DIANNE BUNCH
Bilkent University

Dangerous Spending Habits: The Epistemology of Edna Pontellier's Extravagant Expenditures in *The Awakening*

IN AN INTROSPECTIVE DIARY ENTRY OF 1884, the widowed and motherless Kate Chopin wrote:

> If it were possible for my husband and my mother to come back to earth, I feel that I would unhesitatingly give up every thing that has come into my life since they left it and join my existence again with theirs. To do that, I would have to forget the past ten years of my growth—my real growth. But I would take back a little wisdom with me; it would be the spirit of perfect acquiescence.[1]

Reading this passage, we might wonder if this were actually written by the same author of America's feminist classic, *The Awakening*. Chopin's early biographer, Seyersted, found this entry highly ambiguous; indeed, conventional wisdom traditionally sees intellectual "real growth" and "perfect acquiescence" as contradictory experiences. If we take this passage seriously, Chopin's "little wisdom" (surely an ironic understatement) is a belief that acquiescence is the natural conclusion to a woman's awakening into knowledge.

After more than three decades of serious criticism on *The Awakening*, critics are usually for or against Edna's suicidal actions, or as Christopher Benfey succinctly explains: her suicide is seen as either "a

[1]Quoted in Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), pp. 58-59.

triumphant liberation or a cowardly capitulation."[2] By concluding that no "amount of interpretive pressure can reduce this stubborn ambiguity," Benfey reifies the traditional critical consensus that sees the novel's philosophical stance as lacking clarity. Preferring to ignore (or at least shelve) the larger philosophical questions regarding Edna's quest, Benfey, and other recent critics, focus instead on the historical and cultural milieu of Chopin's Creole New Orleans.

By contrast, my intent is to show that what Benfey refers to as Chopin's "stubborn ambiguity" is actually Chopin's *cri de coeur* against the superficiality of "knowing" existence through artificial oppositions. Ironically, the scholarly debate between liberation and capitulation mirrors what Chopin critiques throughout *The Awakening*: dialectics may awaken us to knowledge but, then, they must be discarded in order for us to grasp the larger ontological truth that life is an experience to be felt, not an object to be known. For Chopin, liberation was not the antithesis of capitulation, and Edna Pontellier's suicide is neither triumphant liberation nor cowardly capitulation; rather, it is capitulation for liberation, an acquiescence attained after true intellectual growth.[3]

Since the setting of *The Awakening* is South Louisiana and New Orleans, critics often overlook the fact that Chopin wrote this novel in St. Louis, where she was living as an unmarried woman among intellectual elites. During that time she became more familiar with German philosophy, particularly Hegelianism, through her close friend, Dr. Frederick Kolbenheyer, a leading St. Louis intellectual,[4] Chopin's

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[2]Christopher Benfey, *Degas in New Orleans: Encounters in the Creole World of Kate Chopin and George Washington Cable* (New York: Knopf, 1997), pp. 244-245.

[3]Carl A. Wade concurs with my reading of Edna's death as "both triumph and defeat" ("Conformity, Resistance, and the Search for Selfhood in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *Southern Quarterly*, 37 [Winter 1999], p. 103); however, Wade sees Edna's death as meaning that Chopin is implying that "true selfhood, though non-negotiable, is also unattainable." I believe that Edna's life reveals that true selfhood can be realized before death but only when we encounter the heterogeneous in moments of gross expenditure.

[4]Emily Toth, *Kate Chopin: A Life of the Author of "The Awakening"* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), p. 61.

gynecologist and, according to her son Felix, perhaps her lover.[5] However, Chopin made it clear to her friends and family that she "couldn't abide" many of the "high-minded intellectuals" in Kolbenheyer's St. Louis circle; along with her friends and supporters, she often satirized the Hegelian idealism and advocacy of social reform found in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, a publication of national importance produced by these St. Louis intellectuals (*Unveiling*, pp. 114-115). Chopin preferred Whitman and Flaubert (Seyersted, p. 63).

This rejection of Hegelian logic, then, becomes an important key to understanding Chopin's resistance in *The Awakening* and, more importantly, understanding why the tone of this novel has more ontological urgency than any of her other works. In *The Awakening*, Chopin's last and most ambitious literary endeavor, she questions many of the assumptions of the intellectual elite of her time, and, by so doing, she creates a prophetic narrative that anticipates the radical acephalic emphasis of modernity and post-structuralism.

Indeed, the radicality of Chopin's vision anticipates the anti-Hegelian stance of French philosopher, literary critic, and novelist, Georges Bataille. Bataille produced a large and complex body of work from the 1920s until his death in the 1960s, and is best known as a forerunner of post-structuralists like Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva. However, I believe that Bataille's anti-Hegelianism and detailed discussions of transgression and heterology are particularly relevant for seeing Chopin's epistemology of subversiveness in *The Awakening*. Through Edna's narrative, Chopin reveals that she and Bataille share a skepticism of how one can "know" human existence through any rational system. Bataille explains:

> To know means: to relate to the known, to grasp that an unknown thing is the same as another thing known. Which supposes either a solid ground upon which everything rests (Descartes) or the circularity of knowledge (Hegel). In the first

[5] Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p. 106.

case, if the ground gives way . . . in the second, even if assured of having a well-closed circle, one perceives the unsatisfying nature of knowledge.[6]

While Chopin anticipates Bataille's belief in the "unsatisfying nature of knowledge," her style of fiction differs drastically from his. Bataille's novels are all pornographic, and although they are written in an elegant French to cleverly undercut that genre, Bataille relies on shock value to inform his readers. Further, Bataille's women characters are prostitutes, incestuous mothers, young nymphomaniacs, or debauched nuns, and seem to be caricatures of his meta-pornographic genre rather than real women. Ironically, Bataille's women "work" for him as stock tools to illustrate the dynamics of his theories instead of becoming what he desires most: the playful transgressor who cannot be assimilated into the efficiency of production. By contrast, I believe Chopin's creation of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* reaches Bataille's unrealized fictional goal of creating palpable women characters that are unable to be reduced, defined, and assimilated. In fact, in the last three decades of serious and voluminous criticism on *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier has eluded literary critics who attempt to make her "work" as either a feminist spokeswoman, Marxist revolutionary, or, more recently, as a representative of Creole New Orleans in a retro-appreciation of regionalism. While these critiques have enriched our understanding of *The Awakening*, they have also overlooked the radical and irreducible aspect of Chopin's extraordinary characterization of Edna Pontellier. In Chopin's narrative, Edna struggles against being useful and, instead, strives to become the unassimilable. Using Bataille's theories of heterology with such a well-read text as *The Awakening* is not to make Chopin work for Bataille either; rather it is to allow him to help us see the larger ontological dimensions of Edna's Icarian journey and to explore Chopin's own vision of heterology.

That vision can be glimpsed in a remark wistfully made by an elderly Kate Chopin to a young boy:

We never know what illusions are till we have lost them.

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[6]Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Ann Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 108.

> . . . They belong to youth, and they are poetry and philosophy, and vagabondage, and everything delightful. And they last till men and the world, life and the institutions, come along. (Qtd. in Seyersted, p. 60)

Indicating that in the so-called real world "poetry," "philosophy," and "vagabondage" are deemed "illusions," Chopin reveals that an "other" economy exists that is inherently resistant to assimilation. Furthermore, Chopin shows her strong attachment to that "other"; *The Awakening* is, after all, the story of one woman's privileging of "everything delightful," particularly dangerous "vagabondage," over traditional marriage and motherhood. Chopin's comment to the young boy anticipates what Bataille will fully develop through his extensive writings on two related, but often competing, dynamics: the homogeneous, which is the traditional economy of institutions that define and assimilate human beings especially through production, and the heterogeneous, an economy of the "other." Bataille defines this heterogeneous economy as:

> everything resulting from unproductive expenditure (sacred things themselves form part of this whole). This consists of everything rejected by homogeneous society as waste or all superior transcendent value. Included are the waste products of the human body and certain analogous matter (trash, vermin, etc.); the parts of the body; persons, words, or acts having a suggestive erotic value; the various unconscious processes such as dreams or neuroses; the numerous elements or social forms that homogeneous society is powerless to assimilate: mobs, the warrior, aristocratic and impoverished classes, different types of violent individuals or at least those who refuse the rule (madmen, leaders, poets, etc.).[7]

Bataille explains that all systems, the individual and, say, a factory produce excess—such as human waste, trash, smoke, scraps—that cannot be assimilated into the working function of an individual body, factory, or economic system. This excess, then, becomes part of the heterogeneous economy, but is often deemed dirty and shameful in the case of waste or suspiciously luxurious in the case of art, music, and religious devotion. In other words, anything which is unassimilable to a system (even the system that produces it or worships it) must be partially denied or carefully circumscribed in order to keep the system functioning. An emphasis on

[7]Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess (Selected Writings, 1927-1939)*, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 142.

waste, excess, or unassimilable parts of a system is usually defined as acceptance of the divine, the perverse, or the evil. Unbridled eroticism threatens marriage; fanatic fervor threatens the stability of organized religion; non-productive expenditure threatens capitalism.

Moreover, individuals and systems cannot operate without linking to the economy of the "other." Cultures depend on values—religious, economic, or political—that lie outside cultural systems. Indeed, values from the heterogeneous are often the beginning and the end of producing economies. All systems take energy from another sphere—the sun, air, petroleum—consume and absorb that energy and then produce work or commodities. For example, erotic desire sparks marriage, but marriage limits and regulates that desire, making it "work" for the raising of children or the social organization of the society. Individual spending and consumption might define capitalism's drive, but the system creates a society of workers who consume only to produce more goods.

Bataille's escape plan is, of course, radical transgression, requiring individuals to destroy the very boundaries that form their identity. Throughout his work, Bataille suggests that only by transgressing boundaries, those of the body or any restrictive system, can we begin to feel an "other" realm that lies beyond and gives life to our traditional values and economic systems. This drive for something unassimilable and "other" motivates Edna Pontellier. Exploring how she might resist all enslavements, Edna discovers how transgressive interior experiences such as eroticism opens her up to experience an entire economy of "otherness," a new community that lies outside all systems, wherein art, music, the sacred, and, indeed, the institutions that enslave her find their exuberance.

Inextricably connected with Bataille's heterology is his belief in sovereignty, which he defines as living within the moment of consumption, risking everything in order to prove one's humanity beyond that of a useful product or "thing." In other words, to be a sovereign is to be an "other," part of the heterogeneous. The truly sovereign person refuses to be defined by "work" or any utilitarian function. None of Bataille's theories better implicate Edna Pontellier as a Bataillean heroine. Indeed, Edna's actions after her awakening at Grand Isle seem

set on a consistent course for achieving a Bataillean-like sovereignty. Edna's erotic transgressions lead to extravagant spending habits; Edna disavows marriage, traditional motherhood, or meaningful employment in order to remove herself from work and objectification. If she participates in eroticism outside marriage, sends her children away, spends money extravagantly, or throws a feast for friends, Edna is living within the luxurious economy of excess: she produces nothing, and her actions are purely for pleasure. Moreover, the sovereign who disavows all boundaries must also include the ultimate (albeit arbitrary) limitation of the sovereign's own death. In this context, Edna's drowning becomes death-defying and death-affirming; through death, she erases the borders between her interior and exterior realities, giving herself fully to the heterogeneous and becoming irreducible to any system.

In almost excruciating detail, Chopin describes the restrictive systems or the traditional economies that surround Edna, forming her identity and simultaneously denying her any chance for sovereignty. Raised on a Kentucky plantation, Edna lived her childhood in the midst of a comfortable, yet decaying, order, where wealth had been accumulated through the specious labor system of slavery. This order is poignantly represented by Edna's strict Presbyterian father, a distinguished-looking Kentucky Colonel. Wearing a coat carefully padded to give his shoulders a "fictitious breadth and depth,"[8] the old Colonel, like the decayed patriarchy that he represents, has degenerated from within. His elegance and dignity are based on an ability to invoke, by his appearance, that past system; now, he is an empty shell of his lost power and dubious "honor." Léonce, Edna's crafty Creole husband, who is making a fortune as a commodities broker, also bases his identity on a false appearance of swelling profits. He is a speculator, a member of a profession which demands the "look" of success in order to sell more commodities.[9] Every expenditure Léonce makes is a calculated move for reinvesting and, thus,

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[8]Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, ed. Margaret Culley (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 68.

[9]See John Carlos Rowe's reading of this new speculative economy that "concentrates on the increasingly independent (or fictional story) of money (risk capital) that appears to grow without any labor on the part of the investor" ("The Economics of the Body in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," in *Kate Chopin Reconsidered: Beyond the Bayou*, ed. Lynda S. Boren and Sara deSaussure Davis [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992], p. 123).

enhancing his status. Léonce, who measures himself and others by their appearance of past and future wealth, "greatly value[s] his possessions, chiefly because they [are] his" (p. 50). Yet, Léonce's face and body reflect a servile life of studying profits in the abstract; at forty, he is already stooped and wears glasses. Lacking true sovereignty, Léonce is simply an extension of his profession and his possessions. Although Léonce gambles, he never truly spends his winnings, preferring to buy more goods that will reflect his wealth and, thereby, his prestige. Framed by the circularity of his own game, Léonce is unable to recognize, much less enjoy, the surplus produced by his work. He remains perpetually in the harness, unable to retire.

Indeed, Léonce includes his wife, Edna, and their "love" life as pawns in his game of swelling profits. Before her awakening, Edna describes sex with Léonce as an acceptable domestic routine: "She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of life which has been portioned out to us" (p. 32). Living within Léonce's economy, Edna senses that her "desire" becomes her "work," a project for domestic security; she is unconsciously complicit in his definition of her as a possession, and the Pontelliers' routine sex life mirrors Léonce's asset management, spending designed to keep himself and his possessions oiled and in running condition so they can accumulate more.[10]

Although Edna has been assimilated into Léonce's economy, her marriage was originally begun as a subversive act toward her father. Due to his and her sister's "violent opposition" (p. 19) to Edna's union with a Catholic, marriage became Edna's "escape" of them and her girlish romantic "illusions"; she marries in order to take "her place with a certain dignity into the world of reality," and to "clos[e] the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams" (p. 19). Edna

[10]Margit Stange sees Edna Pontellier as an object of exchange, but argues that Chopin's doctrine in the novel is to validate increased property ownership for women ("Personal Property: Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*," in *The Awakening*, ed. Nancy A. Walker. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism [Boston: St. Martins, 1993], p. 207). In my reading, accumulation and ownership would never help Edna achieve the kind of sovereignty she desires; Edna's story critiques just such an economy of ownership.

attempts to grasp her existence through dialectical understanding of the differences between father and husband, Protestantism and Catholicism, adulthood and childhood, dreams and reality. When each opposition proves ultimately to be a reinscription of the other—father and husband are both accumulators of goods; Catholicism, like Protestantism is a restrictive ritual; adulthood is as oppressive as childhood—Edna is desperate for an escape route.

At the South Louisiana resort of Grand Isle, Edna discovers that route through a self-interrogation that begins only when she realizes her lack of "mother-woman" (p. 10) qualities. After observing the other Creole women there, including Adèle Ratignolle, who looks like a "faultless Madonna" (p. 12), Edna feels estranged from them and their industrious lifestyles. Adèle happily helps her husband with his pharmaceutical business, produces a baby every two years, and keeps up her music skills, not for personal pleasure, but in order to teach her children. Adèle has assimilated motherhood into the economy of production.[11]

Edna's relationship with her children is vastly different. Although Edna is fond of her sons, Etienne and Raoul, in an "uneven, impulsive way," she exclaims that motherhood is a responsibility for which "Fate had not fitted her" (p. 20). Edna is unsure where to place these impulsive feelings for her children, but she is clear from the very beginning that those feelings do not belong in an economy of production and accumulation.[12]

Edna also begins to see that her reaction to the young, attractive, and carefree Robert Lebrun cannot be synthesized into Adèle's schema for safely handling extra-marital infatuations. When Robert flirted with Adèle it was "without any thought of being taken seriously" (p. 13), and,

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[11]In her discussion of Adéle, Peggy Skaggs says that "her entire sense of who she is depends upon her maternal capacity (*Kate Chopin* [Boston: G.K. Hall, 1985], p. 92).

[12]Elaine Showalter claims that Edna "appears to reject the domestic empire of the mother" ("Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book," in *New Essays on "The Awakening,"* ed. Wendy Martin [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], p. 43).

according to Robert, Adèle teased him like a mother to child: "'Robert, come; go; stand up; sit down; do this; do that; see if the baby sleeps; my thimble, please, that I left God knows where.'" Adèle flirts without transgressing her economy of domestic tranquillity. Edna's passion, on the other hand, is ignited by Robert's, and, instead of Adèle's and Robert's mother-child banter, Edna shares moments of silence with him that are "pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire" (p. 31). Chopin's imagery here depicts motherhood as duty, while pregnancy, a slippery boundary between human beings, is linked with the transgression of sexual desire.

Through Robert, Edna senses the possibilities of entering another economy, one unassimilable to her normal routine. While on a small boat travelling between land and a small island with Robert and other tourists, Edna "felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening" (p. 35). Dreamily discussing the possibility of going out at night in the pirogue to search for hidden treasure, Robert speaks to Edna in a seductive tone of new possibilities, saying that perhaps the "Gulf spirit will whisper to you" (p. 35) the location of ancient treasure. It is Edna's imaginative reply, however, that reveals her growing awareness of a new, unfettered economy by which you can spend money without a concomitant gain:

> "And in a day we should be rich?" she laughed. "I'd give it all to you, the pirate gold and every bit of treasure we could dig up. I think you would know how to spend it. Pirate gold isn't a thing to be hoarded or utilized. It is something to squander and throw to the four winds, for the fun of seeing the golden specks fly." (pp. 35-36)

This passage offers the clearest insight into Edna's experience at Grand Isle. Wealth is only important if given away as a non-utilitarian gift, allowing the giver to remove herself as an object or producer. Hoping that Robert will follow her lead, Edna dreams of his spending the gold by throwing it to the wind in a ruthless, squandering act. For Edna, this disposal, particularly of the unearned, non-utilitarian gift, would be highly erotic, since sharing such a transgressive act of expenditure with another

forms a new community (at least for one erotic moment) in which she and Robert would no longer be servile to the traditional economy.[13]

Here, Chopin directly describes Edna's overwhelming desire for Robert in economic terms, revealing that she, like Bataille, sees true eroticism as a non-utilitarian expenditure, inherently subversive to institutions or the traditional economy. For Bataille, eroticism leads to the unconscious remembrance of lost intimacy when human beings lived as one with the immanence of nature without the boundaries of civilization and morality.[14] With Robert on the island, Edna feels the boundaries of society recede, as she strives for a deeper intimacy, which is now experienced as anguish. According to Bataille, this anguish is eroticism, the human desire to be an animal living in immanence, while simultaneously longing for an order which defines us as non-animal and self-aware objects. By desiring Robert, Edna loses what she knows as self and moves toward this primal intimacy. Yet, Edna also remains within individuation, experiencing for the first time the dangerous, sliding movement of eroticism. Intoxicated by its pleasure, she sees these moments of losing the "I" of self as the means to connect with a force

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[13]Numerous critics have focused on the so-called erotic nature of Chopin's text. per Seyersted mentions Chopin's "descriptions of the power of sexuality" (p. 194). Some scholars have drawn connections between the sexual nature of Chopin's novel and the protagonist's search for identity. Barbara Ewell mentions the novel's "probing of such moral questions as the nature of sexuality, selfhood, and freedom" (*Kate Chopin* [New York: Ungar, 1986], p. 158), while, according to Elaine Showalter, "*The Awakening* is insistently sexual, explicitly involved with the body and self-awareness through physical awareness" (p. 43). Daniel S. Rankin, Chopin's first biographer, indicates that what others have identified as sexual is more in keeping with the notion of eroticism. He claims that Chopin was influenced by Aubrey Beardsley's "hideous and haunting pictures, with their disfiguring leer of sensuality" (*Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932], p. 474). Rankin goes on to discuss the "erotic morbidity" of late nineteenth-century European novels and describes Chopin's texts as "exotic in setting, morbid in theme, erotic in motivation" (p. 175).

[14]Bataille explains that "[t]he history of eroticism is by no means that of sexual activity allowed within the limits defined by the rules; indeed, eroticism only includes a domain marked off by the violation of rules. It is always a matter of going beyond the limits allowed: there is nothing erotic in a sexual game like that of animals. . . . Man's sexual life developed out of the accursed, prohibited domain, not the licit domain," (*The Accursed Share*. 3 vols, trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Zone Books, 1991], I, 124.

greater than the self, an exuberant economy of the "other." At this moment, Edna senses her epistemology: life is an experience to be felt rather than an object to be known. Therefore, Bataille's definition of eroticism as unassimilable transgression proves significant in the understanding of Edna's new enthusiasm for subversive acts; it is her only way to connect to the heterogeneous and, thereby, know the unknowable.

Leaving the Island tour group with a violent headache, Edna is led by Robert to Madame Antoine's quaint Acadian cottage to take a nap. The tour has presumably reduced her romanticized vision of the swampy Baratarian islands into mere facts and figures, so that Edna, as an observer, cannot fully experience this exotic setting. She prefers the unconsciousness of sleep, and when she awakens, she is literally in a primitive, Edenic intimacy, alone at last with Robert. Tossing him a plucked orange, Edna says, "'How many years have I slept? . . . the whole island seems changed. A new race of beings must have sprung up, leaving only you and me as past relics," (p. 38). With this statement, Chopin describes eroticism much the way Bataille does. In desire, lovers feel pleasurable anguish, since, as "relics," they remain cognizant of old constraints but are now, in the frenzy of attraction, able to lose those constraints in pleasurable transgression. Later, as Edna listens to Madame Antoine tell the couple stories of the Baratarian pirates, she dreams of living within this pirate economy in which spending, sexually and financially, is for pleasure alone: "The night came on, with the moon to lighten it. Edna could hear the whispering voices of the dead men and the click of muffled gold" (p. 39).

After Edna's trip to the island, she is never the same. The possibilities of living within an "other" economy that values eroticism, waste, danger, and even the "whispering voices" of the dead drives all of Edna's subsequent actions. Four scenes in particular exemplify Edna's resolve to live within this new economy of ever-intensifying expenditure: the first occurs in Edna's bedroom when she smashes a vase; the second is in her dining room at an extravagant birthday feast; the third depicts Edna living alone in a small, rented house; and the final scene is her suicide in the Gulf.

Having returned to New Orleans from Grand Isle, Edna takes up her duties as Léonce's wife. While alone in her bedroom, however, she struggles to relive the moments of freedom with Robert on the island. Standing at her bedroom window, the border between her house and the outside garden, Edna uses sexual self-arousal in an attempt to recover a past intimacy. Then, she attempts to destroy those objects that represent her enslavement:

> She went and stood at an open window and looked out upon the deep tangle of the garden below. All the mystery and witchery of the night seemed to have gathered there amid the perfumes and the dusky and tortuous outlines of flowers and foliage. She was seeking herself and finding herself in just such sweet, half-darkness which met her moods. But the voices were not soothing that came to her from the darkness and the sky above and the stars. They jeered and sounded mournful notes without promise, devoid even of hope. She turned back into the room and began to walk to and fro down its whole length, without stopping, without resting. She carried in her hands a thin handkerchief, which she tore into ribbons, rolled into a ball, and flung from her. Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet. In a sweeping passion she seized a glass vase from the table and flung upon the tiles of the hearth. She wanted to destroy something. The crash and clatter were what she wanted to hear. (p. 53)

Longing to return to the "deep tangle" and "perfume" of Edenic intimacy, Edna uses her own body as a means to participate in eroticism. However, the moment cannot overcome the dominance of her objectified existence in Léonce's house. Stamping on her wedding ring, the object that most fully symbolizes the circularity of her entrapment, Edna tries to destroy its hold upon her. It is only the "crash and clatter" of the glass vase, however, that satisfies Edna. As an aural signifier of her earlier sexual expression and as a completion of the stamping of her ring, the vase's clatter indicates the object's loss of the boundaries that allow it to function as a useful household item. Yet, at the moment of the vase's destruction, Edna perceives its loss and, thereby, acutely feels its true value. Likewise, Edna appreciates herself during autosexuality, a brief but smashing moment from which she must return to find herself a disconnected object that cannot join the sky and its dark brutality. The vase, on the other hand, remains broken, and Edna is soothed by its shattered pieces that are now part of an economy of excess and waste.

Edna's joy from smashing the vase sheds light on her deliberate seduction of the dilettante Alcée Arobin; Alcée appeals to "the animalism that stirred impatiently within her" (p. 78), and sexuality with him becomes a conduit for stamping out her marriage bonds. Alcée's language brings "the crimson" (p. 78) into Edna's face; her shame occurs as she transgresses the boundaries of civilized behavior, losing her objectification through animal attraction. Unlike Robert Lebrun, Alcée does more than simply flirt with married women, and, with Alcée, Edna has found a perfect partner for experiencing the illicit.

Edna increases her transgressive spending by hosting an extravagant party in celebration of her twenty-ninth birthday.[15] Rejecting the formal dining chairs, Edna uses the "most commodious and luxurious" (p. 86) ones. While being served gourmet "delicacies" (p. 87) on the laciest of linens, Edna's friends are soothed by mandolins playing in the distance and the soft splash of a patio fountain. The glittering table is set with Edna's finest china and crystal, which shine "like the gems which the women [wear]" (p. 86), as Edna's guests seem heightened and transformed by her luxurious milieu. Wearing Léonce's birthday gift of a diamond tiara, Edna flagrantly consumes resources from their monotonous marriage and flaunts his attempt to crown her as a possession. Ironically, the wearing of Léonce's gift marks the end of their marriage and the beginning of Edna's new life of sovereignty. As a gross expenditure that will not fit within Léonce's economy of exchange, Edna's party does not "work"; it will neither enhance Léonce's reputation or result in a reciprocal accumulation. Serving her father's before-dinner cocktail, a drink he created for his younger daughter's wedding, Edna satirizes her father's patriarchal assumption that daughters can be owned and constitute goods to be exchanged. When Alcée toasts Edna's father's health with the Colonel's own cocktail, served in a glass that "looked and sparkled like a garnet gem" (p. 87), he facilitates Edna's transgressive gesture toward her father, her husband, and the ritual of marriage; Alcée freely enjoys Léonce's and the old Colonel's prized possession without

[15]Sandra Gilbert notes the importance of this scene to Chopin's vision in the novel, suggesting that Edna's dinner party is the creation of an Aphrodite myth, a feminine Christ serving the Last Supper ("The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire," *Kenyon Review*, 5 [1983], 44).

participating in their economic exchange. More importantly, however, Alcée's toast marks Edna's ascension to the old Colonel's role; she is now the father of the bride, the supreme gift-giver, who, as a subject, is able to offer herself freely to others:

> The golden shimmer of Edna's satin gown spread in rich folds on either side of her . . . There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the high-backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone. (p. 88)

Feasting only for pleasure, Edna's extravagance functions as excess, a pure moment of expenditure.

The domestic picture of Edna in her four-room pigeon house continues this excess.[16] Leaving the valuable possessions in the house she shared with Léonce, Edna downscales her clothing and furniture to fit into the small rented house. This move, however, is not an act of frugality; like the true ascetic, Edna narrows her surroundings in order to intensify her senses:

> Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. (p. 93)

In the intimate simplicity of her new home, Edna feels the boundaries of her body diffuse and the acuity of her senses increase in order to enhance her new ontological experience. Fittingly, the pigeon house becomes the love nest for Edna's adulterous and increasingly erotic relationship with

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[16]Critical commentary generally supports Edna's rejection of her marriage to Léonce, while lamenting her refusal to find a new means of support for herself and a way to win in the game of production and accumulation. Anne Godwyn Jones believes that Edna fails because there are no female images of femininity and power in the novel (*Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981], p. 182); Doris Davis finds Edna's move to the pigeon house contradictory and a "denial" of the luxury she loved ("*The Awakening*: The Economics of Tension," in *Kate Chopin Reconsidered*, p. 145); Davis concludes that "Edna's actions strike us too often as irresponsible, a squandering of strength and resources" (p. 148). John Carlos Rowe also states that Edna lacks adequate "modes of production" to express herself and thinks that Edna would be better for identifying with the working-class characters to form an "alternative community" (p. 134).

Alcée. Moreover, Edna financially supports this new lifestyle with winnings from the racetrack and an inheritance from her mother; both sources of income are unearned gifts to be spent for pleasure.

Through these three scenes—Edna's destroying a vase, her hosting a feast, and her living as the sensual ascetic—Chopin depicts a heroine who embraces dangerous, yet necessary, spending habits. Any fruitful use of resources would keep Edna within her father's and husband's economy of exchange and accumulation. In order to break this circle of knowing self only through oppositions and within systems and institutions, Edna realizes that she must remove herself as object and live fully within a pirate economy in which total expenditure reigns.

Edna's suicide, therefore, can only be judged in the context of her previous actions and her commitment to know herself at any cost. The events leading up to Edna's death, her greatest act of expenditure, are the final meetings with Robert Lebrun and Adèle Ratignolle. Both desperately try to bring her back into the "real" world of marriage and motherhood. Robert sheepishly explains that he hopes to make enough money in order for Edna to leave Léonce and marry him. At this moment, Edna disappointedly realizes that Robert was never the pirate hero of her newly found realm. In the voice of a sovereign, Edna exclaims, "'I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,'" I should laugh at you both'" (p. 107). As Léonce was once viewed as the opposite of her father only to become his younger reflection (and, indeed, a greater accumulator), Robert's opposition to Léonce is now revealed as another illusion, for he is merely a younger, more attractive version of Léonce. Edna finds herself, once again, caught in the circular insularity of oppositions; Robert simply parodies her father and Léonce, further reinscribing the economy of exchange.

The last person Edna sees before her death is her "mother-woman" friend Adèle Ratignolle. Indeed, Edna leaves Robert in order to be with Adèle during her labor and childbirth, described by Edna as a "torture" (p. 109). Like an inverted erotic moment, childbirth is depicted as an anguishing separation that rips apart total intimacy between mother and child. Having Edna describe this moment as an "ecstasy of pain" (p. 108), Chopin portrays childbirth as another one of life's anguishing, yet

glorious, moments when bodily boundaries are transgressed and the "other" economy from which life originates is glimpsed. Like eroticism, it is a moment when human existence is revealed as a slippery, messy event: a concomitant push toward individuation and a screaming desire for the primal intimacy that has been lost.

When Adèle, in her greatest pain, admonishes Edna to "[t]hink of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children!" (P. 109), she implores her friend to deny suffering by focusing solely on the potential accumulation of this moment. Adèle perpetuates the lie that motherhood is production and that even children are objects to be hoarded and projects to be realized. We can only imagine that this "mother-woman" admonishment to Edna intensifies her resolve to be sovereign. It recalls Edna's instinctual comment to Adèle regarding motherhood at Grand Isle: "'I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself'" (p. 48). Edna has always been uncomfortable with "mother-women," and, later, with her newfound sovereignty describes traditional motherhood as "the soul's slavery" (p. 113). Traditional maternity for Edna is a servile predicament for women. Moreover, it is the sneaky trick of a traditional economy to reinscribe itself by using mothers to enslave another generation. Focusing on the survival of children, mothers are forced to validate the traditional economy as the "real world" and deny the heterogeneous. Edna prefers that her relationship with her sons, Etienne and Raoul, consist of extravagant caresses, affectionate letters, and luxurious gifts; all of which she gives freely, expecting nothing in return.

After pondering Adèle's words, "think of the children," Edna determines to remain faithful to her newly discovered sovereignty. She chooses a luxurious and extravagant death over servanthood as either Robert's wife or a "mother-woman." Swimming out into the Gulf, Edna allows herself to glide gradually into oblivion, slowly transgressing the boundaries between her interiority and the exterior, natural world in an anguished, and, thereby, highly erotic, death:

> She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. *Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the* barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air. (p. 114)

While she sinks, Edna hears the sounds of civilization calling her away from an inexorable desire to return to primordial intimacy. Her father's and sister's pious voices combine with a chained dog's desperate cry to escape his restraints. Then, the sound of the spurs of the attractive cavalry officer Edna desired in her youth (an image of civilization's taming of animal desire for utility) is contrasted with the "hum of bees and the musky odor of pinks." It is this final image that overwhelms all others; the senses of smell, sight, and sound merge as Edna's embrace of the heterogeneous is finally returned, superseding all oppositions. Edna finds in death, the most intimate moment of life, the completion of her awakening—a final moment of knowing and being known.

When Denis Hollier comically, yet aptly, characterizes Bataille's cogito as "I sink therefore I am,"[17] he might also be depicting Chopin's epistemology in *The Awakening*; Edna sinks in order to understand her existence fully. According to Bataille:

> the luxury of death is regarded by us in the same way as that of sexuality, first as a negation of ourselves, then—in a sudden reversal—as the profound truth of that movement of which life is the manifestation. (Accursed I, 34-35).

Bataille's belief in death, and eroticism, as the moments of ontological significance allows us to reenvision Edna's luxurious death as the pinnacle of her quest to "know"; death allows Edna to become an eternal expenditure, a movement that lies outside human existence but from which life finds its exuberance. Reflexively, Chopin's depiction of Edna enhances our understanding of Bataille's heterology. Edna is the heroine Bataille could not create in his own fiction. However, through Edna, Bataille's theories are given life; she allows us to feel the luxurious textures of heterogeneity without the constrictions of Bataille's philosophical and theoretical prose.

What is disturbing about Bataille's theories of transgression and its goal of sovereignty is, of course, what disturbs readers about Edna Pontellier's actions in *The Awakening*. Most of us sympathize with Edna's

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[17]"The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille." *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), 138.

entrapment but question her deathly acquiescence as the only means for escape. Instead, we ask: does a life lived as a sovereign necessarily preclude functioning within a traditional economy of work, marriage, and child rearing? Edna answers our question with a resounding "yes," since she sees any change as creating just another opposition and, thereby, further entrapment. By presenting Edna's painful journey as a pleasure to read without actually drowning, however, Chopin answers our question with her view of heterology. Through Edna's narrative, Chopin demonstrates that the "other" must be recognized, even if we dare not fall into its full embrace. Edna is best understood as a female Icarus, for she reveals to us the glory, yet inevitable destruction, which occurs when we come too close to the sun, that "other" economy whose source is the origin of our existence. Chopin leaves it to her readers to formulate their own answers to the question of how one lives in the world, but she does allow us to feel "the other" and perhaps glimpse a higher level of humanity that can be reached by our continual tapping into its sources.

This does not mean that Chopin endorses Edna's choices any more than Bataille promoted pornography; both wrote with an urgent desire to unveil "that movement of which life is the manifestation." Filtering Chopin's well-known novel through a Bataillean lens restores *The Awakening* to its original incarnation as a dangerous, radically subversive, non-utilitarian novel that expresses Kate Chopin's deeply felt epistemology. *The Awakening* is no systematic philosophical refutation or "how-to" manual; neither is it a political manifesto. This text refuses to "work"; instead, it seduces us to sense human experience in all its vulnerability and glory, its brutality and beauty. Ultimately, it is Kate Chopin's extravagant gift.

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