SCHÖNE WELT, WO BIST DU

by

LUC RIOUAL

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» Schöne welt, wo bist du . . . «

A review of the reviews of Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* & other thoughts on literature & ambivalence . . .

by

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You don't have to have read a book to have an opinion on it. I don't read novels. I prefer good literary criticism; that way you get both the novelist's ideas as well as the critic's thinking. With fiction I can never forget that none of it ever really happened; that it's all just made up by the author.

WHIT STILLMAN
Metropolitan

It seems to me normal to begin with the life-occasion as we deduce it from the poem; it is only an error when one ends there.

HELEN VENDLER
Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire

And one trembles to be so understood and, at last,
To understand, as if to know became
The fatality of seeing things too well.

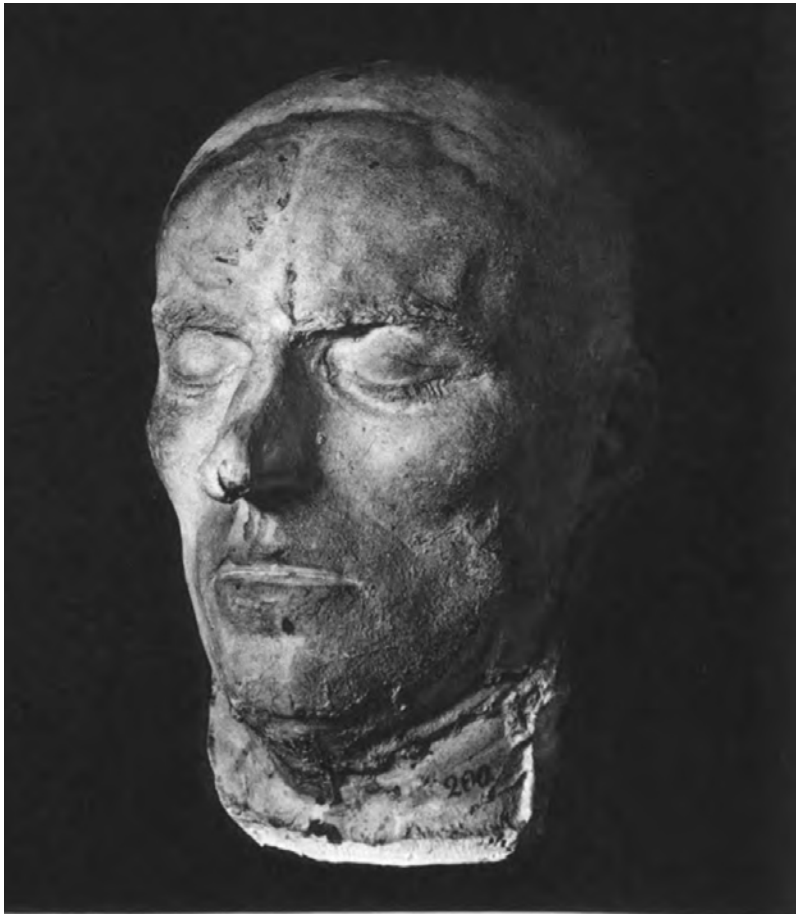
WALLACE STEVENS
"The Novel"

9 MAY 1805. LEWIS AND CLARK are along the Missouri River. Lewis kills one or two buffalo and Clark the same, though both their counts total three. The buffalo roam about in large herds, their gross more than 40 million, "emunerable herds of buffalow, & goats to day in every derection." They are "So pleanty and tame" that men of the party walk close enough to "club them out of their way." In 84 years the region will be admitted to the union as the 41st state of Montana. In the interim, 21 presidents will have moved in and out of office and twenty died, two by gun. Amendments thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen will have been ratified, and 1.5 million immigrants walked through Ellis Island. Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman, Dickinson, Melville, Poe and Thoreau will all have been born and died, within a couple years. The buffalo will number fewer than 500. It is a Thursday,

a fine Day a wind from the east we proceeded on verry well.

Lewis shoots four plover and measures their beaks: 2.5 inches in length. The sign of beaver is abundant. Timber is scarse. In Weimar, Germany, Friedrich Schiller, 45, dies of consumption.

Goethe shows a letter of Schiller's to Eckermann: "You see how apt and consistent is his judgment, and that the handwriting nowhere betrays any trace of weakness." The letter is dated 24 April 1805, sixteen days before the autopsy. Thomas Carlyle in his 1825 *Life of Schiller* records that "the most vital organs were found totally deranged." Heinrich Doering, another contemporary biographer whom Carlyle quotes, wrote, "the structure of the lungs was in a great part destroyed, the cavities of the heart were nearly grown [together], the liver had become hard, and the gall-bladder was extended to an extraordinary size." Dr. Wilhelm Huschke, the physician who performed the autopsy, described Schiller's right lung as *ganz desorganisiert*, utterly disorganized, *faul und brandig*, putrid and burned, and *breiartig*, mushy; it had so "fused" with the pericardium that it could not be separated with a knife. The edges of the liver had gangrened and "fused" with nearby parts leading to the spine. His spleen was two-thirds larger than normal. The kidneys "dissolved" and "fused together." The intestines "fused" to the peritoneum. The heart had wrinkled and lacked the weight of muscle; it was like an "empty sac" that flaked apart into pieces. "He was a splendid man," said Goethe to Eckermann, who wrote it down, "and went from us in all the fulness of his strength."



Lacking muses on which to rely, Schiller kept a drawer full of rotten apples by his desk; what brought poor Goethe near to fainting kindled the flame of his friend's pen. "Schöne Welt, wo bist du?" it asks in 1788—Beautiful World, where are you? Or Beauteous World. Or Lovely World. O beauteous age! return! return! goes one rendition, the essence of each translation more or less the same: a palpable loss felt in the rising of modernity and life's slow, relentless fragmentation. Partitioned were the fields of Thessaly. Dammed the rivers. Lumbered the forests. Mined the hills. Nymphs and fauns and satyrs tossed over city walls like dead dogs. Shade became only an occlusion of light, Orpheus in the furnace of earth mere lump of coal. Gone was Olympus, its halls and thrones of marble crushed under the weight of Newton's law into dust.

"Die Götter Griechenlandes"—Schiller's poem, "The Gods of Greece"—sings in the shadow of a mountain for which it longs but never touched, whose dust no longer gathers under the olive tree but rests along the top of its printed record, waiting in the library to be stirred. This is Schiller's lot, his loss a fiction. The poem is not only a lamentation, of course, but a veneration:

> O'er the beauteous world when Ye presided,
> And in Pleasure's gently-leading band
> Happier Generations Ye yet guided,
> Lovely beings of the Fable-Land!
>
> (trans. Samuel Robinson)

(continued, in another translation—)

> Ah! What another age existed
> When your mysterious rites were paid
> When garlands for thy shrines were twisted,
> Venus, enchanting Cyprian maid.
>
> (Percy. E. Pinkerton)

> When the magic veil of Poesy
> Still round Truth entwine'd its loving chain—
> Through creation pour'd Life's fulness free,
> Things then felt, which ne'er can feel again.
>
> (Edgar Alfred Bowring)

(further down . . .)

> For then were Heroes, Gods, and Mortals
> United in the bond of love;
> Equal in Amathusian portals,
> Men bowed with those who rule above.
>
> (E. P. Arnold-Forster)

At the time, some read "Die Götter Griechenlandes" as a protest poem against Christianity, a pagan manifesto, and in response he revised the 25 stanza edition of 1788 down to sixteen, five years later. Gone were the references to shepherds and sheep, panthers and flocks, and what remained was the sentiment that had always been there, one at the center of eighteenth-century German life and eternal in its resonance: a struggle with change. It was not a poem *against* the time; it was a poem *of* the time. In 1924 John George Robertson lectures at Oxford,

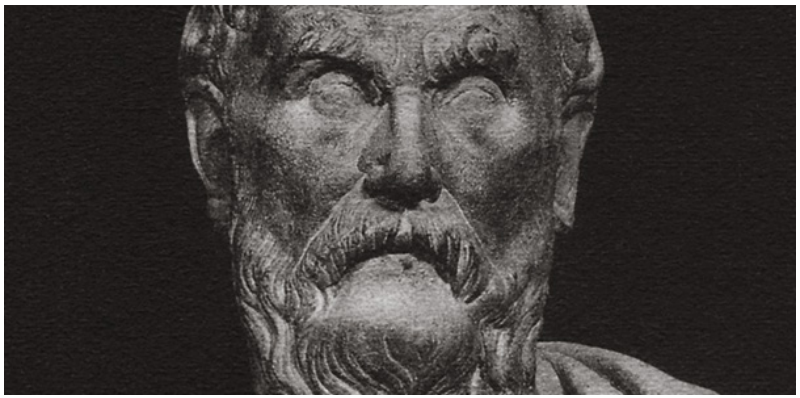
> There is no more wonderful poem in the whole range of German verse, no poem that has reverberated longer through subsequent ages . . . Now, as always, the gods of Greece are the guardians of the ideal for the disillusioned soul.

Man, suddenly finding himself bound to "complicated machine[s], which [shun] the light," was no longer one in sense and spirit, severed from himself by (just to start) the division of labor. Gone was Demeter. Gone Apollo. Helios's chariot may have flown but John Henry's railroad was tied to the ground. "Utility," Schiller writes in 1794, "is the great idol of the time," replacing glory, and, in 200 years, not much has changed. *Hercules* is a cartoon, says "I'm an action figure!" Zeuss produces records in Hadley, Massachusetts. Elysium is a nightclub in Austin, Texas.

> Well might each heart be happy in that day—
> For Gods, the Happy ones, were kin to Man !
> The Beautiful alone the Holy there !
>
> (Edward Bulwer-Lytton)

But what of this does Schiller really know? Distance, as a rule, blurs an image. Perspective weakens boundaries, makes of objects far off like clay: easy to mold and put to use in a drama of one's own making. His framing on the ancient world is necessarily revisionist. Schiller, in his frustration, gifts the Greeks a tool they did not have: an historical self-consciousness. Oswald Spengler claims "what is absolutely hidden from Thucydides is perspective." At the opening of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the Greek historian writes, "The actions of an earlier date, and those still more ancient, cannot possibly, through length of time, be adequately known; yet, from all the lights which a search into the remotest times hath afforded me, I cannot think they were of any great importance, either in regard to the wars themselves, or any other considerations," this in the fifth century BCE. The Great Pyramid of Giza had been erected two thousand years before, the stones in Carnac set back one more thousand, the cave at Lascaux painted another ten, where it sat waiting to be discovered, thousands later, by a dog named Robot in chase after a rabbit. For Thucydides as Herodotus as as Tacitus, the means were not available; he "would have broken down in handling even the Persian Wars, let alone the general history of Greece, while that of Egypt would have been utterly out of his reach," Spengler writes, hammering at these differences for one thousand pages: "It never entered the Classical head to draw any distinction of principle between history as story and history as documents." Nicholson Baker has provided his own testament to this distinction; for more than ten years he has been sending Freedom of Information Act requests trying to determine whether or not our country used "biological weapons in the 1950s? Use them, I mean, not in laboratories in Frederick, Maryland, or in the deserts of Utah, but in foreign countries, on people whom the United States government viewed as enemies." He still doesn't know for certain, this question about a time no further back from us than the Persian War was from Thucydides. Today it is historians with methods

like Baker's who do their best to pen history and governments like our's who choose what to still black out. Means determine methods. Men use the tools their time gives them, live in the homes and complexes and towns of their peers. Time, though, is capacious, making room enough for convention and for critic.



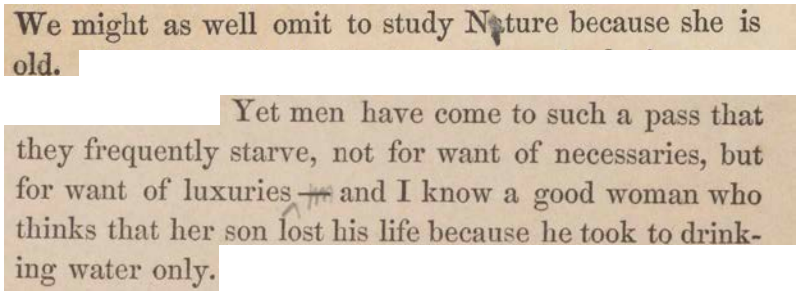
Take Diogenes of Sinope who lived in what is often simply called "a tub" that he carried around Athens on top of his head. He thought Plato "a waste of time," and "the performances at the Dionysia great peep-shows for fools." By one account, he died in Corinth by holding his breath, and by another on, 10 or 11 June, 323 BCE, the same day as Alexander the Great. He is said to have written seven tragedies and fourteen dialogues, though Sosicrates and Satyrus claim he wrote nothing, and either way no text attributable to him is extant. We have, rather, page upon page of anecdote and paraphrase, some of these compiled six hundred years or so later by Diogenes Laërtius, no relation, in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.

> He would often insist loudly that the gods had given to men the means of living easily, but this had been put out of sight, because we require honeyed cakes, unguents and the like. Hence to a man whose shoes were being put on by his servant, he said, "You have not attained to full felicity, unless he wipes your nose as well; and that will come, when you have lost the use of your hands."
>
> As for those who were excited over their dreams he would say that they cared nothing for what they did in their waking hours, but kept their curiosity for the visions called up in their sleep.
>
> Some one having reproached him for going into dirty places, his reply was that the sun too visits cesspools without being defiled. When some one was discoursing on celestial phenomena, "How many days," asked Diogenes, "were you in coming from the sky?"
>
> When some one reproached him with his exile, his reply was, "Nay, it was through that, you miserable fellow, that I became a philosopher. Again, when some one reminded him that the people of Sinope had sentenced him to exile, "And I them," said he, "to home-staying."
>
> At a feast certain people kept throwing all the bones to him as they would have done to a dog. Thereupon he played a dog's trick and drenched them.
>
> (R. D. Hicks)

Or in Guy Davenport's rendition:

> I pissed on the man who called me a dog. Why was he so surprised?

In 1845, 40 years after Schiller's death, Henry David Thoreau—"the American Diogenes"—moved to Walden Pond, onto land owned by his friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, where he lived "a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself," just 500 yards from the railroad, still "in the midst of an outward civilization," where he wrote about, among other things, intention, neighbors, trees, ice, beans; "I rejoice that there are owls." His journals number forty-seven volumes in manuscript. Across centuries, this American eccentric matches Diogenes,"The Dog," in both sentiment and tone, their words like pieces of a strange puzzle in which time folds in on itself, upending the pillars of a nostalgia that make us wish for what we think once was.


We might as well omit to study Nature because she is old.

Yet men have come to such a pass that they frequently starve, not for want of necessaries, but for want of luxuries — and I know a good woman who thinks that her son lost his life because he took to drinking water only.

Can there be any greater reproach than an idle learning? Learn to split wood at least.

This whole earth which we inhabit is but a point in space. How far apart, think you, dwell the two most distant inhabitants of yonder star, the breadth of whose disk cannot be appreciated by our instruments?

(Spengler: "Neither Plato nor Aristotle had an observatory." One of Apollonius's Argonauts at the sight of an island upon which by Zeus they might be stranded: "How desolate looms before us the edge of the limitless land!" "I use these old names, but the men I speak of are my contemporaries," wrote Emerson of Diogenes and Socrates.)

Why should I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way? This which you put seems to me not to be the most important question. What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another. What do we want most to dwell near to?

&w*mM MJdPdcE*$

SOLITUDE. 145

Not to many men surely, the depot, the post office, the bar room, the meeting house, the school house, the grocery, Beacon Hill, or the Five Points, where men most congregate, but to the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, as the willow stands near the water and sends out its roots in that direction.

(Remember Yeshua: "Split wood, I am there.")

I one evening overtook one of my townsmen, who has accumulated what is called "a handsome property," — though I never got a *fair* view of it — on the Walden Pond, driving a pair of cattle to market, who inquired of me how I could bring my mind to give up so many of the comforts of life. I answered that I was very sure I liked it passably well. I was not joking. And so I went home to my bed, and left him to pick his way through the darkness and the mud to Brighton — or Bright-town — which place he would reach some time in the morning.

At Walden Pond he wrote, in the beginning of his *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*,

The Musketaquid, or Grass-ground River, though probably as old as the Nile or Euphrates, did not begin to have a place in civilized history until the fame of its grassy meadows and its fish attracted settlers out of England in 1635, when it received the other but kindred name of Concord from the first plantation on its banks, which appears to have been commenced in a spirit of peace and harmony. It will be Grass-ground River as long as grass grows and water runs here; it will be Concord River only while men lead peaceable lives on its banks.

A rose is a rose is a rose, proclaims Gertrude Stein another 50-odd years later, and this slow process of dissociation—man from his work, word from its world—is what attracted Schiller to ancient Greece as Thoreau to nature: "If I listen, I hear the peep of frogs which is older than the slime of Egypt," knowing "the meadow is not reclaimed as fast as the woods are cleared." There can be found something reliable, consistent, certain, if passing. It is said that in the eleventh century St. Benno one day walked through a field to meditate and pray and wondered if "the singing of frogs might perchance be more agreeable to God than his own praying."

Lovely world, where art thou?—Where thy glory?
  Where the fresh bloom of thy youthful prime?
Only in the Fable-Land the story
  Can we find of that once happy time.
All thy fields lie desolate and lonely,
  Trace of Godhead I no longer view,
Of that life-warm form the shadows only:—
  Not the world which I once knew.

(Robinson)

Schiller's poem labors, as all poems do, within its historic context; his nostalgia is appropriate—that is to say, not laughable or in poor taste—even though it is in celebration of an era and way of life thrown together out of artifacts and sherds, a fabrication of well-intentioned archeologists, and scholars, and poets. The historical perspective that frames the poem is the same structure that, in a case of magical fulfillment—statues of Apollo found along the Straßen of Weimar; Christ all but forgotten Nazarene eccentric, mere line in Josephus—would nullify its existence and very possibility. The power of the Greece for which he mourns is in the form by which he knows it. ("Its inaccessibility is the guarantee of its perfection," writes Harry Levin about out myths of the golden age.)

Schiller is aware; this impossibility—this irony—is the very glue that holds the stanzas together, and why the last one ends:

Ah, that which gains immortal life in Song,
  To mortal life must perish!

(Lytton)

The statement is both a simple fact and an expression of grief, the underlying strength of which is the poet's selfsame fate. On Thursday 9 May, on the second floor of their home on Windischenstraße, with warm pillows on his feet and in the company of his doctor, sister-in-law, and wife kneeled by his side where "he still pressed her offered hand," at around 6:00 PM, Schiller died. He was buried late Saturday, around one in the morning at Jacobsfriedof, less than one kilometer from home. Clouds are said to have parted for the moon to shine on his bier; wind tore through the small crowd that gathered as he was lowered into the grave. "Never did I hear the song of the nightingales so continuous and full as then," his sister-in-law wrote. Goethe would not find out for some days, writing

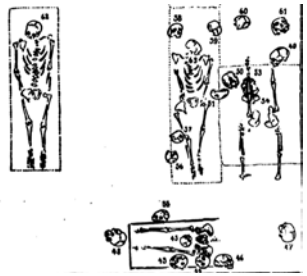
shortly after, "Half my existence is gone from me." In life and death, Schiller was, for Goethe, not only a friend and collaborator, but a source of strength, both certain the other his better.

Schiller: Compared with Goethe I am but a poetical bungler.

Goethe: Even when he cut his nails, he showed he was greater than these gentleman.

In the four years after his death, more than 23 memorials were held in German-speaking cities. In late September 1826 the mass grave in which

he'd been buried was reopened by the Mayor to move his remains to a more venerable location. The Swabian laborers smoked through three nights of secret digging, sorting through the decay of more than twenty bodies, whose coffins had all burst and lay intermingled in their rot, tak-



2. Bei der Grabung. Aufgenommen am 1. September 1911

ing out more than twenty skulls they brought to Goethe's study where it was determined the largest was Schiller's. There it stayed for some time, the sole object of contemplation in a pale-green room left otherwise bare to better focus on his work. A year later, departing the study and after some time in the Grand Ducal Library, the skull and his bones were brought to the vault at the Weimarer Fürstengruft where Goethe would join him in 1832, side by side in identical coffins. In 1911 scientists, unconvinced, dug up another 60 skulls, one of which they placed in an unmarked coffin next to the others, certain they'd corrected a 79-year-old error. In 2008 it was determined, by DNA evidence, that neither skull—nor any of the bones which made up the skeleton—belonged to Schiller, but all to six different men.

Even though his organs had already fallen into the state of absolute ruin his doctor would find them in, Schiller worked up until a few days before he passed, writing scenes from his play *Demetrius*, the monologue of Marfa left on his desk in the same room whose dormers faced south-south-west where, Wednesday, he asked to have the curtains opened to watch the light of the sunset from his bed and, the next day, died.

> I draw these burning from my inmost soul,
> I send them wing'd unto the throne of heaven—

Schiller's poem, like we know about the works of Shakespeare, is in part a synthesis and revision of the work and attitudes of the time. *Schöne Welt,*

1573 Ralph Lever: "to be or not to bée" (67)
1584 Dudley Fenner: "to bee or not to be" (C1)
1588 Abraham Fraunce: "to bée, or not to bée" (86)
1596 William Perkins: "to be or not to be" (4)
1601 John Deacon: "to be, or not to be" (46)
1603 Robert Rollock: "to be or not to be" (*Treatise* 177–78)
1604 Henoch Clapham: "to be, or not to be" (A2v)
1604 William Shakespeare: "to be, or not to be" (G2)

1585 Thomas Bilson: "That is the question" (264)
1604 William Shakespeare: "That is the question" (G2)

1576 Thomas Rogers: "with a quiet minde to suffer" (folios 32v–33)
1582 James Yates: "a patient minde to suffer" (folios 72v–73)

1600 Robert Rollock: "with his owne mind to suffer" (*Exposition* 210)
1604 William Shakespeare: "in the minde to suffer" (G2)

[1540] Desiderius Erasmus: *Mare malorum, Kakôn thálassa* ("a sea of troubles" [1.3.28])
1566 William Painter: "a Sea of troubles" (folio 115v)
1585 John Norden: "raging sea of troubles" (folio 92v)
1590 Everard Digby: "a sea of troubles" (128)
1604 William Shakespeare: "a sea of troubles" (G2)

1578 Henry Bull: "sleepe of death" (182–83)
1581 John Merbecke: "the sléepe of death" (1035)
1600 John Bodenham: "sleepe of death" (233)
1604 William Shakespeare: "that sleepe of death" (G2)

from: **Against Thinking**
PETER STALLYBRASS

wo bist du, he writes, and so does Johann Gottfried Herder, ten years earlier, *Wo bist du geliebtes Griechenland* . . .

> Where are you, beloved Greece, full of beautiful forms, divine and human, full of truth in deception and deception full of sweet truth? Your time has passed, and the dream of our commemorations, our histories, researches and worthy desires will not reawaken you, nor will the foot of the traveller who treads on you and collects your shards, reawaken you.
>
> (William Fitzgerald)

Schiller:

> In those days no gruesome skeleton
> approached the bed of the dying.

Gotthold Lessing in 1769:

> The ancient artists did not portray Death as a skeleton, for they portrayed him according to the Homeric idea, as the twin brother of Sleep, and represented both Death and Sleep, with that likeness between them which we naturally expect in twins.
>
> (Edward Bell)

What takes the poem beyond mere synthesis and gripe is the manner in which it becomes an argument for itself. The first half of the second stanza in a different translation from the earlier makes this slightly more clear.

> When luminous imagination
> Wrapped Truth in Fiction's airy fold,
> Then life's blood flowed throughout creation,
> And, wavelike, o'er its limits rolled.
>
> (Pinkerton)

What is an elegy on the surface—mourning the absence of the imagined life of antiquity—is perhaps more of an apologia and a proclamation: not on the rejection of modern invention and discovery, but the pursuit of liberty through the aesthetic: the imposition of form on matter as a means of reconciling man's unique condition, the division between the mind and the body. It is an argument for the ongoing power of the poem, of the poetic construction *in toto*, of fictions, of art in the face of freight-train change, which he attains, specifically, through a feeling which belongs to every era since even before the classical, "especially" our own: belatedness.

Adam wasn't Greek. He is Hebrew in name but, by pedigree, sui generis; he is the first man who is truly from nowhere, the feral child from whom we all descend. Historically, we can see his emergence as a fresh start: his world a break from the medley of gods running about the fertile crescent, raping and pillaging like their dependents, but his arrival also announces a second break, one primordial and central to the religion he births: from the God of his very conception, a deity itself conceived as pure being, pure act, pure will, a God in whose image we are said to be made—a reflection at best—and where there the resemblance stops. Yahweh, arbitrary and vindictive as he may be, is nonetheless pure abstraction, a deity whose totality necessitated—at least by sixteenth century Kabbalistic reading—a contraction of his completeness to create the universe. He is both everywhere and nowhere, beginning and end, pure paradox, meanwhile Zeus had a dick and was born in Crete, an island in the Mediterranean on which I can go stand and whose dust put a handful of in my mouth.

While the Greek and Abrahamic epistemologies were equally made from the stuff of more primitive ritual and worship, it is the differing implications of their dramas that is most telling. Where Yahweh is supreme and eternal, Zeus rises to power in combat; where Prometheus suffers because he was defiant, a thief, Job (his lawful pair) suffers because he was born. But while the triumph of Prometheus—the gift of human will and the knowledge that there is truth—is no less so for his torture, Job abides his persecution to learn and teach "the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom." Milton can try, hundreds of years later, to "justifie the wayes of God to men," but faith has always been knowing the answer to the question, "Canst thou penetrate to the essence of God?"

And when faith is lost? Or questioned? Or never had? When one needs more than "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him"? Here in the year of our Lord, 2024, we cut open rocks instead of goats, read graphs instead of entrails. We bemoan the end of the world that has not come, now, as men did then and before. Alas! now it is no longer merely voices that portend the end—we have proof! We can measure the time it takes a particle of light to move across a single atom, and can traverse the distance Lewis and Clark roamed over two years in six days or less by hybrid car. And for what? Neighbors gun one another down and robot planes drop bombs. Elected officials hold the keys to perfect oblivion, while we turn our own to hasten our ways to and from work, and drive unto slow immolation with our air conditioned homes in rearview, where packages sit on the doorsteps, all watched over by the machines of recorded space. Means determine methods, and then methods determine means. Our experiments are as replicable as cheap toys. Experts move forward the hands on the doomsday clock. Forty million buffalo dead and in their memory 1,212,995,919 nickels.

"We later civilizations," writes Paul Valéry in 1919, "we too now know that we are mortal." In 1949 Etienne Gilson writes, "On the threshold of a new millennium, man has the proud conviction that the day is perhaps not far off when he himself will be able to explode the planet." A diligent Freudian of a certain bent might argue we are doing a damn fine job; Brigid Brophy in 1962 writes, "If men conceived, believed and, by

every kind of casuistic rationalizing, persisted in the idea that there is a God who condemns sinners to everlasting torture, it was not by error but because they wanted it to be true." We feel righteous in our depression, fight anxiety from neuron to noggin, and for dinner order delivery because we are too indolent to walk as the world, we cry and set the match to, burns.

"Nostalgia, good or bad, is not possible without a divided or split-consciousness," writes Carol Mavor, and though Schiller's form of looking backward feels unavailable to us—having been obliterated somewhere between the trenches of Verdun and Bill Gates' last day at Harvard—we yet remain permanently and perpetually divided, eight ways to Sunday, a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose, daily bearing the unbearable as a matter of course.

BELATEDNESS, FRAGMENTATION, DECLINE —these eighteenth century preoccupations of Friedrich Schiller and his peers—are, from what I have gathered, also at the heart of Sally Rooney's third book, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, published in September of 2021, a novel which I have not read and so cannot be entirely convicted about, only suspicious. A summary on the-bibliofile.com reads:

> In *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, Alice, a novelist, meets Felix, who works in a warehouse, and asks him if he'd like to travel to Rome with her. In Dublin, her best friend, Eileen, is getting over a break-up and slips back into flirting with Simon, a man she has known since childhood. Alice, Felix, Eileen, and Simon are still young—but life is catching up with them. They desire each other, they delude each other, they get together, they break apart. They have sex, they worry about sex, they worry about their friendships and the world they live in. Are they standing in the last lighted room before the darkness, bearing witness to something? Will they find a way to believe in a beautiful world?

Since 2017 and the publication of her first book, *Conversations with Friends*, Rooney has been one of, if not the, most discussed and written about young novelists today. Not only does she outsell the majority of her peers—"literary fiction" a term most liable to use under the headline of "I know it when I see it," though more generally befitting low print runs—she also dominates the space held for critical appraisal. On April 27, 2021, about five months before the publication of the book, I read an essay about Sally Rooney that I found wanting, and wrote the following email to several friends, which is arguably the germ of this essay.

> according to an article in the irish mirror, as of a year ago, rooney's books had sold more than 305,000 copies in the US alone. this same article estimates her books to have brought in a revenue of around $14.5mil as of a year ago. she has very clear, investable market value!!! and while the calculable and projectable valuations surely determine the efforts of marketing departments, publicists, and those in their pocket or debt, and thereby the books a presence and accessibility to buyers and readership, wanting or not, it tells me little

> of why so many people—beyond those victim to the simple and vehement ploys of marketing—are willing to invest hours of their time to either of her books (neither of which i've read nor have any feelings positive or negative about) and not other books.
>
> i think what i ultimately find frustrating is that, whether or not sally rooney is a failed marxist and bad stylist who writes tv dialogue for emotionally immature boors and—what's more—has been proven so by critical dissection time and time again, and whether or not there are more and more books of this ilk to which rooney and [Ben] lerner are easy targets and avatars, is that people are still out there buying the book and presumably reading it and TAKING SOMETHING AWAY FROM THAT EXPERIENCE, and i want someone who's smart and well read to put the time into TELLING ME WHAT THAT IS!
>
> - who are these (305k+) people?!
> - why are they reading (and buying!) these (305k+) books?!
> - what value do these (305k+!!!) books have to readers?!?!

Here are some more numbers to get us going:

	Amazon	Goodreads	Book Marks*
Conversations with Friends (2017)	38,611	434,230	11
Normal People (2018)	116,219	1,234,722	62
Beautiful World . . . (2021)	23,643	353,831	80

TOTAL NUMBER OF RATINGS AND REVIEWS
(AS OF FEBRUARY 2023)

Diligent scouring of Book Marks inclines one to think *Beautiful World* to have the greatest number of collected reviews, with *Normal People* in second, and Kazuo Ishiguro in third with 58 reviews for 2021's *Klara and the Sun*, his first book published after winning the Nobel Prize in 2017. Gabrielle Zevin's breakout success, *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*, the winner of the 2022 Goodreads Choice Award for fiction (*Beautiful World* was 2021's) has been rated there 583,305 times, though it boasted only 14 professional reviews, while Garth Greenwell's *Cleanness* was put under the microscope 53 times to his present day 7,447 civilian ratings. These numbers ultimately mean little outside the realms of pride and pay ("literary fiction" often being big on the first and, for most, small on the second) but are emblematic of strange tendencies in the larger critical apparatus, a subject on which philippics abound, and for good reason: it isn't easily sussed out or agreed upon what exactly is the problem there—more money would help, no doubt; greater leeway and higher word counts; a wider variety of books chosen for review; deeper analysis; more venues; more readers; less snark—but even then how is any of this put into regular, consistent play? The money spent doesn't money make so the money goes and magazines close. The capacity for sustained attention continues to decrease (so "they" claim) and with this scope (though the excuses for word counts for online venues cannot be accounted for). Books that "don't sell" don't get read about. Shallow "critics" drown in the deep end. Snark, it turns out, sells, and but—clearly—so too does Sally Rooney. And so I thought, where could this lead that is more interesting than another screed? What would it look like to review all the reviews of Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* without ever reading the book?

On February 3rd, 2023, around midnight, I spent approximately 45 minutes downloading every review collected on the Book Marks website, most of which were available at a single click and some which required the use of the archive.org Wayback Machine or www.12ft.io (a proxy site that allows one to bypass some paywalls). On February 4th at about 1:00 AM, I began to read through the reviews and take notes, at first copy / pasting sentences I thought worthy of note and revisitation along with my own thoughts, if I had any—"Wowowowow fuck this shit," "BOOM, THIS SEEMS ACCURATE", "what would be the implication of this, then? What does it matter?"—eventually cataloging the repeated use of quotations, references, and comparisons to other writers, slights made, word choices, and recent graduates from Yale (2), until approximately 5:30 AM, and finished reading all 67 (unable to account, on their website, for the missing 13) around 5:00 AM on February 11th. I then spent six days writing approximately 4,400 words about Friedrich Schiller whose poem, "Die Götter Griechenlandes," Rooney took her title from, not a word of which am I entirely confident in, yet it stands, and on we go.

* Book Marks is website operated by the "organizing principle" Literary Hub that aggregates and weighs reviews published within a three month window of the book's release, and generally served in the case of this essay, my sanity, and my time, as gate, guard, and valet.

There were three trends that stood out most: a relentless conflation of the writer with her characters, a fixation on the writer's age and generational positioning, and a complete disregard for how the title of the book might impact the ways in which one might read it.

Of the 67 reviews, only 11 mention Schiller and the title; 7 of these suggest the reviewer did not read the poem, one suggests the absence of a question mark is "text speak" (to which writer Brian Dillon (who had also not read the book) responded on Twitter: "But surely Rooney intends an echo of the common dismissive/despairing Irish use of ' . . . , how are you'"), one christens him Franz, one mentions the same-named Liverpool Biennial (which Rooney notes, by way of Schiller and his poem, attending in her acknowledgements), and that same one claims it sounds "a bit like a children's book crossed with a Mariah Carey album."

Mariah Carey is not the least strange reference made. Below is a list whose order is that in which I first encountered them.

Vivian Gornick
Lord Byron ("byronic")
The Enlightenment (3)
Gossip Girl
Jake Paul
Wes Anderson
Characters from *Twilight*
Theodor Adorno/Auschwitz
Natalia Ginzburg (3)
Kanye West
Drake (Aubrey, not Sir Francis)
The Queen's Gambit (show), *The Last Dance*, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, Richard Linklater, Paul Thomas Anderson
John Updike
Jean-Paul Sartre
Flannery O'Connor
Romano Guardini
Frank O'Connor
Edna O'Brien
William Butler Yeats (2)
John Millington Synge (2)
James Joyce (4), specifically "The Dead" (1)
Jane Austen (2)
Puck (Shakespeare)
Fyodor Dostoyevsky (2)
Raven Leilani
Candice Carty-Williams
Rebecca Watson
Leo Tolstoy
Vladimir Lenin
Nikolai Chernyshevsky
Upton Sinclair
Henry James (2), *The Golden Bowl* (1)
"the oddly misnamed *The Karamazov Brothers*"
Augusta Gregory
Keats (3) ("Keatsian")
Brandon Taylor
"Cw teen drama"
Bible
Audre Lorde (4)
James Baldwin (3)
Zadie Smith
Sarah Jessica Parker
Taylor Swift
Emily Ratajkowski
Arundhati Roy
Philip Roth, Bret Easton Ellis, Haruki Murakami, James Salter, J. G. Ballard, E. L. Doctorow, Norman Rush, Don Delillo (who write about "explicit sex")
Alan Hollinghurst, Sarah Waters, Michael Cunningham, Garth Greenwell (who write about sex "well")
Rainer Maria Rilke
Kathleen Stewart (*Ordinary Affects*)
Don Delillo

Karl Marx, in any number of forms, received the most with 19. He is, I believe, the well-known foil to any harmonious shape in the realm of her critical appraisal and, perhaps, the very source for much of the vituperation around Rooney and her work. (That she is herself a professed Marxist, and her characters betray or make clear a similar political bent, became a cause for much hostile chatter, at least as books go, the problem working like a mirror: Rooney's characters were bad at being Marxists and, then, also Rooney for having made them so. More on this later.) Marx receives,

in all forms, a mere 3 explicit mentions across all three novels, and the easily searchable forms of "communism," "socialism," and "capitalism" total far less than 19; "the left" and its various configurations were much harder to search so I did not—though I'm aware of the greater space these as themes and the broad subject of class takes up. The increased attention paid to the first two books by the adaptation for Hulu / BBC of *Normal People*—mentioned in 26—certainly exacerbated the critical brouhaha by the sheer increase in exposure, but also the casual stigma attached with greater commercial success, particularly for someone so young. Three writers mention their own age; three times she's called a "wunderkind."

"Millennial" is found in 35, more than half of the reviews, and is itself one-third (or -fourth or -fifth) of the phrase attached to her name that has been the cause for the remainder of the controversy around the 32-year-old: "the millennial novelist," or "the Great Millennial novelist," or "the *first* Great Millennial novelist," the definite article doing all the heavy lifting.

"the voice of a generation"
RYNE CLOS

"the commercially anointed voice of millennial malaise"
BILAL QURESHI

"Rooney's name has been adopted as the signifier of millennial late-capitalist malaise"
HILLARY KELLY

"deemed millennial"
JOSHUA BOHNSACK

"Millennial mastermind Sally Rooney"
ALEXIS BURLING

"is now a poster girl for the so-called genre of 'millennial fiction'"
ESMÉ HOGEVEEN

"her ability to capture millennial existentialism and dread while almost simultaneously soothing it"
DENA SOFFER

"If 'romance' is one key insult here, 'millennial' is another"
ANNE ENRIGHT

"the ferocious tendency of fans and critics alike to make Rooney into an emblem, to give her another title of best or worst millennial something"
STEPHANIE PHILP

"Rooney, the millennial success story, seems to be a conversation topic far more engrossing than the content of her two (soon to be three) best-selling novels"
ISABEL JONES

And so while the writer herself is far from the public eye—accepting the grotesquerie of press as any grateful, gracious writer does in thanks to their publishers and readers—her books function as the greatest point of access in a world whose boundaries around the personal daily half and the demands of fandom double. This dilemma presents an even greater hazard given the glaring superficial resemblance between the author and one of her main characters, the result of which is a body of reviews that ended up more personal than critical.

"Early on in Sally Rooney's fraught and lovely new novel *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, it becomes clear that one of the big problems Rooney is struggling with on the page is herself. Or rather, the phenomenon of herself." - Constance Grady

"Reading Rooney's latest, you can feel her struggling to reconcile her own strange reality with the ideals that have become so much part of her image . . . Ultimately, though, these long philosophical tangents on the value of fiction, the meaning of art, and the decline of beauty read like overindulgent and anxious attempts to preemptively control the cacophony that surrounds the reception of her work."- Jane Hu

"In making a novelist struggling with overnight fame one of her central characters, she has placed her own angst on the page." - Bilal Qureshi

"The chapter may as well have been signed, 'Love, Sally.'" - Kyung Mi Lee

"The emails allow Rooney to vent about the literary world." - Harvey Freedenberg

"seemingly showcase everything Sally Rooney thinks, dreams, and breathes." - Rien Fertel

"and the author's very real fear of humanity's imminent downfall." - Lisa Peterson

"Ironically, just as Rooney bemoans this obsession for information about the writer, here she seems, via Alice, to reveal her own deeply personal response to literary fame." - Nicole Abadee

"(a successful novelist living in the Irish countryside based on Rooney herself)" - Cazzie David

"Alice is a fairly obvious Rooney avatar: a famous young novelist already sick—as in literally ill—of fame, hiding away in a small coastal community as far from Dublin as one can be while still in the Republic of Ireland." - Ryne Clos

"It's clear that the author has made no conscious effort to distinguish herself from the protagonist. The narrative is, in part, autobiographical - Alice is a successful novelist suffering from depression who has written two critically acclaimed novels and is struggling to write the third." - Eliz Akdeniz

"The primary object of Sally Rooney's analytical gaze is Sally Rooney herself, which is to the novel's detriment in the end." - Emma Levy

> "For Rooney, these emails clearly serve as proxies for her own ethical and intellectual anxieties," & "(Rooney has evidently been stung by criticisms that her books do precisely that.) " – Claire Allfree
>
> "Rooney recently told Vogue that she 'can only' draw on her life for material; we'd be kidding ourselves if we pretended Alice is not a stand-in for Rooney, who also sold her first novel for six figures at age 24, moved from Ireland to New York and back again, and humped it around the globe on an interminable press tour." – Hillary Kelly
>
> "Alice is obviously not Rooney but, as a celebrated and financially successful novelist, is just as obviously her avatar." – Tara K. Menon
>
> "(although she denies that this is auto-fiction)" – Louise Ward
>
> "The arrival of a novel like *Beautiful World, Where Are You* is always followed by hot takes and attempts to piece together the autobiography embedded within such a book, though there doesn't need to be too much digging this time." – Grace Byron
>
> "The relationship between Sally Rooney's novels and her personal politics is one over which much ink has been spilled. (Like Alice, I recognize my own complicity in adding to this ink-spilling, and like Alice, I'm probably not going to stop any time soon.)" – Emer O'Hanlon
>
> "Contrary to insights of early-twentieth-century literary theory, biographical criticism remains very much in vogue. But little of it seems to be making us smarter about the novels in question." – Lauren Michele Jackson

It is perhaps a consequence of Rooney's youth that she is not dead, in literary terms—"the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author," we know from Roland Barthes—and still victim to an easy violence endemic to creative writing seminars, and a habit of mind that betrays a habit of culture: the combination of busybodydom and despair we know as gossip. Patricia Meyer Spacks was right in 1985 when she wrote in her book *Gossip* that it, "like poetry and fiction, penetrates to the truth of things," and that it has within it the possibility to "generate deeper humanity, more penetrating analysis than one finds in any but the best fiction: the moral risks of gossip accompany real moral possibility," but even so she was not able to predict the damage wrought by a world whose economy has come to rely on a consumer fixation with the lives of strangers. One must necessarily be surprised that not a single review suggested that Rooney, like her doppelgänger Alice, had spent time in a psychiatric hospital after the success of her own first two books. One wonders if this were a matter of decorum or of a guilt activated by touching the fabric of the novel, but is relieved either way. ("I didn't just struggle, wrote Nylah Burton, "to think of something interesting to say about *Beautiful World*. I actually struggled to criticize it at all, because Rooney's most stimulating passages feel like they're wrenched directly from her heart.")

What feels worse is the fact of an expressed and explicit boundary. If that Alice and Sally being different names were not enough to differentiate them, Rooney has asserted she is not writing autofiction, a form that, in its broadest definition, involves a deliberate and present intermingling of "autobiography" and "fiction." One of autofiction's great fruits is a playful and observable self-consciousness felt in the friction between the word made flesh and the flesh made word. To a nosey reader, the question of where might the writer stop and character start is put immediately on its head—a different game from that of Austen or James is being played—and confessions unknowingly buried by the writer less likely to be found because they are, perhaps, rather laid traps in the world's endless hunt for "truth." The generous reader knows some is "real" and some is "not," but the who, what, when, where, why, and how, is (or can be) entirely uncertain, even if the words seem to come from the writer's very mouth itself; here, truth is more of an dramatic, poetic, philosophical conceit. When Sheila Heti's Sheila (*How Should a Person Be*) writes, "I am writing a play that is going to save the world," whether or not Sheila Heti the writer once wrote that in earnest and plopped it into her novel doesn't matter; it becomes, here, in the space between two Sheilas, a statement one can both sympathize with and laugh at, and this is by design. When Alice writes

> Who can care, in short, what happens to the novel's protagonists, when it's happening in the context of the increasingly fast, increasingly brutal exploitation of a majority of the human species? (quoted twice)

the feelings in response are more scrambled. "These long philosophical tangents on the value of fiction, the meaning of art, and the decline of beauty read like overindulgent and anxious attempts to preemptively control the cacophony that surrounds the reception of her work," writes Jane Hu. "Full transparency: it's possible I," writes Cazzie David, "only found Alice and Eileen so pretentious for e-mailing each other long-winded fundamental [sic] opinions about political extremism and Christianity because all my friends and I talk about with each other is Deuxmoi" (an Instagram account and podcast that "publishes rumors & conjecture, not facts" about celebrities). Christian Lorentzen, in his generous but unenthused review in the *London Review of Books*, is keenly aware that this

is a problem owing not simply to art but its collision with commerce, quoting Norman Mailer on French TV in 1994: "We wanted to change the nature of American Life. None of us ended up as heroes; we ended up as celebrities." This is, of course, no fault of the author (although Mailer, e.g. stabbing his wife, etc., is not the best example); rather, it is perhaps a result of the writer not meeting the expectations of her audience. "No one wants to read a book that seems to despise them," writes Susannah Goldsbrough, speaking only for herself.

There seem to me three major ways in which to interpret a slipperiness between the writer and her characters: (1) she is lazy, (2) she is stupid, or (3) maybe the slipperiness is on purpose.

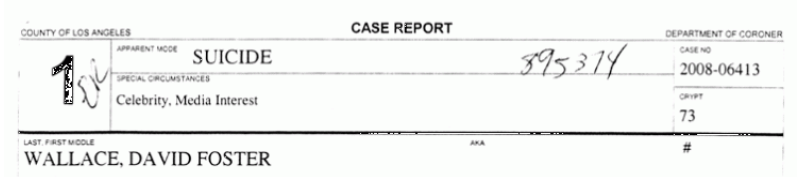
Many reviewers fall into the first camp, believing Alice and her friend Eileen no more than "intermediaries" through which Rooney speaks. This is a fine albeit uninspired take, the problem with which is: well, then, so what? How would this change how one reads the book, to know the fiction has a basis in a private reality? Does this generate more than crumbs of trivia? And, then, what for? Is it cowardice? Perceived limitations of the confessional form? A simple preference for written drama? Is she just being coy? What is it about what she might think that would keep her from making the emails (in which the book abound) essays of her own, slapping her name right on them for all to read? No one would need to speculate and ask anymore, what do you think, really? why all this navel-gazing and humdrum worrying? because they would already know.

> Aren't we unfortunate babies to be born when the world ended? (7 mentions)
>
> And isn't death just the apocalypse in the first person? (4)
>
> So of course in the midst of everything, the state of the world being what it is, humanity on the cusp of extinction, here I am writing another email about sex and friendship. What else is there to live for? (8)
>
> My own work is, it goes without saying, the worst culprit in this regard. For this reason I don't think I'll ever write a novel again. (8)
>
> Because when we should have been reorganising the distribution of the world's resources and transitioning collectively to a sustainable economic model, we were worrying about sex and friendship instead. Because we loved each other too much and found each other too interesting. And I love that about humanity, and in fact it's the very reason I root for us to survive – because we are so stupid about each other. (6)

The word "stupid" occurs 17 times in the novel, "idiot" 10, "moron" 1. "I have tears in my eyes even typing this stupid email," "I don't know how you put up with me saying such stupid things all the time," "I feel so stupid, I'm sorry," "The stupid thing is that I really liked writing that essay, and I did want to write another one, and after I got that email I never did," "This is a completely stupid story, by the way," "I know that probably sounds stupid," but no one actually thinks Sally Rooney is stupid. They think her cheeky and guarded ("archy," claims *Vogue*). "This seems a complicated way of preserving her privacy," as though that were an unreasonable thing to want—the right of private judgment—and in turn reveals a base ingratitude; "if Rooney's structural analysis of fame has a shortcoming, it's a failure to recognise that, with no bad faith intended, most people simply want to know more about those they admire," writes Emma Brockes. But what are the limits of our curiosity?

Fans know that in 2008 David Foster Wallace duct-taped his hands behind his back before hanging himself with a belt from the support rafter of a backyard patio at the Claremont home he shared with his wife of four years. "The decedent is a male, Caucasian, who appears to be the reported 46 years of age. He was wearing gray shorts, blue t-shirt, brown under-

wear, white socks and white gym shoes. The ambient temperature—unregulated was 69.2 degrees at 2355 hours. The liver temperature was 91.7 degrees at 0005 hours. Liver mortis blanched to light pressure and was consistent with the position found. Rigor mortis was 3 throughout. The decedent has a ligature mark about the front of the neck. The decedent also has duct tape around both wrists," all so different from the words in Schiller's. You can see the scans of the police report and autopsy online. They are very easy to find. "The decedent weights 161 pounds and measures 76 inches in height. The decedent appears thin. There is a furrow/impression present around the neck. The furrow is present around the anterior neck at the level of and above the thyroid cartilage. It measures approximately 2.5 cm in maximal width and up to 10 mm in depth. It slants slightly upward on both sides laterally. No noose is present. No other trauma is present. There is a tattoo on the right upper arm laterally with word 'Karen' and a symbol of the heart." ("That is how the past exists, phan-



COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES — CASE REPORT — DEPARTMENT OF CORONER

APPARENT MODE: SUICIDE

395314

CASE NO: 2008-06413

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES: Celebrity, Media Interest

CRYPT: 73

LAST, FIRST MIDDLE: WALLACE, DAVID FOSTER

AKA

#

tasmagoric weskits, stray words, random things recorded," writes Hugh Kenner.) Perhaps you did not want to know all this. "Intent" and "bad faith" are strange notions to invoke when poking around in the lives of people we don't know. "It is a strange fact of the moral life that we never attribute bad motives to ourselves and yet do so most readily to everyone else we know," writes Phyllis Rose. Wallace has been earnestly, playfully, and derisively sometimes called "Saint Dave." His uncertain canonization (to put it mildly) is due in part to the moral seriousness of his work—incompletely, a combination of 12-step theology and Mid-Western

Thoreauvian petition—and declarations by some readers and critics of pretentiousness and shallow philosophizing, not to mention posthumous disclosures about his personal life (and an (often) annoying, avid fanbase). The ur-usage of the honorific was a profile after his death in which his friend Jonathan Franzen said, "But he wasn't Saint Dave." Mary Karr's 2009 memoir *lit* recounts how Dave got her named tattooed on his bicep before they'd kissed on the lips, how in fights he'd throw things—backpacks, books—and once flipped over her coffee table at her; D. T. Max's 2012 biography tells how the Saint tried to buy a gun to kill Karr's husband to end that marriage. "You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide what to worship," Wallace wrote in his Kenyon College commencement address, echoing Thoreau—"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately"—and Stanley Cavell reading Thoreau: "Our choice is not between belief and unbelief, but between faith and idolatry." It is a strange fact of moral life that we have collectively endorsed a loss of privacy as the cost of fame. On his fiftieth birthday, curbed.com posted: "There are good reads by and about Wallace all over, but you could also try wringing a little meaning from these photos of his last house in Claremont, which accompanied the listing when his widow Karen Green sold it in early 2009." At a reading in 2006 an audience member asks, "I'm just wondering if you could say a little bit about the role religion plays in your life and work? Cause you mentioned going to church, do you still go to church, or?" and he answers, after a short pause, "Why don't you give a quick statement of what role religion plays in your life and work, so I'll know how to do this."

Why leave space for conflation? What can happen there? What does Rooney think?

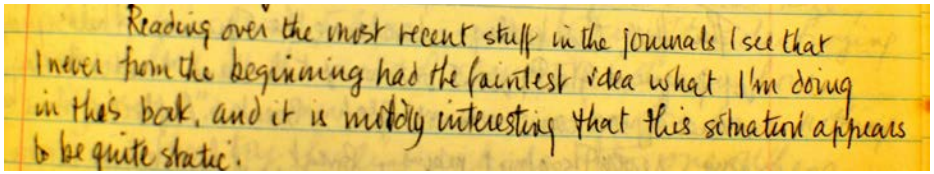
> As to what drew me to writing about a novelist: my previous books were set partly in schools and universities, and it so happens that when I wrote them, I had not spent much time outside school or university settings yet. Since then, I've spent most of my time writing and editing. And now it happens that one of the protagonists of this book is a writer and another is an editor. So I think it is fair to say that I write what I know. The events of this novel, like those of my previous two, are entirely fictional, but the world of the book is based on the real world that I have actually lived in. My experience of the world is of course very limited, and

> I only write about a small limited number of things in my fiction also. But I don't mind that – there are lots of other writers writing about lots of other things.

she says in an interview for Waterstones, sidling the question, not endorsing the grade-school dictum, "write what you know" but admitting her confinement to it. Means determine methods. Women use the tools their time gives them. "We live on mined land," writes Annie Dillard, spiritual daughter of Thoreau.

> Nature itself is a laid trap. No one makes it through; no one gets out. You and I will likely die of heart disease. In most other times, hunger or bacteria would have killed us before our hearts quit. More people have died at fishing, I read once, than at any other human activity including war. Now life expectancy for Britons is seventy-six years, for Italians, seventy-eight years, for people living in China sixty-eight years, for Costa Ricans seventy-five years, for Danes seventy-seven years, for Kenyans fifty-five years, for Israelis seventy-eight years, and so forth. We sleep through twenty-eight of them, and are awake for the other fifty-one. How deeply have you cut into your life expectancy? I am playing fifty-two pick-up on my knees, trying to find the weeks in a year.

Why not do as Dillard? Speak the words from her own mouth? What


Reading over the most recent stuff in the journals I see that I never from the beginning had the faintest idea what I'm doing in this book, and it is mildly interesting that this sensation appears to be quite static.

benefit is there in having Alice say, "I find my own work morally and politically worthless, and yet it's what I do with my life, the only thing I want to do," and not Sally? even if we presume that Rooney has, herself, felt this way at one time or another? For a novelist's character—a novelist herself—to claim her work is worthless puts a strange pressure on the statement and its sentiments. Is the writer undermining the value of her work, or is the character playing a part? Confusing Sally for Alice or Alice for Sally strains the thought which, to me, feels like a deliberate challenge. A

novel that declares a novel worthless undermines the claim right then and there. If Sally believes it, Alice shouldn't exist and be able to say it; but if Alice says it and Sally doesn't believe it, then it isn't straightfowardly true. The statements, in being at once from neither one nor both, then seem to come as if from nowhere, the attitude of their sentiment lost in the whirlwind of their descent, and you and I—in the best of worlds and the best of executions—are left to sort through the wreckage. The question "Why?" of course, implies the question "Why not?"

What is our expectation? How does one best martyr herself? The world has changed in twenty-four years. *For The Time Being*, published in 1999, was Annie Dillard's last book of non-fiction; in 2007 she published *The Maytrees*, a "SHORT novel of lifelong love in marriage, set on Cape Cod among the Provincetown artists' colony people," and otherwise prefers to "lay low." She is 79-years-old and her husband whom she met after writing him a letter of compliment on his biography of Thoreau, and married after "two lunches and three handshakes," Robert D. Richardson, died in 2020 at 86 from a subdural hematoma. Once I found one of her children

on Instagram, the one about whom Dillard writes—"I mentioned to our daughter, who was then seven years old, that it was hard to imagine 138,000 people drowning." "Cold clear water cupped in the palm of a hand," writes Rooney. "Would he remember, at least at first, to watch for its own blue seas' palming the earth?" writes Dillard. *For The Time Being* received two

New York Times reviews in 1999—just like *Beautiful World*—one positive, one negative. "Almost desperately, you look for a pattern in the seeming randomness of Annie Dillard's disturbing new book," and "This is not a pleasant book to read, nor is it intended to be," the two open—but can you guess which is which? "As a Jewish atheist with little or no feel for nature, I am admittedly not the ideal reader," claims one. "I wanted to review the new Gossip Girl, but I got so frustrated I worried it would give me an ulcer, so instead I'll be reviewing *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, Sally Rooney's third novel, because . . . mental health," opens Cazzie David, ellipsis and all, whose first book is titled *No One Asked For This*. "They cannot tell the difference,"writes Alice to Eileen,

> between someone they have heard of, and someone they personally know. They believe that the feelings they have about this person they imagine me to be—intimacy, resentment, hatred, pity—are as real as the feelings they have about their own friends.

but is it so simple? Anne Enright doesn't think so—"When a fictional writer opines that writers' opinions should not matter, the real writer is either having her cake and eating it, or enacting the paradoxes her character so derides." Past the horn of plenty letters sent and snatched up at a click, the phlox and thyme and peonies of romance, the pressure of her politics, the burthens of Realism and the "19th century bourgeois novel," Rooney operates, I imagine, I hope, I want in a tradition of paradox.

Beautiful world. "A holocaust of children, there is something grand in the idea!" says Captain Hook in 1902, and all 40 million buffalo are dead, slaughtered as though one might be the fugitive Zeus. In 50 years the United States will drop practice nukes on the Marshall Islands and in another 50 the women there will give birth to "what look like strands of purple grapes," "jellyfish babies" "born without bones in their bodies and with transparent skin," but who wants to hear about that? Diogenes, when asked whether "death was an evil thing" replied, "How can it be evil, when in its presence we are not aware of it?" Thoreau: "—what danger is there if you don't think of any?" John Donne in 1622 preaches, "That the Kingdome of Heaven hath not all that it must have to a consummate perfection, till it have bodies too," of course.

It is fifteen minutes until midnight, February 27, 2023. A coal mine in China collapsed the other day; five people are reported dead and 47 still missing. It is 37 minutes until midnight, February 28, 2023; talk of World War 3 escalates (again) and will go nowhere. A baby I know has the largest small hole possible in his heart and soon will be crawling. It is 1:24 PM, March 1, 2023, and I just watched a video of a man in St. Louis shooting another man at point-blank range, in daylight, cars trafficking up and down the boulevard, two men watching from an empty suite of echos behind decorative window-film that obscures them from sight in "the most technologically advanced, high-availability office property in the region" with a "well-lit and quite unique underground parking oasis" that is heated and "secure," recording while the gunman, holding his phone up with his left shoulder, slowly reloads the semi-automatic pistol, pockets the phone, and then "just fucking killed him, he just fucking killed him," and this has already been viewed over 30 million times. The building is home to several defense contractors, including General Dynamics, equally famous for developing the F-16 fighter aircraft and their subsidiary, Gulfstream, that manufactures private jets people like to have photos of themselves taken on, even whilst grounded. On July 27, 2009, I met a girl in St. Catherines, Ontario while on the road with a friends' band and I gave her zines I'd made; on August 4, 2009, a few days after my 22nd birthday, I write to her:

> Tour's going well. I'm going home Friday, but the band is staying out for another week after that. We're staying at some guys house in Dayton Ohio tonight. I'm sleeping on the floor of his kids room, haha. Toys all over. (They're not here.) I got to see one of my really good friends the day after my birthday in Chicago and they (the girl he's kind of dating and him) made me a cake and got me a book. I also got to stay with my friend Joe in St. Louis. It was a weird night because the neighbors house caught on fire maybe thirty minutes before we got there. Really sad. He wasn't living there but was fixing it up and the entire inside was destroyed. He came down the road and he looked completely devastated. I felt so bad for him.

What are the parameters of a book? A love story? Mercutio, Tybalt, Lady Montague, Benvolio, and Paris all die before Romeo and Juliet. I visited the girl from Canada three more times, and we never even kissed.

> There is thy gold, worse poison to men's souls,
> Doing more murders in this loathsome world,
> Than these poor compounds that thou mayst not sell.
> I sell thee poison; thou hast sold me none.

What value is there in reminding you of the hardness of the world? Will you fly to China with trowel and dig? Paint your face and join the war? Wrench flesh from flesh and plug closed the heart of that small boy? What business is any of it of mine or yours?

> **Why should I speak of what a thousand hearts**
> **Have felt, and every man alive can guess ?**

writes Wordsworth in 1805. This is Rooney's risk and mine: the obvious. For her it is the traps of depicting youth; "The book's millennial cri de coeur can also tip into navel-gazing indulgence . . . Their World isn't really new, after all; it's just new to them." For myself its adding to the the grumbling over uninspired and lackadaisical book reviews, complaints about this as regular as the new moon. In 1846 Poe's *Marginalia* quotes Laurence Sterne in 1762, "As we rode along the valley we saw a herd of asses on the top of one of the mountains—how they viewed and *reviewed* us!" "Reading many reviews these days," writes Heidi Julavits in 2003, "I have the feeling of dust settling on a razed landscape, in which nothing is growing, in which nothing can grow." It is safe to say there's something amiss in book reviewing, but I won't say what because I'm not an ideologue and I don't know if I know. Nonetheless, after having read 67 reviews and much, much more, I feel desperate to read Rooney's book like a cheat sheet against which to check my hunches, having no clear idea as to why the book does or does not work, nor who is ultimately to blame: the "rabble of ridiculous and unlovely muddlers" (Edward Thomas) or Rooney and her novel?

"THE PROSE IS THE REASON for Rooney's popularity," writes Joshua Bohnstack in a 484 word review of which 45 are a quotation from Rooney without a line drawn between his definitive statement and his singular line of potential proof. Here are some other descriptions.

"thoughtful prose"
"the limpid realm of this luxurious prose"
"low-temperature"
"unembellished"
"Rooney's, shall we say, distinctive prose"
"prose burns up the page"
"tests out other theories of praxis by prose"
"Rooney's typical effervescent prose, whose extreme readability"
"in a long lyrical, ecstatic burst of prose"
"extremely spare"
"plain prose"
"her prose style helps"
"unfussy prose"
"Such descriptions are not necessarily revelations on the level of prose"
"invigorating Rooney's prose with a sharp critical edge"
"a simple, mesmerizing naturalistic prose style, to the polemical, expository style of the emails"
"her distinctive, expository prose style that reads like a late capitalist homage to Hemingway"

The only piece to offer any in-depth examination of Rooney's prose was by novelist Tony Tulatimutte, in *The Nation*, and one of the only to also have made note of Rooney's other reviews and their tendency to rely on her "various public identities."

> Worst of all, Rooney has suffered the misfortune of being dubbed "the First Great Millennial Author" in *The New York Times*, a title that's not only impossible to live up to but invites invidious scrutiny, making the author accountable for the bluster of critics and publicists. It's fine to argue about how Marxist, feminist, Irish, millennial, or "great" a book is, but when most of the writing about it consists of squabbling over how much and what sort of relevant subject matter it contains, we are doing hype criticism, not book criticism.

His review—the second longest at 3,223 words, and appropriately generous—spends its last act considering "the quality of the writing," including several quotations from reviews of Rooney's earlier novels, to establish the ground from which he (and everyone else) operates, suggesting that

previous appraisals of her writing were lazy.

> I also used to think Rooney's prose was clean and errorless; it turns out I didn't read closely enough. When you slow down to study the sentences, the first thing you'll notice everywhere are intensifiers and down-toners: those kludgy modifiers used to compensate for inexact word choice. Not that bean-counting alone is any way to evaluate literature, but just to convey the extent of the problem here, the words "very" and "really" appear a combined 238 times over 353 pages, while "kind of," "a little," "a bit," and "almost" show up a combined 292 times. Sometimes they appear twice in the same sentence ("I dread to imagine what kind of faces I was making, in my efforts to seem like the kind of person who regularly interacts with others").

I take the biggest issue with two words in the above: 1) "errorless" and 2) "used." Given that he does not provide for the reader any "actual" errors (misuse of a word or muddled syntax, say), the term is here conflated with what one would assume Tulatimutte to think are the parameters of prose falling somewhere on the spectrum between "sufficient" and "great," on the outside of these "serviceable" and "spectacular." Were one to perform this same statistical analysis on, say, Ivy Compton-Burnett or Henry Green (which I did), the numbers aren't so far off, but that tells you nothing about the books or their two writers.

Which brings me to my second point of contention—"used"—"those kludgy modifiers *used* to compensate for inexact word choice." "Kludgy" is fine and "modifier" is accurate but "used" feels at best presumptuous and worst prescriptive. My own inclination is to think this a consequence of Tulatimutte's self-employment teaching a writing workshop out of his apartment (a job for which he is regularly praised and, I'm of no doubt, quite good at) where it is almost inevitable that a writer's preferences become pronouncements (ergo anaphora is not just annoying but it is "better that you should rush upon this blade than enter the workshop with anaphora in your manuscript" (@CRITWorks 4/23/18)). Honestly, I just disagree—"very" and "really" modify, period, their ends fixed in their contexts—and the extremity of the statement seems less really (an adverb deployed not out of a sloth in the face of hunting down the exact word but because it is, in fact, the exact word because I chose it) of a systematic conviction than hyperbole, a term easy to forget is, given its everyday use, another age-old tool of rhetoric. I'm regretful to have spent this much time picking at a freckle on Tulatumutte's otherwise smart and very generous review—I am reminded of a writing workshop wherein I was for several minutes castigated by the teacher for clichés in a draft of twenty pages only to, after, find no more than two—but it felt representative of a snag the book review of today tends to trip-up on: an assumption of accident as opposed to intent.

Intent gets its time, we've seen, in feeling for the ropes that tangle the real-life writer to the words in the text like a trawling net, but little of that energy (in the aggregate, for there are exceptions) is put towards sorting out what the words might be doing or trying to do; not the writer's intent, exactly, but the consequence of an assumption of intent on the writer's part in constructing a cohesive whole that may or may not make itself readily, easily apparent to a reader or, for that matter, the writer. ("Of a study I wrote of Eudora Welty, Miss Welty replied, with great kindness and friendliness, that she did not intend any of the symbolism I saw in her work," writes Guy Davenport in 1985 of his attempt to place Orpheus and Eurydice in the background of her novel *Losing Battles*.) Raised on the scientific method, this seems dispositional of western culture, to start with hypothesis, and is emblematic of our ongoing failures, having taken no time to experiment, to end in the same. Rather than try to ascertain a motive (or if there might be one) for the perceived gulf between the novel's "insistence that beauty is what redeems art's uselessness" and the "stylistic infelicities," Rooney's second-rate sentences serve Tulatimutte—somewhere between straw man and a begging of the question—tautologically, only as proof of themselves. Pushed, accepting the premise of the approach, I question less the novel than the writer, the takeaway more personal than literary. And, for what it's worth, novelist Anne Enright finds Rooney's sentences "impeccable."

Rooney's characters—no one would quibble—are often deeply concerned with the ethical and political side of life, but there is no consensus one level up as to whether or not her books engage with these ethics and politics in earnest (or what that correspondence "should" look like). Alice, for example, is deeply uncomfortable with her fame and the money she makes but does nothing to change this—the novel in question serving for many, one discovers, as proof that Alice did not give up writing—and this structure repeats itself throughout her books: a character expresses an

ethical belief and then acts in a manner that conflicts. The failure of her characters to be beacons of Marxist hope, or whatever, isn't the actual problem, nor their very common, very average concessions to pervasive inequality, death, etc.; the issue is with this very ethical preoccupation itself, the further complaints in consequence.

"Characters acknowledging their privilege and access to capital has somehow come to be seen as actual class critique in one's art," writes Brandon Taylor in *The New York Times*, and Jane Hu for *Vulture*, that after "a tide of adulation," there was a "predictable backlash . . . around Rooney's self-proclaimed Marxist politics . . . and the lack of Marxist praxis in her mostly orthodox romance novels." "The character's in Rooney's books are leftists, but the politics are mostly gestural," writes Madeleine Schwartz in her essay on the first two books: "the reader wonders why, for all their talk of capitalism, they don't rebel against the situation they've identified, or find a politics they might use to change it." Becca Rothfeld, in her own essay on the first two books, claims "however funny, cerebral or Marxist Rooney may be in person, her fiction is about as politically radical as it is formally adventurous—which is to say, not very"; the characters "don't make any good-faith efforts to improve the state of the world." Two years later Rothfeld made of Rooney a Dublin planetree and ground a heavy axe over all this in a much talked about essay published in *Liberties* and called "Sanctimony Literature." She defines the concept as "an extension of social media: it is full of self-promotion and the airing of performatively righteous opinions. It exists largely to make poster-cum-authors look good and scrollers-cum-readers feel good for appreciating the poster-cum-authors' goodness." What's more,

> Sanctimony literature may champion admirable political aims, but it does so at too high an ethical cost: it flattens complicated moral landscapes into children's jungle gyms and addresses its readers as if they were prepubescent.

Much of her frustration is easy to understand: "sanctimony literature is suspiciously easy to read," and "often unambitious," "the syntax undemanding," and "usually formally unadventurous." Her stance is that "ethical failings . . . are not irrelevant to . . . aesthetic deficiencies," and that "fiction succeeds when it captures our real, if perhaps mistaken, sense of self," while "the sanctimonists maintain a tidily bifurcated interest in good people and bad people," but this is where she loses me: "when in fact what they should be studying is the good and the bad in all people." Rothfeld's issue, if it is not clear, is not so much that the novels in question are preoccupied with ethical and political matters, but that the they fall short of her own moral-aesthetic standards; the metaphor she employs throughout is juvenility: "set in the simplified ethical universe of adolescence," [again] "it flattens complicated moral landscapes into children's jungle gyms and addresses its readers as if they were prepubescent" in an "exercise in retiring intellectual curiosity" begging "in the manner of a child waving an impressive report card at her parents in the hopes of a pat on the head." Part of the problem, unsurprisingly, is that books like this have "similarly affirming and consoling effects: [they serve] to make us feel proud that we share [their] ethical assumptions," the irony, of course, being that her essay is victim to the same menace. I either agree and feel good, or disagree and, depending on my constitution, feel better or worse, at no fault to Rothfeld, this trap native to good intentions, in this case shared by both.

It was Rothfeld's essay that I'd read in April of 2021; I paste the remainder of my email below.

> my issue here is less with rothfeld's piece itself . . . than the general type of discourse that erupts around these literary phenomena. i'm also painfully aware of the obvious—people like to read books that other people are reading because reading is also for them a largely social activity; marketing works and that's why corporations continue to pour money into not only marketing itself but researching what marketing works best and how to reduce those costs; also, people are lazy—but i really think there's more to be said; or, rather, i want and need to believe there is more to be said.
>
> i think why i take umbrage with this at all is that it does not seem to be the fault of lerner or rooney or any other writer whose piñata has been sufficiently whacked that nothing sweet falls out anymore, and who certainly doesn't want or need me to stand by and defend their papier-mâché husk. sure, it's great to push writers to try harder, try more, consider the world outside their own, all that, but this circumstance—the popularity of certain types of simple-minded books—is, to me, the fault of publishers and buyers, not necessarily writers.

> i don't have an "answer" to that problem, but i don't think the repetitive lambasting of whichever three to five books hold the discourse for the time is it.

What would be the value of upbraiding J. F. Powers *Morte d'Urban*, winner of the 1962 National Book Award, because it is not Nabokov's *Pale Fire* over which it won? *Peanuts* for not being *Calvin and Hobbes*? A daughter because it is not a son? The foundation of Rothfeld's argument—in short: a demand for more rigorous moral realism in fiction: "My critique is only of what I take to be a simplistic and therefore itself morally misguided presentation of moral goodness," she later clarified in a newsletter; "My problem with sanctimony literature is . . . that it is dogmatic and patronizing"—taken to its illogical conclusion, seems to suggest that the success of a novel is, precisely, that which she so deplores: an alignment with the moral-aesthetic compass of its critic or reader. Abstracted even further and we are at the grotesque border asking if the admonishment Rilke felt looking at Apollo's chopped up torso made of stone

You must change your life.

or James Wright's hammock-bound rearticulation

I have wasted my life

is "the point" of our engagement in literature: material change, and, then, of course, of course, how far? and to what end? (which I'm confident not what Rothfeld, a smart and attuned critic, wants).

Schiller thought we'd been sundered from nature—or simple humanity—by self-awareness and a movement into history. Homer is one with the world while Rilke and Wright can only reflect upon it. Everything exists now at a distance, both a cause and consequence of culture, a force whose counter to nature was meant to reconcile our primeval division: feeling from thinking. Between the sensuous (force, survival, matter) and the rational (law, justice, form) there was the aesthetic—a reciprocal harmony of form and matter—unbounded by compulsion, contingency, or constraint; a realm of being of the possible. Schiller writes, "It is through beauty that we arrive at freedom," because "it demands the cooperation of [our] two natures"; dominated by neither the sensuous nor the rational, one is capable of choice, of play: "the free movement which is itself its own end and means," and its gift is freedom through freedom. "Man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays." It is only here—in the aesthetic, in the state of play—that "the most slavish tool is a free citizen . . . and equality is realised." Things are more complicated now. Art, in the traditional sense, is now an intention more than a definable mode or form given that "aesthetics," in the common, is now a philosophical discipline applicable to anything in the perceivable universe. Less a shared energy and force, as it was for Homer and Schiller, "the aesthetic" is now a method of intellectualized appreciation; one can define an "aesthetics of" damn near anything, and find just as many angles in a painting of Nicolas Poussin's as ABC's *The Bachelor* as a box of penne rigate as a bobcat eating a rabbit. The working of matter and form, in what is today called "aesthetic," no longer reflects nor serves the creation of a reciprocal harmony whose function is to liberate. More time and money is spent in getting you to spend more time and money on yogurt and seltzer than art. Rather, there is made a feedback loop in which the eventual, inevitable distortion blurs the line between self-determination and clever marketing. This wasn't the intended outcome of any one or other motivated party, necessarily, but the logical, ongoing consequence of a way of life that prefers ease to

effort, lounging to labor; the abstractions that replace people—dividing their efforts to lighten their loads, breaking down Atlas into armies of ants—benefit everyone by the obvious whilst they are consumed by way of wherefrom their attentions have been drawn. Life seeks the path of

least resistance. Methods determine means and means determine methods. "The Systems's neatest trick consists in having turned powerful rebellious impulses, which otherwise might have taken a revolutionary direction, to the service of these modest reforms," wrote Theodore Kaczynski before he mailed bombs from the woods and then slipped up and wrote, "You can't eat your cake and have it, too," the older formulation of the common idiom, and his brother caught the tic. Curiously enough, that is precisely what art offers, though: the opportunity to eat one's cake and keep one's cake at the same time.

Rothfeld, in her 2020 "Normal Novels" in *The Point*, writes that Rooney's books—contra comparisons to Austen (7), Woolf (4), Hemingway (2), George Eliot (2), Henry James (2)—are placed in the wrong company, and that they are "not [like] Austen's tense novels of manners but commercial romances that specialize in a certain sort of fantasy fulfillment." It is, I believe, because of this that their failure as "Marxist polemics" isn't actually what is bothersome. "Indeed, one of the books' greatest strengths is that they capture, perhaps despite Rooney's intentions, the impotence and hypocrisy that abound in the fashionably leftist communities she describes." What is "much less innocuous than Rooney's politically anodyne writing is her inflated reception." It is facile to say that if Rooney had sold only so many books as there are people debating her stature that there would be no debate, but less so to note that it isn't sales at the root of the contention but that, given her avowed political affiliations and the politics of her characters, she has loudly encroached onto the land of the literate gentry. Technically it's an open field without borders, but Rooney's public coronation sounds no less like a kind of annexation by pollution; these are commercial romances and so dismissible to real critics; distinctions must be made. And once again, we are left with a conflation of writer and character, author and book, the failures of one serving the castigation of both, that results in more name calling.

> Isn't it funny that a good person, as envisioned by Lerner and Rooney, is exactly like Lerner and Rooney and all of their readers? And isn't it striking that all these Lerner-clones and Rooney-clones are depicted as irreproachably upstanding, while all of their enemies are represented as one-dimensionally irredeemable?

Abstracted and reconfigured, the moral-aesthetic realm of Rooney's books does not exactly appeal to me, either (part of the reason that I have not yet read them) but what I find frustrating about Rothfeld, and Tulatimutte, and others, is that their own argumentative presentations so often fail the tests of purity and logic which they champion.

Rothfeld is one example of many that fall into what the editors at *n+1* (issue 40) called the "Contemporary Themed Review" (or CTR) which, as Christian Lorentzen ("The Intellectuals are Having a Situation," *Gawker*) makes a point of saying what everyone else was thinking, had as "one actual target . . . Becca Rothfeld." The opening essay makes a claim similar to my own about criticism of this sort: "Readings are deductive rather than inductive—theses in search of evidence." (Lorentzen disagrees but offers no other take.) *n+1* blames this on the economics of book reviewing—few opportunities presenting little pay necessitating a need for forms of virality resulting in more CTRs, and that's just on the writer's side—and cites as its major blunder that it is "never not obvious," but otherwise fails to differentiate it on the level of the review from its earlier

likeness, "the review essays of the mid-20th century found in magazines like *Partisan Review* and *Politics*. *Here are four books by returning GIs,* they went, *What does this tell us about man, war, and Sartre?*" or, for that matter, essays they've published that meet the same criteria (minus, one assumes in being charitable, the "obvious"ness). They are both understanding of the circumstances ("Before you know it you're declaring bankruptcy") and, in tone, resentful of the outcome ("Next up: book deal"). What seems elided from their argument was specifically stated by one of their editors, Dayna Tortorici, in a series of tweets, since deleted, preserved in Rothfeld's newsletter responding to the public response to her own essay: "It's really too bad that the recent pieces lamenting literature preoccupied with being a "good person" ([Lauren] Oyler, Rothfeld) only take the case cynically. The literature they describe is so much more earnest than they admit." It is not that the CTR—as it were—is largely negative in its judgments of Rooney and her peers that to me seems cynical so much as their unceasing conflation of character with writer and its consequential collapsing of worlds. It seems to exclaim that these writers are just stupid.

One of the sharper points of Rothfeld's essay is that a "resistance to self-examination" on the page stands beside a deliberate public "self-presentation" it is unclear whether or not Rooney "stands behind . . . at least in her private life . . . This person, or this persona, is at pains to convince us that she is someone any of us could become: that all you have to do to win is not really care about winning, that all you have to do is become a decorated writer is dash off a charming email." On one hand, the reception is inflated, and on the other "the commercial and critical success of Rooney's books is no mystery, for they give the comforting impression that, whoever you are, you too . . . could publish the story or seduce the entire school. You too are different—and that is what makes you the same!" "These displays of preemptive self-flagellation" that are characteristic of sanctimony literature "have proved commercially irresistible" in a world where everyone thinks themselves special. "The heroes and heroines of sanctimony literature are so steeped in self-satisfaction that they provide an inadvertent moral lesson. It turns out that someone can have all the *de rigueur* political opinions without thereby achieving any measure of meaningful ethical success." The heart of these books is not seen as artistic—or political or moral—so much as exactly commercial, their talk of "normalcy" undermined by both the worlds of the fictions and the lives of the authors. "Genuinely normal people do not have the chance to advertise their normalcy in *Vanity Fair* or Oprah's magazine."

"So is she normal, or isn't she? The truth is, the book fulfills a ubiquitous romantic fantasy precisely because it can't decide." "Rooney and her readers hope to bask in the self-congratulatory glow of their supposed egalitarianism without ceding any of their accolades." They, like Rooney, want to eat their cake and have it too.

I'm suspicious of this if only because nothing about Rooney's public self actually seems itself suspicious; she is direct and clear and I'm inclined to believe her earnest if evasive. Rothfeld remarks in a parenthetical, "The *New Yorker* journalist tasked with profiling Rooney reports that the novelist interrupted the interview to ask why she merited an article, a detail disclosed with fawning flourishes in the resultant piece," which is, to be fair, disingenuous. Here's the bit from the profile:

> "There are two warring aspects of my personality," [Rooney] said. "One of which is a desire to be friendly and nice, because I know journalists don't love you to give monosyllabic responses. The second is: don't tell them anything." Now she had a question for me. She asked it politely but seriously. Why did I think that a profile of her was worth writing? If this were a debate, the motion might have been: This house, while honored, fundamentally believes that we are wasting our time.

Rothfeld's switch is grammatical, the effect rhetorical. Lauren Collins, in her paraphrase of Rooney, has as the subject of her question "a profile"—redirected and rephrased: "what is the potential value in a written profile of me"—whereas Rothfeld makes the subject Rooney herself: "what is it about me that warrants this profile?" The implication is negative—that Rooney is, in fact, not so "normal," and knows it—when the only real answer is, no matter who's speaking: because she is famous. "People simply want to know more about those they admire," or so popular thinking goes.

> Goethe noted that when a man has done something extraordinary, the world enters into a conspiracy to ensure that he doesn't do it again. Epicurus' advice to live unknown is wisdom with more point to it now than then. The telephone, the interviewer, mail from importunate strangers, the collector of acquaintances, invitations into society, moths around the glamour of fame: Sirens, all, indifferent

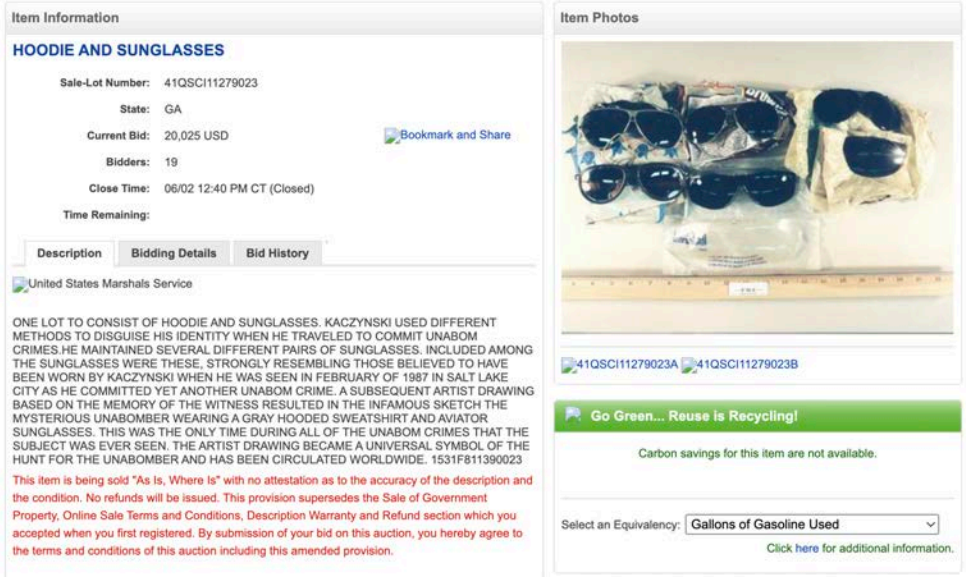
to the shipwrecks they cause. We have seen poets murdered by adulation, writers smothered, actors sent into a spin. Publicity is a blowfly. One of the few details of Shakespeare's blank biography is a note declining a drinking party, pleading that he had a raging toothache. One imagines rather that he spent the evening writing.

(Guy Davenport)

What does a reader gain in reading Rooney for Alice? Alice for Rooney? Why should one care? How better do we know Schiller's words with the fact of his taste for rotten fruit? Balzac's for his masturbation? Thoreau that his favorite flower was andromeda? That Dillard smoked until she married Richardson and then, poof, quit? What if the belt that held up Wallace's pants while he walked around Italy, goofing off for the camera, was the

same one with which he hanged himself two years hence? You can see him twirl and tamp a cigarette on a video from one evening on Capri. Someone paid $27,000 for sunglasses once owned by Joan Didion, almost $10,000 more than I've ever made in one whole year of life. I am ~~35 36~~ 37. I am not famous. I understand exchange value. I live on the virtue of thrift and manna of kindness. I write slowly out of fear. *Non basta guardare, occorre guardare con occhi che vogliono vedere*, wrote Galileo (so said; I believe it was Vasco Ronchi in a book on Galileo), "It is not enough to look, one must look with eyes that want to see." "Do not whine" writes Didion on a notecard. "Do not complain. Work harder. Spend more time alone." "Work—work—work!" wrote Thoreau to his friend Harrison Blake. Someone I do not know but follow on twitter is posting tonight, at 5:00 AM, about killing himself. Privately, I commiserate. Some truths feel

more self-evident than others. It has been three months since I finished a first draft of this essay and am now in revision; it is 2:30 AM; my former step-mother died two weeks ago after a life spent in pursuit of her very death, successful at last. $27,000 is about the yearly income of someone making $13 an hour before taxes, no sick days or vacation.

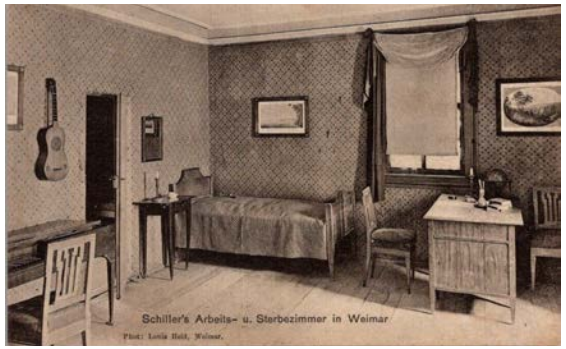


"The authority of print," writes Ian Watt in 1957, "—the impression that all that is printed is necessarily true—was established very early," and, in a way, late twentieth and early twenty-first century autofiction heralded the "post-truth" age we are said to inhabit. But while the work of sorting out what is "real" and "true" from what's not feels distinctly and uniquely contemporary for its present-day perfect penetration (consider the speed with which "printed" information now travels) it is a problem as old as the "autobiography" of Robinson Crusoe, and the tale of the man of La Mancha:

> Matters of war, more than any others, are subject to continual change; moreover, I think, and therefore it is true, that the same Frestón the Wise who stole my room and my books has turned these giants into windmills in order to deprive me the glory of defeating them: such is the enmity he feels for me; but in the end, his evil arts will not prevail against the power of my virtuous sword.

Though our romances still trade in fantasy, as they must, and the distance between dream and delusion remains about the same, as it will, we are born knowing our swords dull and ornamental, justice an abstraction, rare, smoke; we know the windmills were never giants, their spin a soporific, and are doubtful they turn unto anything but the erosion of their works. The gentleman found no "knights to fight in an age when gunpowder had replaced magic potions" (Nabokov) and the threshold for madness is now a calculus. It is emblematic and of no surprise that in an age of such distrust that the realms of fiction are rife with the flourishes of despairingly impotent Dons Quixote in housecoats and bathrobes, people of good heart and hope, demoralized, in disarray as to where best they can focus their rage, scolded all the while. "If our Lord Don Quixote were to rise again and return to this Spain of his, they would go about looking for some ulterior motive and purpose in his noble extravagances," writes Miguel de Unamuno in 1925. "If any one denounces an abuse, attacks injustice, fustigates orthodox platitudes, the slavish crowd asks: What is his object in that? What is he aiming at?" And yet we've no need to conflate Cervantes and his hero because their resolution—"a persuasive awakening into mortality" (Harold Bloom)—is our inheritance, burden, and beginning. I can watch footage of American-made Stinger missiles launched by Ukrainian soldiers at Russian troops within minutes of their firing; I can watch this from my desk, a pretzel in my mouth; I do not need to leave the house where I write about an Irish woman who writes novels. To present this, to address it is not morally challenging, one can argue, but that makes the fact of it no less real and true and horrifying.

Reviewers and critics, no matter their take on the success of *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, in the aggregate, agree that Alice is Rooney not because it benefits any literary analysis, nor that it is simply the logical conclusion of the character's likeness to its writer—nothing more than gossip—but because the novel's concern for the world in which it exists as a novel, the world in which it is read, forces us out of the book like a foot to the chest; Rooney must be Alice because we are in both worlds at once, neither reducible to its constituent parts, worlds that are total and in their totality, somehow, both simultaneously true and thereby irreconcilable. Cake eaten, cake had. "The trouble is that both politics and art are universalist in their ambition, each claims a total vision of life," writes Denis Donoghue in 1982. What's more, "these books—millennial agit-prop, millennial middle-brow—"(Rothfeld) complicate their reception by their accessibility; it is perhaps because they are uncomplicated and unassuming in the work done by both content and form that one sees the collision of the two as a collapse—a lack of art supposing a lack of substance—and one drives by seeing only the smoke, never stopping to look for the sparks.



"Moral freedom is the freedom to choose to act in one way rather than another: aesthetic freedom is the freedom to postpone all such choices, and to remain in the enjoyment of one's general capacity," writes Donoghue about Schiller who himself writes in his fifteenth letter of *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, "we must regard the capacity which is restored [by] the aesthetic mood as the highest of all gifts, the gift of humanity itself." "What I put into words is no longer my possession," writes Susan Howe about Emily Dickinson. "Possibility has opened."

We can bicker over Rooney's prose but the mood of any novel is foremost aesthetic; only secondarily can its mood be critical—or moral—though they work in oscillating synergy. It feels not only mean but foolish to pretend that Rooney would not be aware of the implications of writing a character who so resembles herself, particularly after having already been on the receiving end of so much presumption and attack about this very thing. Narrative correlations aside, it is, again, perhaps Rooney's plain prose that deceives us. Hugh Kenner writes, "It is clarifying to reflect that the language of 'fiction' cannot be told from that of 'fact'" and it is no wonder why, in the realm of the simply put, "there can be a radical disagreement about what is being said" and, perchance, who is really speaking. "Plain prose," he goes on, "is the perfect medium for hoaxes," because it feels improvisational, casual, personal—one cannot discount that, most often, a rose *is* a rose—even if in the midst of three-hundred written pages, a deliberate and eccentric undertaking. Preoccupied as I am with my own inheritance—immigrant, American—it is important to remember that Rooney's is James Joyce: Stephen Dedalus, "named for an artificer who wore wings, a symbol of transcendence, escape and freedom" (Davenport)—a *Hero* abandoned, a *Portrait* ten years in the making, "the *fons et origo* of modern fiction," an "autobiographical" novel that is also not, the transformation making "an *uncompleted* Joyce, indeed radically uncompletable" (Kenner) because a book and not a man. "The artist, like the God of creation," writes Stephen, or Joyce, "remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails."

> —In order to see that basket, said Stephen, your mind first of all separates the basket from the rest of the visible universe which is not the basket. The first phase of apprehension is a bounding line drawn about the object to be apprehended. An esthetic image is presented to us either in space or in time. What is audible is presented in time, what is visible is presented in space. But temporal or spatial, the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as selfbounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it. You apprehended it as *one* thing. You see it as one whole. You apprehend its wholeness. That is *integritas* . . .

It is a curious mark of fiction's value and the aesthetic mood that truth can be found there is, itself, a truism. If Kenner is right that "fiction" and "fact" cannot be discerned on the level of their language, it is of note he also claims that if "fiction speaks political truths, then, it does so by allegory. That is tricky, because it transfers responsibility for what is being said from the writer to the reader"—no one in their right mind would blame George Orwell for Joseph McCarthy, nor call *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a manual—while proffered fact and its articulation is the liability of the hand that held the pen and the masthead that rubber-stamped its printing. From where do these truths emerge? Harold Bloom's imposition of the competitive temper on the poets lets slip his own motives, which he admits—"We read to usurp"—but while the working stuff of criticism can be seen and heard and touched and felt (the book sits here, on my floor) the wellspring of a fiction is, once again, behind gauze. "He is himself only when he is most evasive," Bloom writes of Wallace Stevens, and Donoghue responds, "Evasion plays no part in knowledge . . . but it is crucial if you want to escape or refute your fate." Schiller thought the poets of our time lacked a unifying harmony with the world around us and "not in unison with ourselves, and unhappy in our experiences of humanity, [we] have no pressing interest except to escape from it." Stevens' "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," part 3, canto X, reads

> Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,
> How is it I find you in difference, see you there
> In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?
>
> You are familiar yet an aberration.
> Civil, madam, I am but underneath
> A tree, this unprovoked sensation requires
>
> That I should name you flatly, waste no words.
> Check your evasions, hold you to yourself.
> Even so when I think of you as strong or tired,
>
> Bent over work, anxious, content, alone,
> You remain the more than natural figure. You
> Become the soft-footed phantom, the irrational
>
> Distortion, however fragrant, however dear.
> That's it: the more than rational distortion,
> The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.

"Irrational" rather than lacking rationale here supersedes it, is "more than," provides for the truth neither could contain. Stevens dramatizes

Schiller's thinking about the gap between the poet of ancient Greece—characterized by a lack of self-consciousness, symbolized by a relationship with the muse and natural world—and the poets of every time since, at a distance from their world, defined by the "difference . . . a moving contour, a change not quite completed," taking the shape in 1960s France of an infinite deferral of meaning, and a skeleton lurking at the foot of every bed: "Haunting would mark the very existence of Europe. It would open the space and the relation to self of what is called by this name," writes Jacques Derrida, looking back upon a past, like Schiller, that does and does not exist. The ancient Greek poet is not only one with nature but their own work—in a "marriage with endless space" (Spengler)—while we are sundered from the world, from the meanings of our words, the speaking subject at a fixed and permanent distance from its object. "None of our fictions," writes Frank Kermode, "is a supreme fiction." Rooney and Stevens dramatize this each in their own way, embodying what Cavell wrote in his book about Thoreau, "The art of fiction is to teach us distance." Gaea is no more but, now, "Fat Girl, terrestrial," eminent and full in this image, outline later reshaped "the soft-footed phantom," a ghost, "however fragrant, however dear," haunting us; Alice two books deep dithers, emails Eileen, "I don't think I'll ever write a novel again," and Rooney publishes her third. This is not an inconsistency; it's not a mistake; it's a provocation, the reader responsible for its reconciliation, if one is ever possible. It is the instigation to which one can only respond with the words of Friedrich Schlegel, writing in 1800 and knowing well the answer, "What gods will be able to rescue us from all these ironies?"

Rooney's concern (it seems) and mine, is the unbearable, a feeling of prolonged grief. Traditionally, grief is managed by ritual—Achilles tearing out his hair after the death of Patroclus, a handful of dirt thrown on a coffin, the writing of this essay ("After great pain, a formal feeling comes")—a form by which unmanageable feelings are made manageable. It is the impression of a form on the disorganized tumult of raw feeling, the process of objectification, that releases one from the power held by the object of grief, a process no different from that of Schiller's aesthetic mood. "What is objective to him can have no power over him, for in order to become objective it has to experience his own power . . . As far and as long as he impresses a form upon matter, he cannot be injured by its effect; for a spirit can only be injured by that which deprives it of its freedom." Nostalgia is one of those forms. It is variable, notional, ideological; it has no one object, no fixed point, and as such no means of disappointment or fulfillment. It is, according to Susan Stewart, "the desire for desire," (echoing Lacan) and therefore infinite; its motif is utopian, its direction "future-past," its state permanent. "In literature at least, the nostrum killeth but the nostalgia may give life," writes Ian Watt. The futility—the split consciousness, the impossible object, the banishment from the garden—is itself the very same condition by which the aesthetic mood is possible; the form is what makes it bearable; as Heaven needs bodies, so every Sisyphus needs a boulder. And although life abounds today with practical, localized nostalgias, and we are overrun with retrievable souvenirs of an irretrievable past, it is "wanting to be understood, as adults," per Adam Phillips, that "can be . . . our most violent form of nostalgia."

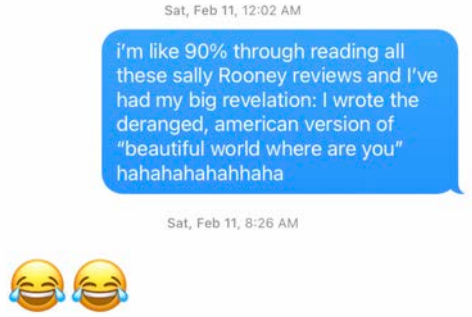
In May of 2022 I finished writing a novel that I started in March of 2016. The idea for the novel—a man locks himself in a bathroom to hide from a prostitute, it's called *The John*—I remember as having came to me while in Wyoming at the Ucross Foundation in October of 2014, but an email I wrote to a friend on the 9th of that month claims I'd already been thinking about it for a while. That day it was announced Patrick Modiano (with whom I share a birthday) was the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature and Emma Cline (with whom I shared a classroom and upon I had a crush) had signed a three-book deal with Random House "for a rumored $2 million and change." In between paragraphs of bellyaching and despair, I wrote to my friend George, on a line all its own,

it disgusts me how badly i want to be seen

and not much has changed. This conflict is at the center of all my experience. I want to be understood but don't want to be someone who wants to be understood; I want to be thought smart but never seen to be wanting to be thought smart; I want to be handsome, and hot, and desirable just as much as I want to take monastic vows, don a habit, and make of my poverty a covenant with God—the desire for attention, positive or negative, feels grotesque, but I am not satisfied alone, keeping my thoughts to myself, walking in ever tightening circles until the ground gives. (Flaubert lurks over my shoulder: "The impatience of literary folk to see themselves in print, acted, known, praised, I find astonishing—like a madness.") Well-intentioned people like to suggest that over time I will acclimate; that one feeling, one compulsion, one aspect of my character will weaken while the other hardens, but I don't think that's true, not exactly, because comfort and self-assurance and certainty are not states that I desire. I'm interested, fundamentally—as concerns the aesthetic mood, art as a vocation, the critical function—not in conviction but ambivalence. To reconcile the conflict between paradoxical forms of desire would be the very grounds for filling my pockets with rocks and walking out into a lake. Tension resolved ends a song. If Alice is Sally the book is no more. It is a fiction. I'm not confused; I'm divided, and it is the division that both allows for and requires the pressure of a form, in this particular case a ~20,000 word essay nominally about Sally Rooney, but mostly, quietly about myself.

Much like my idea for *The John*, an essay about the reviews of a book I had not read just seemed funny, and I've refused—~~3rd 4th~~ fifth revision—to break off from the bit. While I felt confident I could take the experience and from it make a (somewhat) cohesive piece of writing, I did not feel confident any publication would take on such a silly idea from someone without a name to warrant the energy and space it would need. When I spoke to my friend Jordan Kisner on January 28th, 2023 and she told me she might make a zine from a section of her new book, I asked if this was something I could do with her. I was six months—now [two] ~~a~~ year[s]—into querying *The John* and the absence of bureaucracy married to its immediacy made a zine feel, once again, liberating. When I was 19, I printed the first of thirteen zines I would make over a period of four years, an exercise that began out of a belayed inclination, the day I dropped out of college, to drown myself in the pond near where I grew up. They consisted of poems and stories in which I tried to give form to a feeling I have yet to kick—here's how I phrase it in the novel, giving the narrator my feeling: "that somewhere in the pine groves and parking lots of our youth I somehow missed the secret everyone else was told"—denied the wonderful gift of enough self assurance to get by on suspicions alone. What I hoped to replicate, here, was the access I had, then, to an urgency, a fearlessness, an indifference to how I might be judged while I lingered there, on the upswing from suicide. Over time, the ambivalence I felt about life underwent a transference onto writing, where eventually it further transferred onto the formal object itself; I am no longer consumed by a conflict about life—in the sense of Hamlet and his forebears—or a conflict about writing, so much as I feel the greatest harmony with art that is constitutionally ambivalent, art that might argue for its very nullification. On 18 May 1840, Emerson wrote in his journal, "Criticism must be transcendental, that is, must consider literature ephemeral & easily entertain the supposition of its entire disappearance." I like this. I feel a kinship with Thomas Hardy, who writes in 1896, "Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion—hard as a rock—which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting . . . If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have let him alone," and with Wittgenstein who asks, in 1950, "Suppose it were forbidden to say 'I know' and only allowed to say 'I believe I know'?"

By February 11th I'd read through "like 90%" of the reviews, and I wrote to Jordan,



emphasis on deranged. "A 100,000-word literary fiction novel, THE JOHN is about a man grappling with the difficulties of pleasure, control, inheritance, a grudge with the actor Tom Hanks, and what it means to want something," reads my query letter. Rather than writing emails to his friends, like Alice, he writes essays to himself; rather than having left a hospital to convalesce, he undertakes the act that could lead to his

committance, if he doesn't first disintegrate into ash or words. I realized, perhaps too late, how off-putting the elevator pitch might read to one who does not already know me.

Ambivalence isn't a virtue, despite Whitman's efforts—overwhelmed by the solidity of its articulated form, so poised and proud in his contradiction! —doubt reads as weak, as unstable; an ambivalent object gives a confident, desirous subject the opportunity to walk away, or so have said certain of my friends. We tend to view this conflicted, dual-state with animosity because it most often acts as a barrier to already present needs, and threatens to annihilate not only their satisfaction but their desire. One has to develop a tolerance for daily, nonsense ambivalences, like what to have for dinner, as well as a capacity to choose, so one doesn't go to bed having only swallowed pride, but it is not that simple in art that is undecided about itself. This is because ambivalence challenges the framework of its very containment—in the already ambivalent aesthetic—by questioning the possibility of the union, harmony, and reconciliation in which it is already held and made possible; it asks if this infinite is even possible from inside of it, and threatens a return, through Freud ("I am anxious not to be misunderstood"), to Greek fate, to concession, when we still need the promise of being someday understood; Job may never come to understand "the wayes of God," but he could only reconcile this tragic fact after having been heard by his comforters. "No one" wants to read a book that hates them, or listen to a song while being asked if there isn't something better to be done; "no one" wants to be reminded that comprehension, connection, life is temporary at best. We want escape, no? "Your breaths," wrote Elias Canetti, "cannot be condensed into conclusions," and the irony of the assertion shouldn't be forgotten, the aforementioned teacher once admonished me. The cake you eat you will shit, and the cake you keep will decompose. The unbearable will be borne. "Explanations," writes Giorgio Agamben, "are in fact, only a moment in the tradition of the inexplicable," echoing Arthur C. Danto, "the generalization of today will be revolutionized into oblivion tomorrow," who echoes J. G. Frazer, "after all, what we call truth is only the hypothesis which is found to work best," and I am daily crushed under the faux-marble of others' certainty.

Today, the known universe continues to expand and we do our best to fill it with hot air. Even so, many of the pragmatic truths of daily life discovered in Schiller's time have not changed in years, only the various shapes taken by our personal ducks and drakes. In a sense, it seems, the reason for all the bickering is the underlying questions remain the same.

> If there were no first, no cause, no Father, no Creator, no incomprehensible wisedome, but that every Nature had beene alike eternal; and Man more rationall than every other Nature: Why had not the eternall reason of Man, provided for his eternall being in the World? For if all were equall, why not equall conditions to all? Why should heavenly bodies live for ever; and the bodies of Men rot and dye?

writes Sir Walter Ralegh in 1604, one year after stabbing himself in the right side of his chest with a table knife, "There an end!" before hitting a rib. Is this not still our problem? Are these not our questions? Are we any closer, really, to their answer? "But, alas!" writes Thoreau in his 1843 lecture on Ralegh, "What is Truth? That which we know not. What is Beauty? That which we see not. What is Heroism? That which we are not. It is in vain to hang out flags on a day of rejoicing—fresh bunting, bright and whole; better the soiled and torn remnant which has been borne in the wars." Means determine methods. Certainty usurps conjecture. Machines replace men. Reality replaces art. Potential replaces possibility.

One is not encouraged, in a world so confident and assertive, to lead with doubt; it's as though it were contagious and one at risk of doubling their already present sickness. Surety. Decisiveness. These sell in our culture of debate. "In Melville's America," writes Lewis Hyde, "it's not light flooding the mind that's the mark of true belief; it's money changing hands." Investment. A promise on return. To write there is "no reason thous shouldest employ thy time about so frivolous and vaine a subject" of one's own work your name must needs already be Montaigne.

Robert D. Richardson writes of Thoreau, "As he walked around Concord people noticed that his eyes rarely left the ground." There was to be found—rock, leaf, arrowhead—our past, present, and future, here the same dust that fell from the shield of Achilles as that rests on the coffins and books of Schiller and Goethe. "Three thousand years," Thoreau writes in March of 1838, no mind to belatedness, "and the world so little changed!—*The Iliad* seems like a natural sound which has reverberated to our days." He does not look back; he looks in, and writes. Our reconstructions of the fragmentary past allow it to exist in as many shapes as we can make, but of Thoreau—who died in 1862 of consumption, the same

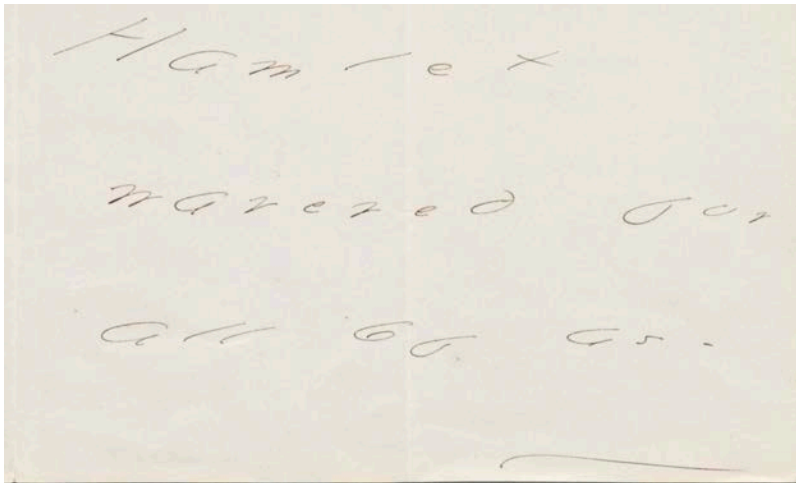
disease that ate through Schiller—we have twenty-four years in forty-seven volumes of journals by which to know, a small mole in the eye of one's digital record. "Zeno the stoic stood in precisely the same relation to the world that I do now," he wrote, but even the handy serendipity of names (or mistakes of same and paradoxes strewn from them) cannot bind two million words into a man named Henry, five feet, seven inches tall, walking through the woods of Walden four hours a day, no matter Whitman's claim—"Camerado, this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man"—or how fast we read or close to the page we get. Gaps remain. "The classics can console," wrote Derek Walcott, "But not enough." Distance must be taught, managed, spanned. Distance is the given. Distance,

Dissonance
(if you are interested)
leads to discovery

wrote William Carlos Williams, aware that distance, separation, difference, division, dissonance, however you want to call it—that you and I are not one and cannot ever be—is the very rule which creates all possibility, and allows for the discovery it just as much compels.

Herodotus, Livy, Gibbon all tell a version of history, but the natural world is the living record of itself. "The eyes of the oldest fossil remains, they tell us, indicate that the same laws of light prevailed then as now. Always the laws of light are the same, but the modes and degrees of seeing vary," Thoreau writes in *A Week*. "Perspectives begin to tell tales," writes Sir Thomas Browne in 1658. "Only some deeply grounded and fully paradoxical view of God," writes Dillard, "can make sense of the notion that God knows and loves each of 5.9 billion of us." Alice and Sally. Sally and Alice. Between them, what? "How simply the fictive hero becomes the real," writes Stevens in 1942, "the real made more acute by an unreal," eight years later. Has too much time passed? Melville's Ahab made a living killing whales for the oil with which Americans lit their homes, and now one sees in the dark by the blue light of mobile phones on which we occupy ourselves with the infinite lives of strangers, the unbounded held in a rectangle with smooth, rounded corners. "History assaults," saith Elizabeth Hardwick, "and if you live you are restored to the world of gossip." We've long run out of land—"We are the last 'first' people," wrote Charles Olson—and have shifted focus, slowly perfecting the colonization of time. Entire economies rely on the the profitable banalities of

Josephine and Joseph Schmoe. Stores of attention, we are told, diminish and life fragments into clips. No longer does it feel as though we live in the same world as Diogenes, a man fashioned out of anecdote. "What are your historical Facts; still more your biographical? Wilt thou know a Man, above all a Mankind, by stringing together bead-rolls of what thou namest Facts?" wrote Carlyle's Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, "God-Born Devil-Dung." We look upon the torso of Apollo and it says nothing. It is not of another time so much as a forgettable shard of our own. We have, per Stevens, "lost the whole in which [we were] contained, / [Know] desire without an object of desire." Remember: nostalgia is as much a form of remembering as it is of forgetting. Remember:



Hamlet wavered for all of us—
(Dickinson)

It is ~~August 23rd~~ ~~September 7th~~ ~~November 6th~~ August 3rd, 2024, and I waver: why all this conflation of Alice and Sally? I am—and have been—reluctant to make explicit claims, to avoid, in equal measure, hypocrisy ("the only modern sin," per Nick Denton of *Gawker*) and revealing the fool I fear I am. I hide behind a book I have not read and other's words. Nevertheless, I have hunches.

That some readers feel judged is clear, a failure of "the text," in the playful words of Barthes, to "prove to me that it desires me," and envy feels obvious; that one would, following Melanie Klein, be consumed by "the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable

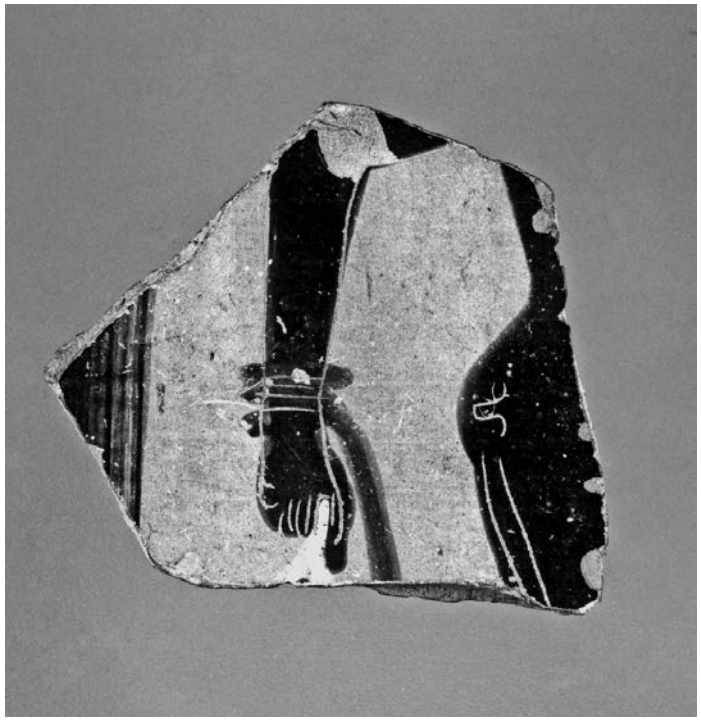
—the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it." So too does the Oedipal—encore, Barthes, "to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end"—seem given, what with its near universal welcome and secondary validity: a projection onto Rooney of one's own desperate need to be understood, particularly in a culture of endless validation. In making of Alice an avatar for Rooney—the obverse of the supposition that I hold in contempt—her role as an artist is unavoidably supplanted by her role, now, as celebrity; her work reveals aspects of her unspoken, hidden biography rather than the biography supporting and deepening interpretations of the given work. She is, then, in a sense, objectified (Coleridge: "a subject . . . becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself,") that is to say, rendered powerless. One could see this as a form of capitalist reification (Rooney's stature is determined, of course, economically) but it feels closer to Winnicott's transitional object: the infant's blanket or teddy bear that offers comfort while supporting the ongoing separation from the parent. It is, like a novel, both found and made: "the baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created." What allows the object to be of use is its ability to withstand this paradox and another: its destruction.

> The subject says to the object: "I destroyed you', and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: "Hullo object!" "I destroyed you." "I love you." "You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you." "While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) *fantasy*." Here fantasy begins for the individual.

It is Rooney's seeming within our grasp and at the same without it that made of her a worthy object. The problem is that she did not survive her destruction, at least not as Winnicott thinks it; she reacts to the articulated fantasies, and disrupts a normal maturation. Nylah Burton, the reviewer reluctant to criticize *Beautiful World* because it felt "wrenched directly from [Rooney's] heart," also writes:

> After reading both Alice's words and those . . . of Rooney about the assumptions of others—their ungenerous criticism of her work, their heated Twitter debates about her upbringing—it feels strange to sit down at a computer and do more or less the same thing

painfully aware she is herself, too, being watched. Not only does the book deny the unbounded fantasy it promises by its nature as a novel—the aesthetic held, by itself, in ambivalence—but the author denies her own objectification by response: "Hullo subject!" "You destroyed me!" "I loved you!" In that articulation there is lost the potential of an unconscious projection: the opportunity for one to themselves, in the fantasy of objectified destruction, be found both indestructible and powerless in a form of perfect, impossible consolation. "Anyone who singles out, by desire, some one man or woman as a singular valued object, creates by



that act a fiction, an idealized image in which desire finds or thinks to find, its satisfaction," writes Helen Vendler in 1984. Is this not the shape of fame—the laurel of celebrity? loneliness in the round? town square in the sanatorium? a cake that never rots and, no matter how much you eat, never dwindles?—to be bestowed the grace of being made a fiction: unfettered by laws natural, common, and legal, left free of the guilt that is our shared, earthly inheritance? A life in sustained paradox? Free, what's more, from death, even if only in metaphor? Prometheus bound with a liver to eat and to hold? Or at least this is, today, what I've let myself think.

If Thucydides lacked the tools for historical perspective, we are overrun with them. Like the Romans, we take pieces of the past and press them back together with gobs of wax. Our narrative daily revises itself, assimilating new evidence and angles to better form a temporary whole out of ill-fitting parts, the goal of which is, exactly, a more precise narrative: a stronger, harder truth on which to hold, even if it is the inevitable lot of historical perspective to one day prove false, this the very mark of progress. In the onslaught of realities, we forget that Don Quixote is yet more real than Philip IV, the Planet King, not in spite of his unreality but because of it. Rilke's poem was inspired by the remnants of a statue carved out of Parian marble more than twenty centuries earlier instead of bodies found preserved in time at Pompeii; that it was an image of Apollo, with him, we go along; Wright's poem testifies to R. P. Blackmur's remarks about Stevens: "Nature becomes nothing but words and to a poet words are everything" (an echo of Herder: "From every sounding being echoed its name"). I have no fixed argument, only an affection for assonance, a desire for a form, an itch I must scratcheth. "There is no conclusion," wrote William James, "There are no fortunes to be told, and there is no advice to be given.—Farewell!"

Le Paradis,

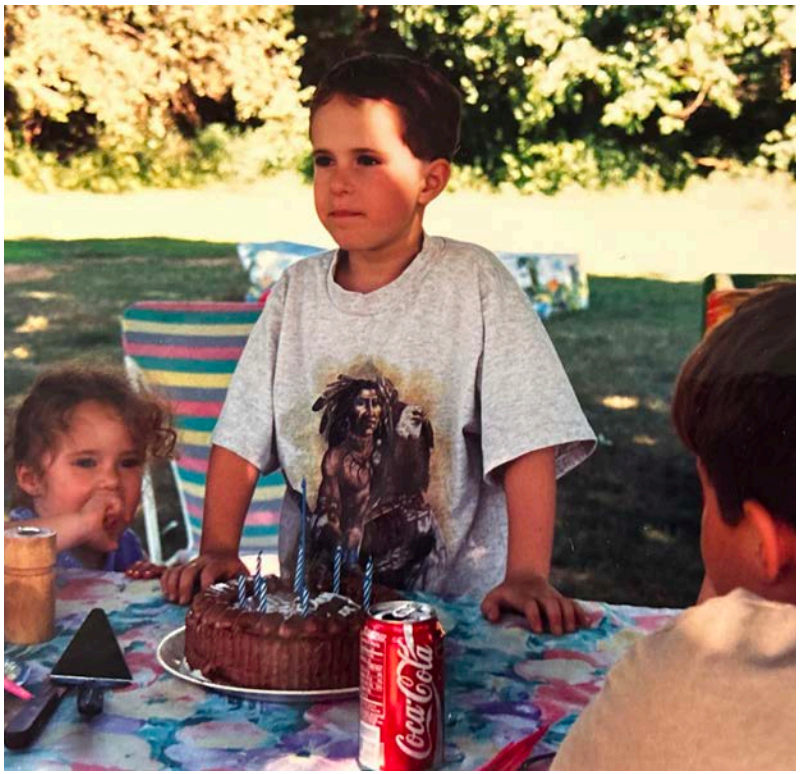
writes Ezra Pound,

exists only in fragments,

the laudatores temporis acti
claiming that the shit used to be blacker.

I cling to failure even as I try to bury it in quotation, every statement provisional at best. "Understanding," wrote George Santanyana, "is an applicable fiction, a kind of wit with a practical use," and Stevens: "What a thing it is to believe that / One understands." Let me be clear: let me be perfectly understood: I do not care if Sally Rooney's novels work; I care that they are treated as works of imagination, and that this is worthwhile; I care that criticism respect the difference between a writer and their characters; that fiction is treated on its own terms, not those of gossip rags and fame. To draw the boundary of the aesthetic—the found from the made, fact from fiction, Sally from Alice—is a method of evasion that keeps forever in abeyance the judgments of impending fortune; that asserts the value of giving form to life. It is "the imagination," Northrop Frye rewrites Shelley, that "redeems time. Its métier is not potential but possibility, its privilege equal measures conviction and doubt. "Saint Thomas did not allow the deity to contradict himself, which is one of man's chief pleasures," wrote Henry Adams channeling "Walt Whitman, a kosmos"; Leviticus kept "distinct the categories of creation," involved "correct definition, discrimination and order," (Mary Douglas) while *Leaves of Grass* sang "Of the terrible doubt of appearances / Of the uncertainty after all—that we may be deluded," of the freedom to be found by embracing ambivalence through the unbearable.

It is from this vantage one can best hear Winnicott shouting "(The paradox must be tolerated)" in a whisper; can see in Steven's Hartford a baker's dozen blackbirds pressed finely into one; can know the peculiar truth when Emerson writes, "Jesus is not dead: he is very well alive: nor John, nor Paul, nor Mahomet, nor Aristotle"; can feel the hard, dense fact in each of Homer's seven places of birth; can try and wrap our minds around, with Annie Dillard's daughter, the tragedy of 138,000 people drowning in a typhoon: imagine: "lots and lots of dots, in blue water." It is from here we can understand that, maybe, Sally Rooney thinks two things at once, one threatening the other, and rather than settle or implode, she does her best to sing both, "not to console / Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound." It is here one can labor free from the burden of approval, and embrace the mystery of not knowing. Here that one can try. Here, one can let go. Beautiful world, where are you? "The empire of the Titans is crushed," writes Schiller, "and boundless force is tamed by infinite form."



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