“Pissing on Walls: Beau Brummell, or Romantic Psychosis Writ Large”

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Abstract:

This essay argues that Beau Brummell’s reign as Regency dandy illustrates the pathological arc of a psychotic in the making. His celebrated eccentricities performatively enact the larger cultural psychosis of a period without a king and therefore without a clear relation to the symbolic function of the paternal metaphor and “the Law.” Brummell’s signature acts of defying the prohibitive Law, whether this is the law of social hierarchy or the laws of polite behavior, perform the defacement of the walls and block that which the patriarchal Symbolic erects around the subject. Because the psychotic has a fractured relation to language through the foreclosure of the Symbolic, walls can be recoded, repurposed, or ignored. Brummell used walls to constrain his unstable subject status by way of the tightly corseted figure he cultivated, in this manner imitating the “normal” neurotic subject but without heeding normal social constraints. Once psychosis became the revealed temper of his narrative arc, he substituted cell walls for sartorial ones, effectively busting out of bodily constraints that could no longer contain his self-authored myth.

Psychosis as an illness, like schizophrenia, causes pain, terror, disruption, isolation. But used in the adjectival sense to describe a society at its limits, the terms *psychosis*, *psychotic*, or *schizoid* can yield thoughtful insights into cultural phenomena. It is in this sense that I will pursue the question of Romantic psychosis as embodied in the story of Beau Brummell’s ascendency and exile. If Deleuze and Guattari appear to spectacularize psychosis as the unveiled expression of capitalism in its essential character, Lacan brings us back to the psychic mechanisms that permit, enable, and structure psychotic cultural events. Indeed, Lacan’s presentation of psychosis makes it appear to be *the* representative psychic state of twentieth-century society through his discussion of the ego’s normal functioning as hallucinative, much in the same way as Freud presented neurosis as representatively Victorian.

Psychosis understood in this sense, as I will undertake to trace its psychic and social lineaments in my telling of Beau Brummell’s Regency embodiment, reveals a great deal about Romantic-era culture that might allow us to redirect our gaze away from Jane Austen’s saner presentation of that period and toward its zanier, and therefore more revelatory, episodes. These episodes hold startling resemblance to the screwier, nearly incomprehensible, and psychotic episodes of today’s world of media grabs, self-authorizing gestures, and power snatches, which can be viewed as echoing Brummell’s capacity to center social attention on his visual image. Brummell’s rise to power and meteoric fall represent an instability that, accompanied by a disintegration of personality and language, feels uncomfortably familiar in terms of today’s political stage. If there are no lessons here for us to learn, there are at least warning signs we might do well to register.

An intimate of the Prince Regent and Mrs. Fitzherbert, George Bryan Brummell seemed to purposely escalate the friction he began experiencing in Carlton House toward the end of his intimacy with the Prince, which appeared in tandem with the Regent’s abandonment of his Whig friends. Various anecdotes were floated to account for the final disintegration in 1811 of a friendship between Brummell and the heir to the throne that had begun in 1794 when Brummell was able to purchase a lowly commission in the Prince’s Tenth Royal Hussars. Living always beyond his means was fundamental to Brummell’s self-portrayal, much like Donald Trump’s career in real estate. He was virtually afloat, living on wit and words, a parodic figuration of the nobility with whom he associated. Finally, words were his undoing: whether it was, according to anecdotes, because he said to Colonel McMahon of the Regent, “I made him what he is, and I can unmake him,” or because he asked Lord Alvanley “who’s your fat friend?” when the Regent didn’t acknowledge him, is irrelevant; however it happened, the cut was made verbally, figuratively, and above all, it provoked the Regent’s most symbolic counterstroke. This signifier itself is the cut on the presymbolic Real and remains the cutting tool that bars or eclipses the subject: it is the signifier that the Other cannot give but that cuts in all directions, especially across the ego-defenses of the Imaginary—in other words, the signifier “phallus.”

Thus, both the Prince, on assuming his royal identity as Regent, and Brummell together experienced a crisis, one in which social mask and subjective identity come into conflict. The Regent’s political and personal loyalties took a 180-degree turn on the assumption of symbolic power while Brummell’s carefully constructed social mask slipped, revealing disturbance in the disparity between appearance and reality, between the pretense of having the phallus instead of the Prince (or access to it) and the reality of not having it. As for any psychotic awaiting a triggering event for the psychopathology to emerge, this was a matter of hystericized self-rupture that would eventuate in a catastrophic undoing of Brummell’s fabulated person.

However it transpired, Beau Brummell, dandy extraordinaire, came to a paradoxical end: was he indeed ill or simply invested in living out a self-mockery? Brummell’s last years after his meteoritic fall from grace with the Prince Regent and then from London society at large—a fall exacerbated by the concurrent evaporation of his carefully amassed cultural capital, plus a gambling debt of thousands of pounds—was spent in exile on the Continent to avoid debtor’s prison.[[1]](#endnote-1) After ten years, he gained a small and short-lived appointment at the British consulate at Caen, but when that evaporated, he was forced into the Calais debtor’s prison and eventually died of syphilis at age 61. Syphilitic destruction of the brain is a slow process, and its symptoms closely resemble those of other mental disturbances. In Brummell’s case, “unkempt” might best describe his physical appearance during his decline, his dress a paradigmatic self-mockery; but in the asylum where he died, he was also said to live in a feces-bespattered room (revealing the fictitiousness of his self-authoring personal hygiene during his ascendency) and behave generally in ways that signaled a loss of self-consciousness and a deep disturbance in the symbolic register.

I am interested in how such a disturbance opens up the constrictions of dandified dress and a deeply self-conscious, performative life practice to what lies beyond such tight bodily delimiting. If Brummell at his height would not deign to eat common vegetables—hating cabbage in particular (too gaseous?), though claiming “yes, yes . . . I once eat a pea”—at his darkest moments that tight bodily control became its opposite.[[2]](#endnote-2) Finally, the body is allowed to speak, and it speaks of its immersion in life processes as if in protest against the purity regime it had so long endured. Busting out, as it were, the body turns inside out, beyond the corseted confines of elegant profile. The cut of scathing wit drawing in return the most devastating cut of all, the publicly-enacted castration that came with the absolute finality of the Prince Regent’s rejection of Brummell, provides the reverse of a Lacanian *point de capiton*: an *un*quilting point, an *unbuttoning*, that instead of securing ego integration by the lodging of a signifier onto a signified initiates psychological disintegration. What had been mere phallic play is suddenly, and uncannily, the thing itself, and Brummell didn’t have it. Brummell’s break with reality, in my reading, traces back to this point when the Symbolic ruptures; slipping from his self-appointed place in the symbolic network, he faces the writing on the wall as social death.

The hallucinatory aspects of the high point of Brummell’s career and his subsequent lowest point reflect an aspect of Lacan’s theory of psychosis. Because Brummell’s most potent performances were through his witticisms, the verbal hallucinations that characterize psychosis are relevant here—their most important aspect being that they have structure at the level of signifiers. Moreover, “what characterizes the hallucinatory satisfaction of desire is that it’s formed in the domain of signifiers and that, as such, it implies a locus of the Other” (Lacan, *Seminar V* 204–5). The psychotic, as if fascinated by the foreclosed Symbolic, can’t stop fixing on signifiers that nevertheless remain without signification. In Brummell’s case, signifiers become mere playthings, witticisms, and the place of the Other is unstable, unfixed. The cause for this coming unstuck, this unquilting, is that “the Name-of-the-Father [is unable] to respond from its place, which is where it is incapable of responding from because it has never come to that place” (*Seminar V* 188). Instead, the structure of the mother’s “not” appears in its place; the phallus or paternal metaphor has never arrived. What could the Prince Regent have that Brummell did not have more of?—that seems to have been the question. Whether the cutting remark or the thin, brittle dandy’s cane, Brummell wielded phallic playthings as if he didn’t know their force or their function.

I want to consider here Beau Brummell’s psychotic disintegration as emblematic of Romantic radical openness, hallucinogenesis,[[3]](#endnote-3) and the materiality of language. The phallic signifier seems to have come unstuck for those living through the events and aftereffects of the French Revolution when, in Paris, phallic heads and paternal metaphors really did come unstuck. I am also interested in the interstice between psychosis and solipsism run amok: radical solipsism transitions into “a sense of senselessness” as Shelley depicts it in both *Alastor* and *Laon and Cythna,* an alienation effect where the Imaginary can no longer hold the Real at bay. At the height of his politico-social influence as the arbiter of taste, Brummell was already self-estranged. His success depended on an economy of borrowing time and credit out of nowhere, resources self-created as much as particles emerge from empty space by borrowing energy and cashing it in before the system notices and reacts to the debts incurred.[[4]](#endnote-4) His career, built on daily acts of staged identity using borrowed energy and credit, stayed afloat for some years after the Prince Regent’s public rejection but finally the system noticed. With this crash, Brummell began his descent into an increasingly variegated and delimited psychotic region that seemingly mirrored the largess and splendor of his earlier success. The spectacular rise and fall of notable people was a constant of the period, as Emma Hamilton’s career illustrates; it was also characteristic of a period in which the instability of geopolitical alliances meant that nothing was proof against incipient or looming disaster. Brummell’s extraordinary success depended on grand gestures that had the effect of pissing on walls, defacing them, and thus disfiguring the barriers that sustained rank as well as hierarchically inscribed rules of politeness. Rule-smashers always deface what sustains civil life in order to impose their own rules and their own status-making machinery. (Trump’s behavior has long exemplified this truth.)

Brummell’s loss of control over his status-making behaviors, concomitant with the wall the Regent raised against Brummell, resulted in diminished gestures that can be read as a staging of Romantic irony to an inversely small audience or as a nod toward openness that moves into pure art as the thing itself: pissing on walls as materially revelatory, as the jouissance of writing. This too can be psychotic: in psychosis, the father does not intervene as law, and instead “there is the raw intervention of the message ‘not’ upon the mother’s message to the child,” which “insofar as it is completely raw, is also the source of the code that lies beyond the mother” (*Seminar V* 188). Therefore, the schizoid’s relation to language is flattened, two-dimensional, just writing in effect. But writing that mystifies, that contains a new code. According to Lacan, the psychotic’s verbal hallucinations do indeed provide a new code that substitutes for the one beyond the mother: “The messages that he receives in the fundamental language, which are composed of words which . . . are always neologisms in their own way, consist in teaching the subject what they [the words] are in a new code, one that literally repeats a new world to him, a signifying universe” (188).

This new world is the biblical writing on the wall, as at Belshazzar's feast in chapter five of the book of Daniel.[[5]](#endnote-5) Yet figured as a wall (prison walls, asylum walls, or the figurative wall erected by the Prince Regent against Brummell), this new code can transliterate into something that can be pissed on literally. A wall to be disgraced becomes a wall *of* disgrace, which becomes Brummell’s expressive domain. Rather than the body being so tightly confined that the neck cannot bend and sitting is difficult without splitting one’s fine leather breeches, the body now becomes liberated into discourse, its viscera and excretions the very stuff of expression and self-representations. The grace of body and visage become disgrace and defacement. As Lacan notes, in psychosis where verbal hallucinations have become typical, the “invasion of the world of objects by the image of the body” is what the delusions manifest (*Seminar V* 188). The expression must seem meaningful to productively continue, but as a semantic field, bodily products are unstable signifiers. One wants an audience to endow the expression with associative, figural, or performative coding. But in bodily signifiers, meaninglessness converges with the possibility for nonverbal expression, like dandy couture and stylized body language. Though these are not without their message, they must be received by the other to be authorized; when they are not (when the Name-of-the-Father does not give the law, when it does not sit in its place), the unsymbolized “not” stands in but is unable to authorize. Without authority then, this allows Brummell free range, for he is beyond rather than before the law, much like the Prince himself who is legitimately so as the nominal lawgiver. Brummell’s writing at the end of his life, his delusional messages, take the structure of the psychotic’s stutterings: the interrupted messages are ones that “present themselves as pure messages, as orders, or as interrupted orders,” that are message and code dissociated from each other (188). This is the nonresolution of the father’s discourse, which should ratify message and code, turning them into coherent discourse; but for Brummell, it is as ephemeral and meaningless as his self-expressiveness in tight form was at the height of his insubstantial and airy career, though not without message. The difference is that in the aftermath of a psychotic break, using the sinthome or symptom, which should hold everything together, to essentially cheat the Symbolic is jouissance for an audience of one.

My sense of the dandy, whether strutting metropolitan streets then or today, is that this is a performance artist, a trickster, but one who is caught in the role due to a belief in both its elevatory power and its supererogatory requirements. It requires both narcissism and not a little madness to be the exemplary dandy, the sine qua non as “the essential thing” for a social elite to contain. The dandy is a transcendent factor when viewed from this angle, embodying ascension over the body, over the social, over even the smallest lapse. Taking every moment as a staging and every space as a performative one, the dandy’s discriminating and discriminatory eye never rests. Turned ever on the self, the dandy’s eye is equally brutal to others; if discernment creates categories of the acceptable and unacceptable, its judgments also create insurmountable distances between the subject of scrutiny and who or whatever else occupies the surrounding space.[[6]](#endnote-6) These others become mere reflections of the self, or inconsequential noise and background data, in the constrictive theatre of such a performative becoming. As such, the dandy is the transgressive supplement in a hierarchical and discriminatory system that both requires and produces it. Brummell is both phallic power and its empty shell, both manliness and its emasculated formality, a trump card in the social register. A system that faces change can forestall it by playing one faction off against the other—Brummell against other social elites—to create a tension and envy that sustains the harmony of the system.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Brummell, a self-constituted man of his time, fascinates because his story is timely. Mark Salber Phillips’s 2015 study *On Historical Distance* provides a conceptual mapping for the various ways we feel and treat historical distance, and I extend his thinking on this disciplinary imperative to include the ways in which we *do not* feel historical distance. Beau Brummell provokes the collapse of historical time, or perhaps it is a Mobius strip he makes apparent where several spots or nodes provide contiguities between his experiential moment and ours. I am not suggesting a naive assertion of equality between late-eighteenth and early twenty-first-century historical realities but rather that what Brummell produces, specifically its efficacy, is recognizable today in the effects of individuals who exert similar pressures and discriminations on our own society and also that Brummell’s pathological behavior resembles the psychopathologies of these contemporary individuals whose constant presence in the historical compressions and contiguous points orient my thinking here.

One more note on such historical and hystericized figures: hystericized in the self-dandification, as psychic tension registers itself symptomatically on the body. I am not using the psychoanalytic definition of hysteria here in which the typically female subject displaces her desire onto another with whom she identifies and uses her self-alienation to push the envelope of knowledge, aggressively seeking to find the gaps in the Other’s knowledge. Brummell has no wish to know; he is hysterical in the sense of the dandy’s self-performance as teetering on the boundary between masculine and feminine, between agent and object, between gazer and object of the gaze. Despite his supposed rivalry with the Prince for women of their circle, it seems to me that Brummell evinces a playful sexuality that can go either way (I am phallically male; I am hysterically female), and in its play he displays an absolute security in his identity—unlike the phallically-construed man and woman who are always aware of their lack and must mask it with a performance of masculinity and femininity. I am thinking specifically of individuals contemporary to us who, unlike Brummell, are all clearly insecure about their masculinity but entertain the self-destructiveness of excessive discrimination of Brummell; in this they are dandyesque. One attribute stands out for both of these historical and contemporary dandy figures: they all strut, and they view their capacity to piss on the world as their most important attribution. Because they identify this world as the space of their theatrical behavior, it exists as so many walls—so many surfaces to deface, to write on with the detritus of the self; so many nondiscriminatory planes whose adequacy or inadequacy the dandy takes upon himself to judge. His judgment is fatal but also whimsical; whimsy, it turns out, can be the most cutting edge, a veritable surgical knife wielded by one who self-identifies as superior to any of the medical or intellectual elite, for whom therefore reason is unreasonable to suppose.

These several descriptive lines between the historical and contemporary dandy figures converge in a twentieth-century figure of psychoanalytic note, Judge Daniel Schreber. I take the pathologies of Brummell and certain contemporary dandy figures to be incipient psychoses, though this is a reading and (most emphatically) not a diagnosis. Through Schreber’s account of his psychotic breakdown, I find significant contiguities or touching points with Brummell’s fall from power, and hovering behind both Brummell and Schreber are the contemporary presences (Trump is exemplary, but there are others) that both inform and haunt my cultural analysis. Haunting is important since so much of psychotic experience occurs through hallucination. Because in psychosis the Imaginary must also do the work of the Symbolic, what Lacan considers to be the ego’s normative hallucinations, those that guide our interpretations of reality, fall into crisis: things talk, words are written in the sky, other people become irrelevant or transform malevolently. Moreover, because the ego’s normative hallucinating is founded on the mirror stage, we might map Brummell’s self-transformation into the epitome of dandyism as an altered relation with the mirror stage: he is the narcissist whose self-mirroring has psychotic tendencies. Lacan says of the mirror stage and the gaze that we are eternally transfixed by the image as a necessary narcissism, in which the libido can become attached to the ego in literal self-love. Indeed, Brummell is so transfixed he seems to find the world reflecting his image wherever he looks, so potent is his love. But his narcissism is more than neurotic; it loosely holds together a psychotic break about to happen.

For Judge Schreber, narcissism did not function this way; rather, Lacan notes “what was repugnant to the said President’s narcissism was the adoption of a feminine position towards his father, which involved castration. Here is someone who is supposed to be better off obtaining satisfaction in a relation founded on a delusion of grandeur, since castration can no longer affect him once his partner has become God”[[8]](#endnote-8) (*Seminar III* 89). But, Lacan argues, “something has profoundly modified the object” or the other to which Schreber’s libido is now attached (90). The usual aggressive aspect of libidinal attachment to an other is here made impossible when it is the ultimate big Other, God. The ego cannot control this relationship, which has gone beyond representational limits. Lacan’s analysis drives inexorably throughSeminar IIIto reach the conclusion, never stated in so many words, that Schreber’s relationship to God, which famously is as a handmaiden to the Divinity as well as a bearer of His future progeny, is the result of anal rape. As a handmaiden, Schreber avoids the difficult question of his homosexuality, but God inseminates him in that manner. The analogy I am drawing between Brummell’s and Schreber’s cases forces the question: has Brummell been fucked by the Regent, figuratively speaking? Inefficacious as prince, the Regent holds the rod of power after all. His cutting of Brummell is a cut to the head, a designification of Brummell’s sartorial phallus. For Schreber, God’s anal fuck renders the male body indeterminate, both male *and* female. “Judge” is the paternal role that Schreber feels ill-equipped for, while the dandy’s costume is a phallic rendering of male symbolic power at the same time that it depicts the male body as immobilized, so tightly contained that sitting is difficult, musculature discouraged, and movement in general constrained. Rendered passive by the corseting uniform, the dandy parodies the real psychotic’s passivity enforced by God. Confinement becomes the main descriptor of the dandy’s and the psychotic’s physical space, the feminized space of nonmovement. What Brummell was playing at, Schreber experienced psychotically but also in reality, insofar as the Real and Imaginary became confused and blurred for him. Brummell’s own play with sexuality, space, and an either/or relation to the phallus—phallic having (as the masculine position)/phallic being (as the feminine one)—after his rupturing castration by the Regent soon becomes his reality as well.

In psychosis, both the Real and the real become unglued and begin to interleave with internal discourse. It is hard to tell where things stop and start, and nothing can be anticipated; such unfathomability is the very opposite of Brummell’s tightly disciplined regime, but it is very consonant with his whimsy. In a whimsical universe, trauma and pleasure can recycle beyond signification; words begin to change form and function, becoming something altogether other. So too, in psychosis, where the Symbolic cannot organize signification, words are untethered from meaning-making signifying chains and instead appear, as they did for President Schreber, as streams of nonsense or as divine but incomprehensible commands. Charles Shepherdson argues that the signal move we must make is to “think *through* the ‘linguistic turn’—not to react against the formative power of representation, but rather to think its *limits*” (1).[[9]](#endnote-9) Schreber’s breakdown signals the limits of representation in a way that describes the arc of language—its role in the structuring of the self, its flight at the transcendent moment, its inefficacy for the disintegrating ego, and finally its memorializing function in creating a narrative to account for this sequence of events. Such narratives attempt to rationalize and thus obscure representational limits, which is why literary analysis alone cannot frame and think through these limits. Brummell’s writing on the wall must be taken into account as well.

Because Brummell’s representations are largely visual and performative, archived through the descriptive language of others such as William Hazlitt but not accounted for in language by Brummell himself, Schreber’s autobiographical account of his psychotic breakdown provides one speculative map through Brummell’s own, though rather different, breakdown. Nonetheless, it seems to me that Brummell’s case provides an exemplary representation of the larger cultural “psychosis” at play during the period of the king’s madness, the Regent’s whimsical behavior, and the unraveling of words and meanings that—not unlike our recent politico-cultural situation—threatened cultural stability and continuity. It is the limits of this representation, of Brummell’s breakdown, that I want to push against and think through. Lacanian thought provides an itinerary through this terrain that exposes the stages of language’s psychotic arc and helps make sense of how reality constitutes itself differently depending on where a society is in its development from normative neurosis to a full-blown psychosis—which is how I view the Reign of Terror—in other words, those historical traumas whose legacies reshape subsequent realities such as the Holocaust, genocides against other nations, and similar crimes against humanity. Those legacies, the writing on walls, the shit that happens, reclaim the Symbolic as the register of order itself. In this way cultural psychosis is reabsorbed into the cultural Symbolic, patriarchally reinstalled as normal deviations within the mean of history. Lacan notes that “remembering necessarily takes place in the symbolic structure,” remembering being crucial to restorative justice, whereas in psychosis “an enormous meaning” emerges into reality, but it is one that is incomprehensible because “it cannot be tied to anything, since it has never entered into the system of symbolization—but under certain conditions it can threaten the entire edifice” (*Seminar III* 104, 85). The task for the posterities of historical trauma is to read the writing on the walls and to restore the edifice differently so that it cannot be threatened again by “the nonsymbolized reappear[ing] in the real” (86). The task for those of us who are reading congruencies between the Romantic Period—particularly the Regency—and today’s political traumas is to attend to this very wall-writing and its representations *in order* to attend to the work of a restoration grounded in first principles and in careful attention to the otherness that is without exception all of us.

With that warning in mind, I want to turn to the more positive rendering of psychosis in Deleuze and Guattari’s treatment. Notwithstanding the criticism of their conception of psychosis as too liberationist, too unrealizable in a world of human manufacture, their anti-Oedipus offers a way to unpack Brummell’s story productively, furthering my argument concerning his as a test case for today’s psychotic state.

If Beau Brummell’s figurative pissing on walls, transfigured in his decline literally as the fluid expression of his discontent, can tell us anything, it is that the Oedipal structures that Freud and Lacan find so consistent throughout human experience are there to be resisted, parodied, mocked, and defiled *precisely* to reveal them and at the same time reinforce them. Psychoanalytic theory tells us no less than this: Oedipal structuration both enables our self-definitions and describes our essential lack or incompletion, our unmeetable need to be satisfied. Oedipus is the myth in which we understand our compulsory dimorphism, inescapable familial dysfunction, masculine aggression, feminine complicity, and patriarchy itself.[[10]](#endnote-10) This is never so clear as in a monarchy headed by a woman or, as for George III and the Regent in his future role as George IV, a weak king. Lacan situates the phallus as the primary locus of our dysfunction, even as it allows us to speak as subjects. Nevertheless, because the phallus is in so many ways synonymous with language itself—our subjectivity as structured and experienced through language, our sheer expressive capacity, even to an extent our creative capacity—it enables us because it inducts us into the Symbolic. The psychotic or schizo is positioned to do the end run around the phallus rather than playing it straight precisely because the Symbolic is closed off and unavailable in schizophrenia. The paternal function or metaphor fails, and the subject is never alienated from him- or herself in the way that language use both structures and depends upon. Instead, language for the psychotic is flat, becoming a code to which one has partial clues but no mastery or a game at which winning and losing are mere gambits and inconsequential. The first example describes Judge Schreber’s schizoid episodes, whereas the second describes Brummell’s.

I draw some of my insight into Brummell’s situation from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus: Schizophrenia and Capitalism* because of the authors’ heavy emphasis on the role of schizophrenia in unveiling Oedipal structures as retrofits. They argue that these are structures Freud and Lacan sutured onto capitalist society in order to explain societal/familial roles in subjective identity and experience. Not only is psychosis/schizophrenia the mind-body state that sees Oedipus as fictional, thereby unseating the psychoanalytic reinforcement of patriarchal power as essential and inescapable, but capitalism itself is a schizophrenic economy at its limits. Who better to realize its anti-Oedipal energies than the schizo? Redrawing the lines of this argument, I ask, who better than Brummell to unveil the schizoid energies of the Regency with its runaway lust for material goods and experiences that we need not categorize as sheer consumerism. In fact, for the bon ton as Brummell embodied it, materialism was not to be accumulated, for dispersal was as important as acquisition. Whereas in the earlier part of the Romantic period gambling was an aristocrat’s game, for Regency high society gambling became the exemplary metonymic for capitalism’s random effects: incomes and outflows mediated by the game. For Deleuze and Guattari, the flows are the circulation of energies that Oedipus attempts to harness and disrupt. But flows are essential to the body, whether the human body-machine or the social body, the “body without organs.”

These flows are what transform body-machines into desiring-machines. The baby doesn’t experience itself as having a body (which only happens once one views “wholeness” in a mirror); instead, the infant has a mouth-breast-machine and a mouth without the mother’s breast that is a desiring-machine wanting what it lacks. Body-machines are always only partial objects (at this moment, I consist of a foot that hurts and typing hands; I am a foot-shoe-machine and finger-keyboard-machine). Within the context of body-machines, the gaze, that most Lacanian of concepts, is inconsequential. What I see—the words unfolding, the world as constituted by my surroundings—is not the gaze (for Lacan, it is the projections of my hallucinating ego), but nor am I constituting myself by it. The gaze, following *Anti-Oedipus* is a psychoanalytic myth overly valorized by film theory (or even misunderstood, as Joan Copjec argues). These partial objects to which I am attached, then detached in my coupling and uncoupling of body-thing-machines, are productions of the Real or the unconscious, and they return in my dreams in various ways. I am therefore the product of my machinations alone, my desiring flows, attachments, disjunctions, conjunctions, and blockages. Blockages are provided by the socius, the social field with its players constrained by hierarchies and filiations, but not by Oedipus unless I believe in him. Blockages keep our desires in check and ensure that we continue to feel inadequate, lacking, and in search of that which will complete us: the Lacanian “barred Other,” that which is prohibited under castration as the Oedipalized mother herself.[[11]](#endnote-11) But Deleuze and Guattari argue that when schizophrenized, both the sociohistorical and the individual unconscious can be seen to belong to desiring-machines, not to the mythical and nonexistent Oedipus.

Brummell excelled in producing himself as an elaborate corpus of connected body-machines, one that mimed a standing, walking phallus whose power is parodied and revealed as no-power through his slender cane, the ineffectual walking stick that supports and, although sword-like, wounds no one. His body, then, was a giant desiring-machine that mocked and unveiled the glaring lack in Oedipus’s power of the gaze. “Gaze on me,” his body demanded, “desire me; you can’t have me—I’m not the mother!! I’m not even the father, look at my tiny stick!” Brummell was no revolutionary; his status as an idiosyncrat makes him exemplary of the Regency rather than its resistor, parodist, or delinquent son as was Byron. Brummell’s parodic self-as-art-object only reinforces the Regency’s claims on a power that needed to be reinstalled in the monarchy. His infamous cutting remark to the Regent that invited the Regent’s “off with his head” castration thereby restored to the Prince his sovereign power. No longer Brummell’s second, the Prince comes into his own as the phallic father whose castrating function restores order to a socius endangered by desiring-machines run amuck. After the Prince’s dismissive gesture, no one desired Brummell; his flows were effectively, catastrophically blocked.

We might not know, despite Brummell’s superficiality, that he was no revolutionary, since he so effectively shepherded group fantasy. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, group fantasy is revolutionary whereas individual fantasy is merely Oedipalization and castration. But the group fantasy involving Brummell was a dalliance in the vein of the Parisian aristocracy’s guillotining parties at which a black humor reigned, women famously wearing red ribbons around their necks in anticipation of their beheading. Brummell’s admirers, like these self-mocking Parisians, belonged to the gambling crowd. They were men and women who squandered fortunes just as they squandered clothes and food at their extravagant feasts in rituals of schizophrenic enactment that ironically restored equilibrium to the socius (Deleuze and Guattari 150). But neither individual nor group fantasy can be revolutionary unless the group fantasy is sufficiently motivated to disrupt the socius by either the individual (Trump) or group hallucination (Trump’s supporters). Even in that case, as for the French revolutionists, disruption inevitably leads to the restoration of the socius in its normative configuration. What is revolutionary is desire, for desire is anti-Oedipal. Freud says no less; desire wants what it wants, though as Lacan explains, it is produced in and through language, whose messages can never actually articulate the prohibited desire for the m(Other). But normatively, desiring production—as in body-machines that are desiring-machines—is social production. These two productivities, desiring production and social production, have different regimes and so contest each other: one requires flows, the other actively blocks flows. But they work together as antagonistic antipodes that make a systemic whole. At the height of his career, Brummell facilitated flows, encouraging desiring production to run rampant. Few blocks were put on his construction of an alternate body without organs, his walking phallus, a body on which group desire was inscribed. As his dry witticisms demonstrate, what Brummell most epitomized was a kind of cultural complaint; a signifying chain in which the headless state is a symptom of a futureless future (much like Trump’s disastrous claims against tomorrow with his denial of climate change, COVID-19, journalistic professionalism, and even of words as meaningful). Complaint, Aaron Schuster claims, is “the very essence of desire” which “finds fault with whatever is in order to persist as desire.”[[12]](#endnote-12) With Brummell, desire (and complaint) got out of hand; Romantic psychosis reveals itself in the group fantasy that is uninhibited by the Symbolic, resistantly desiring and unwilling to be reined in by Oedipus. This kind of revolution is mere rebellion; it does not lead to change but neither does it lead to redemption and reabsorption by the Law and the reign of the Name-of-the-Father. Non-reformist, it instead causes chaotic and random events, a game of chance by which society gambles with its future. The same could be said of our own capacity to view chaos and random whimsy as a new version of probability theory; so too do we gamble with our future.

At his height, Brummell described perfectly a capitalist society at its limits. Deleuze and Guattari make the problem clear: “Neurotic territoriality of Oedipus, perverse territoriality of the artifice [artwork], psychotic territoriality of the body without organs” (136). Developing this thought further, they write,

The relationships of neurosis, psychosis, and also perversion depend on the situation of each one with regard to the process, and on the manner in which each one represents a mode of interruption of the process, a residual bit of ground to which one still clings so as not to be carried off by the deterritorialized flows of desire. . . . sometimes the process is caught in the trap and made to turn about within the triangle, sometimes it takes itself as an end-in-itself. . . . Each of these forms has schizophrenia as a foundation; schizophrenia as a process is the only universal. (136)

I want to draw attention to what happens when the process of flows and blocks is interrupted: the process can take “itself as an end-in-itself” or it can get “caught in the trap and made to turn about within the triangle.” Certainly, Brummell’s perverse body art was always in danger of being carried off by the flows of desire; that in itself is a strong rationale for his excessively straightening costume that barely allowed movement and his express rejection of desire, particular of the alimentary kind of which the Regent was so fond. But when it took itself as an end-in-itself—when both the flows of desire that his body art suggestively emitted and the straightening costume become a closed circuit—then his desire turned inward, thus fending off, quite perversely, the socius. His body without organs becomes the entire world for him; free of familial repression, desiring production is all the social production he finds necessary. This is Brummell at his most self-infatuated height. But entrapment reverses this situation; once caught in the trap of Oedipus (daddy-mommy-me), the process is “made to turn about within the triangle”—not the Oedipal one, but the neurosis-perversion-psychosis one. One turn of the dial, perversion into psychosis, artist into schizo, and back to neurotic. Neurosis makes one subject all over again to Oedipal castration and the “I,” as a walking incompletion, an I-lack. This was Brummell’s fate, to be Oedipalized all over again.

I want to suggest that it drove him over the wall in a move characteristic of the Romantic socius generally, due to its psychotic condition of the missing phallus (a mad king and a Regent incapacitated by Parliament), the nonsignifying Symbolic, and surplus jouissance (rampant desire played out in bizarre feasts and extravaganzas). Each of the ways the process can be interrupted “has schizophrenia as a foundation; *schizophrenia as a process is the only universal.* Schizophrenia is at once the wall, the breaking through this wall, and the failures of this breakthrough” (Deleuze and Guattari 136; emphasis added). It is the pissing on walls that is Brummell’s metaphorical signature. His acting out at once describes the wall, suggests its defacing and breaking, and anticipates his own failure to be other than contained by it. Just a joke after all, this little jest.

The jest is, of course, a mocking of what the master (both George the III and the Regent) knows and can say (the one mad, the other merely playing at royalty). Even the child, Lacan says, knows that the master or father “is he who knows nothing about truth” (*Seminar XVII* 130). And this is because desire, expressed as jouissance, “separates the master signifier . . . from knowledge qua truth.” With knowledge separated from truth, it is hard to know what the truth is and harder to know what desire will lead to. Things were complicated by the Regent’s serious version of Brummell’s mockery; his dandified dress, and imitation of Brummell’s performative behavior. Where Brummell only pretended to be challenging the Regent’s sociohegemonic power, the Regent certainly desired his own father’s death: George III was old and mad, and his heir was growing older while playacting childishly, the throne continuing to elude him. The death of the father, or rather the desire for it, brings jouissance—the very jouissance that is prohibited as desire for the (m)Other. In the Regent’s case, the prohibited mother—Mrs. Fitzherbert—is already his, albeit clandestinely. The jouissance he desires upon the father’s death might more properly be Mother England herself (as Lacan notes, “To be sure, it’s through murdering the father that Oedipus finds free access to Jocasta, and that this is granted to him, to popular acclaim” [*Seminar XVII* 117]). The Regent looks forward to his ascension to popular acclaim; importantly, he will insist that his wife Caroline be prohibited from the ceremony. The prohibition, then, was not against desiring the m(Other) but the woman herself as impossible.

But there is more to the death of the father than either Brummell’s jesting or the Regent’s real desire. Killing the father, however metaphorically, occurs because the subject “absolutely want[s] to know the truth. . . . It is not possible seriously to examine the Freudian reference without bringing the dimension of truth to bear, along with murder and *jouissance*” (*Seminar XVII* 117). Yet the subject never knows what he wants to know. Moreover, the subject doesn’t know what he desires, but as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, *desire knows what it wants,* and the key to understanding desire is not knowledge but truth or rather “the schiz and not the signifier” (137), psychosis and not neurosis. Still, neurosis is where both Brummell and the Regent reside, playing with psychosis as a gambit just as the Regency itself was a play of life, a comedy with intermittent serio-tragical scenes. If the phallus is coordinated with knowledge, jouissance is the only path to truth. But did either Brummell or the Regent want truth? What is more evident is that Brummell’s process of desiring flows and regulating blockages reached an apex where it became stuck in the trap of his self-enclosed circuit, refusing both jouissance and the truth. This denial, this end-in-itself, precipitated the event of the Regent’s cut, the recastration that fully reasserts the Oedipal myth and loses Brummell his head (metaphorically speaking). To be castrated once is to enter into the realm of the master (the son will be the father); to be recastrated is altogether another matter. At that moment, the master signifier, the phallus as Regent who is playing the big Other at this moment of the decapitation, reigns through the signifier and in re-Oedipalizing Brummell pushes him through the wall, the limit of capitalist society. There is truth in this. Pushed into an outright schizophrenia instead of a play-enactment of it, Brummell’s world does indeed lose its symbolically signifying capacity to make meaning as well as any justifying and self-justifying legislative function. Jouissance, the desire that is prohibited by the father (the wall itself), loses all meaning in the schizoid world of exile, but truth reigns supreme. As Lacan notes, “truth is the little sister of *jouissance*” (*Seminar XVII* 116).

Lacan as well as Deleuze and Guattari push at the borders of what jouissance, especially surplus jouissance, can do when unregulated. Language is, of course, the regulator par excellence since it transmits the Symbolic and the law, but it is also inefficient: “Language, including the language of the master, cannot be anything other than a demand, a demand that fails” (*Seminar XVII* 124). Perhaps this is why Brummell’s trademark had been spare witticisms, le mot juste, or the cutting look that was not “the gaze” but rather a not-saying all the more hurtful. Like the witticism, the silent cut enhances the failure of the other’s demand by reducing and reifying it as an artful product that showcases negation, an inconsequential gesture that ruins reputations or renders another socially invisible. A deadly serious game in which language’s demand and failure are unveiled and derailed. Only in this way can patriarchal power be challenged, mocked, toyed with, and—after all, it was only a joke—reinstated. Not revolutionary, merely the acting out that justifies and helps regulate the ordering regime: the necessary symptom that binds society together.

The master’s intervention in language is to produce the master signifier; in anti-Oedipal terms, it is to inaugurate blockage of the desiring flows. This is a preproductive production, one that gets the desiring economy going. The master signifier—“the subject” as an empty signifier, or “the phallus,” both of which are empty in that they are not tied to a literal body (the “I”) or a literal partial object (the penis)—says nothing but gets everything going. Brummell’s witticisms and cutting remarks, his “quizzing,” function similarly as parodic versions of the master signifier’s legislative function. To parody the phallus’s role in language is both to unseat its mastery (the Regent is no king) and to reinstate it (*my* friend the Regent, whom I authorize with my pretend “stick”). The subject is a self-produced parodic art object, the phallus is a sham artifice. Brummell dewigs the signifier rather than unseats it, revealing the master/Regent to be just a body-tool after all.

None of this bothered the Regent; he was, to the contrary, as drawn to this performative play as were Brummell’s other dandy acolytes. It was hardly his sexuality that the Regent felt Brummell was challenging during the famous incident of the cut. Indeed, the major insight I draw from Lacan’s *Seminar XX* is that there is no such thing as woman (in *Seminar XVII* Lacan has already noted that “there is no sexual relation” [116]). Neither the Regent nor Brummell were sparring over a woman, or even the m(other), but rather the right to castrate another, to keep another man in his place. Perhaps until this point of rupture, and Brummell’s fall into a full-fledged psychosis, it is reasonable that, given the unpredictability and arbitrariness of the second half of the Romantic period, both the Regent and Brummell took it upon themselves to occupy all the positions, male and female, brothers as daddy-mommy-me encapsulated in one body, and many personas. The Regent played these out in resplendent detail, designing outlandish and feminizing outfits for himself, crying in public at theatrical productions and in private over lovers. Even his clandestine relationship with Mrs. Fitzherbert might be seen as that of a son who desires his mother (she was six years his senior) rather than a husband. If Brummell was more restrained in his sexual personae, merely the ambiguity of his dandy costume was enough to suggest multiple sexualities at play. Indeed, Brummell’s dandyism is predicated on an androcentric universe; women are there for sexual dalliance, but they are not objects of desire in the usual sense. Whereas the Regent took his Romantic psychosis—his schizophrenic selves—rather seriously, he also escaped it when, in cutting Brummell, he restored himself to the paternal function, the patriarch who excludes the woman and the feminine. Brummell, on the other hand, because he did not take his psychosis seriously, but instead played at it with all his might, fell more deeply into the schizoid state after his fall from power. What had been mere play became his Real projected onto the real in an all too literalizing way. If Schreber, the historically true psychotic, merely hallucinated, Brummell discovered his projections were all too real: the poverty that was itself a parody of his former riches, the filthy body that was the Real informing his pristine dandified self.

Lacan raises one idea in *Seminar XVII* that can shed some light on the game Brummell thought he was playing during his ascendency. It is what Lacan calls “the double agent.” This returns us to the problem of sexuality, of occupying all the positions in the assumption that the woman is impossible, a nonplayer. Deleuze and Guattari's three impasses of the process of desire blockage (“sometimes the process is caught in the trap and made to turn about within the triangle, sometimes it takes itself as an end-in-itself, other times it continues on in the void and substitutes a horrible exasperation for its fulfillment” [136]) are all ones Brummell played to the limit. Even his witticisms evince exasperation for having got the prestige and wealth he gambled for. But playing at these impasses, pretending to be stymied and trapped, can be read in terms of the double agent. This is someone who “starts again” because he “doesn’t just want the master’s little market,” Lacan remarks (*Seminar XVII* 126). He thinks he is in contact with “everything that has true worth, I mean in the order of *jouissance*,” which he also thinks “has nothing to do with the web of intrigues” or the entrapments that create impasses. The double agent thinks that everything that has to do with jouissance “would also have to be arranged.” Brummell is the master of such arrangement, of such tight control, for the double agent is one who “conserves.” But why? Lacan offers a clue: “Because if that is true [if jouissancehas to be arranged and conserved], the arrangement is going to become true, and by the same token the first arrangement, the one that was obviously fake, will also become true.” That is, the double agent takes the Oedipal myth—the master’s game (his “little market”)—and attempts to unmask it as *mere* myth through the valorization of the schizo’s tool, jouissance or desiring flows. What was obviously fake—the Regent’s political and legislative power, Brummell’s playacting, Regency feasts and spectacles—“will also become true” once the double agent has revealed the artifice of the master game. Yet if desiring flows are true, so are blockages and repression: one is what is true, the other what legislates truth. In trying to make things true that were myth, Brummell’s playacting is real (“no, I really meant it after all”). His witty repostes *are* truths, even if they are also harbingers of his exile years where saying truths has no market value and jouissance translates into the unsayable.

The one who reveals Brummell’s truths as such—where the desiring flows and the belief that such flows can be artistically and politically arranged and yet the legislative blockages are also true—is the Regent’s legal wife, Caroline. She is both fake (the Regent was already married to Mrs. Fitzherbert, albeit illicitly) and mythic (Princess Caroline, beloved of the people yet hated by her husband). She has no verities at all, no access to truth. She is *not* the Oedipal mother (she is the antithesis, the undesirable, the unprohibited). She is made to disappear from the Regent’s world. And yet, despite her antithetical role that helped prove Brummell’s truths to be true (he is both the wall-defacer and its proof as limit), Caroline evinces a jouissance of her own. In the all-male theatre of her husband’s world, in which woman is denied and unsayable, Caroline found a way to speak her desire. Lacan notes that “the mother’s role is the mother’s desire” (*Seminar XVII,* 112). That desire in Oedipal terms is directed at the son and the husband; Caroline had neither—even her daughter was alienated from her. In such a case the mother’s desire might depart from the Oedipal scheme, for Caroline has been un-mothered, un(m)othered, and so un-othered. Outside Oedipus, she is only, but also exactly, a desiring-machine freed from the socius. Caroline spent her later years chasing her desire, indulging her appetite in ways that parodied her husband’s expanding girth and sexuality. She was prodigious, ridiculous, unappealing—and she didn’t care. Lost in her own world of jouissance without the Law, perhaps she was the more successful schizo. Having broken through the wall, she broke through the possibilities for Oedipal entrapment. She is the body without organs who transcribes on her surface the ravages of the Regency’s play with Oedipal myths, for as she aged, she became increasingly unappealing visually, the object of no one’s gaze; yet she was no self-parody. She only wore on her surface what she had become, perhaps even no longer divided as a subject, perhaps beyond such Oedipal restrictions.

I have given Caroline little space in this argument,[[13]](#endnote-13) but she is a clear rebuke to the status of the impossible woman under Regency psychosis. Unlike Brummell, whose end is equivocal (has he failed at the game or succeeded in pursuing jouissanceto the end?), she proves Deleuze and Guattari’s claim that it’s “the schiz and not the signifier,” psychosis and not the phallus or the paternal function, that is the truth under capitalism. Freud thought everyone was neurotic unless they had worse pathologies; Lacan begins to think everyone is actually psychotic. Deleuze and Guattari think that everyone *should* be, and unless convinced otherwise by psychoanalysts, actually *are* psychotic. We are all schizes up against the limit. In the Romantic period, there were two options to those rare individuals who recognized this truth of the capitalist dilemma: play the schizo deliberately, with gamesmanship, or be the schizo at full jouissance. Brummell or Caroline. One is the dandy’s way, the other is perhaps the way of the impossible woman, not allowed to speak under the law but pursing her unauthorized, nonsignifying desire just the same. There is a lesson there somewhere for us today.

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1. He escapes to the continent in 1816, the same year Lord Byron also self-exiles. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. William Hazlitt renders Brummell’s quip slightly differently, “Madam, I once ate a pea!” (163), revealing how Brummell’s wit is memorable but not rigidly bound to the words themselves; rather, his witticisms are performance art, each a cut in the imaginary-symbolic relation. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I use the term “hallucinogenesis” in “Hallucinogesis: De Quincey’s Mind Trips” to discuss De Quincey’s Orientalized opium experiences. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (75). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The wall’s inscription appears to foretell Babylon’s destruction. During a feast held by King Belshazzar, a hand suddenly appears and writes in Aramaic “numbered, numbered, weighed, and they are divided” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Dan. 5.25). Daniel interprets the words as pointing to Babylon’s fall. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. These are the mechanisms Kant explicates in the third critique, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The system must then eliminate such a generated tension in a mirror version of it: here, the Regent’s physically-enacted cutting of Brummell (his turn away in a public space) mirrors Brummell’s signature act of verbal cutting. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This is Lacan’s summary of Freud’s analysis of the case. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Shepherdson’s fuller claim in chapter one(1–49). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Lacan’s *Seminar XX* on feminine sexuality helpfully unpacks further the relation between gender assignment and our essential lack, that on which desire is founded, by building on his earlier explanations of being the phallus (female) versus having the phallus (male), the two role-playing identificatory games men and women play. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Lacan explains that the barred Other is not the actual woman who is the child’s mother but the position of “mother.” [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Schuster’s brilliant synthesis of Lacan and Deleuze in *The Trouble With Pleasure* (17). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. I have written about Princess Caroline in “Mary Robinson: On Trial in the Public Court.” [↑](#endnote-ref-13)