

Killing Time: Ennui in Eighteenth-Century English Culture

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Abstract

The article explores the meanings of ennui in eighteenth-century England. Based on text searches, it proposes that the French term *ennui* was adopted into everyday usage in England around the mid-century, and was from the 1770s onwards used to signify especially the temporal aspects of the word, that is, boredom. Ennui was closely tied to social rank: it was thought to plague the wealthy if they had too much time on their hands. Interestingly, ennui was not particularly gendered, but plagued both men and women. It was intrinsically related to lifestyles. A multitude of activities were proposed to avoid ennui, from reading to physical exercise. Avoidance was a question of life and death: ennui could lead to moral collapse and ultimately to suicide, killing not only the body but also the soul.

Keywords: Boredom, British Cultural History, Eighteenth Century, Ennui, Temporality

1. *Introduction*

This essay explores the temporal meanings of ennui in eighteenth-century English usage.¹ It is an attempt to show the many ways in which ennui was linked with time. It looks especially at the element of boredom in ennui, and argues that boredom was the most important temporal aspect of eighteenth-century ennui. Both simple and existential boredom can be found in ennui, and for many eighteenth-century authors, simple boredom led to existential boredom. Ennui was a moral concept too, and strongly linked to the negative, corrupting influences of affluence, which reinforced the effects of boredom. In the eight-

¹ Most of the texts quoted in this essay were printed in London, but a few elsewhere in England, and quite a considerable number in Dublin, which I would like to think suggests that ennui was not limited only to London high society. I wish to thank my anonymous reviewers, the participants of the ISCH Bucharest 2015 session, and members of my research group for their valuable suggestions and comments. Special thanks to Eleanor Underwood for checking my English.

eenth century ‘boredom’ as a *term* did not yet exist but the *concept* of boredom did. As has often been noted, boredom was an ancient feeling, a plague of the desert fathers who named it *acedia*, the noontide demon which made the mid-day hours of hunger last forever. In the high Middle Ages, *acedia* meant the sin of boredom with the life of prayer (Kuhn 1976, 40-46, 64; Kessel 2001, 20-21; Knuuttila 2004, 141; Toohey 2011, 107-111; Johannisson 2012, 82-89). In French, *ennui* was an old term, deriving from Latin (*in odio*). As Martina Kessel puts it, *ennui* as a human condition was born in the Renaissance and in seventeenth-century philosophy of mind (2001, 22), but as we will see, the word was not used in English as early as this.

Looking at *ennui* across genres, from fiction to religious texts, and from medical tracts to conduct literature, gives a broad basis for understanding the meanings of *ennui*. It shows that in eighteenth-century English usage, firstly, *ennui* was inextricably linked to time and to what we would call ‘being bored’; secondly, that *ennui* was also an existential problem which could put a person in mortal danger; and thirdly, that *ennui* was not gendered unequivocally male or female. It also confirms the findings of earlier scholarship that *ennui* was highly class-oriented and was thought to plague particularly the elite. The essay takes the reader from a brief review of earlier scholarship to a discussion on method, and proposes a new timeline for the term ‘*ennui*’ in English. After this, the character of *ennui* in various genres is discussed, followed by an exploration of the birth of *ennui* and the ways by which one could avoid it. The temporal moralities relating to *ennui* are then examined, and the discussion closes with a look at gender and class.

1.1 *Earlier Scholarship*

Most scholarly interest in *ennui* has been manifested by literary scholars. This is also noted by Martina Kessel in her immaculately researched *Langeweile. Zum Umgang mit Zeit und Gefühlen in Deutschland vom späten 18. bis zum frühen 20. Jahrhundert* (2001; *Ennui. On dealings with time and emotions in Germany from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century*), exploring the concept *Langeweile* in its many German contexts (2001, 11).² Another rare exception to the rule is the Swedish historian Karin Johannisson’s inspiring 2009 *Melankoliska rum (Melancholy Rooms)*, which unfortunately has not been made available to English readers. This volume explores the many forms of melancholy in the history of Western culture, and it devotes one of its nine chapters to *ennui*. Opening her discussion, Johannisson goes to Goethe’s Werther’s *Weltschmerz* and argues that *ennui* is existential melancholy. She proposes that there were two emotions involved in *ennui*: disgust and boredom

² Kessel’s focus is strongly on gender and politics, and is essential reading for understanding the German Enlightenment.

(Johannisson 2012, 134, 139),³ thus allowing for a temporary dimension to ennui as well.

This is not far removed from Reinhard Kuhn's position in his classic study of ennui in literature, the magisterial *The Demon of Noontide. Ennui in Western Literature* (1976). Again discussing Werther and his *Langeweile*, he argues that 'This boredom – *Langeweile* places the emphasis on the endless duration of time – is not contrasted with ennui as it is in Rousseau, but complements it to such an extent that it is difficult to distinguish the one from the other'. For Kuhn, ennui is 'inextricably linked with the notion of time and space' (1976, 5).⁴ This, as we shall see below, is what the English sources in my study will argue as well; this association becomes perhaps even more emphasized when one leaves the 'high' literary sphere, since short term temporality then gains more space.

In my interpretation, this is in contrast to what Patricia Meyer Spacks argues in her *Boredom. The Literary History of a State of Mind*. She writes that 'Boredom was not (is not) the same as ennui, more closely related to *acedia*. Ennui implies a judgment of the universe; boredom, a response to the immediate' (1995, 12). While this may be or may have been true in the metaphysical sense – ennui implied a judgment, boredom not – I will suggest that eighteenth-century English ennui as a concept and lived experience included much more boredom than has often been thought. In other words, ennui had much more immediacy and held a stronger temporal element than has earlier been assumed.

Very usefully for the present purposes, in his *Boredom. A Lively History*, Peter Toohey divided boredom into two forms: simple boredom and existential boredom. Simple boredom included situational boredom – which can be brought on in a classroom or a meeting – and boredom of surfeit, which is brought on by excess and repetition (2011, 4-5, 12-13, 17). Toohey is interested in this simple boredom which, he points out, is usually considered not worth the effort of studying and is overlooked by scholars since it carries the 'stigma of childishness' (5-6). Kuhn, for example, considers this kind of boredom 'hardly worth serious study' since 'it is a temporary state dependent almost entirely on external circumstances' (1976, 5-6). While Kuhn dismisses simple boredom as an uninteresting subject of study, and focuses – like most scholars have done – on existential boredom, especially Toohey and Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren have paid attention to the less glamorous (simple) boredom of queuing, listening to boring sermons and so on. Even though Ehn and

³ Because it is readily available to me, I am using the excellent Finnish translation of Johannisson's work, but it would be relatively easy to locate this discussion in the original Swedish version or in other translations.

⁴ For Elizabeth Goodstein, too, boredom means the drawing out of time and an existential state (2005, 107).

Löfgren focus on present-day culture, the temporal definition of boredom is testable on, if not directly applicable to, past cultures as well, as they argue that ‘when people have nothing to do, they “experience time as just that – time”’, and when they are bored, ‘time is then experienced as an oppressive void. This kind of time must be killed before it kills’ (2010, 55-56). In this sense temporality, and ennui, can be deadly, and for the eighteenth-century people it was that in a very literal sense.

1.2 *On the Search Method Used*

Extensive database searches are key to reaching the many uses of ennui in eighteenth-century culture. I searched the staggering 33 million pages of text (more than 180,000 titles) from the eighteenth century available in Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO)⁵ for the keyword ‘ennui’. Using the advanced search facility, I limited the search for ‘ennui’ by year, but allowed texts without a known publication year to be included, and by language (= English). Language limitation in the database is not perfect, and titles with other languages, especially many French and some Latin, are included (these are wrong hits). The French cases are problematic, as they are usually correct, but they are often rather remote from the English discussion. This, however, is not always the case, as will be seen with Molière. The French cases certainly cannot be completely dismissed, as these French books were mostly printed in London and were most probably intended for the English reader. Table 1 lists the total number of titles found.⁶

1700-1709	2
1710-1719	6
1720-1729	7
1730-1739	27
1740-1749	22
1750-1759	27
1760-1769	49
1770-1779	115
1780-1789	328
1790-1799	590

‘Table 1 - Number of works containing ennui’

⁵ This Gale database covers, as said, more than 33 million pages, and includes various sorts of publications (excluding newspapers). The OCR quality of the database is high, and wrong hits are relatively rare. I have used the database under the University of Turku licence.

⁶ Numbers rechecked April 1, 2016.

While these numbers include some wrong hits and many reprints and double volumes, the numbers give a clear indication of the history of the term's usage in English. In the first decades, ennui is offered almost only in French books, grammars and dictionaries. To confirm that ennui was not used in English before the eighteenth century, I searched Early English Books Online (EEBO) for 'ennui', and found nothing in English usage, which further confirms that the term came in later.

The preliminary search result in the ECCO database is always a title, and one title of course can include several hits of the keyword. A preliminary perusal of the titles containing the word 'ennui' quickly revealed that until the 1780s 'ennui' was so rare (1700-1779; altogether 255 hits) that it was, in fact, possible to go through all the hits of 'ennui' from the database manually. In the 1780s and 1790s the titles were, however, so numerous (328 and 590 respectively), that checking all of them manually was no longer possible for the purposes of the present essay. Nonetheless, for the last two decades of the century I checked through most of the titles of fiction that I found, all the medical works, and most of those from other fields as well, omitting mostly only reprints, new editions and duplicates.

The increase in the number of titles mentioning 'ennui' cannot be explained only by the expansion of printing itself, or by the great number of reprints. The increase clearly confirms that use of the term 'ennui' was growing during the second half of the century. Therefore, the findings here can be considered more than mere guidelines, and I can confidently propose that 'ennui' was adopted into the usage of the English elite in the very middle of the eighteenth century, that for the next generation, in the 1770s, the term – and very likely the feelings attached to it – was already well known, and that by the third generation, in the 1790s, 'ennui' was already a familiar term. However, more sophisticated data mining, especially topic modelling and particularly into newspaper and journal material, will be needed, and will be welcomed, to make these findings even more nuanced.

2. A New Timeline for Ennui

In the last decade of the eighteenth century, John Bennett wrote some advice to young women in which he made visible the blurred lines between having too much time, feelings of ennui, and the moral difficulties that arose from trying to fill time in the wrong way:

It is a great unhappiness to many ladies of fortune, that they have not sufficient employment to fill up their time; and in order to prevent that languor and ennui, which are the most unpleasant feelings of human life, either fall into a low state of spirits, or have recourse to play, public pleasures, or a perpetual round of visits, for their amusement. (1789, II, 11)

As we see, Bennett quite confidently uses the term 'ennui'. As the discussion above shows, I am able to suggest a new timeline for the term in English. By the time of his writing, in 1789, 'ennui' was a well-known term, but it had not been in use for as long as has been supposed. Patricia Spacks notes that 'ennui' came into English usage in the seventeenth century (1995, 14), but this is not the case. It was well into the eighteenth century before the term became naturalised. Early in the eighteenth century, however, the word *ennui* was certainly familiar to many who knew or studied French. In early- and mid-eighteenth century grammars and dictionaries, 'ennui' was typically translated as weariness (e.g. Malard 1716, 26; Durand 1746, 80; Chambaud 1750, 87; Elphinston 1756, 2), but uneasiness was also used (Buffier 1734, 5). Samuel Boyse translated 'ennui' as despairing (1738, 58). The word 'ennui' was also included in French grammars in guidelines for pronunciation, as an exception to the rule for pronouncing 'en', for example as 'En keeps its proper Sound when followed by another n; as, ennemi, prene, &c. except' (Anonymous 1718, 15);⁷ one could also find 'ennui' in Nathan Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1721) as the origin of the word 'annoiance'.

For the reading elite, the word 'ennui' would perhaps first have been encountered in French literature. Molière's *Le Misanthrope* (first performance 1666) was, for example, available from local London printers from 1732.⁸ This particular volume offered parallel texts, with the original French on the left-hand page and an English translation (by an anonymous translator) on the right. Here the fluent French reader would encounter the word 'ennui' on several occasions, but see it translated with a variety of words: 'uneasiness', 'tedious pain', 'pain', 'being ruffl'd' (1732, 20-21, 32-33, 108-109, 134-135). The fact that 'ennui' was not used once in the translation suggests the assumption that the word was not familiar to the English reader, and that it probably was not in spoken use in the early 1730s.

It seems to have taken some years more for the term to emerge in English usage. When it did so, sometime around the mid-century, it did so with such force that by 1754 'ennui' could be satirically considered by the bluestocking Sarah Scott to be a necessary condition of those with 'refined Sentiments and an elegant Mind' (1754, I, 55). In fact, the very first occasion on which I have found *ennui* being used in an English text in a naturalised way, without any mention of its French origin, is five years before Scott, that is, in 1749. The volume is Joseph Beaumont's *Original Poems in English and Latin*. It was printed in Cambridge 50 years after Beaumont's death in 1699 (and reprinted in 1799, again to mark the anniversary of his death). 'Ennuï' is found in

⁷ The same work also lists 'ennui' as an example of masculine nouns ending in -i (Anonymous 1718, 57).

⁸ Based on material in EEBO and ECCO, checked 28 March 2016.

the preface, written by 'J.G.', the editor John Gee.⁹ When describing what motivated Beaumont to write poetry after he was banished from Cambridge during the Revolution, he claimed it was to avoid the ennui of being without his books. Writing was an escape 'from that ennui and irksomeness of being, which in that long divorce from Books, could not but oppress his active and vigorous mind' (Beaumont 1749, xxiv). Gee seems to have considered this oppression to have been quite strong, as he chose as the first, opening poem one entitled, 'Reasonable Melancholy', and as the second, 'Death' (1-5).

3. *The Character of Ennui*

Lacking the term 'ennui' did not mean that the English lacked emotions related to ennui before the term itself came into use. Interestingly, Jean-Bernard Le Blanc wrote in his *Letters on the English and French Nations* that the English suffered greatly from ennui but that they did not have a word for it. He thought spleen, vapours and consumption would be ennui 'carried in its highest pitch', and that it would 'become a dangerous, and sometimes a mortal disease' (1747, I, 64-65). The synonyms given for the term in literature, or translations, also reveal that ennui was a concept easily understood by English speakers. In the case of Molière, as I said before, *ennui* was translated as 'uneasiness', 'tedious pain', 'pain', and 'being ruff'd'.

Perhaps the most typical understanding and synonym for ennui was 'weariness', and very close to that was 'lassitude'. Going further in time, in the novel *Columella* (1779) the protagonist simply has too much time and feels ennui, which here is understood as lassitude:

since my place has lost the force of novelty, and reading and other amusements are become indifferent, or rather insipid to me, I own that I find my time hang heavy upon my hands, and feel a consequent lassitude, or ennui as the French call it; and expect with impatience the state returns of the ordinary functions of life; and many a day do nothing but count the hours from breakfast to dinnertime, and from dinner to supper; not for the pleasure I take in eating or drinking (for I have no appetite) but merely for some little variety which those periods produce. (Graves 1779, 116-117)

Here, as the notion of reading and amusements having 'become indifferent' or 'insipid' and the loss of appetite reveal, ennui is partly existential in nature. Ennui is also clearly linked to the protagonist's having too much time to kill, and especially to days going slowly; the only variety there was in the day was waiting for time to pass from one meal to the next. It is nearly impossible

⁹ Confirmation that J.G. is John Gee can be found in the *Dictionary of National Biography*: John Gosse: Joseph Beaumont, <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Beaumont,_Joseph_%281616-1699%29_%28DNB00%29>, accessed 15 February 2017.

to read this without considering the state of ennui to be related to boredom: boredom and ennui were relatives, perhaps siblings.

Often ennui was boredom itself, an immediate, temporal feeling which hardly contained cognizance of life's darker mysteries. Of course, in comedy, one would recover from ennui very speedily: 'Yes, Doctor, I find myself greatly recovered from my yesterday's ennui' (Andrews 1781, 38). The comical in this case, dating from 1781, derives from the understanding that ennui was in principle somewhat deeper than a passing feeling, but it also reflects the fact that it was often nothing more than a moment of weariness, and hints at fashionable people's short-term thinking. This is instanced in Richard Watson's apology to Edward Gibbon: 'I am afraid, Sir, I have tired you with scripture quotations; but if I have been fortunate enough to convince you ... I shall not be sorry¹⁰ for the *ennui* I may have occasioned you' (Watson 1776, 65-66). Watson realized that listening to a series of quotations might have been tedious and could have given rise to feelings of ennui, although he hoped it had not. Similar ennui could be caused by uninteresting people. This happened to Emma, the protagonist of a sentimental novel from 1773: 'O the Bore! I was dieing with ennui whenever he spoke! so talkative, there was no possibility of escaping the head-ach with him' (Anonymous 1773a, II, 203). Again, ennui presented itself in bodily terms, in a headache. In 1776, Laurence Sterne felt ennui in France due to

the eternal platitude of the French characters – little variety, no originality in it at all – than to any other cause – [illegible] they are very civil – but civility itself, in that uniform, wearies and bidders one to death – If I do not mind, I shall grow most stupid and sententious ... (1776, 78)

If we glance back, we quickly notice that from Graves' *Columella* to Sterne's ennui with the boring Frenchmen, the quotations above originated between 1773 and 1781. They all describe the same temporal dimension of ennui. This suggests that in the 1770s ennui was often understood as simple boredom (Toohey 2011, 17). This is in fact borne out by further contemporary evidence: the Bon Ton of the 1770s, the cream of society, were considered by their contemporaries to suffer from this. A song written in 1775 – which was, perhaps not altogether coincidentally, the same year as David Garrick's play *Bon Ton, or High Life About Stairs* was first performed at the Theatre Royal – suggested humorously that 'drowsy ennui' was a modish infirmity of the fashionable set of the 1770s (Anonymous 1775, 4). Further, in 1778, *The Theatrical Bouquet* combined 'weak nerves, bon-ton, ennui and foreign graces' (Anonymous 1778, 10). Ennui was entirely fashionable, but being a quality of the Bon Ton, it was something that could be mocked as well.

¹⁰ I have retained the original spelling throughout.

After this, ennui stayed in fashion, but it did not lose its temporal dimension. Gregory Griffin's 1787 description of the sufferings of genteel society from boredom and their difficulties in finding a not-so-boring location in which to spend their idle hours is extremely interesting:

Dear Greg, Your Mic. [microcosmos] is dead Lounge, – dissipates insufferable Ennui of tea table, – fills boring intervals of Conversazione, – Exquisite substitute for switch, – and in short quite the Ton: – By the by, in your next propose some new Lounge – they are all so dingle at present, they are quite a Bore. – Lud, how much I have written. – You charming creature, hint at some new Lounge. Your's, Narcissus. (25)¹¹

And in 1792, Robert Bage's novel, *Man as he is*, described a situation in which Mr. Bardoe was clearly bored, suffering from time-related ennui. He had arrived at an inn, and had to suffer a long wait for his meal:

All the inn was quickly engaged in the service of the honourable Mr. Bardoe, whose major domo ordered a supper, which for plenty and variety might have served the Duke of Tuscany at least. In the three hours taken in preparing it, his honour had walked a little in his apartment, lounged a little upon his sofa, looked a little in the mirrors, read a little in each of half a score travelling classics, and at length was taken with a little fit of ennui, which he thought very impertinent and provoking. (III, 265)

'A little fit of ennui', 'impertinent and provoking' sound similar to the ennui suffered by the earlier generation, the Bon Ton of the 1770s, and suggests that the nature of ennui did not completely change. Ennui rather received new audiences; boredom continued to plague the 'jet set' of the time.

By the end of the century, if not earlier, ennui had begun to receive the attention of medical writers. It was even recognized as a form of mental derangement. We can find this in Sir Alexander Crichton's *An inquiry into the nature and origin of Mental Derangement*, published in 1798. For him, ennui was 'irksomeness of mind' but interesting to us is the fact that ennui holds a temporal aspect here as well. In fact, ennui was *caused* by the very slowness of the passing of time:

The slowness hinted at is necessarily relative to the nature of the ideas. New ideas please much better when they succeed each other with a certain degree of slowness, than when quickly presented to the mind; but when a person is confined to the house, and is deprived of society, and has no opportunity of seeing a succession of new objects, and is not under the influence of any desire, or passion, which can give

¹¹ 'Narcissus' as the signee tempts one to make a detour to the interesting discussion of the somatisation of feelings in the culture of sensibility developed in the chapter, 'Ennui and Narcissism', in Stolberg 2011, 191-195, as Griffin's Narcissus very much seems to dwell in emotional perturbation.

rise to a flow of thoughts, he necessarily falls into this distressing state, from the too slow succession of old or accustomed thoughts. (1798, I, 321-322)

For Crichton, this slowness could lead to a chain of misery and torture, even delirium. Ennui presented itself along with restlessness and weariness, and took over the whole body of the sufferer, who ‘yawns frequently, his senses become dull, his attention unsettled, and he at last falls asleep’. In the young and active, ennui if prolonged (another aspect of time), could present itself in startling activity:

I have seen a person in company after suffering impatiently these kind of tortures for a long time, at last totally forgetting where he was, suddenly start from his chair like a frantic person, walk about the room for a minute or two with a quick pace, panting for breath, as if he had not breathed freely for some hours before, until the expressions and astonishment of the people around him awakened him from his delirium, and brought him a proper sense of the indecorum he had been guilty of. (I, 323)¹²

This is fascinating. Crichton’s description shows that ennui was not only listlessness, but could take the form of action which, being irrational, suggested madness. Even though space does not allow us here to go into nineteenth-century expressions of ennui, it should be noted that the eighteenth-century understanding of ennui gives a sound basis for reading the madness of ennui of the following century, the Romantic boredom of Byron and his companions, or Maria Edgeworth’s much studied novel, *Ennui* (1809),¹³ in which aristocratic ennui takes forms that bring on disease, including hypochondriasis, and can lead to moral or spiritual crisis, even the possibility of suicide.

4. *The Genesis and Prophylaxis of Ennui*

To understand ennui, it is useful to take a look at the birth of ennui, its causes and its origins in humans, and to reflect on the role of time in all this. The countryside seems to be the place to begin, as it was the birthplace of ennui for many people. For the socially privileged, the countryside stood in many ways in stark contrast to the town, especially to London, even though many of what were perceived to be the good and beneficial elements of country life, such as walking, were deliberately introduced into city life as well, and

¹² This exploding ennui can be seen as a reaction to the rigid rules of the culture of sensibility. See, again, Stolberg 2011, 191.

¹³ On ennui in Edgeworth, see for example Woodworth 2011, chap. five. Interestingly, Hollingworth (1997) reads Edgeworth’s novel as a metaphor of Irish politics.

the difference between the two was not always as clear-cut as it at first seems to be (Kaartinen, forthcoming). What the country especially lacked was the endless round of entertainment that the city offered night after night during the season. For many the country, like the city, did indeed offer an active round of visits, but it was recognized that even the 'constant round of pleasure, perpetual engagements, is not able to secure' one from ennui (Anonymous 1767, I, 8). Even though summer in the country was for many people a delightful change from the city, even a welcome season of rest, some novels of the time presented the countryside as a place of ennui, even to such an extent that it could be fatal.

In the novel *Edward*, the countryside itself was the culprit, the cause of ennui: 'you are reduced to seek amusement in the dull scenes of rural life – which fills you with spleen and ennui' (Anonymous 1774, I, 2). Remoteness was the danger: 'in a remote province, where one is in danger of dying of ennui' (Mackenzie 1777, 34). In other descriptions the country could be tolerable, given proper company: in a novel by Frances Brooke, a Lady Anne 'declares she can no longer support the country without [Mr. Mandeville] but shall die with chagrin and ennui' (1763, II, 67). What was most dramatically lacking in the country, and, as is shown in the following, what could be fatal, was the lack of amusement. In the novel *The Relapse* (1780), Clara refuses marriage, and cannot think of living in the country, as she would die of ennui there. The expanded dashes in the following quotation emphasize the horror:

The Country! ----- Horrid! ----- Sauntering, dozing over a book, yawning at what is called the conversation of the rustics of our neighbourhood, or yawning by ourselves, for want of something to say; each day repeating over and over the same dull scene we trod before:– mere vegetation! I should die in a twelve-month, of downright ennui'. (Anonymous 1780, I, 62-63)

The vegetative nature of country life was also the cause of the ennui of the lovely Maria in a popular collection, *The Weekly Entertainer*. A mean spinster aunt, jealous of the beauty of Maria, who was 'formed to shine in courts', denied her this possibility. Instead, she 'condemned this flower to droop unseen, and wither in the shade'. This was the 'dull scene of vegetative existence', to combat which Maria's only resource was books (For Monday Dec 8 1783: Anonymous 1783, 539), an aspect to which we will return later. The countryside as the scene of a merely vegetative existence is an extremely strong metaphor and one that appears in late eighteenth-century literature so many times that it very likely reflects the term's use in real life: life in the country was so dull that many saw it as nothing but a vegetative existence (Parson 1799, I, 18).

The countryside was at least similarly, if not even more traumatically, in Mrs Thomson's novel, *Excessive Sensibility*, in which a fashionable lady with terrible memories of the country could not understand why she 'should suffer

[her] elegant figure to be carried down to the family mansion-house, just like a new piece of furniture', and while the house itself was 'well enough', there were – the key to the definite superiority of London in the pursuit of avoiding ennui – 'no Operas, no Ranelaghs, no Routs, and, to sum up all, there are not pretty fellows, to put one in a good humour with one's self' (1787, 47). It could not be helped, and in August at Haddington Hall she was 'devoured with Ennui', and complained that

I can't think what people of fashion do with country houses, unless it be to make nursery: or to confine a daughter in it. – My mother kept me confined in an old antiques castle, until she got a second husband; – It pleased heaven to release me; but even the name of the country has given me the spleen ever since'. (45-47)

As we see, popular novels considered, there was a link between ennui and the country, and they suggest that the quiet social life and especially the lack of entertainment would make the time excessively long, and thus cause ennui.

However, to be fair, as Fanny Burney notes in her *Evelina*, it was not entertainment that one needed, but it was the company one had when entertaining oneself that really mattered. One could therefore feel ennui even in the amusements at Ranelagh: 'Those whose – whose connections, and so forth, are not among les gens comme il faut, can feel nothing but ennui at such a place as Ranelagh' (1779, I, 193). The importance of company, of good, suitable society, comes out very strongly in these passages. The country was dull especially because company was limited and what there was lacking in quality: 'Heavens! I expire with ennui: thirty miles from the metropolis and not a pretty fellow to dissipate the melancholy reflection' (Anonymous, *A Lady*, 1774, 28), or 'How long she would have borne patiently, and without *ennui*, the society of three persons, who seemed to be no more animated with what animated her, than the ancestors in effigy were, I cannot possibly guess ...' (Craven 1779, 15) – hinting further that it was precisely country society that was dull and boring. Yet we must remember that dull company was not something one ran the risk of encountering only in the countryside; Steele suffered from ennui in France because of the 'eternal platitude' of the company (Sterne 1776, 78). On the other hand, a city, even a melancholy one like Rome, did not lead to ennui because it had much to offer in terms of fine arts and antiquities (Miller 1777, II, 222).

In the most dramatic cases, where a protagonist was being kept a prisoner, the countryside could lead to the vegetative existence mentioned in the two quotations above, which hint at true loneliness. However, being alone in literal terms was rarely a significant problem for the upper classes in the eighteenth-century – especially for women in fiction, as has been clearly presented above. Friendship was a great preservative against ennui: 'When dissipation fatigues, [fine ladies] fly to [friendship] as a resource from ennui' (Anonymous, *A Lady*, 1774, 143), and Lady Mary Walker advised that 'the

business of a family is the most profitable and honourable study a woman can employ herself in: this employing a great part of her time, will prevent her feeling that ennui attending fine ladies, and she will have no time for complaint' (1776, 206).

If one wanted to prevent ennui, then, one had to seek pleasure and good company, stay active, and take both mental and physical exercise. John Bennett suggested religious exercises instead of public pleasures and 'a perpetual round of visits' for young ladies to avoid ennui (1789; II, 11).¹⁴ As in the case of the beautiful Maria above, and others, books were a typical, simple and recurring remedy against ennui (Stanhope 1774, 109; Griffith 1782, 63; Anonymous 1783, 539; 109; Hervey 1788, 183; Moore 1790, 212). This discussion of the benefits of reading, especially to women, and especially of reading novels, is interesting.

In the avoidance of ennui, the cultivation of letters and the study of science and other fields had a strong moral connotation (Karppinen-Kummunmäki 2015, 195-218). This can be seen in advice literature for women, for example in Hannah More who, writing on dissipation, pointed out that serious interests would prevent 'a strong passion for promiscuous visiting' and other less favourable pastimes, including gambling, and were particularly useful because study 'induces a relish for domestic life, the most desirable temper in the world for women'. For her, study was poignantly 'a relief against that mental disease, which the French emphatically call ennui'. For Bennett, study was, at its best, if pursued through suitable reading, 'an act of religion' (1789, II, 23-24). Unsurprisingly, study and avoidance of 'that monster' ennui were urged in connection with the promotion of education for both young men and young women – importantly, education would help women to enjoy time instead of trying to kill it:

were women early taught to reason and reflect, they soon would direct their feelings aright – they would be virtuous from reflected principles, not from policy: and a less frivolous education would enable them to find resources at home, really to enjoy time, in place of that monster Ennui driving them into folly, riot, and dissipation, to kill it at the expence of peace, honour, and reputation. (Anonymous [Lady Wallace] 1787, 15)

In addition to reading, music and the study of nature were good remedies (Griffith 1782, 63; Bute 1785?, 4; Moore 1790, 212), and medical authors prescribed moderate physical exercise (Rymer 1785, 26; Adair 1799, 69-71). Ironically, so was playing at cards, which not only killed time but saved one

¹⁴ James Boswell noted that 'Belief is favourable to the human mind, were it for nothing else but to furnish it entertainment. An infidel I should think, must frequently suffer from ennui' (1768, 252).

from the dullness of the conversation of any awkward company: 'when People of a certain turn are got together, they shou'd prefer doing any thing to the ennui of their own conversation' (Berkeley 1755, 74-75). Edward Topham recommended pleasure, 'the darling object of the mind, the dispeller of care, melancholy, and that ennui, which makes life itself so burdensome, was somehow or other to be obtained' (1776, 247). We get a hint what this pleasure could be in *The Modern Couple*. Here it included conversation, which in this case was beneficial, visits and walking, dressing, meals, and writing letters (for which there would be hardly any time if days were properly filled with activities; Anonymous 1776, 57). Very similar advice is given in *Hadleigh Grove*, where ennui was prevented by a whole series of delightful things to do: reading books, making music, walking, drawing, and meals; and then 'Our hours glided on the soft downy pinions of delight; not a moment was there allowed for lassitude or ennui. Our time was continually employed either in something useful, or something instructive, at the same time that it was entertaining' (Anonymous 1773b, 39-40).

5. *The Temporal Moralities of Ennui*

As we have seen, if one used his or her time well and properly, one would not be plagued by ennui. At times a person who suffered from ennui could be driven to killing time in unprofitable ways, and was then considered morally weak. It was especially serious when ennui might lead to immorality, for example in connection with marriage or its failure, and ultimately to suicide.

Ennui was a danger to marriage, and thoughtless, senseless behaviour would lead to ennui. Marital infidelity could come about because of ennui, boredom:

An eternal round of sameness and insipidity disgusts them; and, as a refuge from ennui, they form a connection with one in nearly the same insipid line. The intrigue keeps attention alive, and the parties, having a sort of business on their hands, drive on at an extraordinary rate, till, by growing too bold, they cannot escape destruction. (Anonymous 1782?, 27-28; see also Hayley 1783, 137-138)

To illustrate this moral side of ennui, I will next take a look at two short novels which were written for educational and morally elevating purposes. Both stories were very likely written in the 1760s. The first of them is fictitious, but its anonymous author¹⁵ says that everyone knows that the stories in it are true. The novel is a collection of falling-into-sin-biographies of former prostitutes, now 'penitents in the Magdalen-House'. For our purposes it can be assumed at least that the stories of the fallen women rang true to their readers.

¹⁵ Sarah Fielding is a very likely author of this text.

The anonymous author of *The Histories* (1760) carefully introduced a moral into each of the 'autobiographies' of the fallen women in her novel. The moral in each case had very much to do with time – time had to be well spent:

Novels should be wrote and read as books which are to teach by illustrating the moral by the facts, where precept is enlivened by examples, and imagination brought in to strengthen reason, not to confound it. If the writer loses sight of this design, still the reader may, if he pleases, keep it always in view; tho' such novels as require much effort in the mind to discover a good moral in them are certainly very pernicious; for works of imagination are fit only for the entertainment of an idle hour; when we should do by the reader, as indulgent parents act by their children, teach them in play, and blend instruction so closely with amusement, that the design shall be scarcely perceivable to the mind in that childish state of inactivity. (Anonymous 1760, I, xxii-xiii)

In the story of a wealthy merchant's daughter, the declines stems from the fact that she has fallen in love with a poor man but at the age of fifteen or so is forced to marry an old man of fifty, to her an utterly disgusting brute called Mr Merton. She eventually forgets her vow of fidelity, reasoning to herself that love must be a higher force than marriage vows, and begins an affair with her true love, Captain Turnham. Mrs Merton is caught, imprisoned by her husband, saved by Captain Turnham, and they run away. Time passes. The lovers live separately but she gives birth to a son, and then suddenly Mr Merton finds her and kidnaps her when she is on her way back home from her lover. She is taken to Mr Merton's dreary estate in the country and imprisoned there. She is upset because her baby has been left in London. She manages to escape from this prison too and, returning to London, gets in touch with Captain Turnham, finds her baby well, and they resume their blissful way of life. Mr Merton gets a divorce, the couple move to Scotland, where they present themselves as a married couple, and they have two more sons, but gradually the situation changes. Captain Turnham is overwhelmed by ennui. The couple see each other too much, and especially he grows bored with her: 'But when, by being seen every hour, our follies and our frailties become conspicuous, the love which was founded on a supposition we were free from them [the frailties], must decay' (Anonymous 1760, 224-225). Mrs Merton's interpretation of their situation seems to be linked to their living without regard to social conventions, being outsiders and therefore alone. She explains what happens:

Of this I was very sensible; but yet I could not avoid being greatly affected, when I saw Captain Turnham's fondness abate. I was always at work; his vivacity could not for ever be proof against a dismal situation, and a total want of company. Conversation would flag, and even playing with his children would often become tedious. Ennui, that great destroyer of the happiness of those who have no misfortunes to distress

them, reached even our solitude, and oppressed Captain Turnham's spirits. I had no particular reason to complain; for he grew as weary of every thing about him, as of me. (225)

Ennui is the moral culmination point of the story, although what finally destroys Mrs Merton is brought on by Turnham's death while they are stationed in Gibraltar, where everyone knows their situation and where they are therefore completely isolated from decent society. When Turnham dies of a fever, she is left desolate, penniless, and with children, far away from Britain. In the end she has no other way out of the tangled web she is in but to become a prostitute.

The second moral biography is 'The Miseries of Idleness and Affluence', attributed in a collection to Dr Smollett. This story of Pichromacus¹⁶ is a moral tale in which too much wealth destroys a loving, this time married, couple's happiness. Pichromacus and his future wife fall in love but they marry against the will of her father, who then refuses to give her any support. Pichromacus himself is an army officer on half-pay, the second son of a wealthy country gentleman, whose only inheritance was a decent education and his position in the army. After marrying, the couple lived on his income and the interest on a small inheritance she had from her aunt. They bought a house with some land in the country, and rented a large farm. Even though they were not blessed with children, he says, their life was bliss: 'The labours of the field, the little domestic cares of the barn-yard, the poultry-yard, and the dairy, were productive of such delights as none of your readers will conceive, except those who are enamoured of a country life' (Smollett 1772, 104).¹⁷ This bliss was destroyed and complete devastation of their happy lives followed. Within the period of a few weeks, the husband's nephew, who had received a large inheritance from his father, died of smallpox, and the wife's only brother died in an accident, and they inherited a fortune. Suddenly, they were unbelievably wealthy, and began to live the life of the rich and idle: 'we quitted our romantic solitude, and rushed into all the pageantry of high life ... we became enamoured of tinsel liveries, equipage, and all the frippery of fashion' (104).

Because of this moral decay, ennui follows, and the couple come to hate each other: 'we find ourselves in a state of mutual disgust; and all the enjoyments of life we either taste with indifference, or reject with loathing' (106). He suffers from ennui:

¹⁶ It seems very likely that the name, Pichromacus, of the tale is derived from the Greek *pikrós* (bitter) and *machós* (fighter), reflecting the protagonist's state at the time of telling the story, when he was suffering from ennui.

¹⁷ The story was published before this collection but unfortunately I have not been able to locate the first printing, nor have I found this text used by other scholars. The identity of the author as Smollett therefore rests solely on this publication's Table of Contents, which attributes this text to him.

a confirmed imbecility of mind, and a want of relish, attended with a thousand uneasinesses, which render life almost insupportable. I sleep without refreshment; I am fatigued without labour; I am scarce risen when I wish the day was done; and when night comes, I long for morning: I eat without appetite, drink without exhilaration; exercise affords no spirits, conversation no amusement, reading no entertainment, and diversion no pleasure. (106)

His wife has ceased to be an object of love: 'even she that was once the delight of my eyes, and the joy of my heart, is now become the subject of perpetual disquiet' (107).

As we see, ennui could have devastating effects on a marriage, but of all the moral dangers of ennui, the gravest was suicide. Perhaps especially in the aftermath of *Werther*, ennui tempted its prey to suicide;¹⁸ when ennui, the 'leaden mountain' (Burroughs 1798, 131) became overwhelming, there was the fear of suicide. So serious was ennui considered to be that, as Robert John Thornton put it in 1797 in his *Medical Extracts*, 'men often make the cruel choice, and seek death as a welcome release from that insupportable ennui which thus overpowers them' (879). Crichton pointed out that 'this tormenter of human happiness', ennui,

often occasions a degree of inquietude which is productive of the most alarming and fatal consequences; for the desire of relief becomes, in some cases, so great as totally to destroy all judgment, and consequently hurries the person on to the most criminal violence against nature. It is in this way that ennui, like melancholy, may terminate in suicide. (1798, 322)

Thus, ennui could be fatal not only for the body but also for the soul.

6. *Gender and Class*

In her *Melancholy Rooms*, Karin Johannisson points to the maleness of ennui. This is perhaps partly due to the nineteenth-century focus of her discussion. For her, ennui becomes flesh in the characters of the dandy and the flâneur. She suggests that 'ennui is an emotion of the young, the elite, and of men' (2012, 138). As many of the examples discussed above show, perhaps surprisingly, in eighteenth-century English usage ennui was not clearly gendered. Having said that, it must be admitted we are on very uncertain ground here. This is very much a genre-sensitive question: it is possible that ennui as an existential problem was a slightly more male feature, because it is manifest in male genres. Whether this is a sign of gendering or an issue of genres cannot at

¹⁸ This is perhaps visible in Craven 1779, Dedication.

this point be stated conclusively; for example, in scientific treatises the generic 'man' may also have referred to women. This is a point which demands more comprehensive research, and cannot be solved here.

In the above discussion, we have seen both men and women suffering from ennui. The evidence points to a certain equality of the sexes in this respect. With married couples, both the husband and the wife were at risk of infidelity as a result of ennui, and in the educational advice literature ennui was present in the lives of both boys and girls. This apparent equality was probably related to the fact that ennui arose from life's temporal dimension, that everyone's life was affected by time. Choosing different sources and genres would have an effect on the gendering of ennui: after reading only advice books for young women, ennui would look like an overwhelmingly female issue, and after reading some volumes of French philosophy, ennui would become rather an existential question for the male. A brief look across genres, and one that calls for further (especially genre-comparative) study, shows that in eighteenth-century English usage ennui was not gendered, and not even bores were gendered: both men and women could be boring company. Both sexes were advised against ennui and members of both sexes were accused of being boring.

As we saw above, Pichromacus' bitter ennui was born out of wealth, fulfilment and surfeit. Even though an extreme, and fictitious, case, Pichromacus' tale is essentially a tale of ennui: a tale of riches, boredom, and losing interest. When all the senses are satisfied a thousand times, nothing makes a difference, but even in that existentialist issue, there was a slight thought of temporality in this suffering too:

A full gratification of the sense would constitute a perfect satisfaction of the mind. But in such a state as this, when every passion is indulged, and every wish, the senses can suggest, gratified, the mind is as far as ever from enjoying a plenary satisfaction: it palls and sickens under an undescrivable languor; which the Latins called the *taedium vitae*; and the French term ennui; and for which our language, though we are not strangers to such kind of sensation, does not afford a name. (Shepherd 1779, 80)

Ennui was therefore heavily dependent on social rank: it was an ailment of the rich who let themselves be idle and bored, who had too much time on their hands. Clearly, when Pichromacus had to live frugally, albeit not living in utter poverty, he was happy and felt strong, and when he gained an enormous fortune he lost everything important. Too much wealth was a danger, but this only meant that those with fortunes had to employ themselves in suitable ways, not that their wealth in itself would destroy them.

The vast majority of sources across genres seem to suggest that ennui was an ailment only of the upper levels of society. The Earl of Bute is the only source I found that suggests a less class-oriented definition of the ailment:

short as our existence is, how many find the day too long, how many tedious hours are past in absolute idleness, where even thought is banished: nor does this prevail in solitude only, nor is it peculiar to any age, rank or sex; we meet with it in the greatest cities, as well as in the desert ... (Stuart 1785?, 1)

Interestingly, there is evidence to suggest that a laborer could *not* suffer from it, as they simply did not have time for that kind of existential problem: René Girardin's *An essay on landscape* described the countryside:

Farther on, in another inclosure, the husbandman drives his plough; whilst he sings, the youngest of his children play around him, and the eldest, who are able to work, hoe up the weeds in the fields that are already sown. – Labour prevents the disorder of the passions in youth; it gives health and strength, and prolongs the days of old age: and at night one may at least say, that these good people have escaped that ennui which is but too often the lot and the torment of the rich and great. (1783, 62)

While sympathizing with the hard toil of the country peasant, Girardin points out the advantage that he is after all saved from the dangers from which the rich and great suffer. This is seconded by Lord Monboddo:

But there is another thing as necessary as money for the enjoyment of leisure; and that is to know how to employ it. If he does not know that, he falls into a sore disease, which the French call ennui, and which, as it is a lasting and lingering disease, makes a man, I believe, more miserable than perhaps any other; for it is a disease of our mind or better part. It is the source of almost every vice and folly; for a man, who does not know what else to do, will do any thing rather than do nothing; and I maintain, that the richest man, who is haunted by this foul fiend, as it may be called, is a much more unhappy man than the day labourer who earns his daily bread by the sweat of his brow, and who, therefore, only submits to the sentence pronounced upon our first parents after their fall, and which, if it be understood, as I think it ought to be, of the labour of the mind as well as of the body, we must all submit to, or be miserable if we do not. And, accordingly, those, who can find nothing to do, endeavour to fly from themselves; and many of them fly from their country, and go abroad, for no other reason. (Burnett 1779, 92)

Ennui was the plague not only of the aristocracy but of the elite in general; it was considered to be 'a thing not unusual in the brightest circles' (Anonymous 1769, I, 150; see also Goodstein 2005, 110).

7. *Conclusions*

The Earl of Bute interpreted ennui in very temporal terms: for him, ennui haunted those 'whose hours hang heavy on their hands' (Stuart 1785?, 1). He believed ennui to be born in idleness and empty hours, and it is very interesting that for him ennui did not discriminate between male and female or, as we saw above, between ranks. A look at many genres and a multitude of

sources has shown that in eighteenth-century English usage, ennui was a fluid concept which was interpreted and used in various ways. This is a remarkable finding. Perhaps because the English language did not have a term similar to *Langeweile*,¹⁹ the term 'ennui' bent to the use of those who wanted to express the temporality of their suffering, the moments of boredom. These were due to repetition and sameness, which then created frustration and plain dullness. Country life showed that dullness could lead to ennui both in company, in the endless repetitive rounds of social life and, of course, if one was left without company. The literature studied here very strongly suggests that in the eighteenth-century ennui was a synonym for boredom, both simple and existential boredom, with the emphasis on the latter.²⁰

The vast majority of the texts mentioning ennui did not gender ennui strongly; it was generally understood as an ailment of the elite of either sex, generated by their way of life, if they were not careful. Too much time on one's hands led to ennui, and could in the worst cases lead to complete destruction. Importantly, English ennui was not only existential, which has less to do with temporality, as it included much of what we would call boredom: a terrible weariness, lassitude, frustration even. In this meaning it comes up in humorous contexts too, to make fun of the nervous, restless elite. In this sense it was very temporal. This is why Kuhn's definition of ennui as 'independent of any external circumstances' (1976, 12) rings very foreign to eighteenth-century uses of the term. As we saw, it was feared that the existential crisis of ennui would lead to suicide. That being the case, we can agree with Kuhn that

we can tentatively define ennui as the state of emptiness that the soul feels when it is deprived of interest in action, life, and the world (be it this world or another), a condition that is the immediate consequence of the encounter with nothingness, and has as an immediate effect a disaffection with reality. (13)

But it was more than that: it was an immediate reaction to time dragging.

The eighteenth-century history of ennui is multifaceted, and shows that the term was used then in many different ways and with a number of meanings. People in the eighteenth century were keen to make the term their own, even at the risk of suggesting foreign ways and inclinations. They were extremely sensitive to time and its passing, and to the tedious moments when it did not pass quickly enough and one was desperate to find ways of killing time. They also recognized that if they failed in that, time could kill.

¹⁹ Or Finnish, which is rather inventive in its expressions for 'the time becoming long', with for example 'aikatulepitkäksi' or 'pitkästyä'.

²⁰ Contemporary correspondence confirms this finding. I am indebted for this observation to Henna Karppinen-Kummunmäki, who kindly looked at her collection of eighteenth-century correspondences and diaries for 'ennui'.

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