"The Stain." Film still from *Don't Look Now.* Dir. Nicolas Roeg, British Lion, 1973.

Living (and Dying) in the Other

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In the prose poems collected in *Paris Spleen*, Charles Baudelaire offers an account of the novel pleasures of desire and identification available in the modern city. In "Windows," for instance, the speaker describes the joy he experiences in observing a lonely, middle-age woman in a nearby room. Having dreamed up a history for her, he goes to bed, "proud of having lived and suffered in others besides myself."[1] Not merely a social observer, the speaker practices extreme acts of empathetic identification. He does not watch city's inhabitants from a distance; instead he merges with them, living and suffering *in them.*

In *Baudelaire and Freud,* Leo Bersani considers the ambivalence in these poems toward the fragmentation or dispersal of the subject: "Baudelaire's work gives us images of . . . psychic fragmentation at the same time that it documents determined resistance to all such ontological floating."[2] That ambivalence is legible not only in the rhythms of attraction and repulsion that mark movement toward the other in these poems, but also in what I want to draw attention to here: the unequal distribution of psychic mobility among Baudelaire's urban figures. "Anywhere Out of the World" begins "Life is a hospital where every patient is obsessed by the desire of changing beds."[3] While the desire to change beds runs throughout these poems, in Baudelaire's hospital some of the patients are too sick to move. Particular figures—the artist, the philosopher, the flaneur—are constantly switching places; others such as the poor, widows, and blacks are stuck where they are. Those who are most beaten down by the social order are available as objects for the poet's identifications, but they do not perform such acts themselves.

Consider, for instance, the exemplary mobility of the poet in "Crowds":

> The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able to be himself or someone else, as he chooses. Like those wandering souls who go looking for a body, he enters as he likes into each man's personality. For him alone everything is vacant; and if certain places seem closed to him, it is only because in his eyes they are not worth visiting.[4]

Baudelaire casts the ability to enter into any subject as a privilege, even if it is a privilege paradoxically associated with homelessness and psychic

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displacement. The decision about whether or not he will enter is not left to the owners of the bodies he observes—they cannot help being available for such identifications. If the poet does not enter, he tells us, it is not because he can't but because he doesn't want to.

Though this gift of being able to enter into the other is ambiguous, it is nonetheless clearly preferable to *being* the other—preferable, that is, to being one of the visibly marked figures whom the poet enters with such ease. The prose poem "Widows" begins with a description of the urban locales where such figures congregate:

> Vauvenargues says that certain avenues in the public parks are haunted almost exclusively by disappointed ambitions, frustrated inventors, abortive glories, and broken hearts, by all those tumultuous and secret souls still agitated by the last rumbling of the storm, who withdraw as far as possible from the insolent eyes of the gay and the idle. These shady retreats are the meeting places of all those whom life has maimed.
>
> And toward these places poets and philosophers love to direct their avid speculations. There they are sure to find rich pasture. For, as I have said before, they scornfully avoid above all other places, the ones where the rich and the joyous congregate; that trepidation in a void has nothing to attract them. On the contrary, they feel themselves irresistibly drawn toward everything that is feeble, destitute, orphaned, and forlorn.
>
> An experienced eye is never mistaken. It can at once decipher in those set or dejected faces, in those eyes, dull and hollow or still shining with the last sparks of struggle, in those deep and numerous wrinkles, in that slow or dislocated gait, the innumerable stories of love deceived, of devotion unrecognized, of effort unrecompensed, of hunger and cold silently endured.[5]

In what amounts to a guidebook for misery-hungry poets and philosophers (*Lonely Planet*?), the speaker instructs his reader where the lowest of the low can be found and details the physical signs by which they can be identified and through which their stories can be read. For those whom life has maimed, these shady retreats will provide them refuge from the festivities of the rich and the gay but not, alas, from the experienced eyes of poets. Their ravaged bodies are the natural prey of those inveterate speculators whose greatest pleasures consist in identifying them and identifying with them.

Baudelaire spells out the power differentials that structure the activity of looking at and living in the other. What is more, he seems to actually represent the costs of this activity for the downtrodden figures who are

"Leaving for Venice." Film still from *Don't Look Now.* Dir. Nicolas Roeg, British Lion, 1973.

its objects. The activity of the poet himself often appears partly responsible for the sorry state of the visibly marked figures whom he observes. Those "deep and numerous wrinkles" on the faces of those who haunt the city's back alleys may not, then, be merely the signs of past life experience—they may in fact register the effect of the poet's attentions. Baudelaire suggests that the poet's keen eye and unerring hand may actually engrave the lines he claims only to interpret. At the same time, he notes the effects on the other of an affective life lived vicariously: the poet is an emotional squatter, someone who needs to suffer in the other because he cannot suffer in his own person, and this practice wears a body out. The other is forced to bear the burden of representing the poet's own losses on her person. She has not only to represent herself (bearing the signs of her social maiming or disqualification), but she also has to represent the poet. She manifests his losses, bearing his tortured soul *in* and *on* and *as* her body.

The special "burden of representation" that social others bear is at the heart of Nicolas Roeg's 1973 film *Don't Look Now.* Roeg's film is based on Daphne du Maurier's 1971 story of the same name. Du Maurier's story begins with a classic account of the pleasures of living in the other. John and Laura Baxter have escaped from their country home in England to Venice to recover from the sudden loss of their young daughter. They are having lunch at a restaurant when John sees two women seated together at a nearby table, and says to his wife: "Don't look now . . . but there are a couple of old girls two tables away who are trying to hypnotise me."[6] This scene of casual marital teasing is loaded with significance for John: he comments that this is a game that they used to play before Christine's death, when they were happy. In order to forget and feel better, John is trying to revive the game, to allow them to drown their sorrows through aesthetic absorption and the fascination of other lives.

Sitting in the restaurant, the Baxters construct a shared fantasy through reading familiar social codes: they watch their own private movie. What makes this a particularly pleasurable film is the legibility—or, better, the hyperlegibility—of the figures they discuss: "They're a couple of pathetic old retired schoolmistresses on holiday, who've saved up all their lives to visit Venice."[7] The "fact" of lesbianism—and of a particularly sad and outdated form of it—is recognizable to John, as he practices the episte-

mological one-upmanship that is the hallmark of encounters with sexually marginalized others.[8] At the same time that the Baxters' fantasy careens off into more and more impossible and unlikely scenarios ("They're not old girls at all. . . . They're male twins in drag"; they are "criminals doing the sights of Europe, changing sex at each stop"),[9] the social codes through which they read the women are rigid and inflexible—this "free play" relies, paradoxically, on hardened cliché.

The service that these "old girls" provide at this point in the story is crucial. The accidental death of Christine has overwhelmed the Baxters with grief and threatened to separate them from their retinue of privileges. The contrast between their own status as an attractive married couple—who would know that they had lost a child?—and the spectacle of these frumpy, exposed, odd women exerts a powerful attraction. The more unnatural these old girls seem, the more natural John and Laura feel themselves to be. The more the women stand out, the more the Baxters blend in, as the spectacle of these weird women facilitates their withdrawal into invisibility, away from the glare of loss and grief.

The dynamics that mark the opening of the story are amplified in the early scenes of Roeg's film, which pictures Christine's death by drowning in England (an event that Du Maurier does not represent directly). Roeg shows us the Baxters at their ease: they have just finished lunch, not out at a restaurant, but in the comfort of their rural retreat. Untouched by loss, they are a perfect, intact family, in deliberate exile from the social world. While the Baxters' life in Venice is a nightmare of encounters with others, here they are sufficient to themselves—affluent, white, replete with children, able-bodied, and alone. John (played by Donald Sutherland) is looking at a slide of a church in Venice he plans to restore, while his wife Laura (played by Julie Christie) sits nearby reading a book called *The Fragile Geometry of Space;* the children are playing outside. As John looks at the slide, focusing on a figure in red, he accidentally spills some water; as the red of the figure blurs across the surface of the slide, he appears to sense what is going to happen to his daughter and he runs outside (but is too late to save her). In some sense, the "event" of the slide blurring seems to be as real or more real than the catastrophic event of Christine's death. The breaking or staining of two-dimensional surfaces is identified with Christine's drowning, and sealed in her wet red mackintosh her dead body is a double of the stain that spreads on the slide indoors. Roeg represents the moment that the fragile geometry of the family is shattered, as they suffer a loss that will cast them out of the realm of "normal" life.

The rest of the film concerns the (failed) attempts of the Baxters to come to terms with this loss. The great irony of the early scene in the restaurant is that over the course of the film the Baxters will come to

"The Widow." Film still from *Don't Look Now.* Dir. Nicolas Roeg, British Lion, 1973.

depend more and more on these two women—sisters, it turns out, not lovers, named Wendy and Heather. Heather is blind and is gifted with second sight. Laura is drawn to the sisters and wants them to contact Christine in the spirit world. John wants nothing to do with the women, but as it turns out his resistance is grounded in an unwanted identification—John, too, has the ability to see the future. Over the course of the film, he has intermittently seen a small figure in a red mackintosh running around Venice. At the end of the film, John finally makes contact. As it turns out, the figure is not Christine or even her ghost but rather a garishly made-up dwarf—a foul parody of his daughter. The dwarf is the red figure that John noticed in the slide at the moment of Christine's death. She is also the serial killer for whom the Venetian police have been searching during the course of the movie. As John chases this figure into an abandoned palace (another scene of ruined domesticity), the dwarf turns, shakes her head "no" at him, and stabs him to death.

As John bleeds to death, his life flashes before his eyes—but that life is significantly here the same as the film: Roeg presents a feverish précis of the film's events, with a focus on John Baxter's desire for his own death. As he cuts from a shot of the blood flowing out of John's neck to the red stain of the slide, Roeg suggests that the Baxters' fate was decided from the first: the spreading red is the kernel of otherness that invaded—from across the channel and from the future—the closed intimacy of the Baxters' world. At the same time, the film suggests how loss can disrupt distinctions between the normal and the pathological through its material effects, its tendency to mark those it touches. While death might seem to attach only to particular kinds of bodies—those that are hypervisible, already stained—in the end, even the most luminous and abstract bodies are maimed by its touch. This is what the film brutally "teaches" the Baxters: in the restaurant scene, we see John trying to "switch beds" at the hospital by imagining the interiority of the "old girls"; he ends up in the farthest corner of the sick room, unable to get back, the red stain that is the film now flowing out of his body.

At the end of the film, Laura, too, is transformed. The final scene depicts the progress of John's funeral barge down the Grand Canal: Laura, dressed in black, stands between the two sisters. (This scene replicates an earlier scene in the film, when John sees this scene as a vision of the future but fails to interpret it correctly; now it is real.) Laura's radiant beauty, so noticeable throughout the film, has gone missing as, drawn and pale, she now finally seems to "fit" with the sisters. Like Baudelaire's widows, Laura now signifies loss with her whole being. While some are

born to this task, others fall into it. The loss of Christine tests John and Laura to see how well they can bear loss; that is, how they can hold up under, but also bear the signs of, grief. As it turns out, they are not able to fend off loss; rather, they take it in, incorporating it, making it the permanent substance of their being.

In a meditation on the origin of the double in "The Uncanny," Freud considers the relation between the fear of death and representation. He writes:

> the "double" was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an "energetic denial of the power of death"; and probably the "immortal" soul was the first "double" of the body. This invention of doubling as a preservation against extinction has its counterpart in the language of dreams, which is fond of representing castration by a doubling or multiplication of a genital symbol. The same desire led the Ancient Egyptians to develop the art of making images of the dead in lasting materials. Such ideas, however, have sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man. But when this stage has been surmounted, the "double" reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death.[10]

In Freud's essay, the uncanny is bound up with the material residue of what he calls the "overemphasis of thoughts." Here, imagining one's double as a means of preserving life backfires badly: it produces corpses—and, as it turns out, you yourself are among them. The uncanny here is not just something that you feel; it is something that you are: in encountering your double—the obverse image of your humanity—you realize your kinship with that which is at once inhuman, less than human, and already dead. In *Don't Look Now,* this experience means confusing your daughter with a dwarf, seeing your wife as the familiar of "odd women," and experiencing an unnatural intimacy with your corpse.

Freud writes, "An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the things it symbolizes."[11] In the end, a spot of red that begins as an image on a slide spreads over everything—real blood staining characters who had seemed untouchable. Laura Baxter is finally an embodied sign of grief. She takes over the "full functions" of the loss that she symbolizes, representing it

not only for herself but for any "experienced eye" who might happen to read the sad story now visible on her person.

The "work" that visibly marked social others perform in modernity is, in part, a *labor of representation.* For subjects like the speaker of Baudelaire's urban prose poems, social others provide opportunities not only for vicarious living but also for vicarious suffering. That is, marginal subjects are pressed into service not only to enable fantasies of mobility, escape, or transfiguration but also precisely as signs of loss, fixity, and diminished being. Stigmatized social others serve a function not unlike that of the immortal soul, as Freud describes it: they offer an insurance policy against death and more precisely against a *social death* understood to be characteristic of specific social groups but in fact experienced much more widely. Paradoxically, these figures ward off such losses by embodying them.

Becoming a visible sign of loss is another way to describe the work of taking up a stigmatized identity: it is what Walter Benjamin seems to mean when he discusses the idea of "bearing" in Baudelaire. In a letter to Theodor Adorno, he writes, "I do not think it is too bold to claim that we encounter someone's 'bearing' when the essential loneliness of an individual properly manifests itself to us." Benjamin goes on to describe that loneliness as "the site of the individual's historically conditioned emptiness, of the persona as the individual's sorry fate."[12] To Benjamin's formulation, we might add that the "bearing" of the stigmatized other is not only the sign of an *individual's* historically conditioned emptiness. Rather, it takes its permanent cast (Benjamin compares it to a brand) not only from a lifetime of suffering but also from the demand to vicariously bear—or stand in for—other people's suffering. Emptiness is the sorry fate of all modern subjects, but the burden of representing that emptiness is hardly distributed equally. Bearing more than one's share of general social losses is, for many modern subjects, simply what it means to be a person.

Notes

1. "Fier d'avoir vécu et souffert dans d'autres que moi-même." Charles Baudelaire, *The Poems in Prose with* La Fanfarlo, ed. and trans. Francis Scarfe (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1989), 154; my translation. Scarfe's edited volume also includes the original French.

2. Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 4.

3. "Cette vie est un hôpital où chaque malade est possédé du désir de changer de lit." Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen,* trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1947), 99. Baudelaire, *The Poems in Prose,* 190.

4. "Le poète jouit de cet incomparable privilège, qu'il peut à sa guise être lui-même et autrui. Comme ces âmes errantes qui cherchent un corps, il entre, quand il veut, dans le personage de chacun. Pour lui seul, tout est vacant; et si de certaines places paraissent lui être fermées, c'est qu'à ses yeux elles ne valent pas la peine d'être visitées." Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen,* 20. Baudelaire, *The Poems in Prose,* 58.

5. "Vauvenargues dit que dans les jardins publics il est des allées hantées principalement par l'ambition déçue, par les inventeurs malheureux, par les gloires avortées, par les coeur brisés, par toutes ces âmes tumultueuses et fermées, en qui grondent encore les derniers soupirs d'un orage, et qui reculent loin du regard insolent des joyeux et des oisifs. Ces retraites ombreuses sont les rendez-vous des éclopés de la vie.

"C'est surtout vers ces lieux que le poète et le philosophe aiment diriger leurs avides conjectures. Il y a là une pâture certaine. Car s'il est une place qu'ils dédaignent de visiter, comme je l'insinuais tout à l'heure, c'est surtout la joie des riches. Cette turbulence dans le vide n'a rien qui les attire. Au contraire, ils se sentent irrésistiblement entraînés vers tout ce qui est faible, ruiné, contristé, orphelin.

"Un oeil expérimenté ne s'y trompe jamais. Dans ces traits rigides ou abattus, dans ces yeux caves et ternes, ou brillants des derniers éclairs de la lutte, dans ces rides profondes et nombreuses, dans ces démarches si lentes ou si saccadées, il déchiffre tout de suite les innomerables légendes de l'amour trompés, du dévouement méconnu, des efforts non récompensés, de la faim et du froid humblement, silencieusement supportés." Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen,* 22. Baudelaire, *The Poems in Prose,* 60.

6. Daphne du Maurier, "Don't Look Now," in *Don't Look Now* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), 3. Nicolas Roeg (director), *Don't Look Now,* film (British Lion Film Corporation, 1973).

7. Du Maurier, "Don't Look Now," 4.

8. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

9. Du Maurier, "Don't Look Now," 3.

10. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. XVII, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 235.

11. Freud, "The Uncanny," 244.

12. Walter Benjamin to Theodor Adorno, 7 May 1940, in Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University

Press, 1999), 473. See Judith Butler's discussion of this passage in her afterword ("After Loss, What Then?") to the volume *Loss: The Politics of Mourning,* ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 473, n. 5. Butler's discussion of this passage and particularly of the dialectic of mobility and fixity in melancholia has influenced my thinking here.