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Existentialism

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Q. Over the course of the semester, we have examined different problems of modernity and existence […] trace the development of a thought or theme that you consider an important element of the existentialist tradition.

Genealogical Investigation of Alienation and Desire in the Existentialist Tradition

Alienation and Desire are two inescapable, intertwined themes in all works in the existentialist tradition, necessarily as they represent the condition of the subject simultaneously alienated from the world and experiencing desire directed towards it. In this essay, I will traverse the genealogy of these two themes throughout the history of the existential tradition from texts by Kierkegaard to Sartre, and storytelling by Ibsen to Feinberg. In doing so I aim to offer a perspective on the relevance of these themes not only in artistic or philosophical form but in reality, of one's own lives, in lived, embodied experience, and the repercussions they have as we march into the postmodern.

I. Alienation: Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*; Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*; Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*; Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*

Alienation in its existential form appears first in Kierkegaard, who describes the paradoxical actions by the biblical Abraham, sacrificing his son at God's command. The Hegelian perspective that Kierkegaard adapts reveals that the story contains "the teleological suspension of the ethical," (Kierkegaard, 46) or in other words the suspension of *universal* ethics for an *absolute* divine—Abraham, by entering a "relation with God" via the "leap of faith," is above the universal. The alienation then materializes in the "paradox of faith […] that there is an inwardness that is incommensurable with the outer, an inwardness that […] is not identical with [commonplace privacy] but is a new inwardness," (Kierkegaard, 60) a necessary and sufficient condition for this faith. This "infinite resignation" as a form of alienation is alienation from the Hegelian ethical sphere, regulating and reproducing ethical norms. The significance in the Christian sphere of Kierkegaard's contemporaries is that existence and subjectivity are *for the first time* divorced

from ethics, and that individual faith is wholly incompatible with it. It is the divine ethics of the era having the seeds of its own demise, as one's faith-relation must contradict the universal-relation, thus the "paradox of faith". This is from which our discussion of alienation must begin, as it first marks alienation in distinctly individual form.

Alienation takes a secular form in Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* which, disposing of God and faith, introduces an absolute disconnect from the sphere of ethics: society. He aims to partake in the simplest of social interactions, deliberately bumping into a stranger: "But I confess that after many attempts […] we didn't bump into each other, no matter what! […] it seems that we're just about to bump, when I look up—and once again I've stepped aside while he's gone by without even noticing me." (Dostoyevsky, 37) It is not simply that he is fearful, but that he consciously attempts to bump, yet he could not; the stranger not intentionally ignores him but fails to notice him. The alienation from society is complete from this moment, as this reveals that it is not animosity, but disconnect that drives and reinforces his spite. His attempts at socialization with his former classmates end in failure also not due to lack of effort, but because he himself engages ruinously, spitefully attacking his friends: "I continued almost automatically, because I was beginning to become numb with horror, not knowing how I could be speaking this way." (Dostoyevsky, 52) He is decidedly unintentional, "automatic" in his spitefulness, yet he yearns for connection; he resides in the paradox where he is spiteful deliberately yet yearns unintelligibly for connection, in a paradox akin to the paradox of silence in faith in Abraham.

As opposed to *Fear and Trembling* the first-person narration of the Underground Man highlights how isolated his subjective experience is from others, as he *literally* resides underground. Comparing with Abraham, the Underground Man's alienation is seemingly without an absolute, and his *spitefulness* or equivalently *nihilation* of connection into convoluted insults, exacerbates his condition as opposed to Abraham who simply "must stay silent." Abraham's leap of faith requires suspending the universal ethical for a paradoxical relationship with the absolute; the Underground Man seems conversely paralyzed—trapped not by *external* divine command, but by an *internal* spiteful hyperconsciousness that isolates him as effectively as Abraham's faith, making his inescapable subjectivity the secular ground of his alienation.

This subjectivity or as he terms it "consciousness," is a disease: "not only is being overly conscious a disease, but so is being conscious at all," a quality he contrasts with others who lack such a sophisticated subjectivity as his, these "spontaneous people and men of action." (Dostoyevsky, 6) Such others, for him, are the *absolute* other—the fact that he is fundamentally disconnected with other subjects, that they can not even be believed to have "consciousness." Thus spiraling into the solipsistic rant in his isolated situation he completes his alienation, driven only by internal subjectivity, disconnected from the universal and relegated to the raw consciousness underground.

This other-ing, in the Hegelian formulation when performed by both subjects who enter a dialectic, is formed when subject A, while having no choice to relegate B into other-ness, *acknowledges* B's subjectivity and understands that B must equally *acknowledge* themself, A, as the other; Beauvoir deems this *reciprocal* otherness. However this dialectic is complicated by the unique situations of subjects embodying certain classes of bodies, and produces an absolute other which we examine this time, not the subject othering another (like the Underground Man) but the subject who is being other-ed. The subject resides in a *class* of body perceived by other subjects to have certain qualities that are independent of the subject, and to various degrees denies the subjectivity of the subject residing in it. Woman, for instance, under patriarchal embodiment "is the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity." (Beauvoir, Second Sex, 4)Her thoughts, opinions, actions are considered simple facts of her body: "Is femininity secreted by the ovaries? Is it enshrined in a Platonic heaven? Is a frilly petticoat enough to bring it down to earth?" (Ibid, 3) The female function, the platonic essence, or external appearance are all elements of the object, the material conditions of the body or social embodiment of the woman, the "girling of the girl" (Butler, 7), and independent from her subjectivity. As opposed to the reciprocal otherness of two subjects, woman is the absolute other, who is denied entry into the universal dialectic. Thus embodiment poses a distinct alienation to the embodied subject, and to every extent one is situated in a body, it is from the body the subject is alienated from.

Beauvoir's conception of the embodiment of women is thus naturally extended in other fictional or autobiographical accounts, in Ibsen's play *Hedda Gabler*. Hedda's alienation, as opposed to the Underground Man, is performed externally as she is isolated not due to her solipsistic tendencies but by the situation enforced upon her due to her female embodiment. Her absolute otherness is reflected in her conversation with Lovborg about their previous affair: "Yes, Hedda…and then when I used to confess to you […] Oh, Hedda…what power was it in you that forced me to reveal all those things? / Do you think it was a power in me?" (Ibsen, 218) Taking him literally, Lovborg considers Hedda as an enabler of his own subjective desire, that she *made* him confess through her charm, affect, or other objective qualities, not that she simply *desired* to know and he obliged. Hedda suggests, on the other hand: "Do you find it so hard to understand that a young girl […] should want to find out about a world that […] she isn't supposed to know anything about?" (Ibsen, 219) Taking her also literally, this "peep" into an aesthetic mode of existence (Kierkegaard), the romantic vision of love is what she subjectively desires, and is the motivation for her affair.

However, undergirding these tensions we observe a slightly different conflict: both Lovborg and Hedda desire each other but in diametrically opposite ways: Lovborg deeply wants Hedda, but only as an absolute icon of the eternal feminine, the one who brings honesty, love and desire out of him, or simply, a heterosexual relationship under patriarchy. When he glimpses at her subjectivity—her alienation, disconcert, spiteful and desperate subjectivity as she points a gun at him, he could no longer be with her in this relation. Hedda equivalently deeply desired Lovborg but instead as two subjects in a reciprocal relationship, "this secret intimacy, this companionship" as equals; she desires a *friendship* between subjects, and thus had no choice but to end it because "there was an imminent danger that the game would become a reality […] how could you offer such violence to…to your confidential companion?" (Ibsen, 219); in this case, from "companion" into the romantic "game", of heterosexual subject-object relation where she is relegated to the absolute other. It is still clear that in this encounter woman cannot gain subjectivity in relation with man through her own subjectivity, but instead step outside her body to view

herself as the other, considering that Hedda, describing her own desires, describes not "I" but references a "young girl," completing her alienation from subjectivity and her body.

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Thus we acknowledge, the development of existential alienation, emerging from the "paradox" of absolute faith-relation between subject and absolute, traversing secular society through the hyperconscious subject, culminates in the absolute other-ing of this subject from the body and therefore from other subjects and ultimately general society. From this disconnect we observe naturally arising a yearning, a desire for authentic connection that one, the existential subject, has been robbed of. This desire is directed and formulated in various ways, but ultimately as an expression of one's authenticity, as we will observe. Alienation, then, while a curse directed upon all subjects, is also the condition under which emerges the desire by the subject to achieve their goal, their project, and justify their existence, and thus are inseparable concepts that must be discussed together for a fuller understanding of the existential condition. We now retrace each form of alienation and consider the desire that arises from each form, ultimately to show the various modes of failure and success desire can take.

II. Desire: Dostoyevsky, *Underground Man*; Sartre, *Nausea*; Ibsen, *Hedda Gabbler*; Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*

Dostoyevsky offers the starting point for this discussion, as his "disease of consciousness", and thus the resulting great chasm with others exhibits in the Underground Man a want for a *reciprocal desire*, or in Lacanian terms: "man's very desire is constituted [sic]. Its object is a desire, that of other people." (Lacan, 182) The Underground Man grants initially, in his discursive monologue, that "desire is a manifestation of all life, that is, of all human life." (Dostoyevsky, 20) This is to consecrate desire as the pure expression of the subject, that represents a certain authenticity and respects their subjectivity in its fullest. This arbitrary authenticity is later remarked upon: "one's very own free, unfettered desire, one's own whim, no matter how wild, one's own fantasy, even though sometimes roused to the point of madness." (Dostoyevsky, 18) This mad, fantastical, irrational, unfettered yearning is a reflection of the subject onto the real world; yet he also doubts its authenticity: "But what if I've taken it into my head that this is not the only reason for

living, and, that if one is to live at all, one might as well live in a mansion?"—that desire itself is a hoax, and "that my entire way of being is merely a fraud?" This doubt is why the Underground Man concludes "The final result, gentlemen, is that it's better to do nothing!" (Dostoyevsky, 26) Thus in Dostoyevsky, the desire is a remarkable expression of subjectivity but is *degenerating* when directed at concrete objects, and thus we will move on to consider instead a case of desire directed towards another subject, in his interaction with Liza: the case of "the desire for nothing nameable"—nothing, in this case, the very "nothing but the pure nihilation of the In-itself […] a hole of being at the heart of Being." (Sartre, *Being*, 711)

Liza's interaction with the Underground Man is the strongest expression of a subject's desire for another person's understanding and equal desire. He is possessed by Liza's smile as he waits for her at home: "even after I returned home, even after nine o'clock, […] her image continued to haunt me," the specific image of her "pitiful, unnatural, distorted smile she'd had at that moment" when she understood him, his despicable, spiteful self to the fullest (Dostoyevsky, 75). He is forever stuck "even fifteen years later […] still pictur[ing] Liza […] with that same pitiful, distorted, and unnecessary smile." *Pity* is Liza's understanding of his horrid inner condition; *distortion* is his own projection of the suspicion of *degenerating* desire, of it being "a fraud"; and it is *unnecessary* because, in his alienated state this great chasm between subjects seems absolutely unbridgeable. Yet she still smiles, the simultaneous affirmation of all that is horrid and yet *her* continued desire towards him. This reciprocal desire is an exemplary expression of the previously described reciprocal otherness of Beauvoir, of each subject viewing another as simultaneously an object of desire and desiring for the other to reciprocate it. The alienation is inescapable, yet we bridge this solipsistic degeneration via this reciprocal desire.

Consider similarly, Roquentin's reflection on the song heard in the very beginning and end of *Nausea*. Roquentin's condition shows a lack in *justification for existence*: "Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance." (Sartre, *Nausea*, 109) This is the clearest description of the contingency of existence, its "superfluous (de trop)"-ness and futility, and alienation

from meaning—its *contingency* (Sartre, *Being*, 68). On the other hand, the song "Some of these days" (incorrectly described) as sung by a black woman, is confronted with a strong sense of *necessity*: "A few seconds more and the Negress will sing. It seems inevitable, so strong is the necessity of this music: nothing can interrupt it." *Necessity* justifies the existence of the music (a form of art created by a subject for-itself), as does each note of the instruments—"so many notes have been preparing […] dying that it might be born"—prepares and necessitates her voice. His "Nausea has disappeared" temporarily, as he hears the lyrics; something he only realized the meaning of at the very end: "She sings. So two of them are saved: the Jew [the composer] and the Negress. Saved," because first, their contingent existence is crystallized and immortalized into the necessary object of the art form, and second, via mediation by the art form Roquentin in turn *requires* them, although in being separated through space-time acknowledge and accept their subject existence (Sartre, *Nausea*, 23). It is important to clarify the two-fold process forming this intersubjectivity. "Culture"—or art, in this case, as Sartre later remarks—"does not save anything or anyone, it doesn't justify" by itself but only through the fact that "it's a product of man: he projects himself into it, he recognizes himself in it; that critical mirror alone offers him his image." (Sartre via Weigel, 486) The existence of the singer and composer is justified by first producing the project, projecting the image of themselves into it, and then finally another subject "recogniz[ing] himself" in it, the music form entering his listening and drawing meaning, Roquentin *needing* their crystallized, encapsulated representation of their subjective existence.

This dichotomy between contingency of existence and necessity in justifying it is what drives our discussion of alienation and desire. Contingency, as suggested, is the alienation from meaning, from all other things, due to "The For-itself, [that] is nothing but the pure nihilation of the In-itself; it is like a hole of being at the heart of Being"—all being for-itself are held out into the *nothing*, facing the nausea, the *anxiety* of nothing, and thus "it is in anguish that man gets the consciousness of his freedom." (Sartre, *Being*, 711, 97) This consciousness of freedom, the constant 'nihilation of facticity', means that human reality 'chooses itself' and its ends. Desire then emerges as a fundamental project born from the lack which freedom reveals—a project with striking similarities to the constructions explored in Dostoyevsky.

The particular form of mutual, reciprocal desire, seeking a reciprocal *necessity* between subjects, finds its echo in the song lyrics Roquentin recalls at the beginning and end: "Some of these days / You'll miss me, honey." To miss is for a subject to simply desire another as an object; but stating you *will* miss is to fully understand the other's reciprocal desire directed at yourself. One understands that the other *needs* you and thus they are acknowledged, "saved" as a subject who desires you, just as you will desire and need them. The Underground Man failed to acknowledge this desire when he abruptly ruptures this relation when he pays Liza for sex; yet Roquentin finds hope that reciprocal desire is what can save us from the solipsism, the despondent spitefulness or the Nausea that haunts the solitary subject thrown into existence. "What man desires is the desire of the Other" (Lacan), and this because of the conditions of the nauseating, spiteful conditions of existence itself. Sartre suggests explicitly in *Being and Nothingness* "in desire I make myself flesh in the presence of the Other in order to appropriate the Other's flesh" (Sartre, *Being*, 471)—that one presents oneself as the "flesh," the body, the object to the other who is now subject, acknowledges the subjectivity of the other, and then "incarnate the Other" in reciprocation. This is the reciprocal construction applied both in song and text in *Nausea*, which mirrors and further develops the alternative for alienation via desire offered yet failed by the Underground Man, yet we see hope for in Roquentin, although limited in that is it mediated via an art form, not encountering the subject in their full form, but their trace immortalized and preserved only in material.

The relationship between alienation and desire in *Hedda Gabler*, however, takes a more fundamental form; we will observe this as the starting point, the embodiment from which a more positive form of desire can emerge. For now, however, this potential for reciprocal desire, or even the Sartrean dynamic where one chooses to make "myself flesh in the presence of the Other," (Ibid., 471) seems foreclosed when an embodied subject—a woman, for instance—is already relegated by social structures to the position of an absolute other, to be relegated "flesh." This constructs a different form of desire, the desire for *understanding* or recognition as a subject capable of entering the dialectic, a prerequisite seemingly denied Hedda due to the specific, embodied nature of her alienation, distinct from the more purely

ontological or social alienation faced by the Underground Man or Roquentin. We observe this in two cases, by Thea towards Elvstead and by Hedda towards Tesman, both cases of marriage with a man who fails to observe his wife's subjectivity.

Thea's alienation from her marriage is a "classic" case as the husband "just finds me useful." (Ibsen, 188) It is not simply that Elvstead is unaware of her emotions but that he fails to construct reciprocity in their relationship in acknowledging her as a full subject; even she herself cannot acknowledge her own subjectivity: "And then it doesn't cost much to keep me. I'm cheap" participating in her own objectification—even the play itself never references her except as Thea but Mrs. Elvstead, in an absolute othering in form. Yet it is clear she yearns for a commonality, an understanding: "we just haven't a thought in common. We don't share a thing, [Elvstead] and I" also in why Lovborg was enticing: "And [Lovborg] . . . for his part . . . he's made me into a sort of real person. Taught me to think . . . and to understand quite a lot of things." (Ibsen, 190); she was treated as a subject capable of thinking, understanding and ultimately allowed Thea to help him with his work, the full acknowledgement of her consciousness, value of perspective and intelligence. They were, as Hedda was with Lovborg, "Companions! Yes, fancy, Hedda—that is the very word he used!"

Equivalently Hedda's desire for being understood is reflected in her lies on why she burnt the manuscript: "I did it for your sake, Jörgen." (Ibsen, 251) She, like Thea, is the helpless co-conspirator in the absolute othering of her self as she (presumably slyly) remarks "I couldn't bear the thought that someone else should put you in the shade." which Tesman received at face value "exclaiming, torn between doubt and happiness." He considers Hedda as still wife *first*, then individual *second* and joyous when Hedda appears to prioritize the first even if evidence is presented otherwise: "But—but—I never knew you show your love like that before." He chooses the former object Hedda over the latter subject Hedda as the *object* of his desire, and thus alienates her in ignoring any signals otherwise, and also excused henceforth from the play as by doing so has no more function to offer in the plot. The manifest desire in both Thea and Hedda, therefore, are caused by this absolute other-ing of the embodied subject—the *housewife*—and this alienation is what both drives desire in Thea and Hedda towards Lovborg; not

reciprocal desire as partners, as "companions" but as potential subjects who may understand and acknowledge their subjectivity. Distinction must be made, however, in their perceiving Lovborg as potential subjects capable of understanding initially seems objectifying, but in fact acknowledging their subjectivity (though not reciprocated), as *understanding* another, to "make myself flesh in the presence of the Other" is only possible as a subject. Both, however, are damned still to alienation as Hedda commits suicide, sealing off her potential rescue and Thea chooses the elusive hope Tesman has to offer her which, as we know from Hedda, is impossible.

Now we observe reciprocal desire in its fullest form, in Feinberg's hope for the capacity of mutual understanding in embodied relationships. As a butch lesbian she directly observes the contrast between her contemporary public's perception of her body, and the possibility of reciprocal desire despite, or perhaps owing to her embodiment, in the constructed *space* of her home bar Tifka's. The alienation she faces is with her body, specifically the changes in puberty, "notic[ing] [her] breasts growing [and] menstruation." This causes the "boys [who] hung out of car windows and yelled vulgar things at me […] Mr. Singer at the pharmacy stared at my breasts"—a gaze, a desire that objectifies and reduces, a desire via absolute other-ing of the subject (Feinberg, 19). Indeed it is the externally *marked* body that she notices, not the myriad of biological or mood changes, as she emphasizes—"But breasts!"—that objectifies and bothers her, not the "menstruation […] Unless I bled all over myself, it was a private thing between me and my body." As the gendered or in her case the ungenderable (presenting androgynously since young) subject reduced to the absolute other and presented on a plate sometimes as an object of desire and sometimes of ridicule by the male subject, the onus under patriarchy falls onto this other that must attempt to reconcile—and—the body and subject. The subject is forced artificially to alienate themselves from their body—a decidedly individual alienation as shown before, caused by the external gaze felt upon her, and it is this gaze that she fears, that "whatever the world thought was wrong with me, I finally began to agree they were right." It is the tragedy of normativity and the absolute othering that one is alienated from their own bodies due to the markings made by society, then internalizes it as their own,

which inevitably manifests itself as "guilt [which] burned like vomit in my throat," thus finally treating this degenerating form of desire as the only *possible* form it can take; that "I finally began to agree they were right."

This is contrasted with her experience during her interlope to Tifka's, a queer bar where she is adopted and socialized into her role as a butch. Her body is observed again, this time from another butch that eventually becomes her mentor: "She looked me up and down. I widened my stance." During this gaze upon her body she decidedly has full agency and subjectivity, responding to being seen via widening her stance; offered a handshake and feeling that the other butch "strengthened her grip, I responded in kind." Contrast this from the comfortable place from which her femininely marked body was looked upon before—from the car by the boys, from over the counter by the shopowner. The handshake is an active interaction with eyes scanning and hands clasping. Indeed she stares back in full statement of her subjectivity: "I immediately loved the strength in her face. The way her jaw set. […] Broad back, wide neck. Large breasts bound tight." (Feinberg, 26) Past this interaction and throughout Tifka's, her own breasts never again appear to bother her, as the artificial alienation from her body is no longer externally imposed.

Ultimately, body is the site that she finds a true reciprocal desire far from the vulgar objectification before. She finds herself at a moment in the bar when she stands up to comfort a femme, Yvette and offers her a slow dance: "Then I felt her body move closer and we kind of melted together." (Feinberg, 32) This is her first encounter with positive form of desire as an embodied subject. She notices the body of the other: "I discovered all the sweet surprises a femme can give a butch: her hand on the back of my neck, open on my shoulder," as well the reciprocal desire *for* her: "Her lips almost touching my ear." She looks at Yvette, feels her desire for her while feeling her desire for her; the subjectivity of herself and of the object of desire. This is the positive form of reciprocal desire, failed in Dostoyevsky and intersubjective in Sartre, as both undervalued the role of embodiment in the formation and dynamics of reciprocal desire. As a subject, through her butch identity she interacts with another person, who through her femme identity interacts with her. They embody bodies distinctly marked, yet one of their

own choosing, in their own terms, and satisfy and acknowledge each of their desires that are mediated by the shared symbols (G. H. Mead) of their community. The roles, the distinct, yet self-chosen roles have hailed (Jameson) them, into which they gladly accepted when they entered the bar and eventually the chosen families: "That's what I wanted to be." Then, only when these embodiments are chosen, true reciprocal desire may blossom: "I felt her desire, she aroused mine."

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Existentialism often feels as if it is a despondent discipline; it rejects any simple justifications for existence, catalogues various negative failure modes in resolving this dilemma, and shows glimmers of hope only to in the next argument debunk and deny it. Yet the investigation of life and existence we cannot free ourselves from, the alienation and frustration and anguish every human without exception shall experience; but equivalently we cannot extinguish the hope that there may be relief, the incessant questioning of the universe for a form of existence that preserves the myriad frustrations of the human condition yet synthesizes something meaningful, something worthwhile. I have outlined in this essay the genealogy of one of these hopes, *reciprocal desire*, and how the investigation of it increasingly shows maturity and success in yielding meaningful forms of human experience and relations in texts through time. By doing so, I hope, I offer a vision where the relations we form enrich the lives we live, and thus may provide meaning to the fundamental conditions of our existence.

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