We are neither present in the world nor absent from it. The intelligibility of this assertion will depend on our success in redefining the usual referent of “we,” a success made problematic by the fact that the redefining agency is a function of the very object—or, more properly, subject—to be redefined. We may, however, be encouraged by the thought that both art and psychoanalysis offer ample evidence of the human subject’s aptitude for exceeding its own subjectivity. By that I mean an aptitude for modes of subjecthood in excess of or to the side of the psychic particularities that constitute individualizing subjectivities. Only those modes of subject-being can both recognize and initiate correspondences between the subject and the world that are free of both an antagonistic dualism between human consciousness and the world it inhabits and the anthropomorphic appropriation of that world. While it seems to me that the most profound originality of psychoanalysis has been that it demands of itself a conceptual account of such correspondences, I also feel that it has largely evaded that demand by misinterpreting itself as a depth psychology. The de-psychologizing of psychoanalysis—implicit in Freud and reinitiated, most notably, by Lacan—is imperative if psychoanalysis is to be more than the therapeutically oriented classification of the human subject’s failed communications with the world.

If psychoanalysis invites us to think a register of being radically different from a subjectivity grounded in psychology (it calls that other mode of being the unconscious), it has also, for the most part, failed to see how that discovery reconfigures the subject in ways that open us to the solidarity of being both among human subjects and between the human and the non-human. It is this failure that accounts most profoundly for the limitations of psychoanalytically inspired approaches to art. Psychoanalysis describes our aptitude for transforming the world into a reflection of subjectivity. It has treated the work of art as a double model of subjectification: a privileged representation, in its contents, of subjectifying strategies, as well as an exemplification, in its structural and stylistic enunciations, of the artist’s subjectifying resources. Psychoanalysis has been the most authoritative modern reformulation of the Cartesian and Hegelian opposition (qualified by Hegel as “necessary absolutely”) between nature and spirit or between the res extensa [“corporeal substance” or “extended thing”] and thought. The clinical subject of psychoanalysis successfully strips (I quote from Hegel) “the external world of its inflexible foreignness [in order to] enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself,” in order to find again “his own characteristics,” which Hegel attributes to the “free subject.” Thanks to the ruses of desire, the psychoanalytic subject lives what Hegel defined as “the really beautiful subject-matter of romantic art”: the emergence of subjectivity from itself “into a relation with something else which, however, is its own, and in which it finds itself again and remains communing and in unity with itself.”

The projective, introjective, and identificatory techniques first studied by Freud are strategies designed to suppress the otherness in which my sameness is hidden from my consciousness. To paraphrase an author who made of this war between subject and

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object a gloriously lurid psychic drama (I refer to Melanie Klein), I must impose my good objects on the world in order to prevent the world from destroying me with my bad objects. For Klein, it is the bad object that gives birth to the object as object; the latter is originally constituted in the human subject. From the very beginning, the object as conceived by psychoanalysis is inherently a bad object, or a fundamentally foreign object that I must struggle to appropriate, or, finally, an object in whose depths the subject risks discovering his own psychic wastes. “At the very beginning, it seems,” Freud writes in the 1915 essay “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” “the external world, objects, and what is hated are identical.” Not only at the very beginning: “As an expression of the reaction of unpleasure evoked by objects,” he goes on, hate “always remains in an intimate relation with the self-preservative instincts.”

Given the (perceived) fundamental hostility of the world to the self, the very possibility of object relations depends on a profound mistrust of the object and, consequently, on different modes of appropriating objects. “It is obvious,” Lacan writes in the 1959-60 seminar on The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, “that the libido, with its paradoxical, archaic, so-called pre-genital characteristics, with its eternal polymorphism, with its world of images that are linked to the different sets of drives associated with the different stages from the oral to the anal to the genital—all of which no doubt constitutes the originality of Freud’s contribution—that whole microcosm has absolutely nothing to do with the macrocosm; only in fantasy does it engender the world.”

Lacan goes on to say: “This is a point whose importance does not seem to have been noticed, namely, that the Freudian project has caused the whole world to reenter us, has definitely put it back in its place, that is to say, in our body, and nowhere else.”

Having removed the desiring subject from the world, and having relocated the world within the subject, Lacanian theory would seem to have nothing to say about the world as such or about the subject’s presence in that world. But this is not exactly the case. Lacan relocates the subject—or at least parts of the subject—in the world, not as projections, but rather as that which has been detached, cut off from the subject, as a result of our entrance into language as signification; we are in the world as the psychic dropping that will be identified with the objet petit a. [the unattainable object of desire or the object cause of desire]

In Lacanian aesthetics, especially as outlined in the ethics seminar, beauty, or form, is what protects us from the objet petit a, that is, from the unacceptable, hidden, lost cause of our desires. “The function of beauty,” Lacan announces in the essay “Kant avec Sade,” is to be “an extreme barrier that forbids access to a fundamental horror.” It is this invisible, literally unspeakable presence that gives to beauty its blinding brilliance, the seductive and protective shine of form.

Thus, psychoanalytically conceived, the world interests us, seduces us, even dazzles us to the degree that it contains us—whether it be as a projection, an identification, or an original loss. We might note in passing that the relational mechanisms studied most thoroughly by psychoanalysis—identification, projection,

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introjection—could perhaps only have been theorized in a civilization that has privileged an appropriate relation of the self to the world, one that assumes a secure and fundamentally antagonistic distinction between subject and object. I want to ask the following question: can the work of art, contrary to psychoanalytic assumptions, deploy signs of the subject in the world when they are not signs of interpretation or of an object-destroying jouissance [orgasm; sexually charged enjoyment], but sign of what I will call correspondences of forms within a universal solidarity of being? What I have tried to show in my work on psychoanalysis and art and especially in work done in collaboration with Ulysse Dutoit—in studies of art as diverse as ancient Assyrian sculpture, Plato’s Symposium, Caravaggio’s painting, Proust’s literary monument, Mark Rothko’s and Ellsworth Kelley’s art, and the films of Resnais and Godard—has been how art can, in effect, position us as aesthetic rather than psychoanalytically defined subjects within the world.

Our notion of correspondences has been elaborated almost entirely through studies of the visual arts. That is to say, certain perceptual recognitions—ours, and, it has seemed to us, those of the artists we have discussed—have provided the evidence for our argument for the human subject’s nonprojective presence in the world. Our fundamental claim has been that the aesthetic subject, while it both produces and is produced by works of art, is a mode of relational being that exceeds the cultural province of art and embodies truths of being. Art diagrams universal relationality. How might that relationality be diagrammed in literary works? Pierre Michon’s 1996 novel La Grande Beune begins by locating itself in a comfortably familiar Balzacian fashion: “Between les Martres and Saint-Amand-le-Petit lies the town of Castelnau, along the Beune [river]. I was posted to Castelnau in 1961.” As we learn in the first pages, the narrator was twenty years old in 1961, and it was at a small public school in Castelnau that he had his first teaching position. He lodges at the town’s only hotel, Chez Hélène; its proprietress, Hélène, is a widow whose son, called Jean-le-Pêcheur, is, as his name suggests, the region’s most renowned fisherman. The place is unremarkable except in two respects: it is an area famous for its prehistoric caves (among them, Lascaux), and the woman who runs the local shop where the young teacher buys cigarettes and postcards is a beauty he describes as “a nice piece” (un beau morceau), an animal and a queen, a beauty who instantly made “abominable thoughts” run through his blood. He immediately desires this radiant specimen in terms remarkably free of the romantic idealization one might expect from an ordinary twenty-year-old: “I gutted her” (Je l’étripais) is his concise formulation of his erotic fantasies about her. His interest in Yvonne remains silent, perhaps especially because he discovers—or infers—that she is having an affair with another, older, man. Not only that: surprising her as she returns home, so he assumes, from an assignation with her lover, he notices bruises on her neck and concludes that she enjoys and suffers from her lover’s violence, that her entire, splendidly white body is inscribed with the dark welts inflicted by the lashes of her beloved’s whip. This discovery, or sadomasochistic fable, far from repelling him, inflames the young man’s passions even more. One day the narrator and Mado—a young woman with whom he is having a considerably more banal

6 Ibid., p. 25.
7 Ibid., p. 12.
sexual relation—are taken on a tour of one of the less known prehistoric caves. Their
guide is Jeanjean, whom the narrator recognizes as the man he had judged, by the way he
and Yvonne had once exchanged a few words in her tobacco shop, to be her cruel, happy
lover. The main attraction of the cave they visit, much to Mado’s slightly exasperated
amusement, is a room with completely blank walls. The short novel ends with an account
of how the narrator, in his frustration at not being able amorously to torture Yvonne,
mistreats her seven-year-old son, one of his students, and, on the final pages, with a
description of the rare carp—not the usual scaly kind of fish, but rather the unusual
leather-carp without scales, smooth as water, shimmering, and with completely bare
skin—that Jean-le-Pêcheur proudly brings to his mother’s inn one evening. The narrator
compares the capture of this precious fish to the mythic capture of “queens that are carp
from their bellies down” and who “are surprised in their baths by an ardent man,” one
who might threaten to lift them from their pool as the narrator imagines Jeanjean, at the
same moment, raising and lowering an ecstatically submissive Yvonne from and back
into the water of her bath, Yvonne accepting and announcing to her lover over and over
again her imminent and indefinite death.

It would be tempting to read this rather sordid tale as an anatomy of sexual
fantasy. Since everything we know about Yvonne is filtered through the young man’s
point of view, she—and the sadomasochistic adventure he attributes to her—exists for us
only in his imagination of them. In this reading of the novel, everything proceeds from a
psychic inwardness; the fantasy is so powerful that it affects the narrator’s entire world.
The dead fox hanging on poles carried by a group of boys, the remnants of prehistoric
weapons used to slaughter animals on display at the back of the classroom, the fish
unlucky enough to be caught on Jean-le-Pêcheur’s hook, the images of wounded animals
on the walls of the region’s caves: everything is contaminated by the narrator’s brutal
sexual obsession. Michon’s work would be a rigorous demonstration of the way in which
what Lacan calls a fundamental fantasy structures the subject’s perception of the world.
More exactly, it demonstrates the nonexistence of the world from the perspective of a
psychoanalytically defined fantasy. The world is the narrator’s sadomasochistic fantasy;
it has become an immobilized structure that, however frightening it may be, is also
somewhat protective or defensive. The young man’s lurid projections and displacements
shape the world. It is as if reality were, before this psychic intervention, as blank as the
cave wall Jeanjean takes him to. In a sense, the narrator is as much an artist as the
prehistoric men who covered the walls of other caves in the same region. But, unlike
those ancient artists who resurrected in their art the recently slaughtered animals whose
migration from the Atlantic coast every spring to the green fields of Auvergne provided
food for their hunters and their families, the narrator writes, or paints, the world with his
desire. Everything becomes an image of Yvonne’s tortured body—the painted cattle
caught leaping in pain, the naively designed, martyred St. Gabriel on the postcard the
young man buys in Yvonne’s shop—just as those images are superimposed on Yvonne
herself, whose joyously suffering body takes on layers of tortured identities. The world
thus acquires the stable thematic unity—and monotony—of a work of art signed by the
narrator’s distinct, desiring fantasy. If there is a beauty in this picture, it is a beauty that
emanates from a certain kind of power, the human power that does not exactly satisfy

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8 Translated by Mason as “absolute authorship.” See Pierre Michon, La Grande Beune (Lagrasse, 1996), p. 50.
desire but sees a desire everywhere, to be thrilled by the universal representation of what it lacks.

But this aesthetic, grounded in control, is at once illuminated and threatened by something more terrifying—and perhaps more thrilling—than the visions of lack that sustain it. Walking through the dark, narrow passages that lead to the room with unpainted walls, the narrator feels that he is being breathed on by some invisible beast crawling along the crumbling stones above them, some “great ambulatory abstraction, chaotic and ready to manifest in the low lamplight... the universal miasma with the head of a dead sheep and the teeth of a wolf, straight ahead and upon you in the shadows and watching you.”9 This hybrid monstrosity lacks the features of a desiring fantasy. It is at once an amalgam of animal being and an “idea,” an abstraction, without any substance whatsoever. It is the horror of undifferentiated being that we can never see but that, always hovering, always moving with us, never stops looking at us. Deep within our brain there is the unimaginable imagination of an identityless miasma, of something before articulated being, which the human can only “think” as before the realization of any being whatsoever, as something from which the peace of inorganic stasis, of the death drive fully satisfied, might rescue us. Failing that salvation, there is the pleasure of negating the world that emerged from the original miasma, the pleasure of repainting, of recreating the world as the deceptively variegated sameness of our desire.

With each step of our reading so far, we have descended further into the psyche—moving from the young man’s conscious desire for Yvonne to a fantasy about her that he inscribed on the external world, and finally to a psychic terror of the individual psyche itself being engulfed in a slough of undifferentiated being. In this cave of interiority, the world as world is left behind just as surely as it no longer exists in the prehistoric caves where, as the narrator says, the curious visitors wander in a darkness deeper than the layers of earth where the dead are buried. And yet I want to propose, against the reading I’ve just offered, that interiority in La Grand Beune, far from refashioning the world into the structure of a psychic obsession, is actually produced by the world. The narrator, of whom we presumably have the most intimate knowledge, is never named. He is perhaps waiting to be named, or, to put this in other terms, he may be an empty subject; he is not exactly, in psychoanalytic terms, a subject without an unconscious, but one whose unconscious can only come to him from the outside. The narrator receives from the world the material that will be fashioned into his particular fantasy of violence. There are the images evoked by the objects in the display case; there is the postcard representation of a tortured Saint Gabriel; there is the dead fox carried on poles by boys who, imitating an ancient ritual, display the fox outside the village homes where, repeating an old gesture of gratitude to the hunters who rid them of this dangerous animal, the residents will give something—eggs, a little money—to the young transporters of the dead fox. And there are, above all, the scenes reminiscent of the hunt painted on the walls of the caves the narrator visits with Mado.

Let’s look more closely at the scene with the dead fox. Late one afternoon the narrator finds only Yvonne’s seven-year-old son taking care of the store. He rushes out of the village toward the fields and the edge of the woods where he had often seen Yvonne returning, so he had imagined, from a tryst with her lover. His frantic, searching eyes evoke the phantom Yvonne he had imagined seeing a thousand times emerging from the

forest, in her stockings, her hips naked in the cold, and reminding him of some “big game” (*un gros gibier*). It is just at that moment that the boys appear carrying the dead animal. In the place of the fox, the young man hallucinates Yvonne tied to the poles and, instead of the fox’s red hair, wet black public hair foaming, he writes, “on the bitch’s thick thighs” (*aux cuisses épaisse de cette garce*).10 Just then, Yvonne really does come into view, and he sees the black marks on her cheek and neck that he attributes to her lover’s expertly handled whip. The scene is the novel’s most extreme example of a delirious projection that appropriates the world as a setting for a private fantasy while, at the same time, a certain reality distinct from this fantasy persists, independently but analogously. The substitution of Yvonne for the dead fox is an erasure of the world as the world. When Yvonne appears, it is as if the private fantasy had to accommodate her real presence (she is part of the world as world). But the fantasy is, of course, no longer entirely private. The word “gibier,” thought before the boys appear, “meets,” by chance, its objective correlative in the dead fox, to which “gibier” “responds” by inventing a specifically human version of violence: the violence of a sadomasochistic exchange between lovers. The real marks on Yvonne’s cheek and neck correspond both to and with the fox through the fantasmatic activity that interprets the marks as inflicted by a whip and extends them down Yvonne’s hidden body, blackening the dazzlingly white skin of her legs under her stockings with an extension of the “absolute writing” (*l’écriture absolue*) just seen on her face.11

In our work on the visual arts, Ulysse Dutoit and I have been studying film and painting as documents of a universe of inaccurate replications, of the perpetual and imperfect recurrences of forms, volumes, colors, and gestures. We have spoken of these recurrences as evidence of the subject’s presence everywhere, not as an invasive projection or incorporation designed to eliminate otherness, but rather as an ontological truth about both the absolute distinctness and the innumerable similitudes that at once guarantee the objective reality of the world and connectedness between the world and the subject. We are born into various families of singularity that connect us to all the forms that have, as it were, always anticipated our coming, our presence. I’m now attempting to describe a more specifically psychic version of these correspondences, one in which desiring fantasies both determine and are determined by their replications in the world. Successfully realized, this project might be the basis for a reconciliation of psychoanalysis, both with the world as such and with the aesthetic subjectivity that eschews psychologically motivated communication and replaces such communication with families of form.

In the passage I’ve just been discussing, except for the momentary substitution of Yvonne for the fox just before Yvonne appears, the world is not overwhelmed by fantasy. There is a distinction between what the narrator imagines and procession of the schoolboys with the dead fox, and yet it is difficult to mark a precise boundary between internal and external worlds. In the regime of correspondences that we have been studying, differences are inviolable, although they are not governed by or grounded in a fundamental difference of being between inner and outer. The object never becomes the subject, and the subject, or the subject’s ego, is never, as Freud would have it, simply the sum of its history of object choices. There is neither a subject-object dualism nor a fusion

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10 Ibid., p. 64.
11 Ibid., pp. 36, 38.
of subject and object; there is rather a kind of looping movement between the two. The
world finds itself in the subject and the subject finds itself in the world. What the world
finds in the subject (in addition to physical correspondences) is a certain activity of
consciousness, which partially reinvents the world as it repeats it.

The image of an Yvonne lashed by the whip is the narrator’s contribution to the
universal singularity of violence inflicted upon living bodies. The ancient hunt, fishing,
the medieval martyr, the slaughtered foxes, war, torture, sadomasochistic eroticism: all
these scenes, which inaccurately replicate one another, belong to an enormous transversal
cut of being. Taken separately, it’s true, each one raises specific historical, affective, and
ethical questions; ontologically considered, however, they delineate the variegated
color of one vast potentiality. Seen in this way, present and past variations on any
mode of being permanently persist because *they are not fully*: to remember events is to
recognize ourselves in their imaginary presence. From this perspective, the past is what
has passed from the phenomenological to the virtuality of the imaginary. The past’s
disappearance as events is the condition of a new permanence, the permanent persistence
of possibility. The narrator’s cruel fable about Yvonne is his manner of corresponding
with the persistent cut of violent being that surrounds him; he is the site where different
images of violence intersect. This is the power of the aesthetic subject, fashioning from
the “miasma” of a psyche, which, like all human psyches, can be at once everything and
nothing, its individuating responsiveness to the world.

Does this fable give expression to unconscious impulses? In the reading I’m now
proposing, there is no specified unconscious prior to the material from the external world
in which it at once recognizes and constitutes itself. The unconscious never is; it is
perhaps an essentially unthinkable, intrinsically unrealizable reserve of human being—a
dimension of virtuality rather than of psychic depth—from which we connect to the
world, not as subject to object, but as a continuation of a specific syntax of being. A
continuation that is also an accretion: the psychic designates its place in the vast family of
stored past and present being by contributing new inscriptions—in *La Grande Beune*, the
inscription of the young protagonist’s fable of erotic violence. It is as if the world
stimulated the activity of desiring fantasy. From this perspective, fantasy is not the
symptom of an adaptive failure. On the contrary, it is the sign of an extremely attentive,
highly individuated response to external reality. It is not the result of pressure from
preexistent, dominant unconscious impulses; the only sense in which it is revealing about
psychic depths is that an intrinsically undifferentiated unconscious provides the material
for a psychic composition. Fantasy is thus on the threshold between an invisible (and
necessarily hypothetical) inner world and the world present to our senses. It is not a
symptom to be cured; rather, it is the principle ontic (of, relating to, or having real being)
evidence or an ontological regime of correspondences in which the discreteness of all
things (including human subjects) is superseded, not by universal fusions, but by the
continuation of all things elsewhere. In this regime, the distinction between inner and
outer is wholly inadequate to describe universal reoccurrence. The human subject does of
course exist and act discretely, separately; but its being exceeds its bounded subjectivity.
There is a perspective on fantasy that would imprison it within subjectivity. This
perspective is consistent with the limited individuality traced by a psychologically
defined subject. I’m suggesting something different: fantasy as a function more of
contingent positioning in the world than of psychic depth.
Furthermore, if fantasy is a major site of our connectedness to the world, it is not an act that touches or changes the world. It represents the terms in which the world inheres in the fantasizing subject, the terms that can change as our position in the world changes. An undifferentiated unconscious lends itself to diverse representations of the interface between the moving subject and a world whose relational map is itself continuously modified by the moves of all units—including the human units—that constitute it. All these figures do not have the finality of acts that materially modify the world—such as the actual slaying of a reindeer, the torture of a monk, the whipping inflicted on Yvonne’s real body. On the contrary, they are the possibility of the act that may, of course, precede the act, but that can also follow the act, when the later moves back from the real, so to speak, in order to become always present, permanently imaginary. Psychic fantasy is a type of unrealized or derealized human and world being, the figure, not for the taking place, but rather for all taking place—for all relationality—in its pure inherence. Painting can illuminate this inherence, and it is significant that, as I have argued elsewhere, for thinkers and artists as different as Caravaggio, Proust, Heidegger, and Lacan, the sign of beauty is a certain brilliance or shining—as if the disappearance of the material world as object and event were best figured by an unnatural lighting (one that in Caravaggio is not projected on objects but seems to come from within objects), a lighting that signifies a withdrawal from the visible world into the superior visibility of what has been derealized. Art leads us back from objects, or the actual hunt, to the vast repertory of virtual being that constitutes what Michon’s narrator calls the “marvels” that art seeks beyond its own visibility.

Psychoanalysis, with its notion of a subject divided between conscious thoughts and affects and an atemporal unconscious is, or should be, hospitable to the notion I have been tracing of an aesthetic subject. In mental life, Freud writes in chapter one of Civilization and Its Discontents, “everything past is preserved.” We might reformulate this in the following way: memory is an illusion of consciousness, as there is no past to remember; instead, there are innumerable inscriptions of the world that define us by mapping particular positionings in the world and that simply persist, immanently. These inscriptions are the world, and they are the subject. While consciousness continuously forms affectively motivated projects that essentially oppose us to the world, projects whose satisfaction requires mastery of otherness, we never cease corresponding unconsciously with that otherness. Mind moves not only to master the world but also to acknowledge its own reappearances in the world—that is, the reappearances of itself as self-world. The world configurations that constitute and individuate a subject wait to be received by the subject; to put this differently: the subject is in the world before being born into it. The unconscious is not the region of the mind most hidden from the world; it resists being known because it so vastly exceeds what might know it, because it is not of the same order as what might know it. For the most part, however, psychoanalysis has added depth to classical psychology rather than elaborating the truly radical notion of a nonsubjective interiority. It is, I have been arguing, only the latter notion that might speak persuasively of a subject inherently reconciled with the world. The antagonism between the subject and the world might then be seen as contingent (if, at times, no less catastrophic) violations of a fundamental correspondence between the world and subjects,

a view significantly different from the more prevalent one that posits antagonism as the natural consequence of an irreducible opposition between subject and object. These are not “merely” theoretical considerations; human subjects are educated into how they see themselves as being-in-the-world. Negotiating difference has been the dominant relational mode in our culture. Such negotiations have primarily consisted in attempts to overcome or destroy difference or, at best, to tolerate it. Our most liberal injunction has been: learn to communicate (or pretend to communicate) with a world where differences practically guarantee failed communications. We have yet to elaborate the concrete steps (in education, in politics, in the practice of sociability, in the organization of living spaces) that might help to erase the hegemony of this relational regime and institute a relationality grounded in correspondences, in our at-homeness in the world’s being.

Michon’s *La Grande Beune* is a document of correspondences, a particularly courageous one in that what I have called the cut of being it traces is perhaps the one most likely to be co-opted by the prejudice of psychic lack, a prejudice that conveniently justifies invasive appropriations of the world’s seductive and threatening otherness. The inevitable resistances within the family of being—resistances inherent in the inaccurately replicative nature of correspondences—facilitate a certain backtracking into an oppositional, subject-object relationality. Correspondences do not eliminate frictions, and frictions can exacerbate the appetite for fusions perhaps endemic to sexual desire. Psychoanalysis—especially Freud, Laplanche, and Lacan—has profoundly conceptualized the inseparability of jouissance aggression. Psychoanalytically defined sexuality is not a relation; it is the fantasized ecstasy of a oneness gained by the simultaneous destruction of the self and the world. This ecstatic destruction of the subject is the most extreme consequence of a psychological subjectivity, a subjectivity for which the world as lack is an object of suspicion and of desire. To enter the region of being characterized by the violence of countless versions of subject-object collision is perhaps also to be tempted by the psychological derivative of inhabiting that region, which is sadomasochistic desire. This temptation, inscribed in the language of *La Grande Beune*, accounts for the novel’s rich relational indeterminacy. It would be difficult to eliminate psychological expressiveness from a critical reading of Michon’s novel. The intense affectivity accompanying the young man’s fantasies compels us to think of them as expressing and partially satisfying an otherwise suffocating sadism, while at the same time, his anonymity, the absence of any perspective that might confirm or invalidate his erotic fable about Yvonne, and above all the placing of the narrative within a region of France whose past is present as a pervasive immanent violence—all this encourages a view of fantasy as a subject’s desubjectifying insertion within a particular region of being.

And, yet, contrary to Michon’s presentation of a world that corresponds to but is independent of the protagonist’s fantasies of violence, the novel does seem to cultivate a dream of the world’s disappearance. It is even as if we were being given a key to *La Grande Beune* as a demonstration of fantasy’s power to remake the world in its own image when the narrator says, just before the end of his story, that the rain that never seems to stop allows us to substitute our dreams for the world, to live “the satiety of our dreams behind this grey curtain where everything is permitted.”¹³ Behind the curtain of rain the founding desire of all particular desires might be realized: to make of the world

the mirror of our dreams, the place where nothing is different, where nothing resists, where an omnipotent subject can write anything. Michon often seems to be writing about writing, to be using his own text in order to satisfy a dream of total reinscription by making of his novel an emblematic deployment of that dream. (Even fishing is at one point called writing in the water.) Thus the fantasized whip marks on Yvonne’s body can be described as “an absolute writing”: “absolute” because the nonresistant, exceptional whiteness of her flesh is marked only by the material signs of another subject’s power and desire. Indeed, receptive whiteness haunts the entire text. There are the blind “albino fish” Yvonne’s love has found floating in an underground pool, killed by the electricity brought into the caves; the white leathery skin of Jean-le-Pêcheur’s rare “mirror carp”; and perhaps most notably the “inexhaustible whiteness” of the room to which Jeanjean brings Mado and the narrator, a room with, as he says, in a strangely triumphant manner, “absolutely nothing” on its walls. This, the narrator conjectures, was Lascaux before the paintings, but with the hunter-painters already there, preparing their materials, “conceiving” the scenes with which they would cover the walls. The whiteness of the walls reminds us of a certain precariousness in the transfer from the phenomenological to the ontological. That which has taken place—settled being—may not recede into the permanently potential. It may, as it were, stop at a “point” where potentiality itself is merely potential. Jeanjean’s prized room puts Lascaux into question. Its whiteness could be taken as an emblem of the susceptibility of all potential being to nothingness, as if potentiality could itself fail to “take place” (in fantasy, and in art), could tilt the universe backward into the void, thus failing to reinscribe the history of the universe in a vast present in which no thing is lost, a present identical to the persistent intransitivity of being. Whiteness, or an indefinitely prolonged possibility of possibility, is the gravest threat to ontological intransitivity.

In his seminar on identification, Lacan asks: What is the difference between my dog and the human subject? He answers that his dog never mistakes him for someone else, while misidentification of the other is constitutive of the human. In a sense, then, Lacan’s dog is a better observer of the world as world than his master. In the light of what I have been arguing here, we might say that misidentification is inherent in our inability, or refusal, to acknowledge the world’s independence. That refusal may itself be the consequence of the human infant’s prolonged helplessness—unique among animals—and dependence on others. If, as Freud says, “at the very beginning…the external world, objects and what is hated are identical,” and if, as he also claims, “as an expression of the reaction of displeasure evoked by objects, [hate] always remains in an intimate relation with the self-preservative instincts,” this is because the external world is a potential threat, one against which, for an exceptionally long period at the beginning of our lives, we have neither the physical nor the psychic resources to defend ourselves. A human subjectivity is thus developed on the ground of a profound insecurity, one that might be lifted only if the world didn’t exist or, put differently, only if we could substitute ourselves for the world. Psychoanalysis has, on the whole, been so committed to studying and “treating” the mechanisms of this attempted substitution that it has failed to elaborate a concept of the world as much more than a vaguely specified (or, at best, normative) reality to which we must learn to “adapt.” To do so would mean recognizing that the subject’s need to project himself on the world is not entirely necessary. While a certain

14 Ibid., p. 66.
degree of anxiety about an unmastered world is inevitable, it is also true, as I have been
demonstrating through Michon’s novel, that we correspond to the world in ways that
don’t necessitate or imply the world’s suppression. The world will always resist
embodying our anxieties, or our desires, but we are also in it independently of our need to
master it. External reality may at first present itself as an affective menace, but
psychoanalysis—like art, although in a more discursive mode—might train us to see our
prior presence in the world, to see, as bizarre as this may sound, that, ontologically, the
world cares for us. Finally, however, as Michon’s exceptional novel suggests, it is part of
the complexity of a human destiny that we fail to find that care sufficiently satisfying,
and so we will undoubtedly never stop insisting—if only intermittently—that the
jouissance of an illusion of suppressing otherness can surpass the pleasure of finding
ourselves harbored within it.