

Edna and Zarathustra: Separation and Selfhood

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Nietzsche's Zarathustra and Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier evince similar needs to extract themselves from social contexts which at every juncture threaten the pronounced individuality which they respectively embody. In the interest of achieving relative epistemological autonomy and correspondingly elevated degrees of intellectual and emotional consciousness each must abandon the biologically determined sensibilities, and thus the companionship, of their peers and relations. Members of every society are in practice expected to internalize and retain whatever acculturation their specific culture dictates. Individuals who fail to do so are invariably ostracized. Indeed, Edna and Zarathustra are constantly impinged upon by both exterior and interior determinants which threaten their independence. As social animals we are biologically compelled to perpetually seek the companionship and approval of our own species, hence Zarathustra must descend from his solitude only to realize his incompatibility with the masses as they expresses nature's fundamental paradigm in the marketplace. Much like Edna, Zarathustra no longer shares a common nature with the *natural man*, whose desires and aspirations remain unmitigatedly circumscribed by biological determinants. He is no longer able to accept the inherited assumptions which govern the self conceptions of the masses, and must paradoxically exist in the fold of nature, outside his natural habitat, in the interest of nurturing an incontrovertible sense of self.

In a very real sense Zarathustra is most alone in public. In the midst of a misunderstanding mob he suffers ridicule and rejection for committing the damnable, and laughable, offense of interrupting the temple of commerce and entertainment for wisdom's sake. The jester from the tower offers sagacious council when he observes that "it was (Zarathustra's)

good fortune to be laughed at".¹ Man does not like to be hurdled, and as history illustrates, "the great despisers ... the great reverers and arrows of longing for the other shore" - simultaneous social nihilists and ontological idealists who synthesis culture through negation and create new paradigms to be ignored, refuted, or emulated - are often simply ridiculed, but are also sometimes executed by the politicians and popular opinions of the day when they get themselves taken at all seriously.² Nevertheless, Zarathustra is not interested in safety and has grown accustomed to living in wildernesses by necessity. He does not "ask if the truth is profitable or whether it may prove fatal", and is willingly to suffer the corollaries of his ever expanding sense of selfhood whatever that process may entail.³ The masses do not understand Zarathustra and seek only to satisfy their biological urges and desire for stale entertainment. For them truth is prescribed, not created, and the process of becoming which Zarathustra has willingly undertaken is absurd.

To be sure, the concept of purposeful self destruction in the interest of self creation is for the "natural man" literally unthinkable.⁴ And for his part Zarathustra will not accept the collective sense of inherited truth which determines the existences of the masses, and chooses to abandon orthodox humanity for solitude in the interest of preserving his individuality. He however can not evade the fact that human beings are inherently social, and runs the risk of

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 21.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 15.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, 1895, Trans. and Ed. Anthony M. Ludovici, Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2000, 1.

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, 1755, Trans. and Ed. with Intro, Maurice Cranston, London: Penguin, 1984, 81.

falling victim to solipsism in isolation and doing himself psychological harm. Yet regardless of potential social and psychological repercussions, Zarathustra is willing to do the unhuman; to extract himself from the cyclic scurrying of his natural habitat; to divest himself of its shadows and illusions and glimpse what might be possible in the mind of Man when it redefines its ambitions.

As Zarathustra states, "*I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome*".⁵ In contrast to his so called peers, Zarathustra has developed the ability to self reflexively redefine his epistemology and thus extract himself from the fetters of determinism so far as is possible for a human being. He exists outside the fold of the undifferentiated masses, who fail to comprehend that their most fundamental beliefs and assumptions are in reality entirely inherited and contingent upon biological imperatives and subsequent historical circumstance. The vast majority of human beings remain "rational" pack animals who have adapted to their environment through the instrumentality of relative intelligence as opposed to some other faculty, yet lack the ability to develop the sense for deep history which would allow them to comprehend the true nature of their self conceptions and beliefs.⁶ They are therefore incapable and/or ill disposed to legitimate self analysis and invariably remain stifled by acculturation, and accordingly regard aspiring overmen such as Zarathustra as clowns to be ridiculed. Indeed, for the natural man there is little value in the gratuitous, the subjective, or the truly creative.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 12.

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Trans. and Ed. Richard Hope, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960, 3.

Zarathustra's rejection in the marketplace illustrates that the true heart of every human society remains an arbitrary expression of unchecked chaos which destroys human individuality and serves as a stumbling block for the aspiring *overperson*; a cultural manifestation of unmitigated biological inclinations which serve to thwart the development of the human animal within the natural man at every turn. Everything is reduced to commerce as nature lays itself out in piles to consume itself. Generation heaped upon generation, encumbered by culture, concerned only with bare boned utility, who illustrate that as a species we remain utterly determined by the inertia of the unintelligible physical contingencies which spawned us, and have yet to achieve the ability to redefine ourselves as individuals capable of moral behavior. Yet in keeping with an epistemic orientation which rejects the fundamental assumption that human beings must understand themselves according to the dictates of culture, rationality, and ultimately, the contingencies of the natural world, Zarathustra never doubts the validity of his personal wisdom and makes an empowered decision to overcome physiological determinants and abandon social orthodoxy in order to nurture his individuality.

As Edna illustrates, a minor interest in personal expression and epistemic reorientation can be tolerated by the sensibilities of those such as Leonce Pontellier, but a wholesale *reevaluation* of morality and self identity through the avenue of artistic expression is regarded as madness. Although artistic hobbies are often encouraged by those such as M. Pontellier, any significant divergence from mainstream mores is invariably regarded as a threat. Edna is encouraged to paint so long as she is only brushing paint on a canvas. However her husband eventually comes to understand that "she (feels) in it a satisfaction of a kind which no other employment (affords) her", and consequently attempts to hinder her creative endeavors.⁷ He in

⁷ Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 54-55.

essence instructs her to be herself, which is in reality a reminder to defer her creativity and unquestioningly embody the acculturation which her culture dictates. Yet regardless of her husband's interference, Edna is able to sound out the depths of her impressions, to discern and assign their meanings through the instrumentality of her creative endeavors. Regardless of her level of ability as a painter, she is becoming more and more of an artist with each work through which she passes. The actual work produced is of little consequence except as a sort of trophy commemorating the contingency which gave it form. It is only an object for the masses to disregard, criticize, or admire.

Edna and Zarathustra are similarly possessed of what Freud refers to as "the oceanic", an expansive emotional sense which for the vast majority of individuals is irrevocably associated with religious ideology through the process of early childhood acculturation.⁸ Of course, based upon exhibited behaviors and expressed opinions, it appears the majority of individuals lack a strong experience of the oceanic and express their most powerful emotions primarily through the avenues of religious, familial, and romantic endeavors (a fact to which virtually every pop song will attest). However Edna does not fall victim to the cross cultural, biologically determined, tendency to relegate paroxysms of inspiration and emotion to experience with some God, child, or significant other. She will not defer her oceanic emotional experiences, and hence can not allow herself to exist according to the dictates of shallow convention as the nature of her interests and affections reflect. She is possessed of the ability to self reflexively assert her *relative free*

⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 1930, Trans. and Ed. James Strachey, Intro. Peter Gay, New York: Norton and Co., 1989, 11.

will, and actively participate in how she will inevitably be determined.⁹ Thus Edna is not simply the wife and mother her husband and the masculicentric culture he represents would have her be, and despite Nietzsche's penchant for misogyny resembles the overman in every significant regard.

Nietzsche metaphorically describes the transition from "the all too human"¹⁰ to the overman who creates a subjective morality of his own invention as "the three metamorphoses of spirit", through which "the spirit becomes a camel; and the camel, a lion; and the lion, finally, a child"¹¹. According to orthodox sensibilities Nietzsche is regarded as a complete nihilist, yet his nihilism is only an adjunction to his sanguinity. He is indeed a social nihilist to some degree, but only as an adjunction to his ontological idealism, which is encapsulated in his assertion that "the value of life can not be estimated".¹² It is therefore not he, but rather conventional society at large which is ultimately nihilistic. To be sure, the most deeply rooted and revered occidental cultural institutions resulted in Dark Ages and deny that human life has any value except in relation to some deity and/or hereafter. Zarathustra represents Nietzsche's most deeply held sentiments and thus refuses to accept archaic myths as a basis for his behaviors and beliefs, yet likewise will not settle for a sterile existence of safety and convenience. He consequently denies his biological inclinations and willingly suffers "what is most difficult ... and kneels down like a

9 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Ed. with Intro. Antony Flew, La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1988, 131.

10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 219.

11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 25.

12 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or, How One Philosophizes with a Hammer*, 1889, *The Portable Nietzsche*, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1982, 463-563, 474.

camel wanting to be well loaded".¹³ He does not as the arbitrary masses wish to become the "last man", and is willing to be encumbered by his individuality in every regard; even if it means madness and/or making an utter villain and fool of himself in the world's eyes.¹⁴ Zarathustra's project to overcome the acculturation he has undergone demands he recoup himself from all imposed self conception and inherited morality. Of course, as a human being he to some degree unavoidably retains specific elements of the culture from which he seeks to extract himself. He nevertheless thoroughly deconstructs his epistemology, and consequently rejects all conventional notions of substance dualism and the hereafter. Zarathustra must bare crushing burdens willingly, with no recourse to the comforts a belief in religious tenets can provide, so that he may become aware of his strength of will. He must abandon human companionship to exist in seclusion; to realize that he is impinged upon by the masses in seclusion much as he suffers isolation in public; to become a "preying lion" in the desert of his solitude, so that he may overcome the great tempter which has possessed him since his birth.¹⁵

The lion represents the will to destroy inherited values, which involves some degree of isolation from the masses in the interest of redefining one's mutually informative worldview and self conception. Human nature will not allow individuals who truly stray from conventionality to exist unharassed. Anyone genuinely divergent is regarded as a threat, and rightfully so. As history reveals, the arbitrary masses of every society are biologically determined to exist as

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 26.

14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 17.

15 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 27.

cultural animals, yet culture can take new directions at any moment under the influence of charismatic individuals such as Zarathustra and Edna who offer new paradigms to be explored. Consequently, Edna and Zarathustra must similarly abandon their respective social circumstances to escape the negative consequences of interaction with orthodox sensibilities. However the true struggle is not with the masses, but with what Nietzsche portrays as "an animal covered with scales; and on every scale shines a golden "thou shalt"". ¹⁶ To be sure, the primary stumbling block in the development of the individual will is the human tendency to concede to the dictates of conventionality. It is relatively simple to avoid social interaction, yet reclaiming oneself from the internalization of imposed mores proves far more difficult. From early childhood human beings introject social training through a process of acculturation which allows civilized society to function yet prevents the development of true autonomy. However it should be noted that Nietzsche does not maintain that all humanity should forsake "Thou shalt", which would be an endorsement of anarchy. When Zarathustra abandons the masses he realizes they will in all probability remain forever determined by the cultural and historical contingencies which they have sublimated, irrevocably internalized, and assigned as holy. It is therefore according to Nietzsche only for accidental *higher men* that the destruction of inherited morality on the path to overman is warranted.

Zarathustra and Edna are indeed possessed of narcissistic dispositions, yet as Nietzsche states, "Self-interest is worth as much as the person who has it: it can be worth a great deal, and it can be unworthy and contemptible". ¹⁷ The vast majority of human beings are not possessed of

16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 27.

17 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or, How One Philosophizes with a Hammer*, 1889, *The Portable Nietzsche*, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1982, 463-563, 533.

the intelligence and sense of the oceanic required to develop their individuality to the point that the formation of a self defined morality is possible. They are only capable of amoralism or adherence to prescribed mores, and furthermore do not desire to sublimate their natural inclinations and fully explore the value of their neuroses. Ultimately, the masses are primarily concerned only with satisfying their biological needs and lack the metaphorical spirit to overcome biological determinants. Having never willfully developed the appendages of selfhood they lack the ability to turn into the inertia of the contingencies which spawned them to assert what little agency is open to human beings in an otherwise deterministic framework.

The human animal is on the whole indeed inclined to exist as a rational heard animal. The continuation of the species perhaps depends upon it. Yet culture paradoxically develops through emulation of the few "happy accidents"¹⁸ capable of conceiving their own standard of ethics through the instrumentality of true art, or whatever inspires situations in which "no sham virtues are possible"¹⁹. Individuals possessed of the reverence of self to become beasts of burden, who willingly encumber themselves in the interest of destroying prescribed values by overcoming the dictates of introjected acculturation: "the animal covered with scales" ensconced within the human animal. Elect individuals for whom the oceanic tangibly reveals a deep reality of the human psyche; the *unadorned* struggle between the unmitigated desire to selfishly enjoy and the inherited inclination to acquiesce to social demands.²⁰ Individuals such as Edna, who "(apprehend) instinctively the dual life - that outward existence which conforms, the inward life

18 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, 1895, Trans. and Ed. Anthony M. Ludovici, Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2000, 5.

19 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or, How One Philosophizes with a Hammer*, 1889, *The Portable Nietzsche*, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1982, 463-563, 469.

20 Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1923, Trans. Joan Riviere, Ed. James Strachey, Intro. Peter Gay, New York: Norton and Co., 1989, 19.

which questions".²¹ To be sure, Edna's struggle transcends gender issues and speaks to the fundamental conflict inherent in all human affairs: the primordial tension which renders human society feasible and informs the desires of aspiring overpersons, who ultimately choose to be determined by the power of their egocentric and latent desires as opposed to by the power of acculturation. Nevertheless, Edna must ultimately dispense with any bifurcation of her internal and external lives, and can no longer allow herself to be dominated by custom in light of her oceanic emotional and intellectual insights.

Indeed, for Edna "the voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting (her) soul to wonder for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation".²² By actively exploring and encouraging the development of her oceanic sense, Edna initiates a process of self discovery which eventually invokes her to make a Pragmatic choice "to *liberate the will*" to overcome the inclination to allow her existence to be dominated by her offspring.²³ She naturally cares for her children, yet, in keeping with her continually expanding emotional awareness and correspondingly liberated world-view, prudently evinces more concern for her own development. Edna understands that "the basis of (her) (actions) (must) (be) a hierarchy of values which (she) (herself) (has) established", and further, that her self made morality is "only worthwhile if that system of values can be realized, made incarnate, in (the) world", and accordingly will not defer herself for her children or some

21 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 57.

22 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 57.

23 Emile Durkheim, *Pragmatism and Sociology*, 1955, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983, Marxists Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/durkheim.htm>, Web, 28 June 2008.

propitious future generation which never seems to arrive.²⁴ She understands she must herself become as a little child if she wants to achieve true selfhood, and begins to increasingly "do as she (likes) and feel as she (likes)".²⁵ Even if her wellbeing and the world at large demand she identify with the imposed role of oppressed trophy wife and selfless mother, Edna is capable of "a sacred "No" even to duty", and eventually chooses to self reflexively forgo her seeming best interest in order to define her own essential nature.²⁶

As Cynthia Griffin Wolff recognizes, "The power of the awakening (grows) out of an existential confrontation between the heroine and some external, repressive force".²⁷ Regardless of the fact that Edna exists in a fictional rendering of late nineteenth-century New Orleans and Zarathustra in an entirely fictional environment, each are impinged upon by internal and external pressures to define themselves according to gender. The human world is cross culturally a historical construct resulting primarily from histories informed by patriarchal cultures. Accordingly, self creating women and men have been bullied by androcentric individuals and societies in a vicious acculturative cycle since time immemorial, as many of the world's oldest traditions attest. The natural man unquestioning accepts the gender based role which its society dictates, resulting in mass instantiations of humanity degraded to the point of stale caricatures. Yet the archaic gender roles perpetuated through the ages are in reality a testament to the fact that humanity still allows itself to be defined by the natural contingencies which led to our

24 Emile Durkheim, *Pragmatism and Sociology*, 1955, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983, Marxists Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/durkheim.htm>, Web, 28 June 2008.

25 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 107.

26 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 27.

27 Cynthia Griffin, "Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin's the Awakening", *American Quarterly*, 25.4 (1973): 449-471, Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711633>, Web, 28 June 2008.

existence as a species. Thus as Wolff observes, Edna flatly refuses to sacrifice herself, and in the process becomes aware of her desired place in the universe as an individual.

Not even for her children will Edna be forced to embody the role of selfless mother and doting wife. She has a certain sentimental respect for "mother women" such as Mme Ratignolle, "women who (idolize) their children, (worship) their husbands, and (esteem) it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals ...".²⁸ Yet Edna understands that women such as her acquaintance are usually not naturally inclined toward servitude from birth and are the result of acculturation. Hence regardless of potential consequences, and despite her genuine affection for her own children, Edna will not remain a slave to convention. She is possessed of the courage and ability to "(create) ... freedom for (herself) for new creation", and undergoes Zarathustra's final transformation of metaphorical spirit to become as a "child" who innocently creates a Pragmatic morality of her own invention which reflects her personal disposition and direct experience.²⁹ At whatever cost she asserts her ever developing will against "all created value ... through the instrumentality of "a sacred "Yes"", and achieves the only true freedom available to human beings.³⁰ In an exclusively material existence in which the physical contingencies which dictate our realities can not be abated, the only legitimate freedom is the achievement of relative epistemological self sufficiency. Through the self reflexive modification of the individual world view and mutually informative self conception one can actively choose how they will inevitably

28 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 51.

29 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 27.

30 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 27.

be determined, as Edna does through a process of embracing solitude even while in the physical company of her peers and domestic relations.

The family structure is at the heart of every human society. Yet Edna seeks to exist as an individual in a society rather than simply as a social animal, and refuses to victimize herself in the name of duty. As she states, "By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself I am".³¹ Edna refuses to willingly perceive herself as her families' property, and is all too cognizant of the fact that she is violating prescribed mores to the pronounced dismay of her husband, whose foremost considerations are social and economic standing.³² To be sure, M. Pontellier's affection for the beautiful young Edna resembles his fondness for the other adjunctions to his upper middle class existence, and he is ultimately only interested in maintaining what Zarathustra refers to as "wretched contentment in pair".³³ Edna nevertheless no longer defines herself according to the tyranny of inherited deontological considerations and eventually throws all concern for social standing and public opinion to the wind, deciding to move out of her husband's home to live

31 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 138.

32 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 101.

33 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 70.

alone in an apartment where she might fully nurture her artistic aspirations and new found sense of autonomy in relative solitude.³⁴

Indeed, Edna is entirely dedicated to her personal individuality and freedom, and is willing to follow her own inclinations to whatever result. She refuses to accept the socially imposed mother woman essence assigned her as a nineteenth-century woman, as "it (is) not a condition of life which (fits) her, and she (can) see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui".³⁵ As a girl Edna fell victim to a marriage of comfort and convenience, yet she is unwilling to atone for her mistake with a lifetime of domestic lethargy in a stale, privileged, environment. The impetuosity and lassitude of youth often wed aspiring overpersons to situations and self conceptions which in true adulthood are not easily abated. Perhaps the greatest poverty of human existence exists in the ugly fact that a single moment's action can henceforth determine the course of one's subsequent experience. As Edna is painfully aware, "youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a decoy of nature; a provision to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost".³⁶ Edna therefore refuses to suffer the spirit crushing discontent which individuals disinclined toward conventional existence experience in the course of drudging out the daily routines of bourgeois life, and ultimately rejects inherently amoral natural determinants which would dictate she adhere to an inherited gender based epistemology

34 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 134.

35 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 107.

36 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 171.

and remain forever with a man who ultimately dominates and exploits her, and children who, despite her affection for them, ultimately serve to tie her to a "colorless existence which never (lifts) its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment..."³⁷

To believe that people should allow themselves to be defined by gender is a mistake indicative of the fundamental error at the heart of virtually every culture. As history and a walk around your own backyard reveals, the stronger *naturally* exploit the weaker unless some greater benefit might be derived through altruistic behavior. For human males this fundamental natural paradigm includes within its manifestations a drive to physically subjugate the literally weaker sex. We are in essence not much different than our most primitive ancestors. The time honored gender based conceptions which the masses accept as handed down from providence are in reality the internalized evidence of a legacy of animalistic oppression under the influence of *biological determinism*. As a species we remain cave dwellers in a perpetual dark age newly lit up with electric light - as the Mme Ratignolle's and M. Pontellier's and strip malls and slaughter houses and movie houses and makeup counters and metropolises of the world prove. The vast majority of human mores, habits, institutions, and cultural productions are in reality little more than unmitigated natural paradigms manifested in human terms. However many members of contemporary occidental societies somehow feel that a "return" to nature's design is required. Of course, in reality nature lacks any intelligence, will, or intentionality, despite the human inclination to personify natural forces and infer order where it does not exist, and is only motion and physical matter and relative expressions of chaos. Nevertheless, perhaps it is somehow civilization which has perverted humanity. Indeed, somewhere something has gone wrong, but that something is not that "Mother Nature's" arbitrary paradigms have been abandoned.

³⁷ Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 107.

To the contrary, the difficulty exists in the illusion that any more than a single preliminary step away from allowing ourselves to be unmitigatedly determined by natural paradigms has been taken by the species as a whole. Man is the only animal we can be absolutely sure possesses limited freewill within an otherwise deterministic framework. That tiny seed of agency exists in the fact that as rational animals we can conceptualize ourselves as separate from and outside natural forces, which act upon us yet need not entirely define our self conceptions and subsequent behaviors. We are thus to some degree possessed of the faculty to choose which biological determinants we allow to dictate our beliefs and consequent behaviors. The evidence of this reality exists at the very heart of civilization, which requires that the strongest natural inclinations, i.e., sex and aggression, remain sublimated so that the subsequent simian inclination to live socially may be expressed.³⁸ Although human beings are descended from, and remain, social apes, as a species we reached a point in our psychological development where our individual psyches became so complex and powerful that our latent drives came to challenge even our inclination to exist socially. Thus the natural man came to truly exist through the subsequent birth of the "superego",³⁹ the "animal covered with scales", which passes from generation to generation through the instrumentality of acculturation.⁴⁰ The very concepts of *human* society and morality thus prove inherently antithetical to the most primary natural inclinations and impulses; a fact which Nietzsche criticizes, yet, as with so many of his

38 Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1923, Trans. Joan Riviere, Ed. James Strachey, Intro. Peter Gay, New York: Norton and Co., 1989, 19.

39 Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1923, Trans. Joan Riviere, Ed. James Strachey, Intro. Peter Gay, New York: Norton and Co., 1989, 34.

40 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 27.

unfounded contentions and prejudices, he speaks beyond himself, and there is profound value even in his misapprehensions and mistakes.⁴¹

To be sure, many of Nietzsche's ultimate assertions are valid, yet he reaches many of his conclusions based upon misapprehensions through an accident of passion and honesty. Likewise, many of his various assertions are preposterous, yet he makes useful points in relation to ultimately unfounded assertions such as "the eternal recurrence".⁴² Nietzsche not only accepted many false presumptions in keeping with the pseudoscience and prejudices of his era, but also somehow rejected many of Darwin's assertions, and unfortunately did not survive long enough to see the full delineation of Psychoanalytic concepts under the auspices of that "Ugliest Man" - that killer of God whom he predicted - who allowed humanity to understand itself as psychological as opposed to spiritual.⁴³ Nevertheless, many of Nietzsche's contentions correspond with Freudian and Darwinian concepts and supersede any unfounded prejudices and misapprehensions he harbored concerning the value of science and supremacy of art.⁴⁴ Nietzsche failed to adequately appreciate that for rational animals science is the distilled essence of human potential, which put to its ultimate usefulness might elevate even death, thus rendering all notions of substance dualism and its adjunct institutions impotent and irrelevant. Indeed, science is a means through which not just some elect higher men, but all humanity might eventually

41 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or, How One Philosophizes with a Hammer*, 1889, *The Portable Nietzsche*, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1982, 463-563, 489-490.

42 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 220.

43 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 264.

44 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 302.

achieve a tangible eternity of absolute freedom in which to perfect their art or whatever their individual interests dictate. In any event, regardless of Nietzsche's shortcomings he speaks beyond himself, and the occidental inclination to view nature as a hostile degenerative force to be overcome proves ultimately correct – only misguided.

Nietzsche's assertion that the greatest good exists in everything "that enhances the feeling of power, the Will to Power, and power itself in man", is a clear expression of nature's amoral "ethic."⁴⁵ To be sure, Nietzsche's will to power philosophy is a potentially dangerous entity which misinterpolated can be used to rationalize all forms of cruelty. Nevertheless, properly understood and asserted it allows rare individuals such as Edna and Zarathustra the ability to overcome natural determinants by self reflexively redefining their individual epistemologies. They are thus to some degree capable of altering their behaviors and experiences. In contrast to the masses who share a common inherited identity which allows them to satisfy their biological needs and impulses, Edna and Zarathustra are capable of channeling their natural human aggression into overcoming the *all too human* inclination to allow oneself to be determined by convention and acculturation. Thus, regardless of gender, the truest will to power ultimately proves to be the will to power over oneself and the factors which determine one's world view and self conception, which are of course mutually informative and serve as the primary vehicles for the realization of relative human freedom.

In her essay, "The Nullification of Edna Pontellier", Katherine Kearns argues that "(Edna) may be felt to awaken from her dreams into others' dreams as she takes to herself the language, the assumptions, the essential misogyny of a thoroughly masculinized vision. Thinking

45 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, 1895, Trans. and Ed. Anthony M. Ludovici, Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2000, 4.

that she crafts an autonomous self - "a solitary soul" - she vivifies instead the mummified man, a hollow Schopenhauer, an echoing Nietzsche".⁴⁶ Thus according to Kearns, Edna rejects the imposed role of subservient mother and wife only to assume a masculinized persona informed primarily by male artists and philosophers. To be sure, Edna's "masculine" artistic aspirations are conceived as unbecoming a lady according to nineteenth-century sensibilities. Nevertheless, the desire and capacity to create can certainly exist equally in women and men; the fact that men have historically dominated and defined art and philosophy does not negate this reality. Determined by biological drives, men have historically defined cultural beliefs and invariably relegated women to subservience in virtually every regard. The vast majority of people allow themselves to be defined by whatever acculturation they received as children, but a few happy accidents, rare instantiations of higher humanity such as Edna and Zarathustra, are able to extract themselves from an existence of similitude and redefine themselves according to a morality of their individual creation.

At any rate, Edna indeed resembles the best qualities of Nietzsche's "overman", yet she does not, as Kearns maintains, reject imposed feminine gender roles simply because she has introjected ideals espoused by male artists and philosophers. To the contrary, Edna rejects said acculturation as it is inherently stifling and prevents the development of her emerging sense of personal empowerment and autonomy. Despite misogynistic tendencies, Nietzsche, and the Continental tradition which he punctuates, ultimately illustrate that personal autonomy and socially unfettered free-will are the greatest good of the individual, regardless of gender. Kearns' assertion ultimately reveals the degree to which a patriarchal, masculincentric, epistemology

46 Katherine Kearns, "The Nullification of Edna Pontellier", *American Literature* 63.1 (1991): 62-88, Published by: Duke University Press Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2926562>, Web, 28 June 2008.

informs contemporary views regarding gender roles. Much as when Edna learns to swim, and "her unlooked-for achievement (becomes) the subject of wonder, applause and admiration ... each (man) (congratulating) himself that his special teachings had accomplished this desired end", Kearns' assertion implies that only the inspiration and instruction of some male who preceded Edna in her pursuits could possibly have resulted in her success.⁴⁷ In a patriarchal culture which historically prohibited women from expressing their creativity and individuality publically, it would naturally follow that primarily male archetypes are available to aspiring overpersons such as Edna. Yet it does not follow that she is simply a female caricature of male aspirations.

To the contrary, Edna regularly asserts her genuine individuality, repeatedly evincing a lack of concern for social convention in her personal affairs. Such is the case when she ignores her regular Tuesday callers to her husband's pronounced dismay.⁴⁸ Edna is dominated by her husband, yet unlike her peers she rejects her subjugation rather than internalizing it. She refuses to remain a willing slave to the self conception which her husband seeks to impose, and is fully aware that "her marriage ... was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate".⁴⁹ In light of her awakening, Edna refuses to exist as just another of M. Pontellier's expensive possessions and loses interest in the stagnate company of her husband and socially privileged "peers," whose self conceptions and subsequent

47 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 73-74.

48 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 100.

49 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 62.

behaviors are largely determined by their socio-economic status. Edna realizes that the majority of those with whom she interacts "do not understand (her)", that "(hers)" is not the mouth for (their) ears".⁵⁰ She therefore refuses to stifle her individuality, and hence must disassociate from most, but not all, of her peers.

Similarly, Zarathustra understands that human beings *require* social interaction; that there exist "higher men" with whom interaction is probably worthwhile. He realizes that discernment is necessary, not misanthropy or absolute isolation. As Zarathustra states, "An insight has come to me: let Zarathustra speak not to the people, but to companions ... Living companions I need, who follow me because they want to follow themselves".⁵¹ Hence much as Zarathustra chooses to abandon conventional society in pursuit of personal autonomy and subsequently heightened intellectual and emotional states, he eventually chooses to at least temporarily reenter the society of *higher men* - the sort of characters who, due to relatively individualistic natures, would probably mingle exclusively on the periphery of orthodox social circles, if at all, were they transposed into a real world situation. For her part, Edna correspondingly flouts convention by taking up company with semi-undesirables such as the womanizing Alcee Arobin, and the eccentric, disagreeable, musician, Mademoiselle Reisz; the sort of fringe individuals who exist in almost ill repute at the edge of bourgeois conventionality; a state of relegation which often invokes such individuals to pursue creative endeavors. According to Edna's world view, such individuals represent instantiations of *higher humanity* almost by virtue of their marginal social

50 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 16.

51 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 23.

position alone. Thus for Zarathustra and Edna those who diverge from the herd are inherently more suitable as companions and confidants by virtue of their peripheral status.

Nonetheless, much as Zarathustra, Edna eventually realizes that she is ultimately stifled by the majority of her relationships with even instantiations of perceived higher humanity, and further, that she will inevitably lose interest in passing friendships and romantic infatuations which are rarely in short supply.⁵² Thus regardless of her physical proximity to her peers Edna exists in increasing isolation. Her deepest desires for freedom and individuality are becoming clear to her through the murky undercurrent of her psyche which rages like a torrent that can not be inhibited. Edna consequently can not exist in accordance with orthodox sensibilities, yet unlike Zarathustra, who is presumably a bachelor awaiting the coming of his metaphorical posthumous progeny, she is encumbered with the unwanted responsibility of being a parent and is forced to deal with both internal and external pressures to acquiesce to the demands of convention in her children's interest. Like all children they did not ask to be brought into existence. Edna does not want to cause them unnecessary pain, yet, like everyone they are determined by the contingencies which led to their birth and are inevitably determined to suffer loss. As an aspiring overperson Edna possesses the ability to commit acts which are entirely cruel when necessary to her project of achieving and maintaining epistemological autonomy. She has the strength to embody the "preying lion", which preys even on its deepest affections when they threaten its ability to define itself and the world at large in keeping with its individual will. Edna does not attempt any conventional moral justification of her actions as none is possible or necessary. She is "beyond good and evil" in a causally deterministic framework and chooses to

⁵² Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 174.

assert her limited free will even if it means her own demise.⁵³ Edna irrevocably refuses to exist other than in keeping with her own desires and pronounces a "sacred No"⁵⁴ to the socially imposed essence assigned her as a nineteenth-century American woman, and thus eventually feels compelled to paradoxically assert her individuality and freedom through an ode to selfhood which results in nonbeing.⁵⁵

For his part, Zarathustra has more leeway to entirely forsake "civilized" human society. He has recourse to an existence in a primordial wilderness where he can define his habits, impressions, and self conception unfettered by the tyranny of custom. Although Edna could hypothetically pursue a similar life in the wilds, or perhaps move to another city or country, as an upper middle class nineteenth-century American woman she is unlikely to do so. As a male in a mythical environment in which basic necessities need not necessarily be addressed Zarathustra is relatively free to simply disappear into the mountains, yet Edna would almost certainly meet with pronounced difficulty in every regard if she attempted to follow suit. Her family would likely prevent her escape. Fortunately, Zarathustra is free from such considerations and in due course realizes he must forsake even the companionship of his higher men if he wishes to realize his objective of achieving an unassailable sense of self. He realizes his would-be apprentices are incapable of fully abandoning their social conditioning and excessively cling to inherited epistemologies even in light of new concepts. They are consequently unable to reclaim

53 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or, How One Philosophizes with a Hammer*, 1889, *The Portable Nietzsche*, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1982, 463-563, 501.

54 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 27.

55 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Ed. with Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert, 1899 and Various, New York: Penguin, 2003, 176.

themselves from acculturation and lack the strength of will required to create individual moralities of their own invention.⁵⁴ Indeed, even the higher men are incapable of rising from their slumber to exit the cavern of relative misconception, and are thus not the proper companions of an aspiring overperson.

Ultimately, Zarathustra and Edna to varying degrees must abandon conventional society and social interaction in pursuit of personal freedom. Yet they do so according to contrasting dispositions and motivations. Zarathustra almost gladly abandons his contemporaries, thus ascending to the heights of epistemic autonomy through the instrumentality of perpetually expanding intellectual and emotional states. He consciously chooses to perceive, feel, think, and act in ways which reflect his self sanctioned right to define his world view and corresponding self conception in keeping with his realizations and desires. Zarathustra self reflexively asserts his limited free will and thus actively participates in how he will inevitably be determined. Correspondingly, he selects and rejects his companions in a similar manner; as a male in a masculicentric society he has more freedom to do so. Despite a more social nature, Edna evinces a comparable degree of self-sufficiency. In keeping with her free-spirited and independent disposition, she can not adapt to biologically determined, gender specific, social conventions and circumstances. She has glimpsed what lies beyond the eternal chatter of restless, aping, humanity - the possibility of instantiating an incontrovertible "I" which remains forever unnamable by anyone but herself. She simultaneously embodies Nietzsche's "newest virtue" and disproves his inherited misogynistic prejudices. Like a child before it's forced to be anything she will not sacrifice her desires and emotions. Like Zarathustra she has the capacity for true *honesty*, and willingly suffers whatever may result in consequence of her true essence's unfolding. Indeed,

54 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892, Trans. and Ed. with Preface Walter Kaufman, New York: Penguin, 1978, 326.

Zarathustra and Edna Pontellier traverse divergent avenues which lead to similar yet decidedly individualized instantiations of personal autonomy.

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