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“Un Écho, Un Simulacre”*: The Male Artist and the Woman in *Trilby

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partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in English with an emphasis in Literature

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Abstract

George Du Maurier's novel *Trilby* (1894) traces the relationships between a group of male artists in French Bohemia of the 1850s and the single prominent female figure of the novel, Trilby. As with many popular novels involving a romantic plot, the men all fall in love with one girl, in this case a laundress-turned-model-turned-singer of androgynous physique and questionable virtue. However, the fact that all of the novel's central characters are male artists, as is the author himself, begs the question of the role of the woman in artistic creation, especially that of the male artist of nineteenth-century England.

Although the relationship between gender and art can be tracked through much of Western history, two relevant modes of thought converged in nineteenth-century England to make the issue particularly relevant. The perceived "femininity" of art and Victorian ideals of manhood clashed in the arena of the male artist's subjectivity to create anxieties in his mind: how can a male artist remain fully a man while accessing the feminine to create art? The answer to this dilemma can be found in the empty female body.

Trilby's body, which is repeatedly cast as an empty instrument of art, or worse, a corpse, is a convenient tool for male artists such as Svengali or Little Billee. Several theoretical frameworks, mainly the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva's theories of subject formation and art, facilitate this reading of the popular novel. Trilby allows Svengali to resolve anxieties about the stability of his (gendered) existence by acting as a receptacle of all the causes of his anxiety and gives Little Billee access to the feminine lost during subject formation. At the same time, she serves a specific role for the male artists, that of a gateway to the feminine, the semiotic. The violence often involved in this process, the metaphorical, ontological, and physical murder of the woman, points to a necessity for alternative gender relations in art, an alternative suggested in the form of Little Billee but abandoned due to social pressures and the author's own anxieties as a male artist.

Keywords: nineteenth century, Victorian period, art, male artist, creativity, masculinity, subjectivity, George Du Maurier, *Trilby*, emptiness, body, existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva

“*Un Écho, Un Simulacre*”: The Male Artist and the Woman in *Trilby*

I. Introduction

George Du Maurier’s novel *Trilby* (1894), a story about male artists and their relationship to the female title character, begins with a catalog of art objects and the artists who have either created or currently own them. This opening sets up the tone of the novel as a world that classifies its residents as either creator/possessor of art or art object. Placed in this division of roles in relation to the production of art, Trilby becomes an object that aids the creation of art, initially as a model and later as a musical instrument, but always as the tool used by (male) artists for the production of great art. At the same time, Trilby is more than just a tool for art; she is also the key that allows the male artists to access the feminine realm of art.

Victorian England was a world of divisions and dichotomies. Extreme changes in social, economic, religious, and political systems created an anxiety that Victorians attempted to resolve by creating a (false) sense of order.¹ For order to exist, there needed to be categories, and because of the strength of the anxieties behind the desire for order and division, the categories were often taken to the extreme, with only two antithetical spheres existing, such as public/private, genteel/vulgar, reason/emotion, and, of course, masculine/feminine. There was no middle ground, for the middle ground was a space for potential chaos, riot, and disorder. Such a strict enforcement of boundaries, however, causes a problem for those who must, for some reason, access the other side. This was the case for male artists. When art is gendered feminine but gender divisions are strictly

¹ See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, and Walter Edwards Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870*.

maintained, the male artist is in a difficult situation, for art becomes an activity that potentially threatens or redefines the male artist's subjectivity, at least in regard to gender.

Within traditional gender relations defined by art, man is usually the creator and woman the tool (Gubar), but as with all dichotomous formulas, the situation is not as simple as some would have. Often, the male artist feels threatened or inadequate in his role as creator and reveals/resolves this anxiety in a variety of ways. While many explorations of such anxieties in nineteenth-century England have focused on the social, economic, religious, and other cultural pressures of the period, the perspective gained from theories centering on the subject, such as the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and Kristevan theories of language and subjectivity, provides additional insight into the individual's internal conflicts and processes that allowed the external pressures to have the striking effect that they did.² Tracing the diverse ways in

² Sartre has often been accused of sexism and gender essentialism. In *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre*, a collection of feminist responses to Sartre, various writers criticize, defend, and find use for Sartre in diverse ways. The book's introduction follows the history of the reception of Sartre among feminist scholars, who have largely criticized Sartre for his use of examples involving women (for example, the famous "woman on a date" story in *Being and Nothingness*) and what the editor of the book Julien S. Murphy characterizes as "an unfortunate part of his early work," namely the section on "holes and slime" (8). However, these instances do not completely disqualify Sartre for feminists, as many of the book's contributors demonstrate. Most important perhaps is Murphy's implied advice that feminist scholars should not get swept away by the excitement of pointing fingers at and calling out well-established male philosophers but reflect coldly on whether there is any good in Sartre. The answer of many of the writers in the collection is a resounding yes, mainly because of Sartre's focus on the individual's power and freedom.

Also considered problematic is the inherent essentialism of psychoanalysis. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva offers an apology of sorts regarding her use of psychoanalysis:

We will make constant use of the notions and concepts borrowed from Freudian psychoanalytic theory and its various recent developments in order to give the advances of *dialectical logic* a *materialist foundation*—a theory of signification based on the subject, his formation, and his corporeal, linguistic, and social dialectic. Our purpose is not to adhere to the orthodoxy of any particular school, but rather to select those aspects of analytic theory capable of rationalizing the signifying process as it is practiced within texts. (Kristeva 14-5)

I would like to borrow this explanation for my use of Kristeva and psychoanalysis.

Both existentialism and psychoanalysis serve as effective frameworks for reading nineteenth-century British culture, not because the essentialist implications of the theories are true, but because they reflect the attitudes toward gender of the time period under scrutiny.

which male artists strive to establish their positions against feminine art and women in *Trilby*, I will use both modern and contemporary theories of art, gender, and subjectivity to explore the different ways in which two of the male artists, Svengali and Little Billee, negotiate their positions as male subjects in relation to female subjectivity and feminine art, namely how they use *Trilby* to establish different models of existential and artistic subjectivity that give the male artist access to the realm of femininity in a less threatening way.

II. Art and Gender in the Nineteenth Century

The issues of art and creativity have been inevitably intertwined with gender relations and subjectivity in Western culture, from the muses of Homer to Andy Warhol and Edie Sedgwick. Hazel E. Barnes points to the issue of gender and creativity in his introduction to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. According to Barnes, Alfred Stern's critique of Sartre was "that Sartre's creative talent is feminine and needs to be inseminated and stimulated by other people" (ix). This view of gendered creativity comes from the tradition of the mistaken belief that procreation happens by man planting the seed of life in the woman's body, while the woman's body serves only as the soil in which the seed grows and is not a source of life in its own right. For example, Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex* about the belief that "it is the male principle that is truly creative" and points out that as a result, "woman's fecundity is regarded as only a passive quality" (152). Virginia Woolf reads artistic creation through the language of procreation and childbirth in *A Room of One's Own* to emphasize the effects of having an androgynous mind. Through the "marriage of the opposites," the mind and its products

(writing) are “fertilized.” After the climax of writing, the writer must “lie back and let his mind celebrate its nuptials in darkness” (108). However, in the case of art, the seed of inspiration comes from the (female) muse, while the (male) artist incubates and gives birth to art. In artistic (pro)creation, the woman holds the key to life/art.

Thus, being only an incubator of feminine artistic inspiration, the male artist is dependent on the woman in order to create art. This dependence is a central concern in Joyce Zonana’s representation of the figure of Aurora Leigh in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s female epic poem. Zonana begins her reading of Aurora Leigh as muse and poet by examining Romney’s blindness at the end of the poem. While some critics have interpreted the scene as an echo of Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, Zonana asserts that Barrett Browning is using the traditional image of the “inspired blind poet, listening to the divine song of a muse” (241).³ The blind male poet must gain access to art through the female muse. In contrast, as a woman, Aurora Leigh “can both see and sing, by her own eyes inspired” (241). Zonana demonstrates that by becoming both poet and muse, Aurora Leigh “has no need of an external source of poetic or spiritual power but contains it within herself” (258), while the “blind” male poet has to seek the muse outside of himself, because art is gendered feminine through the figure of the muse. This feminine aspect was particularly strong in the case of poetry. The poet’s emotional excess and poetic sensitivity (Adams 119), and also the “self-consciousness” of poetry, made the work of poem-writing a feminine project (Maxwell, *Female Sublime* 107). Zonana quotes E. L. Bryans, an Oxford scholar known for his essay “Characteristics of Women’s

³ See Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime*, for a detailed discussion of the inherent “blindness” of the male artist that is intrinsically linked to his desire for the female sublime.

Poetry,” to claim that “the Victorians believed that women more than men possess ‘natural gifts particularly adapted’ for the production of poetry” (249).

Indeed, the focus on the feminine aspect of creation in Victorian conceptualizations of art, especially poetry, has led Adrienne Munich to propose the existence of a female imaginative power that is “the nonheroic, the nonrational, the passive, the silent,” “beyond or beneath language, at the level of the unconscious” (“Female Signature” 135). In her archetypal readings of Victorian literature and art, Munich uses the myth of Andromeda to present a strong argument about Victorian beliefs regarding the creative power of women. Through the work of poets such as Robert Browning, Munich situates woman as “the consummate achievement of the Creator,” an entity whose naked body becomes the symbol of creativity and knowledge (134).⁴ Munich sees Browning as using the figure of Andromeda in order to assert “a paradigm of poetic appropriation, imagined in terms of taking over female power,” the power of poetic creativity (123). Through the Andromeda constellation, the artist’s power is linked to the power of artistic “imagination,” through which the “truest artist imposes a pattern on otherwise arbitrary signs” (130). The creating of “pattern,” of art, is a form of knowing that is differentiated from astronomy and science. Artistic power is “a female power unavailable to rational critics or scientists,” who are excluded from the semiotic through their investment in the symbolic, whereas the artist has access to the female body through his relationship with the semiotic (132).

⁴ This interest in the creation of woman is evidenced in the marked presence of the mythical figure of Pygmalion in the literature of the period. Catherine Maxwell bases her article on Browning’s Pygmalions on this premise (989). Helene Cixous also comments on this interest in “Sorties”: “It is men who like to play with dolls. As we have known since Pygmalion” (66). In *Trilby*, the artist Durien is compared to Pygmalion (133). See also Susan Gubar, “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity.”

Similarly, in *The Female Sublime*, Catherine Maxwell uses mythic figures and archetypes to follow the influence of what she calls the female sublime on male poets “from Milton to Swinburne.” Maxwell redefines the poetic sublime as a feminine quality grounded in lyrical song, obscurity, suffering, pain, and the light/fire/vision that is obtained at the price of the symbolic castration of the male poet. This disprevaling of clarity and meaning in poetry is extended to literature in general in John Keats’s concept of Negative Capability. In a letter to his brothers, Keats expounds his theory on “what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (370).⁵ For Keats, lacking certainty, knowledge, and reason, all conventionally masculine qualities, was one of the conditions for great literature.

Such ideas about the femininity of art presented to the male artist “the paradox of artistic manhood”—the male artist desires to claim for himself a position as both “male” and “artist,” but with art gendered feminine, the artist himself is subsequently rendered feminine as well (Sussman 7). Herbert Sussman comments on how the male artists of the period attempted to address this situation, claiming that

Early Victorian male poets and painters sought to differentiate themselves from the feminine, but to do so each male poet, novelist, painter had to shape from the varied possibilities of manly self-fashioning available in that historical moment a personal configuration of artistic manhood that

⁵ In “Sorties,” Cixous calls Shakespeare “being of a thousand beings” (98). She seems to be also noticing a fluidity of identity that comes from freedom, from letting go of a conventional existence, that of being for itself. (See p.27 of this paper.)

was often at odds with the normative model of manliness in bourgeois industrial society. (Sussman 14)

The male artist was forced to redefine what it meant to be a man in terms that agreed with his “feminine” occupation. James Eli Adams also notes this conflict in male writers of the period. Because of the ways in which certain qualities were gendered, “a wide array of Victorian intellectual vocations—Tennysonian poetry, Tractarian faith, Arnoldian culture, Paterian aestheticism, even Carlylean prophecy—came to resemble models of feminine activity and authority” (Adams 1). As a reaction to this feminization of intellectual activity, men sought to reestablish the definitions of what it meant to be a man in their time through “reconfigurations of masculinity” (Adams 5). The ideal of the gentleman was one of the ways this “reconfiguration” happened.

In his study of the gentleman in Victorian novels, Robin Gilmour provides two frameworks for examining issues of gentlemanliness in the nineteenth century: traditions carrying over from the previous century and, as an extension of those traditions, the discourses on the gentleman in the middle of the century. Gilmour’s chapter on the latter framework provides an understanding of the two components of the concept of the gentleman, “gentle” and “man.” According to Gilmour, the idea of manliness “was a key epithet of the period, deriving much of its force from the attack on the supposed effeminacy of dandyism and being used generally to connote a wholesome masculine disregard for the niceties of etiquette and the cramping decorum of the ‘fine gentleman’ ideal” (85). This manliness was further developed later in the century into the “tough masculinity” of Muscular Christianity and the public school culture. However, Gilmour points out, being manly originally did not exclude the realm of feeling and emotions, or

“gentleness” (86). Thus, in the term of “gentleman” itself lies a contradictory potential for a combination of gendered qualities, a potential that is further complicated by the double meanings of the word gentle, which can connote upper class blood as well as gentleness of nature. Gilmour notes the consequent “essential flexibility of the gentleman (the idea, the image, the social fact)” that made it such an appealing idea to a wide variety of intellectuals in a period of extreme change in all sectors (9).

The differing images of manhood presented in the religious sector, namely the contrast between Muscular Christianity and the Oxford Movement, were among the most visible ideals of manhood in the Victorian era.⁶ Opposed to the more stereotypically “masculine” attributes of manhood in the former, the latter, led by John Henry Newman, presented a much more “feminine” ideal. However, if Newman proposes a strikingly feminized version of the gentleman, many contemporary intellectuals emphasized a balance between masculinity and femininity, toward an ideal of androgyny.⁷ Made famous perhaps by Virginia Woolf, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s statement regarding the androgynous mind is an often invoked quote: “I have known *strong* minds with imposing,

⁶ Gilmour corroborates the importance of religion in the formation of this ideal of manhood, claiming that the figure of Christ as the “first true gentleman that ever breathed” (Dekker qtd. in Gilmour 49) was a recurrent theme during the period.

⁷ Androgyny always carries with it the possible implications of gender essentialism. In a lengthy endnote in his essay on Coleridge and androgyny, James Holt McGavran Jr. attempts to address the accusations of essentialism that follow androgyny, which is often characterized as a concept based fundamentally on binary gender divisions and hence fundamentally incapable of escaping essentialism and sexism. McGavran’s defense is that “the psychic ideal of androgyny is *always* accompanied by an ironic awareness of the realities of sexual politics in the everyday world of gender-based distinctions and stereotypes.” McGavran recruits Toril Moi to support his assertion that this self-awareness of the dependence on conventional gender divisions is possibly a step toward moving away from such a dependence (72 n.5).

Cixous, in describing the ideal relationship between two individuals as one where “each would take the risk of *other*, of difference, without feeling threatened by the existence of an otherness” (78), presents bisexuality as an example of such a relationship, but is careful to distinguish between bisexuality as a “fantasy of a complete being” based fundamentally on essentialism and only “veil[ing] sexual difference” and bisexuality as “the nonexclusion of difference or of a sex” based on an opening up of the self (84-5). The latter is obviously less accusable of essentialism.

undoubting, Cobbett-like manners, but I have never met a *great* mind of this sort. [...] The truth is, a great mind must be androgynous” (415). Although not as explicit as Coleridge, Matthew Arnold contends in *Culture and Anarchy* that “perfection,—as culture, from a thorough disinterested study of human nature and human experience, learns to conceive it,—is a harmonious expansion of *all* the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature, and is not consistent with the over-development of any one power at the expense of the rest” (48). Similarly, Nadia Urbinati reports that “[d]efending the unity of the human mind, [John Stuart] Mill argued that an individual lacking in one or the other quality is not a complete but a one-dimensional person” (629). In calling for a balance or unity of the mind, Arnold and Mill raise the possibility of an androgynous subject.

In her reading of Aurora Leigh as a figure who brings together in one body both the poet and the muse, Zonana develops the theme of achieving a balance of often gendered binaries in one subject, but specifically in relation to art. In the case of Aurora Leigh, the binaries according to Zonana are “the male path of the body” and “the female path of the spirit,” the division of which Zonana likens to the Fall (250). Contesting gender divisions in a similar manner, Munich reads Robert Browning’s poetry to claim that “[a]lthough the Andromeda and Perseus myth seems clearly to ascribe activity according to gender, Browning collapses the polarities: the monster turns into the ouroboros, language turns into witch’s chant, poet turns into naked woman” (135).⁸ What was conventionally thought to be masculine is feminized, bringing masculinity and femininity together in one ambiguously gendered space.

⁸ The ouroboros is the cyclical image of a snake or dragon swallowing its own tail. The originally phallic shape of the snake or dragon is transformed into a circular shape.

Such androgynous or feminized ideals of art and male subjectivity were much in evidence during the nineteenth century. However, neither androgyny nor feminization were fully acceptable because of the way gender was understood in the period. It was very important for a man to be manly in nineteenth century England, precisely because masculinity was perceived as threatened. In *Sexual Anarchy*, Showalter examines the anxieties regarding gender in fin-de-siècle England and provides a catalogue of the themes related to these anxieties, such as the odd women, new women, and dandy aesthetes. Showalter claims that the boundaries of gender that were relatively clearly established throughout the nineteenth century started coming into question during the latter part of the century. For example, women were trying to push through the barriers and enter realms previously closed off to them. Such movements toward change resulted in a conservative response from many men and even some women. However, Showalter adds, these reactions revealed anxieties not only about femininity, but about masculinity as well. If women could become less feminine, were men safe in their masculinity? Showalter shows that this “crisis of masculinity” was caused by and also revealed through the legal and literary changes of the period and traces the anxiety about gender boundaries through the various “artifacts” that shape her chapters.

Sussman identifies some of the sources of these anxieties, citing “the homoerotic as one among the many psychological and social forces that troubled Victorian manhood, among them industrialization, the development of bourgeois hegemony, class conflict, the feminization of culture” (10). Such anxieties led to a stronger division of gendered spheres. Walter E. Houghton situates the Victorian man’s relationship with woman in a historical context of Victorian religion, culture, and economic situation to claim that

various anxieties caused by the changing world led to a valorization of the domestic and feminine as separate from the public. Men and women were thought to not only possess very different natures but also exist in separate spheres.

Perhaps anticipating these currents toward stricter gender division, Coleridge showed considerable caution when he stated that every poet is “inclusively woman,” taking care to add the disclaimer that the male poet is “not the worse man on that account” (qtd. in Shires 46). It is almost as if he feared that the male poet’s masculinity would be lost in femininity or would at least be perceived as lost. In his essay on Coleridge’s relationship with the Wordsworths, James Holt McGavran Jr. reads Coleridge’s poem “The Nightingale” as an expression of Coleridge’s ideas on “androgynous imagination, and his accompanying distaste for binary structure in thinking and in writing as well as in human relationships” (57). McGavran defines Coleridge’s concept of “psychic androgyny” as “a transforming synthesis of opposing but complementary—and thus figuratively masculine and feminine—elements,” an ideal of “harmony and growth,” opposed to the contemporary views on gender grounded in “conflict and limitation” (59). McGavran claims that Coleridge saw in the relationship of Dorothy and William Wordsworth the division of the artistic self into the feminine, silent source of inspiration and the masculine appropriator of the woman’s voice. Coleridge seems to be critical of such a relationship where the woman’s subjectivity is lost and the man interjects his own subjectivity onto the woman and onto nature (63). However, hidden within Coleridge’s critique of Wordsworth’s appropriation of his sister Dorothy, McGavran also sees Coleridge’s male anxiety, “both a literary and a personal sexual inferiority to the more manly William” (70).

As a way to deal with such anxieties, ideas about women and art became almost pathological in nineteenth-century England. The purely imaginary muse metamorphosed into the empty, and often dead, female body during a period when gender relations were troubled to say the least, contradictory images of womanhood existed codependently, and artists, intellectuals, and the general public struggled to cope with the unraveling of the foundations upon which their society was built. The anxiety of the nineteenth-century man, which was magnified for male artists because of the perceived femininity of artistic creativity, had to be resolved in some way. The various ways male artists deal with this anxiety form the story at the heart of George Du Maurier's popular novel *Trilby*.

III. Trilby: The “Ideal” Artist’s Woman

In 1894, *Punch* illustrator George Du Maurier published a novel by the title of *Trilby*. The eponymous main character is a young girl, a model and washerwoman, who captivates the artists around her in French Bohemia and leads (is led by?) them into a swirling vortex of art, love, and tragedy. After its publication, the novel became a scandalous success on both sides of the Atlantic, ultimately taking on a life of its own through seemingly infinite permutations, reinventions, products, and cultural references.⁹

The plot of the novel follows the pursuit of Trilby by multiple male artists who are drawn to her for various reasons and with various aims. The novel begins in the Quartier Latin of 1850s France. A trio of “English” painters, the manly Yorkshireman Taffy, the placid and somewhat asexual Laird of Scotland, and Little Billee, an artist of great talent born and bred in the wholesome English countryside, share a studio that

⁹ For a discussion of the proliferation of “Trilby-mania,” see Emily Jenkins, “Trilby: Fads, Photographs, and ‘Over-Perfect Feet’” and Edward Purcell, “Trilby and Trilby-Mania, The Beginning of the Bestseller System.”

serves as a gathering place for many of the artists of French Bohemia, including the sinister Jewish musician and mesmerist Svengali and his kind-hearted violinist sidekick Gecko. Running wild among these male artists is Trilby, a young female model of British heritage. The plot follows the many “incarnations” of Trilby. She is first introduced to the readers and the English artists as a charming but somewhat unconventional young woman who poses in the altogether. Because of the influence of the gentlemanly English artists, Trilby increasingly becomes a demure English woman, denouncing her former life as a somewhat promiscuous model and becoming a laundress whose ultimate goal is to support the endeavors of the male artists. However, when Little Billee’s mother Mrs. Bagot appears in Paris to forestall the potentially ruinous marriage between her son and Trilby, Trilby disappears, only to return five years later as La Svengali, the supposed wife and companion in art to the evil Svengali. La Svengali’s career as a celebrated singer comes to a sudden close when Svengali falls dead, and it is eventually revealed that Svengali had transformed Trilby into a singing virtuoso through his powers of mesmerism. Trilby soon dies because of the draining effects of mesmerism, and Little Billee follows her soon after.

Throughout the novel, Trilby is described as a beautiful and loveable young woman, and given the situation of the novel as a popular serialized sensation of the era, it may only be natural that she appear as the romantic heroine with whom all the male characters fall in love. However, the novel calls for a more serious reading because of the complexity of the issues Du Maurier introduces. In the introduction to the 1998 Oxford edition of *Trilby*, Elaine Showalter provides an overview of the novel’s central themes and concerns. Many of the themes introduced by Showalter, such as those about

Jewishness and the figure of the dandy aesthete, have been examined in great depth in both literary and cultural criticism.¹⁰ However, one issue that does not seem to have received adequate attention is the issue of Trilby's gender in regard to her relation to the artists of the novel, who are undeniably male regardless of how effeminate they may be. Because of Du Maurier's explicit interest in male artists and his representation of the different ways in which they engage with the major female character of the novel through artistic practices, the novel calls for a reading centering on the nature of gendered relationships and subjectivity in the production of art. Why is it that these male artists desire/need Trilby?

Many critics including Joseph Bristow, Nicholas Daly, Neil R. Davison, Daniel Pick, Jonathan Taylor, and Laura Vorachek have argued that Trilby's incarnation as La Svengali is an appropriation of her identity by Svengali, and Sarah Gracombe has demonstrated that even Trilby's "Englishness" is an incarnation brought about by the efforts of the three Englishmen to culturally educate her through books, eating habits, and other cultural practices. However, the question of whether the Trilby that first appears is truly Trilby herself still remains. Jonathan Grossman's claim that the "real" Trilby is "the high-spirited and independent model they try to transform into a typical housewife" (537) assumes that Trilby has a true essence of her own. Similarly, Martha Banta reads *Trilby*

¹⁰ For studies on the issue of Jewishness in *Trilby*, see Ruth Bienstock Anolik's "The Infamous Svengali: George Du Maurier's Satanic Jew," Neil R. Davison's "'The Jew' as Homme/Femme-Fatale: Jewish (Art)ifice, *Trilby*, and Dreyfus," Jonathan Freedman's *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America*, Daniel Pick's *Svengali's Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture* and "Powers of Suggestion: Svengali and the *Fin-de-Siecle*," and Jonathan Taylor's "The Music Master and 'The Jew' in Victorian Writing: Thomas Carlyle, Richard Wagner, George Eliot and George Du Maurier." Studies reading *Trilby* through the lens of the aestheticism of Du Maurier's time include Nicholas Daly's "The Woman in White: Whistler, Hiffernan, Courbet, Du Maurier," Dennis Dennisoff's "'Men of My Own Sex': Genius, Sexuality, and George Du Maurier's Artists," Alexander Doty's "The Queer Aesthete, the Diva, and *The Red Shoes*," Catherine Golden's "Turning Life into Literature: The Romantic Fiction of George Du Maurier," and Jonathan H. Grossman's "The Mythic Svengali: Anti-Aestheticism in *Trilby*."

as the back story of Miss Churm in Henry James's "The Real Thing," as the life story of an artist's model where the true "essence" behind the ever-changing model is presented.¹¹ My reading of *Trilby* is that she does not possess a fully established essence, that she never was "so wonderfully one person," at least in the sense that Banta uses the phrase (21). The *Trilby* that we first see is merely another incarnation, the result of a transformation that has occurred before she enters the plot. The only "essence" of *Trilby* lies in her lack of essence, her immense emptiness.

Emptiness is a recurrent theme in *Trilby*. Svengali envisions *Trilby*'s state after death twice; once she is a corpse, but once she is an empty skeleton. It is important to note that this skeleton is not imagined by Svengali as a framework for holding up the body from the inside, but a hollow shell that encases great spaces inside. Svengali imagines himself looking into these spaces, telling *Trilby* that he will "look through the holes of your eyes into your empty skull, and up your nostrils, [...] into the roof of your mouth, [...] and between your big ribs into your big chest" (131). *Trilby*'s skeleton is a huge, empty void, and this is the nature of emptiness in *Trilby*, an emptiness that is an open space, a potential vessel. Another instance of emptiness is the studio in Paris. When it is first introduced, the studio is full, of art, equipment, artists, action, life, and masculinity. But more significantly, it is full of Englishness, becoming a little island of Englishness in Paris. This masculinity and Englishness, however, are not qualities of the studio itself but qualities possessed by its inhabitants. When Little Billee's mother and sister visit the studio, "the whole aspect of the place was changed and made fragrant, sweet, and charming by all this new feminine invasion and occupation" (204). When the

¹¹ According to Du Maurier's biographer Leonée Ormond, Du Maurier gave James the idea for "The Real Thing" and also the plot of *Trilby*. Apparently James did consider writing *Trilby* himself, as is evident in his notebooks, but ultimately suggested that Du Maurier write it (413-4).

three Englishmen return to the studio years later, it is empty. It has become “bare,” representing “dilapidation, spoliation, desecration” (290) rather than being warm, alive, and beautiful as it had been. Later on, when Taffy returns to Paris with his wife, it has been made “spick and span, and most respectable” by “two American painters” (428). Trilby is not very different from the studio, in that she is essentially empty, bare, and exudes a different atmosphere depending on her “occupants.”

One “occupant” of Trilby is language. Language plays an important role in the novel, not only because it is a story about Englishmen living in France, but because of the way Du Maurier uses it to signify certain character traits. The Laird’s ridiculous French is one of his markers and is maintained throughout the novel, not only for comic effect but also to point to some inadequacy in the character, who is rendered asexual by Trilby. He is the only one she hugs and kisses without being conscious of the fact that he is a man, and the author leaves the question of his interest in the opposite sex rather open-ended. Svengali’s “fluent French with a German accent and humorous German twists and idioms” (12) points to his foreignness and affiliation with the German line of music where the singer is merely an instrument for the composer, as opposed to the Italian line where the singer’s recreation of the piece is greatly admired.¹² Svengali speaking French with a German accent aligns him with the German line and supports his use of Trilby as a mere instrument for himself, the “composer” or creator of the musical performance.

¹² For a more detailed discussion of these two ideas about music, see Phyllis Weliver, *The Musical Crowd in English Fiction, 1840-1910: Class, Culture and Nation*. Du Maurier’s awareness of this debate is shown in the scene where Little Billee attends a private musical performance. The narrator contrasts those who prefer the “‘mere virtuosity,’ either vocal or instrumental” of Italian music and those who laud the pianists for “never let[ting] you forget it was Sebastian Bach they were playing—[...] in absolute forgetfulness of themselves” (239-41).

In the case of Trilby, language is more than a tool for revealing her inner nature or beliefs. Language forms her subjectivity and values. During the transition process of Trilby from French to English, it is said that “Trilby speaking English and Trilby speaking French were two different beings” (92). For Trilby, the two languages embody different values and different sources of influence. English was originally the language of her father, “a highly-educated man” and gentleman, and her mother, a Scottish barmaid; consequently, Trilby speaks “English, with an accent half Scotch” (16).¹³ Now that her parents have passed away, English becomes the language of the three Englishmen. French is the language of “the Quartier Latin—droll, slangy, piquant, quaint, and picturesque” (92)—and the people who live there. The influence of language over Trilby is demonstrated when Little Billee sees Trilby posing nude in Carrel’s studio. While thinking in French, she is unaware of the reasons behind Little Billee’s shock and devastation, for the Trilby speaking French is an “absolute savage” who can be “naked and unashamed” (94). However, once her medium of thought changes from the “French of the Quartier Latin” to the “nice clean English of the studio in the Place St. Anatoles des Arts,” she immediately realizes her shame (116). Language for Trilby is not merely a medium of communication but a mediator of her views, reflecting the various sources of influence around her.

¹³ Trilby’s hybrid nationality causes her to lack a strong connection to one single nationality. This hybridity may be the key to her ability to shift from one nationality to another. That is, she lacks a national identity and hence can be influenced by the nationalities of those around her. Concerning hybridity, Showalter also sees anxieties regarding art, gender, and sexuality materialized in the androgynous and otherwise hybrid bodies of Little Billee and Trilby. Showalter then traces the various permutations of both Little Billee and Trilby to support her claims regarding the fluidity of their natures, especially the function of Trilby’s female body as a “case” for male ideas and anxieties about art and culture, as musical instrument, model, and subject of hypnosis (Introduction xv-xx).

Thus, the Trilby who first appears speaking French that is “funny without being vulgar” (23) may quite possibly be a product of the collective influence of the people of the Quartier Latin. Before this, she was the product of her English-speaking, educated father. Evidence for the fact that Trilby’s trajectory of transformation begins before she even appears in the plot can be found in the occupation she constantly seeks, the *blanchisseuse de fin* (laundress).¹⁴ For Trilby, the job seems to signify an attempt to erase past influences in order to make herself completely blank, ready for new influences to work upon her. The French verb *blanchir* means “to whiten,” “to launder,” and is derived from the adjective *blanc*, which not only means “white” but also “blank.” When a new transformation is required, Trilby makes herself blank, returning to her original state of emptiness, which will allow her to be filled by the next source of influence. Trilby first turns to this occupation after her parents die, leaving her without the influence of her father (52). Trilby becomes a *blanchisseuse de fin*, and is then influenced by “a friend of her mother’s” who apparently seduces her and introduces her to the world of modeling (52). After living under this influence of the Quartier Latin, Trilby meets Little Billee and his friends and “grows more English every day” (92). However, because she has not fully emptied herself, she reverts back to being “French” when past influences assert themselves: “[E]nter a Frenchman or two, and a transformation effected itself immediately – a new incarnation of Trilbyness” (92). Only after Little Billee has seen her modeling nude does Trilby undergo the complete erasure of her Frenchness, by becoming once again a *blanchisseuse de fin*. Now her complete transformation is possible, and is made evident in her physical transformation into a thin, pale Englishwoman (126-8).

¹⁴ For an interesting discussion on the issues of cleanliness and filth in *Trilby*, see Joseph Bristow, “‘Dirty Pleasure’: *Trilby*’s Filth.”

Trilby's next transformation into La Svengali does not involve becoming a *blanchisseuse de fin*, but she empties herself this time by removing herself from the source of her prior influence, Little Billee. By the time she reaches Svengali, she is "an empty shell" as Showalter puts it (Introduction xvii). However, she continues to love Billee because she has not taken the steps to erase, *blanchir*, his influence. Svengali's mesmerism serves to empty her momentarily so that he can fill her with his influence, but this emptying is only temporary. Svengali is never able to fully possess her because she is still "occupied" by Billee. After Svengali's death, Trilby has to make yet another transformation, into the Victorian angel in the sickbed. To do this, she again reverts to emptying herself, this time of Svengali's influence, by trying to become a *blanchisseuse de fin*. She is actually "anxious" to become a *blanchisseuse de fin* (386), as if she somehow knows that Svengali's power over her is not yet gone, as is shown in the reappearance of Svengali in the form of a photograph.

By becoming a *blanchisseuse de fin*, Trilby repeatedly becomes an empty body to be filled by masculine influences such as language, culture, and the male artists. This emptiness is irresistible to the male artists around her. Indeed, the lure of the empty space of woman's body is established early in the novel when the narrator describes "the bust of Clytie" and "the ineffable forward shrug of her dear shoulders that makes her bosom as *a nest, a rest, a pillow, a refuge*—the likeness of a thing to be loved and desired for ever, and sought for and wrought for and fought for by generation after generation of the sons of men" (2, emphasis added). Like Clytie, Trilby's body is an object of male desire because of its function as a receptacle, an instrument. Looking into Trilby's mouth, Svengali is made ecstatic by the size of the cavity, comparing her, among other things, to

a Stradivarius (71). A greater space leads to a greater voice, and Trilby's voice is heard even before she is first seen in the novel, "a portentous voice of great volume, and that might almost have belonged to any sex (even an angel's)" (14) that comes "[from] that capacious mouth and through that high-bridged bony nose" (22) and "has its roots in the stomach, and blossoms into music on the lips" (70). Trilby is the ultimate instrument for the male artist.

Of course, not all instruments are Stradivariuses. Mimi la Salope is an example of an "instrument" that is not able to create a void that is sufficiently wide and is hence discarded by the male artist. Svengali attempts to empty her, for he knows that "in order to teach her anything he had to unteach her all she knew" (60). Mimi does empty herself completely, but unfortunately, this is not enough. Mimi's voice is "all in the head and nose and throat" (60), all insufficient cavities compared to Trilby's massive mouth and chest. Hence Svengali throws her out. Trilby, on the other hand, creates sufficiently large spaces when she becomes empty.

Because of this emptiness, Trilby is able to transform herself or be transformed, either through her own agency or through the power of others. In her introduction to *Trilby*, Showalter directs our attention to a central debate in *Trilby* criticism. The main point of debate is whether Trilby's permutations are caused by others or through her own agency. Showalter presents arguments for each side, with Leonée Ormond stating that Trilby has been appropriated by the male artists who use her as a tool to display their talent, and Nina Auerbach countering this argument by claiming that Trilby's ability to transform herself gives her a "paradoxical power" (xiv).¹⁵ The arguments supporting

¹⁵ This debate is continued in a different context in the book *The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction*. In this book, Phyllis Weliver's chapter titled "Music, Crowd Control and the Female Performer in *Trilby*" and

Ormond have been plentiful.¹⁶ However, the few exceptions to the reading of *Trilby* as object, including Nina Auerbach's controversial reading of *Trilby* as a story "about the secret victories of apparent female victims" (282), deserve some attention.¹⁷

Nina Auerbach's study of male hypnotists and female subjects, "Magi and Maidens," is an attempt to overthrow the prevalent reading that *Trilby* is merely a vessel. Auerbach proposes that the mythology employed by men to control women resulted in actually empowering them, albeit covertly, and weaves a thread through the relationships of the men and women in *Trilby*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and Freud's clinical records. Her main argument is that while the men seem to be in control of the women's fantastic permutations, actually the women manage to exert power over their "mesmerizers" even in their respective states of "vampirism, somnambulism, mesmerism, or hysterical paralysis" (282-3). Auerbach characterizes this power that the women exert over their would-be masters as "somewhat fancifully, somewhat wistfully, and somewhat fearfully imagined in women throughout the century" (283). The power of women is something imagined, lost, desired, and feared. The women who wield this unlikely power are "*tabulae rasae*, all selfhood suspended as [they] are invaded by the hyperconscious and culturally fraught male/master/monster" (284). However, Auerbach's main claim is that the women, who at first glance seem to be no more than *tabulae rasae*, actually "[possess] seemingly infinite capacities of regenerative being that turn on her triumphant

Jonathan Taylor's "The Music Master and 'The Jew' in Victorian Writing: Thomas Carlyle, Richard Wagner, George Eliot and George Du Maurier" take opposing stances on the source of the musical influence that La Svengali's performance has on the audience (understood to be similar to the mob) and the subsequent social changes that it brings about, with Weliver focusing on *Trilby* and Taylor putting greater emphasis on Svengali's power.

¹⁶ See p.14 of this paper.

¹⁷ See also Phyllis Weliver's body of work on *Trilby* as a woman musician, which provides a more balanced perspective than Auerbach's.

mesmerizer and paralyze him in turn” (284). Regarding *Dracula* and Freud, Auerbach’s claims are persuasive, but not so for *Trilby*.

Auerbach’s three supporting claims for Trilby’s power are her large physical size, which allows her to tower over the men; her “seemingly boundless capacity for mutability,” which allows her to transform both herself and her voice (284-5); and her reappropriation of the role of “magus and mythmaker,” which causes the art of the male artists to “lose all meaning before the transforming bounty of Trilby’s familiar presence” (286). Although Auerbach is correct in reading *Trilby* as “drawing on ideals of the uncultured woman waiting for the artist-male to fill her” (286), her claims regarding where Trilby’s power lies and how it is manifested are contestable. Limited by her agenda of giving power back to the women, what Auerbach refuses to acknowledge is that Trilby’s capacity to transform becomes the capacity to *be transformed*, an emptiness that is waiting to be filled. Reading Trilby’s love for the three Englishmen as an act of metamorphosis, one which does not require the powers of Svengali, Auerbach quotes Trilby—“You have changed me into another person – you [Taffy] and Sandy and Little Billee” (193)—and comments, “She [Trilby] does not need Svengali to incite her new incarnations; her power of metamorphosis defines her character” (285). It is true that Trilby does not need Svengali for her transformation into an Englishwoman; she has the three Englishmen instead. Apparently, it is not Svengali that she needs specifically.

Auerbach also mentions Trilby’s singing, saying that its “essence” of “seemingly endless variations” is not Svengali’s, but her own (285-6). However, this claim is not easy to support. Trilby’s singing as “La Svengali” is strongly reminiscent of Svengali’s improvisational performances on the piano, where he was able to completely transform

familiar melodies. La Svengali's ability to sing the same verse with miraculously different feeling each time (307) is merely a demonstration of Svengali's abilities, which he has already showcased with the song "Ben Bolt," when he "fugued and canoned and counterpointed and battledored and shuttlecocked it, [...] and exhausted all its possibilities of beauty" (27). La Svengali's performance reminds the reader of Svengali's performances in other ways as well. When Svengali first makes his appearance in the studio of the three Englishmen, he plays Chopin's Impromptu in A flat (13), a performance that Trilby echoes in her debut performance in Paris (317). And as if this were not enough, the narrator imagines La Svengali repeating words that Svengali had spoken earlier: "*And you shall see nothing, hear nothing, think of nothing but Svengali, Svengali, Svengali!*" (72, 310). As Svengali's accompanist and assistant Gecko says, it is "Svengali singing with her voice," and Trilby, like "Herr Joachim's fiddle," is a mere instrument (441).¹⁸ Trilby claims early in the novel that she possesses the musical power of variation: "I vary it, you know—not the words, but the tune" (23). Indeed, Trilby has this transformative ability to begin with, but it isn't executed properly, artistically, until Svengali takes over. She is tone-deaf and has "no more music in her than a big tom-cat" (131). Only when a master/male musician "plays" her can Trilby truly make music.

Nonetheless, Trilby's potential for metamorphosis is astonishing. She appears to us first as a free and light-hearted French model of Scottish heritage, then becomes a demure Englishwoman, only to disappear and return as an international diva, and finally dies as a Victorian quasi-angel, with a short moment as the living-dead, as if her

¹⁸ Phyllis Weliver continues to argue more persuasively than Auerbach for a reading of Trilby as an empowered woman musician. What makes her argument more convincing is her willingness to accept that it is unclear where Svengali's powers end and Trilby's begin. For example, see her discussion of this debate in the conclusion to *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction* (264-5).

virtuosity has not been explored fully enough already. How is it that this apparently simple, innocent soul is capable of, or subjected to, so many transformations? The initial answer lies in Trilby's immense potential for being "read."¹⁹

Reading *Trilby* is all about "reading" Trilby, the character. There are several scenes where Trilby is "read" by other characters in the book. When Little Billee first sees Trilby, he reads Trilby as a lady in the face of the incriminating evidence that she "sits for the figure" (25). To Svengali, she is a mouth (71). These readings are not an attempt to truly "read about" Trilby, to understand the essence of Trilby, but attempts to "read into" Trilby and impose the readers' desires and anxieties onto her. A good example would be Little Billee's mother, Mrs. Bagot. When Mrs. Bagot first sees Trilby after hearing that she is a nude model, and loved by many men, she says, "Oh yes; you are very, very beautiful—there's no doubt about *that!*" (183). Here, Trilby's beauty is condemning evidence that points to her sexual promiscuity and alluring seductiveness. However, after Trilby has agreed to her terms and decided not to marry her son, Mrs. Bagot writes to Taffy, calling Trilby a "noble and beautiful girl" (187). Now that Trilby is no longer a danger to Mrs. Bagot and her desires, her beauty is a virtue. Du Maurier directly addresses these contradictory readings when the two women meet later in London. Upon seeing Trilby on her deathbed, Mrs. Bagot "soon found herself all but worshipping this fast-fading lily—for so she called her in her own mind—quite forgetting (or affecting to forget) on what very questionable soil the lily had been reared, and through what strange vicissitudes of evil and corruption it had managed to grow so tall and white and fragrant" (399). The narrator comments on the irony of this situation where

¹⁹ Laura Vorachek interprets the same power through Darwinism to claim that Trilby possesses great adaptability. See her article "Mesmerists and Other Meddlers: Social Darwinism, Degeneration, and Eugenics in *Trilby*."

“one who for years had [...] thought of Trilby as a wanton and perilous siren, an unchaste and unprincipled and most dangerous daughter of Heth” was “sitting at Trilby’s feet” (399). For Mrs. Bagot, Trilby can signify both wantonness and purity, depending on how she wishes to read her.

Trilby is also endlessly “read” through her body as a nude model. Auerbach describes the female victims she writes about in “Magi and Maidens” as seeming “not merely enfeebled but culturally naked,” lacking the power of the tradition of cultural knowledge that the men possess (283). In Trilby’s case, she is literally “culturally naked,” although Auerbach does not seem to have chosen her wording in this sense. The “cultural nakedness” of Trilby is made explicit in the comparison between Taffy’s body and Trilby’s nude posing. Throughout the novel, there are a few instances where men are explicitly, or implicitly, naked. Taffy and Little Billee are in the bath when Svengali drops by to borrow some money (64-5), and Taffy displays his near-naked body in public while swimming (196). However, these instances of nudity are not culturally read into at all (in the cases of the bathing men), or read simply as an image of male, physical beauty (in Taffy’s case). Trilby’s nakedness, on the other hand, is much more complicated. The cultural implications of Trilby’s nakedness are complex and diverse, making Auerbach’s choice of language especially pertinent. Taffy is merely physically naked, whereas Trilby is “culturally naked,” for her nakedness carries all the conventional implications of the female body: beauty, virtue, fallenness.

Consequently, readers of female bodies are able to indulge in fantastic “readings” that are not in the least connected to the women themselves. If Mrs. Bagot read Trilby as two contradictory pictures of womanhood, her son looks at Trilby’s foot and ruminates

about “life and death,” religion, and social class (46-8). After following Little Billee on his two-page long digression, the narrator wonders at “all this melancholy preoccupation, on Little Billee’s part, from the momentary gleam and dazzle of a pair of over-perfect feet in an over-aesthetic eye” (48). Little Billee’s long train of thought caused by Trilby’s foot is reminiscent of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Jenny,” a poem that similarly fetishizes parts of the female body, in this case her golden hair. In the poem, the speaker is led by Jenny’s “wealth of loosened hair” (48) to exclaim, “You know not what a book you seem” (51). He then goes on to spend most of the poem “reading” Jenny, then wakes from his reverie, making a statement similar to the narrator’s on Little Billee’s thoughts: “You’d not believe by what strange roads / Thought travels, when your beauty goads / A man to-night to think of toads!” (300-3). In both cases, the men are led on wild trains of thought.

What, then, is the quality shared by Trilby and Jenny that invites these men to think such wide-reaching thoughts? The speaker in Jenny calls her “the thoughtless queen” (7), then attempts to fill this thoughtlessness with his own thoughts, which begin after wondering, “I wonder what you are thinking of” (58). Likewise, Trilby is empty, not only of artistic thought, as is demonstrated by her complete ignorance of music (20, 44), but of identity itself. This lack of a stable identity and her extreme “readability” makes her the perfect solution for male artists struggling to negotiate their masculine subjectivity and their feminine occupation.

IV. Models of Male Subjectivity and the Other in *Trilby*

Trilby's lack of a permanent identity leads to nearly infinite possibilities for transformation, making it possible for the male artist to turn her into whatever he needs her to be in order to resolve his anxieties: feminine wife and boyish homosexual lover, muse of inspiration and empty corpse, everything and nothing. Infinite possibilities are a natural result of the way an existent's being is defined in existential theory. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre contrasts two modes of being, that of being-in-itself and being-for-itself. The former is a mode of being in which being "is what it is" as in the case of objects lacking consciousness, whereas the latter is the being of man, a mode of "being what it is not and not being what it is" (lxvii). To answer the question of what makes the human different from "things" that are only being-in-itself, Sartre points to the existence of nothingness: "Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm" (21). Nothingness for Sartre is not the dialectical opposite of being. The nature of the being of man is such that it can make nothingness come to be. This nature is defined by freedom, which is a possibility to "retire *beyond a nothingness*," "secrete a nothingness" (24, emphasis in original). In his conceptualization of freedom, Sartre directly attacks essentialism: "Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of human being is suspended in his freedom" (25). Freedom is intimately linked to the possible, which Sartre defines as "the *something* which the For-itself lacks in order to be itself" (102). By not having a static and stable essence, the existent is free to explore all possibilities of being. When Trilby first appears, imbued with the spirit of the Quartier Latin but not "possessed" by any single male artist, she is closest to being a true existent of being for itself, not holding on to a static identity, but transforming herself willingly

(albeit into the identity projected onto her by masculine forces). This ability and desire to transform herself is what makes her such a great model.²⁰ Because she lacks “essence,” Trilby possesses freedom, exemplified in her foot, which is “Trilbyness itself” (293), unconstrained by stiff boots that deform the natural beauty of the foot (18-9).²¹

This freedom, however, and the possibilities it entails, has a side effect, namely anguish. Because subjects are able to recreate themselves in any way they choose, there is no telling where they will be in the future until they become their future self: “the future which I am remains out of my reach” (Sartre 36). The nothingness that separates my present self from my future self and my freedom with which to renew myself can result in anguish as “the fear of not finding myself at that appointment [the future], of no longer even wishing to bring myself there” (36). Humans resort to bad faith to deal with this anguish. Bad faith is an attempt to escape the anguish of realizing the nothingness of being, the anguish of freedom. Thus, in an attempt to flee the anguish caused by the nothingness as the heart of being, humans deny their agency in creating their being and their future among infinite possibilities: “I assert that I *am* my essence in the mode of being of the in itself” (40). Likewise, Trilby’s loneliness causes her to strive to take on an

²⁰ Banta reads four nineteenth-century texts, including Du Maurier’s *Trilby* and Henry James’s “The Real Thing,” to discuss what it means to be a real subject in relation to art. What kind of a person is the ideal artist’s model? “Mute and motionless” (12), the model must become the frame on which the artist can build his artistic vision, the “mannikin” on which the artist puts the “clothing” of his ideas (14). Banta uses Keats’ ideas to describe the ideal model as “a fine example of Shakespearean negative capability because she is able to take suggestions from the artist and to give in return suggestions to his imagination. [...] Denying herself, she indicates that reality lies potentially within even the most meretricious of pictorial and verbal representations” (12).

²¹ When Trilby showcases her ability to perform roles by taking on the role of *en demoiselle* on an outing, the only thing that shows that she is really Trilby underneath the mask of “the daughter of an English dean” is her foot (100). Later, when the Englishmen see La Svengali in Paris, her feet are one of the signs that this is indeed the Trilby that they knew (355).

identity that the three Englishmen wish to see in her.²² Her decision to become acquainted with the three Englishmen is completely voluntary, and she takes full agency in deciding what role to take on in relation to them, but, accurately reading the English artists' desire for a woman to be "both ornamental and useful" (78), Trilby comes to lose her agency and freedom, leaving herself with only emptiness and lack, becoming the perfect target for Svengali's mesmerism. She increasingly imitates the patriarchal English ideal of womanhood, becoming the darning, washing, cooking housewife who knows "when to talk and when to laugh and when to hold her tongue" (89). Existing through being in itself, Trilby becomes an object, a thing. As Beauvoir notes, patriarchy constructs woman as immanence—stagnation and immersion in nature (267)—in contrast with man as transcendence—continually striving for freedom and authenticity—to take away her power. By following the model of patriarchal womanhood, Trilby practices bad faith and gives up her freedom, and by imposing this model on her, the male artists are able to take away her dangerous power of self-transformation.²³

However, the side effect of man taking power away from the Other by imposing a state of being in itself is that man alone must take on the burden of transcendence and the anguish-inducing freedom that bad faith serves to deflect. Ultimately, subjects in bad faith attempt to throw off their being as for itself and attempt to take on being in itself, the mode of being for unconscious objects, by, for example, attributing qualities that are "fixed in a permanence like that of things" to a subject (55). In an attempt to practice bad

²² Loneliness is an important cause of the bad faith apparent in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (see p.30-1 of this paper) and seems to be related to Sartre's interest in vertigo as a parallel to the anguish that leads to bad faith in that it is a self-induced state of fear.

²³ Indeed, subjects apply bad faith not only to themselves, but also to others. According to Sartre, we are afraid of the freedom of others as well: "There are indeed many precautions to imprison a man in what he is, as if we lived in perpetual fear that he might escape from it, that he might break away and suddenly elude his condition" (59).

faith, existents deny their freedom. Of course, freedom cannot simply disappear; it must be displaced. Therefore, subjects in bad faith abscond from their freedom by projecting it onto the Other (Sartre 42).

A good example of this attitude of bad faith toward the Other in the form of woman is the philosophy, or ethics, of Emmanuel Levinas. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas examines the relationship of man to the Other. Like Sigmund Freud in “The Uncanny,” Levinas connects pain to death, which is the ultimate “unknown” because of the fact that the subject can only form a relationship with it outside of light/knowledge. This unknowable quality of death makes it a complete and utter “mystery” and “alterity” to the subject, who loses all agency in the face of it. The state of no light and no knowledge leads to no power and complete passivity. This understanding of death and alterity is in direct opposition to the more empowering ideas of certain existentialists, including Sartre and Heidegger. Levinas himself contrasts his own conceptualization of death with that of Heidegger. Levinas’s understanding of death is based on his argument that “death is *ungraspable*, that it marks the end of the subject’s virility and heroism.” Levinas’s subject can only exist through the grasping of power, by being the “master,” but death causes the subject to lose power, reducing it to “supreme irresponsibility, into infancy” (40-1).

The Other, which for Levinas is femininity, is a personification of death that brings death into time, from always future to the present. The Other, like death, is complete alterity that cannot be assimilated: “the Other is what I myself am not” (48). Levinas characterizes otherness and femininity as a form of “modesty” (49). The feminine Other moves away from light into darkness. Furthermore, “the other bears

alterity as an essence.” While the masculine subject exists in consciousness, alterity is existence in a state of femininity, which Levinas characterizes as “mystery” (50). With this modest, mysterious being, only a relationship of Eros is possible. Through Eros, the (masculine) subject is able to establish a relationship with the (feminine) Other not based on light and knowledge (because this is impossible). This relationship with the other will allow him to conceptualize a personal relationship with death.

The model presented by Levinas is strikingly similar to Svengali’s relationship with Trilby. Death doggedly haunts the novel in the form of the neighborhood Morgue, which is mentioned unnecessarily often by Du Maurier. It is a nearly permanent part of the scenery of the area around studio, with the narrator taking pains to point out the morgue even when it is not visible because of fog (152). The Morgue and Trilby are strongly connected as ever-present spaces of death, for Svengali repeatedly equates Trilby with death. In fact, he kills her countless times, not only in his imagination, but every time he mesmerizes her: “when Svengali’s Trilby was singing—or seemed to *you* as if she were singing—*our* Trilby had ceased to exist ... *our* Trilby was fast asleep ... in fact, *our* Trilby was *dead*” (442).

Obviously, Levinas and Svengali cannot be seen as ideal models of man’s relationship to woman. In the *Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes about how the male subject uses the myth of the woman as a convenient tool with which to establish and maintain his precarious subjectivity. Because many (male) subjects are practicing bad faith and denying their states as existential beings, they must resolve their anxiety about the state of bad faith in which they strive to live. By displacing elements that hinder their existence in bad faith onto Others, male subjects are able to maintain the illusion of a stable and

essential state of being. Beauvoir presents the woman as the (male) subject's ideal Other: "he dreams of quiet in disquiet and of an opaque plenitude that nevertheless would be endowed with consciousness. This dream incarnated is precisely woman; [...] woman appears at the same time as an abundance of being in contrast to that existence the nothingness of which man senses in himself," while at the same time embodying "in positive form the lack that the existent carries in his heart, and it is in seeking to be made whole through her that man hopes to attain self-realization" (149-50).²⁴ Woman is alternately Being and Nothingness, depending on what the male subject needs her to be. This is how Levinas and Svengali use the woman.

Trilby's smile is described as an "all-embracing smile of uncommon width and quite irresistible sweetness, simplicity, and friendly trust" (16), acting as a symbol of her existence of freedom, possibility, and transcendence, somewhat like her foot. However, after Svengali has changed her into a statue, a doll, a being of only immanence, she laughs "a little high-pitched flippant snigger worthy of a London barmaid" (341). The space inside her has been "filled with the sight and the sound of [Svengali]" (60). Thus, Trilby's transformation from Trilby to La Svengali is her transformation from a being of transcendence to one of immanence. This change is the direct result of the influence of the men and how they use Trilby. Because of the influence of the Englishmen and Svengali, Trilby repeats the transformation process between transcendence and immanence, being for itself and being in itself. She becomes completely empty only to

²⁴ Interestingly, Sartre narrates a similar power dynamic through the example of the friend of the homosexual man who urges his homosexual friend to declare his identity as a homosexual to illustrate a model of the relationship between subjects. In advising his friend to become liberated by accepting his "essence" as a homosexual, the friend is asking the homosexual man to "constitute himself as a thing, that he should entrust his freedom to his friend as a fief, in order that the friend should return it to him subsequently." Sartre compares this situation to that of Hegel's master and slave (64-5).

then be completely filled with whichever identity the men require of her in an endless cycle. The woman is made to become either transcendence or immanence, but never both at the same time, precisely so that man can have access to both transcendence and immanence, separately, without experiencing anguish or being restricted by essentialism. Depending on the circumstances or the personal needs of the male subject, the woman can be made to stand for anything the man does not want to be. It is as if the male subject has divided subjectivity into several parts and displaces whichever is most inconvenient or frightening (such as death and freedom) onto spaces such as the woman and her body.

In the case of Little Billee, this displacement does not occur voluntarily but because of the interference of others. After he loses Trilby, Billee also loses, among other things, the ability to love. He feels “as though some part of his brain where his affections were seated had been paralyzed,” as if his “cerebrum (or cerebellum, or whatever it is) had been dug out by the vivisector for experimental purposes” (212). Sartre argues that it is “necessary to speak of [a phenomenon] *both* in terms of immanence and in terms of transcendence. The danger, in fact, would be of falling into either a doctrine of pure immanence (Husserlian idealism) or into one of pure transcendence which would look on the phenomenon as a new kind of *object*” (625). That is, a well-balanced ontological subject must possess both transcendence and immanence, which according to Beauvoir were often gendered masculine and feminine. So for Billee, Trilby stands for a part of himself, as is made evident when he looks into her eyes and sees himself (40).²⁵ Thus,

²⁵ Svengali wishes to have a similar connection with Trilby as well, but in a destructive and violent way. He desires “an unconscious Trilby of marble, who could produce wonderful sounds—just the sounds he wanted, and nothing else—and think his thoughts and wish his wishes—and love him at his bidding with a strange, unreal, factitious love ... just his own love for himself turned inside out—*à l’envers*—and reflected back on him, as from a mirror ... *un écho, un simulacra, quoi! Pas autre chose!*” (441). In her study of addiction, Stacey Margolis suggests that Svengali empties Trilby of subjectivity only to fill her with his own image, to use her as a mirror for himself (26).

when he loses Trilby, Billee loses a part of himself, his femininity, and becomes a “better” man, at least according to social standards. He grows a mustache and conducts savvy business with a Jewish art dealer, the Little Billee who had insisted that the artist should exist in a state of feminine, cloistered isolation “*away* from the world—above all that meanness and paltriness” (196). However, in this process of becoming a more socially acceptable male, he becomes an incomplete existent, a being divided into two parts.²⁶

However, according to Julia Kristeva, this loss is only a repetition of what happened much earlier in Billee’s life, during the process of subject formation. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva specifically genders the division of the psyche in psychoanalysis to discuss this issue of the woman’s body in relation to subject formation and language. The so-called thetic phase of subject formation is the stage in which the subject moves from an infantile stage to one within the social order, from the semiotic to the symbolic, from the maternal chora to the paternal law. Crucial to this understanding of the thetic phase is the role of the mother. The language of femininity and physical space characterizes Kristeva’s understanding of subject formation. The chora, the first stage of development, is decidedly feminine, and the “feminine” space/body is not only conducive, but essential to subject formation, if only as the starting point that must eventually be left behind. Women are repeatedly linked to this maternal that must be left behind for the man to grow up. Trilby’s gaze reminds Billee of his mother, who “had often looked at him like that when he was a small boy” (93). Perhaps sensing the similarity of his need for his mother and for herself, Trilby also

²⁶ When Billee sees Trilby again and regains his ability to love and remember, he feels that “He was himself again at last, after five years, and wide awake; and he owed it all to Trilby” (322)

associates her relationship to Billee with that of his mother (184, 396).²⁷ Trilby provides the connection to the maternal, semiotic chora that he lost in growing up and becoming a man. The substitution can go the other way as well. When Trilby/La Svengali refuses to acknowledge him in Paris, the narrator explains that Billee “longed for his mother” (341). One female space is replaceable with the other in a system interested in maintaining gender boundaries, insofar as they are gendered bodies.²⁸

Therefore, Billee must lose Trilby, just as he lost his mother. Not only for psychoanalysis, but for all systems in which the separation between certain gendered boundaries is desired, bodies are important in maintaining social order. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler uses Mary Douglas’ conceptualization of the body as the signifier of boundaries conducive to order. The body stands for any and all systems that impose order on the seeming chaos of the state of being. This order is made possible through the establishing of boundaries in the form of taboos and other limitations. As quoted by Butler, “It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (131). Such boundaries of difference, represented by bodily boundaries, must be maintained for order to exist, and all threats to such boundaries are seen as threats to the security of the system itself. Therefore, the physical androgyny of both Trilby and Little Billee are problematic, and the social forces in the novel strive to make one more feminine and the other more masculine.

²⁷ Later, Alice, Billee’s sister’s friend, also serves a similar role of surrogate or substitute for the mother.

²⁸ Female bodies are not the only way to access the chora. Music and dreams are also important channels, according to Kristeva, and Billee uses both music (202) and dreams (233) to access what he has lost.

V. Models of Male Artists' Use/Abuse of the Woman in *Trilby*

Unfortunately for the male artist, such strict gender division is not conducive to art according to Kristeva. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva identifies two “modalities” within the signifying process: the semiotic and the symbolic. “These two modalities are inseparable within the *signifying process* that constitutes language [...] Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either ‘exclusively’ semiotic or ‘exclusively’ symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both” (24). This reliance on seemingly dialectical but actually interdependent forces is crucial to understanding art, for dreams and the text are the places where Kristeva identifies the dominance of the seemingly lost semiotic (29).

The artist, therefore, needs to access the displaced elements in order to create art. When Little Billee loses Trilby, he claims that he cannot create art any more: “I’ll never paint another stroke till I’ve got her back ... never, never, never, I tell you—I can’t—I won’t!” (196).²⁹ He tries to regain access to the feminine through various channels including music, his mother and sister, and Alice. After losing Trilby, Billee notices that “Alice had looked at him with Trilby’s eyes; or his mother’s, when that he was a little tiny boy. It all but gave him the thrill he thirsted for” (255). As he tried to replace his mother with Trilby and vice versa, Alice is also considered for the role, for “One good woman would do as well as another if she’s equally good-looking” (261). Through a series of women, Billee tries to regain the maternal and semiotic chora that he has lost in the process of becoming a man and following the law of the father (engaging with the

²⁹ He does paint another piece, the “Moon-Dial,” but Showalter notes that this piece is one commissioned for business purposes (Introduction xvii).

public world), for this feminine element is crucial to his art. He needs “his heart as well as his brain” (259), the feminine as well as the masculine, not only as an existent but also as an artist.³⁰ He cannot remain on one side of the divide.

Crossing gender boundaries, however, is never an easy task. In Western tradition, gender has functioned as a convenient binary division under which most factors of human existence could be classified in what was called the two “lines,” with femininity belonging in the same category as death, darkness, and physicality, and masculinity categorized with life, light, and the spirit. In her archetypal study of the Gothic, Anne Williams traces the history of this division to the two lines of the Pythagoreans cited by Plato, “once commonly called ‘The line of good’ and ‘the line of evil’.” According to Williams, these two “lines” were part of the intellectual common ground as late as the Renaissance (19), but ideas about these two “lines” survive to this day. In his introduction to Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Leon S. Rudiez comments on the seemingly binary structure adopted by Kristeva: “While this division [of the semiotic and the symbolic] is not identical with that of unconscious/conscious, id/superego/, or nature/culture, there are analogies here that could be usefully kept in mind. In all four instances there is a constant dialectical process at work, one that has its source in infancy, and is implicated in sexual differentiation” (4). In this way, binaries are often easily

³⁰ This interdependence between the male artist and female instrument is noted by Gecko, when he says, “it takes two to sing like La Svengali [:] the one who has got the voice, and the one who knows what to do with it” (441). Indeed, Svengali wants to bring back the *il bel canto* himself but cannot: “if only I had a bit of a voice, I would be the best singer in the world” (28, translation in 1998 Oxford edition 307). But because he does not have a “voice,” he takes Trilby, the ultimate voice, and trains her: “I cannot sing myself, I cannot play the violin, but I can teach” (28). Little Billee shares this interdependence with Svengali to a certain degree. Commenting on his drawing of Trilby’s foot, the narrator says, “It was Trilby’s foot and nobody else’s, nor could have been, and nobody else but Little Billee could have drawn it in just that inspired way” (25). Both Trilby and Billee are essential elements of the process of artistic creation.

gendered. The division of gender is only one of many other binary divisions, but what sets it apart from the others is that it is the only relatively concrete concept (because of its supposed corporeality), making it the best candidate for standing as the symbol of the other elements in the list. Therefore, under the division of masculine/feminine, it becomes possible to categorize virtually anything. Man becomes the figurehead for certain values and woman for others, causing a gendered division of qualities that are not necessarily or exclusively related to either gender.

The above was true in nineteenth-century England as well. Nadia Urbinati points to George Grote's *History of Greece*, to which J. S. Mill wrote a response, as an example of what I would call the Victorian counterpart of the "two lines" of classical times: "Grote had labeled the 'inclination' to 'the religious and poetical view' as 'feminine,' while attributing the term 'masculine' to 'powers of acting, organising, judging, and speculating'" (627). However, this neat division of gendered qualities creates a problem, precisely because it is so neat. In "Sorties," Cixous criticizes Freud's phallus-driven understanding of the sexes for relying too much on the "having/not having" of the phallus (82). Such a division is the basis of most binary systems. Rather than being a system of A/B, where differences are respected and exist autonomously, most conventional binaries are A/not-A, where the two parts are ultimately defined by only one of the components. Not-A relies on A and exists only as a negation and absence of A, rather than existing on its own. This formulation makes an overlap between the two binaries impossible. You are either a man or a woman; you can never be both or neither.

Access to the feminine, therefore, must not lead to feminization. In his article "Men of My Own Sex," Dennis Denisoff analyzes Du Maurier's uncomfortable

relationship with the dandy-aesthete, a model of the male artist that Du Maurier ridiculed but could not ignore. According to Denisoff, the dandy-aesthete, or the feminine (and by association homosexual) male artist was a threat to Du Maurier, because “while dandy-aesthetes threatened to make the artist and heteronormative male mutually exclusive, men like Du Maurier wished to identify with both” (152). This precarious gender balancing act is exemplified in the studio of the three Englishmen in the novel. The studio is introduced predominantly as a place of art through the catalog of art objects, but at the same time it is described as a space in which two gendered extremes coexist. One half of the studio is covered with “two cheetah-skins and a large Persian praying-rug,” signifying soft, exotic, feminine beauty and art, whereas the other half of the floor is covered with “coarse matting” and serves as a place for masculine exploits of physical prowess including gymnastics, fencing, and boxing (2). Male artists had to be able to move freely from one side of the studio to the other, while being careful not to stay too long on one side. Denisoff finds a solution to the conflict between the masculine, heterosexual male artist and the feminine, homosexual male artist in the androgynous body of Trilby: “Little Billee and Svengali’s sexual-aesthetic admiration of Trilby demarcates her body as a site of erotic possibilities for the men where her attractive femaleness is persistently rendered necessary yet secondary to the potential reconfiguration of the woman as male” (161-2). Denisoff reads Trilby’s body as a screen onto which both heterosexual and homosexual desire can be projected in a way that conveniently allows the boundary between two desires to be blurred. I would like to expand this statement from one about the artist’s eroticism to one about the artist’s identity. That is, for the male artists, Trilby exists as a tool to resolve the male subjects’ anxiety about the feminine quality of art, an anxiety that

is revealed only partially through issues of sexuality. Both male and female, or perhaps neither, Trilby allows the male artists to preserve their masculinity while engaging in the occupation of art, which has been problematically feminized.

A famous example of this phenomenon is the relationship between Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddall, his model, mistress, and later wife. In relation to the time in which the novel is set, the Pre-Raphaelites are very much present in the background of the novel. When Trilby undergoes a physical transformation into an English ideal of womanhood, she is described as being close to the Pre-Raphaelite ideal of womanly beauty (128), and Taffy later subscribes to Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics (24). Du Maurier personally knew many of the artists of the brotherhood, and, moreover, Rossetti's occupation as painter as well as poet makes his relationship to Siddall directly relevant to the relationships between Trilby and the artists in the novel.

The famous story of Rossetti burying his poems with Siddall, and then later exhuming them for publication, is a fantastic tableau involving art, gender, and death.³¹ Similarly, by connecting Trilby with death, Svengali constantly reaffirms her position as art object. When Svengali imagines Trilby lying in the Morgue, he turns the morbid scene of death into one of art and spectatorship through the custom of the time where women's dead bodies were displayed in glass cases (107). He also later imagines her "beautiful skeleton," once again in a state of display after death (130). Furthermore, when the three artists return to Paris to hear La Svengali without knowing that she is Trilby, the "death" of the old Trilby and the "construction" of the new Trilby is foreshadowed through the Morgue. The men discover that the old Morgue has been torn down to build a new

³¹ For discussions on femininity, death, and art, see Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, and Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*. Bronfen examines the relationship between Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddall in regard to art, gender, and death (168-78).

Morgue, one even larger and more beautiful than the old one. This is directly connected to Trilby's reincarnation as La Svengali, who has become an art object, even more so than before, as did Siddall after her death.³²

The relationship between Rossetti and Siddall is described rather critically in a poem by the poet/artist's sister, Christina Rossetti. "In an Artist's Studio" points out that for the male artist, it does not matter who the woman is. The only issue of concern is what she can be for the artist, an attitude that results in "killing" the woman, not directly and physically, but indirectly by erasing her subjectivity and transforming her into a blank or empty body:

One face looks out from all his canvasses,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans;
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
A saint, an angel;--every canvass means
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;

³² There does indeed seem to be a direct connection between art and death. After Billee and Svengali leave the studio, the piano they used to play is described as "a dismal and sulky-looking piece of furniture, a grand piano that nobody ever plays—[...] a kind of mausoleum! a lop-sided coffin, trestles and all!" (215). Like the piano, Trilby is a musical instrument. If an instrument without the musician is like a coffin, Trilby's body can also be equated to this space of death and enclosure.

Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;

Not as she is, but as she fills his dream. (1-14, emphasis added)

The female model is the same “One face” (1), but the male artist can make her become a “queen” (5), a “nameless girl” (6), a “saint, an angel” (7). As a woman, Christina Rossetti is able to see that all the paintings have the “same one meaning” (8), but to the male artist, the woman exists “Not as she is, but as she fills his dream” (14). This erasure of the woman’s subjectivity is directly connected to the reason man can use the woman to represent anything he wants, even opposing extremes, as in the case of Trilby.

Cixous begins “Sorties” by ruminating on Logocentrism’s heavy reliance on “dual, hierarchical oppositions,” asking if the use of binary systems to understand “all concepts, codes and values” has anything to do with the gender binary. Cixous’s answer is yes, and the extended binary of man/woman for her is activity/passivity. The complete passivity attributed to the woman results in completely excluding her from “the world of ‘being’” (64). This exclusion causes the woman to disappear: “She does not exist, she can not-be; but there has to be something of her. He keeps, then, of the woman on whom he is no longer dependent, only this space, always virginal, as matter to be subjected to the desire he wishes to impart” (65). Because woman is thus rendered blank, empty, virginal, she can be filled with whatever man wants her to be, as Beauvoir shows in *The Second Sex*:

Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena—woman is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and falsehood; she is healing presence and sorceress; she

is man's prey, his downfall, she is everything that he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his *raison d'être*. (151)

As Beauvoir notes, it does not matter whether the woman truly possesses or lacks the qualities that are being projected onto or excluded from her subjectivity. Woman serves whatever need the male has for her, even taking on contradictory roles simultaneously. She can be both the medicine and the poison because she is empty/emptied, either because of the way femininity was understood or because the man erases her subjectivity in order to use her empty body.

Nicholas Daly traces the figure of the "white girl" through the artwork and writings of James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Gustave Courbet, and Du Maurier to claim that they were all based on Whistler's mistress and model Joanna Hiffernan. For Daly, who reads Svengali as Whistler himself, *Trilby* is Du Maurier's critique of the "artistic practice of aestheticism" (14), where the female model "is abstracted out of existence" (19).³³ To support this reading, Daly claims that Svengali not only makes Trilby his artistic (and perhaps sexual) "instrument" like the other male artists (13-15), but "goes further by actually stealing her identity, or more accurately by replacing the living Trilby with a puppet, a conduit for his own personality" (19). Not satisfied with Trilby's immense emptiness, Svengali empties her even of the memories of her past through mesmerism, effectively killing her, albeit indirectly or nonphysically.³⁴ What Dante

³³ It must be noted that this is an uncommon reading. Svengali is more often connected to dandy aesthetes such as Oscar Wilde or Jewish musicians. Moreover, there was another character thought to be modeled on Whistler. The "Note on the Text" section in the 1998 Oxford edition of *Trilby* mentions that the character of Joe Sibley in the original serialized version was changed to a different character named Antony when *Trilby* was published as a novel. Apparently, Whistler was offended by how Du Maurier represented him and "threatened to sue for libel" (Denisoff xxii).

³⁴ For a discussion of mesmerism and death, see Athena Vrettos, "Hypnotic Spectatorship: *Trilby*."

Gabriel Rossetti accomplished through painting and marriage, Svengali accomplishes with mesmerism.

The Laird's warning to Trilby that mesmerists "get you in their power, and just make you do any blessed thing they please—lie, murder, steal—anything! and kill yourself into the bargain when they've done with you" (72) is based on real fears of the time regarding mesmerism. Gracombe comments on such Victorian conceptions of mesmerism: "For many Victorians mesmerism's most disturbing quality was the way that it troubled the notion of a stable, unified identity by suggesting that there were hidden-unconscious-mental regions that might contradict one's own sense of self" (100). Such an understanding of mesmerism shows what effect Du Maurier may have wanted to achieve by making his villain a Jewish mesmerist-musician. All three elements, Jewishness, mesmerism, and music, carried implications of a power to affect the subjectivity of other individuals.

Gracombe notices that Du Maurier "undercut[s] the largely positive valence given to the Jew-as-Artist by linking it to the more negative, threatening image of the Jew-as-Mesmerist" (102). Similarly, Pick's focus in "Powers of Suggestion" is on the mesmeric powers of Svengali as the Jew and the relationship of this power to music in nineteenth-century England. Pick connects mesmeric powers to "psychological invasion, showing the Jews' capacity to get inside—and even replace—the mental functioning of the gentile" (107). Pick analyzes Wagner's anti-Semitic treatise on the Jew and music to support his argument. Pick reports that Wagner felt that Jews were incapable of great art but used their money to "rise to prominence in music" (112). Even Mendelssohn, according to Pick's reading of Wagner, had a "crippling deficiency, the tragedy of a real

talent trapped inside the body and mind of an ignoble race” (112). Indeed, Svengali’s Jewishness may be the reason behind his inability to play the “highest and best of all” music (56), but nonetheless music has a powerful psychological influence throughout the novel, as is shown in Billee’s use of music for therapeutic purposes and the wild reactions of the audience to the performances of La Svengali.

However, Pick notes, Du Maurier is not as conclusive about the Jew as the public might have liked, for there is “a difficulty in *Trilby* about definitely ‘placing’ the Jew” (107). Many interpretations of Du Maurier’s ambiguous stance regarding the conventionally dangerous powers of Jewishness, mesmerism, and music are possible, but if the focus is put on the fact that Du Maurier himself was a writer and illustrator who had aspirations for painting earlier in his life, that is, a male artist who was not able to achieve the level of artistry he desired, it becomes possible to read Du Maurier’s ambivalence as a statement that the power to manipulate and erase the subjectivity of others, especially the Trilbys, may be essential to the success of the male artist.

Of course, such a violent “murder” of the woman is not the only solution to this dilemma, but the alternative may have carried equally negative implications in Du Maurier’s time. Rather than appropriating the woman’s body to create art like Svengali, Little Billee chooses to incorporate femininity into his own subjectivity. However, like Coleridge’s feelings toward Wordsworth, Billee’s feelings of inadequacy are aroused by Taffy’s manly physique and Svengali’s possession of the woman he loves.³⁵ Additionally, the presence of artist characters who may be read as dandy aesthetes implies a

³⁵ When Billee has a crying fit because of the emotional experience of being reunited with the feminine in the form of Trilby, he is “restored to his balance” with a good dose of Taffy’s manliness (330). Billee on his own is not man enough.

feminization of men and, by implication, homosexuality.³⁶ Banta asserts that the male artists in novels including *Trilby* are not interested sexually in women because they are “too dedicated to [their] art, too fond of [their] male companions, and too pre-adolescent to have much interest in women” (26). Little Billee is described so often in terms of femininity and isolation, rather than masculinity and engagement, that it becomes rather difficult to define his desire for Trilby as masculine sexuality.

While tracing the trajectory of Du Maurier’s career in relation to his attitudes regarding the dandy-aesthetes and the cultural values they embodied, Denisoff claims that artists such as Du Maurier were particularly invested in the dandy-aesthetes, who “positioned their persona at the center of a power struggle over the sexualization of the ideal type of artist” (147). According to Denisoff, Du Maurier, who began his career as an artist-in-training in Paris, formed his identity as a conservative, essentialist, elitist male artist in the community of *Punch*, where he drew his famous illustrations condemning dandy-aesthetes as effeminate and artificial poseurs. The dandy aesthetes were a threat to male artists such as Du Maurier because they threatened his own masculinity and heterosexuality. Therefore, Du Maurier’s next move was to separate the positive and the negative connotations of the figure of the dandy-aesthete into Little Billee and Svengali in *Trilby*. In *Trilby*, Denisoff claims, the ideal male artist retains some “unconventionality as a sign of possible creative genius,” but the “artistic egoism and self-commodification” of the dandy-aesthetes is rendered Jewish, and hence “threateningly abnormal,” through Svengali (153). Consequently, Little Billee and Svengali are not completely different from each other (as signaled by the drop of Jewish

³⁶ In addition to Dennisoff’s reading of *Trilby* as a screen for the homoerotic desire of the male artists, a reading based on Eve Sedgwick’s triangle of desire in homosocial and homoerotic relationships among men is possible.

blood Billee has), but merely “at different points on a spectrum of genius” (154). Grossman claims that Little Billee’s “tinge” of Jewish blood and his other quirks of effeminacy and homoeroticism are explained away as characteristics that “just barely save him from his own pristine virtuousness” (533). Billee is able to exist in the middle ground between “the tediously pure and the contaminated hybrid” (534). In presenting the effeminate Little Billee as the more ideal version of the artist, Du Maurier may have been attempting to give the male artist access to the feminine in a way that is not inherently violent, but this was an impossible dream. Billee must die, as did Svengali. There was no way out for the male artist, at least within the Victorian definitions of gender, art, and subjectivity.

VI. Conclusion

The question of “Trilbyness” is a puzzling matter. The essence of Trilbyness is her foot, the symbol many critics read as the fetish of desire. Trilbyness is also characterized by the author as a quality that “wak[es] up (and satisf[ies]) some vague longing that lies dormant in the hearts of most of us, men and women alike; grace, charm, magnetism—whatever the nameless seduction should be called that she possessed to such an unusual degree” (383). Another characteristic of Trilby is her extreme susceptibility to mesmerization (73). All these qualities combined, Trilbyness seems to be the extreme, alluring emptiness which draws various individuals to project various desires onto/into her and satisfy their deepest longings.

Gecko tells Taffy that “there were two Trilbys,” “ours” and Svengali’s (440). When Trilby is being painted on her deathbed by four male artists, there are four Trilbys,

for the pictures are “all so singularly like her, and so singularly unlike each other! *Trilby vue à travers quatre temperaments*” (392). In truth, there are as many Trilbys as there are readers of *Trilby*, in addition to all the “readers” of Trilby herself within the book.

Apparently, Trilby’s ability to lend herself to infinite transformation rubbed off on the book itself, for *Trilby* was transformed into countless stage productions, parodies, images, and products. Emily Jenkins explores the world of Trilbymania in her article “Trilby: Fads, Photographers, and ‘Over-Perfect Feet’.” There were Trilby waltzes, Trilby coats, Trilby parties, the Trilby Coterie and Chowder Club, Trilby ice cream, shoes, dolls, sausage, puzzles, games, writing paper, fans... the list is almost literally endless (245-6).

Although Jenkins provides many historical, social, and textual reasons for this proliferation of Trilby-related products, the most convincing textual evidence she provides is in the depiction of Trilby as a commodity that can be possessed and that people wish to possess (227). In the novel, all three Englishmen are said to have “possessed casts of Trilby’s hands and feet, and photographs of herself” (293). The Laird makes an attempt to purchase the drawing of Trilby’s foot on the wall of their old studio (294). When the three discover a shop selling representations of Trilby (La Svengali), “they all go in and purchase largely” (354). Trilby is desirable as a commodity because of her possibility for endless permutations, her essential emptiness which allows her to become whatever the consumer/artist wishes her to be. The transformation of Trilby by the four artists was continued outside the book by the “British and American readers who responded to the novel by writing their own versions of it” (235), and those who consumed these versions and other products. This is the magic of Trilby, the wonder of her Trilbyness, which is completely empty and thus so utterly inviting to all who wish to

project their own desires and anxieties onto her. To the artist, she is the realization of artistic creativity; to certain feminists, the paragon of female power; to the capitalist, a potential gold-mine. The possibilities for “reading” *Trilby* are seemingly infinite, making it the ideal “text” for everyone and anyone.

For Kristeva, the power of literature lies in the fact that “[i]f there exists a ‘discourse’ which is [...] the essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective, and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction—productive violence, in short—it is ‘literature,’ or, more specifically, the *text*” (*Revolution* 16). From such an understanding of literature, it may only be logical for Kristeva to compare the effect the text has on the individual to political revolution (17). However, as acknowledged even by Kristeva herself, there is an element of sacrifice at the heart of art. Grace Kehler reads *Trilby* alongside texts dealing with the “lost voice” of the castrato to explore the mesmeric powers of the singing voice of the castrato and the longing for the lost ideal of vocal performance. The most significant connection between Trilby’s singing and the castrato is the fact that both represent “an aesthetic that violates or threatens individual identity” (3). In the name of art, the bodies and subjectivities of the Trilbys, Mimi Salopes, Jennys, and little boys are appropriated and mut(il)ated. They are consumed, economically as products, metaphorically in the process of creating art, and perhaps even literally in Trilby’s case, considering the allusions to Svengali as a vampiric spider.

The castrato’s art is based on a “loss” of the phallus, masculinity, and subjectivity (7). Kehler quotes from Roland Barthes’ *S/Z* to introduce the concept of “nothingness” that permeates these “castrated texts,” as Kehler calls them, these “aesthetic creation[s]

predicated on lack” (8). This “(essential) lack” leads to “(interpretive) excess”; that is, the lack lends itself to “endless aesthetic speculation” (9). The “eunuch singer” is “an empty vessel, one endlessly available for interpretation, but whose productive malleability carries with it a long history of physical and textual violence that might haunt the imagination along with the coveted voice” (12). This last element of haunting sacrifice is present in the issue of the male artist and his muse/model/Other. In her essay, Kehler asks, “what if the fan had to risk health, identity, or life itself for art, instead of a lower-class or financially needy boy, often a peasant” (14)? From this standpoint, Svengali is the music aficionado who is willing to sacrifice others for the sake of art, and Trilby becomes the singing machine who is “estranged” from the very art that she produces (17-19). However, in some ways, Trilby and Svengali are both the results of such attitudes about art: “These longings produce the operatic voice of Trilby, which Svengali creates to fit both his and the public’s image of a vocal ideal; they also produce a Svengali, who embodies social inferiority, terror, and mystery or enables dreams of artistic repletion” (21). Can there be any alternatives to a process of artistic creativity based on sacrifice and violence? If we read Billee as the music fan who is willing to castrate himself for beautiful music, would he present an acceptable model of artistic subjectivity? Can Trilby decide her own fate?

Janis P. Stout discovers part of the answer in Willa Cather’s “unwilling singer” characters. According to Stout, Cather was greatly influenced by the popularity of *Trilby*, and in characters such as Thea in *The Song of the Lark*, “rewrites [Trilby] into an active agent who, by the end of the book, is answerable to no one but herself” (11). Stout is not the only writer to suggest alternative models of artistic creation and, most likely not by

coincidence, the second writer is a woman as well. In her essay on Felicia Hemans's poem "The Image in Lava," Isobel Armstrong contrasts the poem with Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" to highlight Hemans's use of the imprinted form of a woman's body to present a method of artistic creation based on emptiness. Armstrong reads Hemans's description of the woman's body suckling her infant imprinted in the ashes of Pompeii as a form of "'pure' unmediated aesthetic, a poesis of the earth itself" (214). Indeed, the woman's body exists no longer as a solid form but only as the completely empty mold with which art can be created, "receptive form as container and negative space," "non-matter, emptiness, air," what Armstrong calls an "epistemology of the void" (217-8). Such an aesthetic calls for a different role from the artist, one opposed to the traditional sculptor who made matter conform to his design in an inherently violent manner (217). Creation of art within an aesthetics of emptiness is a "conception of creativity as creation *from the inside out*" (224). Rather than the conventionally masculine and violent carving from outside, this new way of creation is represented in the form of the bond between mother and child, a bond created by the physical bond of the breast through which fluid flows from mother to child (226).³⁷ However, Armstrong notes Hemans's conservatism in presenting the story of this new female creativity of the void as one that ends in tragedy. As always, the mother's body is the site of death as well as birth, leaving the question of whether the woman's body as void can truly create art through "representation" and "language" (227). Billee's hypothetical self-castration will always be seen as a loss.

³⁷ Gubar also sees a possibility of healing the wounds caused by conventional definitions of art in activities that validate conventionally disvalued, feminine acts of creation such as non-creation (blankness) and creation of the blank page itself. The feminine "lack" becomes a potential for creation (261).

However, what if “castration” is not conceived of as a loss or an inadequacy? Both Sartre and Kristeva present a model where representation and language, reason and mastery are no longer privileged. Perhaps only after the hierarchy and division between rigidly gendered binaries are broken down will it be possible to envision a theory of art that is based on inclusion and acceptance of the other, much as Cixous does through her ideas of bisexuality. For Cixous, “writing is akin to bisexuality in its necessity for accepting the other” (85). By reestablishing artistic creativity as something both (and neither) masculine and feminine, Cixous claims that the difference between the subject and the other can be made nonthreatening to either side. Such an acceptance of difference will be possible only when the subject is able to release itself from its restricting “essence” of man or woman; when an existence of nothingness can be celebrated as one of existential freedom, not of death, and not just of the woman; when Little Billee will not be condemned and killed for wanting to become Trilby; and when Trilby’s ability to transform herself infinitely will be a power she can use for herself.

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