mirror of the “Exhibition” mythos: its description is embedded in the unstable and often cruel game of masks between the “gigolo” and Sasha where trust and deceit, crediting and dispossessing wrestle with each other over the issue of desire and money. The whole thing takes place in a context of precarious means which aggravates the sense of exposure to material, symbolic and psychic vulnerability. The implication is that of a change of perspective whereby the human cost of socio-economic violence comes center stage displacing the mythic. This reversal is underscored all the more forcefully when the exhibition building is described as an empty shell or fetish (“cold, empty, beautiful” 137) retaining suspended movements, thus conveying a sense of inner inertia crowned by a grimly ironical “Star of peace”, and yet an object of Sasha’s fascination.
5. The liminal social and political position to which the subject of precarious life is exposed is determined by the shifty threshold of inclusion and exclusion, which to some extent is analogous to Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben’s concept of banishment, in that the power of the law is then preserved inasmuch as it enacts exclusion: “he who is banned is both excluded and included,

8 See R. Bowlby, “The Impasse: Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight*”, *Still Crazy After All These Years*, 35.

9 C. Britzolakis, “‘This way to the exhibition’: Genealogies of Urban Spectacle in Jean Rhys’s Interwar Fiction”, 458.

10 The exhibition indeed displayed two monumental rivaling buildings dedicated to the Soviet and Nazi regimes while hosting Picasso’s painting *Guernica* in the Spanish pavillion.

released and at the same time captured”<sup>11</sup>. In a like manner, the subject of precarious life is exposed to social strictures and their requirements, either as externalized or internalized forces, and yet barred from any access to them because of his/her limited symbolic and material means. Hence, as shown in her confrontation with the aptly named Mr Blank, Sasha’s social impasse is not a static entrapment to which she is doomed. It is the halting, blocking point between contrary forces which, for the subject of precarious life, takes the form of a double bind resulting in a political aporia: you must belong, you can’t belong. As occupying that liminal site which is a non-symbolic inscription materialized by her drifting about, and as bearing the marks of a dissociated subjectivity, she is doubly the excluded Other from the pattern of exchanges, exposed to that symbolic death of which Foucault says that it is at the very heart of biopower<sup>12</sup>. The paradox being however as Deleuze puts it in his essay “Society and schizophrenia” that “the schizophrenic is, as it were, the very limit of our society but the ever warded off, repressed and loathed limit”<sup>13</sup> yet again as such, he/she exposes this limit since “any delirium is a politics and an economics” which exacerbates the enmeshing of politics and desire<sup>14</sup>.

### **Figures of precarious life: the body of need**

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6. The novel is studded with potential “holes” in the symbolic network, portraits of figures of precarious life framed by voices, discourses and affects which enact specific responses to them.
7. The first one develops into a surreal tableau of sleeping bodies. Off the large avenues, and off the way that leads to the exhibition, (that is, out of sight), at the back of Les Halles, the beating heart of trade and markets, Sasha is invited to behold a scene of sleeping bodies: “And, wandering along the streets at the back of the Halles, we came to a café where the clients pay for the right, not to have a drink, but to sleep” (35). The pattern of economic exchange here sustains neither an exchange value, nor a use value but a need value. The issue of natural need is not the primal stage before a social contract is required, as it is in Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, but both the human cost of the workforce made visible as “bare life” (“they sat close-pressed against each other with their

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11 G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 120.

12 M. Foucault, “*Il faut défendre la société*”. We could indeed extend what Michel Foucault says of the relation between biopower and racism to exclusion: “Le racisme assure, je crois, la fonction de mort dans l’économie du biopouvoir”, “Racism ensures, I believe, the function of death in an economy of biopower”, 230 (translation mine).

13 G. Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous*: “Le schizophrène est comme la limite de notre société, mais la limite toujours conjurée, réprimée, abhorrée”, 27 (translation mine).

14 G. Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous*: “tout délire est de la politique et de l’économie [...] le délire exprime plutôt lui-même la manière dont la libido investit tout un champ social historique”, 25 (translation mine).

arms on the tables, their heads in their arms. Every place in the room was filled; others lay along the floor” 35) and yet here turned into capitalist gain. Nothing is lost in the workings of the exchange system, not even the physical needs of the private body. This market economy of bodies in need of sleep is also given the turn of a freak show, for the perverted satisfaction of the outsider who “squinted in at them through the windows” “as if he were exhibiting a lot of monkeys” and who delights in “getting [a drunkard] going [to the point where] he tries to eat his glass” (35). The incorporation of the cutting glass is no different (but how terrifying a mirror!) from the workers' absolute incorporation into the economic machinery with its fascistic dissolution of the boundary between the public and the private. The scene thus displays the full extent of “biopower”, the very seizure of what Giorgio Agamben calls “bare life” being enlisted into an economic violence, falling prey to its sovereignty even when asleep. In this case, a precarious life does not so much result from the acknowledgement of such precarious needs as sleep, but rather results from the foreclosure of this exposure of and to such a precarious self, here that of need. The body of need turns into the standard by which the threshold between humanity and inhumanity is put to the test.

8. The historical echoes of the word “exhibition”, and the intertextual echoes of sleeping bodies in a garden (one cannot help thinking of the iconic representation of the disciples' sleeping bodies on the eve of the Passion), point to unredeemable times when reification is further dramatised as a form of objectality. What might be the difference between these two concepts, coming one from political philosophy and the other from psychoanalysis? The former implies the idea of an instrumental use of a body but which might not be reduced to that instrumentalization (a silent, im/material self might resist the use being made of his/her body), whereas in the case of objectality the negation implied aims at and enacts the potentially unconscious but implacable misrecognition or annihilation of the other, body and soul.

9. Another scene in the novel calls our attention to ordinary social violence as endangering the very body of need: the very physical possibility to maintain viability, on the brink of survival, being then the breathing space that a body requires to live. Here again the scene in literary terms is both economic and forcefully poignant: it is devoted to the evocation of a service room in a restaurant, a tiny nook at the back, next to the toilette, sharing as its function that of a refuse site:

There is just room for the girl to stand. An unbelievable smell comes from the sink. [...] How does she manage not to knock her elbows every time she moves? How can she stay in that coffin for five minutes without fainting? (87)

No elbow room, no breathing space, no scope of vision, the girl looks at no one: she embodies that form of violence of which Judith Butler says that “it is always an exploitation of that [vulnerable] tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for one another”<sup>15</sup>. Political and economic violence strips the “body of need”, denies its primary satisfactions, results in the stifling of soul and body within banal everyday life, wages its terrible war in the interwar times of peace in a text which thus deconstructs the opposition between the terms “war” and “peace”. Her physical portrait points to the savagery of what Jean-François Lyotard calls the inhumanity of the system in that the latter is impervious to distress, anguish<sup>16</sup>: “Bare, sturdy legs, felt slippers, a black dress, a filthy apron, thick, curly, untidy hair” (87); it also testifies to a stubborn resilience resisting Victorian pathos and precluding pity as the narrator self-ironically underlines: “Has not she got sturdy legs, and curly hair?” (88)

10. But resilience turns into near-erasure in the story of the martiniquaise, at the very heart of the novel, told by the “peintre” as an irrepressible story, that demands to be told: that body in need of light, abandoned within the symbolic network is represented as faceless pathos (“she had been crying so much that it was impossible to tell whether she was pretty or ugly or young or old” 79), a banished and self-banished figure whose melancholy inertia roams about the streets. Le peintre’s bearing witness to her sketches a haunting figure of helpless destitution. Precariousness then takes on the form of a social and psychic abyss conveyed through images of terrifying holes of blackness: “She was like something that has turned into stone” (80), “she told me she hadn’t been out, except after dark, for two years. When she said this, I had an extraordinary sensation, as if I were looking down into a pit” (80). Precariousness is thus not given a metaphysical status as in the case of Levinas’s abstract concept of face, which makes of the encounter with the other the reception of a universal ethical command. Precariousness is rather the effect of forms of violence, annulment and self-annulment, resulting in such a degree of alienation and self-alienation that they expose a “body of need”, deprived of all the forms of autonomy even to the very possibility of formulating a plea, of testifying to itself.

11. That “body of weakness”, precariously exposed to its primary needs at the very heart of the cosmopolitan city is given numerous expressions in the novel through Sasha’s own experience: the body of sleep, the body of starvation, the body of exhaustion. Jean Rhys’s control of pathos through a combination of understatement and clinically analysed dismay is most forceful in these pages, as

15 J. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 27.

16 J.F. Lyotard, *L'Inhumain*, 10: “Le système a plutôt pour conséquence de faire oublier ce qui lui échappe”, “The system rather has as its result the forgetting of what eludes it.” (translation mine)

if the narrator were exploring that indiscernible zone between life and the non-being that it can at times host, that is, its near surrender to its own inner inhumanity.

12. That body of need becomes a solitary monad, going through a singular experience of time, whose skeleton-like structure is laid bare by being fleshed off, not unlike Beckett's world. Parameters of time and space are shaped out of their necessary and fragile functions: the day is divided into sleep landmarks "the afternoon sleep and the night sleep" (72) with their interval in-between to be occupied; space is at best a protective shell within which the body tries to nestle or rather preserve itself wherever it goes. Space and time are ensnared within conflicting logics rather than impasses in that they nullify the difference between dynamics and stasis: the line of flight which determines the drifting movement from one European city to another is indeed at one with the fault line along which the body of need is exposed to its precariousness and to the necessity of finding means of survival. Hence a singular experience of time: the present is experienced as the pure sustaining (or surviving) of its possibility through the contract of habit or of self-willed, albeit barren, succession. Contract, programme, habit then serve as imaginary frames within which the self ensures the possibility of its own survival while being fully aware of their potential artifice: "I have decided on a place to eat at midday, a place to eat in at night, a place to have my drink in at night" (8). The present faces a future conceived of as blank rather than pregnant unpredictability or as the morbid threat of the Other, either in the form of his/her hostile presence or alarming default; it splits the past into a discontinuous alternation between the recognition of this extreme condition of survival and the illusions that protected the self from it, if only partially: "But the fifteen pounds have gone. We raise every penny we can. We sell most of our clothes. My beautiful life in front of me, opening out like a fan in my hand" (99). Time is then reduced to this liminal site of exposure to vulnerability requiring the renewing of the conditions of possibility of a bare present, while indulging at times in illusions as to the realm of the possible.

13. This body of need defeats the self through its inertia and yet also paradoxically sustains it, as a hardly throbbing, almost ghostly self. It shapes within the city streets a new figure, a new posture: "This was the time when I got in the habit of walking with my head down" (72). Again not unlike Beckett's postures of the exhausted figure Deleuze mentions in *L'épuisé* and, as can be found in Clov's following cue in *Endgame*: "I open the door of the cell and go. I am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my eyes, and between my legs a little trail of black dust"<sup>17</sup>. What is the meaning of such a body? It is not related to Beckett's negative metaphysics of the possible, but to a barren logic

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17 S. Beckett, *Endgame*, 48.

of the effective; however both meet in bearing witness to the exhaustion of the possible<sup>18</sup>. Indeed it is the body whose paradoxical eternity lasts as long as the credit of its pre-paid rent and breakfasts will, whose sleep then has to be pre-paid. The body of an im/material exchange whereby time is bought, which after all is the law of economic exchange at the expense of experience and the exchange of emotions it allows, as Jean-François Lyotard reminds us in *Le Différend*<sup>19</sup>. Ironically the pre-paid credit of breakfasts and rents is a worldly “eternity” of life as precarious survival in the face of its ever-potential revocability. The meaning of that body of need is thus the embodiment of the temporal sleight of hand of an alienating and reifying exchange that however hardly leaves any trace while creating specific life conditions. Likewise the body of exhaustion is depicted in a scene when Sasha tries to reach the haven for destitute women who give birth to their babies while fearing for their future since they are women “of limited means”. Giving birth and dying overlap through the narrative of the child’s death, and both disruptive events share the same fate, that of erasure:

And five weeks afterwards there I am, with not one line, not one wrinkle, not one crease. And there he is, lying with a ticket tied round his wrist because he died in a hospital. And there I am looking down at him, without one line, one wrinkle, without one crease. (52)

Whose erasure? Whose denial? Whose foreclosure? Let's say in the first place, that of a socio-economic order on the very limit of which insists, as nearly erased, nearly denied, “the body of need”, food, sleep, care as a political-ethical reminder.

## The voice of precarious life: an ethical voice

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14. The very exposure to precariousness rather than endorsing an other-impervious and self-pitying rhetoric, that is a non-accountable subjective impasse, seems in the novel to foster just the opposite: not in the form of normative and dogmatic stances to be upheld but in the form of a dialectic interplay keeping the wound of injustice and wrong-doing open. The precarious then does not so much take the form of Levinas’s face (“what appears most obvious in the other's face is its being radically exposed and its helplessness”<sup>20</sup>) with its theological absolute value of calling (“the

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18 G. Deleuze, *L'Épuisé*, 57.

19 J.F. Lyotard, *Le Différend*: “Avec le capital, il n'y a pas de temps pour l'échange. L'échange est l'échange de temps, l'échange dans le moins de temps possible (temps réel) du plus de temps possible (temps 'abstrait', perdu)”. “With capital, there is no time for exchange. Exchange is the exchange of time, the exchange of the least time possible (actual time) for the maximum time possible (otherwise lost time)”, 255 (translation mine).

20 E. Levinas, *Altérité et transcendance*: “La première chose évidente dans le visage de l'autre, c'est cette rectitude de

face looks at me and calls me”<sup>21</sup>) as that of an ever-jeopardized and ever-to be renewed ethical stance. It goes together with a skeptical outlook on and disqualification of ready-made political discourses and, rather than seeking “peace as awakesness to the precariousness of the other”<sup>22</sup> acknowledges in a self-reflexive gesture the precariousness of critical “awakesness”.

15. This opening up to the other takes the form of the recognition of a commonality with the poor, the defeated: “I know her. This is the girl who does all the dirty work and gets paid very little for it. Salut!” (87). Or when she climbs the stairs to the midwife’s room to give birth to her baby: “Has anybody had to do this before? Of course, lots of people, poor people...”, the dots being then the echo chamber of that commonality. Knowing her, or “poor people” is not an imaginary projection but an articulated active acknowledgement of the blow inflicted to a self by economic and political violence, a reading of the self through the other, not as endowed with a transcendent message but as a bodily sign-bearer of a complex of forces.

16. Different discursive stances are pitted against each other but equally well discredited. But it is not that they are discredited as sham or inadequate discourses, it is that they are cast under one light by the narrator’s voice: responsibility and accountability not in the form of a sovereign categorical imperative (either ethical or religious), but in the form of an insistent question resisting denial. The measure of a discourse then is not its efficacy or performativity, but it is its binding power to the other in relation to the issue of responsibility. Thus the discourse of disengagement, under the cover of a nihilistic pose, uttered by the Russian she gets to know is undermined as a form of cynicism disguised as nihilistic self-protection. It justifies an endless appropriation of the present, which is but the name for irresponsible opportunism. Likewise socio-psychological discourses drawing on social Darwinism and naturalizing the law of “egotism” while turning a blind eye to its “cruelty” and violence (as one of Sasha’s interlocutors would have it at one point) are laid bare not only as deceitful justifications but as denial of their own political implication:

Human beings are struggling, and so they are egotists. But it’s wrong to say that they are wholly cruel — it’s a deformed view’. That goes on for a bit and then peters out. Now we have discussed love, we have discussed cruelty, and they sheer off politics. It’s rather strange — the way they sheer off politics. Nothing more to be discussed. (41)

17. The question of the responsibility of discourse is also taken on through intertextual

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l'exposition et ce sans-défense”, 166 (translation mine).

21 E.Levinas, *Altérité et transcendance*: “le visage me regard et m'appelle”, 166 (translation mine).

22 E.Levinas, *Altérité et transcendance*: “Visage comme extrême précarité de l'autre. La paix comme éveil à la précarité de l'autre”, 144.

allusions: the story, mediated by the Russian, of the martiniquaise who survives in Paris thanks to an almost contractual arrangement with a white man questions and serves as a counter-mirror to the poem *A la Malabaraise* by Baudelaire (whose name is just mentioned in passing in the novel), a poem which celebrates the erotic relationship between a creole servant and her native country. How do the two texts relate? As opposites? Or are we not entitled to suggest that the story of the martiniquaise doomed to haunt the city at night casts a light on an invisible text occulted by Baudelaire's poem? Likewise the waitress at the sink calls for an intertext which this time is made explicit, that of Rimbaud's poem celebrating the insurrectionary Commune through the metonymy of the waitress's hands reminiscent of Jeanne-Marie's hands in Rimbaud's eponymous poem. The waitress's "sturdy legs" and "strong hands" echo that stanza in Rimbaud's poem, equally quoted in Benjamin's *Arcade Project* under the entry "La Commune":

Ce ne sont pas des mains de cousines

Mais d'ouvrières au gros front

Que hâle au bois puant l'usine

Un soleil ivre de goudron<sup>23</sup>.

18. The displacement from the factory-worker to the waitress, the suspended questioning of the insurrectionary ideal celebrated by Rimbaud's poem ("And when the revolution comes, won't those be the hands to be kissed? Well, so Monsieur Rimbaud says, doesn't he? I hope he's right. I wonder, though, I wonder..." 88) leaves gaping the interval between socio-political violence and political as well as poetic discourses. This very inarticulation is not an irresponsible avoidance strategy but quite the opposite: it is the very site of responsibility.

19. The exposure of the body of need is also a way to explore the dialectic between body and money as expressed by Benjamin in his entry on prostitution: "the wound glowing with shame on the body of society breeds money and gets cured. It is covered with a metallic scar"<sup>24</sup>, but this circulation is given endless turns of the screw whereby discourse itself turns into that "metallic scar". Though the vulnerability of the "body of need" to forms of violence proves to be a sharp-edged critical instrument revealing the forces that animate power struggles, it may however be

<sup>23</sup> W. Benjamin, *Le Livre des passages*, 789.

<sup>24</sup> W. Benjamin, *Le Livre des passages*: "la blessure rougie par la honte sur le corps de la société secrète de l'argent et guérit. Elle se recouvre d'une escarre métallique", 510.

enlisted as instrumental in deceitful rhetorics: the “body of need” then turns into a powerful rhetorical instrument in the form of pleas wherein manipulation vies with sincerity, the misleading of the other vies with the avowal of vulnerability. Such is the case when René tries to coax Sasha into helping him by telling her about his symbolic vulnerability since he has no papers, no passport: “The slightest incident and I am finished. I have no papers” (64). Outlawed, banished within, he voices the very conditions and norms for belonging, and thus stands as a figure of the inner exile which any code of belonging determines within itself and tends to foreclose. Yet his rhetoric may also be read as manipulative and then the body of need turns into a mere rhetorical instrument in an irresponsible discourse. René’s identity unsurprisingly oscillates throughout of the novel between the figure of the uprooted expatriate haunting social and political bodies and that of the gigolo making a cynical use of what may be but a mask.

20. This question of how the body of need may express its plea, and the nature of that plea, its binding implications or perverted manipulations is to my mind the issue of all the dialogues staged in minute and compressed scenes throughout the novel. As if the exposure of that body had become the cornerstone by which are tested modes of discourse as well as their political and ethical responsibility. Let us now examine dialogues and situations in which this issue is brought into play. Very often, the threshold onto which the body of need states and addresses its own plea, discloses its precarious condition, generates a sort of centrifugal dynamic marked by resistances, strategies of avoidance or sadistic jouissance (to use a Lacanian concept) in the form of perverse cruelty. Thus when the psychic vulnerability of a woman is exposed, though unbeknownst to her, in a scene when she desperately tries to find a hat that would match her face and of course fails to find an image that would match her sense of self, the narrator registers the unconscious hatred that it arouses in the shop assistant’s gaze and renders its intensity in a striking material image bespeaking how what Jacques Lacan calls “la jouissance” seizes the body: “You can almost see her tongue rolling round and round inside her cheek. It’s like watching the devil with a damned soul” (58) and adds the following prayer: “if I must end like one or the other, may I end like the hag” (58). Dialogues thus often stage the collusion between the political and the libidinal and as such, through their very paranoid lens, serve a schizo-analysis of the political: one striking example is to be found in the scene when Sasha being reduced to near-starvation with Enno in Brussels calls on a man she had met before and asks him for money, or is it not for help? The whole passage rests on an ambiguity as to the meaning of the plea, as a recognition of precariousness and vulnerability or as a sexual offer, and on the misunderstanding resulting from that ambiguity. On the one hand, Sasha’s

mentioning his giving her his address, and in return, as it were, “addressing” to him her plea calls out to his recognizing her extreme vulnerability which she embarrassingly states and understates. Indeed her very plea adds to the precariousness she is subjected to and is the discursive subject of : “I talk it away, saying, as if it were a joke: ‘we’re not exactly stranded...only we’re a bit stranded” (100). Her voice partly reenacts the symbolic erasure she is exposed to and its effect on subjectivity itself, uses the mask of normativity and yet calls upon the recognition of her plea even more than calling for an answer. Yet Mr Lawson’s reactions bespeak of another encoding/decoding of the plea: as if the very plea unveiled the subtext of his sexual investment in the encounter while unsettling it here through her disclosure of vulnerability and lack. Sasha’s plea “gender troubles” the rules of the game and her half-avowal of her precariousness both brings the decoding of the subtext to the surface as well as the denied violence that it implied. In another passage, the centrifugal effects (puncturing effects, we might call them) of the exposure of the body of need is even more forcefully dramatized in a scathingly ironic scene of misunderstanding: one man confides his fear of being manipulated by a woman’s plea for financial help to Sasha. The man’s speech oscillates between protective pity and self-protective suspicion of being swindled for the benefit of the woman’s “maquereau” (74). The circulation of money reveals the imaginary (im/material?) projections running through the man’s speech. But this scene is given yet another ironic twist in so far as the man’s story, mingled with sexual passes at Sasha, is in fact addressed to a Sasha who is about to faint from starvation; her revealing the precariousness of her physical condition, her being unable to sustain her own needs suddenly disrupts the man’s speech and sends him on the run. Here again Sasha’s precarious condition crystallizes the clash between power games resting on banal and ferocious violence and an ethical plea and implicit responsibility which is disclaimed by the man’s flight. Sasha’s ironically detached voice throughout the dialogue undermines the discourses that foreclose this primary condition of precariousness, but in so doing exposes the discursive choice of denial and foreclosure enacted by the man’s flight. Her voice partly reenacts and also disrupts the “metallic scar” that marks the dialectics between “sex and money” that we also have to conceive of as a discursive gap, or hole. Far from being a body of weakness, the body of need proves to be a site of conflicting interpretations, makes of vulnerability less an experience than a signifier which is deconstructed by its various interpretative investments.

21. Yet for all its subtle staging of the strings that animate power codes, the narrative never suggests there is any readymade answer, from an external ethical vantage point, be it located in the disruptive figure of the other as Levinas has it when making of the “face” of the other the

paradoxical incarnation of a transcendence taking the form of an ethical call; the narrative seems even to suggest that any non-contradictory answer would be but an ethical fraud. The ethical cannot be embodied in the meaning of a face, it is ever to be wrenched from the contradictions, uttered by faceless voices, that assail it: “I have no pride — no pride, no name, no face, no country. I don't belong anywhere” (38). The peintre confesses he was unable to respond to the woman's plea for love but he was acutely aware of it, and it definitely altered his perception of the house she was, alive but entombed, the invisible ghost of: “Every time I went in it, it was as if I were walking into a wall – one of those walls where people are built in still alive” (81). Sasha herself is acutely aware of the effects and affects of vulnerability and self-exposure and often turns a blind eye to the responsibility it implies. Responsibility is not embodied through a face as a transcendent meaning but ever and always to be conquered or faced. But this facing has no material means as “the face”, it only rests on immaterial means, words that face up to the implicit ongoing personal risk. Even more paradoxically, the risk at stake often seems to imply in the novel sharing an experience of the uncanny, as marked by the blurring of distinctions between subjective instances: thus when the peintre speaks of his encounter with the martiniquaise he speaks of his “walking into a wall — one of those walls where people are built in still alive” (81), as if he too found himself outside and inside that uncanny space where living and dying, the other and the self are blurred. It seems that through him, psychic precariousness and vulnerability (hers as well as his) and the possibility of an acknowledgment of responsibility (his, one's) were to go hand in hand rather than oppose each other.

22. Thus my paper aims at disputing Judith Butler's ethical stance as expressed in her essay *Precarious Life* and its Levinassian legacy. To my mind no metonymy of the body (such as the face) can stand as the figure of an unconditional or unconditioned ethical absolute without at the same time being then a metaphysical rewriting, implying its being in the custody of a theological signifier of the absolute, the name of God. That implicit phrasing is apparent in Butler's echoing Levinas's extolling the human face as the embodiment of the absolute because of its being the most sensibly precarious. It seems to me that precariousness first lies in the dialectics between the body of need and the recognition of its plea within the symbolic, by the symbolic. That this should be the most precarious, binding bond between a subject and another is epitomized in the encounter between the mother and her child. A child's face is there, “A lovely forehead, incredibly white, the eyebrows drawn very faintly in gold dust...” (51), with its features calling for love. A Butlerian reading would suggest that the mother's grieving over his death, as an acknowledgement of vulnerability has per se

an ethical value, which implies that it is the experience of vulnerability which might serve as an ethical standard. My reading is different: what is precarious is the very possibility of the bond between the mother and the child as giving access to the Lacanian symbolic. Here the bond seems to be doomed on two accounts; the baby does not cry and thus hardly voices a plea and the mother's own social and symbolic precariousness exposes her and her child to even further vulnerability. Hardly voicing a plea, and deprived of a proper response, the body of need is left unnamed and virgin, as it were ("without one line, without one wrinkle, without one crease" 51). Its being figured as linguistic limbo exposes the precarious conditions under which pleas can be acknowledged and responded to, that is instituted as such.

23. Does the temporal structure of the novel suggest a path in this questioning of the conditions of the very possibility of this precarious bond as yet to be? I would say yes it does, the next question being: in what form? What is at stake in the ultimate dialogue between Sasha and the gigolo? I would say an initiation into the possibility of trust through its dialectics with masks: trust in the other and trust in oneself, that is, trust in the possibility for the word to be founded not through a transcendent meaning but through the risk and the necessity of trust. A precarious binding power of the word, resting on its sharing with the other and thereby opening onto the possible. "Anything you like, anything you like... No past to make us sentimental, no future to embarrass us" (149). It sounds though as if the figure of the other were the addressee of a prayer, a precarious instance, if we refer the etymology of the very word "precarious".

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