“A Language Which Nobody Understood”: Emancipatory Strategies in The Awakening

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Despite the academy’s growing commitment to producing and publishing feminist interpretations of literary texts, insofar as feminist critics read Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* as a novel about sexual liberation, we read it with our patriarchal biases intact. Of course *The Awakening*’s final scene is breathtaking; Edna Pontellier transcends her circumscribed status as sensual entity—as the object of others’ desires—and stands before us as her own subject, as a blissfully embodied being: “. . . she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.”¹ It is because of this new dignity and visibility Chopin gives to women’s desires that *The Awakening* has been celebrated as one of the great subversive novels—a novel belonging to the tradition of transgressive narratives Tony Tanner describes in *Adultery in the Novel*. But in this essay I will suggest that Tanner’s ideas are inadequate to account for the real transgressive force of Chopin’s novel. Instead, I want to locate this force in Chopin’s representation of a language Edna Pontellier seeks but does not possess, in her representation of “a language which nobody understood.”²

In *Adultery in the Novel* Tanner explains that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels derive a “narrative urgency” from their power to interrupt the status quo by representing characters or ideas which impinge on society’s stability. While most bourgeois novels affirm marriage, the nuclear family, or genealogical continuity as the source of social stability, these same novels gather momentum by representing “an energy that threatens to contravene that stability of the family on which society depends”: an energy frequently embodied in the adulterous woman.³ While prostitutes, orphans, adventurers, and other marginal characters dominate the early phases of the novel and

¹ Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, ed. Margaret Culley (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 113. All further references will be cited in the text.

² For readings of Edna that celebrate her sexual awakening, see, for example, Per Seyersted’s emphasis on “Edna’s slow birth as a sexual and authentic being” (153) in Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography (New York: Octagon, 1980), pp. 134-63, and Sandra M. Gilbert’s excellent “The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin’s Fantasy of Desire” in *Kenyon Review* (Summer 1983), pp. 42-66. Gilbert’s enthusiastic description of Edna as a “resurrected Venus . . . returning to Cyprus . . . a radiant symbol of the erotic liberation that turn-of-the-century women had begun to allow themselves to desire” (58, 62), endows Edna with an archetypal complicity in erotic myth that Chopin herself takes pains to critique. For a reading that is less passionate than Gilbert’s but truer to the novel’s sexual ambiguities, see Paula Treichler’s “The Construction of Ambiguity in *The Awakening*: A Linguistic Analysis,” in Women and Language in Literature and Society, ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet et al. (New York: Praeger, 1980), pp. 239-57.

disrupt its representations of family stability with a raw transgressive force. Tanner suggests that in the novel's later incarnations this same energy is embodied in the motive or act of adultery. "Marriage, to put it at its simplest ... is a means by which society attempts to bring into harmonious alignment patterns of passion and patterns of property" (15).

According to Tanner, marriage and adultery are central to the bourgeois novel because marriage mediates between the opposed demands of private desire and public law. "If society depends for its existence on certain rules governing what may be combined and what should be kept separate, then adultery, by bringing the wrong things together in the wrong places (or the wrong people in the wrong beds), offers an attack on those rules, revealing them to be arbitrary rather than absolute" (13). This is a fine observation, and resembles the critique Edna Pontellier applies to her husband and children while contemplating suicide. But Edna's critique of her position within the nuclear family, her sense of herself as someone who should not be regarded as her husband's or children's property, is only a part of her story: her realization does not begin to explain the forces in her society that resist critique. While the adulterous impulses of the novelistic heroine challenge one form of patriarchy, I want to suggest that they enhance another: the power of woman's "extra-marital" desire does not have the revolutionary power Tanner predicates.

Obsessed with the other, murdered, ostracized, or killed by her own hand, the adulterous woman is caught in an elaborate code that has already been negotiated by her society. Her actions may be defined as abnormal, but they are only mildly transgressive; adultery remains well within the arena of permissible social trespass. Edna Pontellier falls in love with Robert Lebrun precisely because this possibility is inscribed within her, because adulterous desire is covertly regarded in her society as a path for woman's misconduct: such desire continues to involve an obsessional valorization of the masculine.

Edna often wondered at one propensity which sometimes had inwardly disturbed her.... At a very early age ... she remembered that she had been passionately enamored of a dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer who visited her father in Kentucky. She could not leave his presence when he was there, nor remove her eyes from his face, which was something like Napoleon's. (18–19)

Participating in the bourgeois family is one expression of the romantic obsession that shapes and destroys the bourgeois heroine. Participating in licentious desire for a man other than her husband is simply another. At the Pontelliers' dinner party early in the novel we can see how this desire remains within the schema of approved social narratives:

The Colonel, with little sense of humor and of the fitness of things, related a somber episode of those dark and bitter days, in which he had acted a conspicuous part and always formed a central figure. Nor was the Doctor happier in his
selection, when he told the old, ever new and curious story of the waning of a woman’s love, seeking strange, new channels, only to return to its legitimate source after days of fierce unrest. It was one of the many little human documents which had been unfolded to him during his long career as a physician. The story did not seem especially to impress Edna. (70)

With his generous construction of what is and is not “legitimate,” the doctor has told a story in Tanner’s “New Testament tradition.” According to Tanner, Christ is the ideal narrator, the narrator who, when “confronted with the woman taken in adultery,” tries to make the “would-be lawgivers aware of her problematical reality, calling into question both the impersonal application of the law and the justification and rights of the would-be legislators. Effectively this implies the disintegration of society-as-constituted” (14). But what else might it imply? Christ, despite his distinct “femininity,” and Mandelet, despite his generosity, still claim jural power by virtue of their gender; their acts and judgments do not imply “the disintegration of society as constituted,” but rather its “fatherly” reformation, since these paternal figures define—if not society’s center—then its gentlemanly margins. In their “generous” revisions of law we find the same plot transferred to another patriarchal economy. Neither Christ nor Dr. Mandelet suggests a revision of the traditional heterosexual plot which, while it may or may not involve marriage, always involves a hierarchical reading of woman’s relation to man.

Tanner has more to say; he argues that even “without anything or anyone necessarily having changed place or roles (in social terms), the action of adultery portends the possible breakdown of all the mediations on which society itself depends, and demonstrates the latent impossibility of participating in the interrelated patterns that comprise its structure” (17). This apocalyptic view of transgression is appealing, but wrong. For Edna, the thought or practice of adultery seems revolutionary but is actually a conservative gesture within the larger scheme of things, another mode of social acquiescence. The most radical act of trespass Chopin’s novel describes is not Edna’s propensity to fall in love, or even the way she acts after falling, but the fact that she is disturbed by her own obsessions.

Before her romance with Lebrun intervenes, Chopin’s novel holds Edna’s awakening open for us as an extraordinary event that Chopin refuses to attach—except peripherally—to Lebrun until we have witnessed Edna’s preliminary attempts at self-dialogue and self-knowledge. We should therefore take exception to Tanner’s paradigm, his notion that adultery

introduces an agonizing and irresolvable category—confusion—into the individual and thence into society itself. . . . If society depends for its existence on certain rules governing what may be combined and what should be kept separate, then adultery, by bringing the wrong things together in the wrong places (or the

4 For a similar view of Tanner’s work and an extended critique of the ways in which critics have refused to see the difference between “transgression” and real social change, see Allon White’s “Figs and Pierrots: The Politics of Transgression in Modern Fiction” in Raritan (Summer 1982), pp. 51–70.
wrong people in the wrong beds), offers an attack on those rules, revealing them to be arbitrary rather than absolute. In this way, the adulterous woman becomes the “gap” in society that gradually extends through it. In attempting to ostracize her, society moves toward ostracizing itself. (12–13)

Society may read itself through the absence of the adulterous woman, but she, being absent, cannot read herself. It is the absence of such critique and not the absence of adultery that allows the maintenance of a sex/gender system that remains repressive and hierarchical and victimizes women by making them not only wives, but objects of romantic or domestic narratives. The Awakening’s most radical awareness is that Edna inhabits a world of limited linguistic possibilities, of limited possibilities for interpreting and re-organizing her feelings, and therefore of limited possibilities for action. In Edna’s world what sorts of things are open to question and what things are not? Although Edna initially attempts to move into an arena in which she can begin to explore feelings which lie outside the prescribed social code, finally she can only think about herself within that code, can only act within some permutation of the subject-object relations her society has ordained for her.

If this is so, can we still define The Awakening as one of the grand subversive novels, as a novel belonging to a great tradition of emancipatory fiction? We can make such claims for The Awakening only if Chopin has been successful in inventing a novelistic structure in which the heroine’s very absence of speech works productively, in which Edna’s silence offers a new dialogic ground from which we can measure the systematic distortions of her old ground of being and begin to construct a new, utopian image of the emergence of women’s antithetical desires. Does Chopin’s novel offer such utopian structures?

“She had put her head down on Madame Ratignolle’s shoulder. She was flushed and felt intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor. It muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom” (20). What are the conditions that permit Edna to feel intoxicated with the sound of her own voice, to experience this “unaccustomed taste of candor” in conversation with a friend? These feelings are customary, this rapture quite ordinary, in fictions by men. “The earth is all before me,” Wordsworth insists in The Prelude. “With a heart/ Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,/ I look about; and should the chosen guide/ Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,/ I cannot miss my way. I breathe again!”5 We know, of course, that Wordsworth has it wrong, that he has miles to go before he discovers anything remotely resembling liberty. Intoxicated by his own voice, thrilled at the prospect of articulate freedom, Wordsworth still claims prophetic powers; he permits his mind to wander and releases his voice to those “trances of thought and mountings of the mind” which hurry toward him. This makes gorgeous poetry, but for whom does it speak? Such moments are rarely recorded by women writers either on their own behalf or on behalf of

their fictional heroines. In the scene in *The Awakening* where Edna returns to the beach from her unearthly swim, it is Robert Lebrun who speaks for her, who frames and articulates the meaning of her adventure, and the plot he invents involves a mystical, masculine sea-spirit responsible for Edna’s sense of election, as if romance were the only form of elation a heroine might feel. Edna repudiates Robert’s story: “‘Don’t banter me,’ she said, wounded at what appeared to be his flippancy” (30). And yet Robert’s metaphors quickly become Edna’s own:

> Sailing across the bay to the Chênière Caminada, Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening—had snapped the night before when the mystic spirit was abroad, leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails. Robert spoke to her incessantly . . . (35)

The tension between Edna’s imagined freedom and Robert’s incessant speech is palpable, but unlike the speech of Edna’s husband, Robert’s words invite dialogue: “‘I’ll take you some night in the pirogue when the moon shines. Maybe your Gulf spirit will whisper to you in which of these islands the treasures are hidden—direct you to the very spot, perhaps.’ ‘And in a day we should be rich!’ she laughed. ‘I’d give it all to you, the pirate gold and every bit of treasure we could dig up.’” (35). Not only is Robert’s vision one that Edna can participate in and help to create, but it is also like a fairy-tale: romantic, enticing, utopian. As a “utopia” Robert’s vision is not all emancipatory; it offers only the flip side, the half-fulfilled wishes of an everyday ideology.

> “How many years have I slept?” she inquired. “The whole island seems changed. A new race of beings must have sprung up, leaving only you and me as past relics . . . .”
> He familiarly adjusted a ruffle upon her shoulder.
> “You have slept precisely one hundred years. I was left here to guard your slumbers; and for one hundred years I have been out under the shed reading a book. The only evil I couldn’t prevent was to keep a broiled fowl from drying up.” (38)

This comic repartee is charming: as Foucault explains in *The Order of Things*, utopias afford us special consolation. “Although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up . . . countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. . . . This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula.*”

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with her husband is also potentially communal. This discursive mode cannot, however, invite its speakers to test the limits of their language; instead, it creates a pleasurable nexus of fancy through which Edna may dream. Freed from the repressive talk of her husband, Edna chooses another mode of oppression, a speech-world that offers space for flirtation that Edna finds liberating. But this liberation is also limiting, a form of stultification, and in exchanging the intoxicating sound of her own voice as she speaks on the beach for Robert's romantic voice, Edna Pontellier's growing sense of self is stabilized, frozen into a mode of feeling and consciousness which, for all its promise of sexual fulfillment, leaves her essentially without resources, without an opportunity for other internal dialogues. We may see *The Awakening* as a novel praising sexual discovery and critiquing the asymmetries of the marriage plot, but we must also recognize that this is a novel in which the heroine's capacities for thought are shut down, a novel in which Edna's temptations *to think* are repressed by the moody discourse of romance. In fact, the novel's explicitly utopian constructs partake of this romance framework; they do not function transgressively. Does Chopin offer her heroine—or her reader—any emancipatory alternative?

Let us begin to answer this question by considering a moment from Lacan's essay "From Love to the Libido"—a moment in which Lacan turns upon his audience and denies that we can ever define ourselves through another's language.

> What I, Lacan . . . am telling you is that the subject as such is uncertain because he is divided by the effects of language. Through the effects of speech, the subject always realizes himself more in the Other, but he is already pursuing there more than half of himself. He will simply find his desire ever more divided, pulverized, in the circumscribable metonymy of speech.

The hearing of a lecture, the writing of a psychoanalytic text, the reading of a novel: these are moments of self-divisiveness, of seeking what we are in that which we are not. It is this drive toward self-realization in the speech of the other that we have begun to discover in *The Awakening*. Chopin's novel focuses from its beginning on the difficulties we have maneuvering within the precincts of language. It opens with an exotic and showy image: "A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over: "Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That's all right!" (3) The parrot's speech is nonsensical, and yet it illuminates its world in an intriguing way. An amalgam of English and Creole, this exotic speech alerts us to the

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7 Gilbert argues that Robert's telling of these "wistful adult fairy tale[s]" (53) aids in reproducing a modern Aphrodite's birth from the foam—a birth in which Edna is "mystically and mythically revitalized." Gilbert imagines that Robert's words are without distorting power because she envisions Grand Isle as a woman's world, a colony situated "outside patriarchal culture, beyond the limits of the city where men make history. . . . Here power can flow from outside. . . . from the timelessness. . . . that is free of historical constraints" (51). The point of my essay is that these "historical constraints" invade Edna's fantasies of "timelessness" as insistently as they invade Mr. Pontellier's city life.

fact that the parrot inhabits a multilingual culture and suggests the babble and lyricism bred by mixing world views. But in addition to giving us a glimpse of the worlds we will encounter within the larger novel, these opening paragraphs make enigmatic statements about our relation to language itself; they open up an intriguing linguistic matrix.

Mr. Pontellier, unable to read his newspaper with any degree of comfort, arose with an expression and an exclamation of disgust. He walked down the gallery and across the narrow “bridges” which connected the Lebrun cottages one with the other . . . .

He stopped before the door of his own cottage, which was the fourth one from the main building and next to the last. Seating himself in a wicker rocker which was there, he once more applied himself to the task of reading the newspaper. The day was Sunday; the paper was a day old. (3)

In contrast to the giddy plurality of the parrot’s speech, Mr. Pontellier’s meditations are redundant and single-minded. Chopin asks us to associate his propriety with the backward tug of words which are “a day old” and already emptied of meaning. The parrot, on the other hand, speaks a language emptied of meaning but full of something else. “He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence” (3). Repetitive, discontinuous, incomprehensible: the speech of this parrot points to an immediate contrast between everyday speech and a more extraordinary speech world. The parrot mixes modes of speech at random; its polyvocal discourse directs our attention to a potential lack of meaning in words themselves—to a register of meaning beyond the reach of its language which is paradoxically articulated in The Awakening as “a language which nobody understood.”

In reading the parrot’s speech we are in the vicinity of what Lacan calls “metonymy”:

A lack is encountered by the subject in the Other, in the very intimation that the Other makes to him by his discourse. In the intervals of the discourse of the Other, there emerges in the experience of the child something that is radically mappable, namely, He is saying this to me, but what does he want?

In this interval intersecting the signifiers . . . is the locus of what, in other registers of my exposition, I have called metonymy. It is there that what we call desire crawls, slips, escapes, like the ferret. The desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject in that which does not work, in the lacks of the discourse

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9 Edna is also associated with old print. Early in the novel Adele Ratignolle “brought the pattern of drawers for Mrs. Pontellier to cut out, a marvel of construction, fashioned to enclose a baby’s body so effectually that only two small eyes might look out from the garment, like an Eskimo’s.” This is a world where characters are cut to fit the language they speak, where Edna’s manufacture of a pattern for her children’s garments can be read as a parable for her condition within language: “Mrs. Pontellier’s mind was quite at rest concerning the present material needs of her children . . . but she did not want to appear unamiable and uninterested, so she had brought forth newspapers which she spread upon the floor of the gallery, and under Madame Ratignolle’s directions she had cut a pattern of the impervious garment” (10).
of the Other, and all the child’s whys reveal not so much an avidity for the rea-
son of things, as a testing of the adult, a ‘Why are you telling me this?’ ever-
resuscitated from its base, which is the enigma of the adult’s desire. (214)

Reading Chopin’s text we find ourselves, from our first overhearing of the parrot’s empty speech, in the position of the child who asks “Why?” but unlike the child we can begin to formulate an answer. The register of desire—of something not described within language but premised and promised there—is provided for us in the “empty” referents of the parrot’s speech and its highly charged iterations of the mockingbird’s song. It is this enigmatic “language” Mr. Pontellier attempts to shun as he navigates his newspaper and the “bridges” connecting the coherent and well-mapped spaces between the cottages. But it is in the unmapped spaces, the spaces between words, the unspoken sites of desire that Edna Pontellier initially resides, and in order to understand how this transgressive impulse is structured into Chopin’s novel we need to see that Chopin herself has divided the linguistic topography of The Awakening in to an extra-linguistic zone of meaning imaged for us at the beginning of the novel in the speech of the parrot, a “language which nobody understood,” and a countervailing region of linguistic constraints imaged for us in Mr. Pontellier’s speech.

Although Lacan’s reading of “metonymy” helps us to identify this linguistic topography, the novel’s missing register of language should not be confused with the irrecoverable “lack” that Lacan defines at the heart of discourse, or the psychic dyslexia in which Kristeva says “Woman” resides. Although “the feminine,” in Kristeva’s early essays, is said to be synonymous with the a-linguistic (“What I mean by ‘woman’ is that which is not repre-


Thus Edna Pontellier speaks an unfinished discourse that reaches out to be completed by other speaking human beings: her "lost" speech—represented by her own speech fragments, by the sibilant voice of the sea and the chatter of the trilingual parrot—is not unfinished on an a-historical, metaphysical plane. Instead, Chopin's displaced metaphors of vocality help us to envision for her heroine a more radical speech situation, a linguistic practice that would reach out to the "differend," to a politics that is not yet a politics, to a language that should be phrased but cannot yet (or could not then) be phrased. In this reading of Chopin's text the emancipatory moments in The Awakening do not consist of those instances of adulterous desire that drive Edna toward the transgressive side of the marriage plot. Instead, such emancipatory moments are contained in those unstable instances of self-questioning and dialogue with herself and with other women that the novel's romance plot helps to elide.

Before looking more closely at the way the "differend" operates in Chopin's novel, let us consider the moment of Edna's awakening in more detail. On the evening when Edna first begins, consciously, to recognize her powers and wants "to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (28), her experience is one of multiple moods, of emotions which seem confused and inarticulate: "A thousand emotions have swept through me to-night. I don't comprehend half of them.... I wonder if any night on earth will ever again be like this one. It is like a night in a dream. The people about me are like some uncanny, half-human beings. There must be spirits abroad to-night" (30). Sensing the extraordinary reach of her feelings, Lebrun answers in kind:

"There are," whispered Robert. "Didn't you know this was the twenty-eighth of August?"

"The twenty-eighth of August?"

"Yes. 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 up from the Gulf. With its own penetrating vision the spirit seeks some one mortal worthy to hold him company, worthy of being exalted for a few hours into realms of the semi-celestials. His search has always hitherto

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13 Gilbert wants to discover a more definite, definable symbolic matrix than Chopin's novel provides. Still, her essay itself is a beautiful testimonial to the "differend" in Chopin's novel. Gilbert finds The Awakening prophetic, and argues that Chopin's novel calls out toward new paradigms: Edna "is journeying not just toward rebirth but toward a regenerative and revisionary genre, a genre that intends to propose new realities for women by providing new mythic paradigms through which women's lives can be understood" (59). But Gilbert argues that this transformation actually occurs as Edna swims "out of one kind of novel—the work of Eliotian or Flaubertian 'realism' she had previously inhabited—and into a new kind of work, a mythic/metaphysical romance that elaborates her distinctively female fantasy of paradisiacal fulfillment and therefore adumbrates much of the feminist modernism that was to come within a few decades" (52). In other words, Gilbert experiences the novel primarily through its differend, through the future discourse it calls toward. This may distort Gilbert's reading of Chopin, but it transforms her essay into a form of feminist myth-making that uplifts and inspires.
been fruitless, and he has sunk back, disheartened, into the sea. But tonight he found Mrs. Pontellier. Perhaps he will never wholly release her from the spell. Perhaps she will never again suffer a poor, unworthy earthling to walk in the shadow of her divine presence.” (30)

While Robert Lebrun may have “penetrated her mood,” he has also begun to alter its meaning. Edna’s experience has been solitary and essentially mysterious; her swim has been a surpassing of limits, a mythic encounter with death—an experience suffused with metaphor, beyond comprehension. Robert’s words do not begin to encompass its meaning, but he does attempt to communicate with her, to understand her mood. And since Edna lacks an alternative register of language to describe her tumultuous feelings, Robert’s conceit soon becomes her own; his language comes to stand for the nameless feelings she has just begun to experience. Just as Edna’s initial awakening, her continuing journey toward self-articulation and self-awareness is initially eccentric and complex, so this journey is finally diminished and divided, reduced in the romantic stories that she is told and the romantic stories she comes to tell herself, to a simplistic narrative that falsifies the diversity of her awakening consciousness. From this perspective, the pivotal event of Chopin’s novel is not Edna’s suicide, nor her break with her husband, but her openness to Robert Lebrun’s stories, her vulnerability to the romantic speech of the other which has, by the end of the novel, become her speech as well:

“I love you,” she whispered, “only you; no one but you. It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream. Oh! you have made me so unhappy with your indifference. Oh! I have suffered, suffered! Now you are here we shall love each other, my Robert. We shall be everything to each other. Nothing else in the world is of any consequence. I must go to my friend; but you will wait for me? No matter how late; you will wait for me, Robert?” (107)

Edna’s final retelling of her story is not an accurate self-portrait, but a radical betrayal of the “awakening” that emerges at the novel’s beginning. This initial “awakening” does not involve the violent triangulation of adultery, romance, and erotic story-telling, but the exploration of a discontinuous series of images that are promisingly feminocentric. In fact, what is disturbing about Edna’s last speech to Robert is its falsification of her story, its naming of Lebrun as author of her growth, as source of her awakening. For what this last speech denies is the essential strangeness of Edna’s initial self-consciousness, the tantalizing world of unvoiced dreams and ideas that Edna encounters at the novel’s inception. By the end of the novel Edna has drifted into a system of self-explanation that—while it seems to account for her experience—also falsifies that experience by giving it the gloss of coherence, of a continuous narrative line. Edna’s thoughts at the beginning of the novel are much more confused—but they are also more heterogeneous and promising.
In the opening scenes of *The Awakening* this struggle among different social possibilities, among diverse points of view, fails to take place as explicitly realized dialogue. Even Edna's husband does not have the power to challenge the voices which annoy him, but only "the privilege of quitting their society when they ceased to be entertaining." "The parrot and the mocking-bird were the property of Madame Lebrun," Chopin tells us, "and they had the right to make all the noise they wished" (3). The detail seems trivial, but it is worth noting that just as Mr. Pontellier's reaction to the parrot's nonsensical speech is defined in terms of his relation to the parrot as someone else's possession, so his wife is defined in terms of property relations as well. "'What folly to bathe at such an hour and in such heat! ... You are burnt beyond recognition,' he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (4). In Pontellier's linguistic world, the roles of speaker and listener are clearly defined in terms of social and material hierarchies. Edna Pontellier is someone her husband feels free to command and free to define, but she is not someone to whom Mr. Pontellier listens:

"What is it?" asked Pontellier, looking lazily and amused from one to the other. It was some utter nonsense; some adventure out there in the water, and they both tried to relate it at once. It did not seem half so amusing when told. They realized this, and so did Mr. Pontellier. He yawned and stretched himself. Then he got up, saying he had half a mind to go over to Klein's hotel and play a game of billiards. (5)

When Pontellier—feeling "very talkative"—returns from Klein's hotel late at night, he blithely awakens his wife to converse.

He talked to her while he undressed, telling her anecdotes and bits of news and gossip that he had gathered during the day. From his trousers pockets he took a fistful of crumpled bank notes and a good deal of silver coin, which he piled on the bureau indiscriminately with keys, knife, handkerchief, and whatever else happened to be in his pockets. (7)

Pontellier expects his words to have the same weight as his silver; the only difference is that he dispenses his language with greater abandon. But Edna Pontellier inhabits a speech-world very different from her husband's, a world oddly bereft of his cultural symbols. "Overcome with sleep," she continues dreaming as he speaks and answers him "with little half utterances." For her husband, Edna's separateness is maddening. Her words, like the words of the parrot Pontellier cannot abide, seem nonsensical; her "little half utterances" suggest a replay of the early morning scene on the beach. But this time the hierarchies are played out in earnest, and Pontellier reacts to his wife's inattention with a burgher-like furor. Nominally concerned for his children, he stalks to their rooms, only to find them inhabiting their own bizarre
speech-worlds: "He turned and shifted the youngsters about in bed. One of them began to kick and talk about a basket full of crabs" (7).

While *The Awakening* traces the closure of its own intervals of desire and self-questioning, Chopin is also engaged in the radical mapping of those moments of speech in which our desires begin to address us. If the socio-symbolic world we inhabit encourages us to displace unspoken polyphanies with repetition, with customary stories, with narrative lines, the force of *The Awakening*'s subversive nocturnes, its metonymic intervals, belies the permanence of Pontellier's social forms and suggests a linguistic counterplot which glitters through the text with dis-articulate meaning. The child's response throws his father's patriarchal assumptions into even higher relief when Pontellier responds to his son's "utter nonsense" by chiding his wife: "Mr. Pontellier returned to his wife with the information that Raoul had a high fever and needed looking after... He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (7). When Pontellier uses his power of speech to awaken his wife and to define her, Edna answers with deliberate silence. But when Pontellier drifts off to sleep, this silence loses its power. "Turning, she thrust her face, steaming and wet, into the bend of her arm, and she went on crying there, not caring any longer to dry her face, her eyes, her arms. She could not have told why she was crying." What is remarkable about this episode is Chopin's emphasis on the unspoken, the unsayable:

*An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken. She was just having a good cry all to herself. The mosquitoes made merry over her, biting her firm, round arms and nipping at her bare insteps. (8)*

The oppression Edna feels is not merely "indescribable" and "vague," it also comes from an "unfamiliar" region of consciousness and can only be described through analogy. Edna's mood closes as swiftly as it has opened: "The little stinging, buzzing imps succeeded in dispelling a mood which might have held her there in the darkness half a night longer" (8). The biting mosquitoes add an ominous note and operate upon Edna like her husband's alien language; it is as if their determined orality forecloses on Edna's own right to speak.

In the morning the talk between wife and husband is amicably re-established through an economic transaction: "Mr. Pontellier gave his wife half the money which he had brought away from Klein's hotel the evening before" (9). When Mr. Pontellier responds with the appropriate cultural symbols, Edna is as trapped as she was in her conversations with Robert; she can only
voice gratitude. "It will buy a handsome wedding present for Sister Janet!" she exclaimed, smoothing out the bills as she counted them one by one. 'Oh! we'll treat Sister Janet better than that, my dear,' he laughed, as he prepared to kiss her good-by" (9). This happiness continues when Mr. Pontellier returns to New Orleans. The medium of this continued harmony is something oral or edible, something, like language, that Edna can put in her mouth:

A few days later a box arrived for Mrs. Pontellier from New Orleans. It was from her husband. It was filled with friandises, with luscious and toothsome bits—the finest of fruits, patés, a rare bottle or two, delicious syrups, and bonbons in abundance.

Mrs. Pontellier was always very generous with the contents of such a box; she was quite used to receiving them when away from home. The patés and fruit were brought to the dining-room; the bonbons were passed around. And the ladies, selecting with dainty and discriminating fingers and a little greedily, all declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better. (9)

Chopin's description of Edna's acquiescence, her praise of her husband, is edged with an undeclared violence; Edna is "forced to admit" what she does not feel. But what else could she say? "Mr. Pontellier was a great favorite, and ladies, men, children, even nurses, were always on hand to say good-by to him. His wife stood smiling and waving, the boys shouting, as he disappeared in the old rockaway down the sandy road" (9). Edna has no words for describing her intricate feelings, and if she did, who would listen? She could only speak in a private "language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze . . ."

In her essay on The Awakening Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that Edna's central problem is psychological, that once her "hidden self" has begun "to exert its inexorable power" we can see that Edna's "libidinal appetite has been fixated at the oral level."14 I have begun, in contrast, to suggest that Edna's problem is linguistic and social, that her "orality" is frustrated, exacerbated by her social milieu. Wolff insists on the correspondence between Edna's "preoccupation with nourishment" and an infantile, "orally destructive self, a limitless void whose needs can be filled, finally, only by total fusion with the outside world, a totality of sensuous enfolding" (208, 211). She explains that this totality "means annihilation of the ego." But we have seen that Edna's need for fusion, her preoccupation with nourishment or oral surfeiting, does not arise from Edna's own infantility but from social prescription. Married to a Creole, Edna does not feel at home in his society, and she feels especially ill at ease with the Creole manner of speech. If the gap between Creole and Anglo-American cultures gives Edna a glimpse of the inadequacies of each,

Edna’s inability to deal fluently in the language her husband and lovers speak remains a sign of her disempowerment. As she sails across the bay with Robert to the Chénière Caminada, he flirts with a "young barefooted Spanish girl" named Mariequita. Mariequita is coy and flirtatious; she teases Lebrun and asks him sweet, ribald questions:

"Edna liked it all. She looked Mariequita up and down, from her ugly brown toes to her pretty black eyes, and back again."

"Why does she look at me like that?" inquired the girl of Robert.
"Maybe she thinks you are pretty. Shall I ask her?"
"No. Is she your sweetheart?"
"She’s a married lady, and has two children."
"Oh! well! Francisco ran away with Sylvano’s wife, who had four children. They took all his money and one of the children and stole his boat."
"Shut up!"
"Does she understand?"
"Oh, hush!" (34)

The scene is gay, but Mariequita’s questions are filled with foreboding. Robert’s knowledge of several languages, his power to control what others hear and speak, is a sign of his “right” to preside in a context where “no one present understood what they said” (34).

In a conversation with Alcée Arobin later in the novel we see how the paths for women’s self-expression are continually limited. As Edna begins to explore her own deviance from social codes, Alcée Arobin usurps her role as story-teller; he begins to define her himself:

“One of these days,” she said, “I’m going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don’t know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can’t convince myself that I am. I must think about it.”

“Don’t. What’s the use? Why should you bother thinking about it when I can tell you what manner of woman you are.” His fingers strayed occasionally down to her warm, smooth cheeks and firm chin, which was growing a little full and double. (82)

The text moves from an emphasis on Edna’s power of thought and speech to an emphasis on her erotic power, her flesh, as Arobin reasserts the old codes and “feeds” her with stories. Earlier in the novel Adele Ratignolle is similarly primed. Counselling Robert Lebrun to leave Mrs. Pontellier alone, Madame Ratignolle is rebuked for her efforts to speak: “‘It isn’t pleasant to have a woman tell you—’” Robert Lebrun interrupts, “unheedingly, but breaking off suddenly: ‘Now if I were like Arobin—you remember Alcée Arobin and that story of the consul’s wife at Biloxi?’” Lebrun’s speech operates not only as a
form of entertainment, but as a form of repression. "And he related the story of Alcée Arobin and the consul’s wife; and another about the tenor of the French Opera, who received letters which should never have been written; and still other stories, grave and gay, till Mrs. Pontellier and her possible propensity for taking young men seriously was apparently forgotten" (21). Lebrun dismisses Madame Ratignolle’s concern for Edna and reminds us that the women in Chopin’s novel taste little if any verbal freedom. Visiting the Ratignolles Edna observes that

*The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union.*

...  

*Monsieur Ratignolle ... spoke with an animation and earnestness that gave an exaggerated importance to every syllable he uttered. His wife was keenly interested in everything he said, laying down her fork the better to listen, chiming in, taking the words out of his mouth.* (56)

If Edna “is remarkably vulnerable to feelings of being invaded and overwhelmed,” if, as Wolff insists, “she is very much at the mercy of her environment,” this is because her environment is invasive and overwhelming, not only limiting her self-expression to acts of eating, but also rewarding women who, like Madame Ratignolle, are dutifully “delicious” in their roles, who put men’s words in their mouths, who have “eaten” their husbands’ language.

We have established that *The Awakening* revolves around the heroine’s limiting life in the courts of romance and describes, as well, a frightening antagonism between a feminine subject and the objectifying world of discourse she inhabits. “The letter was on the bookshelf. It possessed the greatest interest and attraction for Edna; the envelope, its size and shape, the postmark, the handwriting. She examined every detail of the outside before opening it” (47). What men say, what they write grows more and more portentous, and the cumulative weight of their saying is often the same: “There was no special message to Edna except a postscript saying that if Mrs. Pontellier desired to finish the book which he had been reading to her, his mother would find it in his room, among other books there on the table” (47). The world of alien discourse seems omnipresent in the novel, and when Edna tries to make her own mark, her efforts are fruitless. “Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet” (53). In frustration Edna seizes a glass vase and flings it to the hearth. “She wanted to destroy something. The crash and clatter were what she wanted to hear” (53). If *The Awakening* can be defined as an emancipatory text, if it voices a conflict between men’s speech and the speaking of women, this is a conflict articulated as a struggle between men’s normative language and something un-
voiced and enigmatic—a clatter, a "language which nobody understood." Edna’s anger is speechless; her gesture all but impotent, for when a maid sidles into the room to clean up the glass she rediscovers her mistress’s cast-off ring: "Edna held out her hand, and taking the ring, slipped it upon her finger" (53).

It is, in fact, only women of property like Madame Lebrun, the owner of the summer resort where the Pontelliers are staying, or artists like Mademoiselle Reisz who have the power of public expression. But Mademoiselle Reisz (who would seem, initially, to offer Edna another model for female selfhood) is surprisingly complicitous in limiting Edna’s options. We find the strongest image of her complicity midway through the novel when she hands Edna the letter from Robert and asks Edna to read it while Mademoiselle Reisz plays heart-rending music. "Edna did not know when the Impromptu began or ended. She sat on the sofa corner reading Robert’s letter by the fading light." As Edna reads Mademoiselle plays like a manic cupid, gliding "from the Chopin into the quivering lovenotes of Isolde’s song, and back again to the Impromptu with its soulful and poignant longing" (64). The music grows fantastic; it fills the room, and Edna begins to sob "as she had wept one midnight at Grand Isle when strange, new voices awoke in her.” Now she hears one voice only and this voice has an oppressive material weight. “Mademoiselle reentered and lit a candle. Robert’s letter was on the floor. She stopped and picked it up. It was crumpled and damp with tears. Mademoiselle smoothed the letter out, restored it to the envelope, and replaced it in the table drawer” (64). Like Mr. Pontellier’s crumpled bank notes and small change, the letter has come to possess its own objectivity, its own material power. But if this is a letter that Mademoiselle Reisz can exchange for the pleasure of Edna’s visit, it also represses her particular sonority. Mademoiselle Reisz’s music is replaced by Robert’s tune: “Robert’s voice was not pretentious. It was musical and true. The voice, the notes, the whole refrain haunted her memory.”

The speech of the masculine “other” becomes, for Edna Pontellier and the women in her society, an arena of self-loss and inner divisiveness. Madame Lebrun’s expressions, like Edna’s, remain vestigial, enigmatic. Her sewing machine echoes the “clatter” of Edna’s broken vase.

“I have a letter somewhere,” looking in the machine drawer and finding the letter in the bottom of the work-basket. "He says to tell you he will be in Vera Cruz the beginning of next month”—clatter, clatter!—“and if you still have the intention of joining him”—bang! clatter, clatter, bang!

"Why didn’t you tell me so before, mother? You know I wanted—"Clatter, clatter, clatter! (23)

If Madame Lebrun does not possess Alcée Arobin’s power of definition, she does possess his power of interruption, and the noise of her sewing machine half-prepares us for her jibe at her younger son: “Really, this table is getting to be more and more like Bedlam every day, with everybody talking at once.
Sometimes—I hope God will forgive me—but positively, sometimes I wish Victor would lose the power of speech" (42).

Translated into the language of the other, Edna’s own story fails to materialize. But what might it have looked like? What is the rhythm and content of Edna’s speech when she is neither speaking like her father or lover nor to him? First, we have seen that Chopin plays with the hiatus between the stories Edna inherits and what, in Edna, is heterogeneous to these stories, but is not bound by them. In *The Awakening* a story or framing device is frequently set against a “remainder” or supplement of meaning not encompassed within that frame. This remainder, this “excess” of meaning represents a “differend” which challenges the framing story’s totalizing power, its explanatory validity. (Adorno puts this another way in his *Negative Dialectics*: “A matter of urgency to the concept would be what it fails to cover, what its abstractionist mechanism eliminates, what is not already a case of the concept.”)\(^{15}\) It is never a question of Edna’s transcendence of local mythology, but rather of a negative and dialectical play between myth and that which resists mythic closure:

“Of whom—of what are you thinking?” asked Adele of her companion . . . .

“Nothing,” returned Mrs. Pontellier, with a start, adding at once: “How stupid! But it seems to me it is the reply we make instinctively to such a question. Let me see . . . . I was really not conscious of thinking of anything; but perhaps I can retrace my thoughts.”

“Oh! never mind!” laughed Madame Ratignolle. “I am not quite so exacting . . . . It is really too hot to think, especially to think about thinking.”

Clearly Adele Ratignolle’s dislike of “thinking” is normative in Edna’s society and acts as near-absolute rule. But Edna ventures into areas of the mind that are not well mapped, into memories excluded from Adele Ratignolle’s cultural typology. And in thinking of “Nothing,” something old and familiar emerges:

“But for the fun of it,” persisted Edna. “First of all, the sight of the water stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky, made a delicious picture that I just wanted to sit and look at. The hot wind beating in my face made me think—without any connection that I can trace—of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass . . . . She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. Oh, I see the connection now!”

“Where were you going that day in Kentucky, walking through the grass?”

. . .

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“Likely as not it was Sunday,” she laughed, “and I was running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of.” (17–18)

As practitioners of free association and students of Freud we may see little that is remarkable in Edna’s response. But this is to underestimate the radical quality of her awareness, to dismiss its acrobatic integrity. It is as if Chopin is aware, as Edna is only naively, that the mind wants to go beyond itself, to go toward extremes, to test the accuracy of its own boundaries. Even as the social order demands a closing of ranks—a synthesis or yoking together of disparate ideas in such a way that their disparity grows invisible—the individual has the capacity to challenge her own syntactic boundaries. Edna’s talks with Madame Ratignolle present us with a radical example of thought as disconnection, of Edna’s capacity to separate ideas from one context to pursue them in another. This is the precondition for dialectic, the capacity for critique that Hegel defines in his Phenomenology:

*The activity of dissolution is the power and work of the Understanding, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power. The circle that remains self-enclosed and, like substance, holds its moments together, is an immediate relationship, one therefore which has nothing astonishing about it. But that an accident as such, detached from what circumscribes it, what is bound and is actual only in its context with others, should attain an existence of its own and a separate freedom—this is the tremendous power of the negative; it is the energy of thought, of the pure ‘I’.*

What does this “power of the negative” mean for Edna, and what does it do for her? The images she conjures up seem aimless and accidental, beyond further synthesis, beyond dialectic. But this is precisely their virtue.

In escaping her father’s old sermons, Edna strikes out into new physical space; she veers toward an arena of free feeling not designated by the patriarchs. Similarly, in walking to the beach, Adele Ratignolle and Edna have slipped momentarily outside the zone of paternal definition. “In some unaccountable way they had escaped from Robert,” Chopin explains (15). The problem, of course, is that their escape is literally unaccountable, that outside the other’s language they enter the arena of “Nothing,” of a language which nobody speaks. And yet in talking with Adele Ratignolle Edna begins to see connections she has not seen before; her thoughts become unsystematic—they go forward before going astray. “Thought,” as Maire Jaanus Kurrik suggests, “must admit that it is not only cogency but play, that it is random and can go astray, and can only go forward because it can go astray. Thought has an unshielded and open aspect, which is unsystematic, and which traditional philosophy has repressed for fear of chaos.”

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17 Maire Jaanus Kurrik, *Literature and Negation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 221. Kurrik’s ideas have been useful throughout in helping me come to terms with Edna Pontellier’s way of thinking. See also Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 3–57.
that thought must “abdicate its idea of hegemony and autarky, and practice a
disenchantment of the concept, its transcendence,” if it is to challenge its own
preconceptions (221). Edna is not so self-conscious about the nature of her
thinking, but as her mind plays over the past in a random and heterodox
fashion, we can recognize in her thoughts the potential disenchantment of
the concept that most binds her, the concept of an obsessive attachment to
men, of a romantic and excessive bondage to father-like figures. The image of
the beloved cavalry officer that Edna remembers is followed by a series of im-
ages or memories of men who have “haunted” Edna’s imagination and
“stirred” her senses. These broken images come to her not as images of love,
but as sources of puzzlement, disaffection, and wonder. Edna is open to
thinking about the mystery of her affections; she notes in past amours an ob-
 sessive quality that demands perusal.

But something prevents Edna from thinking further, from becoming fully
aware of the conditions which bind her. In this instance the conversation be-
tween Edna and Adele is interrupted; as they converse on the beach their
voices are blurred by “the sound of approaching voices. It was Robert, sur-
rounded by a troop of children, searching for them” (20). Unable to continue
their conversation, interrupted in the very moment when Edna had begun to
feel “intoxicated with the sound of her own voice ... the women at once rose
and began to shake out their draperies and relax their muscles,” and Madame
Ratignolle begins to lean “draggingly” on Robert’s arm as they walk home
(20).

Thought should, perhaps, be “unshielded” and “open”; if thinking is to oc-
cur at all the mind must open itself to what is playful, random and unsystem-
atic. But thought can only go so far afield before it ceases to be thought at all;
as Hegel suggests, mind or spirit possesses its power only “by looking the
negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is
the magical power that converts it into being” (19). And this “tarrying with”
is something that occurs over time and in a community of speakers; it is not
the product of an instant. What prevents Edna’s “tarrying with” the negative
is not her own inadequacy or some incapacity inherent in speech as such, but
Edna’s lack of a speech community that will encourage these new specula-
tions, her lack of a group of fellow speakers who will encourage the growth
of her thought and its translation into praxis. Though Madame Ratignolle is
sympathetic and offers Edna both physical solace and a sympathetic ear, open
conversation between them is rare; they speak different languages. “Edna had
once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her
children, or for any one. Then had followed a rather heated argument.” Edna
finds herself speaking a language as impenetrable to others as the parrot’s
babble: “The two women did not appear to understand each other or to be
talking the same language” (48). The pull of the libidinal speech-world Edna
shares with Robert, then, is immense. (Robert, Chopin explains, “talked a
good deal about himself. He was very young, and did not know any better.
Mrs. Pontellier talked a little about herself for the same reason. Each was interested in what the other said" [6]). What emerges from their conversation is not a critique of society, however, but gay, utopian play, a pattern of speech in which Edna is once again caught within the semiotic, the bodily residues of her social code, and is not permitted the range of meaning or the control over culturally established symbols that Robert Lebrun is able to command.

Given the power that Robert (and the romance plot itself) exerts over Edna’s ordinary patterns of associative thinking, it is worth noting that Chopin’s novel ends in a more heterogeneous zone, with Edna’s attention turned neither toward Robert nor her husband and children, but toward her own past:

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)

This lyrical ending is as enigmatic as the novel’s beginning; it might be read as a regression toward oral passivity: toward an infantile repudiation of the validity claims, the social responsibilities adult speech requires. But I would suggest this extralinguistic memory comes to Edna at the end of her life because it is in such a sequence of images, and not the language of Robert Lebrun, that Edna can find the most accessible path to her story—that even in death Edna is seeking (as she sought on the beach) a path of emancipation; she is seeking a register of language more her own.

At the end of the novel as Edna swims out to sea and tries to address Robert once more, she fails again; she finds herself trying to speak a language no one understands. "‘Good-by—because, I love you.’ He did not know; he did not understand. He would never understand” (114). The story that Edna has told herself about her affection for Robert is inadequate. Close to death, she turns her mind toward the blurred edge of her womanhood, and the novel ends as it has begun, with a medley of distinct and disconnected voices. Here they represent a point of possible origin; they trace that moment in time when, still experiencing the world as a multitude of sounds, Edna’s attention begins to shift from the plural voices of childhood toward the socially anticipated fulfillment of her sexual rhythms, toward the obsessive “clang” of the cavalryman’s spurs. Just as the novel begins with the parrot’s strange speech, with an order of speaking that satirizes and escapes from the epistemological confines of the heroine’s world, so Edna’s own awakening begins with and returns at her death to the rich and painful lure of desires that are still outside speech and beyond the social order. We must look again at this excluded order of meaning.
In *The Order of Things* Michel Foucault describes the discontinuity and disjunction he feels in perusing a list of incommensurable words or objects encountered in a story by Borges. Foucault experiences the variable terms of this list as "monstrous" and unnerving—Borges' reader is presented with an "order of things" which refuses orderly synthesis. This mode of disorder Foucault defines as a "heteroclite," a state in which "things are 'laid', 'placed', 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible . . . to define a common locus beneath them all" (xvii-xviii). In the opening sentences of *The Awakening* the parrot's speech presents us with a similar confusion. Here different syntactic and semantic units from different language systems mingle but refuse to cohere, and we find ourselves contemplating a potential "heterotopia," a discontinuous linguistic space in which the communicative function of language itself is called into question. These discontinuous linguistic spaces, these "heterotopias," are disturbing "because they secretly undermine language . . . because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things . . . to 'hold together'" (xviii). The opening sentences of Chopin's text have a similar effect upon their reader.¹⁸ In the discrepancies between different languages and the fractioned idioms these languages produce, we are presented with several categories of words and of things that cannot be held, simultaneously, in consciousness. The novel begins by challenging orthodoxy; it posits a world of saying in which ordinary ways of looking at things are called into question.

Chopin's novel pushes us from its beginning toward an arena of speech which asks us to become aware of disjunctions between the disorder of words and the social order, between our usual perceptions and the world these perceptions are designed to organize. The potent, possible syntheses between the self and its world—the syntheses the symbolic order insists we believe in—are challenged and in their place we discover a universe that is anomalous, asynchronic, confusing: a world not so much out of joint as out of its inhabitants' thought, a world outrageously unthinkable. Chopin insists that Mr. Pontellier's manner of organizing himself within this world is to ignore its arch nonsense, to cling to its objects for fetishistic support. He reads his newspaper, fingers his vest pocket: "There was a ten-dollar bill there. He did not know: perhaps he would return for the early dinner and perhaps he would not" (5). Within the novel an extraordinary register of speech is always opening up and then quietly shutting down—a closure which returns us, inevitably, to the circumscribed world of other people's objects and other people's speech, to a linear world in which the intervals of desire are stabilized

¹⁸ I have focussed on the opening sentences, but this sense of the "heteroclite" pervades Chopin's text. The most bizarre and recurrent instance of a set of characters who simultaneously inhabit Mr. Pontellier's world and live in some other, incommensurable realm is the pair of lovers and their surreal duenna:

*The lovers were just entering the grounds of the pension. They were leaning toward each other as the water-oaks bent from the sea. There was not a particle of earth beneath their feet. Their heads might have been turned upside-down, so absolutely did they tread upon blue ether. The lady in black, creeping behind them, looked a trifle paler and more jaded than usual.* (22)
by cultural symbols that determine the perimeters of self-knowledge.

Chopin makes us aware that the world her novel is designed to represent is itself a heteroclite; her text points to a discrepancy between one kind of social order and its possible others. "It is here," as Foucault says in *The Order of Things*, in the region where the heteroclite becomes visible,

*that a culture, imperceptibly deviating from the empirical orders prescribed for it by its primary codes, instituting an initial separation from them, causes them to lose their original transparency, relinquishes its immediate and invisible powers, frees itself sufficiently to discover that these orders are perhaps not the only possible ones or the best ones; this culture then finds itself faced with the stark fact that there exists, below the level of its spontaneous orders, things that are in themselves capable of being ordered, that belong to a certain unspoken order . . . (xx)*

To argue that Edna Pontellier commits suicide because she lacks a language, because of this "unspoken order," seems a cruel oversimplification of her character and of her material situation. And yet at the end of *The Awakening* we are, like Edna, subjected to a multiplication of points of view and can see no way to contain this multiplicity within the novel's heterosexist milieu. To argue that Edna lacks a language, then, is not only to say that culture has invaded her consciousness, has mortgaged her right to original speech, but that Edna's language is inadequate to her vital needs, that it is singular when it should be plural, masculine when it should be feminine, phantasmic when it should be open and dialectical. And what becomes clear by the novel's end is that Robert Lebrun has served as an iconic replacement for that which Edna cannot say; his name functions as a hieroglyph condensing Edna's complex desires—both those she has named and those which remain unnameable.

In *Powers of Horror* Julia Kristeva suggests that "phobia bears the marks of the frailty of the subject's signifying system," and Edna's love for Robert—although it is not phobic as such, reproduces this frailty as symptom; when Edna seeks nothing but the speech of her beloved, it makes her "signifying system" frail. Edna Pontellier has no language to help her integrate and interrogate the diversity of her feelings; she experiences neither world nor signifying system capacious enough to accommodate her desires. But by the end of the novel these contradictory desires become noisy, impossible to repress. As Edna helps Adele Ratignolle through a difficult childbirth the romantic interlude that Edna has shared with Robert becomes faint; it seems "unreal, and only half-remembered" (108), and once again language fails her. When Dr. Mandelet asks if she will go abroad to relax, Edna finds herself stumbling for words: "'Perhaps—no, I am not going. I'm not going to be forced into doing things. I don't want to go abroad. I want to be let alone. Nobody has any right—except children, perhaps—and even then, it seems to

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me—or it did seem—' She felt that her speech was voicing the incoherency of her thoughts, and stopped abruptly" (109). After watching Adele give birth and listening to her painful repetitions ("Think of the children, think of them"), Edna begins to re-experience the bodily sensations and feelings for her children that she has repressed; her extra-marital desires grow more tumultuous. Once more her sentences split with the weight of this conflict, and as Mandelet tries to put them together, as he offers to "talk of things you never have dreamt of talking about before," Edna refuses his kind and magian powers, just as, in childhood, she refused her father's chill summons to prayer. She gives herself, instead, to the "voice" of the sea, to that sibilance in which every name drowns. And her mind returns to what she can claim of her childhood, to the story she told Adele Ratignolle on the hot summer beach.

Kristeva has suggested that we consider "the phobic person as a subject in want of metaphoricalness" (37), and I have suggested that the same becomes true of a woman in love, a woman who becomes the subject of her culture's romantic fantasies. "Incapable of producing metaphors by means of signs alone," Kristeva argues,

\[\text{[this subject] produces them in the very material of drives—and it turns out that the only rhetoric of which he is capable is that of affect, and it is projected, as often as not, by means of images. It will then fall upon analysis to give back a memory, hence a language, to the unnamable and namable states of fear, while emphasizing the former, which make up what is most unapproachable in the unconscious. (37)}\]

I am not suggesting that Edna is in need of a Freudian or even a Kristevan analysis. I am suggesting instead that we can locate the power of the novel's final images in Edna's desire "to give back a memory, hence a language," to that within her which remains nameless.

There is a fact which our experience of speech does not permit us to deny, the fact that every discourse is cast in the direction of something which it seeks to seize hold of, that it is incomplete and open, somewhat as the visual field is partial, limited and extended by an horizon. How can we explain this almost visual property of speaking on the basis of this object closed in principle, shut up on itself in a self-sufficient totality, which is the system of langue?²⁰

The "voice" of the sea Edna tries to embrace is more than a harbinger of death, more than a sign of dark and unfulfilled sexuality; the novel's final images frame and articulate Edna's incessant need for some other register of language, for a mode of speech that will express her unspoken, but not unspeakable needs.

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