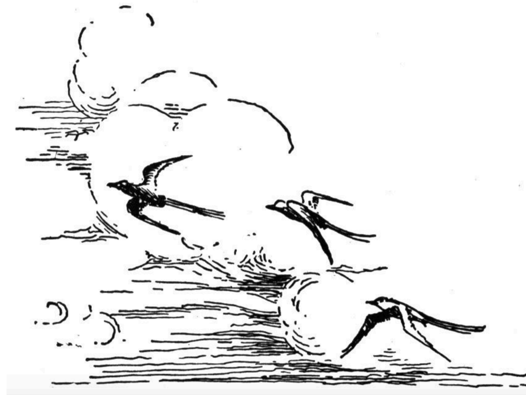
Transcendent Moments in Modern Literature:
A Revision of the Diagnosis of Disenchantment



Then the LORD God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever."

– Genesis 3.22

You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment.

– Henry David Thoreau

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I. Karl Ove Knausgaard and the Project of Re-enchantment

In December of 2007 a man in Sweden experienced an extra-ordinary moment—and he wrote it down. Karl Ove Knausgaard was riding the commuter train between Stockholm and Gnesta, passing through a grey, industrial wasteland filled with railway cars, gas tanks, and factories, gazing out at the dying sun, and thinking of nothing in particular when it happened: "[one of] these sudden states of clear-sightedness that everyone must know, where for a few seconds you catch sight of another world from the one you were in only a moment earlier, where the world seems to step forward and show itself for a brief glimpse before reverting and leaving everything as before…" (222).

As he relates this event to us in the first volume of his six-volume autobiographical epic, *My Struggle*,[1] we relive it alongside him and are swept up by a stream of questions. What is it, exactly, that he is experiencing? What does it mean? And what is this *other* world? As these questions press in on Knausgaard and his readers and we sense their inescapable importance, we are simultaneously met by the knowledge that, try as he might, even Knausgaard cannot give completely satisfying answers—and it is by virtue of the questions themselves. The moment he experiences is not only outside of everyday reality and outside of the ordinary passage of time, but also outside of normal language and, we come to find, human reason. As a result, he cannot grasp the precise nature of the experience. The best he can do is to conjure it up in language, that is, metaphor. He makes two significant attempts do so in his lengthy ensuing meditation on the phenomenon. The first is contemporaneous with the actual moment.

> I wasn't thinking about anything in particular, just staring at the burning red ball in the sky and the pleasure that suffused me was so sharp and came with such intensity that it was indistinguishable from pain. What I experienced seemed to me to be of enormous significance. Enormous significance. When the moment had passed the feeling of significance did not diminish, but all of a

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[1] In the original Norwegian it reads "*Min Kamp*."

> sudden it became hard to place: exactly *what* was significant? And why? A train, an industrial area, sun, mist? (222)

Yet again, we get a deeply tantalizing glimpse of this experience, and, yet again, we are left with just the glimpse and nothing more. But we begin to develop a better idea of what constitutes this moment. It can happen in the most mundane of situations; therefore, it seems that it does not require any particularly special set of objects in the world. If so, it follows that the moment does not find its origin from without but rather from within the mind. An internal shifting of perspectives, a changing of lenses, lets Knausgaard see the world without in a different light. Things are thrown into sharper relief ("clear-sightedness") and experienced with "intense," "sharp" pleasure. This interesting cocktail of clear-sightedness and pleasure ensures that the moment cannot be interpreted exclusively—as thinkers in the West are wont to do—as either a process of the intellect or of sensation. Rather, the experience contains both of these seeming opposites and unites them, making them greater than the sum of their parts. This is a deepening, or, more accurately, a heightening, a transcending of ordinary bounds of consciousness. But there remains something inherently ineffable about the resulting state.

In speaking of the two worlds, the everyday world and the "world that stepped forward from itself," Knausgaard comes close to the heart of the matter.

> It was doubtless in this interlying space where it "happened," where it appeared, whatever it was I saw, when the world seemed to step forward from the world. When you didn't just see the incomprehensible in it but came very close to it. Something that didn't speak, and that no words could grasp, consequently forever out of our reach, yet within it, for not only did it surround us, we were ourselves part of it, we were ourselves of it. (223)

Just as, in the text, Knausgaard reaches out and briefly touches this "happening" from behind the bars of the prison called language, so, in life, does he reach out and briefly touch this world-that-has-stepped-forward-from-itself from behind the bars of the prison called being-human. What is more, these two prisons evidently do not completely shut Knausgaard off from what is "outside." Fleeting

rays of light may occasionally pierce through the prisons' darkness, through holes that open up in their ceilings out into the beyond. Knausgaard explains that this is as much a coming into contact with something outside of himself as it is with something inside of himself. Not only is there an incomprehensible something out in the world, but there is also that same incomprehensible thing inside Knausgaard and, he implies, inside all of us who count ourselves human. In the passage above, he opens up the conditions of possibility of this experience with his transition from first person to second person to third person—"I" then "you" then "we." The experience becomes universalized. We can all feel it.

Much of Knausgaard's *My Struggle* is taken up with these sorts of questions. What is left for us in the Westernized, modern, secular, post-Enlightenment world in which, Nietzsche famously proclaimed, God is dead? Can there be meaning in a world desiccated by the forces of alienation, materialism, liberalism, colonialism, uniformity, bureaucracy, and atheism? Can we redeem what Knausgaard and many others see to be such a hollow reality? Oftentimes, nihilism beckons. Like many postmodernists before him, Knausgaard writes with an ironic, acerbic tone, and sometimes his cynicism feels insurmountable. One need not look further than his choice of book title (the Norwegian reads *Min Kamp*) with all its literal and historical interpretations, or the first line of the first volume, which is redolent of this mood: "For the heart, life is simple: it beats for as long as it can" (3).

Yet a reading of Knausgaard would suffer from not also noticing the uplifting moments in *My Struggle*. One such moment appears in the train episode in which Knausgaard attempts to affirm and redeem our modern existence. To "affirm" and to "redeem" are two very different modes, but his project, I would argue, is to do both. "Affirm" comes from Middle English (in the sense '*make firm*') which itself comes from Old French (*affirmare*) which comes from Latin (*ad-* '*to'* + *firmus* '*strong'*). He affirms existence in that he deepens an appreciation and gratitude for what already exists,

what we have in front of us. It is in this sense that he is the materialist. But his is also the project of re-enchantment, and in that sense he must redeem. "Redeem" in the late late Middle English sense of *'buy back'*, which comes from Old French (*redimer*) and Latin (*re(d)- 'back' + emere 'buy'*). Here, then, he is operating in a world from which the gods have been exiled, a world that has become insipid and dull. Knausgaard longs to "buy back" into an old sense of the beyond. His train episode gives him a perfect opportunity to do so.

Knausgaard laments that the old categories have fallen by the wayside. "The great, the divine, the solemn, the holy, the beautiful, and the true are no longer valid entities but quite the contrary, dubious or even laughable" (224). "The great beyond," he goes on to say, "which until the Age of Enlightenment had been the Divine, brought to us through the Revelation, and which in Romanticism was nature, where the concept of Revelation was expressed as the sublime, no longer found expression" (224). Here he speaks principally of modern art and what he sees as its reduction of the world. We can see where his sympathies lie even earlier when he mentions a fixture in his office, William Blake's monotype of Newton underwater, in which Newton is so intently focused on his tools and calculations that he does not notice he is underwater. The problem worsens, Knausgaard makes clear, after 1900. "It is as if humans swallow up everything, make everything theirs. The mountains, the sea, the trees, and the forests, everything is colored by humanness" (224). Fulfilling Descartes' prophecy, humans have become "masters and possessors of nature" (*Discourse on Method* 35). And man has a tendency for intelligibility and abstraction that infuriates Knausgaard.

> Everything is explained, everything is understood, everything lies within humanity's horizons of comprehension, from the biggest, the universe, whose oldest observable light, the farthest boundary of the cosmos, dates from its birth fifteen billion years ago, to the smallest, the protons and neutrons and mesons of the atom… For a long time it was only nature and its laws that were made abstract and transparent in this way, but now, in our iconoclastic times, this not only applies to nature's laws but also to its places and people. The whole of the physical world has been elevated to this sphere, everything has been incorporated into the immense imaginary realm. (221)

His strongest assault on this demystification of the world plays directly off the moment on the train and, un-coincidentally, occurs within a few pages of the moment. Speaking of his late twentieth and early twenty-first century world, he says:

> Art does not know a beyond, science does not know a beyond, religion does not know a beyond, not anymore. Our world is enclosed around itself, enclosed around us, and there is no way out of it. Those in this situation who call for more intellectual depth, more spirituality, have understood nothing, for the problem is that the intellect has taken over everything. *Everything* has become intellect, even our bodies, they aren't bodies anymore, but ideas of bodies, something that is situated in our own heaven of images and conceptions within us and above us, where an increasingly large part of our lives is lived. The limits of that which cannot speak to us – the unfathomable – no longer exist. (225)

This impassioned and desperate lunge to escape from modernity's self-enclosed world and commune once more with the unfathomability of our world does not meet a dead end. In his own writing and literature, as in the train episode, Knausgaard finds one escape. But also, looking back through history at like-minded thinkers and writers, I think we might find that Knausgaard has more allies than he expects. Despite what the intellectual historian of our times might have to say, "the unfathomable" and "the beyond" that Knausgaard speaks of and experiences are far from extinct, and his bold twenty-first century claims are animated and bolstered by thinkers and artists from modernity to antiquity. In fact, moments precisely such as the one Knausgaard experiences on the train fill some of the grandest works of the Western canon. This experience—of coming into contact with the beyond, the infinite, or whatever we choose to call it—is at the crux of some of these works, and I, personally, am drawn to the instances in which it happens. By exploring a host of these moments, and delving into their connections and parallels, I hope to follow Knausgaard in making it so that we can once more speak of the unfathomable—in the world and in ourselves—without it being dubious, or worse, laughable.

II. The Moment and its Metaphysical Underpinnings

Instances and articulations of this experience are scattered throughout the history of Western literature and thought, to which we will confine ourselves. Those in modernity remain very similar to the Knausgaard example in the terms used to describe them; going back further, the language surrounding the moments changes, but their core or essence is very much the same and becomes recognizable once it is clearly delineated. It will be necessary to first determine what constitutes these moments, to impose some sort of structure on these experiences—insofar as a structure can encompass them. This comes out of the practical need to identify them by distinctive criteria, not to totalize them.

First and foremost, these experiences occur in a moment. They happen, and then they are gone. They do not last except in vague wisps of memory. But the moment, when it happens, seems to stretch. There is sometimes the sense of an overwhelming present. Time seems to stop. In this sense—and many of the authors use this word—the infinite draws near, for what does it mean to be outside of time if not to be infinite?

Within the moment, there comes a clear upward directionality. The individual feels the presence of something "extra-ordinary," "beyond," "incomprehensible," "unfathomable," "ineffable," "infinite." These are all terms used by the various authors under discussion, and they all connote the impossibility of full expression of the phenomenon. Under discussion are some of the greatest wordsmiths in western history, and so it is telling that, in attempting to convey these experiences, they violate the well-known catchphrase of any introductory creative writing class: "show, don't tell." There truly must be something in these moments beyond language. In the moment, the individual transcends ordinary bounds of human experience and, perhaps, the subject-object divide. Limitations of consciousness are torn asunder, and the something breaks free.

Which brings the final key ingredient: transcendence, the process of *cross*-ing from one place to another. In all of the episodes to come, in some more explicit than others, there is the sense of two places, the one normal place, and then the other that is accessed briefly in the transcendent moment. This is what Knausgaard means when he says, "for a few seconds you catch sight of another world from the one you were in only a moment earlier" (222), or "when the world seemed to step forward from the world" (223).

Knausgaard makes the dichotomy clear, the dichotomy that exists everywhere and in all systems of thought between the here and the beyond, the subject and the object, the finite and the infinite, the phenomenon and the noumenon, the Earthly City and the City of God. These two layers of reality are present from the beginning in Plato's *Republic*. In the Allegory of the Cave, there are the shadows and then the shapes that cast the shadows. The prisoners who are tied down cannot see the true forms; all they can see are the grey half-truths hovering on the wall. Christianity takes this Platonic division and makes it even stronger—between Heaven and Earth, between man's feeble intellect and misled senses and God's omnipotence and omniscience. In the Enlightenment, Kant sets the trajectory for all philosophy thereafter by declaring that noumena, things-in-themselves, are fundamentally unknowable to man and that we must make do with phenomena, or the things as they appear to us through our built-in "lenses" of space and time. Some questions, he says, "transcend every capacity of human reason" (*Critique of Pure Reason* 99). Then, in the twentieth century, Isaiah Berlin gives perhaps the most lucid account of these two layers of reality in his essay, "The Hedgehog and the Fox." The essay is an interpretation of Tolstoy's understanding of history and reality, an understanding that Berlin himself clearly thought of as true. Berlin speaks of the "crucial line that divides the 'surface' from the 'depths'" (488).

> We – sentient creatures – are in part living in a world the constituents of which we can discover, classify and act upon by rational, scientific, deliberately planned methods; but in part… we are immersed and submerged in a medium that, precisely to the degree to which we inevitably take it for

> granted as part of ourselves, we do not and cannot observe as if from the outside; cannot identify, measure and seek to manipulate; cannot even be wholly aware of, inasmuch as it enters too intimately into all our experience, is itself too closely interwoven with all that we are and do to be lifted out of the flow (it *is* the flow) and observed with scientific detachment as an object. (488)

Berlin's theory is not so very different from Plato's or Kant's. He, too, recognizes the existence of some deeper form of reality inaccessible to ordinary human faculties. He calls this supersensible level of reality "the flow." Even for the most famous twentieth century mathematicians and scientists, the existence of a reality outside of human intelligence was undeniable. A *New Yorker* article from 2005 paints a portrait of Einstein's and Gödel's complicated relationships with time and the infinite.

> A certain futility marked the last years of both Gödel and Einstein. What may have been most futile, however, was their willed belief in the unreality of time. The temptation was understandable. If time is merely in our minds, perhaps we can hope to escape it into a timeless eternity. Then we could say, like William Blake, 'I see the Past, Present and Future, existing all at once / Before me.' In Gödel's case, Rebecca Goldstein speculates, it may have been his childhood terror of a fatally damaged heart that attracted him to the idea of a timeless universe. Toward the end of his life, he told one confidant that he had long awaited an epiphany that would enable him to see the world in a new light, but that it never came. Einstein, too, was unable to make a clean break with time. 'To those of us who believe in physics,' he wrote to the widow of a friend who had recently died, 'this separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, if a stubborn one.' When his own turn came, a couple of weeks later, he said, 'It is time to go.'

It is interesting to hear that Gödel longed for "an epiphany that would enable him to see the world in a new light." Perhaps what he was missing out on, lost deep in a maze of his logical quandaries, was a timeless, transcendental experience precisely like the ones soon to be discussed.

In summary, all of the above dichotomies are various formulations of the same idea. For the secular Knausgaard, as may be evident, the two layers of reality take on some version of the "fathomable" and "unfathomable," while other thinkers, situated in different times and places, may use different terms. All describe the same phenomenon: 1) the fleeting moment, 2) the infinite/beyond that opens up within the moment, and 3) the crossing over or rising up to the one state from the other. In what follows, we will first trace signs of the phenomenon from Modernity

to Genesis, noting along the way several significant objects and moments. In the next section, we will move back to Modernity and spend time with a few crucial thinkers and moments. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the validity of these experiences and the limits of language, art, and literature.

III. Retracing our Steps: a Genealogy of the Phenomenon

Knausgaard relates that he "virtually imbibed" Proust. It is no coincidence that scholars and critics are already drawing similarities between the two authors, despite *My Struggle* being less than a decade old. Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* was published in France a century ago, between 1913 and Proust's death in 1922. Spanning more than 3000 pages (like *My Struggle*) Proust's magnum opus is an epic of memory and loss. It is a retreat from the world to literature, and an attempt to use memory and art as salves for the misery of life. In a world where the gods were dead, or from which they had fled, or in which they had ceased to take their traditional forms, Proust found new meaning and value in art as remembrance. In his writing the dichotomy is clear—it is between fleeting present and meaningful past. The past is his "beyond," that with which he longs to come into contact for even the slightest brush. Yet, for Proust, even when the past does rise up into consciousness, it is not complete and fully formed. It cannot be summoned by any amount of reasoning or intellectual effort. It must be felt, must arise, spontaneously, and insofar as it is these things must be illusory and hard to grasp.

> And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. (*Swann's Way* 47-48)

So what does happen when Proust finds such an object? And how does he write about it?

Proust's famous example of this recollection-through-object is the madeleine dipped in tea, which fits all the categories of the transcendental experience in question.

> Many years had elapsed during which nothing of Combray, save what was comprised in the theatre and the drama of my going to bed there, had any existence for me, when one day in winter, on my return home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first, and then, for no particular reason, changed my mind. She sent for one of those squat, plump little cakes called "petites madeleines," which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell. And soon, mechanically, dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory - this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it *was* me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature. Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it? (48)

A phrase that stands out towards the beginning and before the moment has occurred is: "for no particular reason." Proust's ability to have this transformative experience hinges on his accepting his mother's offer of tea, but he is very close to not accepting it. He cares so little about the decision and about his surroundings—evident from his ennui in the opening—that he changes his mind, randomly, distractedly, as if he were busy thinking about something else, or nothing at all. This recalls Knausgaard's state of mind on the train when he "wasn't thinking about anything in particular." Proust, too, is completely vacant and absentminded when, out of the blue, he experiences an infinitely joyful moment. The moment comes with the sensation of taste, a taste of this combination of tea and pastry, and it takes several pages for him to place it and remember that it comes from a memory of his Aunt Léonie giving him a madeleine dipped in her tea on Sunday mornings in Combray. But what of the taste itself and all it contained?

The moment happens and then is over with a shocking finality. He is convinced of the realness of his experience, "this unremembered state which brought with it no logical proof, but the

indisputable evidence, of its felicity, its reality" (49). Yet, afterwards, he has a mouthful again and then again, each time with diminishing returns. He realizes that "the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself" (48). He gets across the feeling of an infinite space being opened up inside of him in the passage above. His mortality becomes insignificant to him in the face of this overwhelming pleasure. Recall that he "ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal"—which is to say, he ceased to feel "human," as the condition is understood by positivism and the natural sciences. Instead, he felt an "all-powerful joy" that "infinitely transcended" the materials of the tea and cake, the materials of life. After this experience he frantically tries to capture it in some way, to bring it back to mind. He finds that art itself, his writing, is the only way of keeping the moment alive.

> I put down the cup and examine my own mind. It alone can discover the truth. But how: What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day. (49)

Here, creation stands in for art-making. Proust does not discover and find something that is already there, for that something has long since flown away; instead, he creates and reproduces the experience in order to preserve it. The shift from past to present tense over these pages is telling. As he attempts to recapture the past he locates himself fully in the present, acknowledging his limitations and the necessary conditions of creation. Towards the end of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust reflects on the nature of art as attempting to transcribe these shadowy sensual-spiritual truths.

> And then, after I had dwelt for some little time upon these resurrections of the memory, the thought came to me that in another fashion certain obscure impressions… had solicited my attention in a fashion somewhat similar to these reminiscences, except that they concealed within them not a sensation dating from an earlier time, but a new truth… as if our finest ideas were like tunes which… come back to us although we have never heard them before and which we have to make an effort to hear and transcribe… I had the feeling that perhaps beneath these signs there lay something of a quite different kind which I must try to discover… For the truths which the intellect apprehends directly in the world of full and unimpeded light have something less profound, less necessary than those which life communicates to us against our will in an impression which is material because it

> enters us through the senses but yet has a spiritual meaning which it is possible for us to extract. In fact… the task was to interpret the given sensations as signs of so many laws and ideas, by trying to think—that is to say, to draw forth from the shadow—what I had merely felt, by trying to convert it into its spiritual equivalent. And this method, which seemed the sole method, what was it but the creation of a work of art? (912)

Proust underscores the difficulty of obtaining such murkier truths, as opposed to the rational truths of the "world of full and unimpeded light." But, he insists, these murkier truths have a deeper and more pressing meaning.

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In the work of the Austrian modernist writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal, we get another instance of the transcendental object. Hofmannsthal writes of the presence of some "mysterious, wordless, and boundless ecstasy" in a quotidian object and the experience of a surge of transcendence and pleasure in his *The Letter of Lord Chandos* (1902), a fictive letter back-dated to 1603. Written by a certain Lord Chandos, son of the Earl of Bath, the letter addresses none other than Sir Francis Bacon. Bacon, as a founder of the scientific method and champion of empiricism, is considered a sort of father of the Enlightenment, or even more grandly, as Karsten Harries, the current Howard H Newman Professor of Philosophy at Yale, says: the "founder of our then just emerging modern world" (1). In his memorable 1627 novella *New Atlantis*, Bacon pictures his utopian world of the future that features "the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible" (71). This man, who echoes the Cartesian vision of man becoming master of the world, is a fascinating foil for Lord Chandos. But, beyond Hofmannsthal's highly intentional framing of the letter, the contents reveal even more.

Lord Chandos is obsessed with the rift between language and reality. He recounts how he went from being a successful and promising poet to developing a deep distrust of letters. "My case, in short," he says, "is this: I have lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently…. the abstract terms of which the tongue must avail itself as a matter of course in order

to voice a judgment – these terms crumbled in my mouth like moldy fungi.” What he experiences is familiar to the post-modern existentialist, but not to Bacon with his soaring optimism in the commensurability of human thought and expression with nature. In fact, Lord Chandos can only vest his hope for meaning in one place: “the epiphany of presence” (Harries). He recounts some such moments, in the cautious tone of one speaking to a superior, knowing how absurd he may sound to the father of the scientific method.

> It is not easy for me to indicate wherein these good moments subsist; once again words desert me. For it is, indeed, something entirely unnamed, even barely nameable which, at such moments, reveals itself to me, filling like a vessel any casual object of my daily surroundings with an overflowing flood of higher life. I cannot expect you to understand me without examples, and I must plead your indulgence for their absurdity. A pitcher, a harrow abandoned in a field, a dog in the sun, a neglected cemetery, a cripple, a peasant's hut – all these can become the vessel of my revelation. Each of these objects and a thousand others similar, over which the eye usually glides with a natural indifference, can suddenly, at any moment (which I am utterly powerless to evoke), assume for me a character so exalted and moving that words seem too poor to describe it. Even the distinct image of an absent object, in fact, can acquire the mysterious function of being filled to the brim with this silent but suddenly rising flood of divine sensation.

Again, the paradox lies right under our noses, the paradox of language trying to capture a “barely nameable” thing. But perhaps Lord Chandos, like Proust, has made peace with the fact that language cannot perfectly measure up to the world. As with Proust’s madeleine, we find that the objects in the *Letter* are essentially random and meaningless in themselves. Lord Chandos happens upon them in the most ordinary of circumstances and without the slightest expectation. Yet a certain dimension of the experience changes subtly from Proust to Hofmannsthal. Where the madeleine evoked the past, a memory, and therefore moved backwards, the objects for Lord Chandos have a very clear upward trajectory. They pertain to the above, the beyond, or Heaven. We find this in phrases from the passage above like “higher life” and “rising flood of divine sensation.” But, regardless of whether the movement is backwards or upwards, once the boundary has been transcended or crossed, the individuals feel the same sense of the unbounded, the infinite.

> On finding beneath a nut-tree a half-filled pitcher which a gardener boy had left there, and the pitcher and the water in it, darkened by the shadow of the tree, and a beetle swimming on the surface from shore to shore-when this combination of trifles sent through me such a shudder at the presence of the Infinite, a shudder running from the roots of my hair to the marrow of my heels.

This infinite (which the translation of Hofmannsthal chooses to capitalize) is, of course, inexplicable, but it contains the key to Hofmannsthal's newfound Weltanschauung. His is a discussion of disenchantment that anticipates Weber's (in *Science as a Vocation*) by roughly two decades. But unlike Weber and his call for resigned stoicism, Hofmannsthal longs for re-enchantment and for us to "begin to think with the heart." "These mute and, on occasion, inanimate creatures," he says, "rise toward me with such an abundance, such a presence of love, that my enchanted eye can find nothing in sight void of life. Everything that exists… has a meaning."

And, finally, there is once more the movement into the self, where the individual realizes that it is in themselves whence the feeling arises.

> It is then that I feel as though I myself were about to ferment, to effervesce, to foam and to sparkle. And the whole thing is a kind of feverish thinking, but thinking in a medium more immediate, more liquid, more glowing than words. It, too, forms whirlpools, but of a sort that do not seem to lead, as the whirlpools of language, into the abyss, but into myself and into the deepest womb of peace.

So Hofmannsthal, like Knausgaard and Proust, decides that these feelings ultimately lead into his own self. Yes, the experience is brought about by the vision of some object outside of consciousness, but ultimately the meaning comes from within. Or as Proust says, "the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself."

* * *

Moving backwards through history, the form of these moments of transcendence begins to change, but their essential nature remains the same. The ubiquity of this privileged experience – across times and cultures – shows that the fleeting moment is far from fleeting. Now, we will momentarily depart from the main examples of this phenomenon (its manifestations in modern

literature), and turn to some of the other forms it has taken in different mediums and in different times.

Contemporary with Proust and Hofmannsthal was the artistic movement of Dadaism. Known for works like Marcel Duchamp's urinal, *Fountain*, the movement was characterized by Hans Richter, its best historian and a Dada artist himself, as "an artistic revolt against art" (*Dada* 7). Dada was a form of "anti-art" in the sense that it sought to rupture all preexisting ties with traditional art and art-making. Dada sought to create something new and worthwhile in what it perceived to be the vapid, bourgeois, disenchanted world of early twentieth century Europe. Indeed, Dada operates in very much the same spirit as Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos does. Just like Lord Chandos, Dadaists grew tired of the conventional expression of things—indeed they both question the degree to which things can even be expressed. Richter, in his 1965 book *Dada*, pulls together strands from all across the Western tradition. Speaking of the disenchanted climate in which Dada arose, he says:

> Descartes must have been aware of the danger of nihilism which lay in his 'cogito…'. In his *Meditations* he attempts to demonstrate the presence of God in human experience in order to give this experience value. Modern science and the state of civilization in the first half of the twentieth century have destroyed the basis of such a demonstration. But the abyss that opened before Descartes is the same abyss that opens before us today. Man is becoming more and more conscious of his isolation. His sense of loneliness and of meaninglessness is becoming unendurable…. 'How can I know that this world is not simply a dream…? (Heidegger). (91)

Dada, Richter continues, is complicit in what he calls this "disintegration of reality." But, face to face with this abyss, Dada finds recourse in one thing alone: "Dada put its trust only in the fleeting moment" (92). Richter then proceeds to quote from Professor Harries' *Exploration of Nihilism*. "By philosophers like Dilthey, Bergson, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and James, [Life] is described as an infinite stream; any attempts to exhaust this richness must be inadequate. Life and concepts are incommensurable;… to seek them is to hack the fundamental unity of life into pieces" (92). Dadaists saying that life and concepts are incommensurable is the equivalent of Lord Chandos saying that his words can no longer measure up to reality, and that they crumble like moldy fungi. Dada, then, is a

frantic attempt to find something to hold onto. Like Lord Chandos, Dadaists look towards "found objects" (*objet trouvé*) – ordinary everyday things that become imbued with extraordinary significance. Urinals and pails of water and bottle racks and bicycle wheels, they suggest, can generate as much feeling as the Sistine Chapel.

Just decades earlier, the French poet Charles Baudelaire had played with similar ideas in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life." He speaks of the scourge that is the masses of people in the Louvre flitting from one Old Master to the next, ignoring all the lesser artists in between. He compares them to those "people who, having once read Bossuet and Racine, fancy that they have mastered the history of literature" (1). In Baudelaire's Paris the effects of modernization and industrialization were beginning to be felt. Speed of travel and communication had a disjointing effect on the psyche of city dwellers (an effect that many of the Impressionists would capture). Baudelaire recognizes the growing impermanence of modern life—or perhaps in Richter's Dada terms, "the abyss"—and lays out the project of "the painter of modern life," the modern artist: "he is the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains." Baudelaire is explaining precisely the nature of the transcendental moments under discussion. He recognizes that Modernity is in danger of becoming disenchanted, but he sees a route towards salvation and the eternal in art.

* * *

In Great Britain, we encounter an important technical discussion of the effects and meaning of the phenomenon of the stoppage of time—essayist and critic Thomas De Quincey's analysis of an episode from Shakespeare's *Macbeth.* The episode occurs in the moment immediately following Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's murder of King Duncan in which a knocking is heard from the gates of the castle. The incident sounds benign enough, but De Quincey insists that it has always filled him with "great perplexity." De Quincey says there is an "awful parenthesis" in the moment

between (1) the murder and then (2) Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and the reader hearing the knocks. We are not aware, however, that Shakespeare has transported us into another world, "the world of devils," until we hear the knocks, as if from a long distance off, beckoning us back into normal reality. As we reenter the normal world of humans, the contrast between the two worlds is felt even more sharply, and the horror of the murder is driven home.

> In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers, and the murder, must be insulated—cut off by an immeasurable gulph from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs—locked up and sequestered in some deep recess; we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid asleep—tranced—racked into a dread armistice: time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion.

Many aspects of this experience are different from those in the aforementioned examples; for instance, this temporal parenthesis is evil whereas the moments I am interested in are overwhelming good. Yet, for all their thematic differences, crucial features of the transcendental moment, like the cessation of normal time and experience, feature in *Macbeth*. Shakespeare, perhaps more effectively than anyone else, is able to use narrative techniques to actually make the reader feel and not just comprehend the experience. De Quincey is especially touched by precisely this aspect of the moment. Shakespeare does not have to use words like "infinite."

* * *

Roughly contemporaneous with De Quincey were the Romantics, who constituted an important stage in the genealogy of this phenomenon. (Recall Knausgaard's classification: prior to the Enlightenment's dislocation of the "the beyond," it had been the sole provenance of the Church, but then the beyond came to take the form of nature in Romanticism.) Two giants straddle the transition from the Enlightenment to Romanticism: the Frenchman Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the German Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Rousseau was a thinker truly ahead of his time. In his confessional *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, one of the last books he wrote, he speaks of the unity

he feels when immersed in nature. While on a solitary retreat in Switzerland, he rows out into a lake and experiences one such experience. Letting the oars drop, he lies back, perfectly alone, rocking in the boat, thinking about absolutely nothing. In this experience, akin to meditation, he ceases to feel the effects of time. "The present lasts forever without, however, making its duration noticed and without any trace of time's passage" (68). He names this feeling, which we should recognize as being quite similar to Knausgaard's and Proust's, the "sentiment of existence" (69). So long as we feel this way, he says, "we are sufficient unto ourselves, like God" (69). This feeling of divinity via nature recurs and becomes an archetypal peak experience within the Romantic tradition. But Rousseau's influence reaches beyond Romanticism and into late Modernity. Tolstoy—just one of many who venerated the Frenchman—is reported to have said the following towards the end of his life.

> People have been unjust to Rousseau, the greatness of his thought was not recognized, and he was calumniated. I have read the whole of Rousseau, all the twenty volumes, including the dictionary of music. I admired him with more than enthusiasm, I worshipped him. At fifteen I wore on my neck, instead of the usual cross, a medallion with his portrait. With some of his pages I am so familiar that I feel as if I had written them myself. ("Rousseau and Tolstoy" 13)

Goethe, also standing at the fountainhead of European Romanticism, proves another indispensable figure. In his famous play *Faust*, he includes a deeply romantic outlook on the beauty and divinity of the world. After his lover has accused him of atheism, the play's hero Faust replies thus:

> Is not the heavens' great vault up there on high,
> And here below, does not the earth stand fast?
> Do everlasting stars, gleaming with love,
> Not rise above us through the sky?
> Are we not here and gazing eye to eye?
> Does all this not besiege
> Your mind and heart,
> And weave in unseen visibility
> All round you its eternal mystery?
> Oh, fill your heart right up with all this,
> And when you're brimming over with the bliss
> Of such a feeling, call it what you like!
> Call it joy, or your heart, or love, or God!

> I have no name for it. The feeling's all there is:
> The name's mere noise and smoke—what does it do
> But cloud the heavenly radiance? (109)

Goethe mentions several important themes and motifs that we will pick up over the course of this essay: the height of the heavens and the beauty of the sky; the synthesis of mind and heart; themes of "eternal mystery"; the privileging of the feeling over its name. This is characteristic Romanticism, and these themes are taken up again and again by his heirs. Goethe is another name that will haunt later writers in Modernity and he will appear later in discussions of Joyce, birds, and language.

In England, meanwhile, a whole generation of Romantic poets was producing works of a similar spirit. William Wordsworth offers a typically cheery illustration of the way the Romantics thought about the themes we are engaged with in his poem "To My Sister."

> Love, now a universal birth,
> From heart to heart is stealing,
> From earth to man, from man to earth:
> —It is the hour of feeling.
>
> One moment now may give us more
> Than years of toiling reason:
> Our minds shall drink at every pore
> The spirit of the season. (77)

These verses exemplify the Romantic tradition that Knausgaard refers to, the tradition in which nature and feeling are the beyonds. Wordsworth makes the (quite Faustian) suggestion that one pleasure-filled, sun-soaked moment in the Lake District can offer more than years spent hunched over books. Wordsworth also dipped into themes of immortality more directly. In his ode "Intimations of Immortality," he uses the cyclical seasons to rescue some sense of the eternal from the fleeting nature of human life. And he rejoices in the smallest of objects, like Lord Chandos.

> Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
> Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
> To me the meanest flower that blows can give
> Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears. (525)

Elsewhere, in "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819), Keats cries to a bird: "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" (237), giving another glimpse of the how the Romantics saw nature as a portal to the infinite. Wordsworth and Keats' reverential enthusiasm is certainly not echoed by every Romantic poet, but it is certainly representative of the prevailing mood of the time. Europe was not yet in the throes of the *mal du siècle* of the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Lastly, the great American poet Walt Whitman falls into this tradition. In his epic poem, "Song of Myself"—highly individual yet somehow all-encompassing in its democratic spirit—he obsesses over "moments," insisting that each one is filled with divinity. "Each moment and whatever happens thrills me with joy, … / A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books" (47); or, "You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life" (73); or, "Why should I wish to see God better than this day? / I see something of God each hour of the twenty four, and each moment then" (75). This appreciation of the moment enlivens life, and we will see it carried forward later into Modernity.

* * *

Retreating into the rich, fertile grounds of pre-Enlightenment thought, this genealogy inevitably leads to the Middle Ages and medieval Christianity. And the Middle Ages and medieval Christianity lead inevitably to scholasticism and St. Thomas Aquinas, whose conception of God is not very far off from the "beyond" that so many Modernists speak of.

In his *Summa Theologica* Aquinas offers five ways to prove the existence of God. They are: 1) the argument from motion, 2) the argument from the first efficient cause, 3) the argument from possibility and necessity, 4) the argument from the gradation of things, and 5) the argument from the governance of the world. These are for the most part complex, Aristotelian formulations of the idea of the Unmoved Mover. For things to be, they must have some point of origin, an Archimedean point. This point for Aquinas is God. The third argument pertains most interestingly

to the categories of our transcendental moments. In nature, Aquinas says, we find things that are possible to be and not to be. But, given infinite time, these things cannot always be—they sometimes must have not been. And once a thing is not, it can no longer come into existence, for something cannot come from nothing. If every thing must not have been at some point and if a thing cannot come from nothing, then there ought to be nothing. In other words, if nature were completely composed of contingent objects they would have all passed out of existence by now. Yet this is of course not the case. "Therefore," Aquinas reasons, "not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary." This leads him to the last step of the argument: "Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God." This division that he speaks of between contingent things and necessary things is not so very different from the divisions that Kant or Berlin draw between observable things and noumena or "the flow." In practice, we can say: God is to Aquinas what the beyond is to the Modernist. When we strip away the different languages, we find the underlying object of discussion to be quite similar. This furthers the validity of the idea that this phenomenon or "effect" is an eternally subsisting thing. It is not a passing fad or sophistic conceit, but a presence that is felt by all thinkers in all times.

For Aquinas, the beyond is God and therefore it is untouchable. Indeed, there is an argument to be made that in all of Christianity the beyond has been unattainable from the outset. We find this in Genesis. In Eden, there are two forbidden trees: the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. The tree of knowledge is the one that Adam and Eve eat from, and, consequently, the tree of life gets forgotten. But God was equally (if not more) afraid of their eating from the tree of life and becoming immortal, like Him. When he discovers that they have fallen and eaten from the tree of knowledge he rushes to intervene:

> Then the LORD God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever'—therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword of flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3.22-24)

The rest of history can in a certain sense be interpreted as the descendants of Adam and Eve attempting to grab fruit from this tree of life, attempting to be eternal. I see Proust and Knausgaard, Hofmannsthal, and Duchamp as trying to do what Adam and Eve could not and capture, even for the most fleeting second, a feeling of what it is to be outside of time. To be God.

IV. Selected Privileged Moments in Modernity and the Oceanic Feeling

The attempt to grasp the beyond becomes most pressing in Modernity for it is in Modernity that the beyond is furthest away. In the wake of the so-called "Death of God," the world threatened to become meaningless. Whereas for nearly two millennia Christianity had been the West's polestar, the Enlightenment introduced new political and intellectual currents that threatened the status quo. And the reactionary backlash of Romanticism could only endure for so long before nihilism reared its ugly head. No thinker better articulates these intellectual-historical effects than the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. And perhaps no writer gives a more beautiful rendering of what it looks like to succeed in finding something of value in the disenchanted world than James Joyce. These two writers—in different countries and in different languages—animate much of modernism.

In Nietzsche's famous passage from *The Gay Science*, the madman declares the death of God.

> 'Whither is God?' he cried; 'I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? … God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?' (181)

Nietzsche does not mean—as many interpret him literally in the popular imagination—that God in a real sense existed and then was killed off. Rather, he pronounces that *belief* in God is dying in the West. This leaves an enormous vacuum. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he attempts to give us an answer to the problem. He warns us against becoming "the last man"— the boring, mundane, logical endpoint of man under the existing conditions of modern life:

> Then the earth has become small, and on it hops the last human being, who makes everything small. His kind is ineradicable, like the flea beetle; the last human lives longest. 'We invented happiness' – say the last human beings, blinking. (10)

The way to avoid this, for Nietzsche, is through a transformative, transcendent process: "*I teach you the overman*. Human being is something that must be overcome" (5). As always in Nietzsche, his destructive, negative arguments are more readily accessible than his positive ones, and so we are left wondering how exactly the modern human condition can be overcome. Best, instead, to look elsewhere.

James Joyce gives an example of this process of overcoming in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where his autobiographical hero experiences an ecstatic moment of transcendence. The novel, an artistic bildungsroman of a boy called Stephen Dedalus, spans childhood, adolescence, and then early adulthood. Before Stephen's moment of liberation, he feels trapped in Ireland, and his stated aim is to transcend the constricting traditions that hold him fast: "When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets" (220). Of course, under discussion is the very moment in which he flies free from these trappings and institutions and feels "an instant of ecstasy" (186).

One day, while he is accompanying his father into town for business, Stephen finds himself waiting outside while his father speaks to a tutor, pacing back and forth between two loci of power, Byron's public house and Clontarf Chapel. Finally, after more than an hour, Stephen's patience

snaps. He sets off towards the ocean along a seawall by the coast called the Bull. As he crosses over a bridge (symbolic, perhaps), he decides to forego a life in the Church, where he had planned to work for much of his life. He senses that he is "obeying some wayward instinct" (179). As he continues to walk toward the sea, a series of words transfixes him. "A day of dappled seaborne clouds" (180). He feels a great harmony and closeness between words and things. Words and things seem to coincide, like they did in the Beginning. He continues to reflect on the beauty of language until Joyce cuts him off as Stephen passes "from the trembling bridge on to firm land" (181). Something final has or is about to occur. Wind, water, and light fill his world as he approaches the ocean and a faint musical scale recedes away in his mind. He hears echoes of people calling his name. "Hello, Stephanos," they call out, "Here comes The Dedalus!" And he wonders as never before at the prophetic nature of his last name. Daedalus was the Greek carpenter who, along with his son, fashioned wings to fly free from the Minotaur's labyrinth. The parallels of flying free are not coincidences. Stephen imagines that he sees Daedalus himself, flying between sun and earth.

> Now, at the name of the fabulous artificer, he seemed to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air. What did it mean? … a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable, imperishable being. (183)

Stephen Dedalus, like Daedalus, must forge something to escape his own condition. And then, all of a sudden, Stephen's heart quivers, his breath comes faster, and he reaches a sort of orgasmic peak experience.

> A wild spirit passed over his limbs as though he were soaring sunward. His heart trembled in an ecstasy of fear and his soul was in flight. Hi soul was soaring in an air beyond the world and the body he knew was purified in a breath and delivered of incertitude and made radiant and commingled with the element of the spirit. An ecstasy of flight made radiant his eyes and wild his breath and tremulous and wild and radiant his windswept limbs… An instant of wild flight had delivered him and the cry of triumph which his lips withheld cleft his brain. (183-184)

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" he cries to himself. Aflame with energy, he takes off his shoes and stockings and wades out into the sea, where he is "unheeded, happy and near to the wild heart of life" (185).

As if this moment had not lasted long enough, had not already filled him up to the brim, Stephen looks up and sees that he is no longer alone. Standing further out in the ocean, silent and still, is a girl. She is turned away, gazing out to sea. And there is something unearthly about her, mirage-like. A closer look reveals that she has all the features of a bird.

> She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful sea-bird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane's and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh. Her thighs, fuller and softhued as ivory, were bared almost to the hips where the white fringes of her drawers were like featherings of sort white down. Her slateblue skirts were kilted boldly about her waist and dovetailed behind her. Her bosom was as a bird's soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some darkplumaged dove. (185-186)

This vivid image, both erotic and mystic, entrances Stephen. Half human, half bird, she is like him, belonging to both the earth and to the air, the here and the beyond. "When she felt his presence and the worship of his eyes her eyes turned to him in quiet sufferance of his gaze, without shame or wantonness" (186). For a time, Stephen stands stock-still, in awe.

Similarly to the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*, here the "faint noise of gently moving water broke the silence, low and faint and whispering, faint as the bells of sleep" (186). And on this cue we the readers, with Stephen, are roused as if from a trance. We move from the former elevated, privileged state of existence, back to a normal one. Stephen erupts: "Heavenly God! cried Stephen's soul, in an outburst of profane joy" (186). Tearing himself away from the sight of the girl, he takes off down the seashore to greet his new life, to drink it in through all his pores. For a long time he wanders blindly along the seashore, and only when darkness gathers and the tide rushes in does he head for home.

Does Stephen's experience fit into the three categories of the transcendental experience? The first category is the moment, and while Stephen's experience certainly lasts for more than what a clock would measure as a second, the whole experience seems wrapped up somewhere outside of normal time. Until we are reawoken by the sound of lapping water, we are completely oblivious to

the passage of time, and Joyce repeats and emphasizes phrases like "instant of ecstasy" (186) and "instant of wild flight" (184). This constitutes a moment, a special, privileged moment. Stephen also feels a whole range of sensations akin to the second category, the presence, within the moment, of something grander and greater, something extra-ordinary. Joyce's language abounds with words like "soul," "impalpable," "imperishable," "radiant," "magic," and "angel." Indeed, in his *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Joyce scholar Morris Beja coins a Joycean epiphany: "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind—the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it" (18). (These epiphanies are laid out and more fully elaborated upon in Joyce's other writings, like his unfinished *Stephen Hero*.) Finally, regarding the third category, Stephen certainly transcends himself. His crossing over the bridge functions only as a hint of what is to come, with the subsequent bird and Daedalus metaphors fully driving home the message. Birds here function as direct metaphors for escaping the confines of human society, institutions, and customs. Stephen and the bird-girl are halfway divine, like angels. Indeed, Joyce even attempts to transcend language itself with his relentless use of chiasmus. "Her bosom was as a bird's soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some darkplumaged dove" (186). He stretches the bounds of simile with this structure, attempting to come close to the primordial relation between words and things.

The ocean is also an important motif here, and will continue to be for the rest of the transcendental moments in this section. The ocean functions as a cue for the beyond. To the viewer on the seashore, the ocean is infinite and unfathomable, stretching for as far and farther than the eye can see. We can only scrape the surface of it, literally, with our gaze. Contemplating it, as seen in this Joyce episode, can bring us closer to the infinite. Other modernist writers also document the relation between the ocean and the infinite and write of its effect on the subject. Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) calls this a "sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something

limitless, unbounded—as it were, 'oceanic'" (24). Although he is in fact discounting it as a phenomenon when he names it thus, it need not trouble us for his reasoning is that: "It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings" (24). This oceanic effect cannot be described by science or for that matter language, for our presupposition is that it is outside of both. Later psychoanalysts would write whole books on this "oceanic feeling," identifying it as the source of humankind's spirituality. Nearly a century after Freud, William Parsons writes, "true religion arose from the mystical experience of oneness with the world (*la sensation océanique*)" (4).

Elsewhere in modern literature, we get more insights into this oceanic feeling. The French author Madame de Staël in her 1807 novel *Corinne, or Italy* reflects on her character's voyage at sea: "the sight of the sea always makes a profound impression; it is the reflection of the infinite, to which our thoughts are continually attracted and in which they continually get lost" (6). Colette, another French author and contemporary of Proust and Joyce, has a passage in her novel, *The Vagabond*, whose seashore sensations are eerily reminiscent of those in Joyce's episode (in fact, hers predates his by six years, being published in 1910). Her heroine, Renée, is on a train riding by the ocean. Renée writes in a letter:

> The day before yesterday, we were departing at dawn and, in the railroad car, I was resuming my repose in snatches, interrupting it and recommencing it twenty times, when a salty gust, redolent of fresh seaweed, opened my eyes again: the sea! *Sete*, and the sea! There it was, flanking the full length of the train, returning just when I had stopped thinking of it. The seven o'clock sun, still low, was not yet piercing it; the sea was refusing to let itself be possessed; not yet fully awake, it retained a nocturnal tint of blue ink, with white crests…. Half-asleep, like the sea, surrendering myself to the rocking of the train, I thought I was skimming the nearby waves with the cutting flight of a swallow… I was savoring one of those perfect moments… (170)

This passage, in addition to reminding one of Stephen Dedalus and his seaside, bird-like exploits, could also be straight out of Knausgaard or Proust, with its image of the train and the idea of the "perfect moment." Regardless of whether or not any of these authors read Colette, their forebear, their stunning like-mindedness speaks for itself. The characters in all of these novels are world-weary

in some capacity. They all live in a nominally disenchanted world. And yet, upon feeling these sensations of rapture and sublimity and oneness, they have an overpowering feeling of spiritual goodness, of meaning, of significance. The way that they find these moments can seem random, but there are some common motifs and settings—a train, a seashore, a bird. The nineteenth century French poet, Stéphane Mallarmé, brings many of these themes to bear in his poem "Brise Marine" (Sea Breeze).

> Both the flesh and the spirit weary me; I am no longer
> in love and I have read all my books. I long to get away,
> to flee from this world to where the birds are wild with
> joy to be flying across unknown seas and skies.

Or, in another translation from *Harper's*, this one more literary:

> The flesh is sad, alas! and all the books are read.
> Flight, only flight! I feel that birds are wild to tread
> The floor of unknown foam, and to attain the skies!

In many ways, Stephen Dedalus does precisely what Mallarmé's speaker longs to do. And in this moment of wild flight, normal, mortal categories are left on the ground far, far away. Earlier in the nineteenth century, Goethe, in his *Faust*, anticipates Joyce and Mallarmé's longing for wild, bird- or angel-like flight.

> Oh if some wings would raise me, if somehow
> I could follow its circuit through the air!
> …
> At divine speed I fly,
> The sea already greets my wondering eye
> With its warm gulfs where now the sun's rays fall.
> Now the god seems at last to sink and set,
> But a new impulse drives me yet:
> I hasten on to drink his endless light,
> The day ahead, behind my back the night,
> The sky above me and the waves below…
> …
> Wings, alas, may grow
> Upon our soul, but still our body is
> Earthbound. And yet, by inborn instinct given

> To each of us, our hearts rise up and soar
> For ever onwards… (34-35)

To Faust's, Mallarmé's, and Nietzsche's desperate nineteenth century pleas, Colette and Joyce and Proust and Hofmannsthal and Knausgaard give affirmative twentieth and twenty-first century answers. In his recent book on the French poet, Sterling Professor of French at Yale, Howard Bloch, says, "the collapse of time for Mallarme—the creation of the sensation of an eternal present—was a means to secular salvation" (277). Here, Bloch is referring to Mallarmé's famous poem, "One Toss of the Dice," but the same idea applies to Joyce and to all of the eternal moments with which we are dealing. These moments are means to salvation and re-enchantment, telling us the world can be redeemed.

* * *

We find a great heretofore-untouched literary trove from Modernity in nineteenth century Russia and in the writings of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. In both of their works, the privileged, transcendental moment reaches heights as sublime as anywhere else in the Western tradition. In his "The Hedgehog and the Fox," Berlin mentions Tolstoy's, "wonderful descriptions of moments of illumination in which the truth about the human condition dawns upon those who have the humility to recognize their own unimportance and irrelevance" (457). He specifically cites two prominent moments (from *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*, respectfully): "Levin goes through an experience during his work in the fields, and Prince Andrey while lying wounded on the battlefield of Austerlitz" (486). The latter example will be explored in detail below. What makes these moments even more compelling is that these two great novelists also both experienced in their real lives the sorts of epiphanies of faith and joy that they write of so beautifully—Dostoevsky in front of the firing squad and Tolstoy in his midlife crisis/conversion. In the interest of some degree

of brevity and depth, we will center the discussion on several episodes from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869).

There are three steps in the spiritual awakening of one Prince Andrei Bolkonsky in *War and Peace*. At each step, Prince Andrei experiences a privileged moment like those we have been discussing, an epiphany or sudden realization of the beauty of the world. These epiphanies are outside of normal language and rationality, they happen in sudden moments, and they relate to the oceanic feeling—this time through the experience of infinite sky or nature.

Prince Andrei's first experience of sublimity, of something greater in the world, occurs in the Battle of Austerlitz between his Russians and Napoleon's French forces. The year is 1805. Prince Andrei comes from a wealthy, aristocratic family, and he enters the war with delusions of grandeur. His hero is Napoleon, who he believes to exemplify all the great traits of manliness, honor, virtue, and justice. Although Prince Andrei is Russian, Napoleon's divinity at the time transcended national boundaries. Hegel gives the best rendering of the spirit of this adulation in a letter from 1806.

> I saw the Emperor – this world-soul – riding out of the city on reconnaissance. It is indeed a wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out over the world and masters it.

All this adds weight to the transition we see take place in Prince Andrei in the Battle of Austerlitz, when his entire world is flipped upside down—literally and figuratively. In the aftermath of the battle, he regains consciousness and finds himself on his back, lying wounded on the battlefield, moaning and bleeding, gazing up at the sky, "the blue of infinity" (290). Suddenly he hears voices and unmistakable among them is Napoleon's. Napoleon and his staff are surveying the battlefield, sending any wounded to be cared for. Napoleon stands over Prince Andrei, who he presumes to be

dead, and declares, "*Voila une belle mort*" (291).[2] But Prince Andrei barely notices his idol. He is intent on the "distant, lofty, and eternal sky" (291).

> He knew that it was Napoleon—his hero—but at that moment, Napoleon seemed to him such a small, insignificant man compared with what was now happening between his soul and this lofty, infinite sky with clouds racing across it. (291)

Prince Andrei comes close, therefore, to what he calls the "indefinable, unfathomable power, which I not only cannot address, but which I cannot express in words—the great all or nothing" (293). The sky here functions as the ocean did in Joyce, Colette, and Mallarmé—as an outlet to the great beyond. His "expectation of imminent death" (293) also animates the urgency of this experience. He lies bleeding out on a battlefield, knowing that it could all come to an end within moments. This recalls Dostoevsky's realization in his famous brush with death in which he was arrested and brought before the Czar's firing squad for being part of a transgressive utopian society. Czar Nikolai I changed the sentence only at the last minute, opting to send Dostoevsky and his fellow members to Siberia instead. In his Introduction to *The Brothers Karamazov*, Richard Pevear quotes the letter that Dostoevsky wrote to his brother about the experience. Of the moment before the bluff is revealed, Dostoevsky writes:

> At the last minute you, you alone, were in my mind, and it was only then that I realized how much I love you! … Brother, I'm not depressed and haven't lost spirit. Life everywhere is life, life is in ourselves… (xii).

Like the fictional Prince Andrei, the real Dostoevsky feels an incredible welling of passion in what he believes to be his last moments on earth.

After his experience on the battlefield, Prince Andrei's life goes back to normal for a time. He returns to his home in the country for his convalescence and in the country he stays. He finds that his wife has died while he was at war, and he mourns her loss but soon is back to work, busying

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[2] There's a fine death.

himself on his estate, organizing his serfs, and keeping up with the news. Forgetting his feeling from Austerlitz, he develops a stoical detachment from the world.

That is, until one day the young, passionate idealist Pierre visits him. The two are old friends, and they take a carriage out onto the surrounding lands, boarding a ferry along the way to get across a river. Upon arriving on the far side of the river and long after the carriage and horses had been prepared by the lackeys and coachmen, the two men remain on the ferry, leaning against its railings, deep in discussion. Pierre, a recent novitiate of the Masonic Order, is attempting to convince the jaded and older Prince Andrei of the eternal beauty of life. "'We must live, we must love, we must believe,' said Pierre, 'that we do not live only today on this scrap of earth, but have lived and will live eternally there, in the all" (389). Hearing this and wanting to believe it but not believing it, Prince Andrei gazes out at "the red gleam of the sun on the blue floodwaters" (389). Until:

> Stepping off the ferry, he looked at the sky Pierre had pointed to, and for the first time since Austerlitz saw that high, eternal sky he had seen as he lay on the battlefield, and something long asleep, something that was the best in him, suddenly awakened joyful and young in his soul. This feeling disappeared as soon as Prince Andrei re-entered the habitual conditions of life, but he knew that this feeling, which he did not know how to develop, lived in him. The meeting with Pierre marked an epoch for Prince Andrei, from which began what, while outwardly the same, was in his inner world a new life. (389)

This marks the second awakening that Prince Andrei experiences, as he sits in conversation and thought, just looking at the setting sun's reflection in the water.

As Tolstoy mentions, Prince Andrei subsides into his normal, everyday existence after this peak experience, but he is at least aware now of the potential of his soul. One day in the spring of 1809 things come to a head. He is on a trip, off to the Rostov's for business regarding his trusteeship. The fresh, new spring air caresses him pleasantly as he sits in his carriage looking at the "first grass, the first birch leaves, and the first billows of white spring clouds racing across the bright blue sky" (419). As he sits there, "he was not thinking about anything, but looked around… meaninglessly" (419). This calls to mind Knausgaard and Proust's descriptions of heedlessness prior

to their moments. Still, despite the weather, Prince Andrei is troubled by his business dealings and sees an oak tree among a copse of birches that seems to corroborate his mood and age: "It alone did not want to submit to the charm of spring and did not want to see either the springtime or the sun" (419-420). In such a state of mind, he enters the Ryazan estates home of the Count Ilya Andreevich Rostov. Going up the long drive in the carriage he suddenly hears the shouts of girls. Separate and apart from the others, he sees "a dark-haired girl… very slender, strangely slender, dark-eyed in a yellow cotton dress, her head tied with a white kerchief, from under which strands of loose hair escaped" (420). He, like Stephen Dedalus, is entranced. He arrives at the estate and endures an eventless dinner and evening, sneaking glances all the while at the beautiful girl, who he has determined to be Natasha Rostov, the daughter of Count Ilya Andreevich Rostov.

That night, he stays over with the Rostovs, but he cannot fall asleep. He gets up to open the window and moonlight bursts in "as if it had been watching at the window a long time waiting for that" (421). Prince Andrei leans out onto the windowsill and fixes his eyes on the night sky. And then, once again, he hears the music of feminine voices coming from somewhere. He recognizes one of the voices at once. Natasha. She is speaking to her cousin Sonya. Sonya keeps telling her to get back in bed, but Natasha has the window open, one floor above, just like Prince Andrei, and she cannot go to sleep because, she says, the night is too beautiful.

> 'Sonya! Sonya!' the first voice [Natasha] was heard again. 'How can you sleep! Just look how lovely it is! Ah, how lovely! Wake up, Sonya,' she said almost with tears in her voice. 'There's never, never been such a lovely night.'
>
> Sonya made some grudging reply.
>
> 'No, just look, what a moon! … Ah, how lovely! Come here. Darling, dear heart, come here. Well, you see? I'd like to sit on my heels, like this, take myself by the knees—tight, as tight as possible, you've got to strain—and fly away!' (422)

Eventually, Sonya manages to tame Natasha and close the window. But Prince Andrei is left below, and "in his soul there suddenly arose an unexpected tangle of youthful thoughts and hopes" (422).

He immediately falls to sleep, and it is not until the next day and some distance that he is able to reflect upon how special this moment was.

Riding back the other way, he sees the same oak tree but barely recognizes it. It seems full of life now, and this radically altered image of the tree symbolizes the radical transformation that he is undergoing.

> Suddenly a causeless springtime feeling of joy and renewal came over him. All the best moments of his life suddenly recalled themselves to him at the same time. Austerlitz with the lofty sky, … and Pierre on the ferry, and a girl excited by the beauty of the night, and that night itself, and the moon—all of it suddenly recalled itself to him.
>
> 'No, life isn't over at the age of thirty-one,' Prince Andrei suddenly decided definitively, immutably. (423)

This is the turning point of his life, his reawakening. The beauty and significance of life dawns on him, and it happens through these moments of epiphany. Notice, first, the frequency with which Tolstoy (through Pevear's translation) uses the word "suddenly." Just in the quote above, it occurs three times. Tolstoy seeks to underscore the momentariness of these revelations as well as their urgency. And then there are all the markers of these experiences pertaining, somehow, to the beyond. The "causeless" welling up of feeling echoes not only Knausgaard and Proust—as they sat on a train or a coffee table, minding their own business—but also Aquinas and his argument for the first cause. That which contains its own cause, he reasons, must be God, for there is no known observable matter that can act without being acted upon. Therefore we can say of this epiphany in Tolstoy that it pertains to the same sort of otherworldly, unobservable category as Aquinas' God, for it is described as "causeless." Tolstoy's language, like that of so many of the other authors we have discussed, overflows with superlatives (*superlatus* meaning *'carried beyond'*) of experience: "lofty," "beauty," "immutable," "renewal," "infinite," and "eternal," among others. He makes no mistake about the fact that these moments are partially super-natural. The perceptive Berlin comments on this in his aforementioned essay, saying, "Tolstoy himself, too, knows that the truth is there, and not

'here' – not in the regions susceptible to observation, discrimination, constructive imagination" (491). Max Weber puts it in another way in his "Science as a Vocation" (1919), saying, "Tolstoy has given the simplest answer, with the words: Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: What shall we do and how shall we live?" (11), which is essentially a restating of Fichte's entreaty "But—what am I myself, and what is my vocation?" (*The Vocation of Man* 3).

But what of the way to get there, to get to the beyond? Prince Andrei and Natasha use methods that will be familiar by now. The soul—that part of the body that seems to defy the body's physical laws of containment—is capable of flying skywards. At Austerlitz, Tolstoy speaks of "what was now happening between his [Prince Andrei's] soul and this lofty, infinite sky" (291). Like angels, we humans are part earthly, part heavenly, and this heavenly part of ourselves rejoices in contact with the beyond. It is like Stephen Dedalus' soul soaring through the air. The sky, of course, is like the ocean in Joyce: a symbol for the unfathomable beyond. Natasha calls to mind birds and flight once more when she longs to "fly away" (422) off into the night, a night that indeed could have been the very same one Whitman describes in "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" (1865):

> When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
> When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
> When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
> When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
> How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
> Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
> In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
> Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars. (227)

Somewhere in the "mystical moist night-air" that Natasha and Whitman feel there is a connection to a greater mystery, a mystery that somehow unravels before their eyes. Andrei fondly and beautifully refers to Natasha later on as the "girl who wanted to fly into the sky" (423). Such a fairy-tale appellation was never more well deserved.

After this magical night, Prince Andrei leaves the Rostov estate, but not for long; he returns soon with a marriage proposal, one that Natasha and her family gladly accept. Tolstoy describes Prince Andrei's odd behavior back home in his office in the time before he proposes.

> Prince Andrei, putting his hands behind his back, would pace the room for a long time, now frowning, now smiling, thinking over those irrational thoughts, inexpressible in words, secret as a crime, that were connected with Pierre, with glory, with the girl on the windowsill, with the oak, with feminine beauty and love, which had changed his whole life. (423-424)

Prince Andrei experiences a moment just like Knausgaard, Proust, Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, and Colette's Renée. As with all the others, this moment "changed his whole life," but Tolstoy says, it is "inexpressible in words."

V. The Problem of Language: Wanting it All

Until now, this necessarily cursory survey has sought to chronicle the history of the transcendental moment in the West and then to tease out some of the forms it takes as peak experiences in modern literature. There will always be more examples to draw upon and more books to read; comprehensiveness is not the purpose. Rather, the purpose is to meditate on these moments and, in so doing, to gain a better understanding of how and why they work. We have found that the moments are relevant to many times and many places, but that they have particular interest in Modernity, where the category of the beyond/infinite is most threatened and indeed considered almost impermissible. This marginalization of the broadest and most meaningful of categories can be seen as a result of the particular intellectual history of the West. Ever since the Enlightenment (and before that Descartes and Bacon), the rationally inexplicable has been put aside and discouraged in favor of the rationally explicable. The result has been that with an almost logical inevitability, the gods, those illogical and fanciful creatures, fled from the world, leaving it colorless and disenchanted. By "the gods," I mean anything beyond the human senses, untouched by our

acquisitive reason; or, if we recall Knausgaard's examples, "the great, the divine, the solemn, the holy, the beautiful, and the true." Weber in "Science as a Vocation" (1919) would famously declare, "that the world is disenchanted" (8). In his essay you can hear his affinity to Knausgaard.

> The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.' Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations. It is not accidental that our greatest art is intimate and not monumental, nor is it accidental that today only within the smallest and intimate circles, in personal human situations, in *pianissimo*, that something is pulsating that corresponds to the prophetic *pneuma*, which in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand, welding them together. (20)

With his fatalistic diagnosis of disenchantment, Weber concedes and resigns. There is nothing to do, he says, but to "bear the fate of the times like a man" (20). And it is precisely here that Knausgaard and so many of the other thinkers treated in this essay beg to differ. Yes, they too lament the loss of the old categories and the disenchantment of the world; yet, where Weber settles for average, drab, meaningless existence, Knausgaard, Proust, Tolstoy, Joyce, and others seek to affirm and to redeem the world. They refuse to believe the diagnosis of disenchantment in any real sort of sense. Certainly, they agree, the *idea* of God has been killed off, but might He still be there, waiting to return, in some form or another? And might we still be able to give voice and expression to this beyond? Their project is to reinvigorate the old categories, to re-enchant the world; and one part of this project is the subject of this essay: transcendental, epiphanic, revelatory moments. These moments seem to suggest that there still exists a beyond and that it still has value. So, finally, we must ask: are they successful? Do they accomplish what they have set out to do? These questions will animate our concluding discussion—but the short answer, I believe, is yes.

* * *

An incisive reader might put forth a number of difficult questions concerning the foregoing discussion. *How do we know if these moments are even real? Where is the proof? Is language a faithful medium?* And, perhaps most unsparingly—*So? What now?* In this concluding section, I will offer possible

answers to these questions, and the focal point of my answers will be language. The irony and paradox of the examples I have taken from literature is that they are conveyed *through* language, a medium, as we find stated by many of these authors, to be severely flawed. This opens up the question of how this is possible, and whether it is permissible. Can an unnamable experience be written of? What are the philosophical problems of language? The practical issues? Finally, how can we pull together art and reality, as so many of these writers aim to do?

In the West there is a rich tradition of skepticism regarding the limits of language running all the way to Wittgenstein's stark twentieth century commandment in the *Tractatus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (*Proposition 7*, 108). In the beginning, or so the Christian myth goes, words and things aligned. An oak tree was perfectly captured in all its uniqueness by a word. But then came the fall of the Tower of Babel and we lost this primordial language. Humans began to speak in countless variable tongues. Whether or not the myth is true is beside the point—we now speak in many tongues and have different words for different things. Augustine of Hippo, the early Christian philosopher, is one of the most acute critics of language. As Howard Bloch reports in his book on the Middle Ages, *Etymologies and Genealogies*, Augustine "betrays a pervasive distrust of words" (47). Augustine, Bloch says, saw language as an "imperfect medium," as "hopelessly bound to the contingent, mutable, temporal realm of the sense," as "not productive of knowledge in the first instance" (47). Indeed, Bloch goes on to describe the epiphany-type moments which Augustine privileges over language, recalling Lord Chandos quite vividly.

> Truth, for the Bishop of Hippo, lies beyond the realm of the senses. Intelligible truth, the truth toward which the signs of the perceptible world guide (through memory and illumination) the human soul, hovers in the silence which fascinates Augustine in the *Confessions* and shines forth in the moments of understanding that he associates elsewhere with "listening with the inner ear," or "speaking with the heart." (47-48)

The "inner ear" and the "heart" stand in here as metaphors for a deeper language of the soul, a language that Latin, English, Russian, etc. cannot in the least bit measure up to. But a permanent

grasp of this language was lost with the Tower of Babel, and now the proliferation of words and languages actually takes us further and further away from Truth. We find this sentiment in Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754) where he says, "the more limited the knowledge, the more extensive becomes the dictionary" (50). In the same essay, he puts forward his idea of the state of nature, and it is part of his larger campaign against the over-civilized, over-intellectualized, rarefied environment of his eighteenth century world. He lambasts traditional liberal ideals (which goes hand-in-hand with his critique of language) saying: "all the subsequent progress has been in appearance so many steps toward the perfection of the individual, and in fact toward the decay of the species" (65). He sees in the over-adornment of language and society a neglect of basic truths and facts of life.

In his essay, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," Nietzsche asks, as Harries paraphrases it, "Do not all our words lie?" Nietzsche's argument is an old one. First, let us take truth to be the correspondence or congruence between designations and things-in-themselves, as do Aquinas and Kant, among others. Given this definition, we can never arrive at truth, for, recalling Kant, we can never access things-in-themselves! Nietzsche puts it in his own gripping language:

> The various languages placed side by side show that with words it is never a question of truth, never a question of adequate expression; otherwise, there would not be so many languages. The "thing in itself" (which is precisely what the pure truth, apart from any of its consequences, would be) is likewise something quite incomprehensible to the creator of language… (82)

Nietzsche's perplexity with the baselessness of language is echoed by Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos. Recall that Lord Chandos writes to Bacon of his loss of appetite for writing. He puts his reason for such abandonment thus: "I have lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently." He feels the unbreachable gap between designation and thing, saying, "the abstract terms of which the tongue must avail itself as a matter of course in order to voice a judgment-these terms crumbled in my mouth like mouldy fungi." Lord Chandos instead has taken to

a truer, perhaps prelapsarian, language; he has taken to filling his life with little moments of transcendence, which he experiences through insignificant objects, as discussed earlier.

> … the language in which I might be able not only to write but to think is neither Latin nor English, neither Italian nor Spanish, but a language none of whose words is known to me, a language in which inanimate things speak to me and wherein I may one day have to justify myself before an unknown judge.

It is an irony of which I am sure Hofmannsthal is aware that Lord Chandos is expressing himself in a human language, and it is being transmitted to other humans; it is also ironic that Hofmannsthal's beautiful linguistic descriptions of these nameless, mysterious feelings do perhaps generate some sort of comparable feeling in their readers.

So, what is the response to these deep critiques of the efficacy of language? As just alluded to, Hofmannsthal himself is halfway there in his *Letter*. One answer could be to differentiate between two species of language: language of reason and language of poetics. When Nietzsche says that the standard of truth for language is congruence between word and thing or when Wittgenstein says that we cannot speak of that which we do not know, they are speaking of the language of reason. The language of poetics, on the contrary, is not so concerned with literal truth and with alignment. *Who cares*, a defender of the language of poetics might say, *if it is all art and artifice and unreal? It makes me feel.* The language of poetics is more of a minefield, but its potential is also far greater. Mallarmé identifies this rift between truth and lies, logic and poetics, taking the side of poetics:

> Yes, *I know*, we are merely empty forms of matter, but we are indeed sublime in having invented God and our soul. So sublime, my friend, that I want to gaze upon matter, fully conscious that it exists, and yet launching itself madly into Dream, despite its knowledge that Dream has no existence, extolling the Soul and all the divine impressions of that kind which have collected within us from the beginning of time and proclaiming, in the face of the Void which is truth, these glorious lies! ("Letter to Cazalis")

Mallarmé exhibits a beautiful and heart-wrenching honesty. He admits that all of his life's work has been dedicated to "lies," but he maintains that this is still better than committing to the hollow

"void"-like truths of science left in the wake of God's death. Indeed, we can fool ourselves into truly believing the language of poetics. In a sublime moment, as in a sublime work of art, the artifice melts away, leaving a seamless interplay between words and things. Rousseau feels this cosmic unity and oneness in the "Fifth Walk" of his *Reveries* as he lies by himself on a lakeshore in Switzerland.

> Surrounded by greenery, flowers, and birds, and letting my eyes wander in the distance on the romantic shores which bordered a vast stretch of crystal-clear water, I assimilated all these lovely objects to my fictions; and finally finding myself brought back by degrees to myself and to what surrounded me, I could not mark out the point separating the fictions from the realities; it was this thorough conjunction of everything which made the absorbed and solitary life I led during this beautiful sojourn so dear to me. (70)

Finally, Nietzsche has a good definition of what we have defined as poetic language. Nietzsche wonders how we can speak of experiences outside of normal reality (our transcendental moments). This is his answer.

> There exists no word for these intuitions; when man sees them he grows dumb, or else he speaks only in forbidden metaphors and in unheard-of combinations of concepts. He does this so that by shattering and mocking the old conceptual barriers he may at least correspond creatively to the impression of the powerful present intuition. ("On Truth and Lies" 90)

These "forbidden metaphors" and "unheard-of combinations of concepts," I contend, are just other ways of saying poetic language. This is what the artist of letters, the poet, does: he creates original linguistic formulations.

But there is a simultaneous attack being launched on language from another angle. This attack takes aim at more practical aspects of language. The message here echoes to some extent what Rousseau put forth in his discussion of the state of nature. In short, why would we bother with this fickle thing called language in the first place if instead we could desert our musty studies and go out into the world with the goal of immediate, sensory experience? This age-old refrain comes to mind most prominently in some of the Romantics' work. On a beautiful morning in spring, Wordsworth begs his sister to go out into nature with him, adding: "And bring no book: for this one day / We'll

give to idleness" ("To My Sister" 77). In the opening lines of Goethe's *Faust*, Doctor Faust, holed up in his study, laments the futility of books and learning.

> FAUST [*sitting restlessly at his desk*]
> Well, that's Philosophy I've read,
> And Law and Medicine, and I fear
> Theology too, from A to Z;
> Hard studies all, that have cost me dear.
> And so I sit, poor silly man,
> No wiser now than when I began.
> …
> Oh sad full moon, my friend, why must
> You see me suffer? Look your last!
> Here at this desk so many a night
> I've watched and waited for your light
> To visit me again and shine
> Over this paper world of mine.
> Oh, take me to the hilltops, there
> To wander in the sweet moonlit air,
> By mountain caves, through fields to roam,
> Hovering with spirits in your gloam,
> Cleansed of book-learning's fog and stew
> And healed by bathing in your dew! (15-16)

Goethe vividly captures the Socratic predicament of many pursuers of knowledge—that the more we know, the more we know we know nothing. Faust yearns to escape from his world of abstractions and enter the world of color and sensation. Of course, this ends disastrously for him, and we are reminded of Oscar Wilde's quote (found in Francoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*): "'Sin is the only note of vivid color that persists in the modern world'" (20). Moving into the twentieth century, we get a rearticulation of these grievances but also the beginnings of a solution in the work of Milan Kundera. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Franz, a professor, is a kind of twentieth century Faust. He speaks of moments of coming into touch with the infinite, but he divides a line between these ecstatic moments and his books, thinking that the one is the negation of the other. The moments he speaks of are musical and sexual, two heretofore ignored avenues toward the transcendental moment.

> And suddenly he realized that all his life he had done nothing but talk, write, lecture, concoct sentences, search for formulations and amend them, so in the end no words were precise, their meanings were obliterated, their content lost, they turned into trash, chaff, dust, sand; prowling through his brain, tearing at his head, they were his insomnia, his illness. And what he yearned for at that moment, vaguely but with all his might, was unbounded music, absolute sound, a pleasant and happy all-encompassing, over-powering, window-rattling din to engulf, once and for all, the pain, the futility, the vanity of words. Music was the negation of sentences, music was the anti-word! He yearned for one long embrace with Sabina, yearned never to say another sentence, another word, to let his orgasm fuse with the orgiastic thunder of music. And lulled by that blissful imaginary uproar, he fell asleep…. At the moment he penetrated Sabina, however, he closed his eyes. The pleasure suffusing his body called for darkness. That darkness was pure, perfect, thoughtless, visionless; that darkness was without end, without borders; that darkness was the infinite we each carry within us. (Yes, if you're looking for infinity, just close your eyes!) And at the moment he felt pleasure suffusing his body, Franz himself disintegrated and dissolved into the infinity of his darkness, himself becoming infinite. (94-95)

This crusade against words is undoubtedly impassioned, but we are never quite sure whether to embrace it fully, for it is language. In fact, Kundera himself is the one who shines a light on the error in Franz' thinking. (As a man of letters himself, he probably had the answer waiting in the wings.) Of Franz' longing for being more involved and hands-on in the world (in this case, being involved in political activism) Kundera has this to say:

> Franz felt his book life to be unreal. He yearned for real life, for the touch of people walking side by side with him, for their shouts. It never occurred to him that what he considered unreal (the work he did in the solitude of the office or library) was in fact his real life, whereas the parades he imagined to be reality were nothing but theater, dance, carnival—in other words, a dream. (100)

This is the answer. Working with letters—writing, reading, learning—*is* real. It is a form of action, not a passive, contemplative act divorced from the physical world.

Yet, words themselves undeniably remain in the nonphysical realm. As Baudelaire says, "the duality of art is a fatal consequence of the duality of man." So where does this leave us? Words or things? How are we to choose between them? Or can we, indeed, have both? Can we defy the Sartrean dilemma that states: you can either do it or you can write it. Bloch describes the full extent of this dilemma in the context of Mallarmé.

> He [Mallarme], like Augustine, and like all of us, wanted it all—to be and to know, to feel and to be conscious of feeling, to be ourselves and to see ourselves as others see us, to be outside of time and in it, to be both dead and alive. (232)

And, to turn once more to *Faust*, we see the same longing for both facets of human experience.

> In me there are two souls, alas, and their
> Division tears my life in two.
> One loves the world,
> It clutches her, it binds
> Itself to her, clinging with furious lust;
> The other longs to soar beyond the dust
> Into the realm of high ancestral minds.
> Are there no spirits moving in the air,
> Ruling the region between earth and sky?
> Come down then to me from your golden mists on high,
> And to new, many-coloured life, oh take me there!
> Give me a magic cloak to carry me
> Away to some far place, some land untold. (35-36)

Where is this magic cloak that can spirit Faust off to "the region between earth and sky," where he can experience fully both parts of himself? We have seen one form that this cloak can take: the rapturous flight of the transcendental moment. Stephen Dedalus and Natasha would be able to tell Faust of such experiences. And how is it that they do this? Through writing and literature. Literature is the other form that the so-called cloak can take. Imagine a story so good that it collapses the distance between the earth and the sky, the body and the soul, the sensations and the intellect. Imagine a story in which (as Rousseau would say) you, "could not mark out the point separating the fictions from the realities." Being the reader or writer of such story is another way of donning Faust's "magic cloak," of experiencing a momentary oneness, the infinite. Briefly, fleetingly, we can have it all. We can steal one little bite from God's jealously guarded tree of immortality.

Zadie Smith, a contemporary author, wrote a book review of *My Struggle* in the December 2013 edition of *The New York Review of Books*. She speaks of Knausgaard's ability to collapse this very distinction, of his ability to simultaneously write and do, of his ability to have it all.

> What's notable is [Knausgaard's] ability, rare these days, to be fully present in and mindful of his own existence. Every detail is put down without apparent vanity or decoration, as if the writing and the living are happening simultaneously. There shouldn't be anything remarkable about any of it except for the fact that it immerses you totally. You live his life with him.

It immerses you totally, she says. *You live his life with him.* This is the ability that Knausgaard, Proust, Joyce, and Tolstoy all share, the ability to make the writing and the living appear to be "happening simultaneously." And so if one way of reenchantment is the transcendent moment and the other way is this literature that unites being and knowing, just imagine a book that does both, a book that is of the latter type and that speaks of the former moment. Imagine how privileged the privileged moments within such a privileged story are. These are the vertiginous heights towards which these authors reach. In Book 2 of *My Struggle*, Knausgaard speaks of how he feels when he writes such privileged moments.

> I was filled with an absolutely fantastic feeling… and I could hardly sit still, so great was my happiness. Everything was possible, everything made sense. At two places in the novel I soared higher than I had thought possible, and those two places alone, which I could not believe I had written… are two of the best moments in my life. By which I mean my whole life. The happiness that filled me and the feeling of invincibility they gave me I have searched for ever since, in vain. (70-71)

Knausgaard feels a soaring sensation as he goes "higher" than he had thought possible. Through his writing, he accesses the beyond more fully than ever before, feels more infinite than ever before, feels more like a god than ever before. Knausgaard tastes of the fruit of the tree of life. Of course, he does not get more than a nibble. God, ever watchful, tears him away as quickly as He can and expels him from the garden, and for a time—"with wandering steps and slow"[3]—Knausgaard mourns his loss. Yet, soon, he will come to appreciate just how unique it was to soar so high as to gather a fistful of the beyond.

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[3] The ending of Milton's *Paradise Lost*: Book 12, line 648.

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