Margaret Soltan

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NIGHT ERRANTRY

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE WANDERING WOMAN

Agnes Varda's *Vagabonde* is a quintessentially postmodern film.[1] Its clinical eye scans the fragments of a destroyed life, follows the wandering, disintegrating Mona Bergeron, and does not blink. Bergeron's own eyes are half-open and dull in the first scene - she lies frozen in a ditch - and this death sets the mood of the piece. Like Gerald Crich in *Women in Love,* whose suicide in the snow seems nature's revenge for a frigid soul, the affectless Bergeron meets a fitting end. But unlike Crich, at the spectacle of whose emotional inadequacy we are meant to feel pity, Bergeron elicits no response beyond the muted shock that images of death on film produce. When it becomes clear that the film will be a flashback, that the question is not whether Bergeron's journey will end in death but rather what steps she took to get there, our emotions retreat even further: this is a detective story.

A detective story without a solution, however, since Bergeron's death and life, so far as the film can make out, are meaningless. Her narrative constitutes a series of encounters with various versions of meaningful existence, each encounter neatly revealing the bankruptcy of each version. Throughout, Bergeron acts less an autonomous character than a reflecting, epitomizing blankness: her presence casts an aura of nothingness over every effort to impose order and substance on human matters. Tracing this obscure heroine as she plays out a succession of random events, the viewer gradually pulls back from the action, settling in to experience merely the sequence of images that *Vagabonde* offers. For if the film suggests anything by way of an argument, it is that the viewer naive enough to try reading something into this story becomes one of the deluded characters Mona encounters. Better to allow one's eyes the same dispassionate range as Bergeron's body.

It is a measure of the penetration of the postmodern attitude into popular forms of cultural expression that the lost woman, long a privileged emblem of innocence astray, shows not pathos but pathology in a film like *Vagabonde.* The errancy of characters like Ophelia, Anna Christie, Blanche Dubois, and Tess Durbeyfield is set going by men and intends to evoke sympathy and moral concern. Bergeron's errancy remains obscure; no suggestion emerges that she contains the originary innocence of those others (Hardy's subtitle was *A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented).* Nor does her errancy exhibit the dense existential sadness of Jean Rhys's characters in novels like *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie,* sensitive women whose ventures into the public world have broken them.

Unlike self-conscious modernist heroines, Bergeron displays a virtual incapacity for thought and speech, responding with animal instinct, suspicion, and greed to people and events. No ideology, whether of the victimized woman or the alienated consciousness, seems to underlie her destiny; and indeed foremost among the ideas *Vagabonde* repudiates is that of errancy itself. One cannot be errant unless a centre, even a shaky one, exists to wander away from, and *Vagabonde* presents an entirely decentred world with no realm of coherence and integrity against which to move. Given this lack of grand narrative frame for human movement in time, the only closure available to the postmodern errant woman is death, the only response to her fate indifference.

It was not always so. For centuries the cultural figure 'errant woman' supremely communicated the experience of falling away from the transcendent centre and converting back to it. While she might seem lost to the spiritual and civic body, her real role was to be forgiven and returned to the fold. Reformed, she became a permanent embodiment of penitence, a Magdalene. She also became, more importantly, an emblem of cultural survival, for to bring the errant back was to demonstrate the ability of culture to maintain its integrity. Fallen or recovered, the errant woman functioned to tell a story about the centre's magnetic and transfiguring powers: if she refused conversion and inclusion, her absolute isolation confirmed a separation between mayhem and order; while, if she accepted, her piety certified the process of purification. Hers was a primary instance of Jean-Frangois Lyotard's so-called 'grand narrative'; inscribed upon the body of the female vagabond was a foretold linear sequence of conversions back to culture. Thus in the Bible womanly vagrancy acts as a recurrent metaphor for Israel's straying from the covenant; the spiritual body,

prostituted through promiscuous contact with pagan ways, undergoes mortification and conversion.

It is worth noting that the cultural values attached to the general metaphor of errancy have always been dramatically gender-linked. The term 'errant woman', archaic as it sounds today, remains synonymous with prostitute, while terms of errancy associated with men - 'knight-errant', for instance - tend to imply virtue and courage. (A similar difference exists between the phrases 'public man' - still used to designate a man who has spent his life in public service of one sort or another - and the unfortunate 'public woman'.) The knight-errant wandered through and finally away from a debased world; his errantry was part of a purposive act of cultural regeneration. The errant woman, like M. Hackabout in Hogarth's *Harlot's Progress,* aimlessly deviated from the centre, suffered for her moral idiocy, and could hope only for eventual forgiveness. She lacked the knight-errant's autonomy and initiative; she was not on a journey but trapped in the downward 'progress' from innocence to corruption. This remarkably pure linguistic difference plays upon a rich ambiguity in the word 'errant' itself: derived from the Old French *errer,* the word means roving or wandering, especially in search of adventure; but it has come to be confused with the identically spelled *errer,* meaning to stray from what is *right* (when one sins, one errs). Thus the errant man errs in search of truth and goodness, while the errant woman errs into evil.

The straightforward social arrangements and religious attitudes that made possible this division between male and female errancy began to come undone in the mid-nineteenth century, with the growth of secularism and the collapse of various government schemes for the management of deviant populations. In a culture particularly threatened in its sense of its own coherence, the prostitute/errant began to assume a new symbolic function: she now played out a plot featuring the penetration of errancy into the heart of civilization. In this new story of susceptibility and contagion, of culture's inability to immunize itself against disintegration, the suddenly subversive and malicious prostitute would be fought not with the old rhetoric of theology, but with the instruments of science. Urbanization, incipient freedoms for women, epidemics of venereal disease, and class mobility tended to underlie cultural dissolution; but they lacked the readability, the allegorical potency, of the prostitute. Now a central figure for culture caught in the act of turning away from itself, the vagabond must be objectively identified, diagnosed, and brought, violently if necessary, back to the centre. 'It is always dangerous', warned Alphonse Esquiros in 1840, 'for society to let such people go about unsupervised. They are, after all, divisive . . . and will eventually bring about revolution. There are two natural sisters in the world: prostitution and insurrection.' Once a straightforward spiritual story of the abandonment of the godly path, womanly nomadism was now seen, in more secular terms, as a repudiation of the sort of female behaviour that maintained social order. The confident science of early industrial culture, then, would write into the prostitute an aetiology of abandon sufficiently profound to justify quarantine.

Vagabonde represents, among other things, the postmodern abandonment of this scientific vagrancy plot; particularly in the character of the woman scientist

who temporarily befriends Bergeron, it suggests the futility of intellectual intervention and the emergence of a wholly other 'clinical' errancy. But before I consider the portrayal of this failure, I want to look more closely at the controlling narrative of female errancy in the nineteenth century. Beyond constituting a late and significant effort at social purification resting on a now obsolete progressivist ideology, the fate of the neo-Darwinian reading of prostitution represents an intriguing case study of the sources and implications of the fragmentation of cultural narratives.

State efforts in the last century to immobilize female vagabonds, given scientific legitimacy by a group of neo-Darwinian criminologists, established themselves on the presupposition that virtually all such women shared certain physical and psychological traits. Once identified, their group could be quarantined or otherwise isolated from the social body. As victims of genetic processes, vagabonds could rarely be made decent, but they could be studied by scientists, classified in terms of the severity of their disorder, and kept under supervision. If the lost woman's body, compelled through internal weakness to make itself vulnerable to manifold incursions against it, was an all too vivid image of the state, similarly vulnerable to undermining, divisive forces without and within, then the task must be to erase that image by finding plausible cause to hide it. Thus a visible mark or marks had to be found before she could be made invisible, before she could truly be 'lost'. To trace a serviceable errancy-plot was to impose a newly sustaining narrative upon the unsettlingly plotless pursuit of mercenary sex. The conventional theological narrative, the Magdalenic reading, had weakened sufficiently, and positivist narratives had gained so much prestige that scientists rather than priests now took control of the fallen woman story.

Specifically, scientists insisted on a congenital tendency in the eccentric woman towards what Octave Simonot called mental vagabondage. In this version of her errancy, the prostitute suffered from a short attention span; the wandering of her mind, which she could not control, prefigured her physical roaming. Restless, reckless, sexually impatient, primitive in her mindless movement from one street, one man, one bed to another, the prostitute constituted a radically unstable element. She could, however, be detected, Cesare Lombroso explained in *The Female Offender* (1895), by her 'extremely wide cheekbones', 'virile type of face', 'hairy moles [which represent] a kind of indirect supplement of the beard', and 'heavier lower jaws than . . . women of moral lives'. Lombroso studied twenty-six skulls and five skeletons of prostitutes in his effort to demonstrate the genetic transmission of vice. He concluded that criminal women were essentially sexually over-eager pseudo-men: 'Precosity and virility of aspect is the double characteristic of the criminal woman.'

This association of prostitution with masculinity was in part a response to the notorious aggressivity of the public woman as she sold herself on the streets of the city; she displayed a strong will, a bold disregard of danger in a world of male strangers. It was, too, a response to her working-class status; women of the lower orders, in the eyes of the emergent middle class, lacked feminity, and the prostitute was the epitome of the working-class female. Most importantly,

however, it reflected the fact that men were increasingly afraid of the prostitute and of how *she* might mark *them:* with syphilitic sores, with scars from physical assaults. (One late-nineteenth-century observer anticipated a decline from 'civilization to syphilization'.) She was a kind of enemy on the field of a sexual battle whose balance of power was shifting in favour of the woman. The emergence of fictional characters like Nana and Lulu, with their eerily infantile names and their terrifyingly well-developed murderous instincts, is one register of this shift.

Simonot eventually went further than Lombroso in his research, suggesting that the errant woman was a kind of animal: her stupidity, her meaningless hyperactivity (alternating, Simonot believed, with long stretches of lassitude and total lack of volition), her 'confusion of cerebral sensorial images', and her dullness to sensation manifesting itself in frigidity, meant the mindless receptivity of a lower form of life entirely. 'Humanity', wrote Simonot, 'is strong, adaptive, collective, always evolving; the prostitute is weak, isolated, and adapts not at all.' At the same time, Pauline Tarnowsky, confirming both Lombroso's and Simonot's theories, discovered evidence of arrested physical and mental development among these women; they showed 'on the average a diminution of the principal diameters of the brain of several millimetres', making them 'incomplete beings . . . an abnormal, degenerate, or degenerating, class of females'. The grand narrative of human progress was one in which prostitutes could not take part; indeed, unrestricted they would exert an unacceptably regressive influence.

As it gained in definition in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the whore's condition came also to be called 'moral madness' *(folie morale),* a form of hysteria prompted by defective inheritance and distinguished by lack of shame, by a willingness to do what no normal, decent woman would do. The features of moral madness could be discerned in the discolorations of the prostitute's face; her illness could be 'heard' in her rough, manly voice shouting obscenities. Her history of early onset of menstruation suggested sexual 'impatience', but precocity was typically accompanied by idiocy (an American sociologist, three decades after Tarnowsky, wrote that prostitutes are 'incapable of any but the simplest tasks'), producing a recklessly wilful woman. One physician, a contemporary of Simonot's, reported that over half of the *filles publiques* admitted to his clinic were hysterics, conforming in appearance and behaviour to Lombroso's descriptions. They often alternated orgiastic bursts of energy with long stretches of inertia, a behaviour Darwinians compared to that of savages.

The errant woman's bewildering combination of paralytic infantilism and aggressive masculinity, then, led Lombroso to conclude that she was in fact a kind of half-man, half-woman. No true woman could be so abandoned, so tough; but this wilfulness was not self-produced in the prostitute. Rather it was the result of a confluence of genetic and chemical factors which overwhelmed the prostitute's womanly resistance. This convolution whereby a prostitute was a woman to the extent that she lacked autonomy and self-control, and a man to the extent that she displayed aggression, helped Lombroso explain why male criminals so outnumbered female in the population. Women lacked

initiative, courage, and lucidity, and, for all her seeming forcefulness, the prostitute was still a woman. Unsurprisingly, Lombroso's attitudes towards the vagabond woman ranged freely, from pity (one must offer help to this diseased woman), to fear (the female offender was driven by strong chemical currents and capable of great evil under their influence), to disgust (with her heavy jaws and hairy moles, the female offender was physically repulsive), to fascination (note what peculiar things female offenders do).

Lombroso's work, along with that of Simonot and Tarnowsky, reflects a combination of physical revulsion and psychological incredulity at the sight of a woman whom one simply finds appalling: 'Reason refuses to believe', wrote Tarnowsky, 'that a human being in possession of her faculties would prostitute herself to any man at any time.' Indeed, declaring female errancy a hereditary madness worked for a time to calm the anxieties of men about the intrinsic decency and domesticity of their own women, even as it aggravated women's anxiety about possible symptoms of their own disintegration. Altogether, the primary effect of this proliferating discourse on the aetiology and classification of errancy in women was to strengthen institutional definitions of and restrictions upon personal behaviour, and, correspondingly, to weaken efforts among women to free themselves from rigid sexual dichotomies.

It was perhaps inevitable, given the eagerness of a threatened culture to control, enclose, and make invisible the intrinsic errancy embodied in the prostitute, that the so-called 'closed house' would emerge as the practical solution to female vagrancy. Whether interpreted as a primitive stage in evolution or an invasive form of social anarchy, the phenomenon of wandering women was most profoundly recognized as an early symptom of culture's mysterious suicidal tendencies. The strong association of prostitution with syphilis, and the 'narrative' of contagion as one involving irresistible succumbing to the volatile germ made flesh, only deepened the connection between errancy and dissolution. Thus under the system of regulated closed houses, popular among many European countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women identified as prostitutes found on the streets could be arrested; to go beyond their designated space, they must be accompanied by a chaperone. If the deathly, bestial, avenging, and out of control female savage could not be brought into culture's story, then, she could at least be domesticated. The closed house was indeed a kind of clinic; but it was also a zoo and a barracks, a place in which morally mad women could be collected and displayed to curious onlookers, observed by scientists, and confined by morals policemen, themselves regarded as platoon captains, each responsible for maintaining discipline among a certain number of assigned prostitutes. Like soldiers, prostitutes at the height of regulationism in nineteenth-century Paris carried identification cards stating their vocation. This literal inscription gave the prostitute immediate and permanent legibility: once inscribed in the police lists of admitted prostitutes, she could rarely leave the profession, stigmatized as she was. But whether literally inscribed or not, the Lombrosian prostitute of the closed house was compelled to remain on the *rues chaudes,* the hot streets around the hothouses of sex, or more likely within those fiery walls themselves, wnere she could act out her frenzied personal theatre.

The so-called 'born prostitute', imprisoned in her closed house, appeared with clinical accuracy at this time in a group of naturalistic novels. The heroine of Huysmans's *Marthe* (1876), despite her intelligence and precocious artistic talent, is presented as uncontrollably driven to shut herself up in a regulated house and live a life of dissipation. Early on she displays the hysteria of the born whore: 'a peculiar girl', she appears a 'seething cauldron of conflicting emotions: strange desires, a loathing for her work, a violent hatred of poverty, a morbid longing for something new, a despair that had nothing of resignation about it'. Marthe has inherited this neurotic misery, whose elements of violence and morbidity constitute the very paradigm of the morally mad woman's condition, from her parents. Her father accounts for her 'neurotic disposition', her 'sickly languor' which craved 'a luxurious and glamorous life', while her mother has passed on 'a certain inherent laziness'. Marthe inevitably develops into the embodiment of the female offender: a savage infant exhibiting what the neo-Darwinian called *diathese d'irritabilite,* another effort to express the negative errancy of women. In the closed house, looking at her eyes in a mirror, she notices that 'within their black borders they seemed strangely hollow and in their new depths she discovered a childish yet lewd expression which made her blush beneath her makeup'.

The rest of Marthe's story relates her occasional escape from the closed house into a still shadowy but more public world of vaguely pornographic theatrical revues and men in search of kept women. Yet even outside of the closed house, constant reminders arise of her fundamental and abiding imprisonment, her body's inscription within the borders of vice. In a lover's apartment, she notices on the wall a reproduction of an episode from Hogarth's series *The Harlot's Progress,* and, gazing at the bevy of sluts in the picture, one of them robbing a young man, she is transfixed: 'She stood for a while in silent fascination and then, as if awakening from a dream, muttered: "That's just how it is!"' When her lover enters the room she discovers that 'the speech and manners of the brothel' have suddenly returned to her. Indeed, Marthe proves unable to resist the images and memories of her life on the *rues chaudes:* 'It was with a strange pleasure that she recalled that feverish hysteria which used to make her writhe in delirium, like the dizzy frenzy which makes dervishes maddened by their dances leap into the air and howl.' Aware of the constant threat of arrest outside the house, and aware that she cannot in any case stop thinking about her life there, she returns to live out the bounded anarchy, the controlled sexual release, that constituted the dream of the regulationist movement.

Beyond the borders of fictional discourse, inherent social disorders and the biological vagabondage of syphilis ensured that regulation would be, as Abraham Flexner wrote in 1914, 'needless on the score of order [and] positively harmful in its bearing on disease'. Since there was no stopping the spread of cultural dissolvents, it appeared sheer inhumanity to torment the prostitute, especially since fewer and fewer women conformed to the cultural definition of a prostitute as a single, childless woman totally committed to mercenary sex. Gradually she diminished as a target of apocalyptic anxieties; the Great Whore became the pathetic streetwalker, one figure among many of a general cultural decline. Occasionally arrested, she was mainly left to wander. By the early years

of this century, the prostitute had accomplished a transition from closed cultural narrative to open anti-cultural metaphor. Female errancy no longer implied sin, no longer even implied straightforward prostitution; it merely meant pointless wandering somehow suggestive of a more generally shared loss of cultural and personal co-ordinates, as in the world of Jean Rhys, or as in *Mrs Dalloway,* when Richard Dalloway notices and feels an affinity with a vagabond woman.

Thus at the moment of the errant woman's most thorough inscription, the regulationist system collapsed. Unwilling to accept lifelong designation as prostitutes, most such women simply evaded the carding system, compounding the still vexing problem of distinguishing upright from fallen women on the city streets; reluctant to visit physicians for fear of being reported to a policeman for inscription, many continued to transmit venereal disease to their clients; chafing at the infantilizing restrictions inherent in closed house existence, many escaped again and again. And prostitutes were of course not alone in agitating against inscription. Various reform groups at the end of the nineteenth century began to suggest that the criminologists' born whore was in fact a racist and xenophobic construction, reflecting popular opinion that most prostitutes were swarthy immigrants. The abolitionists, led by Josephine Butler in England, protested the immorality of any state regulating the practice of prostitution, especially when that regulation meant harassment of women and tolerance of men. Socialists like Alexandra Kollontai and August Bebel, and later Emma Goldman and Antonio Gramsci, made prostitution one focus of a comprehensive attack on the degradations of capitalism. Kollontai dismissed the work of Lombroso and the others as that of 'bourgeois academics', pointing out that prostitution invariably rises in economically perilous times. The neo-Darwinian narrative of de-evolution, issuing in a legitimized imprisonment of wandering women, failed, then, not only because 'prostitution' as a way of life and a form of identity became impossibly diffuse, difficult of access and definition; but also because nineteenth-century social meliorism included in its attitude a new kind of political critique and sentimental narrative at odds with the cold, apolitical, pseudo-objectivity of Lombroso, Tarnowsky, and Simonot.

If today the prostitute/errant woman is an object neither of much scientific nor of much social interest, this is in part because she has taken her place in a larger culture rapidly repudiating the possibility of interpretation, definition, and reform in any realm. Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson, among others, have remarked the disappearance of metaphysical depth and epistemological seriousness characteristic of cultural modernism and the emergence of an enchantment with fluctuating surface manifestations characteristic of post-modernism. It is, of course, in part the history of abuses to which interpretation has been put, a history in which neo-Darwinian criminology has a secure place, that underlies the movement away from epistemology. In any case, the prostitute today is still aggressively photographed and collected, as Cesare Lombroso photographed and collected her, but not to give substance to stories of moral madness and justify her surveillance. Rather, the contemporary photographed prostitute - or, more accurately the female social type whom photographers take to represent a certain traditional notion of 'prostitute' - takes her place as one more image acquired in a culture given over to the

compulsive acquisition of images; she has become merely one more member of the society of the spectacle. No sentiment attaches to her manifestation: she is sheer figuration.

It is this new image-function that *Vagabonde* exemplifies as it fixes its camera for two hours on a silent woman about whom we learn only that she was educated through high school and worked in Paris as a secretary. Bergeron drags herself through a series of actions (packing her tent, hitchhiking, dodging police, trading sex for food and shelter, being raped) without breaking her affectless demeanour: hurt, she whines; cold, she shivers; angry, she snarls. Given insufficient history and a character unable to articulate anything at all, the viewer inclines more and more towards a clinical response to Bergeron, which the film's pseudo-documentary method only deepens. Arbitrarily interrupting the flow of events to interview people who met and dealt with Bergeron during her wanderings, the film invites the viewer to assume that these are privileged moments of insight into the enigmatic heroine. Yet each speaker offers a wildly inadequate explanation for Bergeron's behaviour; each, too, displays a patent lack of interest in her, a kind of oblivious stupidity that seems to mirror the audience's attitude as it passively registers the chaos of an inexplicable life. (Compare this distancing effect with the same documentary/ interview method in the film *Reds,* about Louise Bryant - another wandering woman - and John Reed. There the camera lovingly scooped out the character lines on the faces of ageing radicals and Bohemians, and the unseen interviewer elicited detail, emotion, and eloquence from the speakers.)

Indeed, one might say that *Vagabonded* distancing is written into the script, thematized in terms of the line of well-meaning characters who try to approach Bergeron on her wanderings, and reliably prove unable to overcome separation. (Again, these characters seem representative of the film's less acute viewers, who sit in the theatre trying to construct meaning out of what they are witnessing.) A young man who had been a professor of philosophy in the city has retreated to the more 'authentic' life of a farmer. He initially regards Mona as a similar sort of rebel, though clearly unselfconscious and in need of education; that is, he imposes the traditional sentimental reading upon the female vagabond: she is a sensitive woman who has been victimized by society and is enacting an uncontrolled resistance against it. He sets about lecturing to her; he also gives her a place to stay (a trailer on his property) and a plot of land to work. Bergeron, however, sits catatonically while he holds forth, and then returns to her trailer, where she smokes, drinks, listens to music, and motionlessly gazes about herself for hours. He throws her out.

But it is the scientist who gets furthest with Bergeron. A tree specialist, she picks Mona up hitchhiking and reports in her interview that she eventually got used to Bergeron's appalling smell and grew rather fond of her in a maternal sort of way (the scientist is single, a successful career woman). The scientist, in the countryside to find diseased trees and fell them (their condition is untreatable), lets Bergeron drive around with her for a while but cannot bring herself to take Mona into her life completely, mystified by Bergeron's self-destructive ways, and fearful of the effect she will have on her career and friendships.

The modernist viewer will want to identify the information about the scientist

and the diseased trees (fallen trees: fallen woman?) as a commentary on Bergeron, especially when it emerges that the particular virus killing the trees of France was brought in by American troops during the Second World War. Combined with the fact of the film's rural setting (Bergeron wanders among the frost-covered trees of the countryside, not among the chilly streets of Paris), and its preference for backdrops of rusting farm machinery suggestive of the decline of rural France, this theme of nature corrupted by industrial culture presents itself as a likely path towards the elusive meaning the viewer has sought. Is Bergeron a modern-day Tess? There are suggestive parallels. Both wander the countryside in a benumbed, trance-like state, accompanied by the decrepit equipment of a depressed farmscape. Both have as their last significant experience an encounter with paganism: Stonehenge for Tess, where she finds a warm 'home', as she calls it, before the police take her away to be hanged for the murder of Alec; and for Mona, a bizarre run-in with a town's apparently traditional winter ritual, in which men dressed as birds of prey shoot streams of a red fluid about the village. When this group comes upon Bergeron wandering the town's emptied streets, they circle her and begin spraying the blood-like liquid. Terrified, soaked, she runs away, only to fall into a ditch and freeze to death.

Yet, though both stories clearly intend something having to do with de-evolution, Tess's rendezvous with Stonehenge serves a straightforward thematic purpose (Tess is pure in a way that pre-dates a corrupt civilization), while Mona's encounter with primitivism is too grotesque, too darkly comic, for any serious meaning to emerge. Blood-spewing men and bloodied women certainly have something to do with sex and death: but what? Perhaps Bergeron's symbolic purpose lies elsewhere. Does she symbolize a contemporary France ravaged by the cold technological values of industrial America, a France cut off from an historical rootedness and full of resentful self-hatred? Is Bergeron really a diseased form of life that must be cut down in its prime? Is the older woman, caught between an instinctive desire to help Mona and a careerist sense of self-interest, a figure for a modern state caught between welfare and profit motives? For rather than displaying an early industrial confidence that the state can re-track eccentric women, this scientist displays a late industrial ambivalence about the power of the state to establish and maintain order and value. She never contacts any agency for runaway women; and her own 'science' is limited to trees, not people.

One could go on in this way, reading into various other scenes of the film a broadening social message: for instance, after the woman scientist abandons Bergeron, she seems to forget the vagabond altogether until she almost electrocutes herself while drying her hair one day in her bathroom. This brush with death brings Mona, and the woman's guilt over her abandonment of Mona, back into her consciousness with excruciating immediacy, and she resolves to track Bergeron down. Is the film-maker's choice of this ludicrous electronic/ mnemonic device intended to suggest that memory and conscience themselves are inaccessible to us today except through artificial shocks; that a generalized catatonia coupled with a dependency upon technology is now so profound that we must be jolted into thought as a depressive is jolted by shock treatment back

into life? Or again: the only person authentically saddened by Bergeron's death is the Moroccan guest-worker she lives with for a while; he teaches her how to pick crops and cares for her as long as he can. Is his heartfelt fidelity, next to the failed empathy of the scientist, a comment on the essential rottenness of the contemporary French character, against which the decency of the outcast 'alien' disposition stands in dramatic relief? Can we speculate yet further that the film-maker intends to suggest that only outcasts like Mona and the guest-worker retain any spiritual integrity in so thoroughly degraded a landscape?

We can speculate. The postmodern work of art is, most characteristically, radically open to interpretation. But this openness bases itself upon an imagism which remains committed neither to a particular thematic line nor even to the desire to express meaning, so that any exercise of the entirely free interpretive impulse must struggle always against a sense of hopeless provisionality. Indeed, the meaning-construing viewer of *Vagabonde* might well feel not merely intellectually weightless, but ridiculous, given that much of the film seems a parody of explanation itself. Just as Bergeron neady heads off any attempt on her pristine blankness, so the film, with its empty commentary and suggestive but absurd images, heads off attempts to rationalize and synthesize its contents. The clinical Lombrosian eye has retained its brutal detachment but lost its belief in the possibility of understanding what it observes. Thus the film thematizes, and, in its numbing self-rendition, endorses futility. It explores most suggestively the affinities between bondage and vagabondage, and seems to conclude that Bergeron's postmodern version of errancy - apparent fluidity of movement and meaning, actual paralysis and vacuity - is universal. *Vagabonde* reflects the new anti-epistemology of the wandering woman: she and her

observers are finally free to wander, unhampered by the science of containment, but always within a Baudelaireian clinic in which 'the goal displaces itself, / and being nowhere may be anywhere'.

NOTES

I The film was released in France under the title *Ni Toil ni Loi,* and in the USA as *Vagabonde.*