There is an episode of *Dragnet* (by the way, is an American TV show, a crime drama that originally aired in the 1950s and late 1960s, in which a certain Sergeant Joe Friday, along with his sidekick, Officer Bill Gannon, investigate a wide array of felonies and misdemeanors, all allegedly based on real life incidents) . . . there is an episode of *Dragnet* in which a young, well-read factory worker with a powerfully inflated sense of intellectual and moral superiority murders two of his coworkers just to see what it feels like to kill someone. During the course of their investigation Friday and Gannon discover that their number-one suspect (who is, indeed, the murderer) is an “existentialist.” Yes, the fellow’s landlady informs the police, he’s always reading Baudelaire—you know, “that fleurs d’mal stuff.” And the local librarian, flagrantly defying the profession’s code of ethics regarding the right to privacy, reveals to the two detectives that the suspect has been charging out a lot of Flaubert’s works lately. The killer is, of course, brought to justice, and the TV audience is thus forewarned about the dangers of “existentialism”—and, apparently, the reading of French literature in general.

Existentialism has always been difficult to talk about. After all, it’s a philosophy of existence: what could be more profound and universal? Or more trite? Popular culture’s co-opting of the Sartrean enterprise during the late forties, the fifties, and on into the sixties resulted in a colorful but for the most part poorly grounded semiological corpus, the signatures of which were things such as goatees, long straight hair on women, dressing in black, jazz, and, of course, anything French, not to mention the pursuit of kicks—whether on Route 66 or through the committing of motiveless violent crimes. And let’s face it, even in scholarly circles, any buzzword that can be
made to encompass the work of Plato, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, and Jack Kerouac... well, there's bound to be some slippage of the signified. Poststructuralism's entombment of existentialism (or, at least, its move to mothball its trendy predecessor) has not helped to clarify matters.

But what about Mr. Duffy? Now that I’ve crawled out onto what may be a perilously thin critical limb, rotten with potential misunderstanding and swaying in the stiff breeze of what is perhaps a well-warranted impatience that I get back to things Joycean, I shall take a moment to remind myself, perched up here in this Dublin tree, of one of Nietzsche's more pithy, gay-scientific dicta: "the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is—to live dangerously!" (Nietzsche 228). Mr. Duffy would certainly know what I mean. Or would he?

Although seldom considered a writer of existentialist leanings, Joyce, in his "Painful Case," has presented us with a protagonist who is, in many ways, akin to Dostoyevsky's "underground" man, Nietzsche’s "overman," and Sartre's "nauseated" man—a fellow who finds himself "outcast from life's feast" into a barren, lonely world of neurotic self-absorption. In the light of the reading of "A Painful Case" that I’ll be sharing with you here, we might venture to label Mr. Duffy Joyce’s "disembodied" man. What all these characters have in common, and what renders these texts existential, I would maintain, is the protagonists’ realization—whether in moments of epiphany or during a longer, slower period of revelation—that their existence is not entirely understandable in empirical, idealistic, or socio-cultural terms, but that for every instant of their lives they are condemned to relentlessly choose the direction and nature of their becoming. They must create themselves in the face of an uncertain, contingent, and apparently purposeless world. It is this realization, which manifests itself through anxiety, suffering, and feelings of guilt, that is, in these texts, itself the "critical borderline situation" that is often deemed to be an essential characteristic of existential literature, especially that of the engagement genre (Sartre’s Roads to Freedom, Camus’s Plague, etc.). The “adventure,” therefore, in such texts as Notes from Underground, Nausea, and “A Painful Case” is an adventure in being for the “everyman,” one who is not a soldier in wartime, a doctor in plague time, or, if you wish, a wacky aficionado of French letters in American prime time.

Let’s take a closer look at the specifics of Duffy’s situation and at the phenomeno-ontological parameters of what I am suggesting is his existential crisis.

Duffy likes to lead a neat, organized life, stripped of material and social frills, free from chaos. What’s more, he takes this inclination to an extreme, as we know. He lives in a plain, somber, cheerless room, void of decoration and nearly empty of color. His books are arranged on white wooden bookshelves “from below upwards according to bulk” (D67 107)—that is, in an order. He has no friends, no faith, represses nearly every trace of emotion. He
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performs family social obligations "for old dignity' sake" (D67 109). He tells Mrs. Sinico that he ceased attending meetings of the Irish Socialist Party because "they [the workers] resented an exactitude which was the product of a leisure not within their reach" (D67 111; my emphasis). In short: "Mr. Duffy abhorred anything which betokened physical or mental disorder" (D67 108). He is a perfect paradigm of a compulsion neurotic, in Freudian terms. Furthermore, and not surprisingly, James Duffy is a creature of habit. He rides the same streetcar to work every morning, eats the same frugal lunch at the same establishment each day (a small trayful of arrowroot biscuits and a bottle of beer) and dines at the same restaurant each evening. His life is free of "dissipations," with the exception of an occasional opera or concert, if works of Mozart are on the bill. He works as a bank clerk—hardly a dynamic profession—but then Duffy is not a fellow inclined to take risks, to seek adventure, nor, for that matter, to allow adventure to befall him. There is, however, one intriguing chink in his armor of negated possibilities, one highly suggestive fantasy: "He allowed himself to think that in certain circumstances he would rob his bank but, as these circumstances never arose, his life rolled out evenly—an adventureless tale" (D67 109). We are not told what the circumstances might be that would transform his lackluster, uneventful life into an "adventure" and, for the moment anyway, it is safe to say that whatever they are, they are certainly inoperative.

Clearly, Duffy is into control, but unlike those more colorful control freaks who spend their lives pushing the envelope (whether because of the force of circumstance or the sheer glee of existential chutzpah), Duffy's strategy is one of avoidance or, at least, of ontological stealth. He seeks a mode of being that will be stable: a life that is calmly rigid, not fluid, unassaulted, not relentlessly defended. He chooses freedom because he must, because he is condemned to be free, but the freedom he chooses is a freedom in confinement. He is in control because he shuns situations in which he might be confronted with adversity. He creates distances, not just between himself and others, but within himself as well: "He lived at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances. He had an odd autobiographical habit which led him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate in the past tense" (D67 108). Duffy's flight from any real interpersonal interaction, his withdrawal into a life-of-the-mind-in-chosen-exile, and even the bland, orderly, habitual accoutrements of his everyday existence all reflect what Sartre would term Duffy's "fundamental project": to live without threat, without further choice, without existential free play.

There are two turning points in the story, both brought about by Duffy's relationship with Mrs. Sinico—a relationship that clearly in itself threatens to bring down the walls of Duffy's fundamental existential enterprise. The first occurs when Sinico takes his hand in a moment of passion and presses it to
her cheek; the second, four years later, when after learning of the woman's sudden and tragic death, he imbibes two whisky punches at a public house.

Duffy meets Mrs. Sinico at a concert and they begin to keep company. Their affair is entirely platonic, but nonetheless there is an element of risk for both of them in the liaison: "Neither he nor she had had any such adventure before" (D67 110). For Sinico, there is the chance that her extramarital relationship will be misconstrued or that it will develop into something less innocent. Moreover, given the story's conclusion and the suggestion that her demise and death might be related to the failure of her romance with Duffy, this sense of "adventure"—a term that, at first glance, may have seemed a bit hyperbolic when applied to Sinico—appears, in the end, to have been on the mark. As far as Duffy is concerned, on the other hand, the element of adventure in this social intercourse is a bit more abstract but still potentially dangerous, for, as we have already noted, such a course of action for Duffy threatens to destabilize his very being.

At first, he does rather well walking this existential tightrope. He uses Sinico as a sympathetic mirror, confessing himself to her, lending her books, holding forth—and keeping his distance: "Sometimes he caught himself listening to the sound of his own voice. . . . He heard the strange impersonal voice which he recognised as his own, insisting on the soul's incurable loneliness. We cannot give ourselves, it said: we are our own" (D67 111). As we might expect, however, Sinico is not the perfect mirror. She shares her thoughts with Duffy, as well: "Little by little he entangled his thoughts with hers" (D67 110). And later: "Little by little, as their thoughts entangled, they spoke of subjects less remote" (D67 111). Finally: "[O]ne night during which she had shown every sign of unusual excitement, Mrs. Sinico caught up his hand passionately and pressed it to her cheek" (D67 111). End of affair—Duffy withdraws.

It is enough of a risk for Duffy, enough of an adventure, to allow himself cerebral "entanglement" with another, and even then, it is he who must call the intellectual shots. But a sensual, physical caress?! In Being and Nothingness, Sartre notes that: "my original attempt to get hold of the Other's free subjectivity through his objectivity-for-me is sexual desire" (497). Sinico's assault on Duffy's body (and this is unquestionably the way he experiences her caress) threatens to jeopardize the meticulously maintained, fragile sense of self that Duffy guards with such paranoid obsessiveness. What's more, it is by causing him to experience his body as flesh, as his flesh, this body from which he constantly tries to dissociate himself, that Mrs. Sinico insinuates her own being into Duffy's existential realm of ipseity. She might as well have speared him with a hot poker—Duffy runs for his life.

Four years pass, and little changes in Duffy's life. There are a few new pieces of music on the landlady's music stand, a couple of Nietzsche books on his white wooden shelves, his father dies (a rather unremarkable event, as far as Duffy is concerned), but his routine remains as it was in the days before he
met Mrs. Sinico. But then one day, he reads the account of her death in the evening newspaper. She had become a drunkard and was killed by a train as she was crossing the tracks, or more precisely, she died of “shock and sudden failure of the heart’s action” (D67 114). Did she die, at least indirectly, of a broken heart? Duffy’s defenses go up. First, it’s the journalistic prose of the newspaper article that upsets him: “The threadbare phrases, the inane expressions of sympathy, the cautious words of a reporter won over to conceal the details of a commonplace vulgar death attacked his stomach” (D67 115). Then, when this riposte fails, he takes a stab at the deceased woman: “Evidently she had been unfit to live, without any strength of purpose, an easy prey to habits [!], one of the wrecks on which civilisation has been reared” (D67 115). He finds a public house, enters and drinks a hot punch, then another. Now undoubtedly light-headed (the physical beginning to undermine the intellectual), he wanders into Phoenix Park: “He walked through the bleak alleys where they had walked four years before. She seemed to be near him in the darkness. At moments he seemed to feel her voice touch his ear, her hand touch his” (D67 117; my emphasis). She is touching him again and, like the onslaught of the returning repressed at the moment of the psychological trauma’s repetition, this touch is existentially lethal: “He felt his moral nature falling to pieces” (D67 117). Soon the memory fades, the touch disappears, there is silence: “He felt he was alone” (D67 117). The walls of his emotionally self-sufficient bastion of being have crumbled. He now misses the company of others.

Duffy, until his epiphany, has ostensibly led a kind of “life of the mind.” Living at a distance from himself, divorcing mind from body, even relegating certain moments of his life to an inert past experienced by another (recall his “odd autobiographical habit” of composing short sentences about himself in the third person and the past tense), Duffy condemns himself to failure unless he can somehow continue to believe in these sham virtues. And his existence is a sham: this self-insulated, cerebral posturing. He writes his autobiography only in his head; there is no suggestion that the writing materials that are “always on the desk” (D67 108) have ever been used for such an endeavor. His translation of Hauptmann remains, even after four years, only partially complete. His notebook of terse apothegms contains by his own admission little more than “Bile Beans.” His shelves contain a complete Wordsworth, a catechism, and some Nietzsche, among other texts, but he has probably never read the Nietzsche, or at least never clearly understood or accepted even the most basic tenets of Thus Spoke Zarathustra and The Gay Science (the two works we know he owns). Duffy never laughs, either in a Zarathustrian fashion or otherwise: in fact he represses the Dionysian component of his existence. Although some critics have made Duffy out to be a would-be Übermensch, he is actually a rather pitiful example of a Nietzschean misfit.

At the story’s conclusion, however, Duffy is on the verge of undergoing a radical transformation. The eerie return of Mrs. Sinico’s caress and the effects
of the whisky have changed the way Duffy sees himself. Whether he will try to re-repress his disturbing discovery or whether this fresh insight will lead Duffy to completely reformulate his fundamental project we cannot know. But what if he opts for the latter? What if this pompous, withdrawn prig turns his previous lifestyle on its head? What a change! What adventure! Perhaps these are the circumstances in which this sociopathic clerk would rob his bank. After all, he already feels at least partly responsible for the death of Mrs. Sinico. Why not a life of crime? And what might we expect his landlady to say to the Dublin police, perhaps to the two agents who come to question her? “It’s those Nietzsche books, y’know, that Zarathustra stuff!” Or maybe: “Say, d’ya think it was all that Wordsworth?”

NOTES

1. This phrase and some of the wording of the preceding sentence I owe to the definition of existentialism found in Webster’s New International Dictionary, 2nd ed.

2. For further examination of this aspect of Duffy’s persona from a psychoanalytic point of view, see Reid.

3. See, e.g., Magalener and Corrington.

WORKS CITED


